

Chapter 1 -- The Awakening

Espinazo, Mexico, is not a prominent place on any maps – not on world maps, not on maps of Mexico, not even on maps of the state in which it is located, Nuevo Leon. Its name means *spine*, and it refers to the backbone of an animal, a metaphor that comes from a long, jagged ridge running along one of the town's horizons. Most days this animal spine can be seen profiled against a brilliant azure sky, for Espinazo does not receive a great deal of rain. Espinazo is not a large place, the home of maybe a few hundred souls, most of whom have enough to get by on but little more. It is a quiet country village, a desert town on a high plateau, surrounded by mountain ranges, sagebrush country, and arid expanses filled with an abundance of the hardscrabble natural life that exists only in deserts – snakes, lizards, and cacti. The town itself is home not only to the rural people who live there, it is also home to much livestock – sheep, goats, chickens, and cattle – and barnyard smells suffuse the air, as well as the aromas of good cooking.

Twenty years ago or so I was poised on the edge of several great personal discoveries because of this insignificant dot on the map of Mexico. I had been hearing about Espinazo for a long time from friends and acquaintances who knew of my personal and professional interest in *curanderismo*, the art of Mexican folk healing. *Curanderismo*, as it is practiced along the U.S.-Mexican border, the Southwest part of the United States, most of Mexico, and in many other parts of Latin America, is an ancient, fabled, rich tradition which has much to teach modern, conventional medicine about illnesses and their cures.

I had grown up in the United States in a rural Hispanic community in South Texas, next to Corpus Christi, not far from Houston, Texas, and the Gulf of Mexico. While I was growing up, I gained extensive first-hand experience of the long and storied heritage of *curanderismo*, because my own family was versed in the rituals, knowledge and practices of our folk-healing tradition. My mother and father told us many stories about legendary healers, and they were themselves minor practitioners of the healing arts, employing knowledge that had been handed down from time out of mind in the Hispanic-American border communities, where much of the centuries-old culture of Old Mexico still survives.

I grew up in an atmosphere, then, full of the magic, the religiosity, the simple faith of a proud people who had often lived hard lives but who still had a strong sense of who they were, and of their connection with a past that partook both of ancient sciences and ancient faith. The connection with Old Mexico I remember as palpable, and I could feel in my own background as I was growing up the great traditions of the Mexican indigenous peoples, including the Aztecs and Mayans who had contributed much to modern *curanderismo*. I was also deeply aware of another connection, to the Old World of the Spanish Conquistadores and of their own link with ancient Arabic traditions through the Moors, who had ruled Spain for centuries and who also bequeathed, via the Spaniards, much knowledge to what exists now as Mexican folk healing.

All of these things were a deeply ingrained part of me from an early age. And so, as I grew up and began to pursue higher education, I settled on the folk healing traditions of my people as the natural focus of my studies, and I did much research and wrote about *curanderismo*, eventually getting a doctoral degree in my home state – a proud moment

for me and for my family, since I had grown up in a remote rural community far from colleges and universities and other modern conveniences, and since I was the first member of my family to reach this level of achievement.

As I settled into my academic career, and continued with my research into *curanderismo*, I heard from more and more people farther afield about different aspects of this arcane field of study. Many people, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic, were fascinated by *curanderismo*, I think partly because of its implications for conventional medicine. A growing respect in America and in the world at large for the ancient wisdom of rural, folk traditions, and of indigenous peoples contributed to this burgeoning interest. Perhaps the wisdom of such people was disregarded for many, many years partly because of the early missionary zeal of clerics encountering “heathenish” peoples in new worlds during the age of exploration on the one hand, and partly due to the totalizing influence of modern science, which has difficulty at times admitting other paradigms for uncovering useful knowledge. At any rate, *curanderismo* finally seems to be getting a serious hearing.

