

**Erika Aifán: my friend, the powerful woman.**

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### **Erika Aifán: my friend, the powerful woman.**

It's 5:00 in the morning, total darkness in the streets. While 70% of the population is still resting and the other 30% is just waking up in Guatemala, she is ready. With her black hair well combed; "from the salon", as we say in my country, she is already on her way. In high heels, with freshly pressed laundry suit, and a bulletproof vest in the back of her armored van, she heads to work. Protected by two security agents who are in the front of the car, she is taken to the Palace of Justice, in zone 1 of Guatemala City.

I am tired; *"I'm sleepy"*, I say in my mind. *"Hello"*, I told her that day. She, smiling, answered *"how did you wake up?"* All the way I was thinking *"why did I have to wake up so early today?"*. While I complained mentally, I looked at her with her eyes wide open, fully awake and she even told me a joke that I didn't fully understand because I was still sleepy. That's how my friend is, just like her dad, always making jokes. I didn't understand how she was so "awake", while I just wanted to rest. Some people would say that what happens is that over time you get used to being an early riser. But I, who can more or less imagine what her life is like, wonder *how she falls asleep after 3AM because of her work, then goes to work at 5AM and always looks so radiant?*

If I think of her, I think of: determination, courage, and dignity. I think and say *"how I would like to be a little like her"*. She's smart, strong, the type of person who does not give up at first. She is a woman with a lot of power. She is not powerful just because she was a judge in one of the "High Risk" Courts; neither is she powerful because she is internationally recognized and admired for her work; but because she is a woman who draws strength from her family and her community every day to do what is right. And...although, talking about her may sound like talking about a superhero, she is my friend: the powerful woman.

She was a judge for approximately 19 years. Awarded by the Government of the United States as "Woman of Courage"; by France and Germany with the "Human Rights and Rule of Law" award, among many other recognitions. When I saw her "resume" for the first time, I remember getting tired of just reading her many studies and awards in her career path. However, I consider that some awards are still missing. I would give her, for example, an award for every time she inspired children, youth, and adults to fight for justice in Guatemala, despite so much corruption and impunity in the country; for every

time she restored hope to our territory that it was possible, through justice, to transform our environment. Mainly, because I was one of those children inspired by her work and her human quality.

I remember I was like 6 or 7 years old the first time I saw her on television. While I was playing “cut and paste” in my living room and watching TV, I yelled, “*aunt, aunt, there's Erika on the news*”; and since then her father has always said “*my daughter is very intelligent*”. Over the years, it became common for me to see her passing sentences against the most dangerous criminals in the country on television; hear about her on the radio; and read about her on the internet or in national newspapers. Consciously or unconsciously I was “taking note” of what she was doing; how she talked; and even how she dressed herself. Today I think of her as this woman who personalizes many of the values and qualities that a person needs to achieve success; not only professional, but “real” success.

Success is relative many people say. I have always thought that achieving "real" success; success in life; success in general, is closely related to achieving happiness and there yes... that is relative and it is possible to question: what is happiness. I think that when one manages to live according to their deepest principles such as dignity, honesty and rectitude, as my friend, the powerful woman, has done, it is possible to achieve happiness. Mainly because living according to these principles allows the soul to feel satisfied; to feel fully comforted by the sum of joys and daily pleasures.

I cannot assure that Dr. Aifán is happy at this moment or that she has been happy every day since she became a judge. But I can assure that, in some way, she has always been one of my role models on this path to “real” success. *I also want to be powerful*, I told myself one day. *I want to find in my family and in my community the strength I need to achieve all those goals that, consequently, will bring me happiness*, was what I thought. And... precisely, during the last few months, at only 20 years of age, I have been able to achieve many more goals than I ever imagined. Surprisingly, everything has been thanks to the strength that my family and my community give me every day.

I'm not sure I can say that I'm totally happy or that I've already achieved “real” success. What I can say with certainty is that I feel powerful and, somehow, my spirit is satisfied. Especially, because I believe that today I live according to the principles that I have admired so much in other people, such as in my friend: the powerful woman. I feel

governed at every moment by those solemn learnings that I have taken from other women who are also powerful like my mom, my aunt and my best friends, "Majo" and Ximena.

Today I feel ruled by the teachings that have built me over time; some granted, in recent years, by my friends from the "NGOs", as we would say in Guatemala. "NGOs" that are simply groups of people linked by collective purposes that range from the defense of human rights to the fight for the environment and natural resources. Today, I feel powerful, because I am the construction of each contribution that my teachers have given me. But, more importantly, I feel powerful because I feel that, in some way, I carry that fire that burns in the hearts of many Guatemalans day after day and I am the reflection of the values of "eternal spring", as my country is called.

At the same time I think, as Rebeca Lane, my favorite Guatemalan singer, would say, "*I wish eternal spring was true.*" I wish that our political instability did not force people like my friend, the powerful woman, to have to flee into exile. According to the media outlet infobae (2022), "with the departure of Aifán Davila to the United States, there are already 15 Guatemalan justice operators who have had to go into exile in recent months, because, according to the majority, they have suffered 'criminalization' against them". All of this as a result of people, authorities and institutions that have lost their reason for being. Entities like the "State" itself have become this beast governed for the satisfaction of particular pleasures; thus deviating from reaching goals as supreme as "justice", for example.

The last time I saw my friend was a couple of weeks ago in Washington, D.C. As we walked through the rain and the beautiful cherry trees, I asked her "*how are you?*" She smiled and told me "*I'm fine*". Honestly, I didn't expect a different answer, since I've never heard her complain about something. But, I could imagine that the only thing she would have wanted at that moment was to tell me how much she missed her family, her work and her land. At the end of the trip, I hugged her and told her one more time how much I admired her.

Finally, I believe that happiness, "real" success or whatever you want to call it is related to finding a purpose. Indeed, as mentioned by Frankl quoted by Smith (2013) "the difference between those who had lived and those who had died came down to one thing: *Meaning*". My friend, the powerful woman, has undoubtedly found her "meaning" and

has made her profession the instrument to shape it. She probably doesn't know it, but with her work she not only transformed justice in Guatemala, but she also transformed me.

I sincerely hope to one day find power and strength as great as she has. That kind of power that comes from inside and goes out to transform things through work and effort. Hopefully the population in Guatemala can give continuity to the fight for justice as she did. Since, only to the extent that we pursue such supreme ideals and abide by such sublime principles will it be possible to continue giving meaning to our very existence. For all these and more reasons, I will always speak with pride about my friend, Erika: the powerful woman.

## **References**

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