Hiking to Local Antiquity

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HIKING TO LOCAL ANTIQUITY

We were already well into Sunday afternoon when Señor Jorge Sepet, Dona Vicenta's husband, asked me if I would like to take a walk to see a Mayan antiquity. It took a minute for that question, in Spanish, to clear through the cumbersome language filters in my brain. When I realized that I recognized what he was asking, well, that was its own mountain right there. Speaking another language is tricky enough — being able to recognize what is being said TO one — Ahhh, that is a glowing moment.

So I grinned and said “Sí! Cool! Yeah!”

And then I grabbed my backpack, dumped into it a bottle of water, my camera, found my hat, and we were off.

There was a tiny moment when all the little kids who were hanging about looked up at their dad/grandpa. Could they come?

It took less than 10 seconds to sort out. Four of the kids are over four years old. Luis Alexander, Linda Patricia, Viqui, and Evalina could come. Little Maria, who can't be much over 3, if that, had to stay home. She cried a little, but not much.

The hike would take two hours and was not easy. No child (Patricia, at 8, is the oldest I think) ever whined or asked to be carried. It was a subtle but effective bit of child-raising. You don't get treats such as candy or toys for mature behavior because there's no money for non-essentials. What you get, as you mature into independent behavior, are privileges. And even the privileges will require gumption, such as climbing up and down a mountain for several hours. But you won't think of it as work because you are with your siblings and cousins who are your best friends, and with your grandpa, and the sun is shining, and that nice big gringa is a hoot. Who knows what might happen on such an afternoon?

We walked the path that skirts the milpa behind the house. Xetonox, indeed most of rural Maya Guatemala, seems to be knit together by little footpaths. Soon the family footpath connected into a wider path of packed earth about 4-5 feet wide. It crossed a small creek with a handy rock right in the middle to serve as a stepping stone. There was also, over our heads, three tree trunks lying more-or-less across this small gorge. The kids skipped across the tree trunks. I realized from the vegetation line around us that in the rainy season, this small ravine could be many feet deep in rushing mountain water. Three tree trunks over it then would be, well, scary.

I started to climb the path on the other side of the creek. The incline of the ravine wasn't a big deal, maybe 20 very steep feet. Yet my heart was knocking around in my chest like a wild animal trying to get out of a cage. At first I was surprised by this and a little embarrassed — what a pansy I am! Jorge said something to me in Spanish as he chuckled at how hard I was breathing. And then I realized what he was telling me.

We were in the altiplano - literally the “high lands.” Xetonox is 5000-6000' above sea level. It was altitude that was making my heart pump so hard. After that, I felt a little better. I also took a lot of mini-breaks, as it seemed like a lousy day or place to have a heart attack.

 Soon enough the path was flat for awhile. Jorge told me the path we walked on our journey had been used as a route for the Maya for thousands of years. That's why it was wide enough for people, wide enough for an animal pulling a cart, but not wide enough for cars or trucks.

The path led between two small casas. We said hi to one family working in their backyard. I greeted a bull tied to a small tree. The kids giggled at me, this was the reason one would like to follow the crazy Norte Americana, she does stuff like say “Buenos Dias” to animals. (They giggled every time I said “Hola, Señor Spike!” to their dog. Once I heard the adults, talking to each other in Kakchiquel, chuckle as one said “Señor Spike.” The adults apparently think this is funny too.)

We met the main road, crossed it, and started up a steep macadam road. This was where I REALLY began to huff and puff.

At the top of this hill we turned off the road onto another foot path. This path shot straight up to the trees growing at the crown of the mountain. Boy, was it a work-out climbing at what now
must have been approaching an altitude of 6500-7000 feet, along a skinny path of dry golden dust. Milpas were to my right, a drop-off of 5-10 feet was at my left.

I admired the kids scrambling like little goats ahead of me. They wore flimsy sandals, but it never slowed them down. Patricia, especially, kept looking around to make sure I hadn’t tumbled over the edge. It took awhile to scale that dusty height. At last the last little footpath veered to the left. Jorge led the kids, who led me.

There, before us, was the Maya stele, an antiquity of 1500 years. It looks like a huge tombstone, a hunk of limestone (I think) six feet tall, 3-4 feet across, a foot thick. Carved with hieroglyphics. Staring out over twenty miles of valley, silent testimony to more than most of us will ever understand.

I think I saw the eyes that were thickly carved. There was the signature Mayan style; thick, undulating, severe, mysterious. Since ancient times someone has cemented rocks around the base to help keep it upright. The place it stands is a flatish promontory at the top of the mountain. Before and around it is a huge, falling-away view of the patchwork countryside of milpas and tiny houses clustered here and there.

It was Sunday afternoon. Two evangelical churches were broadcasting hours of preaching. The acoustics were so perfect that at the top of that mountain you could easily hear both church services. Before us was in a huge bowl of the earth, surrounded by ranges of mountains. Jorge pointed to two other mountains in the distance, two other points, he told me, where ancients had built two other ceremonial sites. He said, when one talks from these three high spots, one can fill the entire valley.

In front of the stele was a smaller rock. Jorge said it was a place for sacrifice. I’m not archeologist, and what I know about Maya religion is minimal, but goose bumps danced across my skin. Whatever or whomever they sacrificed up on those three mountains would have been heard by all the people in the long, wide valley in between. Just as that afternoon, the countryside was filled with a clarion call to Pentecostal salvation. Maya folks still know how to use their mountain acoustics to an effect we don’t much know.

I picked some flowers, laid them on the altar. I drank some of my agua pura (pure water), gave the rest to the kids. I discovered a baggie of pretzels at the bottom of my pack, handed that to the kids, too. After that we left. The gods, or the circumstance, however you want to say this, offered me a strong dried cornstalk on which I could lean my way back down the dirt path of the mountain.

I don’t think we understand this. Not always, but often, the “poorest” people on our earth are also the most rooted. Jorge and Vicenta, their children, all the scrambling sure-footed little children, are Maya. I visited an antiquity of a culture I know little about. They took me to see what their great-great-grand-dads made. I marveled at the warm, dusty, exotic beauty of the day and place. They took me to what belongs to them.

Years ago I visited a carved runic rock in Denmark. I’m Swedish enough to be able to claim anything a Viking did, and I felt something very deep, respectful, and curious about that rock. In a way I barely understand, it was mine. For better and for worse, it marked a time and a place that had once been me. It took me back past sentimentalities, said behind everything you know and don’t know there were these people and they are in you now.

Watching Patricia and Luis, Evalina and Viqui, I could only salute the amazing, fierce, artistic, determined people from whom they descend, and the future into which they climb, their tiny feet in dusty sandals.

I felt that mystery when I stood on that mountain. There is more in us, of the generations who brought us to this time, than we know.

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SECOND PHOTO taken by Susana S. Martinez.