

Getting Lost and Found In Joyabaj

By Elisabeth A. Miller

She had made many trips back to Joyabaj over the 17 years since that first trip for New Year in 1996. If she didn't have family there, she wouldn't go at all. Not exactly family. Adopted family. Someone else's family. Someone else with whom she no longer had a relationship. With whom she had not had a relationship for a very long time. But Hombre Ortega had given her, in his own way, what she had said she wanted from him, a family.

Betsy would have preferred to spend all of her vacation time in Antigua, Guatemala, a beautiful colonial city left partially in ruins, quiet yet vibrant, that attracts visitors from all over the world. Near Antigua, she had invested in her own small piece of Guatemala, thinking ahead to her retirement. She would have preferred to stay there, and not to travel up the mountains to the town where there were only a few hours of quiet for sleep from when the dogs stopped barking until the roosters started crowing.

Over the years, Joyabaj had changed a lot. On each visit, there were visible improvements. Travel time had been cut in half from town to Guatemala City, and cable TV, cell phones and internet now linked the town to the whole world. On her first trip to the town, there were a total of three telephones in all of Joyabaj.

The town had become a commercial center, the residents proudly saying that it was more important than the district capital of Quiche in serving the surrounding area. It was crowded with people and vehicles, with motorbikes, busses, trucks and tuc-tucs. There were even traffic lights on the corners of the plaza.

In the plaza, there were long lines of people waiting to pay their electric and water bills at the town offices. Opposite the plaza, which was overflowing with women in traditional *traje* on market day, there was now a large store, a Despensa Familiar, a Wal-Mart-owned local chain of mini Wal-Marts which promised low prices every day for packaged goods and foods that had not previously been available in the town at any price.

Clean and neatly dressed young people, using scanners and computerized cash registers, worked in the store for a regular paycheck. Betsy wished that she could have taken a photo of a young Mayan girl dressed in *traje* with shiny black high heel sandals and a backpack on her back, talking on a cell phone, looking at bras. Joyabaj had changed a lot.

It wasn't very long ago that schools in the villages only went through sixth grade, and in town through ninth. Many children didn't make it past fourth grade, just enough to learn to read and do arithmetic, before they had to leave to go to work. Now, Joyabaj had an extension of the public university, private academies and religious schools of various denominations.

Ladino families in town used to have very young Mayan girls as servants to do the errands, cleaning and laundry, and to make the tortillas by hand. Their parents sent them out to work just so they would have something to eat that day. Now, the talk among Ladinos was that there were no girls to work because they were all in school. That was a nice problem to have.

The inflow of investment from the emigrants back to Joyabaj, and the basic improvements in infrastructure made after the war by the government and companies like Sprint, combined had done some remarkable things. The Peace Corps had come back to town, but the best aid the US had offered was "allowing" illegal immigration and not deporting the people who had settled down to work, supported their families back home, and rebuilt their town themselves.

Betsy got lost walking back from the edge of town to the street where the family lived, which even on her last trip had been a dirt road outside of the commercial area. Now it was now a paved cross street with shops on the corner of the main street. Everyone laughed when she told them how she had walked right past the turn and kept on going almost to the center of town before she turned back. Then she had turned onto a dirt street one block before theirs and had to stop and ask a woman if she knew where the Ortega family lived, which she did.

She had made many trips to town to see Primo and his mother, Cunada, the sister of Hombre Ortega, who had become her good friend. Cunada had been in Providence caring for Primo, who had a stroke at the age of 20 in 1998. He had survived because he had been in Providence at the time, but with limited speech, a limp, and no use of his right hand.

Betsy had been in Joyabaj for Primo's wedding, New Year 2008. They had scheduled the wedding as a surprise for her after they knew the dates when she would be there. But on that trip, she arrived to find Cunada very ill, in a wheel chair and fighting for every breath, so there was great sadness with the joy. Cunada died knowing that Primo had a wife and another mother who would care for him. In 2013, Betsy met Primo's daughter, her new granddaughter, for the first time.

The trip for New Year 2013 was different from all the previous trips. This time Betsy was with Papi, Nena, who was 9, and Mama. Papi was going home to Joyabaj for the first time in almost 15 years. He was not going home by choice, even if he was extremely happy to see the family. Papi did not know his own town anymore, his own country, not even as Betsy did, because he had not been there to see it change. Papi was going home scared.

At 35, Papi's life in Providence had to be interrupted so that it might be able to continue. Papi had to go back to Guatemala to wait for his pardon to be granted and his visa to be issued by the US Embassy. Until the day of the final interview, when the US Consul said yes and handed him his visa, there was no guarantee that Papi would not be home in Joyabaj permanently.

With the visa, he could turn around and go home the other way, entering the US as a permanent resident. Free of the fear that comes with being undocumented, free to travel between both homes, free to work at his highest ability and to pursue the best opportunities, he would build a better life for himself and his family in Providence. And he would do the same for his family in Joyabaj.

Papi's and Primo's grandmother had been killed in her house in the village of Raxanep just before the end of the war in 1996. She was killed by people who lived on and worked her land. They had robbed her village store of cash and food and taken it in big sacks to the rebels hiding in the mountains, and killed her because she knew who they were. The neighbors saw and identified them, but there is no justice in Guatemala. They paid their way out of jail. Papi had left Joyabaj angry, fearful of the assassins and fearful of himself and what he might do.