Among the rumors I heard about fascinating practices under various guises of New World folk healing, one of the most interesting to me was that about the turn-of-the-century *curandero* and folk saint Niño Fidencio, a very highly venerated non-canonical saint (i.e., he was elevated, while still living, to the status of folk saint by common consensus of his followers, rather than canonized by church decree). El Niño, as he was called, had lived and practiced and died in the tiny village of Espinazo, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. El Niño, the stories have it, was a very powerful *curandero* who had begun as a house-servant for a German doctor for whom he had ended up apprenticing. Through

this training, El Niño learned to cross traditional faith-healing with surgical techniques. Part of his appeal in his lifetime – and his enduring pull long after his passing, in 1939 at the youthful age of forty – was his playful, childlike temperament; hence his nickname, El Niño, which means “the child.”

Over the years, I grew more and more curious to see the village of Espinazo and to experience the twice-yearly *fiestas* held in El Niño’s name. When I finally got an opportunity to go to this village, during the early 1980s, little did I realize that what awaited me was nothing less than my own spiritual awakening. If that sounds rather dramatic, my own skepticism beforehand as to what I would find when I arrived in this small town in the Sierra Madres would have made it impossible then to predict that my life would be changed by my experiences there.

What happened to me was no less than my transformation from an academic with some personal interest in the folk healing that I saw around me when I was a child, to a man who embraced *curanderismo* as part of a great tradition and as part of his own identity. In other words, I began then to think of myself not just as a recorder of the arcana of *curanderismo*; I began to become a *curandero* myself.

We set out – I went with some American friends of mine; all of us were accustomed to traveling with Samsonite suitcases in comfortable automobiles and airplanes – and in my Lincoln Towncar we crossed at Laredo, Mexico. At Customs in Mexico, we learned that we would need to hand over a \$500 deposit simply to ensure our return, and also to purchase a special kind of auto insurance in order for us to drive through Mexico.

The wait was so long, and the process of getting through all the red tape so complicated, that ultimately we decided to leave the car behind at the border and take the bus to Espinazo. Naturally, this was much more easily said than done.

We traveled all night to Monterrey, the third largest city in Mexico, in the northern state of Nuevo Leon. When we arrived, we learned there was no bus from Monterrey to Espinazo. This was a setback, of course, since we knew of no other way to get to our destination. So there we were, stuck in a strange city of two million people, trying to figure out how to get a ride to Espinazo, which is, it turns out, a dusty little stop off the road between Monterrey and the next big city up the highway, Saltillo. Most of the people we encountered in Monterrey had never even heard of Espinazo, which might convey just how insignificant the little town seemed even to people living in a nearby metropolis. So we set out to find a hotel. In the process, I decided to ask an elderly man I encountered where Espinazo was and how to get there, and he informed me that indeed there *was* a bus to Espinazo. Not only that, it was just around the corner, in a dusty alleyway, and it was about to leave in a few minutes! So my friends and I gathered our suitcases and headed for the alley, where we discovered a rickety old 1940s-era bus loaded not only with human passengers, all of whom looked as if they were very poor, but also with chickens, roosters, goats, and pigs. (Only later did the oddness of it all come home to me – this seemed like something straight from a children’s fantasy story, where the way into an alternate, magical world turns out to be just around a nondescript-looking corner, or tucked away inside of someone’s closet.) The fare to travel from Monterrey to Espinazo was about \$1.00 – an unimaginably cheap fare for Americans

traveling 30 miles, but probably a considerable enough sum for the other passengers on the bus.

As we drove along the dusty road to Espinazo, we were laughing because half the other passengers were farm animals. There we were – several rather comfortable middle-class people from America, the women carrying Samsonite suitcases -- and meanwhile there were pigs running up and down the aisles. As we realized later, people were literally bringing along their food for the festival, in the most effective portable form – still living!

