

Cuentos de los Antepasados— Spanning the Generations

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by Rudolfo A. Anaya

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In our culture there is a very deep relationship between the old people and the children. For us, *los ancianos* and *los niños* go hand in hand. In my own writing, it has been natural for me to use this special relationship of love and learning which takes place between an old person and a child.

For example, in *Bless Me Ultima*, my first novel, the story revolves around the old *curandera* and the boy, and what Antonio learns from Ultima shapes his personality and his future. Likewise, in *Heart of Aztlán* I created Crispín, the old poet of the *barrio*, and around him the younger men gathered to listen to his *cuentos* and to learn from his experiences and knowledge.

Many of us, I am sure, grew up in households where *ancianos* lived with us as a natural part of *la familia*. I know that my childhood was more magical and mysterious and imaginative because of people like Ultima, and it was certainly enriched by my grandfather who lived with us until he was 94. He told marvelous *cuentos* and side-splitting *chistes*, and he teased my imagination with *adivanzas*. I've promised myself that one of these days I'm going to write a book about my grandfather.

So what about these *cuentos*, or folktales, and the literary heritage of our *antepasados*? Are we to allow this wealth of oral tradition to die, or can we bring the wisdom and the perceptions of life that are incorporated in the *cuentos* into the lives of

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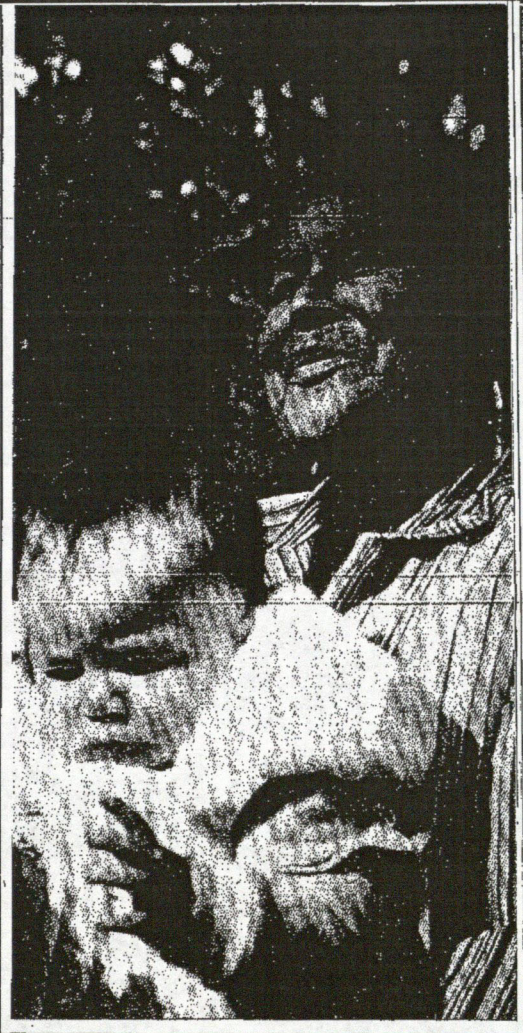
this young generation? That tradition forms a vital part of our culture and history; in it we can find the wisdom of the people, "*el oro del barrio*" as Tomás Atencio calls it. I believe that part of our heritage is relevant to us today and that it should be an integral part of the bilingual classroom.

The *cuentos* of *los antepasados*, and the contemporary *cuento* which is still being generated today by the people, both carry messages which speak to our day-to-day existence. We should listen closely, and we should teach this new generation, which by and large will be an urban generation, to listen to the past.

The most interesting facet of our oral tradition is the most obvious one, that is, it is still being created and composed by the people as they go about their work and play. The Hispanic character loves the "sense of *salsa*" which is the seed of language, and so he constantly plays with it, whether it be to make love or war. I'll give you an example of a story I heard years ago which combines many elements of the *cuento*; it also incorporates a sense of our survival instinct in the face of a different culture.

I call this *cuento* "The Eliminator is Broken" or "How to Succeed in a Minority Business."

Estos eran dos compadres . . . or we can start, once upon a time there were two *compadres . . .* you see, the *cuento* or story can be told either in English or Spanish because



most Chicanos are bilingual storytellers. Anyway, there were two *compadres*, one from Colorado and one from Nuevo Mexico. And with all the Texans flooding to the mountains in the summer they decided to take advantage of the business and set up a small cafe. So they renovated an old adobe house (they left the adobe exposed for local color), fixed the kitchen, hung up their sign and waited for business. But the *compadre* from Colorado, who was the most timid of the two, grew a little worried.

"Oiga, *compadre*," he said, "I'm a little worried."

"Pues why, *compadre*?" his friend asked.