Papi's case for asylum in the US had been denied in the immigration court because he had left after the end of the war, after the election of 1996 that was certified by the US State Department as democratic and fair. For the US government that meant Papi should have stayed in Guatemala. Now Mama had petitioned immigration for Papi's visa, but Papi knew people in Joyabaj who had not been granted their pardons, who had never received their visas, and who were now living in Joyabaj separated from their families left behind in Providence, instead of the other way around.

Betsy had met Papi the day he arrived in Providence, only a few months after Primo had arrived. She met him in the hospital where Primo lay in a coma. While Primo was in the hospital, she had gone everyday to interpret and oversee his care. His father, standing with her at Primo's bedside, knew she had no children of her own. He was himself critically ill. He said to her *"Aquí tienes tu hijo. Gracias por haberlo tratado*

como si fuera tu hijo.” Here you have your son. Thank you for treating him as if he were your son.

Some years later, when Papi brought Nena over to present her, four months old on Christmas Eve, he had said *“Aquí tienes tu nieta.”* Here you have your granddaughter. When Betsy’s cat died, when Nena was two and the family was living in the flat downstairs from hers in her two family house, Papi left a kitten in a basket inside her back door for her to find when she came home from work. She ran down to find Papi with a huge grin on his face. “What are we going to name him?” “He already has a name”, Papi said, “Lucky.” Lucky because he was the one who got to come home to live with Betsy.

Ahead of his trip, Papi had sent home to Guatemala a late-model, shiny white, 4 door Toyota pickup truck loaded with gifts for the family. He picked Betsy up in Antigua, and it was late by the time they got to Joyabaj for the welcome dinner, chickens that had been pecking in the patio now in the soup. As they came into the center of town, busy with traffic even at night, they had to stop at the traffic light.

“Did you know before you saw it that Joyabaj now has a stop light?” she asked Papi. “Did you ever imagine that it would?” “No”, Papi replied, he could never have imagined that. But, he continued, the most surprising thing about being home was that he had felt no fear. He had been worried about the truck, about people envying it, about having it stolen or even being attacked for it. “La envidia mata”, envy kills. Instead, people came up to say how nice it was and would he sell it?

Papi’s youngest brother, a teacher, had started building a house, with help from Habitat for Humanity, on their mother’s piece of her family’s land in Raxanep. Raxanep is the first village on the road going out of town which continues on past Palibatz, a road that used to be dirt all the way to Guatemala City. The road was paved now, and lined with new businesses.

Across from Papi’s family’s house in town, there was now an indoor soccer and sports venue, and next door was a swimming pool club. Joyabaj was noisy with trucks and busses rumbling by the house from early in the morning, even before the roosters crowed, until late at night, even after the dogs had stopped barking and gone to bed.

While Papi waited ten months for his visa, he and his brothers fixed up their mother’s old house and built three more for a family compound in Raxanep. They put in electricity and water, fruit trees, and greenhouses with a crop of tomatoes. They dreamed of opening a bakery where their mother could work. Maybe it was time to move the family back to the countryside.

On the night they told her that Primo's father Tio had died of cancer, she had had a restless sleep, as she often did while she was on chemo. In her dream, Tio came and stood at the foot of her bed and said *"yo tuve que morirme pero tu tienes que vivir"*. I had to die but you have to live. She had family to take care of, family who would take care of her.

Papi's mother gave her a weaving in bright yellow with purple letters that she hung on her wall when she got home. *"Amor es Vida"*. Love is Life. The most surprising thing about being back in Joyabaj, Papi said, was that *"Ya no se siente la maldad."* You no longer feel the evil. What Betsy felt, because she chose to, was the love. That had been enough to sustain them, and it had sustained her. She did not come from Joyabaj, but she had been lucky, because she had found it, and it had found her, in Providence.

Epilogue - Christmas 2015

I returned to Joyabaj for Christmas last year, exactly 20 years after I arrived on my first trip to Guatemala. Guatemala was in a state of suspension politically, after great upheaval, peaceful and well organized through social media, had brought down one corrupt government, and a free and open election, by all accounts, had ushered in a famous TV personality and political neophyte as the next president to be sworn into office in January. Joyabaj was calm, except for the fireworks, and busy at the same time, with Christmas processions blocking the streets and policemen directing the traffic. Everyone was home for Christmas, and one evening I had to eat dinner twice as I made the rounds from house to house.

The town had changed a lot in the three years that I had been away. It was cleaner, more orderly, more finished. The Catholic church had been rebuilt, still with the original façade now repaired and attached to a typical church type building. The fountain in the plaza was working, and the plaza was open and being used for a variety of community events, the market having been installed in a new permanent covered location behind the church. The garden next to the plaza had been beautified with trash receptacles and signs about not littering, and people were sitting out enjoying it.

There were many fewer half built houses and many more businesses. One restaurant/bakery was owned by a woman who told how she had lived in Providence for nine years, where her three children were born, but she had moved the family

home. A pharmacy in the center of town advertised down the wall at the entrance a package delivery service to a number of places in the US where people from Joyabaj have settled down and established their own communities but are still deeply rooted in their hometown. Weekly trips on Wednesdays carry documents, DVDs, sweet bread and medicines to loved ones in many states, and to Providence.

The development of Joyabaj over the last 20 years really has been quite extraordinary. It's not a renaissance, because there wasn't much of a town there even before the 1976 earthquake flattened it and the 36 year long civil war squashed it. It is more like an exuberant flowering, because the people who left sent back water and fertilizer, the end of the war let in the light, and the earth itself was already rich but had lacked the opportunity to produce without the other elements. It can only be love, and Providence, that healed the town, that fed the people, that let them finally thrive after so much depravation for so many centuries.

Amor es Vida. Love is Life.

Betsy