

The Art of Pilgrimage: Meeting Ancient Wisdom in Copper Canyon

By Ron Pevny

As the Giver of Life touched the eastern horizon above Barranca del Cobre, piercing the darkness and winter chill with its light and warmth, drumbeats sounded in the rugged canyons below. The ancient inhabitants of Copper Canyon, the Raramuri (Tarahumara) were greeting the sun, as they have done during late winter since time immemorial, in anticipation of spring equinox and the renewal of life for the earth and all her beings.

High above on the canyon rim, other drums were sounding their prayers of gratitude as the promise of a new day touched the sixteen pilgrims, from across the United States seated among the boulders, yucca and ponderosa pine. The drumbeats from below and above pulsed through one corner of Copper Canyon, Mexico, as those visitors visualized the heartbeats of two very different cultures, separated by distance, world view and pain-tinged history, beating as one.

The Raramuri, whom many authorities consider to be relatives of the Anasazi (Ancestral Puebloans) of the southwestern U.S., experienced their first contact with Europeans when Spanish expeditions came to north-central Mexico in the 16th century seeking gold. Having difficulty pronouncing “Raramuri”, which roughly translates as “people of light feet”, the Spanish called them “Tarahumara”, and this corruption of their preferred name is how the Raramuri are commonly known today. In the ensuing 200 years, the Raramuri suffered profoundly at the hands of the Spanish, who often brutally tried to eradicate indigenous spiritual practices and replace them with Christianity. Jesuits and Franciscans brought Christianity to the Raramuri around 1600. The Jesuits were removed from Mexico by the Spanish King 150 years later. When they returned in 125 years they found the people had integrated various Christian symbols and beliefs into their rich indigenous nature-based spirituality.

Today the Raramuri number between 50,000 and 70,000, approximately the same as their estimated numbers 300 years ago. Probably the most unmixed of any of the North American Indians, more than 95% have pure Raramuri blood. They are among the least changed by modern civilization of the indigenous peoples of this continent. They are best known to the outside world as long-distance runners for whom running up and down the steep canyons, for sport as well as transportation and communication, is integral to life. Most live in small houses made of wood or stone or in large caves as isolated family units or small settlements. Thirty-two

Raramuri dialects are spoken throughout the Sierra Madre and its magnificent Copper Canyon complex.

The Copper Canyon area—Barranca del Cobre—is a complex of several majestic canyons, most deeper and larger than the Grand Canyon. Each continues to be sculpted by wild rivers that eventually join, then empty into the Gulf of California. Over the years mining of silver and gold has played an important role in the history of these canyons and their inhabitants, whereas copper mining has been relatively

insignificant. The canyon system gets its name not from the metal, but from the brilliant copper color that frequently suffuses canyon walls and sky above as sunset gives way to twilight.

On that February morning, as the colors of dawn gave way to bright sunlight, the drums and rattles from above and below went silent. We drummers descended from the canyon rim to our awaiting vans and proceeded on the next leg of what for us was a journey enacted in the spirit of pilgrimage. Ever since we committed to “Meeting Ancient Wisdom, Growing Into Elderhood” months before, we sixteen Americans, ranging in age from 50 to 76, had prepared to come to the magnificent homeland of the Raramuri as pilgrims rather than tourists. Our guides to Copper Canyon and the Raramuri were Jan and Mireya Milburn, who through their Milburn Foundation have devoted decades of their lives to the preservation of Raramuri culture.

The difference between a tour and a pilgrimage is as immense as the canyon itself. A tour is a trip to an exotic locale to see beautiful natural or human-made features and to learn about the culture and history of the place. The focus is on doing this and that with each step planned and the experiences and insights mostly predictable. The tour leaders strive to offer a “controlled” experience where little is left to chance.

In contrast, a pilgrimage is a journey to touch and be touched by the sacred. As such it is deeply grounded not in doing, but in being. The known must be left behind, and Mystery surrendered to and embraced. It is taking a journey with the intention of being fully alive and present to the guidance, mystery, magic and transformative potential of each moment and each experience. Expectations must be let go and the unexpected welcomed. One must trust that a greater Wisdom travels with us and opens us to experiences that—with acceptance, reflection and intention— will further our psychological and spiritual growth.

