**Return to the Shaman: A Spiritual Journey in Ecuador**

By Judyth Reichenberg-Ullman, N.D., M.S.W and Robert Ullman, N.D.

When Judyth received the results of a bone scan, done at a reputable hospital in Chile, that she probably had metastastatic breast cancer in her ribs, it altered the course of our lives in an interesting way. (See Judyth’s last article, “Life is Not a Dress Rehearsal.”) After the scan we spent a week in San Pedro de Atacama, in the high desert of northern Chile. While attempting to figure our what to do next about the results, we decided to call our favorite shaman, Don Jose Joaquin Pineda from Otavalo and Iluman, Ecuador.

*We Meet the Shaman on Whidbey Island*

We had met Don Joaquin, as he is called, on Whidbey Island, where he had come to visit a woman who had studied with him for many years, and offer healings and ceremonies. Always interested in different healing methods and experiences, we decided to have a shamanic healing and cleansing. We were going through some relationship issues at the time, and he did a cleansing for us as a couple, using chanting, herbs, eggs, and elemental substances that proved to be very helpful.

 We offered our home for him to come and give a talk to islanders who were interested in shamanism and healing. As he speaks only Spanish and Quechua, Judyth translated his remarks and stories. While speaking about his methods, we were startled when Don Joaquin suddenly took a lit candle and a swig from a bottle, and with his explosive breath, sent a dramatic burst of fire and light across our living room. He also asked for candy, which he offered to Puget Sound from our deck, while he chanted to the four directions and the spirits of the water and the mountains.

*Don Joaquin Saves Our Trip to the Amazon*

Our next experience with the shaman was four years later, when we were visiting

Ecuador, primarily to go on a journey to be with the Huaorani, a primitive tribe in the Amazon, known for their fierce protection of their lands from exploitation by the oil companies. Judyth wanted to go first to Otavalo, to see the famous market that she had visited before on a five-month trip to South America in 1970, and we looked forward to the opportunity to once again connect with Don Joaquin. As fate would have it, Judyth badly twisted her knee, running for the bus to Otavalo, and could barely walk when we arrived at the town. We were able to get a pair of crutches from the local Cruz Roja that evening. The next day we rented a wheelchair, so she could go to the market, as she was unable to walk because of the pain. This did not bode well for our trip to the Amazon in a few short days, and we thought we might have to cancel it.

 We had arranged for a meeting with the shaman in our hotel that evening, which was Christmas Eve, and he brought his wife and nephew along. We had a pleasant time together chatting and he promised to arrive early the next morning to take us to see a bonesetter, who he thought could help Judyth’s knee. In the middle of the night, she received an unexpected early Christmas present. When she got up to go to the bathroom, Judyth found to her surprise that she could walk almost normally.

 The next morning Don Joaquin arrived bright and early at 7 AM, and informed us that the bonesetter had gone away for Christmas, so he would take us to his clinic instead.

Judyth asked, “Did you do something special last night?” He humbly said, “I had to help you because you were in pain. So I went home and did a ceremony for you.” Don Joaquin proceeded to invite us to his simple cinderblock clinic in the nearby town of Illuman, known throughout Ecuador for its production of shamans Don Joaquin performed a healing ceremony for both of us, which improved Judyth’s knee even more. Our trip to the Amazon was saved, and we parted, thankfully happy for the healing and our relationship with the shaman.

*Shaman’s Can Cure Cancer? “Bueno!”*

Since we already had a good feeling about our healing experiences with Don Joaquin, while we were contemplating our next moves for Judyth’s healing in our hotel in San Pedro, we decided to give him a call and ask if he could help with the return of her cancer. “Bueno”, he replied enthusiastically, “Bueno!” “ Of course I can help. Come! Come for 12 days and you will be fine.” He told us that he had good success we cancer and we should make the trip to Ecuador to see him. We cleared our schedule for early September and made reservations.

 When we returned to the States, we had the scan redone, and after holding our breath for the results, were finally told the Friday night after the exam, that the radiologist was 95% sure there was no metastasis and that the spots on the ribs had probably been micro-fractures from a previous injury or possibly a bad spell of coughing previously. So what to do with our reservations and plans to see the shaman? We decided to go anyway, for prevention of future cancer, and as a spiritual pilgrimage to explore further the fascinating world of the shaman, his spiritual heritage, and his, from our point of view, unconventional methods.

 We flew to Quito on Labor Day weekend and after an overnight stay in a boutique hotel on the ancient plaza of the Cathedral of San Francisco, we set off to take the bus to Otavalo once more. No more running for the bus this time!

