The Socially Proactive Vacation

Chiapas, Mexico, July 27, 1998

The descendants of the Mayan empire are fighting Huey helicopters with machetes. The Zapatista rebellion began on January 1, 1994.

From every western nation visitors have swarmed through the craft markets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, the old colonial city, on their way to the archeological destinations and the lovely lakes. Tourists who travel to the ancient ruins wonder at the magnificence of a civilization destroyed by the Spanish conquest. The sites are vacant, haunting.

Few wonder where those Indians are now, who they are now. 500 years of resistance have passed. The Mexican government supports museums and ruins, and continues the policy of extermination.

In 1998 the favorite street purchases are tiny dolls depicting Subcomandante Marcos, and Comandanta Ramona. A struggle by the indigenous peoples and campesinos has captured the world's imagination.

I'm wearing my big sun-hat, silver earrings, and belted shirt: I am a typical sixty-three year old gringa shopper. With a different destination.

Our group is the Chiapas Media Project. Our travel plan is to leave our hotel in San Cristóbal late Tuesday night, hoping to avoid the 158 military checkpoints, the 57 state police units, the 25

immigration checkpoints and the five judicial police headquarters situated in Chiapas, at 28,528 square miles a state smaller than South Carolina. Of Mexico's total military force, 60% patrols Chiapas where the Zapatista rebellion has no means to fight, and refuses to die.

Into the project's van we pile with all our personal luggage, plus the video cameras we carried on our flight from Boston for donation to the Zapatista communities. In remote rural workshops, elected members of the indigenous communities learn how to use video cameras to document their way of life and their stories. The leaders of the educational Chiapas Media Project carry letters assuring the military that they have a right to travel. However, they are a bit more careful than most educators, because cameras can also be used to record attacks, murders, crop-burnings, and destruction of homes and animals. The indigenous communities have suffered 190 military actions, with 57 paramilitary executions, in this year alone.

Remember Rodney King?

In the van we are four senior citizen "tourists" from the USA, two young Americans in their twenties, a Professor of Government from the mid-west, a Mexican-American named Yo Ann from Los Angeles, the American videographer who founded the project, her Canadian co-leader, and four Mexicans. Mexicans can travel freely in their own country. We Americans are along for the project leaders in case the group is stopped, as a deterrent to dirty tricks, and to witness any harassment. The tactic of the Mexican government most recently is to expel foreigners suspected of "political" involvement, i.e., sympathizing with the Zapatistas. Foreigners are intercepted, interrogated, put on a plane out. The most recent leader of our project, Tom Hansen, left Mexico this way after two days of being held incommunicado despite a search effort by the US ambassador.

We bounce along the two-lane road in the blackness through the mountainous countryside. With hideous prophetic cries the van grinds painfully upward for six hours, the last two hours on unpaved spine-ravaging trails, as we try to doze in the cramped seats, breathing the exhaust fumes sifting in to us.

But this time we successfully reach the first of the Aguascalientes on our itinerary, the Francisco Gómez Autonomous Municipality encampment.

In Chiapas there are five Aguascalientes, each the municipal communications and training center for a region roughly defined by its dominant indigenous language, each under siege by the government, each a miracle of native organizing and stoic determination to protect their lush lands from privatization, exploitative timber cutting and speculation by rich landowners. Thirty-two Zapatista towns have declared autonomy. Each is subject to a campaign of disruption, psychological warfare, and death, that is reminiscent of North America's historic wars on our Native American tribes. The motives certainly are the same—greed for the Indians' land, the necessity to efface their languages and cultures in order to privatize the communal areas still left to them in the resource-richest state in Mexico.

After the difficult sleepless night dawn comes, as it will. Security guards at Francisco Gómez examine our passports, and the van enters the gate. Bienvenido al Pueblo Francisco Gómez Nuevo Municipio Indigena Territorio Rebelde Zapatista the sign reads. The people are happy and proud to claim they are Zapatistas. As a Bostonian with no special political qualifications, I am honored to be admitted to the heart of the Zapatista rebellion. And all I have done is contribute one video camera and sign away my two weeks summer vacation.

Slinging our gear on our backs, we climb down from the van at 5:30 A.M. into a different world.

