A Maya Teacher
A Day of Fieldwork in the Mountains of Guatemala

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Dedicated to the memory of Geraldine Bruckner.

April days in the year 1965 were extremely dry. Thin dust floated over us. The sky was opaque with a brownish color from the burning of the many maize fields in the region. The dryness of the land affected the Maya people's thoughts. One morning I found Dona Maria carrying a pot of water filled with water on her head, and struggling along the steep path. She was telling her concerns to a young mother carrying her child in a cloth-sling on her back.

The rains are late and planting of the milpa (maize fields) is also very late." Then she added in a firm voice. "We must guard (to bear, suffer) since there is no remedy. Perhaps we need to practice some customs (rituals) and talk to the patron on the altar.

The principles (elders) appeared static, fearing a crisis. Through their characteristic formal manner they were teaching others resignation, an important stitch in the tapestry of Maya life. Young parents, however, were impatient, in sync. They seemed less confident about the rains coming in time for planting, and worried that the men might not to find work away from home.

But Don Luis, a middle-aged

man with strong Mayan features, wanted to demonstrate his confidence with a pilgrimage to a faraway volcano. To his close friends he said with a reverent attitude, "Before we begin to suffer, we should make an offering of candles and copal (resinous incense) to the volcano."

He knew that a prolonged dry season could force village men to leave for the hot coastal region of the Pacific Ocean where they worked from sunup to sundown for meager wages. "We suffer there and sometimes we are very ill with fever, and... sometimes we do not return because we die," Don Luis explained to me. "When our life is guided nature to behave in an unpredictable fashion. Then one day he went to the mayor and announced that he would organize the pilgrimage. It did not take long for his plans to be known. Soon, a group of ancestors relatives and friends wanted to accompany him.

On an early morning, twenty men, women, and some of their children walked from the village to the volcano some 65 kilometers away. They carried a few bundles containing their last tortillas, together with small candles, copal incense, fresh flower petals, and bottles of liquor. Round baskets containing these offerings were gracefully balanced on the women's heads.

It was a procession, without the customary image of a saint, moving toward a place where the people could find an ancient way, the Mundo, an earth deity. Don Luis, carrying a staff, walked decisively in front of the group. He wore traditional white Indian trousers and shirt, and a brilliant red sash was wound several times around his waist. His straw hat protected him from the sun.

Staying in the pueblo, I felt, was prudent and so I waited with many other anxious people for their return. The people in the town were quiet, burning candles in their churches.

At the end of the third day, we heard the sound of the traditional drum in the distance. The principals had sent the drummer to await the return of the travelers.

He guided them onto the main path of the village, to the church. Neighbors went to meet them. Few words were spoken but the few carried the message. They brought back hope and the certainty that the rains were about to come. They had been fortunate to find a wise man from another pueblo at the foot of the volcano, consulting the 'book of nature.' He had told them that the rains were near.

The wait indeed turned out to be short. Two nights later, people in the village woke to the sound of raindrops falling on the thatched roofs. It was not a surprise. Don Luis explained the next day, but, with the arrival of the great event of the year, he was unable to sleep. "During the night, I was making plans, for I know now that my work in the land will bring food for the family," he seemed even deeper thoughts indirectly expressed in his remarks: the restoration of life was imminent, and he felt proud to implement it at the moment when carefully, and very much respect he would plant each maize seed. When I saw him at work, his manner was the same as on those occasions when he cared for the home or church altars.

"Like a miracle the rains came and now the earth will give us maize."

In the early morning a new freshness in the air restored the people's faith in nature's way. "Like a miracle the rains came," were the words of an elderly to a neighbor. He was tired from the long wait. "And now the earth will give us maize."

And he was right.

After the first rains the mountains were transformed, they turned a bright green. It was like the coming of spring in some parts of the earth, and for the anxious people the message of hope was loud and clear. It is no wonder that for the Maya people, who do not take the eyes in nature for granted, the rains symbolize the extension of life, a serious concern.
ceremony of thanksgiving before a round stone, planting many small lighted candles in the earth facing it. I understood that rituals like this were tactics to manage his relationship to the earth, assuming that what was good for the past must find continuity in the present.

