

Chapter 5- Road to Ceremony

I went to the second lodge the next evening alone. My wife had made a previous commitment and couldn't attend. I vacillated on using this as an excuse to not show up, but something compelled me to go anyway. I think it was partly the sense of guilt I knew I'd feel if I didn't show up as I had promised, and partly the real desire I had to experience the lodge again.

It was one of those "harsh" Southern California winter evenings, with the temperature hovering down around sixty degrees and a beautiful blue afternoon sky dissolving into a hazy wash of sunset. Shirtsleeve weather. There was already a small group assembled in the backyard when I arrived. The stones were heating in the fire pit and everyone was lounging around in lawn chairs.

Keith-Night Sky Talking- greeted me as I wandered into the backyard. "Yatahay," he said as I drifted hesitantly toward the group lounging together. "Good to see you again. Come on over here and meet everybody".

I was still very insecure around strangers. I had used alcohol as a social lubricant for years. My "meet and greet" skills had yet to find their legs unaided by chemically induced courage. As I was to find out in the near future, I had no "Circle of Self" at that time.

As I approached, Keith introduced me to the group. There was an independent documentary producer, a couple of students, a few people who worked civil service jobs, the artist, and one or two other people I vaguely recognized from my sober fellowship. Keith was holding court with the congregation, explaining at

length his understanding of various different customs and practices.

“Even within the same tribe these guys will teach this medicine stuff different ways. Some say the south is the color red, others say it is green,” Keith explained. He went on to start talking about several other examples of these kinds of deviations in the teaching of the medicine wheels, but my attention quickly faltered and I settled back into a lawn chair and started daydreaming.

The sky was beginning to darken. Dusk had only a few minutes left in its duty for the day. The rocks were starting to make little crackling and popping noises in the fire pit underneath the wheelbarrow. A soft breeze was blowing through the backyard and the feathers dangling on poles around the lodge looked like they were dancing ever so slightly in the wind. As I watched all this I felt as if I were slipping into a very relaxed dreamlike state, yet I was wide awake.

I began to notice something over the top of the lodge. It looked like the air above its apex was vibrating. It looked like the way heat waves look in the air on a hot summer afternoon or the way the air looks as you stare at the exhaust coming out of a jet engine on an airplane as it starts revving up to take off. The air within this shimmering wave seemed crystal clear, as if it were somehow clearer than the air adjacent to it.

As I watched, I began to see a soft swirl of colors, similar to the colors I’d seen at the end of the ceremony the last time I’d been there. They were almost like smoke there above the lodge, swirling soft purple, and yellow and blue and red. I felt drawn into their swirling patterns, and was so totally absorbed in their dancing,

vibrating beauty that I never noticed Miguel come out of the house and join the circle.

“It’s time”. That was all Miguel said. Everyone started to change into whatever they were wearing in the ceremony. The women all changed inside the tipi, the men all changed by the lodge. Everyone lined up outside the lodge just as on the first ceremony, clad in a variety of outfits ranging from gym shorts and towels on the men to bathing suits and cotton robes for the women.

The ceremony was conducted just as it had been on my previous visit. The heat wasn’t as difficult for me this time, and I was somewhat more relaxed about my prayers. I was still struggling to find a sense of personal comfort as I went through the ceremony. It wasn’t the heat making me uncomfortable, it was this massive insecurity I felt about myself that had me critiquing every action before I took it, and then again afterwards. I was successfully making myself miserable.

The ceremony ended and we all reassembled in the tipi. After the group had started to disburse, Miguel approached me.

“ I’m running a ceremony for a men’s group tomorrow night. If you want to come early, I will teach you how to run the fire”.

Before I could come up with at least a dozen good reasons why I wouldn’t be able to show up my mouth said ”What time?” ” Be here by five-thirty at the latest and we’ll get started”, Miguel replied and then turned and walked away.

