

A separate reality:
Native American knowledge of survival



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The knowledge that the Indians developed through thousands of years of survival is based on love and accepting the ways of the Earth. Although for many Indians their knowledge was gained through withstanding the violence of the invading Europeans. “My world isn’t based on right or wrong. It’s based on love and doing whatever a mother needs to get done to survive” (Villasenor, *rain of gold* 379). These are the words of the grandmother of Victor Villasenor. She was a Yaqui Indian and her name Doña Margerita. She was raised by her two full blooded Indian parents who had seen some of the bloodiest battles fought by the Europeans against their people. Her father had lost practically all of his family to the mad Europeans who came upon the Mexican shores with their minds set on the conquest of the new world, and their mad search for gold. Doña Margerita said her life was based on love and survival. She was able to save the life of her children with love. Before the Europeans arrived on the shores of Mexico, the Indians’ lives were based on surviving the unexpectedness of the Earth. Their lifestyle was connected to the Earth and the Earth provided them with the necessities they needed to survive, and therefore the Earth was looked upon as their mother and so life to them was learning to live the Earth’s ways and love the Mother. Doña Margerita was a woman who knew this ancient knowledge and therefore was able to approach the unexpected with certainty, openness and love. The greatest lessons learned in nature are the ones that draw you closer to your own heart, and Doña Margerita had learned these and that is why she had the ability to love in situations where hatred would have seemed so reasonable to use in the violence she suffered under the European conquerors. The Native American way of knowledge resists the search for a “logical” answer and, inspired by the wisdom of survival, cherishes this openness to the unpredictable and unexpected.

Victor Villasenor was born and raised in Carlsbad, California. The mixture of Indian – European culture was deeply embedded into his family’s modern way of living. His Spanish grandfather was Christian and his Indian grandmother accepted the Christian religion but did not forget the ancient ways of her Yaqui heritage. Victor Villasenor describes his

grandmother as being the person who knew all the tricks of living life, and throughout her life she was the one who provided the family with knowledge to survive. Growing up in Carlsbad, California, Villasiñor's only education was the stories told to him by his family members who lived to witness the horrible last few years of European dominance in Mexico before they migrated to the United States. These stories which were told to Victor were full of the many miracles and magical things that, to the Yaqui, are simply part of reality. For example, one story told of the time his grandmother turned into a she-wolf in order to keep the military dogs of the Spanish soldiers from ripping her and her family to shreds. Villasiñor was filled by all the magical things that took place on this world.

For example one of the strangest stories was that of his grandmother Doña Margerita. Her parents were full of love; they tried hard not to let anything interfere with this love for their family, despite all of the bloody battles the father Don Pio had to fight in order for his family not to be torn apart by the European conquerors, who were during his time still trying so hard to have control over all the land. Doña Margerita, who had been taught so well to love, by her parents, decided to love one of these Europeans who her father had been fighting so hard to stay away from. Doña Margerita was raised to know her heart and have a lot of faith in God. Doña Margerita's heart was open because she had been taught her traditional Indian ways and knew all about the powers of the Earth. She knew that the Earth is our mother and that we're capable of going to her for knowledge and help. Doña Margerita held on to her heart and faith as she had seen her father do time and again when he disagreed to her marrying the Spaniard and told her that this man would "cause a war between our very own blood that will last for generations" (Villasiñor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 31). Doña Margerita stood calmly with tears and spoke back to her loving father,

Papa, I've heard every word you've told me and know that you are the wisest, kindest man that the earth has ever produced, but understand, the great mother serpent herself arose last night in all her diamond-glistening glory from out of the heart center of the earth, and she spoke to me, telling me everything that you've just told me. And, well, I still

say that in my heart of hearts, I love this man, and so I will marry him, papa. For, you tell me, how are we ever going to bring peace to nuestra sagrada Tierra if we don't take in these lost sky people with love? (Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 31)

Doña Margerita's first ten years of marriage were good, and she had almost one child every year. But after these years things got tough and Doña Margerita needed to love more than ever if she wanted her family to survive. Her husband as her father told her grew to love only his light skinned colored children and hated the dark Indian looking ones. There was a lot of hate against her and her darker Indian looking part of her family, and the Spanish soldiers would often ride into their village looking for reasons to kill any Indian who did not suit them. These soldiers were the type of men who would say "killing, like making love, always gives a man a good appetite" (Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 252). Doña Margerita's son, Jose, and a few of his friends took the task of protecting their village by keeping the soldiers out. Jose and his group of Indian friends were always very successful in chasing the soldiers off, however, this only fed the soldiers' hunger to kill Indians especially the smart.

One day while heading for the village one of Jose's plans did not work in keeping the ruthless soldiers away and four of Jose's boys were caught. The colonel had been losing his temper too often because of these boys; he had Captain Hans Kayser who was a German military advisor with him who had volunteered to accompany the colonel that morning to get this group who had been chasing him and his men away. The German Captain had huge trained German shepherd dogs with him. Oh how it made the colonel foam at the mouth after they had finally caught some of these no good Indians. The colonel castrated the young Indian boys all in front of each other and let them die a slow and painful death, and he wanted to let the dogs loose on the rest of the gang but the dogs were just too precious to the German captain. The rest of the village was warned that the ruthless men were coming. Doña Margerita took her family and hid on the side of the hill with the rest of the few people who still lived in the village and were not killed or ran with fear from the soldiers. The soldiers

found no one in the village so they started yelling out that they had castrated the four boys and poked their eyes out so that they would be lost for all eternity. The mother of one of these boys could not take it after she had seen the soldiers holding up the clothes of her son, and she ran out begging that they let her send her son off in a proper way. The colonel laughed and said, "Indians are such simple minded, loyal people, that's why they'll crack every time. Turn the dogs loose on her!" (Victor Villasiñor, *Wild Steps to Heaven* 254). And indeed the dogs ripped her to shreds. "You see, she wouldn't even run, you can count on it. She'd rather stand there like a fool letting the dogs tear her apart, than abandon the possibility of us returning her son's clothes to her." The German captain heard the colonel's words and replied, "Yes, and if such loyalty cannot be broken, you will never beat these people in ten thousand years" (Victor Villasiñor, *Wild Steps to Heaven* 254). This is exactly what the colonel did not want to hear. Because it is exactly what has been driving him crazy about these people.

