

ICWA LETTERS

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**CE-11
THE AMERICAS**

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Post Office Blues

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

May 3, 1999

By Chenoa Egawa

This morning at around 9:30 a.m. I went to the post office in zone 1. I had received a note in the mail the previous Friday stating that a package had arrived for me and that I needed to come down, present ID and pay an import tax in order to pick it up. I was ecstatic on the one hand, because I knew it was from my friend Celeste, who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We had talked on the phone several times and I told her that I was sick again with stomach problems as much too usual. I was completely distraught at the idea of having to ingest more antibiotics, this time five per day for 12 days, in order to kill the latest unwanted inhabitant of my gut. She told me that she would put together a care package that would help me to rebuild my own healthy intestinal flora following the treatment with antibiotics. "But, oh," I said moaning, "I am so tired of antibiotics. They just destroy me. I don't know what's worse sometimes, the illness itself or the medicine you take to kill it and everything else."

Celeste, in her infinite wisdom, encouraged me, telling me to sit for at least five minutes after each pill and visualize it going through my system and healing me. "You have to help those medicines with your will and make the conscious decision that they are going to cure you," she said. "If you fight the idea of taking the medication then you will make it a lot harder on yourself."

"Okay," I said. I had been practicing meditation and visualization techniques since I started Tai Chi classes a few months earlier and her advice made a lot of sense to me. Since I was going to take them, I did need to have a positive attitude about it.

I had visited my Celeste a couple times a few years back, and Santa Fe is a health nut's paradise. Health food abounds in restaurants, specialty organic stores and huge health-food grocery stores. Celeste takes immaculate care of her health (for the most part!) and knows that I am that way too. She knew that I had not been having an easy time staying healthy in the third world with all the *aguas negras* ("black waters") that have a way of mixing with any and all comestible items before arriving in one's own kitchen. Some of the vegetables are even grown with irrigation systems that drain black wastewater directly over the plants and down into the soil, so the foreigner has a whole new lineup of mostly unfriendly intestinal hosts to get used to. Despite the myth that the locals are immune, almost everyone I have talked to on the subject of intestinal health (not as hot a topic back in the States as it is here) has some form of "gastritis." The kids suffer immensely with diarrhea caused by who knows how many parasitic offenders, and they reach a higher level of tolerance to such things as they get older. But immune? Absolutely untrue. I can remember screaming out on more than one occasion, "Why can't we seem to keep our shit separate from our food!?" Amoebas, parasites, worms, viruses, the majority of which come from contamination of food by human waste and filth in general, are the tiny enemies

invisible to the naked eye, yet capable of causing a world of hurt.

The taxi picked me up and we headed into the heart of downtown Guatemala City to the central post office. My excitement about receiving a care package was curbed as my mind wandered through the past, picking out conversations I remembered having with other foreigners about their care packages. One friend told me she went to the post office only to find her package had been opened and half of its contents missing. As if that were not bad enough, they wanted her to pay \$20 in taxes to take home what little odds and ends were left in the package after it had been ransacked — a little pinecone decorated as a Christmas tree and a banner that said Merry Christmas. The “import tax,” they said. They could, at least, have had the decency to lower the tax to adjust the worth of the package after most of the items were stolen.

Another friend, an American named Reese, told me that her father sent her a care package. She told him not to, but he sent it anyway. When she went to the post office to see if it had arrived, the man behind the counter had on a t-shirt that said, “Have a great time in Guatemala, Reese!” All of her friends from the States had signed the t-shirt wishing her luck, sending her their love, saying that they would all miss her.

She was stunned. “You are wearing my t-shirt!” she said to the postal worker behind the counter. He flat-out denied that it was hers. Obviously he did not understand a lick of English. After all, a handmade farewell t-shirt personally addressed to a friend does not exactly blend in like a plain white “just jockey” t-shirt. Reese argued with him insisting that it was hers. Finally he excused himself and said, “I’ll be back in a minute.” He sent someone else to replace him at the counter and never returned. There was no record of the package ever being received.

