

filaments of connection

weaving between the worlds

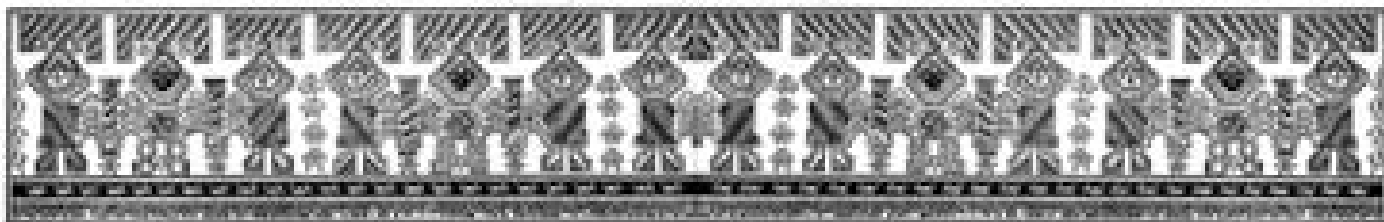


From my sitting position on the sacred stone, huaca, I rise into the air. An oval doorway appears in front of me. It is an energetic opening, or apacheta. I peel the edges back and pry it open with trepidation. Through the opening, I see a filament of light crossing the canyon like a thin, golden guy-wire. Calling my double for reassurance, I take a tentative step on the filament, then another; my double is right next to me. I concentrate on each step, not looking down. I cannot quite believe I am walking in air on a filament of light, yet I am careful not to fall. I cross the chasm, concentrating on staying in balance. Stepping off the filament onto rocky ground, I see more caves, but Américo calls us back. I return across the filament with more confidence, arriving intact with my double.

Coming out of my meditation journey, I shake with fear. The other, unseen world has never been so vivid and real. What will happen to me as I pass through these doorways? Do I really have it in me to learn this way of seeing? Tears of elation and terror run down my face as I walk arm in arm with Américo and haltingly tell him my experience in Spanish. He pats my hand. The earth receives me back on her ground, and I breathe deeply again.

Ten months later I'm back, sitting on the same hillside above the Sacred Valley in Peru. We have walked far beyond the carefully fitted Inca stone walls and sixteenth-century Spanish colonial church with its wonderful folk-art paintings in the entryway. We are on a stone outcropping that is crisscrossed by underground passages and caves that emanate the mysterious energy of these mountains. The ancient, high-backed thrones near us, carved from boulders a thousand years ago, hold the palpable power of uninterrupted shamanic use. The surrounding rich, brown furrows sprout bright-green potato plants. I am profoundly happy to have returned to this sacred and mundane earth.

Compelled by forces I do not understand, I have come on this journey with four friends and Américo Yábar, a shamanic teacher who is my guide to Andean mystic traditions. I made





Manu Jungle Preserve, Amazon basin.

— article and photos by Meg Beeler

Eagle comes to sit beside me. A second eagle arrives. My double flies up to the apu [spirit of the mountain] with Eagle. Traversing the range alongside the Sacred Valley, soaring down the Urubamba River past Machu Picchu, we travel all the way to the jungle.

In the dense jungle, my body disintegrates. I am frightened as my arms and legs fall off and my body decays. I watch myself become compost along with rotting trees and vines. Working hard not to run from or interrupt the image, I observe the compost for a long time. Finally, I become a seed and emerge fresh and new, like a phoenix, and return with Eagle to Chinchero.

a last-minute decision to join the group; it's not like me to travel to the same place twice in a year, or to leave my ten-year-old daughter and my work behind on impulse. I am uncertain now about returning to the Sacred Valley: will I find anything new? Yet, I was drawn to the jungle, and to being with Américo. Traveling with him is a bit like crossing the chasm of my meditation: it's exhilarating so long as I stay totally in the moment, alert, and aware, and not try to explain it to myself or anyone else; it's an adventure of unknown destinations, both emotionally and spiritually.

This morning, inviting us to find a place on the lumpy stone, *huaca*, at Chinchero, Américo instructs our group to do a meditation. For a long time I sit quietly. Nothing happens. I cleanse myself, empty my mind, make a column of light, and do other preparatory practices, waiting.

I am stunned. I know enough to understand that this vision has — or could have — profound meaning, but these images have nothing to do with any conscious expectations.

