**The Second Ceremony**

Aside from a circle of light emanating from a single candle in the middle of the room to Ron’s left, the room was otherwise full of darkness when the ceremony began. Ron, the gringo shaman of Peru, began his ritual of blowing tobacco. He walked to the center of the room. While facing east, he took 7-8 shallow puffs from his Ayahuasca soaked pipe and then placed his right hand in a circle over his mouth to direct the smoke out in front of him. After he blew, he extended his right arm forward with his palm out and fingers up as if to signal stop. He then turned 90 degrees to the right and blew tobacco again from his pipe. This time he faced south. He repeated the same procedure always blowing through the circle of his right hand and signaling stop with the same hand. He turned another 90 degrees and blew smoke to the west and lastly to the north. Then he blew it to the sky above and to the earth below in the same manner as before. Finally, he returned to his seat at the front of the room.

While waving his chacapa leaves, he blew smoke and then spit into the bottle of ayahuasca like chicha. He blessed Mother Ayahuasca praising her for her healing powers and for all of us coming together in pursuit of her gifts. He blessed his family, his lover Carina, his children, and others close to him asking for their protection. Ron’s practice did not cut any corners and displayed dedication to Mother Ayahuasca as well as the spirit world around us.

Calling us up one by one, he asked us to remind him how much we wanted to drink while he poured it into his wooden cup. We each gulped the tarry thick burnt molasses tasting concoction as fast as we could. I plugged my nose to minimize the taste.

After a short pause, the music began. Ron played various Peruvian instruments floating indescribable sounds directly from the world of the Amazon. There was singing and chanting in Spanish and other incomprehensible languages. He used drums and gongs and hissed sounds like cries from other worldly creatures.

After 2 songs, Zach purged wildly. I hoped this meant the visualizations had begun for him as he most longed to have an experience unlike the previous night. The purging progressed to the other side of the room where Diana and Katie were situated. Dominique and Amanda followed next. The shaman, Ron, and his assistant, Matthew, then hurled extensively into their blue buckets. I heard my neighbor Kelly cough a bit as I sat there in silence, still, not feeling much of anything nor any desire to vomit.

I repeated my intentions which were: first, to see my inner child and second, to remove the barriers I had put around my heart after losing my father as they were no longer protecting me from pain but hindering me. Lastly, I asked to see where I would live in the next year after selling my house. I had been trying to meditate on this as I approached homelessness with my kids. I trusted that what was meant to be would be. However, at this point, no other home felt right. This house had basically called me to it. It was meant for me at least for now. I asked Mother Ayahuasca in case she had any advice to give. Then I let it all go and thought, “I surrender. I am willing. Show me what will best serve me now.” Nothing came except a clarity and calm in my body. I did not feel nauseated. I just felt tingly like I do when I meditate. Being a kinesthetic person and not an auditory or visual learner, I wondered if Mother Ayahuasca might show me things through feelings rather than visualizations.

With closed eyes, I only saw darkness. Later some nondescript images appeared like rainforest leaves warping into spiraling figures, perhaps snakes which then warped back into leaves.

While curled on my side on the ground, I relaxed into the experience, no longer afraid of never resurfacing in reality again.

Ron then approached me. He had told me the day before during our sharing circle that he would do something to help my back pain. I mentioned that my back hurt more during the 1st ceremony. He told a story of treating another woman’s pain and how it was completely gone after his treatment. He smiled and said he had a way to help my back. Nothing was 100%, but he would try. He did not give me details, but when he sat by my side that night, I knew he was beginning.

“Lie down on your belly, “ he asked. “Lift your shirt.” I pulled at my layers lifting them to reveal my upper back where the pain was located. He had never asked me exactly where it hurt. I held my shirt around my neck with my R arm. Ron placed a candle by my side. Kelly sat to my right entranced by Ron’s work.

Ron grabbed my purge bucket and placed it to his side. The singing and chanting began. I felt his chacapa leaves shaking across my back. When he finished chanting, he touched my spine and ran his fingers up and down. Thinking he was finished, I peered up at him in the candlelight and whispered, “thank you,” then put my head back down.