Don Luis, like those in the lowland jungles to the north, revered the rains as power beyond the understanding of humans. It was a moment for quiet reflection and thankfulness expressed in the phrase hay que respectar ("one must respect"). The earth was on the way to a recovery.

The rain arrived in the afternoon while we were in the field among the young maize plants. Don Luis observed, "Life could end swiftly, without this blessing from the heavens; without the sun and the water we cannot live." And he watched the rain run over his field. "La naturaleza is a mystery... we know life has been awakened from its sleeping state? It never dies... I wonder about us mortals.

It was evident that the cycles were complex events to comprehend. Perhaps those men from other times felt the same way. Don Luis did not know. Following the conquest, much had been added to the Maya heritage, but the men of these mountains did not seem to have changed more than was necessary under the rule of Iberian men. For Don Luis, nature's way must still be respected because man was nature. From Don Luis, I came to understand the long-lasting determination of the Maya to retain not only the old technology but the accompanying creencias (thoughts) created by their ancestors from other rain days.

Don Luis had not planned to work hard on this day; instead, he seemed to be visiting his fields making statements explaining the existence of things around us. His interpretations were not speculation but reality.

That afternoon the skies were over-energetic, almost extravagant. I felt, as a cloud burst and rain came down with much power. We kept dry in a small shelter in the middle of a maize field; it was a temporary structure, a champu, made of branches laced with thick, long, wide leaves. After two hours, the damp wind began to penetrate our bodies. With some effort, Don Luis built a small fire in the middle of the champu and warmed some of the coffee brought from the house. The heat brought comfort; fire was a welcome companion. It was good to benefit from a discovery of long ago.

Glossary
quirar—to suffer, bear
alevino—spirits
cargue—load
champu—small temporary structure made of branches laced with leaves
chamina—men of wisdom
completer—to complete, finish
hay que completar: "one must complete, finish"
conforme—resigned, resigned
costumbres—rituals
creencias—thoughts
el destino—destiny, fate,
guero—type of liquor
milpa—maize, maize field
milpero—maize grower or farmer
natural, naturales—native(s) of Maya lands
naturales—nature
principales—elders
puro—homemade cigar
respetar—to respect, hay que respetar: "one must respect"
secrets, secrets
suerte—luck
verdad—true (isn't it true)
colondan—will
branches laced with thick, long, wide leaves. After two hours, the damp wind began to penetrate our bodies. With some effort, Don Luis built a small fire in the middle of the champu and warmed some of the coffee brought from the house. The heat brought comfort; fire was a welcome companion. It was good to benefit from a discovery of long ago.

Maith before, I had left my world behind, the world of modern conveniences. Now, though perhaps it sounds strange, I felt at ease in Don Luis's company, with his thoughts, and in a new relationship with nature. I was understanding nature in a different way, the Maya way. He was at peace; a sense of determinism made him submissive to events in nature, even to earthquakes. "If you were a natural like me... you would have seen many rains come and go. Remember my father when old wondering at the end of each rainy season whether he would see the rain once again. It marks one time on this earth, but only God knows the hour."

His words projected his world: the rain was more than water falling from the sky to assist in the reactivation of life. For Don Luis it was a great deal more; the rain was also human history. There was something of the past in his thinking about time. For his ancestors, he knew, "Time was the god," and perhaps it was for him too.

The rhythm of the rain dripping from the leaves above, like a symphony, became the background for Don Luis's voice. I hoped that he would continue to talk, bringing me deeper into his way of thinking and into the wisdom of a man of this land. I could only wait; decisions are made by the elders and we younger remain waiting because the words of wisdom come at the appropriate time... like the rains. I had learned to respect and wait.

Fortune was on my side. Don Luis decided to teach, and in his mind there was a complicated subject: Time.

He knew where to begin.

"There is no rain for awhile and there is much rain afterward." This simple fact was a philosophical statement. "For everything there is order but we do not always know how it happens.

"We know that each day has a name and one's future is tied to it.

For the Maya, costumbres (rituals) are the traditional way of managing a relationship with nature.
The maize fields in the dry season are brown and empty.