Doña Margerita and her family didn't know what to do. The soldiers were now coming up the hill. Then out from behind her mother, Doña Margerita's daughter Emilia jumped out and ran towards the soldiers and the dogs so her family could run free. Seeing the spectacle of unselfish bravery, the colonel couldn't stand it anymore, and he went into a fit of rage, for never in his life had anyone showed him love and cared for him like this before, except for the Indian woman who had nursed him but then his mother had fired her because he started calling her mama. Not even his own mother had shown his love like this before. Then behind Emilia came Doña Margerita to save her from being devoured by the dogs. She ran down the hill yelling to the soldiers that they should be ashamed of themselves and that their mothers should see how they were behaving. Seeing Doña Margerita run after her daughter, caused the colonel to go even crazier with rage. He truly wished that someone had loved him like this just once in his damned, miserable life. He wanted all of these people dead and gone off the face of the earth, forever. The colonel ordered his men to get those two

women, but what happened next was so extraordinary that the German Captain who was watching it all began to wonder if he had left his senses.

Just as the huge, well-disciplined purebred dogs were about to tear the two women apart, the old woman suddenly lifted up her skirt and squatted down, pissing on the ground like a female dog. Rushing up, the dogs didn't maul her or the young woman. No, they began to smell the place where the old Indian woman had pissed, and then they began circling the two women, wagging their tails as they continued sniffing. (Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 259)

Everyone began to watch as the dogs sniffed the two women in courtship of love, as the two women just began to pet the dogs. The German captain was going crazy seeing his part of the finest killers of all the earth turn into, "a pathetic pack of ballet lovers" within a few moments. He wanted to shoot the women for ruining the dogs but he was stopped by one of the soldiers who said that he couldn't interrupt the spirits, and the women's spirits were dancing with the dog's spirits. The colonel's spirit was also taken up by the dance. "The colonel wasn't thinking rationally anymore; oh, no, he was all caught up in a magic splendor of the month, going crazy-loco, dancing up the wild steps of heaven with the dogs and the two women" (Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 259).

From above Doña Margerita's son Juan was watching and realized that the place his mother was standing was the place he had seen her dancing on coals a few nights before. Remembering this he looked down at his mother again and saw that she was a giant she-wolf towering over the hounds that were madly in love with her adoring the very ground that she pissed on. Then Doña Margerita's daughter Luisa who was above with Juan saw it too. They hugged after they had both seen it saying, "I can see the fire of God's love, and I can hear the earth breathing, and feel her trembling with her birth, she's alive!" (Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 260).

The colonel went into convulsions and Doña Margerita was the first to walk up to him, and it would have surprised no one if she had picked up a rock and crushed his skull; but she

didn't. The colonel yelled for Doña Margerita to get away from him before he killed her, but Doña Margerita remained calm and asked if there hasn't been enough of that killing and hatred. She also referred to him as her son, and at first he yelled at her not to call him that but then his spirit came out of his body and started to dance with the old women's spirit. Doña Margerita gently started to stroke his forehead, just as the Indian woman who he would nurse from did. The man then began to melt, to soften, and everyone watched in total fascination, as the big man began to cry and show feelings. He was on the verge of bursting forth into the, "whole new world of Gods living paraiso on earth" but he did not allow himself, he held on to his hatred with real guts. But he was physically no longer able to do any harm. This story is an example of the stories that Villasiñor grew up to.

However, when Villasiñor attended public school he wasn't allowed to believe in these miracles, said he was crucified. On the first day he was hit on the head by his teacher for speaking Spanish and told by his teacher, "None of that Mexican stuff." In school Villasiñor was taught differently. He was taught that all the stories of the miracles that he had learned at home were a lie. His world of spirituality and miracles were beaten out of him during his years of schooling. He grew up to doubt all these stories. Villasiñor became a part of modern thinking in some of the things his parents and relatives had told him became "too foreign and fantastic to his modern mind" (villasiñor, *Rain of Gold* 9).

After the birth of his first child, Villasiñor decided to make a big step and visit Mexico for himself, and researched his parent's past and things that he had been questioning about their tales.

I went by plane, by bus, by truck, by burro, by foot. It took me two days to climb the mountains of La Barranca del Cobre where my mother was born. One mourning, I saw Indians so shy that when I waved hello to them they froze like deer, then ran away from me with the agility and speed of a young antelope. I saw swarms of butterflies so vast that they filled the entire sky like a dancing tapestry. I saw skies so clear and full

of stars that I felt close to God (Villasinor, *Rain of Gold* 10).

Villasinor started to write and wanted to make a book which would tell his family history. He got a tape recorder and started interviewing his father and relatives, but he would run into many problems during the time he would sit down and write. Many stories and descriptions that Villasinor would try to translate into English just didn't sound right or believable. He thought that if he told of how his parents and relatives grew up feeling so close to the Almighty and actually talked to him on a daily basis as they would talk to a friend, and that God himself would often talk back in the form of miracles, that he would look totally foolish (villasinor, *Rain of Gold* 10). Villasinor kept going, feeling inspired and with the will to produce books on his family history that would help people who were in the confusion that he was in. At one time in his life Villasinor did not want to hear about his parents' stories anymore because he could not believe them; but after going to Mexico he discovered some truth about their stories and regretted that he at one point did not want to hear them. He was just so confused before he went to Mexico, because in his parents stories, life was just so different and unbelievable compared to what he lived in California.

Victor Villasinor's confusion is typical for a person of an Indian-European culture. It is often a head-on collision of logic and spirituality, head and heart, dominance and acceptance. That is what forms the confusion, one runs into a decision similar to the one Villasinor ran into, of whether one should believe in one's spiritual world that is open to miracle and closed to an arrogant way of thinking that one can figure out everything. Or whether one should believe in the logical way of thinking which makes miracles seem impossible and has an explanation for everything. This decision then becomes a decision of "head or heart", or "dominance or acceptance".