Despite their widely diverse professional and spiritual backgrounds, what our group of pilgrims held in common was a calling to claim and live the role of elder in our senior years. We all believed that becoming an elder is not the same as becoming older or senior. Understanding and honoring this calling to elderhood can be very difficult in a modern world where the importance of elders is forgotten and their role denigrated

In stark contrast, until the Industrial Revolution, the role of elder was held in high esteem in most societies. Elders have been the nurturers of community, the spiritual leaders, the guardians of traditions, the teachers, initiators and mentors of the young. They have been the storytellers who have helped their people remember the enduring wisdom and deeper meanings that persist through life’s changes. They have been the ones who, over long lives have transformed experience into wisdom and whose revered role has been to model this wisdom.

Among indigenous peoples this ancient tradition is still vital, playing a critical role in their survival and health. The Raramuri respect all people with gray hair and honor their experience and contribution to their community, but they reserve the designation of Mayori, the fullest expression of elderhood, for those who have undergone years of intense training, spiritual practice and deep commitment to their personal growth. Mayori must know everything about the tribe and the way of life that have long made survival possible. They know the songs, legends, dances, ceremonies, and healing practices. They serve

as counselors and teachers. They teach their people how to receive and understand spiritual guidance, and how to use heightened awareness to court the synchronicities and miracles that are central to the spiritual lives of their people.

It is the Mayori who hold the cultural fabric of the Raramuri together, a fabric that has as its source an ongoing experience of relationship with the living earth and the Mystery that created and sustains it, and them. Many of us who embrace a new paradigm for aging believe that the wisdom of true elders is necessary in our world as well if our civilization is to face, successfully, face the momentous challenges that lie before us.

“Meeting Ancient Wisdom, Growing into Elderhood” wove together four strands in our quests to define and live the role of elder in the modern world. We spent time in solitude on the heights above Barranca del Cobre and in the depths of one of its canyons to strengthen our experience of the sacredness of our relationship to the earth. We explored sites of historical and cultural interest. We engaged in practices, such as sharing councils, drumming circles, guided imagery, dreamwork and give-away ceremonies, to share the joys and struggles of our quests to become elders, to open ourselves to our our creativity and intuition, and to deepen our bonding as community. And we spent time with Raramuri and their elders, trusting that the impact of being in the presence of indigenous people for whom the archetypal role of elder is alive and strong would serve as a catalyst in our own journeys toward full elderhood.

Many Raramuri still experience their lives through an expanded consciousness (what some scholars call “indigenous soul”) in which they are able to be present for, and creative in, worlds other than the material. When choosing how, or even if, to relate to outsiders, they read our energy even before we are in their presence. We knew, therefore, that, if we approached them full of expectations, projections and judgments, they might interact with us only superficially, if at all. On the other hand, if we went to Copper Canyon with true humility and a beginner’s mind—if we allowed ourselves to be in each moment without expectation—we would come with an energy they could resonate with. And by befriending them in this way, we hoped to befriend a basic part of our own human nature, a state of consciousness that enables us, like them, to have living experience of our relationship to all of creation and its Creator. With this heightened awareness, we come to know our unique roles as elders in supporting the health of earth and the human community.

We began to recognize this shift of consciousness early in our pilgrimage as we experienced our first striking example of synchronicity, or meaningful coincidence. When we left El Paso for the five-hour drive to Chihuahua, a major storm was passing through the area, with the weather

forecasters predicting strong, dangerous winds that could very well cover the highway with sand and close it for hours. We offered our prayers for protection, visualized a safe journey, and began the drive in our caravan of two vans and one truck. Five hours later we arrived at the Westin Hotel in the city of Chihuahua, having passed through miles of barren, sand dune- landscape with little wind.

Several days after our drumming session on the canyon rim, another wonderful “coincidence” resulted in an unexpected, highly impactful experience for our group. We had the rare opportunity to spend the morning with an 83-year old Raramuri shaman named Lorenzo and his wife Conchita, who is a healer talented in the medicinal use of plants and herbs. Mireya Milburn, who is Raramuri, spent much time in her childhood with her family’s neighbors, Lorenzo and Conchita. She introduced them to Jan thirty years ago, but Jan and Mireya had not seen these friends in fifteen years. One morning Jan learned that

Lorenzo, who is often away from his home doing his healing work, would be at home that day and was eager to offer his blessings to our group. With only a brief handshake, this life-long shaman assessed each of our physical and spiritual selves and prescribed practices and remedies that would help us restore balance. He then used both Christian prayer and sage incense to cleanse energies of fear, which are so pervasive these days, so that we could more fully embrace trust, a critical doorway to indigenous soul.

