

## The Huichol Offering: A Shamanic Healing Journey

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**Abstract** An American transcultural psychiatrist, and a Mexican engineer deeply involved with the Huichol Indians, build a team that heals a decade-long epidemic caused by sorcery. Huichol children in boarding schools became possessed by demonic witchcraft that transformed them into aggressive animals. Many local shaman had been called in to treat the illness but had been unsuccessful. The team found a way to incorporate traditional belief and ritual, with modern psychological principles to weave a healing story. This article represents the ultimate integration of mind/body/spirit medicine to heal across cultures.

**Keywords** Shamanism · Healing · Mind/body/spirit medicine · Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) · Culture-bound illness · Huichol Indians · Demonic possession

A shaman does not see himself as being responsible for the cure, but as an instrument through which a healing power flows and which he knows how to direct. He is totally involved in the experience, present physically and emotionally in every moment. He is never a detached, clinical observer; he creates a sacred space for his work, a place that separates him from ordinary space and time and focuses on the specialness of this time.

A shaman is willing to take creative leaps of faith. It is not only certainty that moves him forward; it is intuition and belief.

This is a shamanic healing tale about the integration of mind, body, and spirit to create a new ending to an old story.

### The Setting

In 2004, a team of Mexican and American colleagues was formed to consult with a Huichol Indian community. This ancient tribe is located deep in the mountains of central

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Mexico; the Huicholes (who call themselves *Wixarika*) have lived here for at least 15,000 years according to carbon dating of the ashes from their sacred fireplaces. The Huicholes worship at the oldest continually used ceremonial altars in all of the Americas. They were discovered and Christianized by the Spaniards and then essentially ignored because of their inaccessibility (Lumholtz 1902).

For more than 10 years, mostly students, but also teachers and staff, from boarding schools in their communities had been plagued by an epidemic of demonic possession. Children (some as young as 5) became possessed by a mysterious demonic “illness” that took over their bodies. They became incredibly strong and aggressive, roared like animals, and if they were not immobilized, would run away and attack people. Some afflicted children had even stoned a suspected sorcerer to death (Bayardo et al. 2006).

The Huicholes have systematized their knowledge of the cause and treatment of disease. Their explanation for all illnesses not caused by old age is to be found in the supernatural. The exploration of these mystical realms is facilitated by the holy sacrament *hicuri* (peyote). Peyote is central to Huichol beliefs and *marakame* are the trusted guides who unfold its mysteries. A little hallucinogenic cactus, *hicuri* is the manifestation of God’s presence on earth. *Hicuri* is the way to enlightenment and health. During the year, small groups make the long, difficult journey of hundreds of miles to Wiricuta, where they gather this holy sacrament. It is the goal of every Huichol to make this pilgrimage; it is a stopping place on the road to eternity.

In traditional Huichol culture, spiritual pursuits and visionary experience are the central tasks in life. Huicholes eat and live, and celebrate a pantheon of ancestors and holy places that keep them, their tribe, and the entire planet in balance. The *marakame* are the most highly respected leaders of the communities. The position seems to run in families, but it is also possible to be called to the work by the spirits. Most are men, but there are a few female *marakame*. Learning to become a *marakame* takes many years. The successful candidate has to absorb an enormous body of knowledge, including the use of medicinal plants; learn to recite compellingly the sacred stories and to summon the help of spirits. Not a day goes by without a *marakame* making the time to connect with these ancestral spirits. The *marakame* know the deities well and they are not afraid to serve as vehicles for their healing power; sometimes they successfully conquer illnesses and sometimes not.

The Huichol believed the demonic illness was attributable to witchcraft and turned to their *marakame* (their shaman) to treat the problem. Many *marakame* were called in but none could cure the illness. Medical doctors who staffed the local clinic prescribed drugs for what they believed to be a “psychotic” disorder. Psychiatrists were consulted; some even visited and recognized it as a culture-bound syndrome that a shaman could treat. However, when told that it had been tried many times and failed, they offered no other solution.

The predominant opinion was that a sorcerer, who was a “man of *kieri*,” caused the illness. *Kieri* (Jimsonweed) is another hallucinogenic plant that, like *hicuri*, has enormous power. *Hicuri* is the light side of spiritual deliverance, and *kieri* has the capacity to reveal the dark side of the unconscious mind. *Kieri* has a dual personality; it holds a key to enlightenment, but it has the power to seduce you to the dark side of sorcery. In every healer there is a potential sorcerer. When the ego overtakes the reality of one’s flawed humanity, and the healer wants to magnify his healing power, he succumbs to the black magic. Such a sorcerer can capture a person’s life force (*kupuri*) and destroy him or her.

