

LOVE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Past, present and future sense together

by Evelyn Kohl LaTorre

"M*e gusta mis pescadores con limon.*" "I like my fishermen with lemon."

That's what I said for the first four months of my Peace Corps stay, before I met Walter. He corrected that—and many other misstatements—by the time we married at the end of my Peace Corps service.

Learning to speak another language, theory says, has more to do with motivation and emotion than with time spent memorizing conjugations, vocabulary and declensions. That certainly was my experience. I always say I got a lot out of the Peace Corps. Besides a new language, I gained a loving Peruvian-born husband and two sons. We have mastered several languages in addition to the language of love.

Walter was the thirteenth Spanish-speaking young man to propose marriage to me: the blond, blue-eyed product of a Midwestern family with Germanic and English roots and the graduate of a Catholic all-women's college. Walter didn't speak English, only Spanish and Quechua. I had studied two years of Russian and one year of Spanish in college.

Walter's stepfather, Adolfo Eguiluz, had requested volunteers to work in his Food for Peace program in Abancay, a day's bus ride from Cuzco. When fellow Volunteer, Marie, and I were assigned there, the Eguiluz family "adopted" us. One day, we encountered Sr. Eguiluz in Cuzco. He said he was picking up his twenty year old son from the university. "Only twenty; a mere child," I thought, since I was all of twenty-two. But then we met him: broad shouldered, thin-waisted with a head of thick black hair, brown eyes and a gentle way about him. Sr. Eguiluz was mistaken; Walter

was a few months short of turning twenty-two.

Marie and I wouldn't have gotten to know Walter as a friend and later, for me, as my self-appointed language

tutor and "*enamorado*," if fate hadn't intervened. First, the University of Antonio Abad went on strike several times; often for months or entire semesters at a time. With each *huelga*



Evelyn and Walter at an unrepaired wall along the Great Wall of China.

Evelyn LaTorre

Walter returned home to Abancay. Once, when he reported back to the university, I developed a serious abscessed tooth that could only be taken care of by a dentist in Cuzco. Then Sra. Eguiluz became seriously ill after giving birth to her fifth child. Walter came home immediately and stayed with her in the hospital, day and night. There were the customary university breaks and vacations and the Peace Corps requirements for gamma globulin injections and assorted medical checks at the regional headquarters in Cuzco. Sr. Eguiluz frequently sent me to deliver messages to Walter.

Eventually, we simply sought out each other and sat in plazas and cafes in Cuzco or Abancay, talking for hours. To this day my husband says he taught me Spanish. He corrected my mismatched sentences and forced me to speak in past tenses to tell him about my life. I listened intently to his hopes and dreams learning the subjunctive "I would like" case. His wishes included studying physics instead of economics, which was his major in Peru.

A year after we met we started talking in the future tense trying to determine how we could spend the rest of our lives together. I wondered how someone who didn't know English and wasn't familiar with *Time* could fit into my world in the U.S. Walter's natural father, I learned, was living in Ohio. I wrote to him and received back a polite letter stating three requirements Walter would have to meet before Mr. Frank LaTorre would bring him to the U.S.: he'd have to be fluent in English, have a marketable skill and be eligible for a work visa.

We were married in two ceremonies, civil and religious. The latter was in an old Spanish chapel built on top of strong Incan walls. (My marriage, I often joke, began "in ruins.") A fellow Peace Corps Volunteer, whom I barely knew, signed as my witness for the civil ceremony because those I had been with for two years had left the country. There was nary a North American in the wedding chapel, save myself. All proceedings were conducted in Spanish. The wedding cake that Walter's aunt made for us fell flat due to the altitude

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and vanilla wafers were substituted and served with the champagne at the small wedding reception. I had sewn my white satin wedding dress.

The language learning tables were turned when we came to the U.S. Walter learned English better than I speak Spanish. In the first years we spoke mostly in Spanish but gradually slipped into total English.

Since I retired as a special education administrator and Walter as a computer program analyst, we have traveled the world together learning each country's language as we go. I have obtained jobs, scholarships and many friends because I speak Spanish. The same is true for Walter, but with English. Walter and I have recently mastered Italian and are

beginning to learn French. We believe that living in a country is the best way to learn a new language—just as I did years ago. Though I have much emotion for each language, it hasn't quite the intensity it did forty-five years ago when I was falling in love.

Evelyn LaTorre served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Abancay, Peru from 1964 to 1966. She worked in an orphanage, a hospital, taught physical education and started a girls' 4-H group. After obtaining a Masters in Social Work and a Doctorate in Multicultural Education, she worked as a school psychologist and special education administrator until her retirement in 2002. Now she just writes about her experiences and travels.



"Our present world cries out for a new Peace Corps—a vastly improved, expanded, and profoundly deeper enterprise.... I'm not defending the old Peace Corps—I'm attacking it! We didn't go far enough! Our dreams were large, but our actions were small. We never really gave the goal of 'World Wide Peace' an overwhelming commitment. Nor did we establish a clear, inspiring vision for attaining it."

— R. Sargent Shriver, Speech at Yale University, November 2001

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