We're surrounded by fog-drenched mountains, moisture dripping not-quite rain. A rooster crows, setting the chickens about their business. Half a dozen small black and tan piglets trot through the yard. The fenced and guarded compound is perhaps one-fourth the size of the Boston Public Garden; outside its confines lie the thatch-roofed homes of the closest community, their few horses and cattle. In the dawning light we are taken to the compound's three main wood sheds, about fifty feet long and with corrugated tin roofs pro-

tecting the dirt floors. We can choose to sleep in our sleeping bags on benches in the first shed, or in our hammocks in the third shed. George and I choose the hammocks; I was afraid of falling off the bench if I rolled over. Sleeping in a hammock, and especially in a sleeping bag in a hammock, is an acrobatic accomplishment. The guys help string the hammocks, a first time for most of us, with a certain amount of knotting, unknotting and cursing. The hammocks sag and twirl from the beams. I install my unzipped bag lengthwise along the net. It falls out. I dust it off, install it again, and hold it while I perch on the edge of the hammock. I untie my boots with one hand, kick them off and sling my legs up. Violent rocking. Grab the net under my butt and pull it around me. Careful zipping.

Finally, wrapped in our hammock nets like so many colored bananas, we're ready to sleep amid the radio's Mariachi music blaring in defiance, a racket of birds and the barking of dogs.

Between the two sleeping sheds stands the one reserved for meetings, a sloping "amphitheater" of rough-cut wooden benches pegged onto the dirt floor, with a stage area in front. Summer is the rainy season. Mud, dust and insects are pervasive. One night a toad creeps under the rough boards into our shed, and on the next night a snake trespasses, much to its regret.

For those who seek four-star accommodations, this isn't it. The sanitary facilities rely entirely on buckets filled from faucets which blessedly still work. The appearance of flush toilets, and showers and sinks is deceptive. The compound has four working faucets, two at the "bathroom" and two at the "kitchen." The lack of hot water is forgivable in the hot summer sun. Electric light is available in naked bulbs overhead. A luxury, for the compound only.

At eight A.M. we roll out of our hammocks to see the first of the day's government military convoys rumble by filled with soldiers standing with their rifles pointing outward. Across the dirt road from our encampment are the community's chosas, the thatch-roof houses. The encampment is absolutely bold and defiant; a thumb in the government's eye. The indigenous communities will not willingly give up their land and customs.

I look about. Perhaps seventeen small slender men stand in the mud and grass. At the roadside, a Human Rights team of youngsters, mostly from Europe, sit from dawn to dusk to count passing military vehicles. I'm reminded of the Midwest, where the day's activity might be only to watch the trains go by. Across the road the chosas send up cooking smoke, matching the fog steaming off the mountains in the first sun. A red hen with four chicks bobs past us. The Human Rights observers are the true heroes among travelers to trouble spots. They can actually do little but observe, stationed by the road. They are allowed no political activity; to occupy their time they clean the latrine stalls, play chess with the children, start up an occasional game of soccer. And watch. And count. And count. And watch. The community's right to exist is very likely saved by their presence. The Zapatista leadership's weapons are humor, poetry and an appeal to the Mexican people. Their strategy, even as the government pours millions of dollars into repression, has won the hearts of people the world over. Perhaps because unmitigated private ownership and élitism has found its limits.

The idea of community is not foreign to our hearts. Nobody suggests that the US government divide Yellowstone National Park into one acre lots for sale to real estate developers. Nor are we unable to tolerate a city, town or rural community which uses an alternative method of self-governance: a mayor, or town meeting, or a Board of Aldermen. So why the enormous problem in Chiapas?

During the month of July President Ernesto Zedillo visited Chiapas for the sixth time this year. From an orange grove in the Lacandon jungle, Zedillo promised agricultural subsidies to raise living standards. And in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Zedillo handed out thousands of dollars to help communities market their handicraft projects and repeated his administration's intention of seeking a political solution to the conflict. Chiapas, with a population of 3.6 million people, has received more federal aid than any other state during Zedillo's administration. The government has spent $90 million to buy and redistribute land in Chiapas. This year alone, the government will spend $90 million in agricultural

subsidies in the state.

So what's the problem?

Poor Indians who leave the ranks of the Zapatista rebels can look forward to food, agricultural credits for coffee crops, and perhaps a haircut in one of the Mexican Army's "social labor" camps. They will also lose their land, their traditional social Uses and Customs, their self-sufficiency, their community, their language. Like Indians in the USA, they will depend on federal handouts, or vanish into the mainstream. Thus far there are few takers.

