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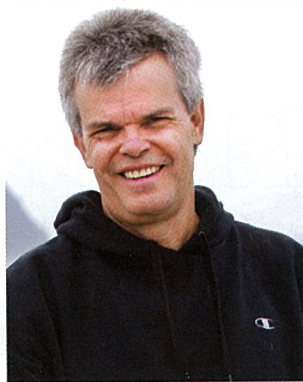
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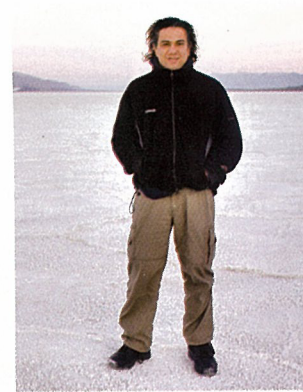
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{ this issue's contributors }

1. Carla Woody is the author of *Calling Our Spirits Home* and *Standing Stark*. She founded Kenosis and Kenosis Spirit Keepers to support human potential and help preserve indigenous wisdom traditions. For more than twenty years Carla has led spiritual travel journeys working with Maya, Hopi and Q'ero peoples, as well as offered group and individual programs toward conscious living. She will return to Chiapas in January 2013.

kenosis.net
kenosisspiritkeepers.org

2. Eliot Cowan

Founder of the Blue Deer Seminary and the Blue Deer Center, Eliot Cowan is the author of *Plant Spirit Medicine*. A *Tsauririkame*, a fully initiated shaman in the Huichol tradition, he offers Plant Spirit Medicine practitioner courses and continuing education, healing camps based on traditional Huichol healing, and animal totem courses at the Blue Deer Center.

bluedeercenter.org

3. Jonathan Merritt is a *Mara-kame*, a traditional healer in the lineage of the Huichol people of Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidentale. A founder, former editor-in-chief and contributing editor of *Sacred Fire*, he is on the board of directors of the Earth & Spirit Council (earthandspirit.org). Joyfully married and the father of three children, he lives, practices and works in Portland, Oregon. He keeps a monthly community fire under the auspices of the Sacred Fire Community.

4. Christine Staub, M.D.,

wife, mother, and family physician, is deeply grateful for her living relationship with sacred aspects of Fire which guide her journey as a human being. She is passionate about the healing power of the circle. As a Sacred Fire Community firekeeper, she has been offering monthly community fires in Greensboro, NC since 2004. She has served as Program Lead for Ancient Wisdom Rising in 2009, 2011 and 2012.

5. Charles Eisenstein is a teacher, speaker and writer focusing on themes of civilization, consciousness, money and human cultural evolution. His books (*The Ascent of Humanity* and *Sacred Economics*) as well as his other essays and blog posts on web magazines have generated a vast online following; he speaks frequently at conferences and other events, and gives numerous interviews on radio and podcasts. He lives in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania with his wife and three sons.

charles@panentheia.com

6. Robert Leon is based in Canada. He is an adventure-travel photojournalist and documentary photographer with 31 years of professional photography experience. His work is a way of contributing to other people's appreciation of diverse cultures and their traditions. He photographs people in their environment, especially indigenous people. His photography has evolved into a visual voice for all cultures.

robertleon.com

1. DARLENE DUNNING; 2. WILL BERLINER; 3. JENNIFER MEANS; 4. KENDRA STAUB; 5. ANDRE ANDREEV; 6. ROBERT LEON

LAST OF THE SPIRIT KEEPERS

Surrounded by the growing influence of evangelicals, a Lacandon Mayan Elder tries to keep the godpots burning.

BY CARLA WOODY

Lacandon Maya boy at Cascadas
Lacanja in Montes Azules Biosphere
Reserve in Chiapas, Mexico



Along the narrow dirt path,

a ceiba tree stands sentinel guarding the rainforest enclave holding the godhouse of Lacandón Maya elder Don Antonio Martinez. The cosmic World Tree of the Maya holds the Upperworld and Underworld stable, creating a portal for humankind to communicate with the gods. But in the village of Najá in Chiapas, Mexico all that the sacred ceiba symbolizes is quickly being lost.

Don Antonio is a man with the unique features of a spiritual leader, a certain presence, an underlying humility that marks a true wisdom keeper. He alone has been holding a torch to the godpots like his ancestors before him. Following in the footsteps of his late father-in-law Chan K'in Viejo, the great *too'hil* (spiritual leader) of the Lacandones, he practices his traditions quietly, attempting to shut out the outside influences increasingly difficult to ignore. He refuses to give up and take his godpots to the burial caves as others have done. He is the last remaining Spirit Keeper of the Lacandones.

For many years, I have led spiritual travel programs, particularly in Peru and Mexico. I bring small groups of Westerners to engage with native spirit keepers who are willing to act as a bridge and share their sacred ways. I have a long-standing relationship with Andean mystic Don Américo Yábar and Q'ero *paq'os*, the wisdom keepers descended from the Inca priest class.