In the days that follow, I move in and out of a range of responses, from anxiety to calm to excitement. I don't

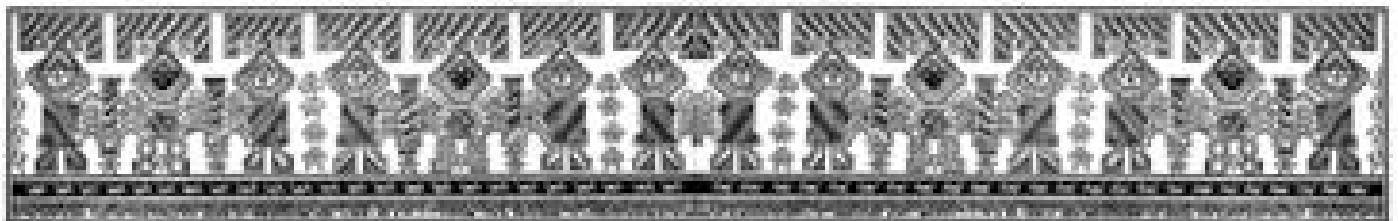
relish the thought of disintegrating, literally or figuratively, when we travel to Manu Jungle Reserve later in our trip. I think of Inanna's descent into the underworld as she sheds her "garments," her symbols of power and ego; I think of Osiris dismembered, his body parts scattered. I reflect on the Dzogschen *chöd* practice in which one offers the illusion of self, or ego, to be consumed at a banquet. I remind myself frequently that all my reactions are mental constructs.

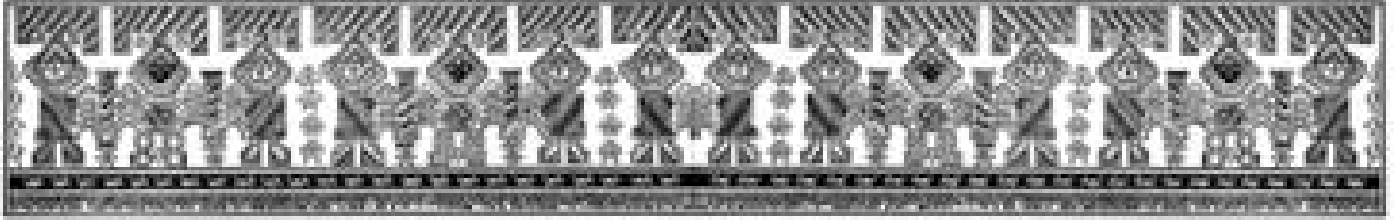
In anticipation of our trip, I gather my energy. I let myself be open and unprotected; I focus on the transformative potential of my seed image.

The spirits of the winds

The second leg of our journey takes us to *Salk'a Wasi* [Quechua for "wild house"], in the Cordillera Oriental range above Paucartambo. Salk'a Wasi's protected grounds offer a safe space for going inward, a quiet and calm place for exploring essence. The surrounding landscape is alive with spirit. Salk'a Wasi's proximity to the Quechua village of Mullu Mark'a, where the women spin and laugh as constantly as the wind blows, provides opportunity for cultural exchange as well as a direct experience of mystery and the mundane intertwined. It was a Spanish monastery before it became a hacienda; Salk'a Wasi now receives small groups from all over the world who work with Américo.

The morning after our arrival, I am sitting on a three-hundred-year-old,





crumbling adobe wall surrounding the rangy, sloping garden. It is spring in the Andes: apple trees and roses are budding, and fresh-earth smells fill the air. Below me, within an hour's walk through steep, geometrically tilled, clay-brown fields, weaves the wild Mapacho Mayu on its journey towards the Amazon River. The dry, undulating ridges across the river-carved chasm are thinly populated with thatched-roof adobe Quechua villages.

A chill wind blows down-river from Ausangate, a mountain sacred to the Inca and their descendants. I shiver and rise. Suffering from a four-day altitude headache, I've been instructed to walk slowly during my meditation. I regulate my breathing with my pounding head, imagining the pressure flowing out with each step; I finger the mint-scented *Muña* stalk, sniffing it to clear my head as I would a bay leaf at home.

I sit again, luxuriating in this opportunity for stillness. I

have no obligations here. My other life — child, partner, and work — seems as distant as a dream. The scent of sunlight on grass fills my nostrils; the wind shifts, caressing my skin. Suddenly, the air is warm and feathery. Seeing that nothing has changed in the visible world, I extend my fingers, trying to feel what has caused the change — energy, atmosphere?

Shortly, the wind shifts again, blowing cold from the mountains. Then, another humid pillow of warmth wafts upriver. I think: jungle. This warm wind is coming from the jungle 400 miles away! Over and over, for the next two hours, I observe this mysterious ebb and flow of wind, this magical mingling of mountain and jungle energy.

The long morning meditation prepares us for group healing work in the afternoon. Our *pong'o*, or medicine circle (literally, a dark place in the water where trout

gather) takes the form of an energy-exchange from the point of non-existence, the *waynu*, just below the belly button. In Andean tradition, the *waynu* is the band from which rivers emanate. It is the same as the Yogic *hara*; the place from which luminous fibers emanate in the Yaqui shamanic tradition; and the place where I find balance when walking.

We divide into groups of three. The person at the head sends energy through her point of non-existence, the person lying down transmits that energy, and the person at the feet receives it. In time, we switch places, so each person works in each of the three positions.

