

Buscando la Vida

ENRIQUE DE ANDA

For many years, whenever asked my father's occupation, I responded, "He was a farmworker," which was true, mostly. Yes, my father had been a farmworker in many stages of his life, beginning in his adolescence, as part of a large agrarian family in the hardscrabble Los Altos area of eastern Jalisco, Mexico, and continuing off and on throughout his life. However, as his life progressed so too did his varied occupations: "farmworker" did not describe the man, instead it described a part of who he was and his legacy of a life of struggle and hard work. It took me some time to decipher and reconcile his peripatetic work history, but it was best exemplified by his answer to my inquiries about the profusion and variety of his work sojourns and activity: "*estaba buscando la vida*" translated inexactly "I was searching for life," his reply.

My father's "*buscando la vida*", translated literally, does not fully explain or illustrate his understanding and use of that term. He would use the term *buscando la vida* to explain his work-related ramblings as a young man: from Mexico City in the 1940s as a construction laborer; the Pacific Northwest during WWII as a worker in the U.S. Bracero Program; to his forays across the border in the 1950s, hopping then lightly guarded border fences, to find whatever work was available in the fields and

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orchards of California. Those seemingly erratic work journeys were the result of “push-pull” factors motivated by a desire to relieve his immediate poverty, then later after marriage, the sustenance and sustainability of his growing family. There were the “push” factors, compelling him to leave his beloved Mexican village, family and way of life due to extremely limited economic opportunities. And, he also felt the “pull” factor of the hope and desire to better his and his family’s economic well-being, particularly through emigration to the United States. His quest ultimately culminated in a transformation, by chance, desire, and fortune, from Mexican farmworker to Mexican-American farmer. He was *buscando la vida*.

The beginnings of my father’s life as a farmworker began in Mexico, where he was born in 1923 in the *ranchos* lands surrounding the small town of La Union de San Antonio, situated in the eastern end of the central state of Jalisco. Known as Los Altos de Jalisco, it is an area of central-eastern Jalisco defined by its geography, translated as The Highlands. The rolling lands are cut across by valleys and plains delineated by mesas large and small and distant mountain ranges, semi-arid and replete with *mesquite* trees and *nopal*, vast grassy areas covered with low growing thorny trees and cacti. The area is historically more noted for livestock raising rather than the scattered and miniscule fields of *maize* and seasonal vegetables; abundant harvests when the summer rains were sufficient, a land of hunger and emigration when they were not. Most of the farm work was in the form of subsistence farming and sharecropping, driven oxen or mules the vehicles for plowing the fields with sons and daughters still in single-digit years following the plow, planting seed in furrows, row after row. Larger landholdings were mostly used for raising livestock, pigs in penned enclosures or free-range cattle and goats. Families too poor to own large landholdings or herds of livestock were forced by circumstance and fortune to farm their small plots or sharecrop. My father’s family fell into the latter category, and from these meager beginnings my father’s life of a farmworker took hold.

The stories my father told of his upbringing in Mexico were of dire poverty and deprivation. A large family of eight children, mother and father, made for ten people to house, clothe and feed, initially in the countryside outside the town of La Union de San Antonio, and then, later in the town itself. As we sometimes would hear his childhood stories of woe while sharing a family meal, it inevitably prompted my father to describe the scarcity and meagerness of the food available to him; his childhood hunger memories still fresh. Since I have never wanted for food, I can only imagine how my father’s memory of hunger motivated him to seek out ways to better

his life. The record is unclear but it seems my father, although literate, did not attend, or sporadically attended, school during his childhood; instead, he was put to work as soon as his young body could be put to use in productive ways. I can visualize his mother, my grandmother, a stern and no-nonsense type of woman, ensuring the entire family was hard at work to keep from starving.

Among my father's early work life, as relayed to me, included taking the family's cow out to pasture and milking it as well. I recall his disappointment and anger when as a child visiting La Union I turned my nose up at freshly milked cow's milk, delivered to the house in the metal pail that minutes earlier had been under the cow being milked, with attendant debris: cow's hair, errant grasses, and small insects floating or swimming in the oddly greasy yellowish "milk". It was like no milk I had ever seen. I believe these types of scenarios elicited my father's hunger memories, and provoked anger against my squeamishness and general fastidiousness that he found irritating and was quick to admonish. It was not that my family did not experience our own economic deprivations in the U.S., we did and they were many. I can vividly remember my various material aspirations dashed once again by my family's lack of economic resources to satisfy the desires of my childhood, simple as they may have been. But, I never experienced deprivation of sustenance; our basic dietary needs were met each and every day and greatly enhanced by my mother's excellent cooking. In contrast, my father's childhood daily sustenance was not guaranteed, tales of children's bloated bellies, miseries and worse abounded. Those past deprivations would color his future outlook on economic security, and what he needed to do to obtain that security.

