

# BY THE WAY

BY TONY BECKWITH



## THE UNIVERSITY OF LIFE

I was at a cocktail party last night when the conversation turned to the subject of college education. When it was my turn to talk I was able to say “Actually, I didn’t go to college” quite comfortably, with no trace of the old awkwardness or embarrassment. It wasn’t always this way.

When I finished high school my father wanted to send me to his (and his father’s) old school in England to get a university education. But I balked, and said that further academic study was of no interest to me because I wanted a career in advertising. My uncle was in advertising, you see, and he was my hero so my path was clear. My father said, “To me, the whole point of education is to learn how to think. I imagine if you can learn that from the University of Life you will probably do just fine.” And then, in his usual quiet way, he set about finding me a job at the Montevideo headquarters of the J. Walter Thompson Company. It was the smallest branch office of the largest international advertising agency in the world. I began as the office boy—which made me the lowliest employee in the global JWT hierarchy—and I reasoned that from there I could only go up. I was right.

JWT had an office in Uruguay to take care of international clients, but it was a very local affair that was actually run out of the much larger office just across the river in Buenos Aires, an hour away by plane. After I’d been there for a couple of years, during which time a string of local managers had proved unsuitable for one reason or another, the bosses in BA decided to try something different. By then I was the account executive and the latest manager’s right-hand-man. This hapless fellow was paralyzed by fear and a very domineering wife and never made a move without checking with his superiors. That showed that there was no real need for a manager as such after all, just someone to handle the clients and represent the agency. The handful of employees had been dealing with the bosses across the river for years

and knew exactly what they were supposed to do, so they didn't really need much in the way of supervision or direction. I was at the right place at the right time and, most importantly, I spoke English, so I became the token head of the branch office. I was a few months shy of my nineteenth birthday.

I resigned a year later because I wanted to go to England, the land of my forebears, which in those days I considered to be the epicenter of the world. I was told that I was mad to walk away from my promising career at the agency, but I knew I had to go and blithely assumed that I would find another job once I got to London. I sold my Vespa and traveled north through the Americas for a year, visiting friends and looking around, learning to think for myself. Icelandic Airlines had the cheapest fares across the Atlantic at the time, and one day I flew from New York to London. It was the mid-1960s and Britain was in a bad way. Nobody was hiring green account executives from the boonies that had dropped out and been on the road for a year. So I had to make do with waiting tables and a clerical sort of job in the ad department of a printing company. Things looked bleak and I began to understand why my forebears had left and gone to South America many years ago.

But one day my luck changed and I got a job at a multi-national advertising agency in Madrid. I was like a fish in water again, happy as a clam at high tide. It was a big agency, with international accounts, and once again I was hired largely on the strength of my ability to speak English. I had an office with French windows onto a balcony and a view of the snow-capped peaks of the Navacerrada mountain range where I went skiing whenever I could. I loved living in Spain, and stayed for three years. But then I was ready to move again and the next thing I knew I was in Australia. My traveling companion and I went bush for a while, wandering from town to town out in the country, doing odd jobs here and there. We were what the Australians call *jackaroos*. I saw parts of Australia I would never have seen if I'd gone straight to work in Sydney, and met people I would never have encountered in the city. It was, in a very real sense, like stepping through the looking glass into an unfamiliar dimension. There was a profoundly surreal quality about life in the outback that taught me to appreciate abstraction and the sense of inhabiting two separate realities at the same time. After a few months we packed it in and returned to the city, where I got a job at JWT again. In time I noticed that all my fellow executives had college degrees but had never been out of Australia, and discovered that this time I had not been hired for my ability to speak English but for my worldly experience. It was another great fit. I became an account director with an expense account and a company car, and

I spent five great years with the firm. Until, one day, I dropped out and went to Mexico.