The fact that this illness was so pervasive and persistent in the boarding schools made us wonder about its manifestation as the dark side of compulsory education and its impact on

traditional Huichol life. Was the illness a symptomatic manifestation of two opposing forces, the clash between traditionalists and modernists? The traditionalists maintained the Huichol way of life, and lived in the same isolated villages their ancestors inhabited for thousands of years that guard the holiest Huichol sanctuaries. The traditionalists define *el costumbre*, the customs Huicholes follow to live a long and healthy life. Modernists lived on the mesa-tops with access to electricity, running water, roads, landing strips, convenience stores, TVs, and computer games. Following the customs was getting harder in the new environment.

I had seen the manifestations of such clashes before: escalating violence, family discord, alcoholism, and addictions. Often the children, vulnerable because they are in the middle of this struggle, manifest the symptoms (Hammerschlag 1988, 1993). Schools are the primary source of assimilation, and few tribal groups have survived compulsory education and remained culturally intact. It is impossible to build a wall of separation that will protect a culture from the allure of modernity. When this push and pull becomes so intense, and no one side lets the other win, both get “stricken by the arrow of disease.” The Huicholes needed somebody from the outside, skilled in Western and traditional medical approaches, to treat illness and bring them together.

I have seen such conditions, and they were curable when the healer could mobilize a power greater than the one causing illness. This is the basic principle of all psychotherapy. It does not matter whether you call the disease-producing mechanism a monster that possesses your body/mind or (in the language of modern psychology) the incorporation of a negative introject. The treatment for such problems is to help patients (and communities) find the power to confront their demons and overcome them (Hammerschlag 1998, 2006; Lumholtz 1902).

### The Team

The organizer and moving force was Fernando Ortiz Monasterio, an industrial engineer from Mexico City who was intimately familiar with and accepted by the tribe. Over the last 20 years, he built a magnificent bridge over the raging waters of the Chapalagana River that swept away many children during the rainy season. Fernando was also instrumental in replenishing the dwindling deer population, one of the Huichol’s sacred totemic animals; he was a trusted relative. Fernando’s brother, Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, a photojournalist with whom he had done previous projects and who was equally regarded, would document the healing process.

Rocío Echeverría, a medical doctor who has devoted her life to the Huichol people, lived in San Andrés for decades and runs the Casa Huichol in Guadalajara; she had attended cases of the affliction. Marta Riveroll is a theologian by training, and an extraordinary, intuitive psychotherapist and energy healer who had an exceptional ability to connect with the Huicholes on previous visits. School Director Jesus Minjares Robles, a community leader, obtained all the relevant data from previous cases and negotiated access into the community.

With me from the U.S. came John Koriath, a long-time friend, brother, and collaborator in the Turtle Island Project where we worked together with indigenous healers. John is a psychophysicologist, an expert in mind/body interactions. Joyce Mills, whom I call sister, a child psychotherapist Healer and also a Turtle Island Project Collaborator, joined us as well. We knew each other well and came up with an outline of a plan.

## The Plan

We planned to involve all the children and ask them to draw a picture, to give a face to the illness and make a picture of what they thought the demon looked like. We wanted to draw it out of them and use these pictures as the foundation of a sacred healing offering at the conclusion of our work.

Joyce envisioned wrapping our offering in a shawl that she would commission her Navajo sister to make. The weaver, a member of the Native American Church, whose members also use the sacrament, said she would make two of them, a big one for the offering and a smaller one to wrap around an afflicted child. I would bring a tape recorder to record our voices and songs, which could be played to the swaddled victim, in case the symptoms recurred.

It was our hope to talk to parents, teachers, community members, and, if we could, a marakame. I would bring along my medical bag with some basic instruments to listen to hearts, look into eyes and ears, and some minor analgesics and herbal teas. We planned to conduct an evening clinic during which we would see anybody with any ailment.

Although this was the basic plan, it was clear to us all that some things would reveal themselves and would be woven into the experience. We all came with open hearts, a loving commitment, and an abiding belief that if we trusted in the wisdom of the unconscious, we would find a way to help create a new ending to the old symptomatic story.

