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The Gift that Keeps on Giving: Reflections on Doc Behrhorst and Pedro Chacach

In May 1980, having just completed my first year of graduate school in Latin American Studies (with a focus on anthropology) at Tulane University, I was an innocent but privileged young woman taking her second international trip ever. Thanks to Tulane's generous summer research support program, I had a fellowship that landed me in Antigua, Guatemala to study the interface of western and traditional health in Maya communities. I was just 22 years old and, not a seasoned traveler, I had no true sense of where I was going or what I might expect to see and do over the next few months. Despite all the background research I had completed in anticipation of doing fieldwork, I immediately felt the counterweights of my formal studies and my innocence about Guatemala – such a beautiful and yet incredibly complex country, plagued by visible and invisible effects of a tortured history – including decades of armed internal conflict, with communities and families simply caught in the middle.

As I left the airport and headed to Antigua, I knew I was taking my first steps toward a deeper understanding of Guatemala and its indigenous people, but I had no clue that I was also starting a journey of self-discovery that would last a lifetime. I wanted to be a force for good in the world but did not know what that could even look like on a personal or professional level. The summer of 1980 was pivotal. And, as it turned out, my conversations with Doc Behrhorst and one of the health promoters were essential ingredients to my professional and personal evolution. I was truly blessed to have these two incredible friends and mentors.

Thankfully, during my first week in Antigua, I met several people who guided me. For example, Bill Swezey, an established anthropologist living in Antigua, had spent a full career in Mexico and Guatemala. He listened carefully to my research proposal and although I'm sure he gave me great feedback, what I remember so clearly is that Bill urged me to visit Doc Behrhorst

in Chimaltenango. So, I did. The next day, I took a “chicken bus” (the nickname for the crowded buses that transported people, animals, and other goods between towns/cities) to Chimaltenango and quickly found the Behrhorst Clinic and Hospitalito (known as the “Fundación”) on the main town square. I walked to the front door with trepidation, not knowing if the man named Doc would take time to help me get started on my research. From the doorway, I immediately saw a short stout, white-haired gentleman in the courtyard. Talking to a woman in a beautiful huipil (a hand woven, traditional Mayan blouse), he looked over and smiled at me. He signaled that I should wait a few minutes. I stood there – trying to take it all in. Patients and staff were everywhere – and I couldn’t always tell who was who – as no staff wore white coats or nursing garb; everyone was dressed the same – most women in traditional Mayan dress, with men split between using western and traditional dress.

A few minutes later, Doc came over and introduced himself. We went to his office for a few minutes where he shuffled papers on his desk and told a string of staff peeking in the door that he would see them in the afternoon. Then he suddenly invited me to his home for lunch. I was absolutely floored by his hospitality – he knew nothing about me or why I was there. But he thought there would be fewer interruptions at the house. As it turned out, his two young daughters (about 4 and 5 years old) were quite excited to have their daddy home and they immediately warmed up to me – the drop-in guest. Needless to say, we enjoyed a family meal and then I played with the girls for a bit. After a short while, Doc said he had to run an errand in Antigua and offered me a ride. In his clunky old jeep, I told him more about my project. He listened intently without saying much. En route, there is a ravine – and pointed out to me that it was one of a growing number of places the army had begun to throw its victims, a pattern which was to intensify in the coming years. When we got to Antigua, all he said was that I should return to the Fundacion in a few days when a group of community health promoters would be meeting. He felt the promoter program would be the best place for me to start learning about my chosen summer research topic. We said goodbye and I spent the next two days reading more journal articles about rural Guatemala and formulating interview questions for the promoters. I wanted to be prepared to meet them.