Dear God, please help me pick up my package with ease, I thought to myself, as the cab driver maneuvered in and out of buses, cars, and the massive clouds of black smoke they each left in their wake.

The cabby was friendly and kind and we talked about work, travel and the politics of Guatemala along the way. “Are you Guatemalan?” he asked.

“No, *Americana*.” I said.

When I say *Americana*, everyone kind of goes, “Oh,” nodding their head like, “Ah yes, one of them,” or else they just come right out and say, “Oh, *gringa*.” He said that my Spanish was excellent.

“Really?” I told him about a recent visit I had with a Guatemalan friend of mine. I had not seen him for a couple of months and he asked how everything was going. Among his questions, he asked how my Span-

ish was coming along. “Pretty good, I think.”

He looked me straight in the face and said in all seriousness, “Actually, I don’t think it has improved at all since the last time I saw you.”

All I could say was “Hmmm.”

It was a little disappointing, but he had yet to see me on a roll. The rolls did not happen every day, but they were becoming more frequent. For some reason around that particular friend my Spanish never was very good. Somehow his extremely stiff and dignified nature always made me a little uncomfortable, negatively affecting my Spanish-speaking ability. The cabby laughed. “On no, your Spanish is very good, and you have a very bright spirit and a pleasant, outgoing personality too,” he said.

“Thanks.” I smiled to myself thinking that I would share his comments with my overly critical friend. I was in great spirits and it must have showed. Little things like care packages can really brighten me up.

Monday morning, and every other morning in the heart of downtown is always chaotic. I told the cab driver to let me out in front of the post office and he could go wait for me at the pay-parking lot on the next block. “Can you stop the meter?” I asked. “It shouldn’t take too long.” Ten minutes is what he gave me. After that he would have to turn the meter back on. Fair enough.

Trying to be efficient as possible with my ten minutes, I ran in to the old, decrepit building. It must have been impressive once upon a time, with its 30-foot ceilings and massive stone staircase worn down to a smooth polished finish from decades of footsteps. Now it had a hollow, gloomy feel to it; no color — just varying shades of gray — not much light, and old paint sloughing off the walls. I headed straight for the armed guard at the bottom of the staircase and showed him my paper. “You need to go to the second floor,” he said.

I ran up the stairs and darted from room to room, finally asking someone else where *aduanas* (customs) was. The guard for customs had not been at the little wooden desk at the top of the staircase when I had passed the first time, but on my second lap of floor two, he was back at his makeshift post looking quite serious and official. I quickly gave him my passport identification number and handed him the paper I had received in the mail.

“Through there,” he said, pointing to the gigantic iron barred gate. Inside, there was not one person in line. Hey, I thought, this might be a miraculously simple process after all. I handed the paper to the lackluster lady behind the counter and she turned around and began scanning the thousand or so packages, coming back a moment later with my little box.

“They will examine the contents over there,” she said,

pointing to another desk in the big, sparsely furnished office. Three employees sat behind the counter. One of them, a woman, came over and sliced open my package to inspect its contents. Inside were little bags of seeds to grow salad sprouts — radish, lentil, mung bean, alfalfa, sunflower and clover.

"What are these?" she asked. "Are they vitamins?"

"Vitamins?" I said. "No, they are seeds for growing salad sprouts. You put them in a jar with water and you can grow them in the house."

"Oh, they are agricultural products," she said. I'll have to call the Department of Agriculture." My ten minutes were already up. As she walked back to her desk to make the phone call, I could see that this was going to take awhile, especially if the Department of Agriculture was going to be involved.

Half expecting this all along, my patience was only superficial at best; it slipped away easily, replaced instantly by irritation. Lack of efficiency in basic services in Guatemala is something I cannot seem to get used to no matter how hard I try. "Look, they are just a bunch of seeds. Look," I said picking up one of the bags, "these are sunflower seeds." Then another. "These are lentils. You can buy them at any market in Guatemala. It's a bunch of bird food!" I said, going through the little bags.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but we have to have it inspected. Our boss is really coming down hard on us and if I let this go, then I could get in big trouble." She was a nice enough woman, but a bit timid and wishy-washy. It always irritated me when people feared their bosses so much that they felt like they could not make one damn decision, no matter how small, on their own. I knew it was not her fault and I told her so. I tried again to explain how unthreatening the contents of my package were in hopes of impeding the involvement of the Department of Agriculture.