It took 6 months to make the necessary arrangements and get the formal invitations from the school principal, head of the parents association, and the tribe, before we finally flew to Guadalajara.

## The Arrival

We arrived in Guadalajara on a humid afternoon, most of us greeting each other face-to-face for the first time. There were lots of joyous hugs as we crammed into a Chevy suburban, our luggage and supplies on the roof. It was a 10-h drive to Huejuquilla, the literal end of the road and gateway to Huichol country.

We checked into the only hotel after midnight, exhausted. Whatever time we awoke was too early, but we had a breakfast welcome date with the school principal who, in full costume, had come down from Nueva Colonia to greet us. Then we continued the 4-h drive down a pot-holed, cattle track until we reached Nueva Colonia. It is a mesa-top town of maybe 1,000 people, with a health clinic staffed by senior medical students, convenience stores, church, and the big boarding school. Fernando drove into the fenced compound and parked under the only tree. The Principal introduced us to Marcos, the head of the parents association, who would become our guide, interpreter, and counselor. We were shown to our 10 × 12 single room which served as bedroom for us all and our evening clinic for the next three days. We began to unpack while word of our arrival spread through the community.

Some kids watched us from behind the buildings and slowly inched closer. Joyce and her turtle puppet made friends while we unloaded the van. When the community gathered, the children were the first to welcome us, lined up in precise rows and most in traditional dress. They sang songs and clapped their hands, and we clapped back. The school principal introduced us in the Huichol language, which Marcos then translated into Spanish, and

Pablo into English. Everyone knew we were the doctors, the marakame from North America, who came to heal the “illness.”

Fernando introduced himself (the ubiquitous translations), told of his relationship to the Huicholes, and then he told them about us; that we had worked with indigenous people in North America and had treated children with similar illnesses. He said we had come at our own expense and our healing work would cost them nothing, but we needed their support in our efforts.

Fernando introduced me and I told them about myself, my tribe, family connections, and my relationship with their holy sacrament, *hicuri*. I talked about the symptoms, and explained I had treated such things before, and I came with respect and appreciation for their healing ways.

I told them I knew many powerful healers had tried to cure the illness, but it continued to reappear. They were afraid of the illness and uncertain of the future, but I believed that the “monster” who inspired that fear could be defeated, but only if we stopped to face it together. Then I shared this story about a double-headed snake monster the Salish people of the Pacific Northwest call “*Sisquiutl*,” or Fear.

The fear monster is 60 feet long, as big around as the tree we are gathered around here. The heads on each end can see in all directions, so nothing escapes its sight. If you were to come upon *Sisquiutl*, your first reaction would be to run, but as soon as you moved, the Fear Monster would see you and come after you until it caught you and ate you. After you move, which happens instinctively, you have to stand still. Having seen you twitch reflexively, it will come after you. But standing still, it approaches you slowly, first one end and then the other, until it has you trapped between both its heads. Suddenly, seeing itself reflected in its own eyes, it becomes so horrified by its own image that it slinks away in horror.

The only way to escape the fear monster is not to run because fear always runs faster than you can. If we stop running and face it together we can defeat the monster and make the illness go away.

John and Joyce outlined the plan; John redefined the concept of a conversion reaction calling it an inside-out disease. He explained that whatever darkness had gotten inside the victims bodies and minds had to come out before the healing light could get inside. Joyce then explained how the children would draw a picture of the monster and we would collect them for our offering. Then she held up a beautiful shawl that was created by Navajo relatives in North America, who also use the sacrament *peyote*, and who blessed it especially for the children. She said we were going to use the shawl to wrap up our offering.

John placed the shawl at the base of the tree and asked the assembly to help us in our work by bringing something that helped them heal in the past and place it into the bundle. When we were finished with our work, we would take the bundle and offer it at a holy place.

Before closing, I said I knew many people had suffered, and I wanted to speak with anyone who was not feeling well. Each night I would open a clinic at our home and all were welcome.

When I finished, nobody moved. Fernando came up to me, “They are waiting for you to sing, they want to feel your heart.” They had heard my words—it was a speech—they wanted to hear me pray and sing my songs. A marakame who could not sing was like a violin with only one string. I began to chant, slowly songs emerged, and we all sang.