This is the knowledge of those men of wisdom, the chamanas. He continued reverently. "To respect is the way, and it is something of the head. But men today is in a hurry like the tracks on the road.

"Time has days and each is named; they cause many things to happen not only to nature but in man. Like things in nature, each one of us has a day; the moment of our birth. That brings order to each person's life. You see, there is the day of the Muertos... Death. My father learned from his chaman that I was born on the day of death when the abanime (spirits) are visiting the earth. When my parents learned from the chaman, there was sadness and pain in their hearts. But they had to be content (resigned).

"I came to this world on a sad day, my luck. Not too good, verdad?" He said it joyfully.

"When I was old enough to understand those things of life, my mother told me that I had been born on a very weak day and I could die any time. As I listened to her words, I felt strong and replied that perhaps it was all lies. But I knew in my heart that perhaps there was some truth in her words. See other persons are born on a strong day. I was not. My mother assured me that chamanas can be very clever and powerful men and can help when the day is not good."

While Don Luis was speaking, the rain slowed and we heard the chirping of the birds. After the rain, nature's fragrance awakens all human senses. It was a good sign to us. We felt tired after a day in the rain but not anxious to return to the village.

"The truth is that el destino... cannot be easily changed, but no harm trying."

After a silence he spoke again.

"From the time I was born, my father frequently visited the chiman to help me to become strong. Sometimes I was made to jump over burning copal nine times to stay healthy. We felt secure and after a while I did not worry that my birth was on a weak day. Strange is one's luck, verdad? The truth is that el destino, marked by the day of one's birth, cannot be easily changed, but no harm trying."

"I remember that in order to help me, chickens were killed because the chiman said that their blood was food for the mountains. Chamanas are careful how they speak to those mountains because if their approach a wrong could be a struggle between the good and the bad spirits, like a fight, and so we listened to the chiman many times.

"Costumbres must be repeated and so we returned to his home. Twenty days later to repeat it because he said: have complete (we must complete). The chiman accepted guaro (liquor) and consumed it with my father during the visit. My father also took a cigar and offered it to the chiman. When it was half gone my father finished it. It was a way to say that he trusted the chiman."

He paused, perhaps reliving in his private thoughts those early days of his life. Looking into the distance he added, "Son... there are many cereencias you can learn among you. We try to know many things but we fail because we are not privileged to know all secrets.

Don Luis moved slowly around the fire, stooped to look outside and smell the air, then returned saying.

"There will be a little more water, we'll better stay here longer."

He remained quiet for a time resting while I thought not only about the ways of the Maya but about my own world which seemed to have vanished. Don Luis expressed interesting ideas, for the Maya past was his present. I broke the silence:

"You have told me about the wise chiman with the power to see into a person's future... Are there other times when naturales consult them? When a man and a woman want to form a family?"

My question did not seem to surprise him. "Sí," he said extending the "S" sound of the word. He spoke again with impressive dignity on a subject about which he had much to say.

High in the mountains among his maize fields, a Maya farmer continues the traditions of the past.
"Our chiman thought for a long time, smoking a pipe, a homemade cigar, and said that he could tell us. He had been looking at me while my father spoke... it was a strong look. Then he took beans and blew on them to rid them of whatever... he knew. We only watched in silence. He placed the beans on the table and took them in palma, as he could see the future. We knew that existing the coming with only one bean was not a good sign. And if we did not have a pair, his prediction was that there would be many problems ahead and advised my father to wait. I became very sad. I knew my parents would accept the chiman's advice.

My father asked why it must be this way.

"Without hesitation and with a force for which I felt alarmed, the chiman said, 'That is his suerte, because it also concerns to the day of his birth, a bad day.'

"There was more to learn from the beans. If this came to a certain number it meant that the girl had knowledge in her head for those things to be used in domestic life. The beans could show wealth, he explained to my father. My luck was Death and the chiman was right; my luck went with that day.

"The chiman became strong and in a demanding voice he said to me, 'You must obey our words to avoid sadness.'