As a middle child, my father's older siblings married, began families or moved out of the little town of La Union to seek brighter futures. At one point in his latter teenage years, my father left La Union to seek his fortune in the Mexican capital of Mexico City. His stories recounting working Mexico City were a bit hazy, like the smoky haze that hung over the Valle de Mexico. He told me that at that time, 1940 more or less, he could walk across the city of Mexico City in one day. It was his form of recreation, natural for a country boy new to the big city with meager financial resources; and, he fondly recounted the memories of the sights, sounds and smells of the city. He worked as a laborer in construction. Much of the work involved digging holes and trenches or hauling building supplies. Surprisingly, when I lived in Mexico City in the early 80s, this was still how building construction was done: a gang of laborers digging trenches or scurrying about rickety scaffolding with buckets of freshly made cement or bricks being hauled up to the next floor being constructed. After a

couple of years of living in Mexico City, my father returned to La Union. He never told me why his sojourn to Mexico City did not become a permanent one, as it did for so many migrants from the countryside, other than his usual refrain: “*buscando la vida*”.

Over the course of the next few years, my father took a zig-zag approach to whatever employment prospect offered the most money to be squeezed out of his only capital: his labor. He somehow arranged to work in the Bracero Program, a bilateral United States/Mexico attempt at a temporary contract labor force imported to the U.S. from Mexico. The Bracero Program introduced my father to his first journey to El Norte, and although he saw large parts of the United States Northwest while working—picking sugar beets in Idaho, lumber work in Oregon, farm work wherever strong backs could be used—the tale was never told of wide-eyed youthful wanderings; instead grim tales of gang-labor witnessing the documented shortcomings of the Bracero program: meager or non-existent wages, squalid housing, exploitation and broken promises. Due to the material shortcomings of food, shelter and medical care, he fell sick in Idaho. In the vernacular of his country people he had come down with *empache*, stomach woes of unknown origins but dire consequences. And, because of the dearth of basic services, including medical care, he realized his only recourse was to escape from the camp. Escape he did and thereby was outside of the Bracero Program and effectively became an undocumented migrant. He then set about on a multi-state journey that eventually brought him to the San Francisco Bay Area where his uncle Pancho lived and was nursed back to health by Pancho’s wife, Trinidad. How he maneuvered this journey, while sick and traveling through strange lands, was never fully explained, but it was indicative of his character to leave things, as he would state, in the hands of the Divine Providence of God, and most probable, kindly strangers. It was a cautionary tale he told resignedly.

My father returned to the land of his birth when he was 25, intent on marrying. He knew my mother’s family since childhood, and my mother, then a 19 year old rail-thin young woman, caught my father’s eye. But he was not my mother’s first choice for marriage; she had already been proposed to by another suitor, who her father found unacceptable and was subsequently rejected. Conversely, my father, known about town as a serious and sober young man, fit the bill. Or at least these are my grandfather’s specifications.

My parents quickly married and eventually settled in Tijuana, Baja California, in 1948, a then relatively small city of 60,000 on the border with San Diego, California. The “pull” factor to migrate to Tijuana had a strong economic incentive, after their honeymoon first year of marriage picking cotton in Mexicali living in a migrant tent

camp with other young couples. Picking cotton and living in Mexicali enduring conditions worse than they were accustomed to pushed and motivated them to search other opportunities; and so, they moved to Tijuana where other relatives had already established a precarious beachhead in the dusty frontier town.

Leaving home for a new country as an immigrant can lead to huge and portentously chaotic outcomes for anyone fleeing poverty and limited opportunity in their homeland. When I arrived in the U.S. with my family, as a four-year-old immigrant boy, it was not so tumultuous. I was too young for the imprint of my birth country to have taken hold of my self-identity. And the new country, California in 1963, was a distinctly fresh contrast to the dusty streets of our pioneering hillside Tijuana home we had left behind. I cannot assume here what our move meant to my older siblings or mother, but I can speculate what it meant for my father: it was his continuing quest for a better life, particularly for his children; *buscando la vida*.