In my group, there seem to be no energy blockages. The energy flows through and between us like a soft wash of light, spiraling into ancestral, cellular memories. The energy turns into luminous filaments; we are connected in an oval bubble of light, a communal healing of shared peacefulness and bliss unlike any other I've experienced.

The next morning, we walk down to the Mapacho Mayu. The path takes us past the 400-year-old adobe chapel; past graves decorated with corn, beans, and plastic flowers on the recent Day of the Dead; and past two villagers plowing a field with their ox. The woman's bright red and black woven clothing against the fresh earth is beautiful, but she hides when she sees our cameras. We put them away.

Salk'a Wasi's protected grounds offer a safe space for going inward, a quiet and calm place for exploring essence.



Women of Mulla Mark'a giving spinning demonstration to the author.
(Photo by Geoff Brown)

The packed-earth trail winds steeply down the mountainside. I take one breath with each step, concentrating on being present in the moment. Américo's 19-year-old son Gayle and nephew Fernando are like bookends for the group, protecting our energy field.

At the river, we hunt for healing stones and cool our feet. The men skip rocks across the cold, fast-flowing water. We are surrounded by a harmony of the elements: wind from the jungle, water from the mountains, heat from the sun, and earth beneath our feet. We find places to sit and do a meditation.

I reflect on Ausangate, the source of this river. The Mapacho Mayu begins with ice-melt from the sacred mountain: drip, drip, drip, forming rivulets, then creeks, then smaller rivers that flow into larger ones. The river grows with rain-runoff and snowmelt, flowing down into the Amazon basin; other large rivers join with it to form the Amazon river-sea. Along all the rivers, water evaporates, creating a biosphere of moisture. Seawater returns to air, cloud, rain — cycling over and over. In this weaving of water, each drop counts and is a part of the whole.

This is the important message: "Each drop of water counts." Each conscious action, each meditation, each cleansing, each filament connection is like a drop of water, contributing to the web we weave.

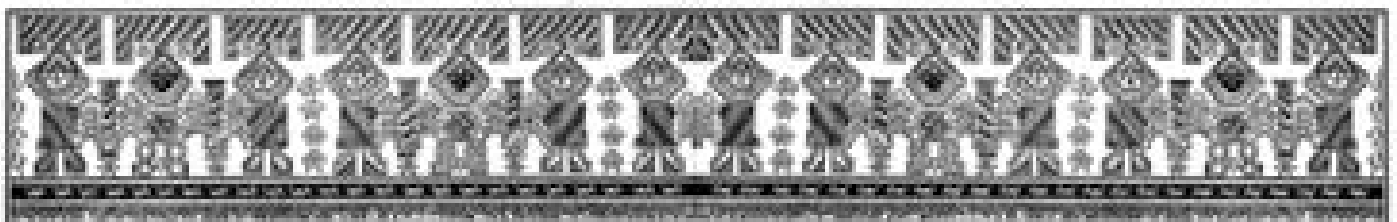
Meeting the shamanas

Two *shamanas* come from the village in the evening to do a cleansing and protection ritual for us. Américo has always said there are both male and female shamans in the Andes: "The women do essential work, even though the men are more known in the world." Yet, this is our first actual meeting with *shamanas* in two years of working with him. We're thrilled and expectant.



The *shamanas* begin with familiar Andean rituals: lighting copal incense, reading coca leaves to see how things are, sharing coca leaves with each participant, doing a *despacho* (offering) for *Pachamama*,¹ and passing around Pisco (Peruvian alcohol).

Then, the *shamanas* do a healing for each of us. When it's my turn, I stand barefoot on the straw cross they have made. The elder *shamana* ties handspun yarn around my left big toe, then slowly wraps it around my body, chanting. Holding the yarn in her left hand, she moves to her left, circling my calves, belly button, heart, the "triangle of death" between my mouth and nose, and my third eye. She breaks the yarn above my head, mumbling some words I cannot hear. Still moving to her left, she breaks the yarn at each of the crossing points, collecting the pieces in her left hand. As she breaks the yarn, one of the blockages in my heart breaks open; it feels as if fresh air is rushing in. After handing the broken yarn pieces to her assistant, she cleanses my etheric* body with downward hand motions. When everyone is cleansed, the yarn collector runs quickly to the creek, offering the broken threads with her left hand to the water, which will carry them to the sea. There, *Mamacocha* (mother ocean, the original source of feminine energy) will eat and transform them.



Later, I learn that this healing, called *lloq'ë nacuy*, is described as “getting rid of bad witchcraft” by the indigenous people. (In the west that’s equivalent to getting rid of neuroses and depression.) The magic of *lloq'ë nacuy* uses threads to represent filaments of light. The healer’s work is to connect a person’s filaments with the light of the stars (*hanaq’ pacha*). As filaments of a person’s heavy energy — pain, sadness, depression, envy — are cut away, the filaments of her etheric body and those of *Pachamama* rise up and mingle with the filaments of the stars, cleansing, energizing, and rejuvenating the person.