The struggle in Chiapas wears two faces: the public and the covert. Zedillo, like politicians everywhere, must dance to the tune piped by the Mexican oligarchy while guarding himself from criticism by the USA which promotes NAFTA and the IMF. While supplying military aid to ensure the stability demanded by US business interests, the US Congress must also beware an outcry against Human Rights violations.

We are the outcry.

What four and a half years ago was a brief fight between the ragtag Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN, and Mexico's powerful army, has become a political standoff and a moral disgrace.

A cement basketball court with netless hoops decays beside the cement and stucco toilet building, the outside wall decorated with a handsome mural of Emiliano Zapata. The Human Rights workers have sleeping quarters for their hammocks, and a tiny kitchen where one young woman is kind enough to offer me a cup of sweetened black coffee from their private supply. Our project brought our own food also; the community cannot afford extra mouths.

We set about lifting our boxes of provisions out of the van, while the women, Yo Ann from Los Angeles and Mara from Oaxaca, search for soap to scrub rust and bugs from the cooking tubs. Everything must be cooked in an open thatched shed over wood fires. Water must be brought in as ours was, and when it's exhausted the next best precaution will be adding iodine drops to the community's faucet water. Today's breakfast scheduled for 10:00

A.M. never happens. We struggle with the logistics of the three pots, the cast iron pail suspended by a wire hook, the long sticks for stirring, three smoking fires, no kitchen utensils or furnishings.

Okay. We each purchase a plastic bowl and crackers when the tiny communal store opens. George and I had both carried with us plastic spoons and Swiss Army knives. Part of the kitchen team, we provide the only tools to peel and chop vegetables.

So begins our participation in the Cat and Mouse game. Surely the military knows we're here but we pretend we're afraid they'll find out; they pretend they know - or do they know - or don't they know? It's an odd relief when the day's helicopter surveillance begins. One of the happier moments of subsequent days came when, as the choppers dipped low over the compound, half a dozen persons ran out carrying video cameras to record them. So much for using US military aid only for drug interdiction.

But we had been eating our first meal! Scrambled eggs with chili sauce scooped up with tortillas! I am starved, and embarrassed to be so hungry. The men who come and go daily eat nothing, it seems, but the corn paste they carry in their packs. They carry thin plastic bowls and these they fill with tap water. Into the tap water they stir with their hands the corn paste. The result is similar to drinking cornstarch. It apparently sustains these slender small men from each village who come to fulfill their tour of civic duty, called a cargo, an institution older than the Conquest. Each community sends five men for three days of service, often by foot over a considerable distance - five hours, eight hours. The service is primarily guard duty, but later this week the Francisco Gómez compound expects more than 200 additional guests. Visitor-delegates from all parts of Mexican civil society will meet this week at all the Aguascalientes to respond to a call from the Zapatista Subcommandante Marcos. "We're here; we're alive," wrote the famous ski-masked spokesperson in his Fifth Declaration from the Selva. With the government betraying the accords it signed with the rebels, and seemingly determined to destroy the autonomous indigenous communities, Marcos hopes that the intervention of civil society will forestall devastation. Indeed, it's

only the presence of foreigners and roused civilians that prevents further massacres. The Mexican government's deniability rests on two absurd claims: that the paramilitaries are not armed by the government, and that the Indians engage in some phantasmagorical Hatfield and McCoy feud, killing each other.

So the men on civic duty rotate daily. I watch a line of about thirty small wiry men and boys carry out of the forest bundles of thatch. Other men appear with poles, cutting them neatly into lengths with their machetes. Heavier timber is set into the ground for roof support. In a clear area behind the Human Rights quarters they set to work. They build a latrine, a perfect engineering miracle. The 200 expected guests will be accommodated.

The splendid beauty of this countryside shines like the hand of God extended just beyond our fingertips. The compound sits in a dish within the Lacandon selva, something between a jungle and a rain forest in the Sierra Madre Occidental. Forest-covered mountains loom on every side. Their green blanket gleams as pristine as the Garden of Eden, the air perfect although the water is not.

At mid-day the summer sun sears everything beneath it, drying out the mud. Men rest on the ground in the sparse shade of the buildings, or sleep in their hammocks in one of the sheds, or sit on benches on the "basketball court." When clouds abruptly blow over us the temperature suddenly dips. The dogs come to life, and inside the cooking shed get stepped on and squeal. Torrents of rain plunge down onto the tin roofs and the ground surges once again with water and mud.