Later, trust was a valuable resource, for some of us, on the seven-hour drive from Cusarare at 7,500 feet down to the former silver-and gold-mining town of Batopilas at 1,200 feet. We envisioned this descent as both a journey into the depths of Copper Canyon and into the depths of ourselves. The dirt road down into Batopilas Canyon is a one-lane ribbon of rock and dirt, full of switchbacks, awe-inspiring and for some, frightening. Burros and goats roamed the hillsides and meandered along the road. Passing Raramuri families, dressed in their multi-colored traditional dress lent brilliant color to a starkly beautiful landscape of gray and brown volcanic rock. Later, in the spring and summer, rains would brighten the landscape with a riot of greens, reds and yellows, but not so during our descent into the canyon.

We spent three days basking in the 75-degree warmth of the canyon bottom and the quaint town of Batopilas. In the early 1900's, Batopilas was the largest silver-producer in the world. Now a town of 1100 residents, mostly of Indian-Mexican (Mestizo) heritage, Batopilas boasts a charming hotel, the Riverside Lodge, that was a magnificent hacienda during the silver boom. With every room different and having its own small courtyard, this hotel provided us with elegant yet simple comfort and an inspiring place to meet as a group for sharing circles. We enjoyed our excellent traditional Mexican meals on the front porch of the home of a Milburn friend named Belia, who cooked for us on a small stove in her kitchen.

On our first morning in the canyon, we hiked four miles following the Batopilas River to the Lost Cathedral of Satevo, whose history remains a mystery lost in the mists of time. The formerly red brick church was being renovated and covered with cream-colored stucco. It is commonly believed that this cathedral was already in a state of decay when the Jesuits arrived around 1600. Its architecture is unlike that seen in Jesuit and Franciscan mission churches throughout Mexico and the southwestern U.S. Rather it contains prominent characteristics associated with churches and monasteries found in Austria and Bavaria, leading to Jan's theory

that Austrian monks from one of Columbus' expeditions had settled here a century before the Spanish missionaries.

Our focus shifted from exploration back to inner work the next day as each of us spent a morning in solitude and silence along the Batopilas River. This watercourse was a small, placid stream at this time, in contrast to its rainy season face as a raging, rock-rolling torrent. Our individual and communal prayer was to use this time to even more deeply open ourselves to indigenous soul and its guidance for our lives.

My own most powerful personal experience of the pilgrimage occurred during this time. As I waded a small channel, reflecting on events of the past few years, I came to understand my dream of the previous night in which the key symbol was a boy being baptized. I suddenly "knew" that I needed, with Jan's participation, to create a personal ceremony to mark the end of one chapter in my life and baptize

myself, with the waters of the Batopilas River, into full commitment to the next stage. I related to my dream as the Raramuri do to theirs, as an important vehicle through which indigenous soul makes itself known. Such a relationship with their dreams is integral to the psychological and spiritual lives of the Raramuri and other indigenous people, and is one that all of us can cultivate. To honor this relationship, Raramuri believe it is essential to tell ones dreams upon awakening, and, in certain cases, to translate dream images into personal ceremonies or commitments.

Our experiences in the canyon were instrumental in preparing us for our ascent to Cusarare and what for most was the defining moment of our pilgrimage, the opportunity to spend time with Raramuri elders. Throughout the journey, we knew this meeting was a possibility but not guaranteed. Months earlier, Jan Milburn had invited several of the elders, including Mayori, to spend an afternoon with our group. These are leaders with whom he had close relationships during those years when he lived and worked with the Raramuri building schools and health clinics, creating work opportunities, and winning back the millions of acres that had been stolen from them by timber and hotel interests. He had not seen most of them for several years, and did not know if they would choose to join us. His two closest mentors had died in the previous year. He told us that the others he invited were, like most Raramuri, naturally shy and not eager to spend their time with whites.

It was not until the morning of the scheduled day that Jan learned that sixteen of the elders had accepted his invitation to join us for an afternoon meal in the cave home of friends of the Milburns. It seemed fitting that we begin that day with the future of the Raramuri, their children, by visiting the local school for Raramuri children, hearing them recite their lessons, delighting in their laughter and smiles, sharing their nervousness, and presenting them with markers, pens and pencils, and notebooks. Then, we drove on to the cave home.

The elders who greeted us at the cave home—governors of communal lands called ejidos, two Mayoris, a healer, several others and their wives—all had dark, weathered faces lined with age. The men dressed in western clothing—jeans, shirts, and hats—with several wearing handmade sandals. The women were dressed in brilliantly colored ruffled skirts, blouses and head scarves, and wore sandals. Curious children whose school day had just ended shyly watched us from behind large boulders above the cave. We suspected that the Raramuri shared

our nervousness at not knowing what to expect. Jan advised us to become comfortable being with the elders in silence, sharing all those many elements of communication that are non-verbal. He told us that a slight brushing of their fingers against ours would be the appropriate form of greeting. To be offered a firmer handshake at some point would be a special gift. Try to feel their energy, he told us, as surely they would be feeling ours—let Raramuri indigenous soul touch ours and trust that to be enough.

