

Special Insert: The Mayan Big Book

Cobán, Alta Verapaz. Guatemala 2010:

This narrative begins just as many others of ours begin, and ends just as many others end; “I can’t stop drinking.” Before I had set out to conduct one year of anthropological field research in a rural community of Q’eqchi’ Maya farmers, I knew I was on my last leg of late-night binges and sleepless nights during the period of withdrawal. This year would be my last, one extended binge before I would get sober. Twelve months away from family and friends before whom I had hidden my excessive drinking for so many years. I was alone now in a country where the alcohol was strong and cheap and occasions to get drunk were plentiful to all who desired that oblivious state in which to enter in order to forget loneliness, fear, and despair. I didn’t last the twelve months I had so carefully planned as one last hurrah; I lasted all of five weeks before surrendering, or so I thought.

I left the hotel after four days during which I drank liters of cheap liquor and ate nothing except a few corn tortillas and a small amount of black beans. By the fifth day the hotel’s owner, who had witnessed my daily binge, took me aside and said in perfect English, “You drink too much.” “I know.” I replied. After sobering up enough to drive I left the hotel behind and started a long, slow journey to Guatemala City to seek shelter at a friend’s home. He did not ask what kind of trouble I was in; only that I was welcome to stay at his home with him and his wife until trouble passed. After four days of sobriety under their roof I drove the couple to the airport at 6:00 a.m. so that they could catch their flight to the United States. Just as soon as they entered the airport I headed straight to the nearest convenience store where liquor is available at all hours from dusk to dawn and grabbed a liter of vodka; my short-lived surrender would have to wait another nine days while I conducted some advanced research regarding my alcoholism.



After waking up early one morning with horrible shakes and nausea I had a decision to make. Do I stay at this drinking business for one more day or do I take my father’s advice and go to a meeting? I resolved to do both as I looked at my bedside and saw one-third of a bottle of Stolichnya vodka staring me in the face. “I’ll just take the hair off the dog”, I thought, “and I’ll sober up enough to hit a meeting tonight.” I needed to stop the trembling and the vodka would do just that. I quickly unscrewed the cap and went for it all in one gulp. Feeling the burn in my stomach I tried to keep it down so it could numb my body. Instead, my body rejected it and out it came. This was a sign, I thought. Listen to dad and get to a meeting.

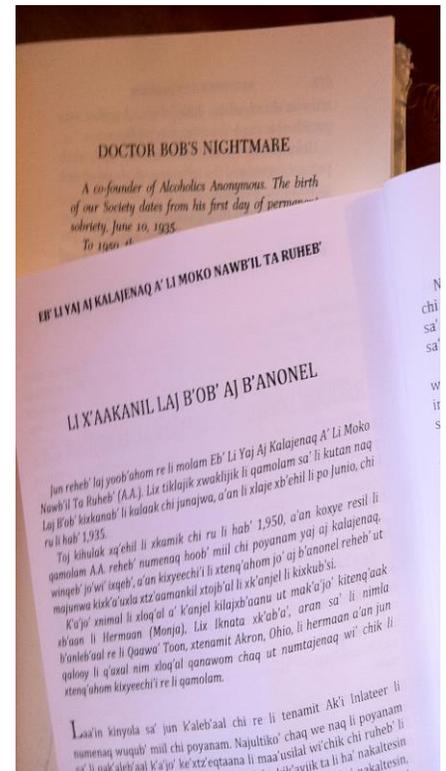
I surrendered and found the number for the Guatemalan General Services Office and shakily stated that I needed to find a meeting nearby. Elizabeth, a volunteer at the office directed me to a number of meetings near the house and from that night on I attended one or more per day. After a month of meetings, lots of strong coffee, and work with a sponsor via telephone in the U.S. and a dedicated Venezuelan-born alcoholic living in Guatemala City (our shared love of baseball drew us together), I decided that I would need to get back to work in my community, a mere eight hours away by car; the community did not have an A.A. group and I worried that my new-found sobriety might not last very long. If I were to not have access to a daily meeting, I thought, I must find something to do each night to keep me occupied and involved in A.A. I stopped by the Guatemala City General Services Office to ask if they had any desire to offer “The Big Book” in Q’eqchi’ Mayan, the language spoken in the central-eastern regions of the country. I was happy to receive and enthusiastic response from the folks at G.S.O. and began the translation in November of 2010. Instead of getting drunk every night to pass the time, I sat at a desk in my small room and started to translate page after page, struggling at times to find appropriate words and phrases to ensure that the context of the book was as true as it could be in the Q’eqchi’ language. When I arrived at Chapter 4, “We Agnostics”, I tested different phrases to express what agnostic and atheist mean in the most basic sense. The problem was that the words for agnostic and atheist, nor the idea that someone would reject the existence of God, existed in this language. I soon found that the process of dissecting these terms was beneficial to my recovery and was the primary reason to remaining sober one day at a time.