Wrapping the body with yarn and cutting the yarn is a cleansing practice I know from the Celtic Wiccan tradition. What moves me deeply during this ceremony is the power of the unbroken spiritual lineage. Despite the Spanish conquest, people in the high Andes — especially the Q’ero — have retained ritual, prophecy, and meaning from pre-Inca times.² I feel empowered by experiencing the similarity of their rituals to ours, the filament bridges that connect us through time and space.

In parting, the *shamanas* tell us that there are two important things: world peace and cleaning the filaments between men and women. They gift us each with a crystal from Valley of the Moon, instructing us to hold our crystal in meditation.

For two of us, this crystal will become the most important *q’uya* (sacred stone) we are given on the trip. We will use it almost daily to strengthen our filaments of connection, the light bridges between sacred places and between worlds; we will use it to shift our consciousness to encompass the unseen. The crystal *q’uya* will become a vehicle for reminding us of our underlying intent.

Weaving Between the Worlds

Weaving cloth in the Andes is a concrete expression of intent, combining the etheric, spiritual, and natural world connections in which people live. The elements of the Andean world — llama and alpaca wool, natural dyes from local plants, ancient pattern symbols for flowers of the lake, the jungle, the eyes of the moon, condor, duck, potato fields, and so on — become physical manifestations of spirit-connection in cloth, field, and ritual. People do not have special meditation practices, they simply live with attention, fluidity, and fusion. “The child watching sheep all day meditates in action, with no positions, no immobility.” We, coming from a culture so bereft of spirit, notice the fields tilled everywhere in geometric patterns, the women spinning constantly. It is easy to see that the weaving of light filaments on a spiritual plane segues naturally from the weaving of cloth.

It is also easy to see why stars are so important to people in the Andes. On clear nights, they are more brilliant than any I’ve seen in North America. The night of the *shamanas*’ healing, after everyone else retires, I stand in the garden watching; I’m filled with the stars’ vastness, quietude, and depth. When I exchange energy with the great mother eucalyptus tree, I travel to the stars.

I float in the silence of the universe; plants float with me in the still, blackness between the stars. The universe sparkles, darkness illuminated by star bodies, my heart opening to all.

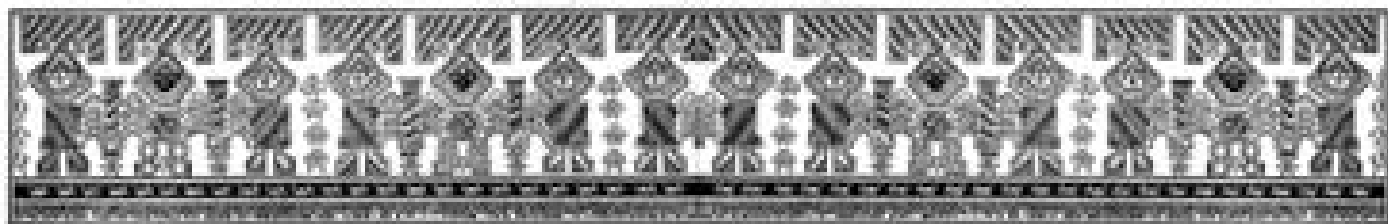
Returning to my body, I lie wrapped in my poncho on a bench in the garden, staring at the spectacular night sky for hours.

While we have fun when we are together, laughing and listening to stories at meals around the heavy wooden Spanish colonial table, most of each day is spent in silent meditation, contemplation, or writing. This rare opportunity for silence shifts me into a more receptive place in myself, a place permeated with sublime happiness.

The evening before our departure from Salk’a Wasi, we walk into the mountains, looking at the *bruja* (Spanish for “Witch”) village, Chichina, across the river — where Basque witches escaping the Spanish inquisition settled. We see the shape of the claw of a puma on the mountain opposite us. We meditate.

I am in the Puma’s claw, held by her sharp nails, a little seared. Then I am suckling her, embraced and warm. I am accepted by her. This feels like a shift in my work.

After the meditation, we do a preparing-to-travel practice: collecting filaments of everything with our fingers — cosmos, sky, mountains, wind, plants, earth, we trace the edges of the mountains with the filaments and our hands, moving southeast from Chichina towards the jungle, asking permission to enter that new place. I focus my intent on the disintegration I saw in my meditation, preparing myself to be open to whatever happens.



At about 15,000 feet, we stop for laughter-filled group pictures.

Traveling through a landscape of dreams

The next day in our rented bus on the single-lane gravel road I gaze at the mountains and wonder what's in store.

I expect the unexpected on both the transformative and practical planes. We are planning to drive twelve hours in a single day, but don't know whether the road will be washed out or where we'll stay when we arrive. We don't care, really. The unknown holds wonder and excitement.