In the summer of 2006 I was engaged in a *despacho* ceremony, a traditional prayer ritual, at Huaypo Lake outside Cusco, when an inspiration to bring native spirit keepers together began to take form. I founded Kenosis Spirit Keepers, a non-profit extension of my original organization Kenosis, to sponsor cross-cultural interchanges between native elders and young adults and to support other community-building projects in indigenous villages.

My work in Chiapas has thus unfolded, through relationship, over a number of years.

I brought my first group to Najá in 2008 to meet Don Antonio. He expressed sadness, perhaps sensing the impending demise of the Lacandones predicted by old Chan K'in. He told us

there was no one to whom he could pass on teachings. His sons weren't interested. Within a tribal culture used to doing things in community, practicing alone was foreign to him, as foreign as the outside influences that threaten the continuity of the gods.

The Lacandón Maya live in a few small villages scattered through the rainforest between Palenque and the Usumacinta River that serves as the border with Guatemala. Their unique appearance, dress and spiritual practices separate them from other Maya peoples, offering at least a couple of possibilities as to origins. They might have migrated to the area from some faraway land. Or, perhaps because they were sequestered deep in the rainforest for eons, their culture developed distinctly. A gentle people, their beliefs are based on *inclusion* instead of *exclusion*, to the point that, when the Jesuits showed up centuries ago with stories of Jesus Christ, they incorporated Hesuklisto within their pantheon of gods, identifying him as the son of Äykantho, the god of foreigners responsible for commerce, medicine and disease.

Back in the 1950s a slow influx of missionaries began making headway in the Lacandón Rainforest. Only the hardest ventured into that then-dense environment which kept outsiders at bay. Now, due to greatly increased accessibility via roads cut by loggers, the *evangelistas* have arrived in great numbers. They teach a message of exclusion: Only their way is true. All other ways, including the ancient traditional ways, are sinful. It's an aggressive dogma, a sad pattern that has occurred across the globe. The peace-loving Lacandones have simply been overwhelmed, from the outlying hamlets to the most interior jungle settlement, casualties of their own inclusive values.

It is January 2009. We are traveling the winding roads from Palenque toward Najá. Along the way, I witness once again the changes in the landscape. For miles we pass pasture and farmland that had, not too long ago, been jungle. While still beautiful, the rapid destruction of the rainforest serves to reflect the intense pressure Don Antonio is under to abandon his ancient traditions, applied consistently by the members of the new religious sect in the village. The mist partially obscuring the green hills in the distance gives a sense that we are entering unknown territory.

And in a way, we are.

Our primary purpose on this journey is to bring Hopi leader Harold Joseph to meet and share traditions with Don Antonio. Harold has been chosen by his spiritual leader as an emissary from his home village of Shongopavi located on Second Mesa in northern Arizona. Dawahafvoya is Harold's Hopi name. As a member of the Snow Clan, his traditional role is to make sure that cultural activities are carried out in a respectful, harmonious way.

Arriving in Najá, we walk to Don Antonio's godhouse located in a clearing at the edge of the village. The jungle surrounding it is held at bay, but given any opportunity the space would be consumed. The thatched, open-air godhouse holds



Clockwise from top: The godhouse of Don Antonio Martinez in the Lacandón Maya village of Najá. Men offering drinking gourds to the gods. Don Antonio Martinez lighting copal that fills the godpots. The sacred ceiba, or World Tree, of Maya creation stories.

central space, accompanied by the small “kitchen” containing the necessary accoutrements to prepare ceremonial tamales. The dug-out canoe, covered by palm leaves, has its place nearby. It is the receptacle for fermenting *balché*, a ceremonial beverage made from mashed bark and honey.

There, inside the godhouse, we find Don Antonio, but he is not as I am used to seeing him. He seems fragile this time, his face deeply lined, his eyes hollowed.

He greets us politely as Harold and some of the others, there for the first time, are introduced. But then he lets us know it is a very sad time. Just a few days prior, his son Chan K’in suddenly, inexplicably passed away—a young man. We are all struck still with shock at the tragic news. After a time, Don Antonio says he wants to go ahead with the *balché* ceremony planned for the next day and asks us to return early in the morning when all will be ready to start.

The *balché* ceremony, undertaken by the males in the community, is a conduit for blessings, prayers and a way of honoring. Individual gods are represented through terracotta godpots, which bear the face of each god and have an interior meant for burning copal. Any godpot may be chosen for use during the traditional ceremonies. Don Antonio, as caretaker of the godpots, communes with the gods that hold the world together. And when he feeds the godpots copal, tamales and *balché*, he is feeding the gods, the universe and everything in it.