By December I found a man who had been active in A.A. some years prior in Guatemala City and we began to meet most evenings for a short conversation or read together. In February of 2011 we greeted a young man who was also involved in A.A. for five years before he relocated to our community. I began to see that in this remote place that I had once feared would lead me back to the bottle there existed support and fellowship. Although we never numbered more than three individuals at any given point, we continued to meet each evening, after which time I would pick up where I left off with translating the book into Q'eqchi'. Although our gatherings never grew at the local level, the one constant that remained part of my continued sobriety was diving into the Big Book and the translation process. By focusing on this project every night, I gained a beginner's level in terms of understanding the power of alcoholism and soon realized that by meeting my nightly goal to work on the translation, my desire to drink, and the fear I once had that I would begin to drink again, faded away because I was involved in service; bringing the words that were helping me to the thousands of potential readers who I hoped would receive the message well in their native tongue.

With support from G.S.O. in Guatemala I arranged for the translation of the Big Book into another of the major Mayan languages spoken throughout the western highlands of the country. A friend to A.A., and a colleague, agreed to translate the book into K'iche' Mayan. And from that moment on I gained renewed energy to make sure we were on the same page as far as context and terminology so that the book would be a useful tool for current and future generations of alcoholics looking for a reprieve from the pain they suffered due to alcoholism. The whole process energized me as well when I would come home from long hot days hiking in the sun doing my field research. I found that as soon as night fell and the village went to sleep, I was content to stay awake and translate, or to call my proofreader in another town to discuss the validity of phraseology and context.

After approximately eight months I had translated a first draft of the Big Book in Q'eqchi' with the other K'iche' language edition hot on my tail. What I am most grateful for concerning this project was the fact that it kept me sober, happy, healthy, strong of mind and body, and I hoped that its message would bring the same sort of change that happened in me to its future readers. But I was not the only one impacted in a positive way from translating these two languages of the Big Book; Salvador G., the man who translated the book into K'iche' Mayan, himself a heavy drinker throughout his life and even during the beginning stages of his work, began to tell me of his own problems with the drink. He was compelled to think about what he was translating, thus giving rise to his own sobriety over a period of months. As I met with him before I returned to the United States his wife took me aside with emotion in her eyes and in her voice. "Thank you." She said. "Thank you for giving him this work. Now he does not drink so much as he did before. Now he is at home and not in the street at night. Thank God for this work."

I first began to read portions of the Big Book while drinking scotch in Albany, NY as an advanced graduate student, only to taper off as soon as I felt that God was being mentioned too much for my liking. "I'm kind of like that." I would say. "But I am not nearly as surly as these folks that are described in this book. Less than two years later I was very much, if not more surly, than those described in the Big Book. It was only when I dove headfirst into the translation project that I saw that I was indeed "one of them" and that maybe I could use the project to help me stop drinking. It worked, thanks to many twists of fate over more than a decade's time, that last one third of Stoli that my body rejected, the will to stop drinking, and the inspired words and stories contained in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. I share my gratitude for the book with many A.A.s and learned that its message is powerful, if we only choose to follow its instructions.



Dr. Bob's Nightmare

Winston S.¹

¹ Many people in Guatemala and Salt Lake City deserve a great deal of thanks for this story. None more than Salvador Guarchaj, the gentleman who translated the Big Book into K'iche' Mayan, and Elida Pacay, a bilingual school teacher that proofread my translation of the Q'eqchi' Mayan edition of the Big Book. May God bless them both for their service.

