

Preface

I wrote *Dispatches from the Sweet Life* for anyone who questions, even slightly, the dominant American lifestyle today. I hope that in the wake of the inner and outer struggles in these pages, the reader will emerge with some knowledge and a good deal of curiosity about how we might live more integrated lives.

This is the third book in the Beyond the American Dream trilogy, which began with *Twelve by Twelve* (2010), about a guy in an off-grid tiny house in rural North Carolina seeking a minimalist, sustainable existence. It was followed by *New Slow City* (2014), about a newlywed couple in a Manhattan micro-apartment trying to re-create that same Slow life in the midst of urbanity. It culminates with *Dispatches from the Sweet Life*, about a young family self-exiled to South America, searching for balance, humanity, and happiness in a Bolivian town. Though thematically and chronologically connected, each book in the trio stands on its own.

There's no single definition of the South American idea of *vivir bien* or "living well." The Quechuas call it *sumak kawsay*; the Aymaras, *suma qamaña*. It also draws from the Guaraní idea of harmonious living (*ñandereko*) and the path to the noble existence (*qhapaj ñan*). Some, like Bolivian philosopher Javier Medina, call this alternative culture *la vida dulce* or "the sweet life": happiness achieved through deep human community in balance with nature.

From the moment I first arrived in Bolivia in 2001, I was fascinated by this new-and-ancient Bolivian dream. Fleshed into the larger society, the Sweet Life worldview seemed the opposite of

my own culture's "American Dream," which positions the individual — via competition — atop a set of natural resources for exploitation.

Then, in 2005, while I was writing *Whispering in the Giant's Ear: A Frontline Chronicle from Bolivia's War on Globalization*, the indigenous union leader Evo Morales won the presidency on a pro-*vivir bien* platform. A cultural meme, at once alluring and sustainable, was now primed to shape a modern nation. This released a powerful question: Could the Sweet Life provide an alternative to the more-is-better hegemony of the American Dream?

Though *memoir* names this book's genre, I've layered in a four-part structure corresponding to the four components of the Sweet Life: the search for balance, the complementarity of diversity, a unified vision, and initiation. I've culled these from Bolivian academic writings (by Javier Medina and Pablo Solón, among others) and from conversations with friends like Chiquitano Chief Gaspar and horse tamer Kusi. I imagine each of the four components, metaphorically, as part of the Chiquitano tribe's "tree of life that holds up the world." Each of the four parts corresponds to a section of that venerable tree — roots, trunk, branches, and sky (yes, in Bolivia that's part of the tree, too). Thus, we climb the tree that both supports and *is* the enigmatic Sweet Life.

There's no instruction manual for "living well" because it is a state of growth, a journey rather than an end point. What works for someone else may not work for you, and the multiplicity of "sweet" paths is its very fragrance.

I share this very personal story aware that I am a man with a US passport, relative economic security, and education. This is part of what made it possible for me to choose to move to Bolivia. For many Global North foreigners, moving abroad is a privilege, in the sense that risk-taking is. The discriminatory immigration policies in today's United States and Europe make the advantages

of my citizenship feel especially poignant. The ability to physically move, so easily, between the United States and Latin America is extraordinary. Our family's and community's honest efforts to live ancient values in their new "transition" expression today are also an attempt to subvert the very status quo that supports our privilege.

Because this is a true story, I chose to protect identities and specific locations, including the name of the actual Bolivian town it describes. I have occasionally collapsed multiple conversations into one or telescoped the chronology of certain events to tighten the book's narrative.

I also include at the back of the book a glossary of terms and translations of some of the Spanish, Quechua, and Aymara terms sprinkled throughout the text. If you are interested in learning more about some of the ideas in this book — like Transition initiatives, permaculture, international development, and so on — please visit my website (williampowersbooks.com) for a list of resources.

Finally, memoir is not diary, but rather literary art seeking a migration from fact to truth. I hope this book might catalyze reflections, emotions, and inspiration in you...toward harmony within that broad, inclusive tribe called *us*.