

# Talking Story

One Woman's Quest to Preserve  
Ancient Spiritual and Healing Traditions

MARIE-ROSE PHAN-LÊ



“Many dismiss traditional healing as being unscientific or superstitious, while others overly romanticize these healing modalities dismissing much that modern medicine has to offer. The value of Marie-Rose Phan-Lê’s perspective is that her feet are planted both the modern and traditional worldviews. *Talking Story* is a wonderful bridge that spans across many cultures presenting an expanded view of healing and wellbeing.”

—PHIL BORGES, documentary photographer/filmmaker of *Enduring Spirit, Tibet: Culture On The Edge* and *CRAZYWISE*

“Marie-Rose Phan-Lê is a gifted writer and storyteller with inimitable style. In *Talking Story* she brings to life ancient cultural traditional wisdom, and the healing arts solely to bring awareness in the hearts of all. She shows that beyond the threshold of analytical sciences is a world waiting to be explored and experienced, that we can immensely benefit from. I am sure this book will enrich many a soul seeking truth beyond the veil.”

—BABA SHUDDHAANANDAA BRAHMACHARI, author of *Making Your Mind Your Best*

“This beautifully written, magical book is an engaging, honest, and often funny recounting of the author’s epic journey to document spiritual healing traditions that are in danger of dying out of memory. The story is also an intimate one as author Marie-Rose reluctantly chooses to face her own fears and thus discovers the heart of what it truly means to be a healer, then and now.”

—ROBIN ROSE BENNETT, herbalist, author of *The Gift of Healing Herbs* and *Healing Magic: A Green Witch Guidebook for Conscious Living*

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**Marie-Rose Phan-Lê**



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*To all the healers and teachers who took the time to talk story with me, and in loving memory of those who have now passed on. May  
their stories live on in your hearts.*

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### Talking Story

In Hawaii, when an invitation is extended, the host or hostess will say, “Come over and let’s talk story.” Talking story is about taking the time to linger over the details of the mundane, to ponder the realms of the profound, and to surrender any structure of time or agenda. It is practicing the art of listening and of being present.

As I began production of the *Talking Story* documentary project, traveling from Hawaii to the Himalayas, it wasn’t long before I realized that in order for me to access healing traditions and healers in remote areas of the world, I would have to practice talking story. There would be no hit-and-run interviews, no rigid film production schedules, no way to remain an anonymous gleaner of other people’s wisdom and experiences. Talking story is about intimate connection—in order to earn the honor of hearing the stories of another, I had to be willing to reveal my own.

This posed quite a challenge for me, considering my background. I was born in Vietnam and spent some time in France before coming to the United States as a child. As with all well-assimilated immigrants, I was taught that survival depended on my ability to blend in. It’s no wonder that the myth of the objective “documentarian,” a scientist of sorts separated from her subjects by a veil of romance or a lens of scrutiny, was so appealing to me.

My plan to remain unseen didn’t last long, for with most healers or spiritual leaders I wished to meet, I first had to walk the gauntlet of the gatekeepers, a series of bridge people who could lead me to the inner sanctum of the healers. Imagine my dismay at realizing that in order to advance in my quest, I would have to reveal who I was, where my family came from, what I was seeking, what I intended to do with the gift of their knowledge, and what I needed to heal within myself. If I made it past the gatekeepers and was judged to be of pure heart and intention, my team and I would be permitted to proceed with the work and I would be allowed to state my case to the master healers.

The more I was willing to shed my self-consciousness, my fear of being exposed, or my presentation of who I thought I should be, the more I learned from the people I got to know. As much as I wanted to be open, however, I truly did not wish to speak of my own healing heritage. And yet that was the one thing that, in the end, opened greater doors to deeper dialogue. I did not want to reveal that my great-grandfather was a blind man who could see the past and the future, and my aunt channeled deities to heal people, nor that this aunt had told me I had the gift of healing and was being tested. My mother funneled her healing abilities in a perfectly acceptable form: she became a registered nurse, and my brother, following in her footsteps, became an anesthesiologist. I had greater confidence in my filmmaking abilities than in my healing abilities. Rather than becoming a healer, I decided I would best serve the greater good by making a documentary about healing and spiritual traditions.

I found myself the reluctant heroine, not in comic-book terms of having excess courage or superpowers, but in terms of being propelled into the everyman’s or everywoman’s path toward exploration and discovery as outlined by mythologist Joseph Campbell. It is only now that I understand I was the unwitting protagonist swept up by an archetypal heroic journey in which fate called and directed her. In looking back, every step that was presented to me could not have fallen more perfectly in place had it been scripted by a Hollywood writer—from hearing the call to adventure, crossing the threshold from the ordinary into the extraordinary world, meeting mentors, facing tests

and trials, seizing the sword, and returning with the elixir. I did it not with full abandon but always ~~holding on to doubt and questioning what I was doing~~. I wanted to make this story about the healer, the fading traditions, the making of a documentary film—anything but about myself.

Yet, if I was not sure of what I was doing, I was at least willing to go along for the ride. I practiced talking story, and in doing so, I was able to have a deeper understanding of what it means to be shaman, medium, doctor, teacher, and healer and what it means to heal. I learned about reciprocity—for everything I wished to receive, I had to be willing to make an offering. I learned my job was not so much about preservation—capturing something as it is and keeping it in stasis—but more about regeneration—turning loss into life, death into renewal. I learned that medicine from one culture, no matter how foreign, could benefit people of another culture if its use could be recontextualized with meaning to those who would receive the remedy. I learned that indeed we are in danger of losing large chapters of our collective physical and spiritual pharmacopoeia, but that it is possible to transform ancient practices into applications for the modern world. And I learned that like talking story, unlike storytelling where there is a clear beginning, middle, and end, the path to the finish is not clearly defined, for there is still opportunity to discover, to recover, and to change the foreseeable outcome.

My friend Pablo Amaringo, a retired Amazonian shaman, said as we walked through an area of the rain forest that was destroyed by logging, “Cutting down a tree is like burning a book before it has been read.” Although we may not be able to stop the fires, my hope is that we at least open the books, become aware of what we are at risk of losing, and perhaps find a way to generate something new with the seeds of what remains.



## Event Horizon

I don't like to think about it. Whenever I do, the same feelings overtake me—nausea, repulsion, and an unshakeable urge to leave the scene. I squirm and can't remain seated. I am forced to think about it now because I am interviewing editors for my documentary film on indigenous healers and mystics—a work in progress for nearly a decade. Viewing the videotapes is like watching a dream that is so strongly with me, yet whose details and meaning escape me.

