

A Piece of My Heart/ Pedacito de mi corazón

by Carmen Lomas Garza

When I was five years old my brother came home crying from the first grade in public school on the third day of classes because the teacher had punished him for speaking Spanish. She had made him hold out his hands, palms down, and then hit him with a ruler across the top of his hands.

This confused us because up to that day my parents had been telling us about how much fun we were going to have in school. So we looked to them for an explanation of this confusing reaction over such a natural act as speaking and why he deserved the unusual punishment. The expression on my parents' faces and their mute silence haunts me to this day. It must have been such a painful moment for them. How could they explain that the punishment was for racial and political reasons and not because he had done something bad?

The incident and the punishment caused much discussion among my parents, their friends and peers whose children were also experiencing the same treatment. Even though it had been seven years since my father and other Mexican Americans had returned from military service during World War II, things had not changed very much in Texas. Now that their children (the baby boom generation) were becoming school age, the discrimination continued. It did not matter that some of our families had been *Tejanos* (Texans) since the days of the Spanish land grants—long before Texas was taken from Mexico. Nor did it matter that almost all of us were *mestizos*, a mixture of Spanish and native Mexican or Native American.

Discrimination against the Mexican American was the main reason my parents became involved with the American GI Forum, a World War II veterans organization of Mexican Americans who fought for civil rights. One of their first activities was to sue a funeral home for refusing to receive the body of a Mexican American hero killed in the Korean War.

My brother's incident still had to be explained. My parents tried to tell us the reasons for the punishment and stressed that from then on at home we would practice speaking only in English and not both languages as we had been doing. I did not make nor understand the distinction between the two languages. And my parents many times spoke in both languages in spite of their decision. All I kept thinking was that I was next in line to go to school the following year.

When I finally did get to school, my first grade teacher was a bit more compassionate and actually took the time to explain the fact that *the* Spanish and *the* English we spoke were not all one language. She demonstrated this by bringing from her bedroom to the classroom a huge fluffy pillow with colorful embroidery and said that the name we knew for it, *almohada*, was Spanish and *pillow* English. I knew and used both words.

The realization that the pillow had a written name and that I knew two languages clicked in my mind just like it had for Helen Keller when she understood the connection between the sign word in her hand for water and the actual water that was falling on her hand. But what had been one world was now two separate entities and it seemed that I had to negate one in order to be accepted and exist in the other.

Knowing the difference between the two languages did not save me from unconsciously using Spanish in the classrooms and on the school grounds so I, too, suffered many physical and emotional punishments. Each time I spoke English I was ridiculed for my accent and made to feel ashamed. At a time when most children start to realize that there is an immense outside world, and communication is an important vehicle toward becoming a part of that world, the educational institution was punishing me for speaking two languages.

When I was in junior high school, I complained to my mother: "*Mami, yo no quiero llevar tacos de tortilla de harina con arroz, frijoles y carne para lonche porque se rien las gringas.*" ("Mami, I don't want to take tacos of flour tortillas with rice, beans, and meat for lunch because the white girls make fun of me.") Tacos that were nutritious and made with love, care, and hope had to be replaced with sandwiches of baloney and white bread.

In high school we could take Latin, French, or Spanish classes, but the Mexican American students were still not allowed to speak Spanish in the halls or in other classrooms. It was so ironic to see the white students practicing their new Spanish words and phrases while walking down the halls yet the Mexican American students could expect punishment for doing the same. But the punishment wasn't with a 12-inch ruler across your hands; it was with a 30-inch paddle that had holes drilled into it so that there would be less air resistance as it was slapped across the back of your legs. By the time I graduated from high school I was confused, depressed, introverted, and quite angry.

The Chicano Movement for civil rights of the late sixties and early seventies clarified some of that confusion, started the slow process of self-healing and provided a format to vent some of that anger. I had decided at the age of 13 to become an artist so when I was in college the Chicano Movement nourished that goal and gave me back my voice. But the university art department (which had over 50 percent Chicano students, the highest compared to all other departments) did not offer art history classes about my heritage: neither pre-Columbian, colonial or contemporary Mexican; nor the native American art, even though we were sitting in the middle of South Texas only 120 miles from the Mexican border. Instead we learned about French Rococo and Henry Moore, the English sculptor. I knew more about the Egyptian pyramids than the pyramids in Teotihuacan. I knew more about Greek mythology than Aztec mythology. The only source for formal training about my heritage was in the anthropology department but only after the study of the bones and teeth of Leakey's Lucy.

I was looking for information about the Aztecas, Toltecas, Apaches and Hopi; the Nahuatl language and poetry; the Mayan ceramic sculptures; the gold jewelry and surgical

obsidian knives; cultivation of corn, chocolate, cotton, and the vulcanization of rubber. It would have been real cool when I was in high school to have known that way before Columbus invaded this hemisphere the Maya were playing a form of basketball wearing open-toe high top tennis shoes with rubber soles.

Discussions with other Chicano students were the best source of information. It was during one of these discussions, in which I described my revelation about the word pillow, that someone commented that the word *almohada* was of Arab origin as were many other words in the Spanish language.

How does a 6-year-old child in South Texas in 1954 come to use a word from halfway across the world for such a beautiful and intimate object? A word that traveled from a desert across a channel, up and down mountains, across an ocean, over and around islands, through jungles and up to another desert. The history of that word's journey as carried by thousands of people from parent to child, generation after generation had been suppressed or ignored by the two institutions that I had already experienced.

And so the anger, the pride and self-healing had to come out as Chicano art—an art that was criticized by the faculty and white students as being too political, not universal, not hardedge, not pop art, not abstract, not avant-garde, too figurative, too colorful, too folksy, too primitive, blah, blah, blah!

What they failed to see was that the art I was creating functioned in the same way as the *salvila* (aloe vera) plant when its cool liquid is applied to a burn or abrasion. It helped to heal the wounds inflicted by discrimination and racism.

We needed to heal ourselves and each other so we started by choosing a name for ourselves, a name to symbolize our movements for self-determination. The accomplishments of our parents during the 50's civil rights movement were not enough. We started to speak more Spanish in public places; we worked to get better representatives on the school boards and local governments, and we started to explore and emphasize our unique culture in the visual arts, music, literature and theater.

I felt that I had to start with my earliest recollections of my life and validate each event or incident by depicting it in a visual format. I needed to celebrate each special event or reexamine each unusual happening.

We have been doing Chicano art not only for Chicanos, but also for others to see who we are as people. If you see my heart and humanity through my art then hopefully you will not exclude me from rightfully participating in this society.

Aquí les doy un pedacito de mi corazón en mi arte. And now I give you a little piece of my heart in my art.

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