Villasinor grew up in this world looking at the moon as the left eye of God and the sun as the right eye of God and many other images of the world that were established by his

Native American tribe. As Villasiñor has said, this was beaten out of him when he entered the world where there were logical explanations for everything and there were rights and wrongs, and goods and bad for everything one did. The reality his parents lived in was much more heart-orientated and contained a lot more balance; in other words, for them good came with bad, and bad came with good. Balance was awake in their hearts. Villasiñor said about his first teacher, “she was a victim, too, of the whole way of thinking that whatever was Spanish was bad and whatever was English was good” (Dolores Hope, *Laughter, tears mark speech*, The Garden City Telegram).

All over Europe and the United States we are taught to use four senses, villasiñor said in an interview. These four senses are located in the brain. The most central ones are sight and hearing. The fifth sense is feeling; we are afraid to go inside feeling because it is the last sense, and we are told by society not to go inside. For example, when men go inside they are considered wimps and laughed at. The sixth sense is balance; this one is often forgotten in today’s society. For example, Bush said, “You are either for me or for the terrorists.” Victor said to take the word “OR” out of language and use the word “AND”. “Take polarity away (villasiñor, interview). The seventh sense is intuition; every decision that is made is made during the time that one is not thinking. Decision making happens during the split second you are using the seventh sense. Decision making is not meant for the head. For Doña Margarita, Victor Villasiñor’s grandmother, her soul was used and alive; she was in partnership with all of her senses. Therefore her soul was alive and she could travel and leave her body.

Once one is a victim of this modern mind one is incapable of grasping the miracle of a miracle, because one is too much in the head and driven by the head senses, and too little in the heart one is not open to wonders of life because one has an explanation for everything anyway. Our heads search for reason, whereas our hearts just feel. “Some of the things that

my parents and relatives told me were just too foreign, too fantastic, for my modern mind to accept” (Villasañor, *Rain of Gold* 9).

Don Pio Castro was Victor Villasañor’s grandfather. After years of fighting against the French he left the army of his own free will. Don Pio had been fighting ever since he was a boy, first in southern Mexico where he grew up, against the soldiers who kept him and his parents in servitude for generations. Finally in the year of 1869 Don Pio laid down his arms and figured that it was time to bring the nation that had been torn apart by war back together. Leaving the army with a thousand men following him, he went and searched for raw unused land. Every where they saw all the good lands had been taken long ago by the church or powerful and rich. For years Don Pio and his men fought the well-armed, well-trained French soldiers with sometimes nothing but their bare hands and rocks with the hope to see a better day for their children (Villasañor, *Rain of Gold* 116). Thousands of people died and Don Pio alone had lost six brothers, five sisters, both of his parents, and all of his uncles and cousins. Even after winning so many of his battles, the rich still controlled all the good lands. Out of the thousand that left with Don Pio only about a hundred good men stuck with him. The rest eventually lost faith in him and went to work for the soldiers whom they had fought so hard trying to escape.

One night Don Pio and his people camped out on a piece of land where there was nothing but steep gullies, wild oak groves and dark rocks and cliffs Don Pio sat out the whole night by the fire. He knew he could not fail his remaining people, and there as he sat by the fire he asked God for guidance. In the total silence of the night with the sound of the fire and the horses grazing Don Pio prayed hard and long, needing God’s help once again. Suddenly he saw a pale light across the valley, and he knew in his heart that it was God coming to speak to him. “The light exploded, bursting through the rosy-white clouds and beautiful colors of yellow and pink. Don Pio sat up captivated by the magic of it all. Then he realized that this was, indeed, the miracle of a whole new day” (Villasañor, *Rain of Gold* 114). Don

Pio felt like it was all clear as he woke his two brothers up full of excitement and telling them that that was the place they had been searching for. His two brothers insisted that nothing would grow there and Don Pio should go back to sleep; all that would happen to them is that they would starve and they had not fought so long and so hard for a place like that. Don Pio said that they would be able to live in peace there because nobody would want that land. Finding it hard to accept, they agreed. Fifty men and their families worked hard from sun to sun to build their new place. Don Pio brought his wife and three daughters. He built his house on the highest point of the knoll that they had camped on the first night. As Villasiñor writes, “he faced the front door of their casa to the east so he and his family could give witness to the miracle of each new day” (Villasiñor, *Rain of Gold* 115). Years later Don Pio was made marshal of the whole region by the president of Mexico, Don Porfirio, who had fought for years with Don Pio. It saddened Don Pio’s heart when he and his men had to hunt down good men who refused to settle down into the hard task of earning their daily bread. Don Pio finally quit, also so he could have more time to do his own work (Villasiñor, *Rain of Gold* 116).

Time passed and Don Pio was finally able to enjoy his freedom to the fullest, until new law men were sent to his area to keep order. Don Pio thought that his old friend the president, with whom he had fought shoulder to shoulder for over two decades, was going too far by sending these violent law men into his area. These men were from other regions and knew nothing about the local people; they would shoot a boy for just taking a few corn cobs from the field to eat. What happened to Don Pio and his people when he had been a boy was happening again despite all of his successful battles against these European people and their hunger to dominate.

