

# Love and Fear *Entre Raza*

I watched the women as they gathered in a circle for the retreat - twenty Latinas chosen from applicants all over the country. I studied their faces. Some swirled out Spanish as they introduced themselves, some threw out Spanish words with double meanings, and many laughed. I saw the ever so subtle dart of an eye, squirm in a chair, nervous chuckle. The moderator had the good sense to ask if anyone did not speak Spanish. A few raised their hands barely shoulder high, and pulled them down again before anyone could count.

A familiar sadness washed over me as I witnessed the phenomenon that many Latinos experience repeatedly but rarely admit - the love/fear relationship we have with each other. Because these are the people, the only people, who can tell us that we are not Latino enough. These are the people who can measure our latinismo and rank our legitimacy within our group.

When speaking with Latinos and Latinas with whom I have built relationships and trust, it's the thing we whisper to each other when we feel safe - that as difficult as racism and other oppressions are, for many it's the judgment that happens *entre raza* that flattens us, paralyzes us, and tempts us to entertain the delusion that it is easier to be around dominant culture white people than each other.

Our withdrawal is insidious as we convince ourselves that we can no longer relate, trapping us in the no-win dilemma that has us, on the one hand, longing for each other and, on the other hand, fearful of being hurt by the ranking within our group. Some of us flip the reaction to the pretense of "super Latino". But it comes from the same fear and our loss is still great because we can never be fully ourselves or get too close, lest we reveal a crack in the image.

Healing from my grief around this phenomenon has been an ongoing process, allowing me to see ever more clearly what it really is, and to discover evolving insights about how to resolve it.

First, I believe, we must be brutally honest that this ominous dynamic does exist and identify how it plays out within our cultural context.

Second, we must operate from a no shame/no blame assumption that we have all been both victims and perpetrators of the behavior.

Third, we must understand that this is not an element of our culture, but rather a predictable product of oppression stemming from the propensity of targets of oppression to internalize our mistreatment and then reenact the disrespect within our own group.

Fourth and finally, we must do the grieving as a pathway to healing, and rediscover collective self-love, which leads to universal connection. Like the paradox about individual love - that you cannot love someone else more than you love yourself - I believe that relearning collective self-love promotes our ability to respect and appreciate other groups, and transcends us to inclusiveness.

During the retreat, as the Latinas came to understand the dynamics of internalized oppression, they dared to face and diminish their fear of each other, bringing safety and healing. I was comforted and reassured by their ability to forgive and honor themselves and one another and extrapolate from the process an enhanced understanding of other groups. I was inspired and deeply touched by their emerging authenticity and the vision that, as Latinos, we can all come home, be real, and fall in love with ourselves and each other again.



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