“Why don't you show us your most interesting footage?” suggests Nazeli, my post-production producer, who has arranged a meeting with some potential editors at her editing facilities. With over seventy hours of footage, finding the most compelling footage might seem a difficult choice, but it is not. The challenge, rather, has to do with whether or not I'm ready to go through this again. I know that the most intriguing images are the hardest for me to face—and even this many years later, it doesn't seem to get any easier. But I can't stall any longer, for everyone gathered here is eagerly anticipating the viewing of the crown jewels—the centerpiece of our would-be masterpiece.

I try to give some context for what they're about to see by leading in with, “Something happened to me in the Himalayas of Nepal, and we caught it on camera. I don't remember a lot of it.” Blake, the editing assistant, puts in the first tape, and I ask him to keep the volume low. As it cues up, my breathing becomes shallow and my mouth feels dry. I feel my pulse accelerating in my neck. I take a drink of cold water and remind myself that I'm here, in an editing suite at Sunset Edit in Hollywood, California. At first, it's the uncontrollable sobbing that I find so disconcerting, then the unintelligible words, followed by wailing, especially when the images reveal that noise is coming from me. We see me in trekking clothes, on the ground at the house of a *dhami* (shaman), struggling to communicate.

I exhale, forcing myself to breathe as I once again witness the footage I know all too well: on screen, the villagers scramble all around me while two of my crewmembers are at my side looking extremely worried. The shaman, Dhami Mangale, pats my forearm and says something that has the tone of, “There, there . . . it's okay.” His assistant, Tsering, gives me a metal cup full of sacred water which I later find out had been painstakingly collected from a holy lake in Tibet the previous summer. I cringe now as I watch images of myself drinking it greedily and splashing it all over my face. The reel ends with my being carried down a wooden ladder on the back of Rinchinpo, one of our trekking guides, who is dwarfed by my limp body. As distraught as witnessing this again makes me feel, my ego is intact enough to make a mental note for the future edit: exclude this shot—my butt looks gigantic, and the socks with butterflies on them, not a very cool look for a trekker chick. Then we see Thomas, our translator and co-producer, move quickly past the lens of the camera, looking concerned as he says, “She was speaking a language none of us understood.”

Blake changes tapes and it's a good time for me to excuse myself. The nausea feels as intense as it did that day. My legs feel wobbly as I head down the stairs. I don't remember the details we just witnessed, but the feelings and physical sensations are palpable, as if this were happening again today. In the women's restroom, I use the same technique we use at high altitudes to prevent hyperventilation—exhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, exhale, inhale. I splash my face with water and in an instant I am taken back to the memory of that cup of sacred water from Lake Manasarovar in Tibet—how it cooled my skin and trickled down my throat quenching a thirst I hadn't known existed. It helped to calm me then. Now I look in the mirror and collect myself.

When I return to the editing suite, I see that they've rolled on without me. I enter quietly and am confronted with images of myself writhing on the floor and being lashed with a yak-hair whip by the dhami as he shouts, "Hey! Ho! Hey!" He blows onto seeds he holds in his closed fist and throws them against my body. Even then I knew he was performing an exorcism. It looks like it should have hurt but I remember only that it hurt my feelings to be treated like some kind of unwelcome demon. Everyone viewing the footage is mesmerized, yet I feel embarrassed and find myself fighting the urge to explain away my bizarre behaviors as simply an intense case of altitude sickness. I have to leave again. It's fear that sends me away this time. It's mounting as it always does when I know we're getting close to this part. I know what comes next, but only because I've watched the tapes so often. If we didn't have this evidence, I'm not sure I'd have chosen to remember any of this. But there were witnesses, of course—my crew, the villagers, and the shaman. Still, there's an undeniable power that the physical images hold. What's about to unfold on the video screen is a long struggle that would last close to eight hours—a struggle to come back to my body while something—some external force—was keeping me away. Away from my frantic film and trek crew, away from the desperate attempts of the dhami to extract the interloper, away from my own body, away from this reality. What I do remember clearly is feeling terrified that I might never return.

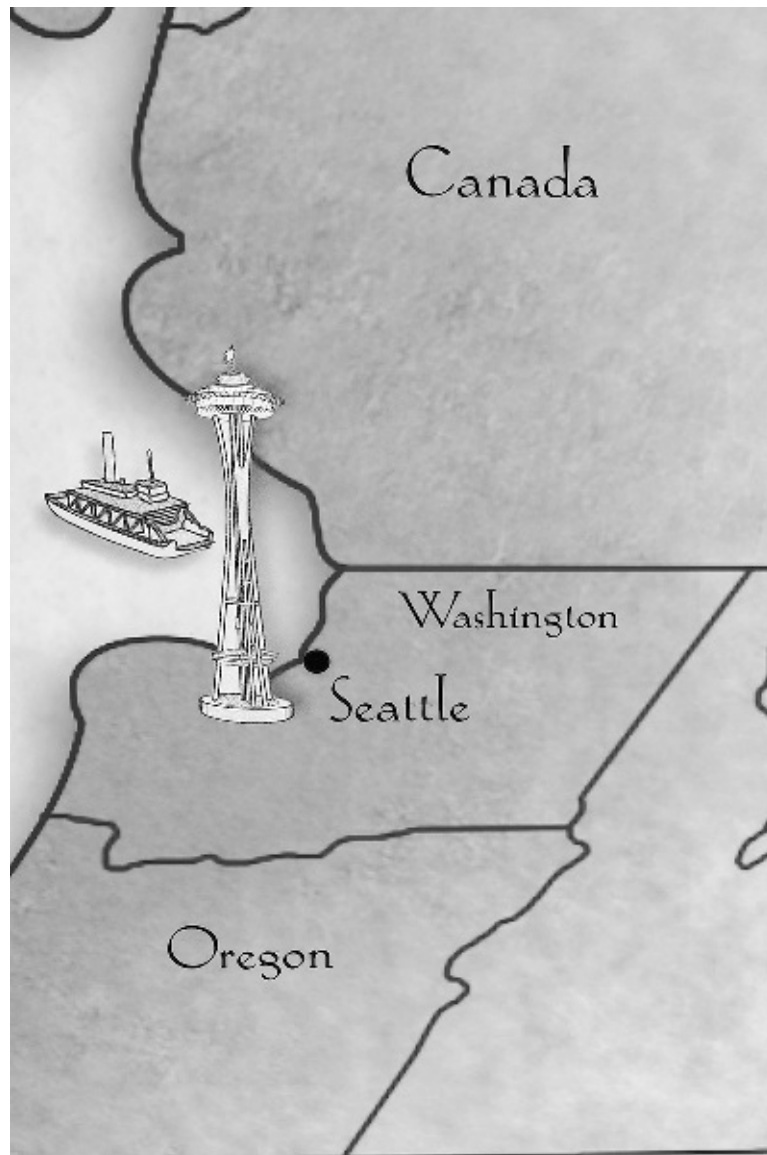
I muster up the courage to head back into the editing room. When I enter, everyone looks at me expectantly. I know I won't be able to explain what they just saw, but I can tell how it came to be.

