

**DO YOUR THING, DON'T WORRY WHAT YOU BRING.**  
(Michael Meyer)



June 10, 2015

*Testimony of Michael*

Why do I do what I do?  
What's my motivation?  
What gets me out of bed in the morning?

Besides knowing how beautiful life is,  
Getting a brand new day,  
And wondering what surprises will happen...

**I just want to be there.**

When that grand ol' party comes to town,  
I want to be there.

And I want to bring as many people with me as I can.

As long as there is suffering,  
There will be those who wish to alleviate it.

**I want to be of service.**

My way of doing that has confused me before,  
Thinking I've been too selfish,  
Or not trusting in what I have to offer.

When you spend lots of time to yourself,  
Getting in touch,  
It can feel like there's a whole world of suffering and disadvantaged people who could use  
your help,  
While you're busy being alone.

So why wouldn't you do something about it?

Because if you're not solid in yourself,  
You are not solid wherever you go.

I felt this first hand,  
Wanting to help so badly that I completely drained myself.

I was certified in Permaculture design in 2010,  
And I quickly caught the natural bug.

I wanted to use my newfound knowledge to help.

I happened upon [Julie Siegel](#) in Chicago,  
Who was giving a lecture about her work with [AFOPADI](#),  
An organization in Guatemala,  
Started by three Mayan brothers and their wives.  
I knew right away that I wanted to go.

It wasn't too long after that I was on a plane with my girlfriend at the time,  
Jetting off to a tiny mayan village situated in a valley named, "Casaca."

I guess "Casaca" literally translates to "bullshit,"  
So it made asking around for it kind of challenging.

I spent most of my days with Chepe Ortiz,  
A facilitator hired by the organization,  
To lead workshops,  
Educate,  
And look after the agricultural division of the program.



We spent our days walking over the hills and through the woods of Guatemala,  
Checking in on families.

We wanted to see if their growing plots were done with organic methods,  
Or if their seed / fertilizer was coming from somewhere or someone else.

Often,  
Because it's cheaper and quicker,  
It's possible to get pressured into doing the quick and dirty with pesticides & GMO seeds.

That's a whole different discussion.

They were growing with the "Three Sisters" method,  
Which usually has a fourth or fifth sister in there too,  
As well as any tag along that proves to be beneficial.

The three sisters are corn,  
Beans,  
And squash.

All in one plot.

It's also a very popular Native American method.

The other sisters are usually flowering plants like Cleome,  
That would attract pollinators.

The idea is that the corn provides the support for the beans to grow up,  
And the squash spreads out on the ground,  
Smothering out any other competition.

The beans provide nitrogen for the corn,  
And the squash shades the soil,  
Keeping it cool,  
As well as moist,  
So you eliminate the need to water.

Over time,  
You build up the moisture retention in the soil through decaying plant matter,  
And organic residue leftover from the harvested plants.

It's the same idea as how a forest builds its soil fertility over time...  
By leaving the leaves.

This then is a self-sufficient and regenerative system that,  
When done properly,  
Appears as lush as it sounds.





Organic After Corn Harvest



Conventional After Corn Harvest



It takes longer to establish though,  
Because you're working at the pace of nature,  
And the Mayan's have very little access to land.

What land there is actually available is literally on pure rock.

So imagine growing on pure rock and expecting corn to come out.

Well,  
It does!



It just takes a while.

If you go the GMO/pesticide route,  
You might get a bigger harvest the first or second year,  
But you're not building up your soil nutrients,  
So you have to add that back in some way (fertilizer),  
Which is an extra cost.

You're soil won't hold as much water,  
Creating nutrient runoff,  
And drying up the soil sooner.

Your actual crop may look the same,  
But for the Mayans,  
Who have tasted the fruit of their seeds they've passed on for generations,  
They can really taste the difference.

If you're wondering why they don't grow something else,  
Or something different,  
It's because it's not in their culture.

There are smaller gardens around,  
And the introduction by AFOPADI of other food sources,  
But when something has been around for hundreds or thousands of years,  
It usually holds lots of merit.

Most of the corn goes straight to the tortilla.  
The women make tortillas by hand for every meal.

These aren't anything you find in the grocery store either.  
They're probably a quarter to a half inch thick of meaty,  
Hearty corn,  
With a trace of lime.

You can eat it alone if you'd like,  
But they pair it with absolutely anything.

If there are no tortillas on the table,  
You can bet you'll hear about it,  
And some of your guests might not even come back.

When it was eventually time for me to leave Casaca,  
I cried for many reasons,  
But knowing I wasn't going to get those tortillas again really helped along the tears.



It's part of certain Mayan creation stories...

That we are made from corn.

It's a very sacred plant there.

Once Chepe Ortiz and I finally came to a house,  
Or a clearing in the middle of nowhere,  
We would usually encounter women and children,  
Or elderly men who couldn't join the rest of the men going to the U.S. to work and send  
money back to their families









Whoever it was,  
We were always fed.

No questions asked.

They had so little,  
Yet they gave so much.

I remember sitting on a stump in a tiny adobe hut covered in soot from years of cooking  
and smoke,  
Filling my belly with a hearty soup-like dish made from a squash plant called Ayote.

I remember looking around and saying to myself,  
“Is this real?  
How did I get here?”

When you’re at a point in your life where you feel like nothing’s happening,  
Or you’re not where you want to be,  
Just wait and see where you find yourself one day.

One day you’ll be sitting in a mud hut wondering how yesterday you were watching “G.I.  
Joe” with your mom before you had to go to kindergarten class.

It kind of doesn’t make sense once you’re doing what you want to do.

You just don’t see any other way about it,  
Once you get rushed into the present.

In those moments,  
It’s like the whole world is illuminated before you to show you that you’re already doing so  
much,  
And the help you wish to give is just the desire you’ve come here with,  
As a reminder that it is indeed in you.

It doesn’t mean that you have to work yourself silly trying to do too much because you’re  
afraid it’s too grim out there.



That's what I did.

**Turns out I was the one who needed help.**

Chepe Ortiz's daily mantra to me was,  
"Poco a poco, Miguel."

*Little by little, Michael.*  
I guess I was going too fast,  
Or he could see/sense it in me.

At the time,  
It really frustrated me.

I saw myself as being very slow already,  
Probably moreso than anyone I knew,  
And here he kept on saying it to little ol' *me*.  
It all led up to one day where we were making hand pumps out of PVC piping,  
To draw water up from concrete cisterns.





There was a piece of plastic that needed to be chiseled off each one,  
And that day I just couldn't take it anymore.

I felt like it was all happening impossibly slow,  
And I was downright frustrated.

The chisel slipped,  
And I gave myself a good ol' puncture wound in the palm of my hand.

So Chepe says,  
"Poco a poco, Miguel."

**I went miles and miles away just to learn to take things day by day.**





*Photo of Margarita and I*

What I thought I was doing was helping.

What I was really doing was learning.

We were sharing with each other,  
But I just feel like they gave me so much more than I could've asked for.

It's where and when I was first told that nothing was required of me.

**They simply wanted me to be there and be a part of their lives.**

I thought I had to bring something to contribute.

I didn't want to arrive empty-handed,  
And I didn't want to feel like I wasn't of any use.

I put so much pressure on myself for it,  
That I eventually broke.



Chepe Ortiz and the entire [AFOPADI](#) family gave me a direction.

They gave me a sense of peace...

*That I don't have to do anything extra.*

It was already enough that I just wanted to be there.

So go ahead,

Do your thing,

Don't worry what you bring.