Another helicopter. It's now 3:30. Another military truck, 5:15. Nine trucks daily by my count.

The men from the Human Rights team set up goal posts and begin a soccer game. Emiliano Zapata from his mural watches genially. The players in rubber boots slide and fall in the mud. One guy in rubber sandals goes down. In minutes they're all coated with mud. We observers cheer and applaud each goal. Lots of cameras appear. The hilarity kindles in me a sense of desperation. In fact,

we're imprisoned in the ambivalence of hope and stoicism, beauty and poverty, the riches and illness of the land. The night patrol sets out for the hills.

In the morning I hear the whippoorwill. The night never quiets; men come and go. But in exhaustion we sleep until the freshest of fog-drenched dawns. On our first day the plan of instruction with the videos gets implemented. The project feeds not only ourselves, but those who arrive from the surrounding communities to take the four-day course of instruction. Mara, a tiny woman whose profession is social anthropology, burns her fingers trying to tend the cooking fires. There are no plates, or coffee cups; the deftest hands try dipping empty tin cans into the vat of coffee. No spoons. Instead, there are swarms of butterflies, magical as a fable by Garcia Marquez, black or golden, hovering around us. We crack eggs and hurl them into the hot oil. Eyes run from the wood smoke. I bring antiseptic from my first aid kit for Mara's finger. Blessedly, a ladle has materialized for stirring the scrambled egg and chili dish. Yo Ann is cooking forty eggs for our project's participants. She climbs and straddles the raised hearth, sturdy as an earth-goddess. Incredibly patient, the newcomers who traveled all night wait to be offered tortillas and eggs, white bread and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Zapatista communities are squeezed to the limit. They often rely on "caravans" of food and clothing brought by Mexican and foreign sympathizers.

This community can supply its own food if the paramilitaries don't come to destroy the young corn or the animals. Fruit trees bear, and chili grows. Nothing gets wasted. This is a society for whom trash is a new concept. The pigs devour pits and cores, cobs and husks and eggshells, but there's no animal to eat paper trash or tin cans. We collect it in a corner, and shoo away the dogs. There's no cash exchanged here save for the three tiny stores; community members must go outside to earn whatever they can. The community tractor squats helplessly beside the cook shed with a flat tire.
Children pop into our midst. The women are invisible during the day, tending their homes and gardens and babies. Next to the

cooking shed stands a church, another wood plank shed with a tin roof. Its identity is marked by the omnipresent Mexican cut-plastic streamers strung over the door. The three tiny shops open at various hours, seemingly on a random schedule. We buy Fanta in the hot afternoon.

The military vehicles rumble past. The helicopters buzz us. The landscape beckons to a lyrical pasture with horses grazing across the road. The thatch-roof chosas beyond the fence resemble a scene from the South Seas, a Gaugin painting. A woman appears in the yard carrying a child in the traditional robozo, a shawl tied around the mother's body to form a sling. The baby girl is wearing a multicolored bonnet sewn of ribbons and ruffles. She peers out at the world with curious black eyes. The mother is barefoot. The fabulous black butterflies hover around her, the golden butterflies dip and soar.

In the thin bar of shade I perch on a plank propped with rocks against the shed. The time again is noon. Rain clouds travel toward us on a sweet breeze. I'm making friends with a boy who has accompanied his father on cargo. The boy's home language is Tzetzal, but like the other children he learns Spanish in school. I teach him in English, "What's your name?" The next day I am approached by other little boys, "What's your name? What's your name?"

At 5:30 uninvited horses surge into the compound, followed by a troop of women, children, and young fellows who strike up a basketball game. The children play marbles on the cement outside the bathroom, or rock themselves in a ragged metal trough. Suddenly the scene is so lively, so thronged I am astonished. In twenty minutes the chosas on either side disgorge their stream of women and children and the compound becomes a village square. The women have come for their weekly community planning meeting. Four military trucks filled with armed soldiers roll by. And then the torrent of rain! Everyone dashes for cover, the butterflies vanish. Four horses stand like statues while the rain drenches their coats.

Inside the video shed the workshop continues with an avid audience of children - almost all boys again. Some wear rubber

boots, some are barefoot. All are underdressed in cheap ragged store-bought clothes. There's no such thing as a plump child.