I couldn't believe my own mouth had tricked me like that. Of course I couldn't come back the next night. I was sure I had something to do even though I couldn't remember what it was at that moment. The truth of the moment was that the prospect of going deeper into these teachings made me uneasy. I instinctively knew that I was fast approaching a point where I would not be likely to turn back. The whole notion of commitment to something that felt as big as this process was feeling to me was making me very anxious.

Yet there I was, committed to showing up the next night for something that I wasn't sure I really wanted to do. I went home that evening and told my wife about what I had agreed to do. She was very enthusiastic about the whole thing, which only made matters worse. Now I was really trapped into doing this. I was trapped because I didn't want to disappoint her and because above all, I did not know how to say no. So I went the next day just as I had promised I would.

I got over to Miguel's house around 4:45 to find he had already come home and begun his preparations. I walked out to the backyard and found him waiting for me with a big seashell filled with sage.

Miguel lit the sage and handed it to me. "Smudge off with this sage and then go into the lodge and pull out all the stones. Place them over by the fire pit. Don't forget to say "all my relations" every time you go in and out of the lodge. Come inside and get me when this is done". He finished his instructions and went back into his house.

It took me about fifteen minutes to get all the rocks out of the pit in the lodge and get them piled up in front of

the fire grate. Before I could go inside to get Miguel, he reappeared holding a large eagle wing in his hand. He handed it to me.

I felt a little nervous holding the big brown wing. It was almost a foot and a half long, and the feathers were a deep rich brown. Highlights of white and gold reflected off of them as I stood there awaiting further instruction in the waning afternoon sunlight.

Miguel walked over to the pile of rocks I had assembled. He stood silently for a minute or two and then turned towards me. My teaching was about to begin in earnest. Miguel's voice had shifted into the same serious, quiet tone that he always seemed to be using for the ceremonies. There was something about the tone of his voice that implied I was to pay close attention to what I was about to hear.

The lodge is the sacred Mother. She is the womb. All of us were born in the womb. When we sit inside of her for ceremony, we are children crawling back into the womb. We come here to give away our prayers. We must always respect these two sacred laws- that all things are born of Woman and that Nothing should ever be done to harm the Children. The lodge sits in the West and her doorway opens to the East .

To the East of the doorway is the altar. On this altar we place a candle. This candle is the Children's Fire. This is the fire we light to let Great Spirit know that the Children have gathered to pray. The two small forked sticks on the altar are where we place the Spirit Bridge. This bridge is painted with the colors of the eight directions. The tall forked sticks you see surrounding the

lodge are there for us to place tobacco ties and feathers on to honor the four directions.

To the East of this is the fire pit. This is where we place the Stones. The Stones are the male seed. We pray over these stones that they may hold the energy of the ceremony in a Beauty Way. The Stones are heated until they are glowing red hot. We then take these Stones, the male seed, and we place them inside the womb of the lodge. In this sacred marriage of the masculine and feminine we experience Creation. We bring our prayers to this Creation ceremony to have them be born into whatever Great Spirit would have them be.

Miguel stopped speaking. Both of us were beginning to sweat, even though the day had started slipping into the late afternoon twilight. The air had begun to take on a charged feeling, just like I had experienced the night before at the lodge. Miguel looked briefly at the sky as if to measure the amount of time left before darkness, and then continued with his teaching.

I want you to take this eagle wing. Light some sage and fan the smoke across all of the stones. As you do, ask that these stone be blessed and purified for the work that they are going to do for our ceremony tonight. When you finish, I want you to stand in the center of the fire pit and think about the direction of the South. Think of everything that the South teaches. The South teaches us of trust and innocence. It teaches us about our emotions. It is the element of water. It is the color red. Think about all of these things. As you do this, look at this pile of stones and select one to hold the energy of the South for our ceremony. Remember that the minerals are the scared holders of energy.