Don Luis became pensive and I did not ask if he married that girl he had chosen, but I could guess that he did not. How could he and his parents go against what was nature's way? We remained silent for a long while. Don Luis had more to say as he was weaving other experiences of his life for my benefit.

His intimate life was indeed an archive; his teaching was based on thoughts from a world for which his parents had great respect and in which they had immersed him without hesitation. During his visit to large cities, other events might have given him a unique understanding toward new things, but in these hills he used concepts of long ago.

Don Luis... kept alive archaic thoughts; they were shadows in the mind.

Unbelievable, I thought, still radiating dignity and poise, ignoring any physical discomfort his body might be suffering at his age. His strength measured up to his spiritual vitality, a complete human being.

The mountain path had dried quickly and together we started our descent. Along the way, Don Luis continued to speak about nature's events. They were brief accounts meaningful, he felt, if I wanted to learn more about things typified Maya. He spoke with the views of the past and with thoughts of long ago.

On our descent, the sky presented us with a perfect rainbow which I pointed out. The heavy load hung from his head bowed to use his sight differently. He slowed down. With his head bent almost parallel to the road he peered through his eyebrows. Instead of admiring the rainbow for its beauty and perfection, Don Luis looked at it differently. His breathing was hard, caused by the heavy load on his back, but he explained that the "rainbow comes from an animal in the mountain, when it rains the animal breathes and an enormous quantity of air from the stomach is released and forms that arc of colors, the rainbow. My grandfather explained this to me in this same story when I was a child. I was returning home with the load of wood."

He tried to look again although it was more difficult since the descent had become steeper allowing him less upward vision. The rainbow was complete.

"Ah... this time the animal must be strong. The half circle is complete. No one has seen him but we all know that he is there and is responsible for shaking the earth when he moves. Who knows what he is up to today. There are strange animals in our valley below."

And so Don Luis added one more piece of teaching drawn from the depth of Maya history.

Don Luis and many others like him kept alive archaic thoughts; they were shadows in the mind.
ing my opinion, they were right thoughts for him in the intimacy of nature and away from the 'white
Building' of his town. They were the creencias he needed when alone in these mountains. He knew that the
laws of nature were not the laws of man. In the hills and alone, he seemed to be telling me, it was still
possible to be natural.

Don Luis with his heavy curga made a sudden motion at a lizard I had not noticed at the side of the
road. "This kind of little animal should not cross in front of us. It means that there would be had luck
ahead of us. Some strange thing could happen . . . . one could even end up in jail," he said in a joking
way.

The Maya live in thatched roof houses.

The village marketplace.
Before we separated to go to our respective homes, he wiped the sweat from his face with the palm of his hand, saying, "Well, it is time for tortillas so I will go to the house and I will sit before eating. It is not good to eat standing; one does not satisfy hunger unless one sits." And with humor behind a serious mask he added, "Be sure to sit tonight."

Don Luis had successfully completed another day, his satisfaction showing in his last words. As for me, in his company I learned that for every step in life there is a creencia fashioned to support actions and ideas. Some keep people within a frame of safety, particularly the traditional milpero (maize grower), who spends a great deal of his time in the hills. And so through this day in the mountain I added more understanding of the way Maya men have woven themselves and nature into one piece of fine tapestry. Perhaps thus they have fewer fears, I thought to myself.

The world of the village could change and he would change with it, but special thoughts of long ago were still accessible for use in the deep mountain crevices about him. In creencias, Don Luis read daily his ‘nature book’ filled with ancestral symbols that he, as a traditional milpero, could not easily change, abandon, or replace. I had the strong feeling that Don Luis was not about to separate himself from the land and the thoughts he felt privileged to know as a Maya man.

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My stay with these people before and after the rain, the visit to the maize fields in the company of Don Luis, and his insightful thoughts and words were moments of fundamental learning. I had stepped out of school for a short time to learn as an anthropologist what teachers cannot teach in the classroom. As Loren Eiseley has said, 'We think we learn from teachers, and we sometimes do; but the teachers are not always to be found in school or in great laboratories.'

I took these first steps to informal learning with uncertainty and found a 'hidden teacher' in this village tradition. I have no doubt that Don Luis understood that I needed his teaching.