While we were on the bus we met another American woman, but this particular person had been on the pilgrimage several times before. After we had told her the tale of our difficulties in getting across the border and then in finding the bus to Espinazo, she told us that it was not unusual at all for first-time *peregrinos*, or pilgrims to Espinazo, to experience some sort of *suffering* on the journey to Espinazo. She told us that it was in fact very common for first-timers to undergo some kind of a test imposed not by a conscious, active agent (that we know of!) but by circumstances, by inexperience, by fear of the unknown, or other happenstances. (I later heard it speculated that the spirit of El Niño himself imposes this test – to see if pilgrims to his shrine are worthy, or to help them to grow to the kind of spiritual stature they need to have to be worthy.)

We were continually reminded, as we traveled toward the dusty little town, of just how different we really were from the people we were sojourning with. As Hispanics, we had always thought of ourselves as belonging to a distinct minority of a sometimes oppressed people in America, but down here it was plain we were just gringos to the locals, in spite of our physical resemblance to many of them. There we were,

Americans, with suitcases and hairdryers, and we were surrounded by humble, sincere, poor people; to them we must have appeared exotic creatures, wealthy beyond imagining, living unimaginable lives. We might as well have been from Mars.

And yet these people treated us with sincerity and dignity, and my respect for them, which was already high, only increased. I felt humbled to be in their presence. It was hard not to look into their eyes and feel as if they had experienced life in ways that many of us can only dream about. Perhaps that is only an *Americano* conceit of mine. But the further I went into this journey of awakening, the more I felt this way.

Our third ordeal was being completely lost once we got to the village. The big feast-day goes on 24-hours per day; there are literally thousands of *materias* there, people who are folk-healers, like *curanderos*, wearing colorful tunics and dresses, many of whom are channeling spirits such as those of Aurorita, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, and El Niño Fidencio. These people are all famous folk saints (as opposed to canonized saints). As we got off the bus in Espinazo, and saw this riot of color and lights, and heard the sounds of music coming from different places around the little town, we realized that we had no idea what to do now that we had arrived.

One of the reasons I had come to Espinazo was to meet my friend Chenchito, a man whose reputation as a healer had spread to America among the Hispanics there. I had met Chenchito (a.k.a. Cresencio Alvarado) through a university colleague of mine, Leo Carrillo, in the office of International Programs at his school near where I worked at the time. Leo was a close friend of Chenchito's, and he had suggested I come down to this village to experience the *fiesta* for myself. Chenchito's and Leo's faces were in my mind's eye as I stood helplessly with my friends on that dusty little road in the middle of

a strange town in a foreign land. I began to wonder whether coming had been a mistake; after all we had already been through, we had no idea where to go, or what to do next.

But then, swimming up out of the confusion and exhaustion we all felt, there, miraculously, was Leo Carrillo, standing across the street, waving to us! At this point I hoped that El Niño's tests of our faith and will to reach Espinazo and figure out what to do once we were there were over. (Later on I also ran into another colleague from another university in South Texas, Tony Zavaleta, who, along with a number of American students, was visiting other *materias* who were friends of Chenchito. So the chances are we wouldn't have been lost for long).

Just to give you an idea of what the atmosphere was like, there were 20,000 to 30,000 people at the feast. But there were no motels, no life conveniences of the kind that Americans are accustomed to. Leo told us he was staying in someone's house, along with his students from the university. This house had a concrete porch in the back and an outhouse and shower that had been constructed by the students. Chenchito, Leo told us, lived two blocks from the house where he was staying.

So we walked up the street to go meet Chenchito. Let me tell you a bit about him: Chenchito was at this time a man in his sixties, perhaps all of 4 feet-eleven inches tall, but with an outsized smile, full of life, very charismatic. You know he's around when he walks into a room: He has a childlike personality, full of innocence and play. Judging by the descriptions I have read of El Niño, Chenchito greatly resembles this folk saint in temperament; he has the happiness and innocence that many of us have lost in growing up.

It was 2 a.m. by the time we arrived at Chenchito's house – we had been traveling all day and a good part of the night to reach Espinazo – but there were 20-30 people there, and more people in the breezeways between the house and the kitchen. Everybody who was there was staying there at Chenchito's invitation, and by custom everybody who stayed donated food and time for cleaning and cooking, although no money whatsoever was exchanged for either the accommodations or the work. Chenchito had arrived three days earlier by bus with a goat that he had been raising especially for this occasion, when he knew he would have many visitors. When we arrived, Chenchito was in the midst of making *cabrito* (goat-stew).