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# Chapter 1

## Connectivity

### Seattle (the Ordinary World)



I put the *mala* beads to my nose and inhale the sweet scent of sandalwood. As I put them around my neck, I think of the Tibetan Buddhist monk who'd taken them off his own neck and given them to me. In so doing, he'd passed along to me all the mantras and intentions of compassion he'd infused in them. It has been nearly a decade, and the cords of the tassels are frayed and the brightness of the gold and red faded, but the power of protection that emanates from them is never diminished. I say my prayer: "Mother, Father, Spirit, God, allow me to be of greatest service to the one before me. Allow her to receive the strength, courage, and healing she needs to stay on her path of highest good. Allow any energy that is appropriate to come through me to do so at this time. Allow anything that no longer serves her to be released. Thank you for allowing me to do this work."

Suddenly that old familiar feeling comes over me. My heart feels like it's going to explode and I am filled with a sense of well-being—like the passion of falling in love. I shift from seeing the furnishings and walls around me to seeing into another place and time. My hands begin to shake and

place them on my patient's head. I feel myself pulling out mental constructs that no longer serve her. "I'm not good enough," "I'm not supported," "I can't be who I really want to be." I lay my hands on her heart and tears begin to seep through her closed lids. I see so many disappointments. I move my hands to her lower abdomen and see invaders—those who did not hold this space as sacred. I cut the cords between her and them. Lighting the stick of *palo santo*, a sacred wood from Peru, I blow cleansing breath into the top of her head, filling her with light and love. I run the wooden mallet around the lip of a Tibetan singing bowl; it evokes the tones of the heart as it vibrates. When she sits up from the healing table, she tells me, "I feel so full and yet so light."

I reply, "This is you without all the baggage. Remember this feeling." As we sit on the couch, she shares what I saw while she was on the table, and she confirms a history of abuse, a string of heartbreaks, and multiple problems with her reproductive system. She adds that despite being successful in the corporate world, she never feels good enough, so she's driving herself, her marriage, and her soul into the ground. She wants to know another way of being. She is ready to learn and heal. And then she asks me, "How did you do it? How did you go from being in the film industry and working in high-tech to being a healer?"

Although it has been years since I accepted this as my calling, it's only now that I feel I can answer with clarity. "It was identity theft," I answer. "I had to lose my sense of who I was, or thought I was supposed to be, in order to connect with my authentic self."



It was the end of the twentieth century and there was an air of excitement—the anticipation of the arrival of the new millennium. Seattle was booming with the success of the technology industry and I worked for the top dog. I had been hired because this company was looking for people who could bridge between the entertainment industry and the world of new interactive media, and I had been working in film and television for over a decade by then. I was doing pretty well for myself, and for the first time in my life, my family could finally sort of understand what I was doing for a living, only because the company I worked for was a household name. The promise of connectivity—creating community—through infotainment, Web portal sites, and interactive television was enticing.

By day, I perceived myself to be a fairly normal person going to work in an office—although it was pretty obvious I didn't quite fit in when I decorated my office with a Zen fountain and put crystals on my computer and a Buddha statue on the bookcase, or when I would show up to team meetings in thigh-high boots, taking full advantage of the lack of a formal dress code. Despite the corporate climate, this particular corporation prided itself on allowing freedom of expression and creativity to nurture genius and productivity. I took this as an opportunity to embrace both my spiritual side and my sassy attitude, figuring it would be acceptable, or at least tolerated, as long as I could perform. And perform I did. With my immigrant work ethic and type triple-A personality, I earned the freedom to make my own schedule and run my own projects.

By night, I studied healing and spirituality with my teacher, having been swept up by the spiritual growth of the New Age movement of the eighties and nineties. I had yearned for a teacher for years. As a child, I had some experiences that the adults around me could not explain. I recall seeing my father walking up the stairs of our home in Vietnam—after he had passed away. When I asked my nanny about it at the time, she chided me, "Don't tell anyone about this. People will call you crazy. They'll send you away." I believed her, and felt something that had been light become dark and heavy. Only now can I name it as shame for speaking something that should have been kept secret. I remember knowing what people were thinking and what they needed. And I was no angel. The

knowledge allowed me to figure out how to get my way. As I got older, this knowing was always with me, but it felt more like a Muzak version of a song I couldn't get out of my head. Besides, since I attended French Catholic school from the age of three, both in Vietnam and France, I was too busy trying to look normal to avoid the inevitable beatings from the nuns, or later, from the American kids who taunted me with, "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees—woo, look at these!" as they flipped my skirts up to reveal my underpants.

Then, in my late twenties, "The gift came back with a vengeance," as I'm fond of saying. I began to know things I shouldn't have been privy to because there were no logical explanations for how I came to know them—the details of a coworker's marital struggles, a fellow flight passenger's near-injury, a secret hand signal used only between my former husband and his deceased brother. At times my heart would feel like it might explode out of my chest if I didn't pass on to others the information I received for them, whether it was "You need to dump the guy," or "You need to see a doctor." And I must admit that my delivery in those early days was not very gracious.

I began to sense things that frightened me, like negativity in certain places or illness in people. These incidents felt overwhelming, and I felt I needed some help in understanding what exactly was happening. Part of me questioned my sanity. I needed a teacher or guide. What I didn't want was to worship a guru, as I'd seen so many others do, but to obtain an apprenticeship. I wanted to be in the presence of someone who practiced spiritual healing and who could give me lessons in a lecture-and-lab format—something like the premed courses I took back in college. I wasn't consciously looking to become a healer; after all, I had given up that notion when I switched my major from medicine to media and marketing. But I longed to have a greater understanding of my peculiar experiences and to have a better grasp of the greater metaphysical realms.