"What happens if we get a gringo customer? Our English ain't too good."

"My gosh, don't worry, *compadre*, I'll take care of it. I can handle it."

Ese compadre de Nuevo Mexico era muy adelantao.

A few minutes later their first customers arrived, a big three-hundred-pound Texan and his equally large wife. They waddled out of their big Cadillac and hurried in to order breakfast.

"Howdy y'all," the Texan says. "I'd like a couple of steaks smothered in onions, french fries, a tossed salad, a jug of coffee, and half a dozen scrambled eggs on the side."

"Me too," his wife nodded.

"Right away," the *compadre* who was waiting on them nodded. He felt good that he had been able to take down the order without any trouble, so he rushed to the kitchen to tell his friend the good news. "Look, I got the order without any problem." Then he added, "But they sure do eat funny, don't they?"

Meanwhile, the Texans, in a hurry to be on their way, decided to skip the eggs. So they called the *compadre* over and said, "Say, Pancho, we're in an awful big hurry, so could you just eliminate the eggs."

Eliminate? our *compadre* thought, uh-hum. He hadn't heard that word before, but he nodded and pretended to write down "eliminate the eggs" then he turned and ran into the kitchen for help. "*Compadre*, we got problems. Now they want to eliminate the eggs! What does that mean?"

The *compadre* from New Mexico, *el adelantao*, said, "Don't worry, *compadre*, I'll take care of this. For me English is no problem." So he walked over to the Texan and his wife, drew himself up as high as he could, and in a cool, confident voice he said, "I'm sorry, friends, but today we can't eliminate the eggs. You see, the eliminator is broken."

There's a message there, a message of pride and adaptability. Perhaps the incident also tells that the next time a school district decides to eliminate a bilingual program in one of our schools it's up to us to stand up as straight as our *compadre* and say, "Sorry, but there's not going to be any more elimination of bilingual programs. As of today the eliminator is broken!"

In fact, we should all be prepared to protest elimination and to call for a well-funded and planned effort to include bilingual/multicultural classes in the school curriculum where the need dictates! The only thing which should be eliminated is the

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idea that bilingual programs are compensatory and transitional in nature. It is not un-American to believe that the multicultural reality of this country should be reflected in every aspect of education, from K through 12 and thereafter. Children today should not be denied the rich culture of their forefathers.

I trust that the process of cultural evolution preserves the best and the most beautiful aspects of culture, and so it is important that the schools should not shut out our history and language.

We already know that the wisdom of *los antepasados* will survive, but in order to insure that this present generation is able to communicate across the gulf of time with *los viejitos*, we must encourage bilingual/multi-

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cultural classes, we must support the creation of more children's literature (a vastly ignored field to date), and we must insure the indigenous languages and all their cultural ramifications should find their way into the core curriculum of our schools.

I have been working on a project which interests me precisely because in its final form it will be one of these communications between the young and the old, and at the same time it will be a cross-cultural communication. I have been translating some of the *cuentos* in Juan B. Rael's monumen-

tal collection of folktales from southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. The folktales were collected in their original Spanish idiom, in the "patois of the native" *como decimos alla en Baretas*, and I am translating them into English. I am struck now, as I was when I was a child and heard many of these stories, by their deep sense of the human condition. They are bright, piercing commentaries on life. The language of the people is alive in them. And each one speaks across the centuries as to the conditions of our contemporary life.

Here is an example of the folk wisdom and the sense of justice which appears in one particular tale. It happened that a poet from New Mexico—keep in mind, this happened many years ago before the most recent flowering of Chicano literature—a New Mexican poet by the name of Chicoria was invited to California to entertain two rich ranchers. When he arrived the two ranchers sat down to eat, but they didn't have the good manners to invite Chicoria to sit and eat with them. So Chicoria decided it was up to him to point out their bad manners.

"You know," he began, "where I come from we use a different spoon for each mouthful we take."

The two ranchers were very impressed. What a unique culture that must be, they thought. What Chicoria didn't tell them was that each spoon was a piece of *tortilla*—*cucharar con tortillas*, it's called.

"And in our country," he continued, "the female goats all give birth to three kids at a time."

"But how can one goat feed three kids?" the ranchers asked.

"The same as you're doing now," Chicoria answered, "while two eat the third one watches."

The ranchers realized their rudeness, they apologized and invited Chicoria to eat with them. We know that there are plenty of boards of education with the likes of the rich ranchers sitting at the table, and they're a well fed bunch. So it's up to us to keep insisting that part of that public pie is rightfully ours. We're not going to sit and wait while everybody else gets their fair share, we demand ours too!