"I'm going to have to call," she said. An elevated level of annoyance surged through my innards.

"Look, my friend sent this to me so that I could eat something green without getting sick for once. All the lettuce, all the vegetables, they are all contaminated here! I'm just trying to get better. They are a bunch of seeds!" Probably not the best thing to say, but once my temper is lost I say whatever comes to mind. My family just laughs at me when I lose it, but the few times it has happened here, people usually just watch me with astonishment, disbelief and shock. Such outbursts are not part of the culture in Guatemala, especially coming from women. She apologized again.

"Just tell me what I have to do!" I said, trying to keep from screaming.

"Well they have to inspect it."

"Who has to inspect it? Where are they? I have a taxi
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waiting for me out there and after ten minutes he's going to start charging me, so just tell me what to do and let's do it!"

"You have to go the Department of Agriculture."

"Are they here in the building?" I asked, gritting my teeth.

"No they aren't, but it isn't too far away."

"My God, the final cost of this taxi is going to be five times the value of the package!"

"Talk to this man at the MAGA office," she said handing me a little scrap of paper with a name scribbled on it, Juan de Leon. "Tell him about how much this is costing you, about the inconvenience," she said politely, apologetically.

"And the address?" I asked.

"The taxi driver will know where the MAGA office is," she said. And I believed her! I reached for my package and turned to stomp out, when she said, "Wait, you have to leave the package here."

What the hell? "You mean I have to go talk to this man about my package and then by looking at me he's going to say whether or not I can take it home, when he hasn't even seen the contents?" Now I was really out of control. "*No tiene sentido, no tiene sentido*," I shouted. It made no sense. It was absurd.

I stormed out of the building, into the traffic and pollution and down the block to the parking lot where the cab was waiting for me. I was steaming. When I saw the cabdriver I went into a mad discourse on the ridiculous post office system, the meaningless runaround, and somehow ended up including in my frustration the ineffectiveness of the entire Guatemalan system. My Spanish flowed like a river. Several people were standing in the parking lot as I ranted and raved about how I was being sent all over the city to talk to this person and that person about a bloody box of sprouting seeds.

I got into the car and we pulled out of the parking lot. "Are you going back to your apartment now?" the cabby asked.

"No, I have to go to the MAGA office," I said huffing.

"What's the address?" he asked.

"She said you'd know where it was," I said. "I don't have an address." Great, just great! We had already pulled into traffic and were driving along aimlessly. "Where are you going? If we don't know where it is, then there is no point driving." He pulled over and radioed the central office for directions. "Look, just go back to the post office. I'm going to get the address from that lady," which I knew was what I should have done in the first place.

I stomped up the big beautiful staircase again and

went right through the gates without stopping at the guard post in front. The guard tried to stop me. "I've already been here," I said mockingly, and just kept walking. The lady who had given me the name was waiting on someone else when I entered. "The cabdriver doesn't know where the MAGA office is. I need the address."

She looked at the man she was waiting on and said, "She is the one I was telling you about." The man shot me a disapproving glance and smirked. I leaned over and looked into his open package, which was full of food products.

"And this one? Will he have to go to MAGA too?" I asked. He was not pleased. With address in hand I returned to the cab. The dispatcher had given the driver an address too, but it was different than the one I had. We went with mine.

MAGA was not near the post office at all; it was on the other side of town. The cabby was driving like a maniac trying to find the address as quickly as possible. I was making him nervous. I thought of the energy work we were doing in Tai Chi and how my aura must have been like an electric shock wave at that moment. I tried to mellow myself out a bit. As if reading my thoughts, the cabby said, "Try to relax. It won't help if you get more worked up. Everything will just get worse from here." He told me how he tries to calm himself down in similar situations, how he tries to be patient, to act with more intelligence than the system he is dealing with, to learn from it and definitely not to fight it. "It's never going to change," he said, "so it's really not worth getting angry over. You will just end up making yourself sick."