I was led to my teacher because an acquaintance told me of a woman healer and spirit medium who was offering apprenticeships. She'd used the very term I had—apprenticeship—and I took it as a sign. I spent the last five years of the nineties under this teacher's tutelage, living as a member of her household, just as it might have been done in the old days of true apprenticeship. I attended channelings, healing sessions, and read everything I could get my hands on about ancient and New Age spirituality and healing. I left the big corporation and struck out on my own to freelance as a consultant to companies and organizations whose missions matched my ideals of bringing positive change into the world. I was beginning to feel my worlds becoming more integrated. I felt at once free and frightened at not knowing what might lie ahead.



In the fall of 1999, I returned from a vacation in France—a much-needed break from the stress of the summer. In the early months of summer, my teacher's health had taken a turn for the worse, and I was a member of her core support team. As her most devoted student, I had been entrusted to give her daily healing sessions. Through prayers, healing work, the support of our community, and caring allopathic and naturopathic doctors, she was able to avoid leg amputation. She did have to sacrifice a toe, however, as well as undergo triple bypass surgery for her ailing heart. She was to remain in the hospital while I was in France, and we'd both agreed that the timing for me to go couldn't have been better. I'd get some reprieve while she mended.

Leading up to her illness, however, I had begun to question her methodology and integrity. I finally took a break and went to France to get a fresh perspective. While I was away, I was able to come to terms with the fact that she was human, and that I'd matured from being her apprentice to being her friend or equal. In the process, however, I'd witnessed her "fall from grace." This seemed like

something we could discuss openly, and I believed she would want an accountability partner. But I also pondered how much her undiagnosed or denied diabetes played a role in the demise of her spiritual foundation. All of it was weighing heavily on my mind that first night back as I began sorting through my piles of mail that had accumulated during my monthlong sojourn.

During my time in France, I'd reunited with the couple—*tonton* (uncle) and *tata* (aunty)—who “adopted” my siblings and me during my formative years while my mom was stranded in Vietnam. My visit with them helped to heal some old wounds around having been forced to leave my beloved *tonton* and *tata* at the age of six to join my mother and her new husband in the United States. They told tales of having to scramble to keep ahead of nosy neighbors, prying authorities, and speculation as to how this French couple ended up with four Vietnamese kids in Marseilles. I complained about the abusive nuns and priests who ran the schools my siblings and I had to attend, but Tata rebuked me by saying, “Hush up, child. Those people agreed to let you attend their schools, no questions asked.” She advised me to forgive them.

To aid with my reluctance to give the nuns a break, I recruited my best friend and favorite travel companion, Giselle, to join me on a pilgrimage to Lourdes in the southwest of France. Here, an apparition of the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared to the now sainted Bernadette in the 1800s. I had visited Lourdes as a child and remembered being mesmerized by the grotto filled with hundreds of crutches left by those who no longer needed them as evidence of the miraculous healings that took place there.

Giselle and I waited in line for hours at the women's bathhouse to be plunged into the blessed waters, surrounded by a chorus of women from all over the world saying prayers in their respective languages on their rosaries. It was a mix of calming meditative prayer and rising anxiety as closing time approached and hundreds of women were still waiting their turn. Giselle and I somehow made it to the baths that day. We were given gowns to wear over our undergarments. The assisting nun instructed me to kiss a plastic statue of the Virgin Mary, which had bright red lipstick residue on her lips from some previous worshipper. The nun plunged me backward into a big tub of extremely cold water fed from the sacred grotto. I was surprised to find that I actually felt a powerful rush of love and well-being coming over me, as if I'd been somehow sanctified by the essence of the divine feminine. Although these nuns were just as austere as any other nun I had ever known, they were clearly in service to a higher authority. I felt safe with them. I made a conscious choice at that moment to bring this compassion I'd been blessed with to my teacher, who had taught me so much about spiritual realms, and yet who was plagued with so much human frailty.



Among the stack of mail back home, I noticed several bills in my name from a variety of credit card companies with whom I was sure I'd never applied for any accounts. As I scanned the charges—huge amounts for purchases I never made—I instinctively started scanning the house, seeking an explanation. With every step I took down the stairs that led me from my side of the house to hers, a sick realization was beginning to sink in, deeper and deeper. I looked around the space and saw many of the very items that had been charged in my name. It dawned on me that I would not have been the one to sort through the mail had she not been in the hospital.

My survival skills kicked in and I cancelled all the accounts. I filed a formal report with the police department. Some companies would never forgive the debt, which ended up being in the tens of thousands—surreal for someone who until then prided herself on paying off her credit card bills every month. I would spend the next few years pleading my case and paying every spare cent to keep m

credit in good stead, all the while holding out hope that my teacher would one day come clean, show up with the money she owed, and realize her error in judgment.

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What happened the night I called my teacher in her hospital room to tell her what I'd discovered should have been a clue that this notion was mere fantasy. Incredibly, I felt badly for having to discuss this disturbing issue with her while she was still recuperating. Even more incredibly, she had no remorse and nonchalantly said, "I'm sorry you're so upset. I know you're just scared, but don't worry. I'll cover the debts and make the payments like I've been doing all along." All along? It hadn't occurred to me that this had been going on for months, even years. And I never saw the bills because she was never the one to sort the mail.

Her words and tone were meant to calm and assure me that all was well, normal even, but they had the opposite effect. I felt like a light had been taken from me, and in its place was a numbing despair. Within twenty-four hours, I packed my things and promptly moved out with the help of two girlfriends and the man I liked to refer to as my favorite ex-husband. I ran as if my hair were on fire, the flames burning all bridges between my teacher and me to ash. To add insult to injury, word got back to me that it was being said that I was possessed by a dark evil spirit, which explained my behavior—the good student who became the bad seed and turned against her teacher. In a bizarre way, it would have been much easier to believe that than to know I was simply a fool who got sucker-punched. Being possessed by something outside of myself would have at least explained how I'd become so dispossessed of my right mind to have allowed myself to be so blatantly taken. If I had ever been the least bit tempted to be a spiritual teacher or healer, that notion was quickly dissolved. How could I ever trust myself again to discern right from wrong, reality from fantasy? The loss of faith in my teacher led to a loss of faith in myself, in my sense of judgment, in my own integrity and in the validity of all I had learned from her.

They call this crime identity theft. Yes, it was someone usurping my sense of self and using my privileges without my consent. But it was deeper than that, since I had to pay for her actions with more than just money. I would come to dramatically label this event as "spiritual rape"—the worst sanctuary invasion. Entrusting a teacher, guide, or healer with the care and development of my spirit, the most sacred aspect of self, opened up the possibility for the greatest level of intimacy and also the deepest level of betrayal. This wounding, however, gave me a precise clarity that has never left me. The immensity of the privilege and the burden of responsibility of any caregiver, especially a spiritual one, is one of the most sacred of all covenants.

