

An Exemplary Life At the University

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Beatriz de la Fuente honored me innumerable times with her teachings, comments and criticisms over the two decades I was her student, disciple and friend. In our almost daily contact, she revealed bits of a profound, yet never hidden, knowledge, the product of experiences matured over time in her beloved National Autonomous University of Mexico, and she always had the perfect word at just the right moment; affable or hard, but always aimed at producing improvements in both herself and those around her.

So, I remember that in early February 2002, in one of those academic, personal talks, Dr. De la Fuente asked me, in her own demanding way, if I was a *universitario* or not.¹ The question was unexpected; it disquieted me and I was silent. So, she asked me again. After an eternity of seconds, I was able to say, “Yes, I am.”

But, how do you define or explain that quality of “being a *universitario*”? What did it mean to Dr. De la Fuente, and therefore, for those who have known her close up. And, how was she one? At the time we were talking and I was able to respond, I was certain, based decidedly on what I had learned from her, that being a *universitario* was a vital attitude.

The idea is to be duly and honorably accountable to the university through its three substantive tasks: researching, educating and disseminating research results. Beatriz de la Fuente never neglected these tasks, even in the difficult periods of her life. That is, for her “being *universitaria*” intimately and indissolubly brought together these three tasks. But the matter does not stop with this definition: it goes much further, since anyone with a refined sense of responsibility can accomplish that.

“Being *universitario*”, then, takes on a deeper meaning, since countless times it implies going against the current at an incalculable price, seldom paying off because it means returning to our alma mater, working in favor of the society from which it emerged, repaying everything that has been invested in us and doing so both disinterestedly and to a greater degree than was originally given. For those who have the honor of working in the university, economic remuneration takes a back seat because the spiritual satisfaction is greater. At least that is what Beatriz de la Fuente told me on numerous occasions.

Thus, I am certain that for Dr. De la Fuente, “being *universitaria*” meant overcoming day-to-day pettiness and implied giving ethics its due place and value, over and above the individual and professional ambitions that characterize ordinary



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human beings. Without any doubt, it is an arduous task, since on different occasions Dr. De la Fuente spoke to me of the almost intolerable fatigue that this vital attitude caused her, particularly when people came to her seeking favors or to satisfy special interests. At the end of the day, she was human, and wanted to go beyond herself and admit her errors so as to amend them as well as possible and with a conciliatory spirit. A seldom seen, enviable ability.

Beatriz de la Fuente's university adventure began first with her study of medicine and later of history. She would prolong them with her two master's and her doctorate in history, with a specialization in art. One of the immediate results of her efforts was the creation of the Pre-Hispanic Art Seminar, which shortly thereafter became the Graduate Program in Art History now given at our university's School of Philosophy and Letters, and which she directed from 1987 on, always with an attentive, inquisitive spirit, full of humanism.

Being devoted body and soul to research, teaching and the dissemination of knowledge from 1971 on did not spare her from exalted academic-administrative responsibilities. In the mid-1970s, she headed up the General Publications Office, and from 1980 to 1986, the Institute for Aesthetic Research. In both cases, she focused her efforts on both academic and administrative activities. In the former office, she fostered the publication and distribution of many works from all fields of intellectual endeavor; in the research institute, she promoted new forms of research and the institute's international recognition. She also was the life-long, honorary head of the Humanities Coordinating Department's Art Collection, which includes fundamental works of Mexican art.

She held other posts outside the UNAM, but one of the highest honors given her was belonging to the UNAM Board of Governors in the 1990s.

Dr. De la Fuente's circumspection was proverbial and very respected. So, she was not only a *universitaria* in the sense already described, but an exemplary one at that. For this reason, she was awarded many distinctions, among them, being the only woman member of the National College from 1985 on; the National Prize for Science and the Arts in the Area of History, the Social Sciences and Philosophy in 1988; the 1992 National University Prize; and being named UNAM Researcher Emeritus in 1996.

As a *universitaria*, Dr. De la Fuente gave her life to our alma mater with complete dedication, for almost five decades, overcoming all adversities. She concerned herself with delving into the knowledge of human beings through their artistic works and, consistent with her humanist spirit, she always awakened sincere scientific interest in others, whether they were colleagues, students or disciples, in a direct, friendly, warm, informative manner, using words that were both pertinent and disquieting.

Being a *universitaria* then, is a vital attitude that Beatriz de la Fuente raised to unusual heights as a woman, a wife, a mother, a teacher, a friend and *universitaria*, guided by a profound empathy with human beings past, present and future. ■■■

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NOTES

¹ In Mexico, *universitariola* refers to someone who has studied or worked at Latin America's first university, the UNAM, with the connotation of it being an honor and a matter of pride. [Translator's Note.]