It was around this time that the two full blooded Spanish Villasiñor brothers rode into their village to see Don Pio about buying some land. Instantly Don Pio’s daughter, Margarita, felt passionate about the taller, more muscular one. Don Pio had trouble

accepting that his daughter, Margarita, wanted to marry this full blooded Spaniard named, Juan Villasiñor. Don Pio knew that the reason Juan Villasiñor was on his own looking for land was because he had been rejected by his family for being madly in love with his own cousin-sister and had killed the man she was to marry only hours before their wedding. The law went after Juan Villasiñor and he killed six more men. Don Pio tried to explain to his daughter with all his heart that this man was an outrage to the soul and all who loved and followed him would come to disaster; because he is in the path of mad-imbalance of the devil. He begged his daughter to understand that his words didn't come from ignorance or jealousy but were the words of a father who know men and knew that this man was destined to hate her every bit as much as he loved her. But his daughter Doña Margerita insisted that she loved Villasiñor so much as he loved her at that time. Don Pio then told his daughter,

...as your mother Silveria and I have been telling you all your life, these bright-eyed Europeans are not of our Mother Earth. No, they are sky people who destroyed their own planeta tens of thousands of years ago and then were cast to live among us against their will, just as this man Juan Jesus was cast among us against his will, too. And so he has no respect for us or for our sacred tierra Madre, and so he will love your fair skinned children, but hate the dark ones who come from your loins. I'm sorry, mi hijita, but please believe me; this man is exactly – exactly, I tell you- the type of man that I've been doing battle with since I was nine years old, fighting first against those twelve big, greedy German families who stole our lands of southern Mexico, and then against the invasion of the French... I beg you, Margerita, amor de mi Corazon, do not marry this hombre! For he will cause a war between our very own blood that will last for generations! (Villasiñor, wild steps of heaven, 31)

Doña Margerita told her father that she heard all of his words, and that she knew that he was the wisest, kindest man that the Earth had ever produced, but she said that she loved this man and that she would marry him. Tears came to Don Pio's eyes as he cried and cried, and accepted the will of his daughter. Don Pio told his daughter that on that very day he

would shave off his beard and cut his hair and never touch another sword or gun. Because if he had either near him during the time he saw his daughter go from difficulty to difficulty he would not be able to control himself from ripping the man's heart out as he had done to many of his kind in battle before. Don Pio shaved his hair and said that he would never speak of the matter again. He kept his word but had difficulties especially when Juan Villasiñor later banned his Indian-looking son from his house, the house Don Pio had built with his own hands, and gave to his daughter for her family.

Time passed and as it did the issues with the law men got more and more bloody. The grandson of one of Don Pio's ex-soldiers was shot just for cutting a little alfalfa in a field for his horse. During one of Don Pio's great family celebrations, three of the law men entered the house and exploded with anger when they saw one of Don Pio's dark grandsons dancing with the most beautiful widow of the valley. Because of the law men's jealousy a fight broke out, and Don Pio's grandsons chased the law men off. The men were disgusted by Don Pio and his family because they were Indian, and law men saw themselves to be much greater than Indians. So if the Indians did not by nature do what these men wanted them to do then they were killed or perhaps even castrated, by them with their hunger to see people suffer (villasiñor, *Rain of Gold* 114-116). Don Pio figured that he would go talk to his old friend the president himself and get these lawmen under control before the Earth got painted with his people's blood once more. Don Pio rode three hundred miles to Mexico City with a dozen of his compadres and two of his grandsons. At Mexico city Don Pio and his men were stopped by one hundred soldiers and told that no dirty Indians would be allowed into the capital during the president's celebration. Don Pio refused to take the insult and insisted that the soldiers give a message to the president that Don Pio wanted to talk to him. The soldier sent Don Pio to camp with the rest of the colonels who came to see the president. By the river were indeed thousands of other ex-soldiers who had fought shoulder to shoulder with the president, Don Porfirio. They camped there for ten days until two of

Don Pio's grandsons could not take the abuse Don Pio received, and rode into the capital with four of their friends. They were all shot dead, by soldiers who then attacked Don Pio's camp at dawn killing five of his compadres and ten of their sons and grandsons. Don Pio was left with nothing but tears as he cried that day as he never cried before. "The French, whom he'd beaten in battle time and again with sometimes nothing but his bare hand and rocks, had won, after all, Don Porfirio, his old friend, had become white, rich, and French" (Villasenor, *Rain of Gold* 117). Don Pio lived his last few years teaching his grandson how to handle the violent lawmen that were terrorizing his people. Don Pio died shortly after a celebration broke out, and the people were saying,

They the meek, the mud gente, what been made from the clay of the heart-center of the Mother Earth, had won! They'd beaten the no-good rurals, and méjico, the great, god given land of el Mestizo, once again belonged to those who truly loved and worked the mother-soil with their own two hands!(Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 177)

Don Pio had heard this before he passed away, and his last words were used to thank the Almighty that he had lived to see that day, where his people once more were alive and Mexico was their Mother Earth. He hugged his full blooded Indian bride, "and went off to sleep with the angels" (Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 177).

Throughout Don Pio's story one can see that he was a man of love, and saw reality in the glory of the Almighty Creator. The day he saw the sun rise while he was looking for land, and the way he felt in his heart that God was coming to speak to him, shows how open his heart was to miracles. He let himself be captivated by the beauty of a new day, and this alone brought tears of joy to his eyes. Don Pio had the ability to see life as a miracle despite all of the challenges he faced in the struggle for freedom, because his heart was open. Once Don Pio told his grandson Jose, who was crying his eyes out because he had been banned from his home at only twelve years old, "thank almighty God for this great challenge that has been bestowed upon you!... go forth with power and the conviction that life is Holy, Holy, Holy, indeed, and each twisting, painful turn is only God's way of drawing you closer to

your own salvation!”(Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 137). Don Pio held a knowledge that was ancient and had existed among his people before his time.

Don Pio as a full blooded Indian can be better understood when one knows a bit about the Native peoples of the Americas. In Native American languages there are no nouns; there has not been a Native American language found that does not describe a person, place, or thing in verbs (Villasenor, Interview). To these Indians everything is alive, and everything is doing. If everything is only a verb then God is “Goding” and the creator is “creating”, so in their eyes creation never stopped, and we are still in full partnership with God. Everything is still a part of creation and is being created. If creation is taking place continually, then openness to miracles and unexpected things is their way of going about life.

This was also Don Pio’s mentality and with it he was able to live his life, despite all of the difficulties, with so much heart, because he had faith in the creator and knew that creation was only to make things better. And it all worked out, the times Don Pio had to hold on so hard to his faith in god and creation; these were the times when miracles happened. His grandson Jose, who was banned from home, turned into a miracle child and gained the ability to see with his heart. Even though everything he had warned his daughter Doña Margerita about came true and he had to watch her go from difficulty to difficulty, he held faith in God and accepted that his daughter had fallen in love with this mad man for a reason. Don Pio tried not to go against creation’s will, but instead tried to love it, and therefore his daughter blossomed. He stayed out of creation’s way, and therefore everything worked out. It is when we try to change nature that things go wrong.