My mom used to say, "What is bad is good," a testament to her survival skills and ability to make lemonade out of lemons. I knew that in order to recover from this and to forgive myself for letting it happen, I would eventually have to find what was good in all of this bad, and one day restore my faith. After all, I had been able to transform a painful divorce into a loving friendship. Of course, that took a lot of work on both our parts. This healing would be a solo project, and it would be up to me to find the meaning behind it over time. In the meantime, I did the only thing I knew to do: I dove into new work. I took a consulting job that had me spending four days a week in Los Angeles, allowing for a change of scenery and leaving only three days a week for me to face the emotional and financial aftermath of this transgression. No matter how busy I kept myself, however, I couldn't shake the feeling of shame for having been so deluded as to believe I was on the spiritual path only to wind up in the hole. There are two choices when you find yourself there—curl up and die or start clawing your way out. Another piece of mom wisdom.

Being my mother's daughter, I discovered fairly quickly that this incident did not squelch my desire to keep seeking spiritual truth and healing wisdom, but rather it fueled my drive to find better teachers and authentic healers. Maybe because this longing had lived in me before I met my teacher, it was

part of me she could not take, and it gave me something to grab onto.

Leading up to the identity theft, I had been growing increasingly disgruntled by the spiritual materialism of the New Age, and my teacher's using my credit to fill her world with things certain didn't help the matter. Admittedly, as spiritual as I liked to see myself, I too was firmly engaged in the material. I drove a red convertible (a car my friend Lama Tenzin, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, deemed "The Selfish Car" because there was barely room to fit two people); liked being fashionable and enjoyed the nicer things in life—fine meals, travel, and spa treatments. The fulfillment of the desires seemed to carry over into my spiritual pursuits. Although I still believe a greater spiritual awareness grew out of the New Age movement, I noticed those of us hungry for the sacred seemed to have an insatiable appetite to consume it. We had to buy the right crystals, the latest books, tickets to the coolest workshops; we made appointments with popular healers and psychics as if scheduling a manicure or facial. All this made me yearn to reach for the ancient traditions as they were being practiced within the context of their own cultures.

I wasn't aware of it then, but now I see that I'd always been a cultural anthropologist, not by training or academic training, but by the necessities of survival and assimilation. I had lived in three countries, made homes in the West, South, Northwest, Southwest, and Mid-Atlantic of the United States, and was born in a war-torn country with a long history of being settled, invaded, and colonized. Learning to live within many different cultures required that I have the skills to study the other and to thrive in an other. My passion to study the loss of a culture's spiritual legacy—its view of the cosmos, its knowledge of its place in the universe, and its connection to the unseen world—may have been due to my home country's history and blended influences of religion, philosophy, and cosmologies, or my own feelings of disconnection to my cultural roots. I was deeply moved by the work of anthropologist and ethnobotanist Wade Davis, whose writings eloquently capture the beauty and loss of so many indigenous cultures suffering ethnocide—the destruction of a culture. I fancied the idea of myself as an "ethnospiritualist," one who studies how members of different cultures use their spiritual resources to adapt to the day-to-day choices of surviving and living.

When I wasn't doing consulting work, I spent my time doing research. With the miracle of modern technology and the World Wide Web, I was able to connect easily with people who were working in the field—anthropologists, ethnobotanists, photographers, and journalists. These experts underscored what I'd been reading—that indeed, the healing plants, people, and places of the world were quickly disappearing due to globalization, habitat destruction, and cultural assimilation. While I had lost my faith on the spiritual front, I was still confident in my professional abilities. I began to make a plan to use my experience in film, television, and technology to preserve and present the vanishing spiritual and healing traditions of indigenous cultures worldwide.

Looking back, I see how fate put together the perfect concoction to heal what was ailing me. It enticed me to take a heroine's journey by giving me a calling with all the right ingredients for my particular constitution. This assignment appealed to my escapist tendencies and offered a promise of adventure and an opportunity to take a leave of absence from licking my wounds. It involved a mission to "save the world," which was no doubt much easier than saving myself. And it allowed me to indulge in my favorite addiction to serve the greater good—workaholicism.

The mission: present an expanded paradigm for healing by traveling the world, making a documentary film, creating an archive, and establishing a portal website to connect healers—those of modern medicine and ancient healing traditions. This would be my public service. My private quest would be to learn what it means to know oneself as healer or spiritual teacher. I wanted to ask the people I'd meet, "How do you balance your earthly concerns with spiritual commitments?" "What are the spiritual laws that shape your lives?" "What do you love about your calling?" "What do you ha



about it?” “How did you walk the path from calling to mastery?”

I accepted this assignment with gusto. It confirmed what I already knew. I didn't need to be a healer myself to be a change agent on the planet. I could simply use my worldly skills to bring healing and spiritual knowledge to others through media. I would dedicate myself to seeking out the healers and sages who still held the mystical as sacred, and who knew nothing about the mundane realm of credit cards.

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## Chapter 2

### Location Scouting Peru (Call to Adventure)



Suspended between earth and sky was my experience of life for many years after my teacher's betrayal, but especially in those first few months. As I was mired in the details of clearing my name and her monstrous debt, I was also reaching for the stars to realize my dream. In the spring of 2000, six months after I cut ties with my teacher, I found myself swaying on a rope and steel cable skybridge, walking among the treetops of the rain forest canopy in Peru.

I felt uplifted among those giants that generously allowed me to traverse their limbs so I could, for a few moments, see a different perspective—and one that opened me up to the endless possibilities ahead. From that vantage point I had an unobstructed view of miles of verdant life in all directions. The canopy leaves made a blanket so dense that I could not see the ground that lay 120 feet below. What I did see when I dared to look down was a single orchid bloom whose stem extended from the side of a tree trunk. Orchids, despite their delicate appearance, are some of the hardiest plants on the planet—able to withstand heavy rains or long dry spells. This one was wise enough to position itself

just the right height, about one hundred feet above ground, to catch the perfect blend of sunlight, rain, and air circulation. I would later learn that the job of a good shaman is to be as the tree is to the orchard—a strong tether for the patient’s or student’s soul as it journeys to higher realms and a safe place for that soul to land and flourish when it returns home.

