

Chapter 6 – I.Q. Tells the Story of Don Pedrito, *Curandero*

I learned about one of the most powerful *Curanderos* in the greater Southwest from a friend of mine who was known by the unusual initials “I.Q.” Whenever I.Q. met people for the first time, he would introduce himself thus: “People greet me by saying, ‘Hi, I.Q.,’ which makes me feel smart, since I don’t want to be called ‘Low I.Q.’ In case you’re wondering, my birthname is Idelfonso Quiñones Vidaurri.”

Idelfonso Quiñones, or I.Q., worked and was my peer at a South Texas university where I usually visited with him often because of my own career as a professor and administrator at the same university. Like me, he was also an academic who helped and counseled hundreds of students; but I.Q.’s first love was his *ranchito* close to the town of Falfurrias, where the great *curandero* Don Pedrito had lived and died, and where he was buried. Because his little ranch was so close to Falfurrias, I.Q. had heard many stories over the years about Don Pedrito from the other old ranchers, who seemed to hold Don Pedrito Jaramillo in the highest esteem.

I sometimes went out to visit I.Q. at his beloved *ranchito*, where we would sit outside and watch his few head of cattle wandering about the grounds and talk for hours. I.Q.’s *ranchito* had begun as nothing more than an old tin trailer home sitting in a couple of hundred acres. To some, this may sound like a large ranch, but compared with other ranches in South Texas, with their thousands of acres, this was relatively small. Over the years, he built several additions to the trailer home, so that eventually the added wings and new rooms made his buildings look almost like a kind of small, rustic *hacienda*. It was a place that was full of a special charm and “homey-ness” of its own.

As we sat out on the porch of this ever-expanding hacienda, we sometimes nursed glasses of tequila or drank beer while we talked far into the warm South Texas afternoon and into the evening. While we sat there, we would watch packs of *javelinas*, those famous pig-like creatures (actually a form of large, hooved rodent with long dark bristles) that roam the desert southwest, rooting around in the sagebrush and prickly-pear cacti, which, in the springtime, bore beautiful fuschia-colored blooms. Coyotes would flit by in the shadows, on their way to some new mischief. (The Native Americans rightfully rank Coyote as one of the great tricksters in their cosmological scheme, which seamlessly blends the natural and supernatural worlds.) While we sat and watched and talked quietly, white-tailed doves and small chicken-like quail would sometimes flush out of the desert foliage and mesquite trees and fly away overhead. Or, sometimes all we would see were his small herd of cattle, ranging about the grounds in slow motion, searching for the few unmolested patches of the tough brown grass that somehow manages to grow in that sun-baked landscape. (Once, I.Q. told me that he was buying green sunglasses for his cows to fool them into thinking they were actually eating green grass.)

As we sat there in the late afternoon, with the shadows eventually lengthening and the moon rising to cover the desert with a silvery half-light as we talked, I.Q.'s stories would inevitably come round to his favorite subject, that of Don Pedrito Jaramillo. As I.Q. tells it, Don Pedrito was, in the estimation of many Southwestern historians and ranchers and others who knew of him through relatives and friends, one of the most powerful men in the entire region in his time. His reputation and influence were known all over Southern New Mexico and Texas and throughout the border country with Mexico. (When the late James Michener was researching his book on Texas, one of the

first things he did was visit the village of Fulfurrias so that he could go to the burial site and shrine of Don Pedrito Jaramillo, not far from I.Q.'s ranchito.) Like El Niño Fidencio, Don Pedrito was so widely known and respected that he also became a folk saint even while he was alive, an unusual phenomenon – that is, he was a saint by common acclaim of the people, rather than a canonized saint of the church. As with El Niño, people prayed to Don Pedrito for succor from illnesses and to combat their misfortunes. Even to this day, visitors can go see Don Pedrito's shrine to pray or meditate, or to petition for various needs and desires to be fulfilled, or to seek cures. At times in the past, there have even been *curanderos* at Don Pedrito's shrine offering their spiritual healing or herbal medications to the dozens of daily visitors.

During my own earlier visits to this small shrine, which burned down and was later rebuilt, and is located on a ranch called Los Olmos (the Elms), I saw crutches tucked in the ceiling beams of the little chapel that is devoted to Don Pedrito. Handwritten thank-you cards are pinned on the wall, as well as photos of all sorts of people; driver's licenses with petitioners' photos are also pinned and taped to the wall, and hundreds of candles are always lit in the interior of the chapel, emitting an almost religious warmth and light. People would actually go into the chapel during the colder months to warm up because of the heat from the hundreds of candles that are kept burning within.