"I know you are right," I said, "but once I take flight, it's really hard for me to come back down."

"Breathe deeply," he said.

I thought how this guy had complimented my bright spirit earlier. "Sorry about my attitude," I said. "This is the other side of the *moneda* (coin), unfortunately."

He just laughed. "It's all right. I'm the same way. People always tell me how pleasant and good natured I am, but I can get as angry as you." He went on to tell me that he was working on his attitude more now, because he had a sister who was under a lot of stress. She would get so worked up that she always had nagging headaches, but she did not pay attention to them. Instead she would just go on with more force, pushing herself harder. During the last fit of anger she had she came down with such a horrible headache that she actually had to go to the doctor. She had broken a blood vessel in her head and died almost immediately thereafter.

Geeez, I thought. Better cool it!

"I'll wait for you here," he said, as we pulled up in

front of the MAGA office. He shut off the meter. "Remember, try to be calm," he called after me. I went into the building; this one looked like a prison on the outside and an old warehouse on the inside. There was a reception area near the entrance. "*La oficina de MAGA?* Juan de Leon?" I asked.

The man and lady behind the plexiglass window looked at each other, clearly puzzled. The lady leaned up to the hole in the window. "I don't know anyone by that name."

"The MAGA office," I insisted. "They just sent me here from the post office with this name, this office, at this address," I said calmly, but with a tone that said, think it over good, please.

Her chubby face approached the hole again, "That office isn't here," she said apologetically.

Sometimes you have to ask the same question four or five times in different ways, until something clicks. "MAGA, the agriculture inspectors?"

The two looked at each other again and I could see their lips moving behind the glass. This time the man leaned forward. "I think it might be at the back of the building. Go through that door there, down the hall, take a left and go up the stairs and out into the parking lot. There is a small office out there."

"*Gracias*," I said with a forced smile. Following his directions, I ended up in the parking lot and there, in a dark corner, was an office. I walked in. There were two "officials" sitting behind a desk, one small and skinny and the other big and plump.

"Is this the MAGA office?" I asked.

"Yes, please have a seat. We'll be right with you," said the skinny one. He was obviously the more cerebral of the two. He was deliberating over some other guy's mountain of documents. He wetted the rubber stamp on the inkpad, and stamped the top paper. The guy was on his way.

"I was sent here from the post office. They just called you," I said. "Are you Juan de Leon?"

"Yes, I am. Can I see your invoice?" he asked.

"They didn't give me anything to bring you, which is ridiculous," I said, "because how can you approve the contents of a package that you've never seen?"

"You're right," he agreed. "He [the other guy] will go with you to the post office and inspect the package." Unbelievable! The big, docile guy and I headed out of the building.

I have a cab waiting for me, so let's go quickly. This is costing me a fortune." We climbed into the cab and the

driver and I exchanged glances and smiles. My glance said, 'can you believe this?' His said, "I know. I'm sorry."

"Back to the post office, please."

The big guy knew the whole thing was silly, but he had his orders, too. Trying to make me feel better he said, "Well, it's not as bad as the United States. The customs people there are much stricter with incoming packages."

"Maybe," said the cabby, "but they would at least have the inspectors in the same building."

Back at the post office and up the stone staircase for a third time. Again the guard tried to have me sign in. "I've already been here," I said in a singsong voice.

"Oh, right." We went into the office. The same man was still standing there with his opened package of food. The same lady retrieved my package a second time and we opened it before the inspector. He looked at the contents.

"All this noise made over this little package?" he said.

"Yep, pretty incredible, no?" I said in agreement.

"It's fine," he said. You can let her take it. She doesn't need to pay any tax."

"Thanks," I said, picking up my box of seeds.

We exited through the iron bars and the guard at the little wooden table said, "The paperwork?"