Out of Paucartambo, we drive up and up, past spectacular valleys falling off the mountainside. At about 15,000 feet, we stop for laughter-filled group pictures and a fantastic vista of mottled-green rainforest vegetation. We then descend through steep, cloudy forest, past myriad waterfalls, driving down, down, down. We catch glimpses of flattening jungle, opening into distant muddy river arteries flowing into the vast Amazon basin. Hundreds of butterflies, like tropical fish, hover at each puddle in the road; we hang out of the windows of the bus in our shirtsleeves, trying to capture their fluttering, ethereal beauty. Yellow, orange, and black butterflies are joined by huge, iridescent rainbow-hued and turquoise-blue butterflies as we descend. This landscape of dreams has become our reality.

We have been promised a tea stop, but the only building we see is a boarded-up wooden shack perched on



the edge of a precipice.

After many miles and hours of steep descent, we stop at a bridge and rush out of the bus, carrying picnic baskets. The crystalline water of the San Juan River flows swiftly over great, bleached, round boulders that remind me of the Sierras. Shedding shoes and socks, the Americans race to find flat stones in the river to bring ashore, which can be used to eat on and to stretch out on. The Peruvians remain more sedately on shore, next to the picnic baskets.

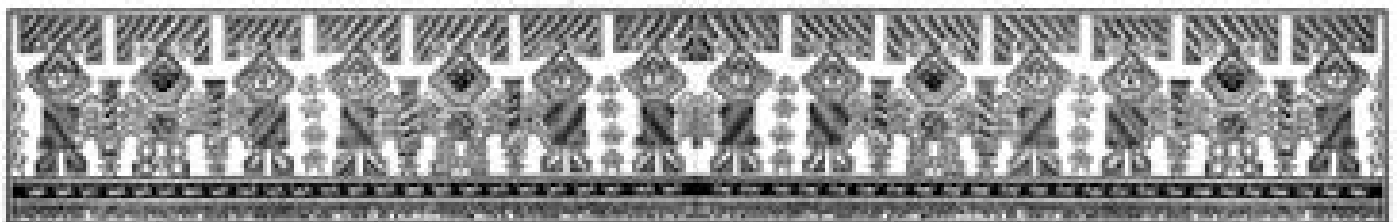
While we eat, a delicate butterfly alights on my foot. I hold my breath. I can literally see through its transparent wings, black-edged and black-veined, to my other toes. When I wiggle, the butterfly doesn't move; I breathe again and begin to eat. When I'm ready to explore the river, I transfer the butterfly gently to my friend's toe, where it seems equally content.

Around a bend in the river, I find a

place invisible to the group. Shedding my clothes, I sink into the fast cold current up to my breasts, wedging my bottom between small boulders. The river cleanses and holds me at once.

I eat *hucha* (heavy energy, the garbage of our egos and social interactions) as they do in the Andes, channeling all the "junk" into my belly button, or *qasco*, and imagining it digested and expelled. I focus on my anxiety about the unknown and the frustration of sitting too long, and breathe it out into Pachamama. She consumes *hucha* as easily as she feeds on leaves, transforming everything into compost.

Refreshed, I return to the group, as everyone prepares to leave. We collect pale turquoise river stones and dance with abandon on the bridge before boarding the bus. We descend into Manu in high spirits.





At the Piñi-Piñi River, we board our guide's skiff. It's exhilarating to feel the wind in our faces as the boat powers through the waves.

the plantation-turned-Amazonia Lodge. Sinking into the unexpected luxury of cushioned, white rattan armchairs on a deep veranda, we sip lemonade like colonials and watch black- and-gold Chest-

nut-Headed *Oropendolos* fly in and out of their hanging nests.

Into the jungle

As dusk closes in, the land flattens; jungle canopy is replaced by the scrubby second growth that follows logging. When we arrive in *Pilcopata*, at the junction of two large rivers, scattered lanterns light a small nighttime outdoor market. Life is different in this humid climate: trade is carried on in the cool of evening; workers rise at 4 a.m. and nothing looks permanent. The locals stare at us, there is none of the friendliness we've experienced in the mountains. We cruise the one lighted block before returning to our lodging. There's no mosquito netting, so I encase myself in the protective mesh of my screened tent on top of my bed and put in my earplugs.

My roommate tries to take a walk in the night and finds out that we are locked in; by morning she's in a barely-contained state of hysteria. We've all slept restlessly, and some of us are covered with bug bites. At breakfast

everyone but Américo looks groggy, but no one complains. The joy of the journey and our meditative work seem to dissipate any impulse to focus on the negative.

We board our luxurious-seeming bus and drive to a tiny settlement on the river. After standing around for a half hour, we pile into a 20-foot skiff. Leaving the security of our bus, it feels as if all boundaries are broken.