We must continue to insist that bilingualism not only serves to personally enhance the esthetic part of our lives, but that it is one of the most useful economic and social tools available. Spanish, for example, ranks among the top five most used languages in the world, and that coupled with the fact that we in the southwest sit next door to Latin America—indeed are part of the progeny of the same forces which created the Latin American civilizations—is enough argument for the teaching of bilingual and multicultural classes in our schools.

But what about the children? What do they need? How can we get involved in their

education? Because I am a writer and an educator, the one question I am most often asked is why don't we have more children's stories and literature? I suggest that we should have a national Chicano or Latino publisher sponsor a contest and award prizes to writers who would be published in this special children's issue. We could even do it by grade levels. The point is to get established writers and younger writers interested in this field. And hopefully the interest by writers and publishers wouldn't stop there, but continue to mushroom.

I have tried my hand at writing for children. A few years ago I wrote a short story titled "Consuelo Goes to School." I also adapted it into the film script of the film, *Promise for Tomorrow*. In it I used another one of the *cuentos* or *chistes* I had heard, and everyone loved it. The *cuento* is about two neighbors, a cat and a rat. The cat was a bilingual Chicano, but the rat was monolingual. The rat could only squeak in one language, and he insisted that was the American way.

One day the cat got fed up with listening to the rat's squeaking, so he decided to have him for supper. He chased the rat but the rat ran into his hole. The cat tried to coax him out by calling to him, "Meow, meow." But as long as the rat heard the meowing he knew the cat was out there. Oh no, I'm not going out, he said to himself. A short time passed then the rat heard a terrible noise and the loud barking of a dog. "Bow-wow! Woof! Woof!" Ah, the rat said to himself, now the dog has come and chased the cat away. It's safe to go out. But the minute he stepped out of his hole, the cat grapped him and ate him. Then as the *gato loco* wiped his whiskers he said, "Ah, it's wonderful to be bilingual *Que bueno es ser bilingüe.*"

Another question I am often asked is why I write in English. Spanish is my mother tongue and I was raised in a completely Spanish-speaking environment. But when I went to school there were no bilingual programs to sustain and build upon the native speaker's language; consequently, our reading and writing competency in the language was not maintained. Now that I'm older and I recognize the value of language not only as a social means to communicate but as a creative tool, I am angry that the school did not help me maintain and develop the language which already was so natural to me. But a lot of us are in the same boat, and I think that is why we are such ardent supporters of bilingual education. We know that we shouldn't have to give up one language to acquire another. The gift of children is that given the right atmosphere they can learn so much!

So let's not have happen to this generation what happened to us. Children deserve the full benefit of language study to live in this century and to deal with a rapidly shrinking and mobile world. School districts have to commit time, money and personnel

so that bilingual and multicultural programs are incorporated into the curriculum.

I would like to close with another *cuento*, and I want to emphasize again the importance of bringing this wealth of our old people into our homes and schoolrooms, so that it will not die, indeed so that it will enrich our lives. In this story there is a mean daughter-in-law who doesn't like the old grandfather, her husband's father. The old man is too much trouble, she thinks, so she persuades her husband to move the old man to a room far away from the house. The room is very cold, and they often forget to feed the old man, so he suffers very much.

It so happens that one day the grandson visits his grandfather, and the old man tells the boy to bring him a blanket because he is very cold. The boy runs to the barn where he finds a nice, thick blanket. He takes the blanket to his father and tells him to cut it in two.

"But what's it for?" the father asks.
"It's for grandfather, so he won't be cold," the boy answers.

"Why don't you give him the entire blanket?" the father says.

"Oh no," his son answers, "I want to save the other half for you when you get old."

The father immediately realized he had been mistreating his own father, so he went and brought the old man into the house where he would be warm, and thereafter he

visited him every day and saw to it that the old man was well taken care of. (Unfortunately, the story doesn't tell us what happened to the daughter-in-law, but I'm sure poetic justice took care of her.)

What the story does tell us is that it took the innocence and love of a child to point out the injustice being committed. It also tells us that we have often been treated like the grandfather, restricted in our educational pursuits by this daughter-in-law culture that would keep us in the back room. But the children see. They see the injustice, and they ask questions. They want to know why their language and history is being denied to them.

We must be strong, like the father, to pursue the changes we know we have to make for ourselves and for the future. And the time for change is now. We must demand that the full benefits of education accrue to us, and that the fabric of the educational system be woven from the wool and warp of our own history and language! As long as society continues to place a value on a liberal education, then the schools of that society must incorporate the cultural values, the world view and unique perspective, and the history of the indigenous people it purports to educate.

If it takes up this challenge, then this society will not only be a more just society, but it will insure itself a richer and more divergent history, and it will insure itself its own well being. **O**



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