

Life in the Subjunctive Mood

by Elisabeth A. Miller

My ex-husband, Mexican-born, only became an American citizen when he had spent as many years on this side of the border as he had lived in his youth on the south side. I, on the other hand, have lived for short periods of time in various Spanish-speaking countries, and spent most of my adult life immersed in Spanish-speaking environments far north of the border.

Now, in planning for my retirement, I have started a slow process of moving my assets, years in advance of moving myself, to Guatemala. Am I actually becoming a Guatemalan? When I wrote Carlos about my plans, about the little piece of land I just bought in Ciudad Vieja, just outside of Antigua, and the camper I am having towed down to be installed on my land as if it were a mobile home, he replied that *“you have been hanging around Guatemalans for too long. Only Hispanics would do that, not exactly sure why but thinking it will work out one way or another.”* Exactly.

The deep divide between north and south can be defined and described in many ways, counted and quantified in socio-economic statistics, but in the end I believe it all comes down to a cultural difference which is clearly reflected in the languages, or, even more specifically, in the grammars. Hispanics who speak Spanish tend to live much more than English-speakers in the subjunctive mood, in a world of what if and I wish that.

The subjunctive has almost entirely disappeared in English, which prefers the indicative to express facts and observations about the “real” and physical world in which we live. The subjunctive can be heard in English when used by those who know the rule of contrary-to-fact expressions as with “I wish I were rich.” In Spanish, the subjunctive is still ever-present, even if those using it don’t know the grammar rules they are following. It is part of everyday speech because it expresses everyday life. Reality in the subjunctive mood is interior, whatever you imagine it to be, mysterious and magical, determined by luck or God’s plan, full of spirits and spiritualism, metaphysical, or what is often described as surreal.

Illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central America live in the US as if they were here legally. The very basis of their existence is subjunctive, and this

influences not just what they say and how they say it, but how they think, dream, imagine, hope, and live their lives. When you do not have what you want or need, it is easier to live and speak as if you did. How can Americans who live in the indicative even begin to understand what that means? Few Americans study the Spanish language to a high enough level to learn the subjunctive mood as a grammar topic, and even fewer will come to understand the cultural implications.

Maybe this helps to explain why immigration from the south continues to be such a divisive issue. The gap in comprehension cannot be bridged by high school Spanish or workplace English. The basic lack of understanding generates strong feelings and negative reactions on both sides, but living in the subjunctive mood is no less valid a way of life than what US culture has produced. Being different is not the same as being wrong. We could all benefit by trying to see the world from the flip side, from our neighbor's point of view.

The US/Mexican border is no longer a real dividing line between our two countries. There are millions of people who are stretched out along the border who flow back and forth daily, who live blended lives and speak a blended language. But there are also many people from south of that line who are now firmly rooted far to the north on this side, and, though it may not make the headlines, there are lots of people like myself from north of the border who have found a home in the south. The border is now, in fact, everywhere, and it is everywhere blurred. It only comes into focus with a change of mood, subjunctive to indicative, indicative to subjunctive.