From Don Pio’s story one can see that he was a man of love, and he was a man of love because during that time that is what kind of people were needed. Don Pio saw fighting as a tragic necessity, and understood that military men always lose, for their solution to life is fighting, and in fighting one never finds the wisdom for loving or living life. “Like the deep, true river waters that gently cut a lasting pathway through mountain and stone, we humans

are to cut our way, not with ax and steel, but fearlessly with love and more love, if we are to survive for long”(Villasenor, *Wild Steps of Heaven* 181).

The story of Don Pio takes place during the time that the Europeans conquerors were still trying to conquer Mexico. Before the time of the European conquerors a different type of surviving was required by the peoples of the Americas; they were not concentrated on surviving the violence of the Europeans, but rather more focused on learning and living with the ways of the Earth. Carlos Castaneda's books describe the teachings of a man who knew this way of surviving. Castaneda was a student at UCLA, studying medicinal plants from Mexico. He went to Mexico and met a man named Don Juan Matus. Don Juan was a Yaqui Indian and his knowledge was a knowledge that came from his ancestors whose life was focused on learning and living with the ways of the Earth. Carlos Castaneda spent a lot of time with Don Juan, with the intention that Don Juan would teach him about medicinal plants. But every time Castaneda brought this subject up and tried to start a conversation, Don Juan always refused to talk about it and would just say, “perhaps there is nothing to learn about plants because there is nothing to say about them” (Castaneda, *Teachings of Don Juan* 18). Don Juan needed to get Castaneda's head to function the way his did before he could teach him about plants. According to Victor Villasenor, Don Juan tried to get Castaneda out of his head and in touch with the rest of his senses (Villasenor Interview). During Don Juan's teachings one can see the difficulty that Castaneda has in comprehending Don Juan's reality. It is clear that Castaneda's reality is one that many people are stuck in, and it is a reality which resists seeing Don Juan's more spiritual truth.

Castaneda went to Mexico with a specific purpose, which was to learn about medicinal plants. He found a man who was known for his knowledge about plants in Mexico. Castaneda did a lot of studying at university and had a feeling that he already knew a good amount about these plants, but he wanted to hear from someone who had experience with them. Castaneda specifically wanted to learn about peyote, because of its ability to

make one hallucinate and because the Indians often used it in their ceremonies. Don Juan simply told Castaneda that he did not know his heart enough to learn about peyote, and that he must give Don Juan a better reason to want to learn about something as great as peyote. Don Juan said that he would teach Castaneda but not about peyote, because he must first know why he wanted to involve himself in such a serious process. He told Castaneda that if he were an Indian that his desire alone would be enough of a reason. Very few Indians have such a desire (Castaneda, *Yaqui Way of Knowledge* 17-19).

Don Juan knew where Castaneda was and knew that he simply wanted to learn about peyote in order to know more about the unknown. Peyote was something Castaneda knew nothing about. He especially knew nothing about the Indians way of going about the plant, other than that they used it in ceremonies, and therefore he wanted to figure it out. For in Indian, peyote is more like a teacher and has the ability to take one further into reality, or as Villasiñor would say, it brings one closer to all thirteen of one's senses especially the six senses of the soul. As Villasiñor said, "six of the thirteen senses are located in the soul." The Indians understand this and they also understand that working with peyote can be dangerous, so unless something brings their will to want to work with peyote then they leave it alone and know that God had chosen another way for them. Castaneda, as Don Juan told him, did not know his heart, and therefore could not if peyote would treat him well, so Don Juan's task was to get him to know and use his heart. And for that, one must be in partnership with the three senses of the heart which are feeling, balance, and intuition (Villasiñor Interview).

Don Juan and Castaneda were sitting in front of Don Juan's house in Mexico. It was then that Don Juan began to teach Castaneda, so before he got up to go to bed he told Castaneda to find "his spot." Castaneda was confused and asked Don Juan to explain what he meant with the spot. Don Juan repeated what he had said before, then got up and patted on the place where he had been sitting and said, "this is my spot, now find yours" (19). Don Juan also briefly made Castaneda aware that the place he was sitting in was making him

tired. Castaneda was not aware of that fact but it then instantly became clear to him that his back was aching and that he was indeed tired. Don Juan told him that “a spot” meant a place where he could feel naturally happy and strong, and he was to find that spot. If he couldn’t then he might as well leave because this was the only way he could accept Castaneda’s desire to learn as valid.

Castaneda started to search for his spot but inside he thought it was Don Juan's way of dismissing him. Still Castaneda had nothing else to do so he continued searching. More than six hours went by and Castaneda wanted to give up, because he had been rolling on the floor like an idiot and still couldn’t make any sense of Don Juan’s riddle. Don Juan told him that if he could not feel the difference between the spots, then he should use the senses that he was used to using – his eyes – but Don Juan insisted that Castaneda feel with his eyes by not looking right into things. Castaneda continued the search until, after a long period of time he thought he had found his spot because of awkward colors that he thought he saw (Castaneda, *Teachings of Don Juan* 22). Don Juan told him to sit in the spot and report to him how he felt. Castaneda sat for fifteen minutes and could feel no difference. Castaneda then started to feel disgusted and headachy and about to get sick, so he got up. Don Juan saw his frustration and told him he could either leave or find his spot. Castaneda would have left but he was too tired to drive. He felt stupid and absolutely embarrassed. He decided to give it one more try, so he sat against a rock to think things over and there he fell asleep. He woke up to Don Juan laughing, and saying, “you found the spot.” Although Castaneda had no idea that he had found the spot, for Don Juan the proof of Castaneda’s will power was enough to go on with the teachings.