When you find a stone that is your south stone, pick it up. Hold it here in this fire pit and pray over it. Ask this stone to hold this south energy in a Beautyway. Ask it to dance in balance with all the other directions in this circle. When you have done this, place the stone in the south of the fire pit. Repeat this for the other three directions. Once you have placed the first four stones, fill in the rest of the stones in the fire pit in a circular fashion. Make sure that they are packed tightly together. Try to pick stones that are at least as big as your two fists put together. Be careful to remember the exact number of stones you place in the fire pit.

Miguel looked at me. “Its getting dark”, he said. “We still have to bless the lodge, so you need to get busy. Come inside and get me when you’re done with this”. He left me standing in his backyard amidst a darkening sky and a large pile of rocks and went inside.

I stared at the rock pile. It just looked like a big pile of reddish, gray-brown rocks to me. I stifled the anxiety I was beginning to feel. What if I did it wrong? Would he be able to tell? I was pretty sure he would be. Would somebody get hurt if I did this wrong? I looked at the sky. It looked like I had an hour or so before darkness. This really began to make the process difficult.

I got down on my knees in the dirt. I started to pray to myself the way I had heard Miguel pray in the Lodge.

“Creator, I ask that you guide me at this time. Help me find the right rock for the South. Help me to make a good circle of stones for the ceremony tonight”. A small voice in the back of my brain started screaming at me- “You’re an idiot, you’re praying to a bunch of rocks in

this guy's backyard!" I ignored the voice and pressed on.

I started thinking about my emotions. They had certainly been raw lately. Anything was bound to be better than the way I had been feeling. I decided to try and trust the process a little more.

Creator, I humbly ask that you guide me to the right rock for the South in this ceremony". I suddenly noticed a reddish colored rock about the size of a large grapefruit just to my right. It seemed to be almost glowing. Not really brightly, like some movie special effect, but more like the stone was ever so subtly a little more colorful than the rest of the pile. I picked it up and placed it in the south of the fire pit. I prayed over it as I had been instructed. It made me feel good. I stopped critiquing the process, at least for the moment. I wasn't worried if I was being foolish or crazy. I felt peaceful and calm. This was a definite departure from how I had been feeling prior to that moment.

I started to focus my attention on the other directions. I went to the West. I struggled a little remembering the teachings involved with that direction. I was completely absorbed by the process now and was working as fast as I could to beat the approaching sundown.

It took me about half an hour to complete the circle and make a large pile of rocks there in the fire pit. I went inside to find Miguel. He came back to the fire pit and showed me how to start the fire for the rocks.

"Now we have to bless the lodge for the ceremony", he said. "It is similar to the blessing for the Stone People,

but this time you will need to use the teaching of all eight directions”.

I waited for him to continue. After a few quiet moments, he started speaking again.

As I said before, the lodge is the sacred Mother. She is the womb. We will be returning to her as children to give voice to our prayers. When we do these ceremonies, we often find that people who come here bring a great deal of pain and suffering with them. They bring it to this place, sometimes without even knowing that is what they are doing. The ceremony helps to draw this out of them so they may be cleansed, but what they leave behind here often remains behind here. When we bless the lodge, we use prayer to help us remove these things that have been left behind, so that the people who come here for this ceremony tonight do not have to contend with what has been left behind.

I want you to take this eagle wing, this sage and this gourd rattle into the lodge. Starting in the south I want you to sit in each direction and ask in prayer that this direction be a safe and blessed direction in this ceremony tonight. Be sure to pray about what each direction represents. Be sure to ask that all these directions dance in Balance, Beauty and Harmony with each other. Be sure to ask whatever painful or malevolent energy you may feel in the lodge to leave. When you find a direction that feels this way, shake this rattle to help dispel these things. Fan as much sage smoke into the direction as you feel it needs. Work your way sunwise around the lodge until you finish in the southeast. Pay close attention to the pit in the lodge where we place the stones. Make sure that the blankets

covering the lodge are secure and that no light is showing through anywhere.