Entering the wide river, we drink in the beauty of the jungle, marveling at a flock of green-blue parrots and waterfalls tumbling down steep banks. We land near a wide wedge of stony beach and wade through the knee-deep water to shore. Walking under the jungle canopy at midday, we stretch out our hands to sense this mysterious place overhung with vines and filled with thorn-embedded tree trunks. The path is goeey with mud. Sweat runs down our bodies in rivulets. We breathe unfamiliar smells and we know we are in a wilderness.

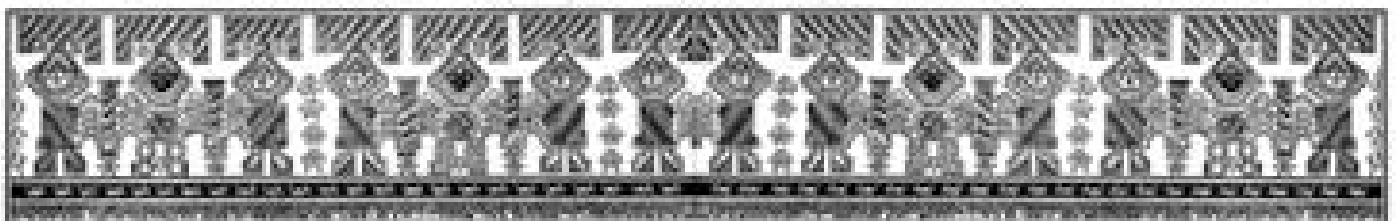
Single file, we pass from the dark narrow trail into the planted grounds of

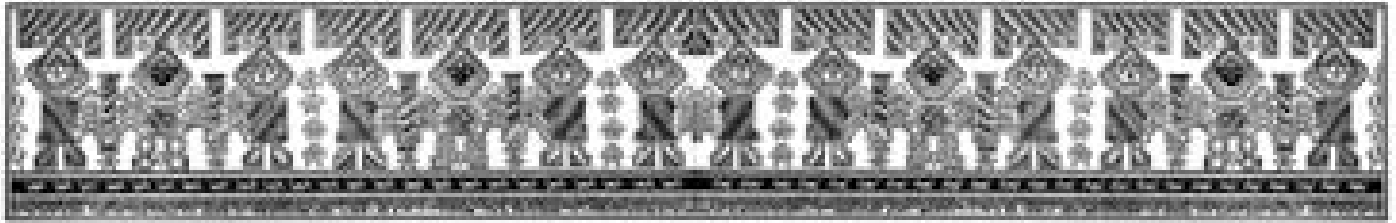
Kept in the dark

Américo keeps us in suspense in the veranda. He negotiates for what seems like hours before we're shown to our rooms. Are these obscure machinations an intentional test of our ability to ignore the mundane and concentrate on the ecstatic or perhaps an intentional effort to keep us off balance? We will never know, for we are always in the dark about what's happening next, always kept hanging in the times between our shamanic work. That work becomes easy in comparison to the suspense.

At night, we gather on the veranda; we sense the vastness that surrounds us. In starless, electricity-free darkness, we listen and smell; the unseen takes form in the silence of our meditation.

The cry of the jaguar and the howl of monkeys merge with the sight of huge trees that hide the sun, vines that kill and cure, and the serpent mother of





the rivers who lies at the bottom of the whirlpool. Like mushroom mycelium, branching, threadlike filaments spreading underground, I feel symbiotically connected to everything. The bliss is almost overpowering.

I understand deeply how each of us — creature, person, and plant — is needed for this work. Reluctantly, I return from my meditation journey, but the bliss is like nothing I have ever experienced, and I do not want to leave it. As I sit in the darkness with the others, I understand that I must have more compassion towards my roommate, the one group member who sets herself apart. If “we are all needed for this work,” who am I to judge how she acts or what work she is doing in her own way?

I understand, too, that my vision of disintegration is about non-attachment: I must keep an open heart and let whatever happens, happen. I need to be fluid, not consuming energy with self-importance but being alert and fully present.

After a blissfully quiet night’s sleep, we rise at four a.m. to look for tapir and a nearby troop of monkeys. The lodge keeper, a gruff uncle of Américo’s, guides us on our hike. When he stops and asks us which direction we would take to find our way back to the lodge if we got separated, I realize that I have absolutely no idea; I have put my normal habits of survival aside. I’m intrigued to notice this level of trust.

By midmorning, we’ve traversed the river, boarded the bus, and arrived at Villa Carmen, a lodge belonging to another one of Américo’s *tios* — he claims so many uncles that we tease him about being related to everyone in Peru. The old horse ranch retains the feel of a self-contained hacienda. The owner and guests stay in the main house, which is surrounded by a cluster of typical jungle

houses (boards roofed with tin) for the ranch and kitchen workers. We are entertained by a parrot, a pet monkey, giant caracols, beautiful ponies, and chickens which run free and devour the baby vipers hatching under the house. Finally, we hike through half-a-mile of orchard and cleared land. At the Piñi-Piñi River, we board our guide’s skiff.

for a year. His love for the jungle feeds our group’s sweat-drenched euphoria. When he whacks a long bamboo with his machete, slashing a V in one section and handing it to us to drink the clear liquid, we bubble over. The liquid dribbles down our chins and onto our soaked shirts.