Those of us who had arrived that night by bus were treated as special guests from the moment we arrived – in spite of the fact that we, like everyone else, slept on the floor of Chenchito's house. I have to admit, I never slept so well in my life – in spite of the hard floor, and the close proximity of so many other people in that small space.

The next morning we were awakened by the sound of music – traditional Mexican folk music. After we had cleaned ourselves up as well as we could, we started the ritual traditional for newcomers – that is, we walked to the California *pirulito* tree that El Niño himself had sat under while he was performing his healings. When we arrived at the tree, we circled it three times, and joined a bigger group led by *materias*, that is, *fidencistas* (followers of El Niño) clothed in white cotton, with red capes and red hats and red neckerchiefs. Some others wore turquoise-colored hats, capes, and neckerchiefs; apparently these color differences signified the diversity of *misiones* or groups of followers from throughout Mexico as well as the United States. Some people present at the *pirulito* tree carried banners showing affiliations with certain other saints and

important religious figures, such as Our Lady of Guadalupe, and there were many accordionists and guitarists present, all playing music, while singers sang special hymns to El Niño. These songs were *corridos*, whose function was a bit like that of patterers from 19th century London; they worked various stories from the life of El Niño into melodic narratives that they sang under the *piruilto* tree. Altogether, taking the *materias*, pilgrims and musicians into account, there must have been literally hundreds of people circling the tree, singing, chanting, offering their prayers to El Niño.

As the day went on, it grew hotter and hotter. Espinazo is in a desert climate – and there were many people there dancing and moving about in the heat; there was lots of music and dust rising from the unpaved streets into the blue disk of the sky. Many fragrances wafted about us as we moved through the streets, the smells of foods being prepared, of livestock, of incenses being burned. There were street vendors and matachine dancers; there were people crying, and people being healed; all of these things were happening around us simultaneously, in a dizzying array of colors, sounds, and odors. And yet this was a little town in the midst of a great dusty plateau in the mountains, with the *sierras* scraping the sky like the naked spine of a giant beast. It was a scene of great beauty, in a stark, barren way; in America, only the desert Southwest is very much like the natural setting for the town of Espinazo. More than anything else, with its great hot blue sky overhead, its spectacular mountains, and its aura of ritual, the town resembles a great outdoor temple, like something you might encounter in ancient Greece – except that here the rituals and the religion, as it were, are happening in the here and now, and the belief systems do not belong to an outworn creed, but are immediate and present.

Once we had participated in the initiation ritual at the *pirulito* tree for a time we walked to the chapel in Espinazo where El Niño is buried. Except that even this was not quite so simple as a *walk* to the chapel; some people actually *roll* in the dirt road to the temple, some walk on their knees, in imitation of the sufferings of various saints and, of course, in imitation of the suffering of Christ. Appropriately, the road is called Camino de Penitencia, or the Road of Penitence. Once we got to the church itself, we waited in line, where more musicians played more music. Inside, we realized the church was as much a kind of museum as it was a place of worship, since it was filled with various mementoes of El Niño's life and career as a healer. These mementoes included such items as desiccated body parts in glass jars that El Niño had removed through amputation or excision, and the broken bottles that he had sometimes used to perform his surgeries.

Close by the church is *El Charquito*, a great pool of water where people bathe, laving themselves with the muddy water that is considered miraculous in order to cleanse away illnesses and the lingering effects of injuries. Sometimes dozens of people were in the water at the same time, and sometimes the ritual they engaged in resembled a kind of a muddy baptism, with one or several of the *materias* leading the various participants in their cleansing rituals.