When you have finished, leave and close the door to the lodge. Do the same blessing for each direction on the outside of the lodge. Make sure you touch the eagle fan to the lodge in each direction. Once this is done, take these tobacco ties and feathers and hang them from the poles set at each of the four directions. Then place this stick painted in the colors of the eight directions into the forked sticks on the altar and light this candle for the Children's fire.

When all of this has been done, the blessing and purification is completed. Do not let anyone other than yourself or me near the firepit, and no one is to come between the altar and the fire pit at any time other than us.

“I’ll be inside getting ready for the ceremony, come get me when you’re done”. Miguel finished speaking and went to begin his preparations for the ceremony.

I thought about the eight directions and what they meant. I wasn’t all that clear on them yet, but the whole idea of cleansing the lodge from the energy of the previous ceremony didn’t seem all that farfetched.

I thought about the saying, “As Above, So Below”. I had heard this saying used numerous times in the two ceremonies I had attended. It seemed to mean that the material world was a reflection of the spiritual world, at least that’s what I had gathered from the context in which the saying had been used. So if there were material things in the physical, the “So Below” world, that left a residue, it stood to reason that there could be

spiritual things in the “As Above” world that did the same. Since it was already clear to me that this ceremony was a place where the two worlds of As Above and So Below intersected and co-mingled, I was not having a hard time accepting the notion that there indeed might be some emotional and spiritual residue from previous ceremonies.

I was working intuitively by this time. I did not question my prayers or actions as I went into the lodge to begin the blessing. I started in the south as I had been instructed. As I moved through each direction, I could feel a slight change in the lodge. It was like swimming in a lake where the depth of the water changes every so often. One area the water is warm, where it’s shallow. A few feet away, where it’s deeper, the water is cooler. The energy in the lodge was much the same.

I finished blessing the inside of the lodge. By the time I came out the air outside had started to get that electric feeling I had experienced at prior ceremonies. The sun was setting and it wouldn’t be long before the moon would be on the rise.

I quickly went around the outside of the lodge and completed the blessing. I lit the small Children’s Fire Candle on the altar and placed the colored bar across the forked sticks as Miguel had directed. I stepped back to admire my handiwork.

The fire from the fire pit was throwing dancing shadows all over Miguel’s backyard. The backyard was starting to turn into that magical place of ceremony once more. The moon hung low to the east, just visible over the fence through the leaves of a neighboring tree. The stars

were beginning to appear past the lights of Los Angeles. A soft breeze was blowing through the back yard.

Lost in my reverie, I didn't hear Miguel come up behind me. "I want you to get the water bucket ready, and then go sit with the stones until its time for the ceremony". I nodded. I felt no need to ask any questions or even speak.

I sat over by the stones for quite a while. Miguel soon joined me. We sat together in silence for a while. Miguel started a new teaching.

The mineral world is the sacred holder of energy. The minerals store all the energy of our Mother Earth. Think about even a computer, built on a silicon chip. This chip uses the energy of the mineral world. It is very important to learn how to hold your own energy. Look at how the stones hold the heat. Soon we will be using the energy from these stones in the ceremony to transform the prayers of the people in the ceremony. Learn to hold your energy in a sacred way. You heard the Song of the Stone People in your first lodge. Sit with these stones and see what they have to teach you. See if they will share a song with you.

Miguel left me alone with the stones. The participants were beginning to arrive for the lodge. I could faintly hear Miguel explaining the ceremony to them over in the tipi. It was completely dark outside and the moon was in full view. The night was still and beautifully dark blue.

As I watched the stones I began to see how the fire danced in them and around them. I had never noticed all the colors in fire before. The white-hot center, the bright orange mass and the pastel soft edges with their yellow

and purple hues. I kept staring at the rocks, watching them slowly change colors. As I stared transfixed at this process, a melody started forming in my mind. These are the words that came with the melody.