In the spacious, smoky cave home, we and these elders and children shared a large meal of tamales and blue corn tortillas, prepared by Mireya's mother and relatives the night before (probably all night!) As some of us played with the children, their smiles and laughter began to relieve the mutual nervousness. Then we went outside to a circular grassy area bordered by large boulders, where we sat alternating Raramuri with white visitors. Using Jan as their translator, several of the elders made short welcoming speeches and extended their blessings toward us. As is customary when meeting elders of all indigenous cultures, we offered gifts that they value: beautiful cloth and sewing materials for the women, flashlights and Leatherman tools for the men. Each of us gave our gifts to an elder with whom

we felt connection, evidenced by a smile shared or one of those subtle yet tangible feelings of being in relationship. And then Jan asked if the elders would accept a rhythmic blessing from our group.

The pulse of our drums and rattling of our shakers carried our prayers for the wellbeing of the Raramuri. With the drumming, we were bringing healing to the old, pain-tinged relationship between these humble people and the often arrogant white man. It touched us deeply to have several of these elders offer us full handshakes as we were leaving. When the elder who best knew Jan asked if we would/could come back, our feelings were confirmed that our unique overture to Raramuri elders was also valued by them and seen as an important beginning. Unlike tourists, we had not come just to get something for ourselves. We had done our best to meet and honor them without judgment or projection. Our innate goodness had met theirs, the indigenous soul that is the essence of our shared humanity had shone forth and was felt by all—and all are all better off for this encounter.

As I write this account in mid-March, it is now the beginning of the season of renewal in the northern hemisphere. The Life-Giver rises and sets each day to the sound of Raramuri drums beating deep in the canyons. The starkness of the winter landscape is giving way to the lush colors of spring. The spiritual practices and beliefs that are the life of Raramuri culture live on, grounded in both Christianity and an indigenous tradition of deep reverence for the earth.

Out of the canyon and many miles to the north, the heartbeats of a group of sixteen aspiring elders continue to beat in resonance with those of our Raramuri brothers and sisters. We still have much to learn about the fullness of our potential to serve as true elders in our communities, but we have made a beginning. We, and others like us, are on the leading edge of a necessary paradigm shift in how aging is viewed in America. As we learned from the Raramuri, aging need not be defined by decline, loss and withdrawal from active contribution to the community. Aging done consciously, with intention and inner work, can be a time when, like finely aged wine, we are at our best, giving our gifts and sharing our wisdom as we fulfill a role that since time immemorial has been vital in the lives of communities—that of the elder.

Our pilgrimage to Barranca del Cobre was a practice in the art of pilgrimage, demonstrating to us our potential for honoring and living each day as another day on our pilgrimages through life. We now know we can journey through our days carrying trust that a greater Wisdom, and its gift of indigenous soul, is traveling with us. The Giver of Life rises each day to remind us, as it does the Raramuri, that all life is sacred and inter-dependent.

The “Meeting Ancient Wisdom, Growing into Elderhood” pilgrimage described in this article, was co-guided in 2009 by Ron Pevny and Wes Burwell, in collaboration with Jan and Mireya Milburn of the Milburn Foundation (www.milburnfoundation.org) a non-profit organization built on Jan’s more than 40 years of dedication to the preservation of the indigenous culture of the Raramuri (Tarahumara) Indians and their Copper Canyon homeland.

“Meeting Ancient Wisdom” is offered each year as an opportunity to do conscious eldering work while being inspired by the wisdom of the indigenous people of Copper Canyon in Mexico, Hawaii or other magnificent places. Ron Pevny is a life coach, organizational consultant and long-time rite of passage guide who, for many years has offered wilderness quests, retreats and other support services for people and organizations in transition. He and his colleagues have offered Choosing Conscious Elderhood retreats and wilderness quests since 2002. Ron and his Center for Conscious Eldering can be reached at 970-247-7943 or info@centerforconsciouseldering.com.

Ron Pevny is Founding Director of the Center for Conscious Eldering He is also a Certified Sage-ing® Leader, is author of *Conscious Living, Conscious Aging* published by Beyond Words/Atria Books, and serves as the host/interviewer for the Transforming Aging Summits presented by The Shift Network.