"It's all taken care of," said the hefty inspector. As we walked down the staircase and out of the post office, he turned to me and said, "It's better not to tell him that you didn't pay any import tax, because if he knew, then you would just have to wait again." *No tiene sentido*, I thought.

The inspector got back in the cab with me. "And now what? I am supposed to pay the cab fare for you to go back to your office, too?" I asked. He either did not hear me, or just pretended he did not. The cabby and I exchanged more glances.

"Where do you want to be dropped off?" the driver asked the inspector.

"As close to my office as possible."

I stopped myself from saying that it might be good for him to get out and walk a bit. We negotiated a street corner that would be close enough for the inspector and not too far out of my way.

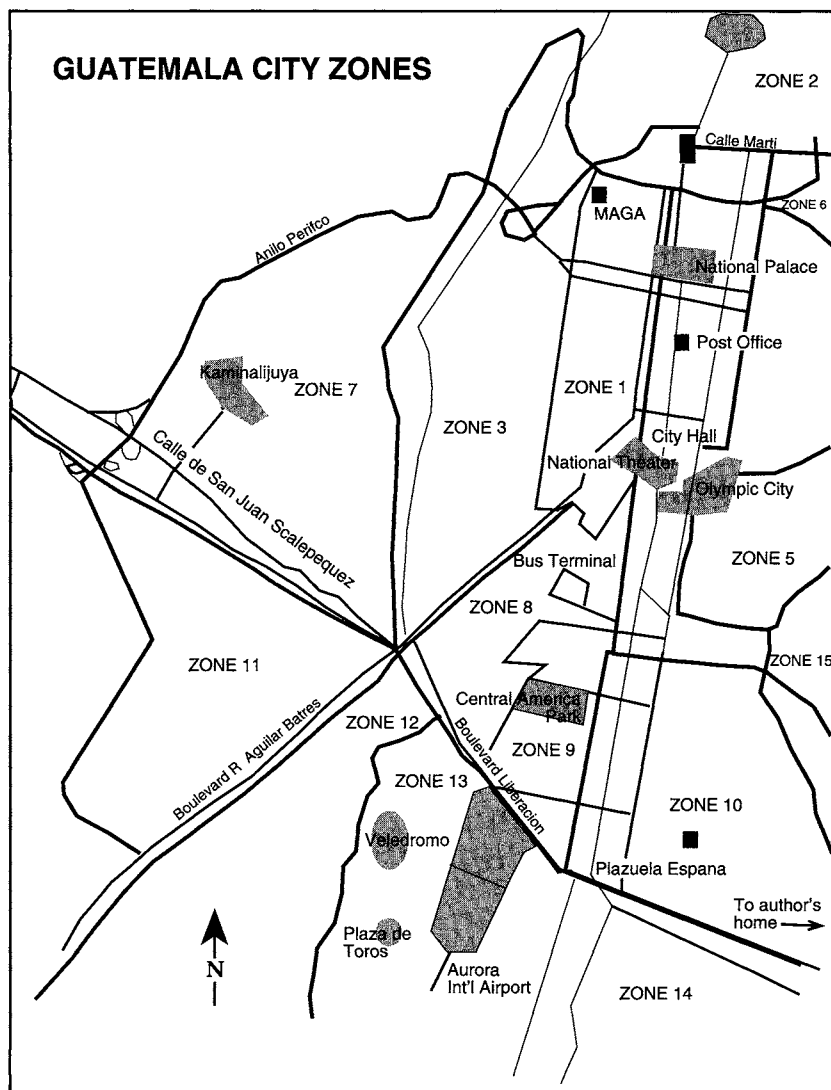
"Thanks for your help," I said as he stepped out of the cab. I was beginning to regain my composure.

"No problem," he said. The door slammed shut and the cabby and I turned right heading uptown.

"Now I'll go back to my apartment," I said. I apologized to him again for having to put up with me.

"Oh, no. It's fine. One thing is for sure, though. I don't think I'll ever forget you."

We both laughed hysterically. I looked down at my care package, sent to me with love by my dear friend Celeste. Despite all, I was happy to receive it. □



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