*Song of Hope, Song of Everything that's living
Song of Dreams, Song of all that's freely giving*

*There is a dance within each heart
There is music in the wind
Where the light and shadow part
Lies the truth that lives within*

*There is rhythm to the heat
There is song within the stone
There are patterns to my faith
And the life that I must own*

I sang the song over and over again. I have used that song for many years now, especially when I am feeling disconnected from my path. It was a gift to me from the stone people on that very first night.

Miguel came back over by the fire pit. "Do the stones feel ready?", he asked. I started to bend down and look at the pile underneath the wheelbarrow. Miguel touched me on the shoulder. "Do they *feel* ready?", he repeated.

I instantly understood what he was saying. My first reaction had been to try and measure something by looking at it instead of sensing the energy of the ceremony. It was what he had been talking about earlier. I was now like the stones. I was also holding the energy of the ceremony. What he was asking me was if the energy of the stones and the ceremony was right.

I took a deep breath and tried to let every thought leave my mind. Suddenly I felt very light hearted, like I was about to start laughing. I had a smile on my face. “ They’re ready” was all I said.

Miguel’s eyes were laughing right along with me. “Okay. Here’s what you do. I want you to sit outside the lodge, right by the door. This is called sweating outside the lodge. I want you to open the flap at the end of each round, and keep the water bucket and drinking water filled. You will bring in the stones for each round. Pay close attention to everything you see and hear outside the lodge. Let’s get started.”

One by one the men who had gathered for the ceremony went inside the lodge. I brought in the glowing red rocks as Miguel directed me to. I handed in the water bucket and closed the flap of the lodge. I sat outside and waited.

I could hear Miguel start the ceremony and begin pouring the water. As the prayers started inside the lodge I began to feel hot. I took off my shirt. By the end of the first round I was sweating. I heard Miguel call out “open the door” and I jumped up and pulled back the flap. Steam came billowing out of the lodge, mixed with the smell of sage and sweetgrass.

I passed drinking water around and brought in more stones. I closed the flap and the ceremony proceeded. For the rest of the night I sweat outside the lodge. The air around the lodge still retained that electric quality to it. I would watch the fire throw shadows across the trees in the backyard. It seemed like everything there was alive and dancing.

At the end of the ceremony all the men from the lodge gathered in the tipi. Miguel sat with them for a while and then came out to see me. He had several packets of tobacco and some sage, which he gave to me. “These are a giveaway from the men in the ceremony, to honor the work you have done and to thank you for holding the space outside the lodge”. I was surprised at this, but accepted the gifts and just stood there, uncertain of what to do next.

Miguel watched me for a moment and then gave me the rest of my instructions. “Put out the fire, collect all the tobacco ties (a small pinch of tobacco that is wrapped in a piece of colored cloth) and feathers from the sticks surrounding the lodge and extinguish the Children’s Fire. Then come inside, there’s one more thing I want to teach you tonight before you go.”

By now all the participants from the lodge had left. I went about my post ceremony chores as Miguel had instructed. I was suddenly feeling very weary. The electric atmosphere had shifted radically. I felt like a little kid and the Circus had just left town. About fifteen minutes later I straggled into Miguel’s kitchen and sat down at a little wood table he had placed not far from the door.

Miguel was waiting for me with a cup of coffee. “Good job on the stones, the energy from them was really sweet. Now, I want you to dance with what you think this means to you”.

He took out a small piece of paper and numbered it one through twenty. ”This is the Children’s Count. This is the story of how creation was born one measure of light

at a time”. I still have that scrap of paper. This is what he wrote.