The family's migration journey to the United States was via a day-long journey from Tijuana in the family station wagon, loaded with our belongings, sparse and meager as they were, to the Niles district of the recently formed City of Fremont in the San Francisco Bay Area. We landed, all eight of us, six children ages one through eleven, and mother and father. Our family lore relates with relief how fortuitous it was that my father picked the San Francisco Bay Area as the place to settle down in the United States and not some forlorn, hot, dusty town elsewhere. However, thoughts of idyllic weather did not dictate where my father would settle us; but instead, it was the draw of already settled relatives in the area, which in turn meant employment opportunities for him.

The relative we landed with was my father's uncle, Francisco, or to us, *Tío Pancho*, a retired railroad worker and his wife Trine, by then in their 70s. Their very modest house at the dead-end of Vallejo Street in Niles was situated up against the embankment of the elevated railroad tracks that ran just yards behind their house. A forest of *nopal*, prickly pear cactus, in the back of the house was a ready source of vegetable from the *nopal* paddles and fruit from the *tunas* or prickly pears in abundance. The *nopal* forest was also a buffer to the railroad tracks, keeping curious and unknowing children away from the potentially dangerous trains that ran day and night.

Vallejo Street was named after a Spanish land-grant family, later known as Californios, who were among the first Europeans to settle in the area, the ruins of their adobe ranch house within walking distance. Alameda Creek ran less than 100 yards away from the house; a trestle bridge spanned the creek, used exclusively for the frequent trains. There was some room in *Tío Pancho's* house to accommodate us, along with an

adjacent small studio in-law cottage where we all huddled to sleep haphazardly on the floor. The fact that we had taken a downward step in our socio-economic mobility, from the modest two bedroom house we owned in Tijuana, to depending on the kindness of relatives for precarious shelter was certainly not obvious to me, or perhaps even to the adults. What was certain was that we had come to set roots and live in California.

The first memories I have of my father's work life are of his days working in the gladiola fields in the East Bay area of San Francisco Bay. In my child's eyes it seemed that he worked in a garden-like environment, the boldly colored row upon row of gladiola flowers carpeting the hillsides and alluvial plains (formed by Alameda Creek) from Spring to Fall. And while enchanted with the scene of flowered hillsides, I realized even as a child his world was one of hard work: coming home in the evenings, six days a week, his weariness evident in dusty work clothes and sweat-stained hat. His ruddy stubbled face giving shape and form to the toil of the day. But even with the rigors of the work, my father did not seem defeated or exhausted; instead, he seemed to take a resigned and somewhat joyful approach to honest, albeit not well paid work. I never heard him complain about the work; but, his advertence to his children was plain: "don't do what I do." While my childhood impression of his work life shaped and colored my belief as to who and what he was, in reality it was but a small chunk of time in his lifetime of toil.

In contrast to his farm labor work in the Bay Area, prior to emigrating, my father had developed a small business selling tchotchkes along the Tijuana/United States border. In conjunction with other men he knew from family connections, they would buy their wares, mostly statuary, from a distributor and they would sell them literally at La Línea, "The Line" of cars crossing the border from Mexico into the United States. Dodging cars and hustling sales, huffing car exhaust all day in a mad-dash dance, he managed to establish his own business, embryonic and fitful, but his. It seems that my father's introduction to business at La Línea would keep his hopes to establish economic security via his own efforts as a lifelong dream.

When we finally settled in the historically Mexican-American Decoto district of Union City, California in 1964, our tiny house dead in the center of town at 7th and E streets, my father put in his first U.S. "*parcela*". The *parcela* was a little strip of land abutting the somewhat dilapidated fence, dedicated to growing his edible garden. It was just a couple of small rows of seasonal plants of chile, tomato, squash, cilantro and tomatillo plants interspersed between a scraggly peach tree and avocado tree that fronted E St. He lovingly cared for *la parcelita* after his day's work in the gladiola fields had completed. His joy was evident as he went among the plants, watering with a

skinny green hose, tidying this or that plant, stuffing a handful of green unripe *chiles de árbol* in his pants pocket as he went along, quick, fruitful and efficient work. It seems hard to believe that after a long day's labors in the gladiola fields he seemed to find joy and release in caring for his own garden.