We mingled, had dinner, and afterward went to the school playground where we were formally presented to the elementary school children. We explained how they got sick,

how something had gotten inside them, and that we were going to get it out. Then I did a little David Copperfield magic that I had just learned. I told them I could get something inside of them and they would not even feel it. I could blow something into their tightly closed fist without their ever feeling it. There were titters when I asked for a volunteer. One brave 7-year-old girl came forward. I showed her some ashes I had brought from our cooking fire. Fire is a sacred totem among the Huichol, the symbolic energy of life. I said I could blow those ashes into her closed fist. “Do you believe me?” I asked. She did not answer and I was not so sure myself. With marginal dexterity, I managed the sleight of hand to “blow” the ashes into her closed fist.

When she opened her fist she stared in amazement at the ashes in her palm, and then walked around showing it to the others. I asked if there was still a skeptic out there, and an older boy wanted me to do it again. I invited him up and repeated the magic feat; they were all listening now.

The next morning we would draw out the illness monster; they would make a picture of what they thought the creature looked like. Joyce told them to think about it tonight; maybe it had a face or a body, maybe a symbol, anything they imagined it might be. She would bring the paper and crayons that they could keep. We said goodnight, and it was long after dark. When we approached the front door to our quarters, there were people lined up for the evening clinic.

The entire next day every elementary and high school student drew their image of the illness. The pictures were accompanied with stories about the incredible creatures and designs; some were ordinary animals, others were half animal/half human creatures, and some were plants. When the children finished their drawings of their fear, Joyce asked them to draw a picture of what made their hearts happy. Joyce knew this was an extremely important aspect of their healing process. Not only were the children’s fears taken, or offered, but equally important was that they were left with their own symbolic images of strength, which often are shrouded in the dark shadows of fear.

One 9-year-old boy had depicted the illness as a giant cactus whose outstretched limbs became arms with long fingernails that were razor sharp, flesh-tearing spines. He said the cactus monster wanted to tear open his chest and pierce his heart. He gave the monster a name; he called him “Eutimio,” which we later learned was the name of a well-known marakame who had been accused of being the sorcerer. This is a serious charge, and some members of the community thought he should be put to death. He was incarcerated for months in the tribal jail, but after investigation was eventually released.

The village where Eutimio lived was a 3-h hike from the school, down a steep canyon trail. We had hoped to speak with a marakame and wondered if a meeting with Eutimio could be arranged. We talked around the fire that night, about how such a meeting might go. We would tell him about the boy’s picture, without any finger-pointing blame, rather only the hope for his support and a contribution to the offering.

Marcos made it happen. Eutimio’s son had been at the initial community meeting, and the news of our presence had already spread to the village. The next day we got an invitation to meet with Eutimio.

### Meeting the Marakame

On the way down I talked to Marcos; between my poor Spanish and his much better English, we managed to cobble a conversation together. Warm and open hearted, Marcos had returned to the village after years in Guadalajara. Now married and with children at the

school. I asked him what he thought the cause of the illness might be. Marcos said there were many problems, and the old customs were breaking down. The traditionalists believed the illness was punishment for federally mandated, elementary school education. Families in the isolated villages of the Sierra Huichol were required to send their children away. For some it was only a several hours walk, but for others it could be a 2-day trek. Living away from their traditional observances was keeping more and more of them away for longer periods of time.

Marcos understood the argument because he left home and learned the hard ways of the city before he came back to marry and have a family. He saw the manifestations of the loss of traditional influences but he also was sympathetic to the progressive elements that wanted to avail themselves and their children of the opportunities of this new world. Marcos' view was that his people had survived the Conquistadors; their roots were deep, so he knew they would survive Coca-Cola and computers.

I asked Marcos if he believed the illness could be caused by a marakame's witchcraft. He knew people could become possessed and assured me this was not just a Huichol thing, "all Mexicans believe in the evil eye." But he did not believe one man could create such an illness. Then he added that Eutimio was no ordinary marakame. Marcos respected him and was a little scared of him.

He told me he was not sure what we were doing would be helpful, but he believed it was possible because we came from the outside. We were doctors who understood both sides, maybe we could bridge the gap; and then Marcos smiled and said, "many people are watching you."

The walk down was like traveling through a time warp. We were high up on the cliffs when the village first appeared. I imagined this is what the first outsiders felt when they discovered the Hopi mesas. As we got closer, Marcos pointed out the holy temples, which were surrounded by adobe walls that separated the sacred grounds from the surrounding homes. There was a palpable energy here.