Don Juan was clearly trying to show Castaneda about one’s spot, and how unaware we can be of the things which damage us. Castaneda first spot was making him tired. Don Juan also said that getting to know these places were the key to well-being. Being in our spot can give us superior strength. On the other hand, being on our enemy spot as Castaneda was

at first, can make us weak and maybe even kill us. Castaneda was also told that knowing the difference and being able to discover these two places, the right and wrong spots, was important especially to a person who was pursuing knowledge.

Don Juan's task seemed ridiculous to Castaneda because it required perception of a different reality. During the time Castaneda was searching for the answer he felt ridiculous, because in Castaneda's previous frame of reference there was no such thing as the kind of power that Don Juan was speaking about. The first time Castaneda told Don Juan that he had found the spot, Don Juan then asked him to sit there and tell him how he felt. Castaneda then said he felt no difference and began to get angry and so frustrated that he got a headache and started to feel sick. That was Castaneda's enemy spot because it made him feel this way. Castaneda's reality prevented him from believing in Don Juan's advice and this was the source of his problem.

Castaneda's way of looking at things led him to his inability of finding his spot. Not only was he closed to leaving his logical reality behind, a reality which told him that his anger and sickness was the cause of a nonsensical act, but he also closed himself from his heart. Don Juan's main goal was to get Castaneda slowly out of his head and into his heart, and this task would have been much more simple if Castaneda had been in partnership with his heart. This task required feeling and intuition, and in Castaneda's reality one usually only uses the head. The head senses are hearing, seeing, tasting, and smelling. Feeling is part of the heart. "We are told by society no to go inside feeling. When we do we are laughed at and called wimps" (Villasenor Interview). In Don Juan's eyes Castaneda was an absolute fool for not being able to feel the differences of the spots. For Don Juan's task the head was impossible to use and it struck Castaneda that finally there was a problem where thinking did not help. One had to have the ability to feel and then use intuition to decide, but Castaneda was so stuck in his head and former reality that he did not even believe that one could "feel" and then be able to make such a decision. The abilities of the heart seemed unrealistic to

him, he had learned to doubt them, because something had created a wall between his head and his heart.

Don Juan does various interesting things with Castaneda which illustrate a separate reality from that known to Castaneda and throughout the teaching Castaneda is just incapable of learning this wisdom. Even Castaneda's view of learning is totally different from that of Don Juan's. In Castaneda's picture of education a teacher is provided and that is then the machine that gives you all the information that you want, and this is how he approached Don Juan throughout their time together. Don Juan knew that all he could do for Castaneda was to guide him slightly and that all the hard work had to be done by Castaneda himself. Therefore, to get rid of Castaneda's false image of the teacher in the beginning, he rejected any money that Castaneda offered, and also didn't allow the tape recorders and cameras that Castaneda wanted to use for his research. Another reason for this was partly because he wasn't going to give Castaneda information; rather, hopefully, Castaneda would give himself information. And partly Don Juan was trying to get Castaneda away from those senses of hearing and seeing. He said that they were unnecessary in his teaching and the only thing necessary in his teachings was "spirit", which we may refer to as well with the word "heart."

Don Juan realized that the first task he had given to Castaneda wasn't very helpful because Castaneda was not open to learning from himself. So from then on Don Juan had to explain a lot more. Next, Don Juan intentionally got Castaneda angry by laughing at him for trying so hard to understand one of Don Juan's teachings. Castaneda got very angry and Don Juan started to sing a song that he had seen recently in a concert. He was able to imitate the man he had seen in concert very well, and Castaneda ended up laughing at him. Don Juan then immediately stopped singing and said, "you see, you laugh at the stupid song, but the man who sings it that way and those who pay to listen to him are not laughing; they think it is serious" (Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* 37-8). He then told Castaneda that he "was like the singer and the people who liked his songs, conceited and deadly serious about some nonsense

that no one in his right mind should give a damn about” (Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* 38). Don Juan is trying to reveal to Castaneda how much nonsense is involved in his society and so much time is wasted on falseness. If most people were to observe some of the average conversations that go on in the modern world and really think about them, then they would find them ridiculous nonsense. There is just no heart involved whatsoever.

Here one can see clearly how Don Juan was trying to take Castaneda out of his reality, but Castaneda only got angry about what Don Juan was saying. Here is where Don Juan decided to reveal to Castaneda that one of his greatest learning disabilities was his self-importance; and that self importance led him to think that everything needed to go his way.

You take yourself too seriously, you are too damn important in your own mind. That must be changed! You are so goddamn important that you feel justified to be annoyed with everything. You’re so damn important that you can afford to leave if things don’t go your way. I suppose you think that shows you have character. That’s nonsense! You’re weak, and conceited! (Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* 38)

Castaneda tried to protest, but that was exactly what Don Juan wanted because now he could go into his next lesson, which he told Castaneda, was about losing self-importance. “As long as you feel that you are the most important thing in the world you cannot really appreciate the world around you” (Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* 40). He then told Castaneda that he was going to talk to his little friend which was a plant. At first Castaneda could not make out what language Don Juan was speaking but then he switched to Spanish. Don told him that it didn’t matter what one said and that he just had to speak to it as if it were his friend. Castaneda knelt down but could not bring himself farther. He said he felt ridiculous and laughed. Don Juan patted him on the back and said it was okay and that at least he was able to contain his temper. He sent Castaneda away to talk to the plants on his own, since he was not able to do it in front of another man. Castaneda went and brought himself to talk to a plant but his feeling of being ludicrous was overpowering, so after what he thought was a good wait he went back to Don Juan. But Castaneda had the certainty that Don Juan knew he

had not talked to the plants (Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* 40-41). Don Juan told Castaneda that he would demonstrate the power of talking to plants. He got on his knees and stated talking to a plant in a loud voice so Castaneda could hear. Castaneda thought he was out of his mind. Don Juan got up and told Castaneda that the plant told him to tell Castaneda that she was good to eat and that a handful of these plants would keep a man healthy and also that there was a big batch of them growing on the other side of the hill. Castaneda of course doubted that the plant had told Don Juan this and insisted that Don Juan had known that all of his life. Don Juan's reply was, "your cleverness makes you more silly than I thought" (Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* 41). He also said that he had known about the plant but the plant told him where more was and it didn't matter if he told Castaneda. Upon arriving at the spot where the plant had told them to go, they saw indeed that there was a big batch of these plants. Don Juan told Castaneda to thank the plants but Castaneda could not bring himself to do so. Don Juan explained that it was very important to thank a plant when it was generous. Castaneda hurriedly leaned over the plant and said, "thank you" (Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* 42).

