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By W. GEORGE LOVELL

What it all comes down to is that we are the sum of our efforts to change who we are. Identity is no museum piece sitting stock-still in a display case, but rather the endlessly astonishing synthesis of the contradictions of everyday life.

— Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*

THE PRIVILEGES OF university life are many. One that recently came my way was the luxury of a sabbatical leave. Released from routine and the call of duty, I could devote myself entirely to writing, sitting at my desk without any need to prepare lectures, grade papers, examine theses, organize seminars, evaluate grant proposals, compose letters of recommendation, or be at hand to help deal with all sorts of crises, real or imagined. It was a good year, during which I dared to think of myself not as teacher or colleague, academic adviser or member of a committee, but simply as a writer. The distinction may mean nothing to anyone else, but a Rubicon it was (and remains) for me.

My father, of course, saw things differently. Home for Christmas, the no-nonsense ways of Glasgow were soon asserted. "Yer mother tells me yer on a year's holiday." Normally a reliable filter, on this occasion my mother had let me down badly. The words had been uttered half as statement, half as inquiry, lost to all the occupants of the Old Stag Inn but myself. I wondered, not for the first time, how to respond to my father's perception of what it is I do, what it is I am.

I began to explain, as my Dean would expect and as best I could, the gulf between "holiday" and "sabbatical," reeling off a litany of tasks I intended to fulfil before the year was over. My father listened patiently. When I stopped talking it was time for another round. He wiped from his moustache the creamy froth of a fresh half-pint of Guinness. "Sounds like a holiday tae me, son!" he declared. The women working behind the bar smiled at the sound of our laughter. Against what did my father measure his son's lucky lot? The years he spent at sea? After the merchant navy, the years spent running our family shop? After the shop closed, the years of swallowed pride sweeping the streets of Govan? As we made our way home, I felt more privileged than ever.

The flip side of privilege, however, is responsibility: to oneself, to one's family and friends, to the people and places we cherish and love, to the things we come to believe in. While more at ease in a university setting than in any other I have yet encountered, never have I felt comfortable with certain academic conventions. Among those that trouble me most is the elite mind-set that equates scholarly endeavor with the ability to engage meaningfully, in conversation or in print, with a select group of fellow

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intellectuals. Even if I had the requisite grey matter to express myself in such a fashion, I doubt I would derive much pleasure from knowing that whatever I had to say could be understood, and cared about, only by a handful of like-minded specialists.

So it was that, early on in my career as professor, I began to lead a double life, publishing papers that conformed to so-called "academic" criteria while at the same time producing the odd essay or book review for media with more public terms of reference. The latter enterprise, over the past 12 years, has seen me contribute a number of times to *The Whig-Standard Magazine*, often on the subject of human rights and social justice in Central America. As one of my sabbatical projects, I reworked those contributions dealing exclusively with Guatemala, paring them down until I was satisfied they might stand together one day as a book, a personal memoir of a country I stumbled on by accident nearly 20 years ago.

Did I choose Guatemala or did Guatemala choose me? I'd been in Canada less than a year, having left Scotland to pursue graduate studies in Latin American geography at the University of Alberta. Classes in anthropology and history, to say nothing of the bite of that first Canadian winter, only increased my desire to flee Edmonton and head south. Responding to my supervisor's instructions — "Finish your field work in Mexico, and get down to Central America" — I arrived in Guatemala on June 25, 1974, youthful and wide-eyed, not really knowing what to expect. I was 23, hitching rides or travelling on second-class buses, and eager for new experiences. Within days Guatemala had exerted a powerful and mysterious hold, seducing me completely, offering not just a fleeting summer's reward but sustaining work for a lifetime. I'd found something I longed for. I could feel it in my heart, see it in the beauty of the weathered Maya faces, be part of it as I walked

through the hills and the corn, observe it everywhere in the lay of the land. Nothing has been the same ever since.

Thereafter, rites of academic passage called for a dissertation, then a book, with some articles and conference presentations along the way. Soon after being awarded my doctorate, however, I felt that something was missing, that the contract I had struck with Guatemala required me to develop the knowledge I had picked up as a scholar, to reach out and embrace a less specialized audience. This occurred in 1981, when the political situation in Guatemala (seldom good) began to deteriorate, when friends whose lives were threatened had to leave, when people I knew and respected were killed. That year, on returning to Canada from a particularly disturbing trip, I made my debut writing about Guatemala in the pages of *The Whig-Standard Magazine*.

Roger Bainbridge, a gentle man in an unkind business, proved receptive to an initial feeler and pronounced himself happy with what I later delivered. "A pen name wouldn't be a bad idea," he mused, for he understood from the start the nature of my involvement, that I would always go back to Guatemala. We settled on Donald McAlpine, a combination of the maiden names of my mother and grandmother. My alter ego was published several times. He even managed, on a couple of occasions, to migrate from the *Saturday Magazine* to the editorial page, where his views were enshrined, if not endorsed, by a number of commentators. After I testified before a parliamentary committee in Ottawa, at which representatives of the Guatemalan Embassy were also in attendance, Donald McAlpine was made redundant. It also made sense not to return to Guatemala for a while. From the time of McAlpine on, once or twice each year I wrote about Guatemala in the hope of making it a real issue, not a distant abstraction, for the Kingston community and beyond.

Creating a focused text from these myriad and disparate writings proved a more difficult challenge than I'd bargained for. I'm wary when I hear people say that they love to write. What I like is the feeling of having written something I can live with before moving on. Writing for me is a siren call I respond as best I can, but given the choice I'd much rather do just about anything else, preferably paint or blow a mean, mournful saxophone. There is, however, no choice in the matter. If I don't write, I don't feel right. The week at the desk I had reckoned on soon became two, the fortnight a month. I'd chosen to tackle the beast in Guatemala itself, so there were countless, justifiable distractions. When the words wouldn't come I'd walk the streets of Antigua in search of inspiration. After a fruitful spell I'd treat myself to a sauna and a massage at Jocotenango, returning replenished and refreshed to where I left off.

What eventually came of that particular sabbatical labor? It resulted in a manuscript that looks at what took place in Guatemala during the 1980s, when a government declared war on its own people in the name of anti-communism. I begin with a series of political snapshots, taking the pulse of the country at regular intervals between the time of General Romeo Lucas Garca (1978-82) and the advent of the current president, Jorge Serrano Elias. In Part Two I tell of two Maya Indians driven into exile, and of the circumstances surrounding their flight from Guatemala. One of them, Rigoberta Mench, is now so famous as to have won the Nobel Peace Prize. The other is not so well known, but happens to be the person I share my house with. He fled Guatemala when he was only 14, after his father and two brothers had been murdered and after the army had forced him to serve in a civil defence patrol. His presence reminds me daily that, in Guatemala, conquest is not a remote, historical experience but a visible, present condition. In Part Three I subject an assortment of books to my scrutiny as reviewer, assessing their strengths and weaknesses as texts from which to gain insight into Guatemala. Wherever possible I bring elements of the Guatemalan story back to Canada, for Canadians, as much as Americans, need to know more about a country that is closer to Ontario than British Columbia is.

I close with a post-sabbatical confession. The year was wonderful, but I missed teaching and its pleasant, unexpected returns. My father, I suspect, is happy to know that when I returned to Queen's last fall there were enough students enrolled in my classes to keep me gainfully employed. "Ah don't understand this sabbatical malarky," I hear him say to my mother. "Are ye sure that boy's no lost his job?" □

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Lovell Sr. on writing sabbaticals: "Yer mother tells me yer on a year's holiday"