It’s exhilarating to feel the wind in our faces as the boat powers through the waves. “Like the serpent mother moving the river into waves of power, the total cosmos,” Américo tells us. Our group energy is high as we land and begin a steep hike up a clay mud trail. We have to walk consciously, avoiding the *Solitario ants* whose bites can kill and looking for thorns before grabbing a tree branch for help as we climb up a steep incline.

Tio points out a tree that heals cancer, another that provides enough protein in its milk for a person to survive on

He whacks a bamboo with his machete, slashing a V in one section and handing it to us to drink the clear liquid; it dribbles down our chins and onto our soaked shirts.

Seventy percent of the jungle’s moisture is in the air, and we feel it. By the time we reach the first waterfall, which drops 50 feet down sheer, dark stone into an inviting pool, we are ready to jump in. Peeling off our sopping clothes, we slip into swimsuits and run into the



We discover that we can make paint with it; we decorate our faces and arms with red-orange triangles, circles, and lines.

surprisingly cool water, splashing and playing like children.

Too soon, we are told we must leave; we're reluctant until told that there's another waterfall up ahead. There, we find clay-like, crumbly, striated stone filled with iron oxide. Rubbing it on the rocks, we discover that we can make paint with it; we decorate our faces and arms with red-orange triangles, circles, and lines.

I begin to climb up the slippery black rocks under the waterfall. The intense water pressure forces me to close my eyes and I move entirely by feel, finding a foot grip and balancing my body before each movement. I climb, step by careful step, until my head finds an air space between waterfall and stone. Water pummels my shoulders as I open my eyes. I am fully in my body, but have no sensation of separateness from the stone or the water.

Suddenly, Tio says that it's about to rain and we must leave. Since we're already wet, his concern seems strange,

but we hike fast, slipping in the now-gooey mud as the trail turns to mush under our feet. The downpour becomes a deluge, when we reach the *palapa*, exhausted and sopping wet, we light a fire and hover around it staring out through sheets of rain at the roiling, rising river.

Initiated by Lightning

In my fatigue-altered state, the heat, the light, and the rain are intense, as if I have entered into another dimension, perhaps the disintegration that my meditation foretold.

Lightning strikes, shaking the ground under our feet. It's very close. Américo tells us to welcome it, to reach up our arms and pull it down with the thunder. Three times we reach up and pull in the lightning. I complete the motions in a daze, barely able to concentrate on lifting my arms.

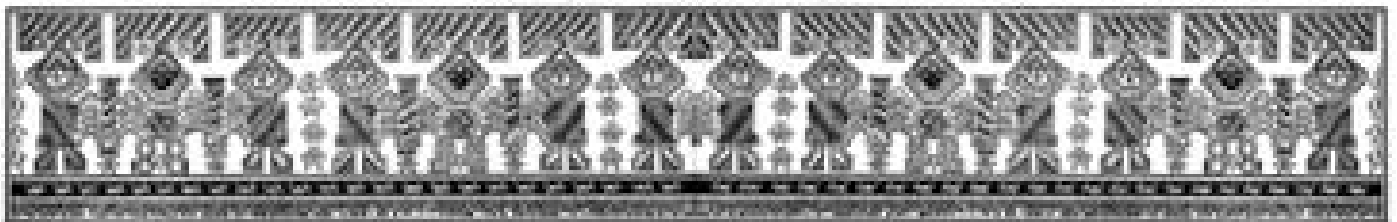
In the Andes, they believe that if the first ray of lightning hits near you and doesn't kill you, it breaks your etheric body into pieces and spreads it out. The second lightning strike brings the

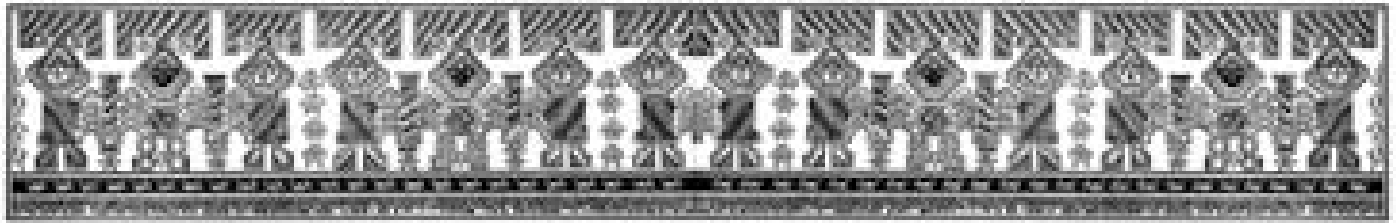
etheric body back together; the third produces ecstatic contemplation and returns you to an incorruptible unity, *kaka haypicha*. It is believed that rays of jungle lightning, *el raio*, come from the fire of the cosmos, entering and changing our consciousness.