The ceremony and its preparation take many hours. Traditionally, women do not enter the godhouse. Their role is to prepare the ceremonial tamales and provide ancillary support. During our travels there, Don Antonio graciously allows the women in the group to sit just inside the godhouse, along its edges, and participate in the ceremony, including drinking *balché*.

When we come to the ceremony the next morning, Don Antonio is still setting up the godhouse. The godpots are already in their place on the ground in the middle as ritual dictates. A small fire is burning in the corner of the open-air structure to reduce the slight chill and the drinking gourds specific to each god are put before the godpots. Clutching a sweater around his traditional white shift, bare feet in the dirt, he looks even more fragile than the previous day. Young men begin to show up, more than I'd seen with us during previous ceremonies—all in traditional dress this time. Don Antonio is obviously grieving, and, since he is to lead it, I wonder how he will get through the ceremony.

He sits on a log in front of the large balché pot, his knees pulled up. As he ladles balché into bowls, Don Antonio shares the inner turmoil he feels as a result of the evangelistas' influences in the village. It is now even stronger than before. Grabbing a stick he traces a jagged line in the dirt and points to it.

"They told me my path is a crooked one." He draws another line and continues, "Not a straight one like theirs. They said I am the cause of my son's death because I do the balché ceremony. They said if I stop they would take me to see their god." Cruel, ignorant words spoken to a father enduring loss, while extolling the glories of a trip to Jerusalem.

The village loudspeaker starts blasting nearby. It continues off and on throughout the ceremony, a cacophony of disrespect repeated to the gods. Yet prayers chanted in the godhouse still make their way upward on copal smoke. "They do this when I am in the godhouse doing the ceremony," Don Antonio says, clearly believing these broadcasts are an attempt by the evangelistas to further interfere. One of the young Lacandón men points, saying he sees one of the godpots crying.

Don Antonio laments that the gods don't come so much any more. "There was a time when people would be healed through the balché ceremony, but not any more."

Harold sits directly in front of Don Antonio and begins to tell him, through a string of translators, about his Hopi traditions, creation stories, some of the ways of the kiva and the meaning of the cycles of nature to the Hopi. Only after the fact do I discover that the ancient migration paths of the Hopi originate in South America, extending to their present homeland in Arizona. The Quechua, Maya and other indigenous peoples along that path are their relations, sharing similar creation stories, symbols and other sacred ways.

Subtly, a beautiful intensity builds in the godhouse. The young Lacandón men begin to talk over each other to translate for Don Antonio in the traditional dialect, which I'd never seen happen before. I take this as a display of their respect for Don Antonio since he understands Spanish just fine. They compare things they have in common, the Hopis and the Lacandones.

After a time, Harold asks permission to do his traditional Hopi prayers. He questions Don Antonio if he can do the prayer bare-chested as Hopis do. But Don Antonio seems confused by

this question, it not being a tradition of the Lacandones, and Harold withdraws the request. Long hair freed, hanging down his back for ceremony, he walks barefooted over to the line of godpots. Through the haze of copal smoke, Harold prays softly in Hopi over each one, his resonant voice still reaching us. His prayers that find a resting place in my body. Moving from one godpot to the next he sprinkles cornmeal from the small bag he carries with him.

At this point Don Antonio collapses into the arms of the men around him, losing physical strength, sobbing loudly, surrendering to what seems an overwhelming grief. Witnessing the depth of his sorrow is heart wrenching. The men hold and console him.

He lifts his eyes to a corner of the godhouse and cries out, "My son. My son is here!"

There is a vibratory shift in the godhouse to something robust and vital that was absent just moments before. Harold sees the godpots enliven, acknowledging that there are those who still maintain connection. Others present witness the same thing.

As the day wears on, the young Lacandón men take an active role in the full ceremony in a way I'd never seen and apparently hadn't happened in a very long time. They line up with Don Antonio in front of the godpots—chanting, offering the balché bowls to the gods. They dip palm fronds over the godpots, coating them with copal smoke to ensure their prayers travel to the Upperworld. Clearly, they are immersed. No rote activity here. Earlier I'd asked Don Antonio if he has an apprentice to receive the teachings, but he said, "No. The boys are empty. They only come to drink the balché."

But not today! Through intervention by an outsider, a Hopi wisdom keeper from Shongopavi, something ancient is reawakened in the young men—spiritual grounding. That day, the evangelistas' incessant proselytizing can not touch them; other Western influences are forgotten. They have the courage to talk to Harold about their feelings, their own distress about the intrusion upon their beliefs. I hear one young man cry out, "I just want to have my religion. The evangelistas can have theirs, but not force it on me."

Harold's presence supports Don Antonio those few days we are there, bringing his own traditional prayers to merge with Don Antonio's, offering the Hopi creation stories so like those of the Lacandones, speaking about the plight of his own people. By the time we leave, there is a glimmer of expectancy—one that touches all of us present.