Eutimio's family compound was a large rancharia with at least five homes and its own religious sanctuary (*calihuey*). He was 81 years old, had 14 children, 44 grandchildren, and 87 great-grandchildren. Entering his compound, we gathered under a tree where chairs, tree stumps, and blankets were arranged in a large circle. Women and children stood on the outside. I was invited to sit in one of the special marakame chairs. When we were seated, Eutimio was escorted out; he greeted us all and then sat next to me.

Marcos translated Fernando's Spanish into Nahuatl. He thanked Eutimio and his family for the invitation and said that we came with respect and honor for his reputation. Then he made the formal introductions and said I had worked with native people in North America, and seen this disease before. We all came at our own expense and expected no payment.

Pablo translated for me in his passionate, soulful way. We told him how his name had been mentioned and that we were not here to point blame; rather, we came to ask for his help in our efforts. We could see that the sacred balance between *hicuri* and *kieri* needed to be restored so that the Huichol circle could become whole again. We knew how much he and his family had already suffered and hoped that he would bless our work and consider making a contribution to our offering. And then, without invitation this time, we stood together and sang.

I sat in a marakame chair next to Eutimio. He pointed to my Detroit Redwings baseball cap and motioned for me to give it to him. When I did, he took off his marakame's hat and gave it to me. I thought this was his offering, but he said it was for me. Then he stood up and invited Pablo and me to follow him into his *calihuey*. The three of us climbed up the several steps into the sanctuary, a 15 × 15 in. stone house with a thatch roof. Inside, there

was barely enough room for the three of us to stand, much less walk around. The sanctuary was stuffed from floor to ceiling with sacred objects; on tables, windowsills, and hanging from the roof beams. There were deerskins, painted deer skulls, feathers, masks, baskets filled with fetishes, stones, beads, peyote plants, Christian symbols, and a tiny key chain painting of him done by Diego Rivera.

One table was crowded with baskets filled with carved wooden prayer sticks called *muvieri*. These sacred objects are potent healing fetishes. We watched Eutimio as he examined one after another, until he found just the one that spoke to him. He then motioned for me to give him my new hat and proceeded to tie the *muvieri* onto it. This was his offering.

Before we left, he asked if I would look into his right eye. He was going blind and added that one side of his face had also been paralyzed for several years. I could see the facial asymmetry, but other than in his face, he had no other muscle weakness. The paralysis was probably an old Bell's palsy that would not get any better or worse. When I looked into his eye, however, he had a dense cataract, which I told him could be improved with surgery.

It was late afternoon before we left, and Eutimio asked us to sing some parting songs. We sang hymns in English, Spanish, Hebrew, Ponca, Navajo, Lakota, Mohave, and Chippewa-Cree; the songs of many tribes and generations and hearing their voices reverberating off the cliff walls moved me to tears. That tingling energy stayed with me on the walk out. Hearing those tunes humming in my brain lifted me from canyon floor to the rim almost effortlessly.

The next morning we stood in a circle under the big tree around the Navajo shawl now filled with the children's drawings, decorated gourds, weavings, beadwork, peyote, a beaded deer skull, sacred Hawaiian salt, and flat-leaf cedar from the Black Hills of South Dakota. Lots of people were there just to see if I was still standing after my meeting with Eutimio.

Pablo related every rich detail of our meeting with Eutimio with psychodramatic flair. When he finished he came to me and turned me around to show the assembly I was still whole. He then motioned for me to take off my hat and untie the *muvieri*, which I then gave to him. He walked it around the circle for everybody to see and then placed it into the offering.

Fernando held up the letter signed by the principal and Marcos, which described our work, our request of the tribal council to spend the night, and our plea to make this offering at the "Holy of Holies." At the end we rolled up the offering and then held hands, sang closing blessings, and slowly walked around the circle to say goodbye to each and every person. To each child we gave a small gift—a box of crayons, soap bubbles, and coloring books—there was a lot of love.

### The Road to Santa Catarina

There is only one drivable road into the capitol of the Sierra Huichol. It is a steep, one-lane trail, impassable in the rainy season. Before this road was completed just the year before, there was only a footpath in. Few non-Huichol visitors ever wandered in here.

Even with the letter from the school principal and community, we knew there was little likelihood that we would be allowed to make our offering at their sacred source, the Holy of Holies. No more than a handful of outsiders had ever seen it, especially after the Norwegian explorer and naturalist, Carl Lumholtz, visited at the turn of the 20th century and took one of their sacred altarpieces.