The shrilling of a whistle interrupts at 6:00. Men rise. My heart slows after I realize the whistle was not an alarm call but a routine summons to the men's meeting. The class continues. The rain stops again. The horses have vanished and now the pigs are grazing in their stead. People go and come. Everything to me is mysterious, charged with hidden meanings. A woman enters the workshop space with a tiny baby in her rebozo. The woman is very young, and lovely. She has adorned her seven month old girl with thin, plastic, many-colored bracelets, seven on each tiny wrist.

A dozen new men arrive, all wearing hats. These hats represent the summit in wealth.

The hatted men head out carrying packs and machetes. One woman tells me they are another replacement three-day team, going into the mountains. The military convoy has already passed. Another shed is under construction for the meeting. The men deftly wield their machetes to bevel the board edges used for siding. George gives it a try. The men cheerfully acknowledge his amateur efforts and laugh.

We are permitted to stroll outside the compound, carefully carrying as we always do our passports and visas. The land is so rich it's easy to imagine centuries of self-sustaining small crop farming. Meat is provided by cattle, pigs, chickens. The children don't drink milk after weaning at about age two; no milk cows. We wander down into the trees adorned with jungle vines and plants, past the large grey cattle that resemble oxen. The ground squelches. Soon we are hidden from the road. In a shaded dell we discover the small river winding a twisted course. Children swim in one of its pools, but we don't risk it. Despite the heat and the sensuous temptation we are aware of the animal run-off and the lack of sanitation.

I think it's Friday. The latrine is complete, lashed to the support poles and neatly thatched. The church is opened and swept clean. Ditches for drainage around the sleeping sheds are deepened so the floors rise like islands. Our shed is visited by a threadbare turkey

chick, too many mosquitoes. Each morning my forehead is freckled with fresh bites; I look like I have measles.

Another group arrives from the outlying villages to help with the preparations for the upcoming meeting. It's the anniversary of the march to Mexico when 1,111 people showed their support for the Zapatistas. With great good humor on both sides we pretend to learn some words of Tzetzal. "What's your name?" Everyone laughs.

Church service is conducted in Tzetzal. The "priest" is a catechist in street clothes. The men fill one side of the tiny church, the women the other, immaculate with their black lace shawls and braided hair. We sit on the usual plank benches close to the ground. The children wander about while we pray. No music, no statues, no wine. The Zapatistas don't use alcohol. No icons, no candles. In my grubby dust-stained clothes I rise with them. I sit when they sit. I can't understand the words, but I understand.

Two little boys creep into the cooking area. Soon two more children appear. We can't feed them all so we feed none. When I pare a pineapple, the scraps of rind disappear from under my fingers. Garbage goes out for the pigs, fallen crumbs are gobbled by the hungry dogs. The children stare, solemn and patient. Most are barefoot and in rags. Two sisters wear matching dresses of red and green. I remember my own two little girls of long ago in matching dresses of red and green. These girls' ragged buttonless dresses are adorned with rags of lace at the collar. A few of the adult men have leather boots and jeans instead of cheap orlon trousers. The men speak among themselves in Tzetzal. They are experts at building cooking fires, and stacks of kindling are appearing along one wall for the group coming. The men offer a taste of their bowls of cornmeal. George and I risk the tap water to taste the gruel. They laugh when we swallow and pretend it's good.

Daily breakfast for the men is tortillas. For us it's eggs scrambled in oil with chopped vegetables. Dinner is tortillas and rice. I walk around with toilet tissue in my pockets.

For those of us who are not involved in teaching video film-making,

we have our kitchen duty and a lot of time to "observe." A major activity is washing one's clothes or one's body, with the buckets of water toted behind a discreet curtain. The showers that once were here have ceased to work, along with the sinks and toilets. There are no resources to spare for repairs.

Two men lead into the compound a horse laden with bags of cornmeal. Suddenly I realize the older children clutch by the hand their younger siblings. The military convoy passes, and the children unfreeze. Men unload the horse.

On our final night we plan once again to travel at four A.M. to avoid checkpoints. The community has planned a celebration that includes a formal screening of the first video productions. There I am in living color, peeling vegetables! Another production shows the video project. George and I are actors. I see us climbing onto the van with our packs, and then a view of the van's slow arrival on the dirt road. I see myself in the group getting off the van in my big hat. After we all descend three little boys suddenly pop out the van door. What a giveaway! The scene was a staged reenactment! Everyone laughs. Clearly the first videos are a big success.

Then the ceremony of presentation. The cameras are accepted by a man wearing a Zapatista kerchief over his face. The audience includes all the single girls and young men who are awaiting the start of the dance. The thanks on both sides are slow and formal. George speaks for us. He says we are honored to be there.

