



My Parents: Mexican Marriage Heroes

My parents were married in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1977. Shortly after their wedding, two things happened. First, my mother's parents crossed the border to live in Texas and second, my mother succumbed to a deep depression.

It's unclear what triggered it: perhaps the shock of marriage after being sheltered by her parents now far away, or possibly the hormonal revolutions during her pregnancy with me. Whatever the cause, she became ill at a time when depression was not well understood. My siblings were born a year, two, and five years later and she grew steadily worse. Unknown to us, she sank into bipolar depression. My parent's relationship became very difficult and my father became convinced that she could not take care of us the children.

For the sake of the family, my father made up his mind to get a divorce. But before he did that, he traveled to his hometown of Uruapan to tell his mother about the decision. His relationship with her was strong even though he had left home to live on his own many years before.

He started to tell her about his decision, when my grandmother interrupted him and answered with a great deal of affection: *"My son, I know that you are in great pain and if I were here to speak only as your mother I might tell you 'You are right, leave that woman and straighten out your life.' But I am here to speak to you in the name of God: you took that girl from her parents' home to the altar and there you promised to love her and respect her all the days of your life. No conditions attached. Not if "all went right." So that is what you are going to do, aware that on this decision your happiness depends in this life and the next. So, my son, you'll forget those plans forever, go back home, buy your wife a nice gift, ask her for forgiveness, and be a husband to her and a father to your children."*

So he did. However, life did not change. Increasingly, my mother would say that she could never be happy in Mexico. So, my father saw no way forward but to move the family to Texas to be closer to my mother's 2 parents, with the hope that it would help my mother come out of her despair. So my father left a successful career, a comfortable lifestyle, everything he knew –his family, friends, and language– to try to save his marriage.

Life in the United States did not improve my mother's condition. I remember vividly that those years were harrowing. A number of times, my mother's death was right around the corner. Her mental afflictions affected her metabolism, and she was dangerously thin. In those circumstances, performing the daily tasks of a wife and mother of four young children was exceedingly hard. To her tremendous credit, she always did what she had to do, despite feeling so much despair and inability.

She got angry with us easily, and daily life was rough. Being close to my grandmother helped to raise us children, but it was not a solution to her depression. Moreover, my father was not able to find work in his area of professional expertise, and when the family's savings ran out, he only found a job doing what many other Mexican immigrants do: repair and handyman work for a large office complex.

Never before had my father worked like that. At one point, an uncle came to visit us. Looking at our new circumstances he said to my dad, "*You went from being a first class citizen in a third world country to being a third class citizen in a first world country.*" Our economic status had become much lower than we were used to and my parents could not afford health insurance. However, they managed to save some money and now and then sought advice from psychologists and psychiatrists. My parents did not like the therapies they proposed.

During my youth, my mother was sometimes scary, but most of the time quiet, as if she had retreated within herself. I remember two moments of crisis in particular when I ran to a bedroom, locked the door and called my father at work in fear. Both times he coached me and my siblings through the crisis with the following words: "*Remember: This is not your mother. Your mother is an angel. I married a beautiful woman. What you see is a disease--a disease that has totally overtaken your mother. Stay calm. This will pass.*"

And true to his word, every few months or so we would catch a glimpse of that angel, the loving, sweet woman she was, who covered us in kisses and tucked us in bed, who held us closely and consoled us as only a mother can, before she was overcome with her depression again. My father's script helped us to understand our mother, appreciate her when she resurfaced, and understand the sacrifices she was making just to get out of bed and prepare us breakfast each morning. We had to mature very fast growing up with mom.

This went on until I left for college. I had the wonderful privilege of attending an Ivy League school. But at home, my parents and grandparents were lost, not knowing what to do. After so many years of illness, mom was so thin that one of her brothers, a physician, came to visit us and told my father very directly: "*she will soon start a downward spiral descent from which nobody will be able to help her. Do something now.*" My father asked for help from everybody. And after more trial and error, my parents finally found a psychiatrist who was able to identify the right cocktail of medicines to help mother come out of her depression. I came home for Christmas break my freshman year to find my mother recovered. To my great shock and awe, she had become –full time—the angel my father had always said she was. She still had (and

has) some endearing idiosyncrasies about her, but her cheer and energy returned and she continues to be an absolute joy to be around. Moreover, she apologizes all the time for the mistakes she made during our childhood, and my siblings and I constantly tell her that she has been forgiven a million times over and to stop apologizing! For their part, my parents experienced a rebirth in their married love that would make you sick to see today. They are inseparable lovebirds, and you would never believe the hell they went through for the first twenty years of their marriage.

The second thing that happened towards the end of my college years was that I learned to appreciate my family despite the difficulties we experienced. Growing up, I was mostly embarrassed about my home life, but towards the end of my university years this changed. Four years of college allowed me to have many girlfriends with patterns of self-destructive behavior, which I could not explain except for the fact that they came from broken homes. Whether in the form of binge drinking or callous sexual liaisons, eating disorders, or kleptomania, I realized that no amount of wealth, private schooling, or famous last name, could give a girl what I had had: the training in human love that a child receives from a mother and father who stay together in challenging circumstances.

My parents showed me what unconditional love is: loving someone in sickness and in health, in richness and in poverty, in good times and in bad. I realize now that their example of unconditional fidelity gave me a core sense of security, a feeling of safety and strength that came from seeing unconditional love in action. I saw that no matter what life sends us, we can be loved, and are *capable* of loving others greatly. I internalized the idea that I would always be loved and wanted, no matter what kinds of grades I made, how I looked, how much money I had, or how many mistakes I made personally. I think this training in human love made me resilient to life's difficulties and helped me to find a stable love later in life.

I would go further. I don't think I would have a stable life at all if my parents had separated. I cannot bear to think of what would have happened if my father had left us, for instance if my mother and grandmother had raised us. I know in my heart that—wonderful as my grandmother was—I would not have been able to cope well being separated from my father. Nor could grandma teach us how to deal with my mother's dark side. It was my father's strength and chivalrous perseverance, his encouragement, his own humble submission to the reality of his marriage, that enabled me and my siblings to learn how to do the same.

And if my father had taken us away from my mother, for instance to be raised with the help of his mother, or even (I shudder to think) if he had gotten together with another woman to raise us, I would have been taught that when life gets hard, we can turn our backs on people who need us and look for an easier way without them.

I believe my parents are marriage heroes, Mexican marriage heroes. I hope their story will touch other marriages and that more of our nation's children will experience what I was given, a married mother and father, who stay together through thick and thin and teach their children that

unconditional love *is* possible and helps us achieve *great things* together—despite our brokenness and the countless difficulties that life will send us.

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