My return to Chimaltenango for the health promoter meeting was a life-defining event for me. Before the meeting started, Doc introduced me to Pedro Chacach, one of the dozens of health promoters he had trained. After a brief conversation, Pedro invited me to his town, San Jose Poaquil, to stay with his family for the summer, get to know his community, and see firsthand how he worked. I knew that Doc had orchestrated this, and I was so completely grateful. A few days later, I found myself staying with the Chacach family and following Pedro around like a puppy – out to the milpa (cornfield) where he tended the family crops and over to the one-room

hut where he offered first aid and, more importantly, provide advice and support to villagers who had fallen ill. Committed to using traditional herbal remedies as often as possible, he had been trained in the production and use of herbs and had an extensive garden. But, what impacted me the most, were his community meetings where he facilitated conversations about how the community might work together to improve land use, grow more diverse crops, among other topics. I realized that Pedro was as much a community organizer as a community health worker! The list of interview questions I had generated went out the window and was replaced by more of an appreciative inquiry style of learning about what the villagers wanted to do and how they could take their decisions/steps with a little support from Pedro and the Fundacion.

For the next two months, I followed a routine – taking the chicken bus to Chimaltenango to spend Monday morning and Friday afternoon at the Fundacion in conversations with Doc and many of his staff. All the time in between, I went to Poaquil (on another chicken bus) – where I was embraced by Pedro’s family and welcomed by the entire town. I was especially appreciative of his younger children – as they would speak Spanish with me whereas everyone else spoke Kaqchikel together at home. (And, I will admit, playtime with the children propelled my Spanish language abilities more than any formal study ever had!).

At the end of the summer, I left Guatemala a changed person. Irreversibly so. The gift I received was the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of two incredibly dedicated and insightful people who saw the best in others (including me), and through a process of collective action, they unleashed the possibilities of lasting changes that would bring more justice to rural people in Chimaltenango. That summer, I learned that the process of HOW we generate change is as important as the outcome of our efforts. I have taken that knowledge with me during my entire career in international development and peace building to over a dozen countries in Latin America and Africa, and by focusing on the empowerment process – whether for my local staff or for the communities we served – I have always felt that I left in place at least the beginnings of a better tomorrow.

After the first trip to Guatemala, I remained tightly connected to Doc and his family until his death in 1990. As the violence increased in Chimaltenango between 1981 and 1983, I traveled regularly to Chimaltenango to support Doc and the Fundacion staff in any way I could. I helped him organize the first local board of directors for the Fundacion and supported the development of new avenues of support for widows and children. Doc eventually had to leave the country under a death threat, landing in New Orleans at Tulane. By then, I was teaching in the Public

Health School, and I invited him to share my office. For the next few years, I observed a steady stream of students from around the world stop by our office – mostly to talk about the community development process. Not surprisingly, I would eavesdrop (actually listen carefully!) and absorb so many pearls of wisdom from Doc and his students. Of course, we're all students; we're all lifelong learners. Doc's intentionality about learning from the Kaqchikel was so special, and coupled with his deep appreciation of their culture, he was able to unleash a program of community empowerment that has endured in Chimaltenango for over 50 years.

A final word about Pedro. Within months of my departure from Guatemala in August 1980, things became quite grim in Chimaltenango and intensified for several years. They were dark times, including an all-out assault on community organizers and health promoters. Pedro had to leave his family and village and go into hiding. For over a year, we did not know where he was or if he was alive. Poaquil suffered greatly – with more than one massacre of townspeople. Thankfully, Pedro resurfaced by 1984 – he had been hiding out in the slums of Guatemala City. Doc and I would go meet with him every few weeks, and bring him news of his family and some provisions until he was able to return home. Pedro was one of the lucky ones – eventually he was able to return home and watch as one of his daughters became a community health worker. Pedro was so very proud of her. But, of the +75 promoters Doc had trained in the 1970s, we know of only 15 who survived the violence.

As I sit here today at my home in Antigua writing these reflections, it strikes me that I have been thinking about empowerment for 41 years. Working toward empowerment has filled my life so much purpose and meaning. I am so grateful that my stars aligned to connect me with Doc and Pedro. I have received many unexpected gifts over the years – but I can say with unshakable certainty, that Doc and Pedro were among the greatest of those gifts.