The dance is held on the cracked cement of the basketball court. The unmarried girls look spotless, with flowers in their hair and ribbons in their braids. They stand on one side of the court like girls at a Senior Prom. The fellows stand on the opposite side. The community band plays. Unless a woman leaves or dies, this is her life.

George and I are the first to dance. I am wearing my blue poncho in the rain, holding it spread to each side like a ball gown. Laughing, we whirl around in front of the astonished crowd, and then retire, gracefully I hope. We hear the band playing for several hours into the night, with a sweet tenor voice floating on the breeze. Finally another downpour ends the festivities. We sway in our hammocks,

wrapped like fruit. After the hubbub of voices, music and smashing rain we manage to sleep for an hour before departure time.

At 4:20 A.M. we are scarcely half a mile down the dark road when the military intercepts us.

As tourists we Americans let our Mexican friends do the talking. We have with us one Zapatista man who asked for a lift part-way back to his home to avoid some miles of hiking. He's frightened, his tenseness giving off an electricity felt across the aisle. The soldiers beam their flashlights around the dark van, hitting each of us in the face. The light passes over all the luggage, and returns to us. We show our passports. The soldiers seem inclined only to delay us so that the immigration checkpoints will be open when we pass.

Meanwhile the soldiers laboriously copy our names and passport numbers into their notebooks. What happens to these lists? All the officials write and consult lists, but as far as we know there's no centralized system for computerizing them. Intimidation, mostly. On this road half a mile from the compound they must know where we've come from. It's difficult to pretend we're on the way to see the archeological ruins at 4:00 o'clock in the morning. Besides, there are no ruins in this area.

Our USA passports and presence pays off. After half an hour the van is released and we grind away in the familiar fumes, thirteen people, and video cameras and props for the next community.
By dawn the van is in trouble.

Cara says, "I'm starting to get omens."

The van backfires twice, a sound too similar to gunshots, and finally the engine dies. We're stranded in the mountains above the Aguascalientes of Morelia. The men make an effort to mend the vehicle but it's not going to respond. The sun is getting hot. I try to sleep. Some of the crew gets out and pretend they're sunbathing on the Riviera. A military truck goes by and ignores us—just another crippled van on the road. One of the Mexicans sets out on foot to get assistance.

Eventually two local minibuses appear to rescue us. But the choices in heavy daylight are not good. The project divides in half.

The two video leaders will go ahead with the cameras and try to make it through to Morelia. From the North American team a seventy-three year old woman activist, and Cara, the twenty-five year old, go with them. Mara, who is from Oaxaca, goes. Two of the Mexican men, Ricardo and Paco, must stay with the van while Juan tries to find a mechanic in the next village. The rest of us climb into the other minibus to ride back to San Cristóbal accompanied by Yo Ann, the fire-stoker and goddess-cook.

It is Sunday and we are intercepted only once. At noon on our way to visit the lakes at Montebello.

In the hotel in San Cristóbal de las Casas we strip off our filthy clothes and bathe. Luxury. I throw away one pair of pants and a shirt torn beyond redemption, but everything else can be restored at the local laundry. My next step is to call my daughter who forty years ago wore a green dress with a lace collar. We're safe, and except for exhaustion and the expected diarrhea, well. Our biggest concern is the other half of our team—would they make it back?

The next night they appear, again passing the closed immigration posts after midnight. They had gone to Morelia, the second of the Aguascalientes on our itinerary, with the video cameras, completed a workshop and left the cameras as planned. The next workshops will teach the women, because if their men are fighting or killed, the women must cope alone. There will also be a workshop on computer use, and a donation of computers.

The team returned with the van repaired, and so now the decision must to be made whether or not to try for the third Aguascalientes, Oventic. In my heart I am ambivalent. It's a great honor to do good deeds, but as a famous philosopher has said, Every good deed must be punished. I secretly hope for three days of strolling through the city, eating at restaurants, showering daily and buying ridiculous souvenirs like any other tourist. We know which craft shops provide outlet for the women's cooperatives, and I want a little doll of Ramona, the indigenous woman leader in the rebellion. I want a new pair of pants and a new shirt.