Life in the lovely colonial town of San Miguel de Allende, in northern Mexico, once again made me feel as though I had stepped into a different dimension—in this case one that was far removed from modern city life. It was here that I discovered translation when I joined a group of literary-minded expats at weekly rooftop gatherings. I had always liked to write, and had always written, and although as an Anglo-Argentine-Uruguayan I had inevitably been a de facto translator, I had never considered it as a profession. I certainly enjoyed it, and vaguely thought: “Who knows? Maybe one day.” Many months passed at a leisurely pace and then it was time to replenish funds so I came to the United States and worked as a cook on an offshore oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. I had learned a little cooking along the way, and after some hands-on kitchen training I spent a wonderful year living on a small metal island out of sight of land, in the company of about twenty-five roughnecks and roustabouts from the Deep South. In the meantime my wages were piling up in a bank in Houston. I think of that experience as my ‘Foreign Legion’ period.

In 1980 I came to Austin, Texas for the weekend and am still here. I fell in love with the place and never wanted to leave. So I stayed and got into the restaurant business. Managing a restaurant is a complex process that requires an eclectic range of skills. My advertising experience stood me in good stead, since a waiter is essentially an account executive and the kitchen is the creative department. My stint on the oil rig, where supplies were delivered once a week, taught me about taking inventory and planning carefully and not running out of things when they were most needed. And my checkered background had exposed me to many different types of people, which helped in dealing with staff and customers. My restaurant period lasted about a decade, by which time I was tired of dealing with employees and payroll and long hours on my feet, and wanted to do something different, something that was just me. I remembered my brief fling with translation all those years ago, and wondered whether it might become my third career. One thing led to another and one day I threw my hat into the ring and became a freelance translator.

At that stage it had been about thirty-five years since I had turned down my father’s offer to send me to university, and never once had it been an issue of any kind. None of the positions I had held or the jobs I had done required anything

more than a high school diploma, so my lack of college credentials had never come up. But now, as I started moving in translation circles I realized that I was virtually the only one with no college background at all. This awoke in me a state of anxiety I had not experienced since I was a teenager whose parents would not let him wear long pants until he was fourteen. It was of some, but not much, consolation to learn that passing the ATA certification exam indicated that I was functioning at the intellectual level of a college graduate. I actually had few doubts about the skills I already possessed, but fell victim to a nagging sense of inadequacy when I contemplated my total ignorance of the academic world. It suddenly seemed that there were so many things I had never thought about, a venerable structure and discipline I had never experienced, and so many books I had never read. Not that all translation is of an exclusively academic nature, of course, not at all. But the kind I was interested in—literary translation—seemed to be dominated by academics with a lifetime of literary experience and letters after their names. And the wider world of technical and commercial translation was populated by college graduates with business degrees or engineering degrees or legal degrees. I confess to feeling somewhat intimidated, and it made me think long and hard about some of the choices I had made. In those circles the subject of one's college education came up quite often, and I sometimes pretended I hadn't heard the question, or sidestepped it with some vague segue to something else. Though no one ever gave me any reason to feel this way, I was embarrassed to admit that I had not gone to college. I knew I was being silly but it made me feel inferior and that was all there was to it. It did not, however, seem to impair my translating skills.

Over the years, like many others in the field, I translated a typically varied assortment of birth certificates and college transcripts, brochures and posters, newsletters and manuals, video scripts and documentaries, poems, tangos, and novels. Time went by and I drifted into a niche translating art books and catalogues. It happened as most projects of this kind do, with a referral and a project that leads to another project that eventually leads to a book. Art catalogues usually include essays by curators and art historians, theoreticians and critics—people with university degrees and letters after their names. There are biographical statements about the artist that often have technical and aesthetic descriptions of the work involved. There are reviews that explore paintings or sculptures and discuss their nuances in highly contextual and critical terms. These documents can contain subtleties of meaning that flutter through the words like butterfly wings. They can express abstract, theoretical ideas that exist in a dimension of their own. And where the words go, the translator must follow.

As with any other form of translation, I read the original text and decide what research I need. As the research progresses, I work with the text to understand the rhythm and get a feel for the narrative flow. I think about what the author is saying, studying the words through an analytical lens that has been polished by the survival skills a lifetime can teach. Once I am ready to write the new version I summon up the surreal sense of duality I experienced in the Australian outback, on an offshore oil rig, and in the mountains of Mexico and approach the text from there. During this process I feel detached from any intellectual structure or discipline of any kind. I feel that I am floating free, communing with the words on a purely intuitive level, looking for meanings I can picture and feelings I can capture. I flow back and forth between the source and the target languages, building the translation word by word, and imagine how pleased my father would be to know that I am a graduate of the University of Life.