 We arrived in Otavalo and took a taxi to our mountain-top refuge, the Hotel Ali Shungu, with a beautiful view 2000 feet over the city and of the imposing green, dormant volcano, Imbabura. After settling in to our private casita (little house), surrounded by eucalyptus trees and flowers, and next door to the llama corral, we called Don Joaquin to arrange to see him. “Bueno! Meet me in town and I’ll take you to my clinic in Iluman tomorrow at 11,” he exclaimed. It’s handy to have a shaman with a cell phone!

*Return to the Shaman’s Clinic*

The next morning, we returned to the clinic we had been to three years before. Now there was a cinderblock and adobe house being built across from the clinic, and workmen were busily completing the inside of the building. The clinic hadn’t changed a bit. A simple, windowless cinderblock structure with a thatched roof, a bathroom, a single treatment room with a concrete floor, one hanging light bulb and no heat. There was a simple wooden bench to sit on, a few old sofa cushions, and a cabinet on the far wall that held herbs and artifacts. An old wooden table (mesa) was adorned with dripping candles, and bottles of unmarked, mysterious liquids. On the surface of the table were arranged various interesting stones (piedras), which looked old with a fine patina. There was an axe-shaped stone, and one that represented and eagle’s head, two large chunks of stalactites, and numerous small and medium-sized oval stones. The stones looked like they had been tumbled or rubbed smooth. A few small crystal globes were perched on rocks with holes or depressions, and the whole arrangement was sprinkled with carnation petals and looked wet. Don Joaquin wore a feathered headdress during the ceremony, as befitting a Yachac or birdman shaman. It was a captivating sight, full of mystery and promise of interesting events to come.

 As Don Joaquin worked, the stones were continuously purified with oral blasts of Trago, liquor made from sugar cane, or a mysterious herbal tincture in a round blue bottle, cologne in a yellow plastic bottle, holy water and Florida water, made from flower essences. Bundles of dried and fresh herbs were located toward the back of the room with more flowers. Over the treatment table, from an aging photo, gazed the serious, placid face of Don Joaquin’s father, from whom he had received the shaman’s mantle. The photo had been passed down, along with many of the sacred stones, in an unbroken lineage from Incan times, nearly 500 years before. Don Joaquin himself, had been a practicing shaman for more than forty years. He hoped to pass on his heritage to one of his nephews, as he himself had only fathered daughters, who were not interested or ineligible for becoming shamans. His nephew was in college pursuing an IT career, but was interested in eventually pursuing the sacred path of the shaman as well.

 A Yachac bridges the seen world and unseen worlds. He receives information from and interacts with the energies and inhabitants of both worlds. Everything in nature has spirit- people, animals, plants, and minerals, mountains, lakes, oceans and deserts, and the natural elements of earth, air, fire and water. Yachacs are an ancient tradition that is inherited. The Yachac takes responsibility for both the physical and spiritual health of their clients, their family and their community. Everything in their world comes from the spirits, who are real beings to the shaman, and invoked for aid and help in healing illnesses, circumstances, bad energy, and life difficulties.

 Shamans in the Ecuadorian highlands treat a variety of traditional ailments, including *Mal aire or mal viento* (bad air or wind), a name for environmentally or supernaturally caused illnesses, in which the person is exposed to *mal* (bad energy or vibrations) that can cause illness through the air or places that have accumulated negative energy, and can cause symptoms of physical illness such as coldness, diarrhea, headache, vomiting, paleness, fatigue and shaking.

 *Susto or espanto* (fright sickness) is caused by a frightening or shocking experience like a nightmare, a shocking accident or encounter with a wild that can cause soul loss, allowing *mal* to enter the person causing illness.

 *Mal projimo (bad neighbor)* is illness caused by people who have negative intent or wish misfortune on others. This is similar to *envidia* (envy), where one person wishes bad fortune to another out of jealousy. Other forces that are attributed to causing illness are *brujeria* (witchcraft) and *duende* (encounters with spirits).[[1]](#footnote--1)

*The Treatments of Ecuadorian Yachacs*

The treatments of Don Joaquin, and other Equadorian Yachacs, must be experienced to be fully appreciated, but we will try to give an idea of what you might encounter during a healing ceremony. First, bring a bathing suit or underwear sufficient for modesty, that you don’t mind getting wet. You will be asked to remove your outer clothes, so be dressed for the treatment before you come to the clinic.

 You will stand barefoot on a cement or earthen floor. The shaman will light candles, purify his stones and chant melodically, in Quechua, while giving you instructions in Spanish. (If he is in an English speaking country, there will be a translator so you can understand the instructions.)

 The shaman dons his brightly colored feathered headdress and may begin to drum. He whistles to the bird spirits, the hummingbird, the eagle, and perhaps the condor. He receives answers about your condition and what has caused whatever problems you seem to have. If you ask, he may share these insights if it is in your best interest to hear them.