The decision is voted, to not push our luck. We are all unscathed,

and this week eleven hundred Mexicans travel the roads toward the Aguascalientes, along with the hundreds of foreigners who are trying to accompany them to the meetings. As a result, the level of military surveillance is inordinately high, even for a state which is already overwhelmed with 70,000 troops. More important, the communities will be burdened with guests and too busy with the life-and-death decisions to come, to send attendees to video workshops. Instead, we can meet with local groups in San Cristóbal who support the peace effort.

I'm greatly relieved.

For those who want to undertake a journey of social responsibility, the first requisite in many cases is money —many organizations assisting the Zapatistas and the peace effort want medicines, expertise and equipment. For those who can stay longer than a two week vacation, human rights observers and peace camp participants can offer their time. The organization Pastors for Peace sends caravans of supplies and needs people to go with their trucks.

We spend much of the next three days visiting the most active non-government organizations: the stalwart Frey Bartolomé Centro por Derechos Humanos (Center for Human Rights) provides us with an overview of the history of the repression of the Indians. At Enlace we are informed about the Human Rights situation by a lawyer whose main activity is trying to negotiate for the release of political prisoners held by the Mexican government. Another organization is staffed by young volunteers for up to a year's duty. They are SIPAZ, (Servicio Internacional Para la Paz) International Service for Peace, an ecumenical church group. A woman from Germany discusses their struggles to bring reconciliation between Catholic and Protestant denominations. Missionary work over the years has contributed to the segmentation of the indigenous communities, leading to feuds, burnings, and expulsions. A hill-side slum created by fleeing expulsados, people pushed out of their homes, perches above San Cristóbal. The havoc is compounded by political divisions. The government's divide and conquer strategy supports Catholics who vote for PRI candidates and expel Zapatistas. Perhaps the

expulsados' slum plight is better than that of the war refugees, about 19,000, who took to the mountains when the military occupied their lands. The refugees are dying in the jungle.

We visit the local church of Santo Domingo where the project Melel Xojobal (The Splendor of Truth) maintains a school for street children and weekly prepares and disseminates news of the struggle. It documents the government's actions, the murders, the massacres. The news is carried by hand to the furthest communities, sent by internet, published in the native languages for translation.

The worried believe that government spies photograph everyone who enters and leaves. Maybe so. We try to move away from doorways quickly.

Most impressive, we have an audience with the Diócesis of Samuel Ruiz, the bishop who has figured prominently in the peace talks. The bishop is away, his Vicar General Felipe Toussaint invites us to the cathedral.

Liberation Theology is alive and well despite the church in Rome taking away half of Ruiz's jurisdiction. Over his years of service he has come to be a champion of the poor and oppressed, espousing a politically neutral position which of course cannot be politically neutral. The Diócesis serves 1.5 million persons, distributed among 2,000 communities, the majority rural and indigenous, home to seven native languages. Ruiz's new co-bishop, the young man who will replace the old bishop at his compulsory retirement age this November, is sympathetic.

The cathedral dominates the San Cristóbal zócalo, the central square, painted a bright ocher and orange, trimmed with highlights of black-painted curlicues and white inserts. The bullet scars of the 1994 uprising are smoothed over.

Toussaint arrives and shows us to a conference room. In the room stands an easel draped with a white cloth curtain. After his presentation on the history of the diócesis we examine the board beneath the curtain. It shows a map of Chiapas with colored pins inserted to identify the current military posts: 153 red for the new military commands installed since 1995, 53 green for the military

commands that were in place prior to 1995, 57 blue to represent state police posts, 25 yellow pins to identify immigration posts, five white pins to represent the judicial police, who are said to be the worst, from whose arrests one does not return.

The Zapatistas have never been associated with blowing up buildings or terrorist attacks. Marcos quotes poetry, speaks in fables.

Bishop Ruiz' strategy is inclusive, Catholics and Protestants alike: his concern is for the suffering. His most recent act has been to resign from the formal Peace Commission: the government has turned it into a sham.

The day of our departure arrives. We are driven uneventfully two hours to the nearest airport along with those leaving today: Paco, Yo Ann returning to Los Angeles, the seventy-two year old woman activist, George and I.

Paco, who travels from Mexico City to guide these media trips, looks about for police and military. Inside the airport we sit separately. Two officials approach George and me. They ask for our papers. George dogs the officials back to their counter, and finally returns with our passports and visas. Once again our names and passport numbers have been recorded.

At the Immigration check-in at Chicago the US official spots us and sings out, "Welcome home!" I think he says that to all the tourists. Everything is okay.

We can return to Chiapas.