Suddenly I felt a subtle pressure directly over the spot of pain just medial to my left shoulder. My hand remained up around my neck as I held my shirt. I wondered, “What the hell is that on my back?” I felt warm air blow on my fingers and thought, “No Fucking Way! That is Ron’s mouth! He’s sucking my back!” I imagined a suckerfish extracting dark dank crud from my back exactly where it hurt. I wondered what he was seeing while on Ayahuasca as I erroneously did not think I was influenced by this plant medicine anymore. I imagined him sucking serpents out of my back. After a minute, he rolled his throat and aggressively spit into the bucket. I envisioned my bucket now full of thick slimy snakes. Ron went in for more, maybe another snake. He sucked vehemently pulling out whatever nasty creatures had set up shop around my heart. It felt like ancient coils harnessed to my organs that Ron pulled at and inhaled into his mouth. He spit again, purging snakes or other venomous creatures out of his mouth. I worried that my snakes would inhabit Ron’s body now. Once more I felt Ron’s mouth on my back this time for a much shorter period of time. He must have gotten them all out, but I worried there were still pieces of snakes in there that might reincarnate and take over my organs again. He spit for the last time. This time it was brief. He touched my back and blew tobacco over it. He needed to seal the gaping hole that had been created in removing the evil snakes I had been carrying around for decades.

“Sit up,” he asked, then blew tobacco a few times on my crown chakra. He followed by blowing down my shirt along my back and then through the front side of my shirt. With hands in prayer position, he blew tobacco into my palms. This was more involved than the blowing of tobacco which happened at the end of every ceremony. He did this to close any open channels that may have formed while drinking Ayahuasca. After finishing, Ron returned to his music at the altar.

I felt internal excitement about this experience and thought, “That was my 2nd intention, but that was not how I ever imagined working through those walls. If nothing else, coming here for that was why I needed to come at that time. I tried to come earlier but no other time worked out. Ron would not have been there at that time. This never would have happened without Ron. I must have picked this date based on the encouragement from the universe.”

I had told myself after my recent life upheaval that I would never do anything without obvious signs from my angels. I had always lived in that space of awareness but the last 10 years I had let my spirit guides leave me. I made all decisions without them. While living this empty life, I realized that I would rather die than continue to live disconnected from the spirit world. I had to make a change. After 10 years of denial, I was ready to let go of my life void of spirit. When I was ready, my spirits returned to me immediately. I was now paying attention to the signs, letting the universe guide me.

I laid back down in the ceremony room in awe of what just happened and what Ron did to help me. I was forever grateful to this man. I stayed reclined on my mat feeling cold, relaxed, and dumbstruck. At this point, I did not care if I had any visual experiences with Mother Ayahuasca. This was more than enough.

While lying with my thoughts, a children’s story I had wanted to write for 20 years popped into my head. It was a story about the girl who found a cursed shell. She traveled the world in search of a cure for the thing she believed was meant to kill her. Yet she had no idea what would happen nor when. She traveled the world experiencing medicine and healing from many different cultures and landscapes as I had done in my life. After this experience with Ron, I knew this was an integral part of my story, but I did not know exactly how. It was during the third and last ceremony that I dictated “The Secret of the Shell” in my head.

That night Matthew began to play the guitar. His music took me to another realm. It was stunningly beautiful. I never wanted it to stop. It felt as if Mother Ayahuasca was playing the music herself. The guitar brought up old memories of attachments to folks who played the guitar. Per Goenka (Vipassana meditation) attachment is one of the major causes of suffering. When Matthew stopped playing the guitar, I let it all go. I yearned to hear his music again and again and again being one of the most beautiful things I had ever heard yet something that did not belong in this universe.

Ron played a few more Icaros (Amazonian songs) as my nausea settled in. I thought, “Shit! Now? Why is it just kicking in now?” or at least that was when I noticed it. He came over to smudge me with tobacco smoke in the usual places: my crown, my back, my chest and my hands united in prayer. I stood up as tears poured down my face and snot ran out my nose. I remembered this last time when the nausea started. It must have been my parasympathetic nervous system kicking in. Venturing to the bathroom lit with a single candle, I glanced at my hazy image in the mirror. Hovering over the toilet, I tried to purge for a long time but nothing came. Surrendering to the unsettling nausea, I strolled back into the ceremony room.