In 1968, when I was in the third grade, and while walking alone to Sunday morning church services, I was suddenly whisked away by a car driven by Uncle Victoriano, Dad's older brother, and taken to their home a couple blocks away. I did not know it at the time, but members of my family as well as relatives, on the road to visit my grandmother in Tijuana, had been in a horrific auto accident in Orange County, California. The outcome of the accident was that my father had broken his back and would spend months in Southern California undergoing surgeries and rehabilitation. Our family was split up during this time, Mother, and younger brother would stay in Southern California with relatives, my two older sisters and I would spend the next few months with Uncle Vic's very large family, and, the two older brothers would continue living in our house three blocks away. Curiously, during the months I spent at Uncle Vic's I do not remember my brothers coming to visit me or me thinking of going to our house to see them. In fact, I was not told that my parents had been in an accident at all. After a few weeks of being in limbo as to my family's whereabouts, my oldest sister told me that our parents had decided to stay in Tijuana for a while. Even my eight year old mind did not believe that account, but I had nothing else to make sense of my family's absence and did not question that version of reality. The time spent at Uncle Vic's house, along with about eight of his eleven children and his wife, was a time of "every person for themselves." I was treated well enough, but Aunt did not have time to take one more child's needs into account other than to provide food and basic life necessities. I appreciated their care but I was a child in exile.

Weeks later, my oldest sister confessed that there had been an accident, that my father was seriously injured and that my mother would be returning to Union City. It was as I had imagined a family tragedy of which I was not informed. The months-long exile at Uncle Vic's thankfully came to an end when my mother returned. Suddenly, my mother was in charge of six kids aged six to sixteen. My oldest brother was also put into the position of household leader, which saved us from having to rely solely on our mother, who was overwhelmed with what had happened and what needed to happen. Our ensuing three years without my father's presence at home changed the family dynamics and changed the family members. It also changed my father.

After a couple years of physical rehabilitation in a San Francisco Bay Area hospital, my father was considered well enough to come home. He could walk with the

help of two metal crutches, and a trussed-up back brace. His miraculous recovery was largely due to his ability to get along, diligently following authority and making the best of a bad situation. The first days home were cautious and fraught with dramas that had not and could not have been anticipated. The whole family was on edge. As the air cleared in the next few months and my father became a bit more secure in his changed environment he began another years-long rehabilitation: to regain the ability to work.

After the many years of my father's absence and lack of his income, the family had subsisted economically by cobbling together what was available as public assistance: Welfare and "food stamps," free lunches at school, Social Security payments and other forms of assistance. If bad luck had placed us in this situation at least it was during the times when economic and social assistance was available to families like ours, and the working-class and poor community in which we lived. Additionally, my brothers and I all worked part-time jobs to allow us our own economic freedom, meager it may have been but some relief from our economic deprivations.

My father's physical recuperation was slow, but he was methodical and diligent with his physical therapies and determined to be productive again. Additionally, he held a great degree of faith in his Catholic beliefs, and that God's divine intervention was not just a possibility, but in his case, reality. After the first year home it became obvious that he would not be returning to his previous occupation as a farmworker. He must have been devastated upon realizing his physical limitations, and what that meant to his future employment prospects.

It was during the time of his rehabilitation and long absence from working that my father began his ascendancy to that of an independent farmer. After a couple years of not working, any attempt at productive labor within his ability was not out of the question: scavenging aluminum cans to redeem for cash, relieving my younger brother and me of custodial jobs we held cleaning a laundromat, and daily sweeping local store sidewalks. No job was beneath him, believing that even menial work was still gainful and purposeful work, he kept his dignity. And, he got paid, assembling a number of part-time jobs to keep him busy and put a little change in his pocket. But, it was the first tentative attempt to establish a *parcelita* in the late 1970s that laid the groundwork for his farm, perhaps unbeknown to him, but he was following his quest, *buscando la vida*.

The first commercial *parcela* was located adjacent to a friend's house he knew from his days of working in the gladiola fields. A bit of a character, and show off, Ramon was part of casual association of relatives, near-relatives and relatives of relatives that emanated from the ancestral village of La Union de San Antonio and

its satellite city of Tlaquitapa. He associated with these all-male cliques to gamble at cards, cook up meat-centric feasts of whatever animal they could get their hands on, and convivial drinking, often in some of the quickly vanishing agricultural lands surrounding Union City. In a deal shrouded in mystery and conjecture, he rented or in some way compensated his buddy Ramon, allowing him to cultivate an empty field at the side of his house. The plot must have been under a quarter acre, at best, but the alluvial soil was very productive, and he established a road-side business where people would pull their cars onto the *parcela's* adjacent dirt lot, which fronted a busy four lane road intense with car traffic. The attraction of fresh produce that customers could see being grown, harvested and sold by the solitary figure, had a strong pull. He had a steady supply of customers, most who knew him personally or by reputation. It was also around that time he became known locally as *Don* Tomás, an honorific he neither sought nor approved of. His self-effacing nature and shyness did not allow him such a lofty title, thinking it beyond his station in life. As he would admonish folks when using the honorific *Don*, "*Tomás, no más,*" requesting that only his name be used, not the *Don*. But the title stuck.