Américo calls our lightning experience alchemical. He says the elements are in charge, producing a *karpay*, or initiation, putting our group into "the dimension of lightning." None of us knows what that means. We do know that our meditations and the conjunction of waterfalls, river, wind, jungle, and now lightning, have illuminated everything. Mysteriously, the lightning has given me a deeper experience of the interconnectedness of all beings than I have known before.

When the rain lets up and the river calms, we quietly pile into the boat and return to the lodge, each of us in our own sensory world. I retreat to my room to sleep. When someone knocks on the door to invite me to the barbecue our host has prepared, I refuse to get up. I am outside time, promises, and commitments. No mind, just body, the sound of rain battering the tin roof, rats running back and forth outside the screen, and more lightning in the night.

That jungle deluge has washed away my defenses. My habitual perceptions are worn down; there's no separation. I begin to experience "the profound silence of the interior light," a heart fullness where everything is in alignment, and my spirit soars. I feel at one with the mystery of the cosmos, without fear.





Opening to other dimensions

On one of our last evenings in Cuzco Américo instructs us to wander the central plaza in Cuzco, “seeing,” or looking at the normally invisible energies that surround people. Among the adults all I see is despair. For the *indios* it’s poverty, for the middle-class *Cusqueños* it’s anger, boredom, or alienation; a few children emanate radiance. As if my experience isn’t depressing enough, all the other group members seem to have had fun. I compare myself with them, wondering if all my great visions weren’t just my imagination at work.

The next night, we gather in our largest room. Soft candlelight flickers over the Q’ero weavings we have collected, decorating the floor with Andean symbols of the cosmos. We begin with the most essential of exercises, connecting our heart energy with the energy of the cosmos, before performing the “opening into other dimensions” blessing. Facing each other in pairs we place our hands around the temples and the soft spot of our partner’s skull. We whisper Quechua words, “*Hampui hatun espiritu*” and the person’s name, blowing the breath of the cosmos into the soft spot on top of her head. We slide our hands down briefly over the ears, containing the energy. Then our partners perform the same blessing for us.

My body moves beyond my skin, expanding an inch or more into the etheric body. I have a sensation of slipping out of my body, of physically existing in two dimensions at once. My body joins with my partner’s in a field of light

energy; we become an electrified cocoon. Around the group, there is an intense container of light. I rise off the ground, levitating. I understand that we function as one luminous organism.

Moving around our small circle, we trade the blessing with everyone. Then, holding hands as a group, we share the energy. Raising our arms to sky, we breathe together three times, and part quietly for the night.

I sleep lightly, waking often to float in the cocoon of realignment. My whole body is engaged in a subtle vibration; my breath comes slowly, as in deep meditation. In previous meditations, I have traveled with spirit guides, received important messages, but I have never physically felt the separation of body and spirit as I do this night.

Weaving the way back home

The “opening into other dimensions” blessing continues to serve me as I return home. It gives me a sense of possibility; strengthening my sense that working with light filaments is a tangible way to heal the earth. Integrating my Peruvian journey with the rest of my life flows smoothly. I am clear and calm in a new way. When I work with stones, trees, water, and mountains, my connections deepen and I feel nurtured. I want to meditate; I want to weave filaments between people and places. I am unable to talk to people about these experiences, so I become more silent. I concentrate on being rather than doing.

The Western fabric of connection has been rent and torn; they have disintegrated, even been buried. My job

is to patiently sew threads of reconnection, like the old women mending under lamplight, laughing, weaving baskets decorated with tiny feathers. My job is to let my energy come from the vast universal and cosmic consciousness while I function in the mundane world of relationships, work, and child-rearing. My job is to keep my bones and cells open and keep a soft belly,³ to make that physical shift where I loosen the shields and let the molecules move freely. If I do so, I can, in the words of the Q’ero, “be connected with everything.”

Backnotes

¹Pachamama is Quechua for both cosmic mother and mother earth. Pachamama represents a complex Andean belief system about interrelationships in the cosmos.

²The Q’ero have lived in isolation in the Andes — above 15,000 feet — for 500 years “speaking with the spirit of the mountains and talking with the stars,” as Américo says. For further information, see Hal Zina Bennett, “From the Heart of the Andes: An Interview with Q’ero Shaman Americo Yabar” in *Shaman’s Drum*, fall, 1994, Number 36, p. 40.

³A meditation focusing on physical opening and softening the belly as a way of releasing all the armoring emotions — grief, anger, fear, distrust, and so on — to make connection possible. Steven and Ondrea Levine teach “soft belly” as a complete meditation practice. ©

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