After we had seen many of these things – and it took us several hours to absorb all of these things, since we were surrounded with a bewildering array of activities, sights and sounds – I made a personal discovery that, alongside my growing sense of identification with El Niño, was to have an enormous impact on my life. I discovered *Aurorita* – the little girl who had the power to heal and who purportedly died in a house-fire in Monterrey when she was only six years old. People in Mexico have a great deal of

respect for Aurorita, so much so, in fact, that some adult *materias* actually attempt to channel her spirit in order to perform healings.

The night of our first full day in Espinazo, I dreamed about Aurorita – a dream that didn't make sense to me, since I did not know about her yet. In my dream I saw a little girl wearing old-fashioned clothing, who laughed and danced and sang. This dream did not make any sense to me, but I did not get a chance to try to figure out the mystery because in the middle of the dream my friend and traveling companion Tim, who was with us at Chenchitos' house, woke me up and told me that he had “just seen Aurorita.” I felt an unaccountable thrill pass through me when he said these words, although I could not say then exactly why.

“Who is Aurorita?” I asked him, wondering at my own sense of apprehension.

Tim looked at me, the wonder still in his eyes. “She was a little girl,” he said, “who died in a house fire during the last century in Monterrey, Mexico. She is regarded as a very potent healing spirit, one of those spirits that the healers who come here to Espinazo try to channel.”

“Do you know what she looked like?” I said then, aware that my question would sound strange.

He told me, looking at me oddly. The girl he described was the one in my dream.

“Tim,” I said to my friend, “I have also just seen Aurorita.”

Tim thought for a moment. “I think this means something, Cheo,” he said. “I think you maybe were meant to experience Aurorita.”

Since it was almost dawn at this point, I got up and started walking around, since the festival was still going on – during the three fiesta days (held in both October and in

March), the town never really goes entirely to sleep – and three or four blocks from Chenchito’s house I came upon a group of people who surrounded a woman who was perhaps in her late forties, dressed like a child – not unlike the child in my dream, in fact.

What happened next I cannot easily explain, but it was unlike anything I had experienced before in my life. As I came up to this group, I saw that this woman’s eyes were closed. She was prancing like a child, and handing out candy to the people around her. She came through the crowd around her – towards where I was standing. She placed her hands on my head. As she did so, I suddenly passed out. While I was passed out, I had another vision of Aurorita. The intensity of this vision was such that I could not remember who I was, or where I was – I only experienced the vision of Aurorita dancing like the woman I had just seen on the street.

When I came to, I was lying on the ground, and three women were splashing alcohol on my face. They told me I had been out cold for 20 minutes. The crowd, and the woman they had been watching, was gone. The three women helped me back to Chenchito’s house, where I fell asleep again, not waking up again until after the sun had come up.

I hesitated to ask questions about Aurorita after this, mainly because my encounters with her had been so exceptionally powerful. The intensity of my lapses from consciousness into a dreaming state had frightened me. Some things, I decided at that moment, I had rather be careful of. In the future, maybe I could research Aurorita – but I would not actively seek her out while I was staying in Espinazo again.

Nevertheless, on the third night that I was in Espinazo, I had another vision of Aurorita, this time less intense, but no less filled with portentous meaning for me. I slept

the night through, and when I woke up I had a cup of coffee with Chenchito, who explained many of the elements of being a *fidencista* to me, which include being a vegetarian, surrounding yourself with flowers, and cultivating happiness and a deeper sense of spiritualism in yourself. All of these things are extremely important for a *fidencista*, a follower of Niño Fidencio, to observe in order to be an effective healer. Of all the *fidencistas*, Chenchito, who was to become my own spiritual mentor in my quest to understand *curanderismo*, was the exemplar – the greatest exponent of the lifestyle and practices of El Niño.

While we were talking, I overheard a group of elderly ladies – all in their late sixties at least, and probably in some cases well into their seventies – talking about an important pilgrimage. They said something about a mountain, and about bare feet, and about suffering. As I listened, I became more and more intrigued, and finally I got up the courage to ask them if I could come along.

“Certainly,” they said without hesitation. “We will all meet at the *pirulito* tree at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning.”