As I took in the viewpoint along the Canopy Walkway, I couldn’t help but pinch myself at my luck. I’d just realized two things on my dream wish list: meeting my first Amazonian shaman, and exploring the rain forest canopy. And the frosting on the cake was that I was being paid as a media consultant to do a feasibility study, or “location scout,” as it’s known in the film industry. The client was a small California-based pharmaceutical company developing medicine from the *sangre de grado* (*Croton lechleri*), or dragon’s blood tree—and its goal was to promote cultural exchange and build awareness about the medicinal value of rain forest plants in Peru. It was a mix of moxie and serendipity that had gotten me here.



While doing research in Seattle, I’d decided to let everyone know what I was up to, figuring that casting a wide net among friends and colleagues might allow me to snag some leads to fund my project. I sent emails, made phone calls, surfed the web, took meetings, and even did some old-fashioned research at the library. All this was part of my two-part strategy—action mixed with intention. In addition to what I was doing out in the world, in the privacy of my own condo I’d started a list on my corkboard, pinning corresponding images of places and cultures I wanted to visit: the Amazonian rain forest, Hawaii, Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal, Vietnam, India, and China to start. I looked at the board several times a day and added any symbols, words, or images that might help me draw the dream out of the ether and into reality.

With connectivity in play, I found the company that would provide my ticket to the Peruvian rain forest. It came through a connection to a colleague I’d met at the high-tech company I’d worked for. What appealed to me about this small California-based company, besides its very charismatic CEO, Lisa, and its knowledgeable ethnobotanists, physicians, and anthropologists, was its commitment to working with the indigenous communities. In addition to developing medicine from the dragon’s blood tree in Peru, they also hoped to create a sustainable economic model that would benefit the local people while preserving the environment and making rain forest medicine more readily accessible. I was so enthusiastic about the company’s mission, yet the first time I saw the images of a worker drawing resin from the dragon’s blood tree, with its heart-shaped leaves, I was surprised by my emotional reaction. As diagonal slits were cut into the tree’s trunk, a deep-red sap oozed from the wounds. As it bled, I wept.

My charge as a media consultant was to create a media platform to document and define the company’s mission to potential investors. I also pitched the idea of an Internet-based children’s cultural exchange pilot program for their nonprofit arm. I was immediately dispatched to Peru to be immersed in the company’s work. Nothing could have been a greater answer to the call to adventure.

Any call to adventure, of course, requires preparation. My forte in film and video pre-production planning was something in which I had great confidence. Planning for my personal needs was a bit more tricky. Although I lived in the birthplace of REI (Recreational Equipment Inc.), a mecca for outdoor gearheads, I was challenged to find expedition wear that was, well, stylish. Let’s face it, if you happen to be a curvy girl who is slight of stature, “sport casual” clothing can evoke a chunky SpongeBob SquarePants look. After much dressing-room trauma, I finally managed to find multipocketed quick-drying convertible zip-into-shorts trekking pants that didn’t make my backsides

look like I was wearing diapers, along with lightweight moisture-wicking wrinkle-resistant su ~~protective button-up shirts with hidden pockets that minimized my bustline.~~ To complete m ensemble, I added what I already had: a North Face Gore-Tex shell, previously tested on film shoos that required withstanding hours under the Seattle rain, snowstorms of the Cascade Mountains, and th winds of the Columbia River Gorge, and my Doc Martens Goth boots, a necessary part of eve Seattleites wardrobe in the late nineties. I was far from chic, but I was satisfied.

Besides gathering the necessary supplies, I also had to endure the slew of recommended trav vaccinations for Peru: hepatitis A, typhoid, yellow fever, hepatitis B, rabies, measles-mumps-rubell and tetanus-diphtheria. My visit to the travel clinic was anything but reassuring. Although I believ that nurses and doctors generally mean well, their scare and shaming tactics, especially where trav abroad is concerned, tend to trigger the rebel in me. Because this opportunity to go to Peru came quickly, I only had enough lead time to receive the hep A series, and I opted to omit the hep B. I ha the mindset, however misguided, that I could pick à la carte from the recommended vaccination men

One nurse tried to dissuade me from going altogether until I could get the hep B series. Then, wh I had refused the rabies series and the antimalarial drug and told her I would be visiting shamans wh would know how to deal with these ailments, she raised her eyebrow and said, in the mo condescending tone, “Do you realize how dirty, risky, and infectious this type of travel can be? You c understand you will be traveling in a Third World country?” I simply looked at her and replied, “I wa born in a Third World country, okay? And look, I survived.”

I knew it wasn't wise to argue with someone who was trying to help me to remain healthy, but remembered all the vaccinations I'd gotten to enter the United States as a child, and I didn't reli getting more than I thought I needed. I did agree to fill a prescription of a prophylactic for malan that is much better than its alternative, mefloquine, which can cause vomiting, dizziness, an depression. I could've handled that, but nightmares, psychosis, hallucinations, and seizures? Tho side effects sounded worse than what malaria might do to me. In the end, I never took a single pi although I wouldn't recommend rebellion over reason when it comes to tropical diseases. Perhaps as reminder not to fight against those who are trying to help you, every side effect that a person cou possibly get from vaccinations I suffered in spades—soreness surrounding the injection sites, extren fatigue, severe headaches, fever, and muscle aches. And all this before I'd even packed my bags. An yet, I knew what lay ahead would make all the pain worthwhile.



Patience is the key to navigating Peru's jungles, waterways, and the politics of working with loc gatekeepers and guides. In fact, it's the key to navigating any quest for something other than th familiar. I'd done my best to plan for the trip, even going so far as taking Spanish immersion classe but nothing prepared me for the slamming on the brakes of my habitual go-go-go get-it-done attitud I had only one week to cover a lot of ground, so I landed in Lima, Peru's capital, ready to make thing happen. I would eventually learn that putting oneself in the position to allow things to happen is a l more efficient and magical than making things happen. But at that time I had been trained an rewarded for being a go-getter, so I was determined to use sheer will to accomplish everything on m “to do” lists.

My time in Lima consisted of four hours of sleep, half an hour for breakfast, and a trip to the airpo for a flight to Pucallpa, a city in eastern Peru that sits along the banks of the Ucayali River, a maj tributary of the Amazon. Elsa, a Peruvian ethnobotanist, and our translator, Carina, a blond, blue-eye beauty of Mexican-Swedish descent, were my welcoming committee. They would be my love

companions for the rest of this adventure, accompanying me to the villages along the Ucayali River and to the rain forest canopy. Lisa, the CEO of the company I was working for, and her seven-year-old son, Bobby, who we later deemed the cultural exchange ambassador, joined us for the first few days of the journey.