0. *WAKANTANKA*
1. *GRANDFATHER SUN*
2. *GRANDMOTHER EARTH*
3. *PLANTS*
4. *ANIMALS*
5. *HUMANS*
6. *ANCESTORS*
7. *THE DREAM*
8. *THE LAW OF CYCLES*
9. *THE DESIGN OF ENERGY*
10. *THE MEASURE OF INTELLECT*
11. *GRANDFATHER STARS*
12. *GRANDMOTHER PLANETS*
13. *EARTH MOTHER*
14. *EARTH FATHER*
15. *SOULS OF ALL HUMANS*
16. *OCTALOTAHAY*
17. *KACHINAHAY*
18. *CHULAMATAHAY*
19. *HOKSHEDAHAY*
20. *WAKANTANKA*

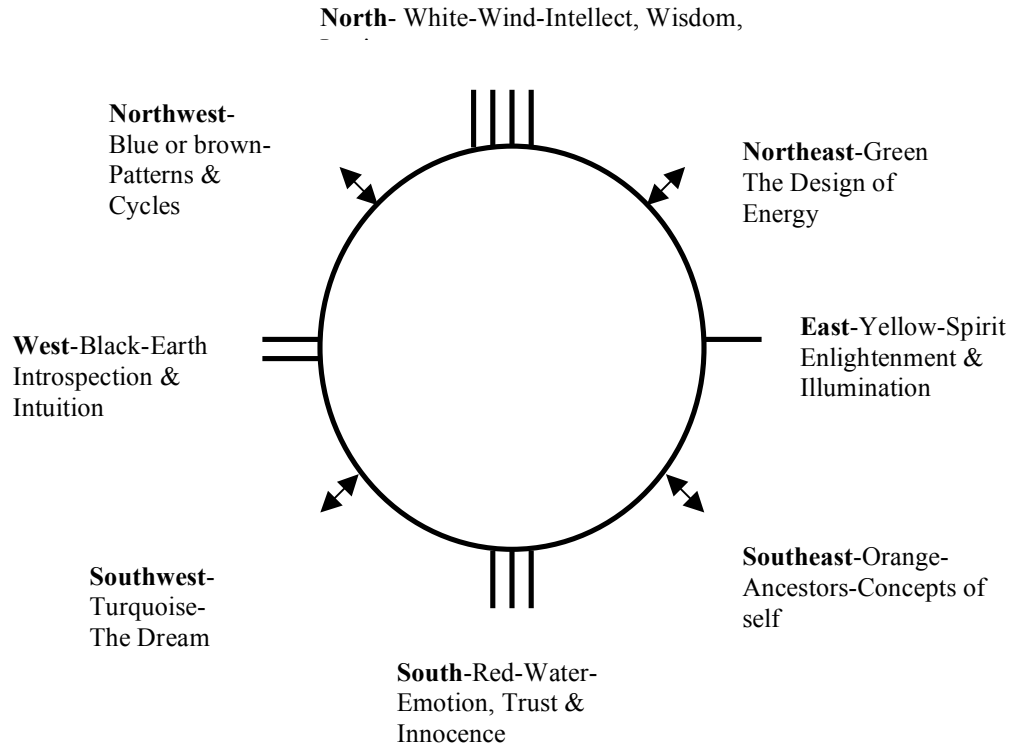
“See what you think this means to you and we’ll talk about it more later. In the meantime, you will need to learn this. There’s another lodge tomorrow night if you want to come”. Miguel patted me on the shoulder and smiled.

I went outside and looked up at the stars. I remember thinking to myself, “There’s no turning back now”. The thought didn’t seem as scary as it once had.

I was now on the road to my first Vision Quest. As usual, I didn't know it at the time, but everything I was learning in that backyard was part of that first ceremony. I was learning tools that would help me to change from who I'd become into who I was. That night I had taken the beginning steps toward learning how to deal with the energy of life, and my teachers had been this mixed blood shaman of Mexican and Yaqui Indian descent and a big pile of rocks.

I went back the next night. I went back every chance I could for months after that. I was always learning something new, and I was getting ready for ceremony without knowing it. I was soon to find out that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better.

These are the directions and some of their teachings as they were taught to me for this ceremony.



The Eight Directions of the Medicine Wheel

To Walk in Beauty is to be in the center of this wheel, balanced in all things.