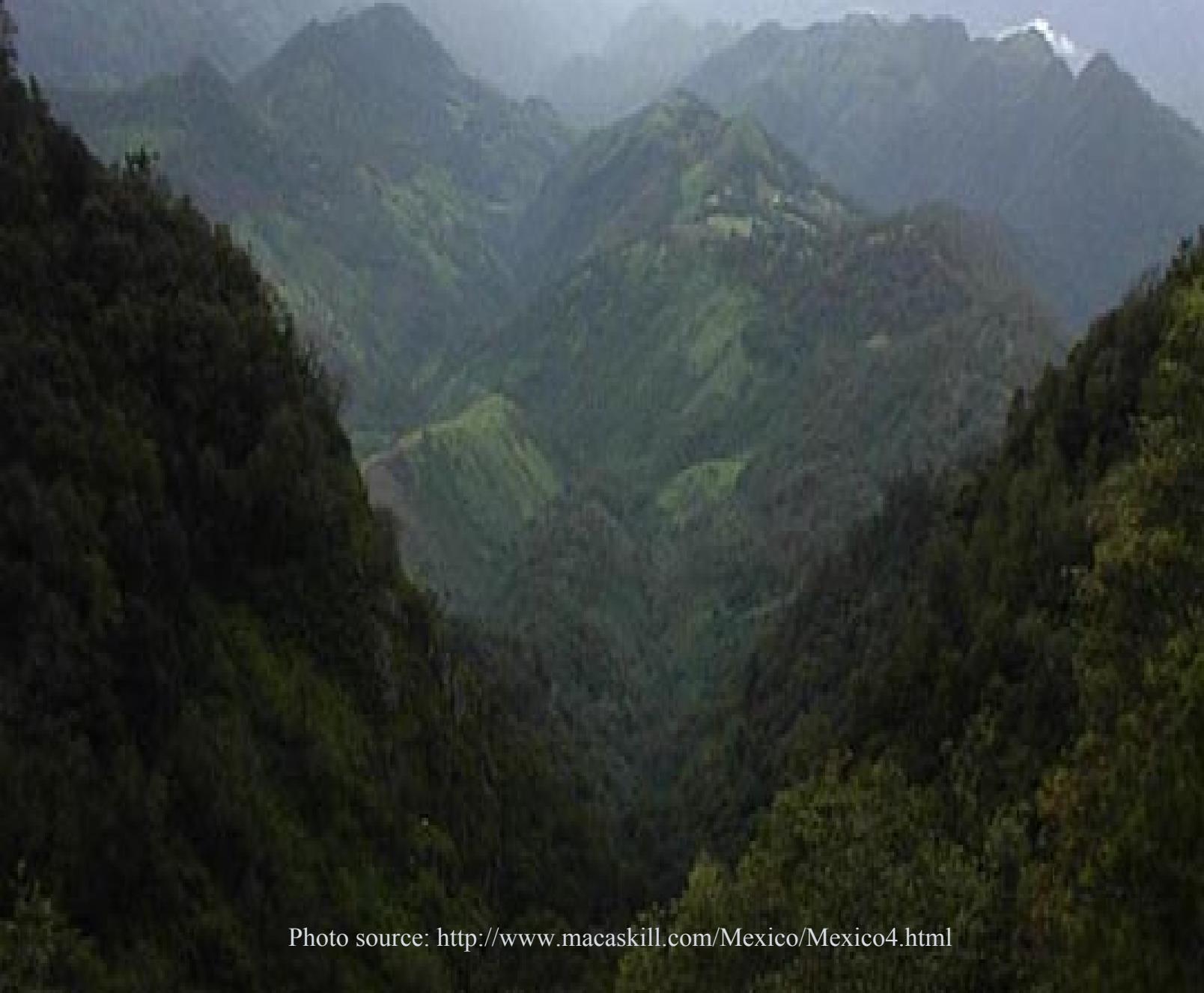


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