At the airport, we got our first indication that delays would be the recurring theme for the trip when Elsa's backpack was stolen. She'd put it down to review our paperwork and in an instant it, and the thief who took it, had disappeared. Elsa was so upset and yet she kept apologizing to us. When I asked her why she was apologizing, reminding her that she was the victim of a crime, she said, "I don't care about my bag. I'm just so sad that this would be your first impression of my country and my people." As it turned out, it was Elsa, not the thief, who in that moment and in the days that followed left an indelible impression of the heart of the Peruvian people.

Pucallpa, "red earth" in the indigenous language of the region, was our base camp for the first three days. This meant it was basically the place where we would collapse each evening and breakfast each morning. The plans we'd enthusiastically make at breakfast, however, were never the actualities we experienced by day's end. Maybe it was being on an adventure full of new experiences that allowed me to begin to release my control-freak ways, or it could have been the *mate de coca* (tea made with the leaves of the coca plant—yes, the very same one cocaine is derived from) we drank daily that helped me feel at once relaxed and rejuvenated. Coca tea is known by the people of this part of South America as the messenger of the gods and is highly regarded for its medicinal benefits, such as combating fatigue and altitude sickness, calming digestive disorders, regulating blood sugar and carbohydrate metabolism, and elevating mood. Whatever it was, I felt a freedom and lightheartedness I hadn't experienced in a long time.

Our first day in Pucallpa pretty much exemplified the need-for-patience rule. We were supposed to go straight from the Pucallpa airport and travel by boat to a small community of indigenous Shipibo-Conibo villagers. When we arrived, the boat driver who was supposed to meet us at the airport and take us upriver was nowhere in sight. Arriving at our hotel by taxi, we found out the boat driver was still at the airport waiting for us. During the time that Elsa went back to the airport to meet him, I had come to meet us at the boat dock. As we walked along the riverbank through clusters of colorful shacks and rubbish piles to get to the port and meet the Shipibo-Conibo leader, we found out that I had gone to his father's inland home. By then, it was too late to make the hour and twenty-minute boat ride upriver. So, inland we went to find the community leader's father's home. When we arrived, we found out that father and son had gone to the airport looking for us. Ah . . . to have had a cell phone then.

And, just like in any adventure movie, our series of mishaps ended with a good old-fashioned car stuck-in-the-mud scene. We'd arrived at the end of rainy season in late April, so many of the local roads that had been underwater, traversable only by boat a few short weeks earlier, remained a terrain of very slippery clay. So, here we were: four women, a child, and a very stressed taxi driver pushing, pulling, and hypothesizing about the best way to get the car on the move again. As luck would have it, we found a fallen branch to put under one of the tires and gave it our all with a series of heave-ho while the taxi driver stepped on the gas. Once the car was freed, the driver mournfully tried to wipe the thick coat of mud off his car with his handkerchief. I felt awful when I later found out that for all his troubles, the driver's fare, though considered fair market rate, amounted to only ten U.S. dollars.

Amazingly enough, despite our fire-drill antics, we still got a lot accomplished with what remained of the day. Most encouragingly, I had the opportunity to meet my very first authentic Amazonian *curandero* (shaman). I had been used to seeing the urban neo-shamans of the New Age in Seattle adorned with jaguar teeth, feathers, rattles, and very serious fierce facades, so I wasn't sure what

expect when I met Pablo. I grew increasingly excited as we drove to the Usko Ayar Amazonian School of Painting, the art school he'd established for the underprivileged children in Pucallpa and its neighboring villages. My heart pounded as if I were a rabid fan about to meet her favorite rock star. We traveled along the potholed red mud roads, passing thatched roof homes along the way. Once we arrived, we walked across narrow wooden planks toward the school building, a brightly painted blue wooden structure built on stilts that was topped by the luxury of a tin roof. At the open doorway, I met Pablo Amaringo, a well-known curandero, who greeted me with a sweet smile and gentle eyes. He was dressed in country club casual—a denim button-up shirt and pressed khaki pants. As I got to know him, Pablo continued to surprise me with the unexpected.

Little Bobby, who didn't speak Spanish and had never been to Peru before, didn't hesitate to jump right into a painting lesson with the Peruvian kids. It was led by Wellington, an Usko Ayar alumnus. When Wellington first met Pablo, he was struggling with recurring malaria that he'd contracted during his military service. He often felt so debilitated by the symptoms, such as fevers, extreme fatigue, sweating, and nausea, that it was difficult for him to find regular work. Pablo not only treated his malaria with a tea made from the bark of a rain forest tree, but encouraged Wellington's interest in the arts by teaching him to draw and paint. Like the many other former students of Usko Ayar, Wellington, now in his twenties, makes a living as an artist and gives a percentage of each painting he sells back to the school. In this practice of reciprocity, he's paying forward what was given to him to support future students. There is no tuition for the school, so as a nonprofit organization, Usko Ayar, which means "spiritual prince" in the Quechua language, is supported by donations and its former students. Wellington explained that Pablo not only teaches art, but also about how to live with humbleness, sincerity, and respect for fellow beings, including the rain forest plant spirits and Pachamama (Mother Earth). Extending Usko Ayar's reach, Wellington had spent a year teaching and living in a Shipibo village upriver. The villagers named him "Wonder Hands" because of the beautiful jaguar paintings those hands could create.

While Lisa proudly watched her son learning to paint jaguars and rain forest life, and Elsa and Carina spoke to the other teachers and students, I had the opportunity to speak with Pablo alone. That was a privilege and I was thrilled. I followed him to a small office in the schoolhouse. Once I set up the video camera and had my pen and paper ready to record Pablo's pearls of wisdom, it dawned on me that there was no translator, and I quickly came to understand just how limiting my four weeks of Spanish immersion classes would be. Although the classes did help my comprehension, trying to speak and retrieve the words I wanted to express felt nearly impossible. I decided the best thing to do was just to let Pablo do the talking, and to my great relief, he graciously switched to speaking English.

Pablo shared how he came to be a retired shaman. As an adolescent, he had been very sick with a heart ailment that allopathic medicine could not cure. He was ultimately healed of his heart trouble and his sister of her debilitating hepatitis, by the shamanistic practice of *vegetalismo* (plant healing), which led him to feel called to become a healer. I would come to learn that the calling for most healers rarely came as a gentle tap, but rather as a powerful pounding and subsequent blowing-open of the form of some type of crisis—be it physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual.