Here once again Don Juan was going deeper than Castaneda thought. In the book Castaneda interpreted the lesson as one that was supposed to get rid of, or make him aware of, self-importance. Castaneda failed this lesson too. Not only did he fail to step off his self-importance; he failed to see the true purpose of the lesson, which was to bring him in partnership with balance. Castaneda did not know how to work with balance and this is why Don Juan chose to bring him in partnership with that sense. To Don Juan's ancestors balance was required, because in nature arrogance is rejected. To walk into nature with the thought that you know everything and nothing unexpected will happen is a good way to walk into death. In order to live in partnership with nature balance is required. One is then simply in partnership with balance because one learns to understand that all the little plants and things one uses to survive is something that one day one's body will serve as food in turn for these

plants. So one comes to understand that neither we nor they are more or less important, regardless of how tiny the creature is; everything on this holy earth is balanced and equal. But now many of us no longer live in partnership with the Earth and therefore we have lost this “balance.”

Castaneda was incapable of getting on his knees in front of a plant and talking to it as an equal. He also felt that as a university student he was far more superior than this old Indian man, Don Juan. This showed how far off balance Castaneda’s society had made him, that he thought he was greater even than one of his own kind. As Victor Villasniñor said, “We can start getting back in touch with balance by taking one small word out of our language: OR. The word “or” creates polarity”. President Bush said “You are either for me or for the terrorists.” The word creates imbalance, because it leaves one with a simple minded decision to make. It supports one to think in terms of “right or wrong”, other than when imbalance every thing is equal and everything has its “rights and wrongs”, instead of just of just “right or wrong”. We need to take the word “OR” out and enter the word, “AND” (Villasniñor, interview).

After a few years of Don Juan’s teaching Castaneda decided to give up searching for this knowledge; he realized that it was not his time yet (Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* 281). He was not to blame for he had showed a great deal of will power to learn and become a man of knowledge. However, the wall between his knowledge and the knowledge of Don Juan was too big. Too many of Don Juan’s teachings could not fit into Castaneda’s vocabulary, and it is hard to believe that they ever would, because the wisdom is something that one must feel, and feelings rarely make sense in the head. The problem was that Castaneda’s society encouraged him to make sense of everything in the head.

I grew up on five hundred acres of land in southern California. My mother and father had both chosen to educate their children on their own. My father, being mostly of Huichol

Indian blood, wanted to raise us under the influence of Indian ceremonies. By the time I entered the world my father had already had five sons and three daughters, but I was the second child he had with my mother. My father was a hard working organic farmer who had a lot of knowledge and respect for the earth and the way she provided us with nourishment. He had established his own company called “Living Earth,” and my mother handled the money and did the book keeping. This was how I grew up for the first ten years of my life.

My father was not always around but when he left he would always take two or three of his kids with him to his older ranches in California and Arizona. When my father was not making me work or teaching me how to cultivate the Earth in balance, then I was with my brothers and sisters exploring our five hundred acres of land under the blazing hot Sun in the dry southern Californian air. And very often my father got the whole family together and would invite the Indians from the reservation for a ceremony. At these times we would have either a sweat lodge or put up the teepee and sit up all night around the carefully made fire and sing old traditional Indian songs, and there it was absolutely forbidden to fall asleep. It was in these ceremonies that I gained my reality and way of looking at the world. I learned to have a lot of respect for these ancient ways, and I was told that they were our teachers, and by participating in these ceremonies I was staying in contact with our greatest teachers, our mother Earth and our Father Sun. I was also told that the earth helps us to stay in contact with our hearts, and the sun and fire was what kept us connected to our souls. I was told that the Earth’s power to connect us beings to our heart was a natural and tremendous power. Even the site of a place where the Mother Earth and the Father Sun had been making undisturbed love for ages could bring a person so close to fully feeling his or her own heart. It helped me that these words were given to me but I can also say out of experience that they are true.

Every full moon my brothers and I got a blazing fire going before sundown with around forty eight rocks placed carefully in the middle. We would drop six buckets into our

well that contained only rain water. Three of them were for watering down the area around the sweat lodge so that no dust would interfere with our work or the work of the fire which was to get the rocks glowing red, and also the water was used so that none of the dried grass that was shriveled up from the powerful Sun would catch on fire. My brothers and I would work for hours in the last heat of the Sun, sweeping the dirt around the fire and sweat lodge carefully so no dust arose, but still getting all the dry leaves away from the area. Then there right before Sun down, I would run out of the little valley of the sweat lodge barefoot, looking darker then ever because of the dry dirt which had settled into my sweaty body. I would take one last glance at the area we had just cleaned to the point where it almost looked like it didn't fit in that valley full of big eucalyptus trees and dry grass. Because of its natural cleanness it seemed holy with the blazing fire and the light brown willow branches that formed the shape of the sweat lodge and looked like the ribs of a dead animal that was left to be eaten by the Earth. I ran bare foot over the still warm cooling down rocks to get the rest of my family and tell them that it was ready. With excitement I would run back, and standing at the top of the little canyon was like seeing the miracle all over again. As I would stand there I could smell the smoke of the burning oak loges mixed with the sweet slightly bitter smell of the eucalyptus trees, and the strong smell of the dried out sage brush. The grounds around the sweat lodge and the fire were dark compared to its surrounding ground; because of the careful sweeping we would do to get away the leaves and small rocks, and then gently wet the ground with a bundle of eucalyptus branches that we would dip in the bucket of rain water and gently shake it over the precious soft dirt. It looked so perfect and natural, and my brothers fit right in with their half-naked bodies looking like natural camouflage with their dirty skin which didn't seem to bother them or me at all. In fact something about the dirt which stuck to all of our exposed skin seemed very fresh and clean. I would then run down and let my legs carry my light body as I hopped from rock to rock.