As time went on, his seasonal road-side business began to gain traction and he felt the desire and ability to expand the business. He did not have to look far to find the next iteration of *la parcela* as it was located just across the roadway, on a much larger plot of land owned by one of the last remaining Portuguese farmer/landowners. At one point in time many small landowners of the type existed in the area, but Mr. Souza's was one of the last. He was about 20 years older than my father, and he took a keen interest in my father and his plans to farm and sell his produce as a road-side business. A friendship developed between the two of them, and Mr. Souza may have seen a younger, Mexican version of his former self. He gave my father full reign on the approximately three acre plot, and my father ran with it.

With the assistance of his brother, Victoriano, a legendary figure who was a master at building any and all things, they established a rudimentary but adequate stall from which to sell the produce adjacent to the *parcela*. From late March onward he would begin the seasonal work: preparing the land for planting employing the aforementioned associate, Ramon, to disc and plow the plot by tractor. Once the land was ready to plant, establishing the seedlings for the planting in early April, and the nurturing and harvesting of produce from May onward into late Fall some years. He maintained a basic routine of products, including tomatoes, chiles, squash, tomatillo and corn. Occasionally, he would venture into more exotic territory and experiment with some other sort of produce, but he always stuck with what he knew would sell to

his mostly Mexican and Mexican-American clientele. And, while his main clientele remained Mexican and Mexican-American, as the demographics of Union City began to change a varied procession of new immigrants could see the value and attraction of his road-side stall. South Asians in particular begin to populate the area, and my father, a skilled practitioner in the back and forth dance of marketplace haggling, more than met his match with the new immigrants, as he complained somewhat bitterly about their relentless haggling over produce prices.

The business was doing well, and by the mid-80s his was one of the last of the roadside stands in the area. By now, *Tío* Victoriano had retired from his rail worker job and would spend many a day helping out my father, their easy and close relationship evident. Other friends would come by and visit as well, taking on the trappings of a social club. A six-pack of tall boy Budweiser beer was happily consumed by the two brothers throughout a long summer's afternoon and perhaps by a visitor as well. But, as age and lingering and new infirmities manifested themselves, he would state in the off-season that perhaps this would be the last year of *la parcela*. He said that a few years, but he would gamely return to his passion the following year. More than a few times, while visiting *la parcela*, I would come upon him as he crawled on his knees between the row upon row of plants, the effects of arthritis and age forcing him literally to his knees. He bravely persevered, but his days at *la parcela* appeared to have reached an end game.

The meddling of an employee from the county public housing authority, a certain *Señora* M., took on a petty but ultimately final stab in the heart of the ongoing business. For mysterious reasons, the housing authority employee took to threatening my father to expose the income he derived from the roadside stand to the housing authority. As the amount of income he derived from the stand was minimal, it would probably not have threatened the senior citizen subsidized apartment in which he resided after my parents' divorce. But, he was a person that feared the power wielded by those in a position to do so. By then he was in his early seventies and surely his body had been stretched to its maximum abilities. The next year, he quit *la parcela*.

Although my parents had divorced in the previous decade, they had reconciled to the point where my father would visit my mother daily at her apartment, help drive her around to medical appointments and other errands, and then return to his own apartment. Fortuitously, his apartment was set back towards the boundary of the senior citizen complex and there was a sizeable plot of land in his front yard for the creation of his neo-*parcelita*. While no longer in the business of planting crops and selling his produce, he could still indulge in his ancestral calling, and he reverted to a simpler and more suited to his present condition *parcela*.

When my father died a few years after the final year of the roadside *parcela*, I returned one day to his apartment to go over his few belongings. It was late March about a couple weeks after his death, and the warmer days had returned. I stopped in the front of the apartment to look over the neo-*parcelita* of his last days. As it was March, he had not planted much, but the garlic that was planted in the previous fall was now a small sea of green stalks waving in the Spring breeze. I carefully plucked the green garlic from the damp earth and bunched them up, tying them together with the green stalks as an improvised string. The *parcelita* seemed to be a parting gift from a man who thought he had little to give but gave to many by way of his sweat, toil and perseverance. It seemed that my father had found what he had sought, consciously or not, or perhaps it had found him. By *buscando la vida* he had found himself.