 Then the cleansing or *limpieza* begins in earnest. You stand spread-eagled with your eyes closed. You feel cold blasts of liquid from the four directions, anointing you with the sacred liquids, including trago, florida water, cologne, herbal tincture, followed by a fine spray of holy water. This precedes the series of warming blasts as he ignites the trago with two candles, with an aim born of forty years of flame throwing. The heat is welcome and feels deeply warming and healing. All the while, chanting is going on, remembrance of the sacred mountains and volcanoes throughout Equador, with special praise for Imbabura and Cotacachi, the sacred volcanoes of the male and female principles, which embrace the clinic in Iluman. He chants to the four directions, and to the spirits near and far, who help with the cleansing. Spirits of the ancestors, of the natural world, and the energies of the half-millenium lineage of shamans are present and revered.

 Then herbs are used, first purified by sprays of sacred liquids and sometimes set alight to create smoke. They are also used as spiritual brooms, sweeping the aura and the back, front, arms and legs to remove malefic energies (*mal*), old patterns, and outmoded beliefs. Common herbs used by Don Joaquin and other shamans include chilca (*Baccharis obtusifolia*), hierba Buena (*Mentha piperita or peppermint*), eucalipto (*Eucalyptus globuleus*), marco (*Ambrosia arborescens*), santa maria (*Tanecetum parthenium*), romero (*Rosmarinus officinalis), ruda (Ruta graveions),* andortiga *(Urtica dioica).[[2]](#footnote-0)2*

 *(*In our first *limpieza*, we were intimately introduced to ortiga. Normally it is used dried, so it doesn’t sting, but on Whidbey Island, there was only fresh nettles. That made for a memorable experience for Bob until 3 AM. Judyth was able to escape, though, having treated herself with homeopathic made from nettles, after having received a preliminary sting in the garden that day. She felt not one sting during the treatment or after. Shamanism meets homeopathy!)

 Ceremonies, prayers and chants are offered for enhancing spiritual power (poder), inner and outer strength (fuerza), good fortune (suerte), work (trabajo) and health (salud). Raw eggs in the shell are used to absorb negative energies and illness from the body, and can also be used for diagnosis, then destroyed afterwards. Carnation blossoms may be showered over or rubbed over the whole body, leaving a circle of beauty around you for when you open your eyes. Then special stones from the table (mesa) are used to rub the body for specific purposes, with a rhythmic clacking sound in time with the chants, as they are cleared for the next pass around the body or the head.

 If one is sensitive, one can feel the energy shifts that are occurring with these various cleansing techniques. After the ceremony is finished, you are likely to feel energized, refreshed and healed, relieved, or ready for more. In any case, we guarantee you will never forget the experience.

 For us, all our experiences with Don Joaquin have been memorable. Her cancer has not returned, our energy is good, our homeopathic books are being revised and reprinted, our new beautifully-reborn website is up and running, and our house and inquiries about our vacation rentals in Pucon are plentiful. And we are reminded that the universe works in curious, unexpected ways! We are looking forward to Don Joaquin’s visit to Chile in November this year, where he’ll be giving healing ceremonies in Pucon and Santiago, and offering Thanksgiving blessings to Pachamama before the feast for our expatriate community in Pucon.

*Judyth Reichenberg-Ullman and Robert Ullman are licensed naturopathic*

*physicians, board certified in homeopathy. Their books include the upcoming* Homeopathic Treatment of Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder and other Mental and Emotional Problems *(a revision of the previous title*, Prozac Free, *a substantially revised* Ritalin-Free Kids, A Drug-Free Approach to Asperger Syndrome and Autism, Rage-Free Kids, Prozac Free, Homeopathic Self-Care: The Quick and Easy

Guide for the Whole Family, Whole Woman Homeopathy, The Patient's

Guide to Homeopathic Medicine, *and* Mystics, Masters, Saints and

Sages—Stories of Enlightenment. *The doctors have taught internationally,*

*and they practice at The Northwest Center for Homeopathic Medicine in*

*Edmonds, WA and Langley, WA. The doctors live on Whidbey Island, Washington and in Pucon, Chile. They treat patients by phone and videoconference, as well as in person, and can be reached by telephone at (425) 774-5599. Their newly redesigned website is* [*www.healthyhomeopathy.com*](http://www.healthyhomeopathy.com)*.* You can read aboutDon Jose Joaquin Pineda (in Spanish) at [www.joaquinpinedashaman.com](http://www.joaquinpinedashaman.com) . You can find the two Pucon, Chile vacation rentals mentioned in this article at [www.vrbo.com/140763](http://www.vrbo.com/140763) and [www.vrbo.com/440129](http://www.vrbo.com/440129).

1. Cavender, Anthony P,\* and Manuel Albán, The use of magical plants by curanderos in the Ecuador highlands, Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine 2009, 5:3 doi:10.1186/1746-4269-5-3

 [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. 2 Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)