Getting down, all of us worked together to dress the sweat lodge with wool blankets, so that when the others arrived we would be ready to go in.

The first to come down would be my father and my oldest brother, Adam, and they brought the instruments. My brother Adam would then fill up the base of the drum – which was a brass bowl with three small legs at the bottom – with water. Looking like he was in total concentration I would observe him closely as he kneeled down in the dirt in front of the fire and started the process of tying the drum. He looked like he was in total harmony sitting there with his long hair and his strong healthy looking facial features, as he sat in the dirt with only his underpants on, looking like a fresher version of my father.

We all gathered in the sweat lodge after the instruments were ready, and the door was closed after the first twelve rocks were respectfully set in the hole of our holy sweat lodge. There in the light that the glowing red rocks were giving us we could not see each others faces. My father's voice would rouse us out of our concentration on the dim light of the rocks. He would start by thanking his children dearly for setting up this miracle, and then thank the Earth for letting us crawl back inside her again every once in a while as the children of the Earth we are, and let ourselves be reminded of our responsibility which is to love. As he had told us before, the sweat lodge that we made was Mother Earth's womb, the willow branches represented her ribs, and the red rocks represented her warm heart, and we crawled back inside her as her children, all of us, no one was greater than another, we all crawled inside; and like mothers do she would show us love and teach us of our hearts. In the sweat lodge each person had four opportunities to speak, and during the time that you spoke you had to let yourself flow and say whatever it was that you were feeling, because during the time that you spoke Mother Earth put you in total contact with your heart. Inside the sweat lodge was where you learned the truth, you learned your heart, and the heart of your family. It was very rare that my father, a big strong Indian, would not burst into tears because he was so moved by the love that flowed in the words of his family; and when his

turn would come one could hear his heavy strong voice turn into a more squeaky one because of his happy crying heart. And the whole time during our prayers my brother Adam would be beating the water drum that made the beautiful sound of Mother Earth's heart beat. Then the drumming would stop and depending on who was leading the sweat, my father or my brother Adam, this leader would always then say his prayer last, and we would all listen in total silence to the wisdom of the words that came from the heart. Towards the end of the last speech is when the most water is showered over the red rocks. After almost every sentence the bundle of eucalyptus branches is dipped in the bucket of rain water then gently showered over the pile of rocks. The rocks and the water would create a hissing sound as the steam arose and blessed us. We would sit in the dirt, and so we were totally covered in mud from the times the steam got too much and we had to lay closer to the Earth to get help. When anyone one had trouble breathing then all they had to do was either take their bundle of sage that was freshly picked and put into the sweat lodge before we entered by my brothers and me, and hold it right in front of their mouth as they breathed, or lean their heads closer to the Earth, and the closer they got the easier it was to breathe. I had never felt closer to the Earth as I had then in the sweat lodge, full of sweat, dirt and rain water with the hard but slightly muddy ground beneath me.

So at a young age I learned that, indeed, connection to the Earth was what got one closer to the connection to our own hearts, because never in my life had I ever experienced so much wisdom and love as I experienced with my family when we gave ourselves over to the powers of the Earth.

Our ceremonies in the teepee where we stayed up all night and gave our thoughts over to the fire in the center of the teepee, as we felt the vibrations of the strong ancient songs that were sung in a very high voice, were also magical. The teepee's door faced east and to see the first lights of the day meeting the fire in the center of the teepee, was as touching as seeing two long lost brothers find each other again and hug their hearts full.

What is left in my memory of that world that I grew up in, has a lot of meaning to me today; I remember it all so clearly because many of my senses were present. Often I can feel myself drifting away from my heart, and I find myself often in a state of mind that no longer marvels at the beauty of the world, but rather makes it seem like nothing special. I often fall into this kind of arrogance and state of mind of “knowing” everything, and my reality becomes only what I see, taste, hear, and smell. This is how it was for Castaneda; the difference is that he knew no other reality, so the doubt of a separate reality was very big. I admire Castaneda’s will to opening his eyes to a separate reality, because I understand the great blocking that one feels trying to enter this separate reality. Castaneda was a person who sought this ancient knowledge which Don Juan had to offer, and had a great will to learn, but he knew of no clear reason why he wanted to learn. In fact there was no clear reason.

In Castaneda’s society the ancient knowledge is almost completely useless, because the ancient knowledge was gained through generations of survival in a different world than Castaneda’s. The ancient knowledge of the Native Americans is knowledge of survival and it was always passed on so that the children could continue living in harmony with creation. In Castaneda’s society a different kind of survival is required; it is a survival where “heart” and “soul” are not used. One can see this in the smallest things – for example, time; we created small machines called watches, and watches tell us, “when.” We no longer have to “feel” whether we want to leave our present spot or not; time does that for us. We look at our watches and say, “oh, I have to go”; this takes away a small role of our “feeling” and “intuition”. One could give a number of examples of things that exist in our world that keep us away from our senses. Castaneda wanted to learn this knowledge, but what was he going to do with it in his world as a student at university. We as humans, by nature, gain the knowledge that we need to survive, and in today’s simple way of surviving a simple knowledge is gained. But what saves me are my memories that bring me right back not only

to the exact pictures of my childhood; but it brings my senses back too. But as I have said above, a wall is created and sometimes it is hard to get through, and my reality is that, connection to the Earth is connection to the heart. Although I spend a lot of time outdoors I still do not fully connect to the Earth because I usually go out with a purpose in mind – for example I go outside a lot to climb and hike, and rarely am I just there with an open mind and stay for a long period of time. But I am lucky because I will always have the small reminder when I close my eyes and see with my heart: I see myself as a child as I would run my young light body through the dry hot air, under the Father Sun, on the magical surface of Mother Earth, truly feeling her beneath me as she warmed the souls of all living things as well as the souls of my feet, with the love created between her and the Father Sun.

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