Somehow I managed to talk my friend Tim – who was reluctant to rise so early to undertake what sounded like a painful ordeal -- into coming along. We had a full day at the festival, and then slept the sleep of the dead. This time I slept the night through in spite of the music that seemed to play 24 hours a day, without having any direct vision of Aurorita, although I could feel her hovering somewhere in the background of all of my dreams, which were pleasant and peaceful. It was almost as though I were being prepared, mercifully, for the next day’s experience. I did not know what to expect of the next day, really – only dark hints of a long barefoot journey through a desert landscape

followed by a climb up a mountain, all of which was supposed to bring a new awakening to those who took part.

The next morning, we headed for the *pirulito* tree, where we met the three ladies. The women proceeded to take their shoes off, and they instructed us to do the same. Then we all began to walk along the road out of town – in our bare feet. The surface of the road itself was dust and dirt mixed with sharp pebbles and burrs, which made for very tricky, and sometimes painful, footing.

We walked for three hours under the crystal clear sky – the kind of blue sky that we only see in parts of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona in the United States, a hot, dry sky that the sun beats down from with a relentless glare. All around us the desert was full of the kind of life you only see in desert places, belying its barrenness – the small rodents, the snakes and lizards, and the sage-like shrubs that seem to fill deserts all over the western hemisphere. It was stark, and beautiful, and it was even barren-looking in some places, but it was never truly empty. Along the way we met people who recognized that we were journeying to Bell’s Mountain and who had bought food and drink just for the purpose of supplying it to pilgrims undertaking this journey through the desert.

Around about ten a.m. we finally saw a mountain – a dark, forbidding escarpment studded with sharp rocks and cacti. As we came up to it I stared up at it and then looked at my guides wonderingly.

“Now what?” I asked the old women.

They smiled at my simplicity.

“We’ll climb.”

“How?”

“Very carefully.”

As we climbed in our bare feet, we stepped on cacti and sharp rocks. It was not a terribly high mountain, although in that plateau country it looked formidable standing apart from the surrounding heights on its own.

After an hour and a half or perhaps two hours we finally reached the top. The women cried and prayed, and other pilgrims who had made the journey did the same all around us. Tim and I nursed our wounded feet and wondered at the ordeal we had just been through. As I sat there in the high sun with bloodied and blistered feet, I pondered over the experience and gradually it dawned on me that I was actually grateful that I had been through it; it was one of the most gratifying experiences of my entire life. The sacrifices that we had experienced as a group had made me more sensitive not only to my own body and its suffering, it had awakened a greater appreciation in me for the will in others to suffer for a higher consciousness.

It took me many years to realize this, but as a result of my pilgrimage to Bell’s Mountain I myself became a more humble, giving person; I’m in better control of my emotions, and I feel more serene than I did in the past. The value of these lessons has reached deep into the recesses of my being and had consequences for my entire life – as a man, husband, father, teacher, university administrator, and as a member of the Hispanic-American community. It has had a profound impact, as well, on my desire to work to help others – both as a citizen and as a healer within the *fidencista* tradition. I have learned not to take things so seriously that in the scheme of things really are not as important as I once believed they were. I have tried in the way I have lived my life since then to arrive at the kind of happiness that seems to be so elusive to so many Americans.

As Americans, we are a people that is surrounded with, and privileged, in most cases, to have a wealth of material goods and a fair amount of ease. But we Americans somehow do not find even this relative ease of living satisfactory, and so we seek fulfillment in ways that ultimately do not make us happy – taking drugs, drinking lots of alcohol, watching the tube night in and night out. I am no teetotaler, nor am I against television *per se* – T.V. is just another medium that can serve both good and bad ends. But I do think that there is more health and happiness than many Americans realize to be found in simple virtues such as community-building and sharing, and in simple pleasures like the basic foods that come from the larders of people who live closer to the land, such as those that I met and talked to and even suffered with down in Mexico. I have never forgotten my first experiences as an apprentice healer just discovering his true way in life down in Espinazo, Mexico.