

**Remarks by Rey Carranza '55 upon receiving the Outstanding Alumni Award
October 23, 2010**

“We steer. You row.” The words are from a friend, one of the many from my village, who have come to live in Chicago. Team work, in other words. I cannot imagine any way I could have done the work for which I am being honored without the guidance and help I have received from my children and friends, without the actual participation of teachers and friends with whom I have teamed up.

Back in Mexico after graduation, I applied for a position in the public school system. In vain: I didn't have a diploma from a Mexican school. Luckily, I was hired by a prestigious private school. First, to teach and later to found sister schools in provincial cities. The three I founded were successful and they might still be. The students did well academically, taught by a team of talented and devoted teachers.

I enjoyed the comfort of urban life and the fever of Saturday nights. Nevertheless, on unexpected moments I used to hear the call of the village, of a village such as the one where I was born-- a village on a mountain range, detached from the world, all green under luminous clouds on a summer afternoon. I used to hear echoes of the admonition to men lying on their backs talking, in my case, about the plight of the villages and never making an effort to get up.

Three successful schools and the fact that the head of the Department Of Education in the state of Zacatecas knew that I had spent one year at Scattergood, a school he admired, opened the doors of the public school system for me.

Early in 1980, the then president of Mexico invited the son of a prominent political family for breakfast. He wanted to establish a separate school system “unequal for the unequals.” He meant, superior academically for children who were socially inferior due to geographical and economic circumstances.

“Academically superior schools for socially inferior children.” With these words foremost in our minds a group of teachers met day after day, week after week to define the content and the structure of the new schools. By late summer our discussions were summed up in piles of papers. New words expressed our aims: We were to create a “new child,” imbued with a democratic spirit, trained to become a “promoter of change.”

September came. I stood in the auditorium of the brand new school to address the students, the teachers and the staff. The students were newly arrived from hamlets and isolated huts as far as twelve hours away. What to say? The head of the Department Of Education had told me, “be father to one hundred and fifty children” – no more. “Unequal for unequals,” “new child” were untranslatable concepts. At that moment I could only say what I firmly believed: “We are indebted to life from the moment we are born. We can pay a part of our debt by making this a better school than we find it, by studying to become better persons than we already are...”

The stony, waterless slope, became a garden. The children grew their own vegetables, raised rabbits, tended cows, made their own clothes. At Christmas they put on a play, “A Midsummer Night's Dream” being the most memorable of all. The mariachi band and the dance troupe were invited to perform at town fairs. They were children who had opened their eyes and discovered unsuspected talents. Some nurtured great expectations.

Four years later a new Mexican president was in office. The school had to close. “For reasons you will never understand,” I was told.

The most ambitious students went on to other schools. Most of them went back to their hamlets or isolated huts, to herd sheep, to snatch a meager crop from the eroded land, to dream of the day they were to be old enough to come to work in the States.

Where was I to go? To Santa Lucia, a far away village high on the Western Sierra Madre, a village I had come to before in search for students for the pilot school. My task was to start a new secondary school. I did, and in time I became a sort of village nurse because I knew how to dress a wound, how to give an aspirin for a toothache, and because I would take the patients to the hospitals in town.

Those seem days gone by long ago. The doctor's office and the delivery room in the village clinic had leaky roofs; the doctor, if there was one, often went to town for several days on a stretch. On an occasion I was called to see a patient, a woman who was hemorrhaging. I needed, I decided, catheters and solution to start an I.V. I broke the clinic's lock, took the only two catheters I found and three flasks of solution; and I rushed to the woman's hut. I entered a depressed vein on the first try. A chicken nesting on the dirt floor under the bed flapped her wings and raised puffs of dust to celebrate my good luck.

One flask after another and a third for the road on the way to the hospital four hours away...

At crucial times in my life guardian angels have opened doors and led me on. Guardian angels sent me to Scattergood School; a guardian angel sent me to Earlham; the Bollings received me as one more member of the family; later, the Curtises; teachers we all remember introduced me to the world of books. Five years ago, John Young opened the doors of his Rotary Club. With their help we bought a children's collection for the Santa Lucia library, the most select children's collection in all the state libraries, and a collection of DVD's with the best movies ever filmed.

This year we tested the village women for anemia. To twelve of them, whose levels of hemoglobin were low, we gave iron and vitamins bought with a grant from the Rotary International, for a period of six months. The level of hemoglobin of nine of the women rose to a normal level. One remained anemic probably because she was pregnant. Two were referred to a gynecologist and found to have myomas. They are taking iron, vitamins and hormones; and they will undergo surgery in two or three months.

We weighed the children and gave vitamins and mineral supplements (also bought with Rotary funds) to the children who were under weight. We have grown a vegetable garden with two aims: to provide vegetables for the school kitchen and to encourage the women to grow their own gardens.

This program became the Department of Health's as well, was carried out under their supervision and the results are recorded in the women's and children's individual files.

Teachers, students, dentists and doctors in town have heard of our work and want to help. Nearly seventy of them came to Santa Lucia last year. They showed movies, helped the village women plant trees, taught them to pickle peppers. A dentist pulled out teeth. In the afternoon, they put on a grand festival with regional dances and a play. Another group will come this fall.

Olga, in Checkhov's "Peasants," reflects:

"Who keeps the tavern and encourages drunkenness?

The peasant.

Who embezzles and drinks up the funds that belong to the community, the schools, the church?

The peasant.

Who steals from his neighbors?

The peasant."

I could ask similar questions and give the same answers. But I would add:

Who slips a fifty-peso bill into my pocket for contingencies (most likely all she had) while I help a wounded fellow into my car to drive him to a hospital?

Maria.

Who, aged herself, goes up the hill carrying a bucket full of water for her bed-ridden friend?

Lupe.

Who goes into my room on one weary Friday afternoon the moment I am returning from classes and cleans the ashes from my stove?

Tona.

Who in the last months organized a dance and collected funds for an unwedded mother whose two-year old daughter became paralyzed?

The peasants from El Carricito, a neighboring village.

“Yes, to live with the peasants was terrible,” Olga reflects.

“Yes,” I assert, “living with the villagers I have come to know the essentials of a good life: a shade (the name the villagers give it), a bowl of beans, a book of verses, a community of kindred spirits abroad; in the village, friends to trust and be trusted by.”

So much depends upon small things: a flue in the fireplace, for instance. Before a cultural mission introduced them, not many years ago, the walls and ceilings in the kitchens were black, and the cooks coughed and coughed. Patients with fever were wrapped in blankets and the door of their huts was shut to protect them from the evil airs. Now their shawls and jackets are taken off; they are cooled with wet compresses, even bathed if the fever is high.

Saramago’s mother lamented; “what a pity to die!” A pity, indeed, for life is beautiful. But we pay a price. I lived and worked in Mexico, while my children grew up in the States. They should know that I have thought of them as my partners and that I am deeply moved by their kindness and love. May that be a consolation.

I ran to the library when John Young informed me that I would be asked to give this talk. I found a stanza by Borges, which I will read to you in Spanish, as Borges would have. He would have told you that meaning in poetry is not important -- important is a certain music.

*La vejez (tale es el nombre que los otros le dan)
Puede ser el tiempo de nuestra dicha.
El animal ha muerto o casi ha muerto.
Quedan el hombre y el alma.*

Meaning matters to me and to most of you, I suspect; so I will read the translation:

Old age (the name others give it)
Can be the time of our greatest bliss.
The animal has died or almost died.
The man and his spirit remain.