Pablo began to work with the sacred medicine ayahuasca, a complex hallucinogenic plant brew imbued as a sacred practice for healing and spiritual growth. He explained that under the influence of ayahuasca, the shaman is not only transported to spiritual realms and higher levels of consciousness but is also given lessons and specific information from the plant spirits on the medicinal uses of various plants. Pablo became known as a powerful healer and began to paint his ayahuasca visions in hopes of sharing the magic and mystery of his journeys with others. Perhaps out of humility, Pablo never told me what I would learn from Carina—that he was in fact a world-renowned artist, due to his

visionary paintings, as well as a published author of *Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman* and the recipient of the Global 500 peace prize from the United Nations Environment Programme.

As a shaman, Pablo experienced things that he said were too terrifying to discuss. It was the one occasion during our time together when I saw the smile leave his face. Pablo explained that just as there are good shamans, there is also a dark side to that world. Helping people who had been victims of sorcerers, whose intentions are to harm rather than to heal, put Pablo in the line of fire. Fearing for his life, he decided to give up his shamanistic practice to focus on social work and being an advocate for the preservation of rain forest life. He started the Usko Ayar school in his own home, taking in children and offering a safe house where they could have community, focused attention, and creative expression. It was also a way for the children to develop self-esteem and pride in the riches of their culture and environment. The program includes a two-week excursion into the rain forest in which Pablo passes on his knowledge of the medicinal and spiritual value of the rain forest and of nature. He invited me to join them when I could return to Peru.

“When I look at how a child paints,” Pablo told me, “it tells me what is happening for them, the state of their mind or heart, if they are troubled or at peace.” He pointed to a heart-shaped blossom with a pink glow, depicted in one of his paintings, and said, “This plant, which cures heart ailments, is now extinct. But when you look at its essence in this painting, you can receive its healing energy.”

“It sounds to me like you’re not retired at all,” I said. “You just changed the way you administer your medicine.” He just grinned.

We parted, vowing to see each other again soon. We exchanged gifts. Pablo gave me a bracelet of seeds made by the Shipibo people and a pot painted in their community’s patterns—physical expressions of the song lines of the *icaros*, sacred chants sung during the ayahuasca ceremonies. The song-line patterns serve as musical notation does in sheet music. I gave him a faceted quartz crystal, something I thought may symbolize the clarity and power of his heart. Okay, it was a little New Age, but it wasn’t something he could easily get in his neck of the woods. As I started for the door, he handed me one more surprise—a stack of paintings from some of the instructors and students, and mixed among them, one of his originals.



We wrapped up our time at Usko Ayar, and the following day began our exploration upriver. The mode of transportation was a small open metal motorboat. I had boat envy as I watched others passing us in the *peke peke* (pronounced “pehkeh, pehkeh”), canoe taxis equipped with a motor and an awning for protection from rain and sun. Despite the diminutive size of our boat, getting out of the port was no small feat. First we boarded the boat at the dock and had to ride to the boathouse of the Tarzan Boat Company, which was floating freely in the middle of the harbor. Then we did a test run circling around the harbor to see if the boat could carry all of us plus the cargo load. It turned out we were too much for the little motor, so it was back to the boathouse. Once fitted with a more powerful motor, we headed back to the Tarzan house so the man in charge could approve. Then off to pick up the inspector, only to realize, discouragingly, that we were taking him back to Tarzan house so he could inspect the boat and motor. Because the Ucayali River is a busy trade route, there seemed to be a boathouse for every type of commerce. We visited the candy store boathouse and then the gas barge. After the forty-five minutes it took us to finally get out of port, my booty was already sore, and the imminent sunburn began making its presence known. And we had another hour and forty minutes before we’d get to our destination. Again I was reminded that in this type of travel, patience is not

virtue but rather a survival skill. Plus, I was in no mood to complain. The detours were all part of the ride, and that little metal boat managed to chug upriver with 1,500 pounds of people and cargo.

We had only three days to visit several villages for the purpose of exploring their sustainability practices, preservation of traditions, medicinal plants, and openness to the children's cultural exchange program. As we rode upriver, we passed riverbanks thick with foliage. One of the high points of the ride was getting a close-up glimpse of freshwater dolphins.

When we landed at the first village on our itinerary, Nueva Betania, a man and his pet baby monkey greeted us. As we made our way toward the village schoolhouse, a fifteen-minute walk from the landing, children were peering out of the windows of huts. The brave ones came out to follow us. Most of the villagers were relaxing on hammocks or in their homes, for we'd arrived at the hottest part of the day when it is wise and a traditional practice to take a siesta. I felt like an invader disrupting the traditional designated quiet time. All the gear I had so painstakingly gathered—my big boots, long-sleeved shirt, long pants, raingear—seemed like overkill on seeing how free and cool the villagers were, barefoot and lightly clothed.

Our main task here was to meet with the village fathers to propose our cultural exchange program ideas. Ambassador Bobby made our job easier by being completely himself and engaging the kids along the way. He handed out gifts of pencils, paper, and stickers and took Polaroid pictures of various kids, directing them and setting up their poses. He'd then present the kids with photos of themselves which brought smiles and shrieks of laughter. One little girl overcame her extreme bashfulness—"I want to see the little white man," she'd announced—and approached us to give Bobby a small clay pot painted with the traditional Shipibo stair-step patterns. While Bobby and the kids, now numbering about fifty, played with a toy globe ball outside the schoolhouse, we four women met with the village chief and all the men of the village. Although it was a bit intimidating to be in front of the classroom facing all these men and their questions, it felt great to have such an open dialogue. It didn't take long for us to come to an agreement to explore the possibilities of what cultural exchange would mean for the kids of this village and those in the United States. Our meeting closed with the children of Nueva Betania singing us a traditional song, and Bobby singing a solo back to them.

*This pretty planet  
Spinning through space  
You're a garden  
You're a harbor  
You're a holy place  
Golden sun going down  
Gentle blue giant  
Spin us around  
All through the night  
Safe till the morning light*

The little white man and his mother headed back to their home in San Francisco, California, while Elsa, Carina, and I headed to the village of San Francisco, another Shipibo community along the Ucayali River. San Francisco village was more "industrialized" than Nueva Betania. Every hut had a solar panel, which could run three fluorescent lights or a small television. There were solar-powered street lamps, a community cellular phone, and a lake where the villagers raised about thirty species of fish. We learned from the village leaders that once, after tourism became more prevalent in the area, the villagers tried to sell their goods to outsiders. They discovered that being dependent on external



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