Manuel Ayau: Guatemala's Architect of Liberty

by Allen Mendenhall

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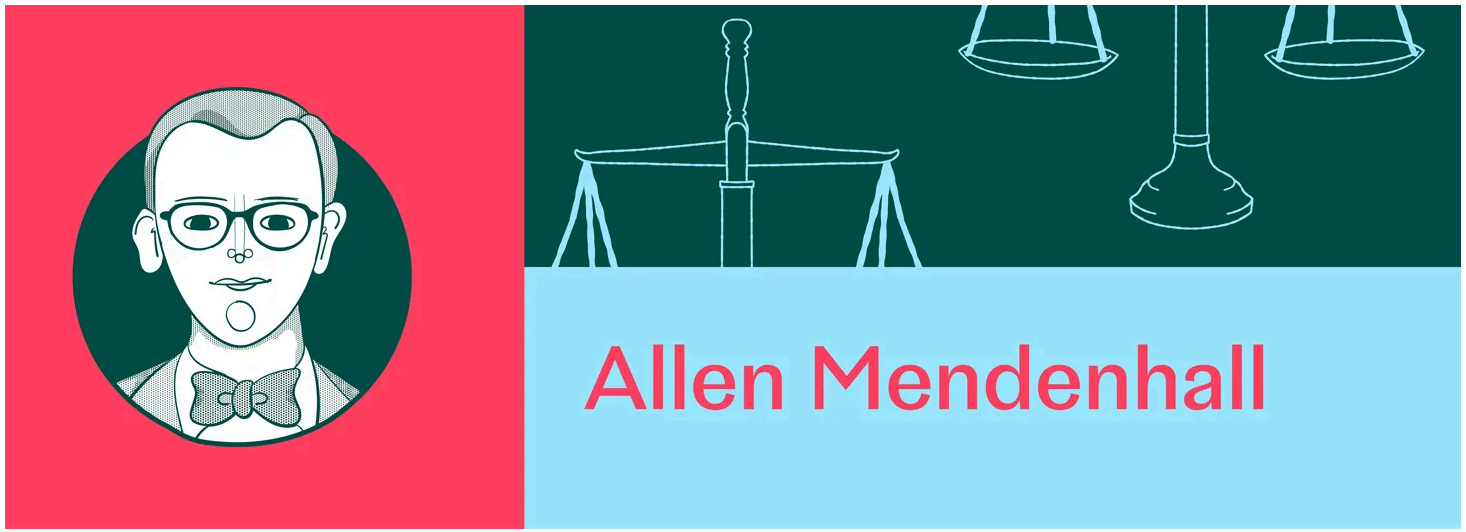

This year marks the centennial of Manuel Ayau's birth. A singular man with a singular vision to establish the Universidad Francisco Marroquín (UFM) in Guatemala City. Muso, as he was known, departed this vale of tears in 2010, leaving behind a

monument arguably more durable than the pyramids and infinitely more effective than the combined legislative output of the US Congress.

The trajectory of his remarkable legacy begins with a boy of five, rendered fatherless and transplanted to foreign soil. After Muso's father died, his mother took the family to the United States, honoring Manuel Ayau, Sr.'s fervent wish that his offspring master the English language and absorb the American ethos. Thus commenced an odyssey that would span continents and decades, ultimately flowering into Guatemala's most formidable bastion of intellectual liberty. I refer, of course, to UFM.

Young Muso's peripatetic education—beginning in Belmont, California, advancing through Upper Canada College, and culminating at the University of Toronto—furnished him with more than academic credentials. Between his studies in chemical and civil engineering, service in both the Royal Canadian Army and Air Force Officers Training Corps, he assembled a cosmopolitan understanding of freedom's fragility.

But Muso was no mere theoretician content to commune with abstract principles. His character was forged in the foundries of honest labor: the forest service in Canada, machine operation in gear-cutting factories, surveying, and seasonal agricultural work. His eclectic résumé would make today's helicopter-parented collegiate progeny swoon with incomprehension. This variegated background in the dignity of work instilled in him an unshakeable conviction that for the responsible and eager, employment is not a scarce commodity but an inevitable consequence of character.

Returning to Guatemala in 1945, Muso applied his engineering expertise as a structural draftsman and construction supervisor. Yet his destiny lay not in blueprints but in the architecture of ideas. After completing his mechanical engineering degree at Louisiana State University in 1950—where he would later be honored as a distinguished alumnus—he began the patient work of intellectual cultivation that would eventually yield his masterpiece.

Muso drew inspiration from Hayek while simultaneously studying how the Fabian Society in England had functioned as an intellectual catalyst for broader societal transformation. Alarmed by communism's encroachment into Guatemala and mystified by his nation's persistent poverty despite its resources and workforce, Muso convened a circle of business friends—neither wealthy nor academics, but citizens possessed of that rarest commodity: intellectual curiosity wedded to practical concern.

Their informal reading group, devoted to parsing economic texts and translating from English into Spanish, evolved organically into the Center for Economic Studies (CEES), modeled after the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE). My friend Pedro Pablo Velásquez tells that story here. This intellectual seed would eventually germinate into something special: a university that dared to suggest education might actually…educate.

Muso has been gone for some 15 years, but his academy in Guatemala endures as a beacon of sanity in a hemisphere overrun by diploma mills cranking out certified

blatherskites at industrial rates. UFM stands as an inspiring rebuke to the prevailing academic fashion, which seems bent on producing graduates who know everything about their feelings and nothing about thinking.

The campus itself seems almost providentially designed as a metaphor for Muso's vision. Sprawling across a ravine where buildings coexist with insistent tropical growth that threatens to reclaim every surface, the university embodies the tension between civilization and entropy, or order and chaos, which defines the human condition. There's a museum here filled with Mayan artifacts alongside a tunnel representing the entire timeline of human history: past and future converging in an eternal present devoted to learning.

The library carries Ludwig von Mises's name, where students may rub a bust of Hayek for good luck before proceeding to lecture halls and cafés alive with gregarious, perhaps caffeinated energy. Everything grows with tropical determination: vines climb above walkways, flowers spill from planters, and leaves achieve such verdant abundance that the whole scene suggests a vast garden that has accidentally become a school—or perhaps a school that has deliberately become a garden of the mind.

While many prestigious US universities have transformed themselves into finishing schools for professional grievance-mongers, Muso's creation remains refreshingly devoted to the quaint notion that education might serve some purpose beyond

credential accumulation. From its inception, UFM has maintained an unwavering commitment to forming individuals equipped to uphold and advance a free society.

I confess a weakness for the place, having made a pilgrimage there on numerous occasions in recent years. It remains among the few spots on this continent where one encounters genuine learning without having to genuflect before the shibboleths of the hour. UFM is Muso's most lasting legacy, an institution where the true constant is innovation itself, ever changing yet ever the same.

On this centennial of his birth, we celebrate not merely the man but the living institution that embodies his deepest convictions. Manuel Ayau understood what our contemporary educational establishment has forgotten: that liberty is not a natural state; instead, it's an achievement requiring constant vigilance, rigorous thought, and the moral courage to defend unpopular realities.

The boy who lost his father at five became the father of Guatemala's intellectual renaissance. In that transformation lies perhaps the most fitting tribute to Muso's memory: the recognition that from the deepest losses can emerge the most enduring gifts, and that a single vision, properly cultivated, can illuminate a hemisphere.

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Thank you, Mr. Mendenhall for this! In addition to being wonderfully well written (and as a 30+-year professional writer and author, I know good writing), I appreciate learning about this inspiring man. I have made several trips to Guatemala in the past few years, plan on returning again, and may just put UFM on my must-visit list!

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