I forgot all about our reception on the ride down because I was holding the door handle in a death grip. In this dry season the road is coated with a layer of fine powder, which makes you slide from side to side on the single lane. We were also headed directly into the setting sun. I was blinded and we often slid perilously close to the unguarded edge on the hairpin turns. Seeing me white-knuckled, Fernando smiled and asked me why I was so tense.

Halfway down, I caught my first glimpse of the village of Santa Catarina. Pueblo-style adobe homes, church, and courtyard, it may be the oldest continuously inhabited community in all of the Americas. The road ended at a convenience store with a solar-powered refrigerator.

We drove into the village, past the community water tank and spigot, and parked the van next to the community house. I staggered out and kissed the ground. The Governor appeared, and Fernando delivered the customary introductions, and then read the letter. The Governor listened, but you knew he had already heard the story. He said we could stay the night, and that later they would decide at a council meeting whether or not we would be allowed in to make the offering.

We carried our stuff into the community house, a huge two-story structure. It was maybe 50 feet long by 30 feet wide, supported by three large center posts; an adobe bench surrounded the entire room.

Fernando had an old friend in the village with whom he had built the bridge; he made arrangements for us to have dinner at his home. Fresh hand-pressed tortillas accompanied an exquisitely flavorful stew of indeterminate substance. Afterward we strolled through the village; the beautiful church had been built three centuries before. In front of it was a walled courtyard that contained a life-sized statue of Christ. This one was dressed in a traditional peyotero's costume with long skirt and feathered headdress—it was stunning. The entrance was guarded by the "keeper of the flame," who saw that the fire inside the church never went out. Catholic Priests conduct Mass here twice a year, on Easter and Christmas, but the Huicholes come here to pray on every important occasion: harvests, hunting expeditions, and pilgrimages to the sacred peyote gardens. They dance all night in the courtyard, stomping hard on the earth to awaken the spirits of their ancestors asking them to keep their circle whole.

It was after dark when we were summoned to the tribal chambers. The council room was long and narrow; inside the entrance was a high wooden table in front of an elevated adobe bench behind which all the council members sat. In front of the table was an open fireplace, and at the other end of the long room was the prison cell in which Eutimio had been incarcerated. The council members—men and women, young and old, some in traditional clothing, others in blue jeans and T-shirts—passed around the letter of introduction.

Fernando told the whole story again...how we came together, what we had done with the children, our visit with Eutimio, and his contribution to the offering. When he finished, a passionate exchange ensued replete with tears and angry outbursts. Some wanted to see what was inside the offering; others did not because they were afraid once opened it might unleash a dark force which would be the sorcerer's revenge for his incarceration. The discussion became so passionate that at one point I whispered to Fernando that we had other options. He whispered back that they had to go through this, if they were going to give permission. When a consensus developed, the Governor called the question and they decided to open the offering.

First, an official cleansed the entire chamber with Copal incense and waved the fragrant smoke over everyone and over the closed offering bundle. Then he walked down to the jail cell where Eutimio had been held for months. Finally they opened the bundle and purified

its contents. The council carefully examined the children's drawings and Eutimio's *muveri*. An official took pictures of the contents with a Kodak Instamatic.

More intense discussion followed and then the Governor turned to me and asked, "What did you see when you looked in Eutimio's eye?" When Fernando translated the Governor's question, I thought it was a clinical question, like what was wrong with his eye. I responded that he had a cataract that was blinding him. Then Fernando clarified that the Governor's question was not an anatomical one, it was one of soul. What did I see when I looked inside his eye? Could I see Eutimio's soul, and did I believe him to be sincere? Did I trust him? Was his *muveri* a healing offering?

I said I believed him; I believed he wanted this illness to end. He was an old man who had suffered much, as had his entire family. He did not want the memory of this illness to be his legacy, and I believed both he and his offering were sincere. More discussion ensued, and finally they decided we could bury the offering at the Holy of Holies. The suffering had been so long-lasting, and the need so critical, that they agreed to let us go. However, it was with the proviso that six officials, including the Governor and his wife, would accompany us, watch us perform the ceremony, and then escort us out.

It was over. We were exhausted and after washing up at the communal spigot, slept side by side in our quarters. I slept fitfully and was awakened from a dream in which I was on horseback. Startled by a hissing snake, the horse bolted and I was thrown off. But one foot got stuck in the stirrups and I was being dragged toward a precipice. It was hard to fall back asleep...the floor got harder and my uncertainties intensified.