Harold's parting words to Don Antonio: "Hold on!"

A few days after we leave Najá, Harold asks me, "What happened, this is what you wanted me to accomplish?" I reply that, for me, it's just about creating the space, and what filled that space was perfectly beautiful, more than I could have imagined. Our conversation leads to talk of Don Antonio and the space he holds for the ancient traditions and his community.

“We Hopis do this. This is our contribution. We have this common thing,” Harold continues excitedly. “This balché is the strongest experience! Its healing cleared my body and uplifted the spirit. This is sacred medicine water! We were connected with everything!” Indeed, that is the outcome of our experience together. But in the early morning hours of the ceremony, I couldn’t have predicted it.

On the airplane out of Villahermosa Harold and I are seated together. We just settle in when I glance out the window, and my breath catches.

“Harold, look!” A double rainbow, each arc as visibly brilliant as the other.

“Be humble. Be humble,” he cautions. “We have accomplished what we needed to do and in a humble way. This sign tells me so.”

Harold returns to Shungopavi and takes part in the Bean Dance. There he shares his experiences with elders and other spiritual leaders. He speaks of all the places we visited. The hieroglyphs of temple ruins told him that his people and the Maya share very similar creation stories and symbols of strength. He relays so many sacred things he saw. And he tells the story of Don Antonio and the situation in Najá.

The elders grow excited knowing that Harold has actually been to places contained in their oral history. And they express deep sorrow for Don Antonio, a desire to lend strength. The elders realize how things can happen if these pressures from the outside are allowed to gain a foothold. “We have those things on Hopi, too. But my elders know we must continue. This story of Don Antonio helped renew their commitment,” Harold reports to me later.

By bringing Indigenous people together who have common roots, I hold the intention that such sharing will enter another level altogether—one of great healing. And I absolutely know that the health of the world community depends on integrating beliefs from native spirituality that accepts there is a web of life connecting us all. What you do *here* will have an effect *there*. For some, it may seem like the work we undertake engaging with native traditions, supporting their preservation, learning through them is inconsequential or even meaningless. I see otherwise. The positive effect on all who are involved is pronounced. Ours is a way of peacemaking through honoring, a quiet antidote that contains its own powerful influence—one that carries on the wind.

The effect of our visit in January 2009 and its moments of compassion and quiet camaraderie are revealed over the next year. In March I receive news that, during a village gathering in Najá, Don Antonio made a public announcement confirming his traditional religion. He emphatically stated he would continue

“Be humble. Be humble,” he cautions. “We have accomplished what we needed to do and in a humble way. This sign tells me so.”

the sacred practices. Soon afterward, he formally entrusted the caretaking of his godhouse to his son-in-law Chan K’in. Turning over care of his godhouse to Chan K’in signaled apprenticeship and continuity—the same way old Chan K’in had passed traditions to his son-in-law Antonio when he was a young man.

With this news I prepare for our next journey to further these connections. Chosen again by his spiritual leader in Shungopavi, Harold is to return. And this time, Gerald Lomaventema and Augustine Mowa will accompany him. In January 2010, a small group of Hopi Spirit Keepers and other travelers sup-

porting the work arrive in Najá.

This time the visit is radically different. A good number gather for the balché ceremony, too many to fit comfortably in the godhouse, and the atmosphere is light in a way I had never witnessed. There are lots of smiles and laughter. Don Antonio is visibly shining. Aside from the traditional chanting and prayers, music is played on guitar. And, for the first time in my experience, a very young Lacandón boy is present, participating with the others. The gods display happiness. Their godpots blaze, none of them exhibiting shyness by refusing to light, as they did the first time I had come. The perfume of copal fills the air.

Back on Second Mesa, months later, we plan a third visit to Najá for January 2011 with the intent to continue the connection and mutual support, to keep the value of community strong. We agree that holding the integrity of heritage is paramount—whether folk art, language, right livelihood, traditional religion or cultural practices—those things that nurture the soul and hold the world together. Through such interaction, we are taught to protect and retain what is of value to us—to disallow attempts by others to pluck away pieces of ourselves.

But when we arrive in Najá I notice a number of changes that sadden me greatly. The young man who in 2009 spoke so passionately of his desire to retain his traditions has shorn his hair and no longer dresses traditionally. He is not at the balché ceremony as he was always previously. Indeed, there are noticeably fewer young Lacandón men present. The remaining traditional dug-out canoes are half-sunk at the edge of Lake Najá, replaced by fiberglass boats. The very air in the village seems different. Even the balché is reluctant to ferment, delaying our ceremony by a day. No explanation is given as to the absence of the young Lacandón men who were so engaged the year before. The ritual is beautifully touching, but the question of how long the Lacandón traditions will endure remains unanswered. Still, Don Antonio is there in his godhouse, a quiet presence, honoring the gods, lighting the copal.