I curled into a cocoon under my blanket. After another 5-10 minutes I got up again attempting to vomit. I leaned over the toilet this time and dry heaved. A drop of Ayahuasca came up my throat filling my mouth with the bitter thick taste of burnt mollases. I cringed, “How the fuck is that still in there! It has been hours!” But I suppose a drop could hang out there in my gut until I ate something else to wash it away. I attempted to vomit again but was only greeted with yawns and burps.

Surrender…despite feeling tired, I had learned the last ceremony that sleep would not come so I walked out to the fire. I grabbed my blanket on the way. Despite the warm air and my many layers, Mother Ayahuasca made me feel cold.

Drew and I sat in silence by the fire until Amanda joined us. I felt altered, almost stoned, as I rambled on seemingly nonsensical thoughts. The one sided conversation was interspersed with waves of nausea and profuse apologies for my verbosity. Drew laughed and said, “I’m stoned and you’re making me laugh!” Amanda said, “It’s hilarious! You say you are rambling but you make perfect sense to me!’

We contemplated our experiences: the stars, nausea, marijuana, ayahuasca, back to stars and our experiences again. Amanda admitted to clenching the floor in absolute terror for 4 hours in fear for her life. Maybe Mother Ayahuasca wanted her to settle into these feelings and watch them change but they never did. If they did, maybe it would have helped to alleviate her anxiety by knowing that these feelings eventually change. “Did you ask Mother Ayahuasca to help you, to be gentle with you?” I asked.

“I tried. I asked her everything but the sensation never stopped for 4 hours!” Amanda replied.

Drew asked me, “ Why did you choose to do Ayahuasca?”

I blurted out my recent life events and how I was about to sell my house on the water, a house which I felt called to, that I knew I would live in before it came on the market. It was too big for me now after all of the work we did on it, but I was struggling letting go with no alternative in sight. I told him about my challenging experience in Brazil. I came home and figured I would go and do Ayahuasca. I had always been terrified of any mind-altering substances. After Brazil, I surrendered, and it was that experience which triggered me to do Ayahuasca in the end.

Katie and Zack joined us. Katie was in a daze, still heavily altered. Zack said he had little to no experience again but he was ok with it this time. He said he realized how uncomfortable it was to be in his own body. That may have been the big lesson…to learn to really be himself. I understood. Some people made it easier to feel comfortable in your own skin and others didn’t.

After rambling on long enough with loads of laughter mixed with waves of nausea we ventured to our own rooms to sleep or attempt sleep. It felt like hours had passed but when I looked at the clock, it was only 12:30 am.

I lay in my bed unable to sleep. When I closed my eyes I no longer saw Alice in Wonderland images. Instead I saw terraces with rotating crops with a green backdrop full of lush leaves. They changed to revolving pumpkins, carrots, squash, and cucumbers. Every vegetable continued to move and shift. I thought of the cliché, “Change is the only constant.” My ideas and recent writings on food, soil, and longevity triggered these images and the importance of crop rotation to optimize the soil and nutritional components of our food.

I closed my eyes and saw the colors darken but whatever images were there I could not place. There were little creatures like ants and other insects moving around. I drifted lightly off to sleep for a few hours, if that.

Sunday morning at 4:21 am, I awoke still feeling nauseated. I dragged myself to my bathroom after sleeping or not. The world was no longer wobbly and spinning, and the lights didn’t blind me anymore. While the Ayahuasca effects had weaned, I was dazed now with exhaustion.

That afternoon, we gathered in the ceremony room to share our experiences from the night before. While I had heard most of the stories already, I enjoyed processing what others experienced. I shared my experience of the treatment of my back pain. I told Ron it felt like he was sucking snakes out of my back. He said he sucked and felt something wiry in his mouth and when he spit, there was a string of black snakes. He was not heavily affected by Mother Ayahuasca at that point per Ron. Our visions were more or less the same. I thanked him for performing one of the most amazing and powerful experiences I had ever had. To this day, while I still get upper back pain, it does not haunt me as it had for the last 25 years. There may be some snakes left but he ripped out a bunch that were harnessed to my heart.