Among the ancient Jews, when the High Priest entered the Ark of the Covenant on the Day of Atonement to ask for blessings on behalf of the people, he went in with a rope tied around his ankle. If he was found unworthy by God to make this plea, he would be struck dead. Since no one else could enter that sacred space, they pulled him out by the rope.

I was surely unworthy, but I would do the best I could, and that would have to be sufficient.

### **The Holy of Holies**

At daybreak we gathered outside the community house. The Governor came over and sat next to Fernando and me, and his mood seemed lighter. He said he had been dreaming all night; in his dream he saw Eutimio walking toward him, and they approached one another until they were eye to eye. The Governor looked inside Eutimio's eye and said he, too, believed him to be sincere.

We were led down by the tribal judge and followed by the policeman who carried a rifle. The descent was leisurely, but I knew the walk up would be harder. The deeper into the canyon we got, the more lush the landscape. It took an hour to reach the dry riverbed; in a month this would be a torrential river.

From the river, it is a short walk to the entrance to the Holy of Holies. The gateway is a serpentine cleft that splits a huge boulder. The crack is only big enough to let one person through at a time. The Huichol say the cleft was created by a giant snake that let them emerge here into their new world. We will be at the belly button of the Huichol world; this is their Temple Mount, or Mecca.

Before we walked through, the judge stopped to pray; he asked for permission to enter, prayed for all of us, for the healing of the children, for the Earth, his people, and gave thanks to the Creator for all the gifts that had sustained them until now. Then he cut small twigs from a bush he said was the actual wood used by the Creator to make the first fire. He

gave us each a few pieces and told us to offer it with our own prayers when we came to the Cave of Light.

It took only a minute to get through the crack, but during the short passage I felt a cold shiver go through me. We prayed at the Cave of Light, each in our own way, and then moved on to more caves and pools, each one with its own altars and power. On either side of the trail, bushes were stuffed with fluffy, white, cotton puffs, the prayer offerings of generations of pilgrims. As the path got steeper, I had to hold onto the cliff walls, and when I did I could feel a hum in the stones. I have felt this before, in the Grand Canyon, and underneath the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem when I touched the cornerstones of the First Temple.

And then suddenly, the altar and fireplace at the Holy of Holies opened up before us. It sits on a cliff ledge perhaps 30 feet wide and 100 feet long and faces a sheer, 100-foot wall. Ashes from the altar fireplace have been carbon-dated 10–15,000 years old which makes this the oldest religious shrine in all of the Americas. We placed the offering in front of the altar and stood there quietly to take it all in.

The ledge is big enough to hold seven little *calihuey* (temples), each big enough for a single person. We each crawled into one; I stayed a while, prayed to be forgiven for my shortcomings and hoped I would not have to be dragged out by my feet.

When I emerged, I walked over to an alcove that contained a pyramid of deer skulls placed here by pilgrims offering their prayers. I returned to the altar, entranced by the fireplace, the Guardians, the smoke-stained cliff wall until Fernando tapped me on the shoulder and got me out of my reverie. He said it was time to pick out a place to bury the offering, and I should pick out a spot that spoke to me. There was a flat area on a narrow point near the cliff's edge which seemed right, and that is where we dug the hole.

When we finished, we returned to the offering in front of the fireplace. We formed a circle around it, and I lit a cornhusk cigarette filled with tobacco given to us by our Navajo relatives. I spoke about its significance and the intention with which it was given to us. Then bending over the offering, I blew smoke all over it and opened it up. I said I would pass the smoke around so each of us could take a puff, bless ourselves, and add our personal prayers for the healing work. In sharing our breath with each other in this way, we would speak as one voice, one heart, and one mind. I said what I said, stood in awe, we had done the best we could, asked that our prayers be heard, and the sacred circle be made whole again.

Everybody took a puff, said something, and passed it on until the smoke returned to me. I put what was left of the tobacco into the offering and then invited everyone to roll it up with me. We carried it to the burial pit and gently placed it in; I sprinkled water from the Spring of Life that flowed through here, cedar from the Black Hills, and sacred salt from Hawaii. I recited the threefold final benediction in Hebrew, and finished with some closing songs.

