



Taco Night

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I remember the invitations:

red text on a white background, the name of the event in curly bold face surrounded by a crudely drawn piñata, a floppy broad sombrero, and a dancing *cucaracha*. A fourth grader that year, I gushed with enthusiasm about these sorts of cultural festivals—the different, the alien, the other—dancing around me, a dash of spice for a child of white flighters. Ms. Manning distributed the invitations in mid-April, providing my parents a few weeks to plan for the event, which occurred the first week of May, on or around Cinco de Mayo.

A few weeks later my parents and I, along with a couple hundred other parents, teachers, students, and administrators crowded into the cafeteria for Guilford Elementary School's annual Taco Night. The occasion was festive. I stared at the colorful decorations, like the papier machet piñatas designed by each class, then watched my parents try to squeeze into cafeteria style tables built for eight-year-olds. Sometimes the school hired a Mexican song and dance troupe from a neighboring town. They'd swing and sway and sing and smile and I'd watch, bouncing dutifully to the rhythm, hoping they'd play *La Bamba* or *Oye Como Va* so I could sing along, pretending to know the words. If it happened to be somebody's birthday the music teacher would lead us in a lively performance of *Cumpleaños Feliz* and give the kid some Mexican treats.

¡Olé!

Granted, not a single Mexican or Mexican-American student attended Guildford at the time. Although I do recall Ms. Manning asking Adolfo, a classmate whose family had immigrated from Guatemala, whether the Taco Night tacos were "authentic." He answered with a shrug. Granted, too, there was little educational substance to the evening; I knew little more about Mexico or the Mexican American experience upon leaving Taco Night than I did upon arriving. Still, hidden within Taco Night and the simultaneous absence of real curricular attention to Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Chicanos, and other Latinos, were three critical and clarifying lessons: (1) Mexican culture is synonymous with tacos; (2) "Mexican" and "Guatemalan" are synonymous, and by extension, all Latino people are the same, and by further extension, all Latino people are synonymous with tacos (and, to a similar extent, sombreros and dancing *cucarachas*); and (3) white people really like tacos, especially in those hard, crunchy shells, which, I learned later, don't actually exist in Mexico.

Thus began my diversity education, my introduction to the clearly identifiable "other." And I could hardly wait until Pizza Night.