We did not hang around long afterward; the governor's wife began giving signals that it was time for us to go. Before returning through the cleft, we stopped for lunch on a broad ledge overlooking the Cave of Light. When we finished, the Governor invited us to cross the riverbed and go into the cave. Inside the spacious cave were several flat ledges that could accommodate a dozen people comfortably; the walls were covered with glyphs, and there were small altars in every crevice containing fetishes and candle remains. At one end of the cave, a deep cistern held perpetually fresh water.

In another few months, the dry riverbed in front of us would become a torrential river. From where we were sitting we would be able to see a step-laddered series of seven waterfalls. The place was overwhelming in its intensity. Slowly we all began to sing; I saw

the faces of the children at the closing circle, and could feel their suffering and their strengths. We sang *Amazing Grace* in three languages in this holy place, and with the sunlight peeking in; I not only heard the tune but, in this magical place, could see the words bounce off walls like sparks. That moment of spiritual clarity, the feeling of being one with all that is, still makes me shudder. I can bring myself into that consciousness when I want to experience deep contentment.

Before we left, Fernando called me over to the cistern where he scooped out water, poured it over my head, and took me as brother. We gathered our things and walked back through the fissure. The 3-h climb out was exhausting, alleviated by thoughts of a cold beer at the journey's end; I had clearly emerged from the world of the sacred into the profane.

We rested, packed up, heard the music, and walked to the church whose courtyard was now filled with dancing peyoteros who had just returned from their pilgrimage to the sacred peyote gardens in Wiricuta. We watched as they placed the sacrament at the feet of the skirted Christ in the courtyard. They danced, stomping their feet to speak to their ancestors and reaffirm their place and purpose in this world. The Huicholes see themselves as the carriers of the light into humanity; a chosen people honoring a commitment to the Creator to keep open the channels to the mystical unconscious to heal themselves and the world.

We exchanged gifts and waved goodbye. I slept on the ride out.

### Epilogue

In the months following our departure, some minor manifestations appeared. A couple of children became agitated, but without violent outbursts. A year and a half after our visit, the Mexican team returned to the community who not only welcomed and thanked them, but also informed them they had taken control of the situation and no further external work was needed.

Fernando wrote to us:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This is the rainy season, travel is difficult, and instead of the dust of last year we move through mud and roads that sometimes seem like rivers. We miss you, but feel your presence, even the old truck started coughing in despair at your absence... We were greeted warmly in the village, just like old acquaintances. There is universal recognition of the radical decline in cases (only two or three mild cases), and the change is noticeable to all. The community has come together, the Extraordinary Assembly (the highest authority in the community) appointed five marakame to serve as the guardians of the healing of the children. Support groups among friends and parents have been formed to address the children's needs as well. There is no question that the community senses the problem of the children is something from the past... The Navajo shawl you brought last year as a protective covering for sick children is no longer at the Nueva boarding school. It has found its way to another boarding school, where it is kept as a protective omen. In the Calihuey of Pochotita, we sang, performed blessings, and presented gifts.... On our way home we sang, the Doors' "This Is The End." We are grateful beyond words and worlds for our connection and the blessing of our work together.

In 2008, four years after our visit, the community reported the disease had been gone for 2 years.

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## Author Biography

**Carl Allen Hammerschlag** I am a Yale-trained, community psychiatrist whose professional life took an interesting departure from ordinary clinical practice when I went to work with American Indians instead of going to Vietnam. I joined the Indian Health Service for my 2-year military obligation, and it turned into a 20-year commitment, most of it as Chief of Psychiatry at the Phoenix Indian Medical Center. This experience moved me from doctor to healer—a transformational journey in which my scientific healing repertoire was expanded to include more mystical explanations for how people get sick and how they get well. In Indian country I learned how to use the power of language, stories, and beliefs, incorporating them into my psychotherapy. I saw how rituals, ceremonies, prayer, meditation, fasting, drumming, natural medicines, and hands-on healing could open channels into the unconscious mind to promote insight and change behavior. Over the last 40 years, I have come to embrace shamanic healing practices. A shamanic healer understands that everything that exists in life has an energy that can be a force for healing. Every scientific discipline and every religious group uses its own words to describe that energy. Scientists explain that force in physical terms such as quanta, strong and weak, or in molecular, biological, and genetic terms. Mystics explain the force in spiritual terms: unknowable, unfathomable, or ineffable. The critical issue to remember is that both scientific practitioners and shamans find a way to develop a relationship with that force that allows them to harness its energy and promote healing.