In the 1960s, when I first visited the shrine, it was cared for by a man named Horacio Villarreal. Horacio was always smiling, greeting visitors, and sharing stories about the life of Don Pedrito with anyone who asked. In particular, Horacio would always welcome *curanderos* to the shrine, because they usually came to Los Olmos to perform healings and give advice in the name of Don Pedrito. To this day, one can visit

this historical shrine and feel healthier simply by virtue of the experience of seeing Don Pedrito's tomb and praying at the shrine.

The scene at Don Pedrito's shrine in Los Olmos, Texas (outside of Falfurrias), with its amulets, herbs, and candles, reminds me rather strikingly of Chimayo, the famous shrine in New Mexico (built in 1813), which is annually visited by a quarter of a million people seeking cures for rheumatism, cancer, and other illnesses. I have myself joined hundreds of pilgrims that walk a few miles every Good Friday to the shrine in preparation for Easter. This experience renews and enlivens my spirit for the spring season. Many of the faithful who come to Chimayo actually eat dirt from the sanctuary, mixed with water; they drink it and rub it on their bodies – acts strongly reminiscent of Don Pedrito's own frequent prescription of mud poultices and the like. Pilgrims to Chimayo literally take dirt from a hole in the floor of the *santuario* and put it in baggies to take home with them, to be mixed with water and ingested for its curative powers or to rub on aching body parts.

Both the South Texas shrine to Don Pedrito and the Chimayo site in New Mexico have had an impact in my own life – on a personal basis, and in observing people's faith being used as a means to heal their bodies. I found that my own belief in the connection between body and soul was strengthened greatly by observing the way people responded to visits to the famous shrines at Los Olmos and at Chimayo.

Whenever I sat on that porch in South Texas with my friend I.Q., I was strongly reminded by his story-telling abilities of the narrative flair of my own father, Don Lico. I.Q. has made it something of a life-calling to collect the stories of Don Pedrito that are circulated among the ranchers who live in the neighborhood of the shrine. One of I.Q.'s

many stories about Don Pedrito is about how the U.S. Postal authorities once investigated Don Pedrito for fraud. They did this because there was more mail going out from Don Pedrito alone than there were stamps sold at the Falfurrias-area post office, which aroused the suspicions of the authorities. So they paid Don Pedrito a visit in his little hut.

In Don Pedrito's humble little home, the postal authorities discovered that Don Pedrito had a barrel full of stamps from all over. The value of the stamps and self-addressed envelopes mailed to him by his followers came to over \$900, more than the average annual salary of farmers and ranchers of the area. This indicated the immense popularity and renown of this healer, who drew requests from all over the Southwest and even all over America for advice on how to solve health problems. With these requests came stamps from people who wanted to ensure that their requests were answered.

The job of answering these letters fell to Severiano Barrera, the supposedly adopted son of Don Pedrito, since Don Pedrito could not read or write. Unfortunately, Severiano could not keep up with the huge quantity of mail that came to Don Pedrito, and many petitions for aid were left unanswered. Nevertheless, Don Pedrito had committed no crime in receiving and collecting these petitions, so he was cleared by the postal authorities of any wrongdoing.

Another of I.Q.'s stories involved Don Pedrito's sojourn from his small rural setting to the city of San Antonio, Texas, where Don Pedrito's presence caused a riot due to the large number of people who wanted to see him. Ironically, the local police arrested the peaceful saint-like Don Pedrito for having caused the riot, but then released him when they realized that they could level no charge against him and that his sole purpose in being in the city was to help the sick free of charge.

I.Q. seemed to know much about the history of Don Pedrito before he came to America, in spite of the fact that Don Pedrito was already 52 when he came to Falfurrias, Texas, from Mexico in 1881. One detail that seems to belie Don Pedrito's saintly reputation was that he had come from the state of Jalisco in Mexico, to the United States at an earlier time when he was actually bootlegging whiskey in Texas. But later, when he was back in Mexico, he vowed that he would leave his homeland for good if his mother died of an illness that he had hoped and prayed that she would survive. Therefore, when Don Pedrito's mother did die, he followed through on his vow and exiled himself from his homeland to Texas. Don Pedrito thus seems to have been a strangely conflicted man, at least early in his career, and in some ways he is a bit reminiscent of St. Augustine of Hippo, in that he led an early life of license followed by a renunciation of this life.

Sometime just before his trip to Texas, the story has it, Don Pedrito fell from his horse, since he was not a very good cowboy, and broke his nose so severely that he almost lost it. While he was experiencing the delirium and pain of his injury, Don Pedrito had a vision that told him that he had a *don*, a "gift" to heal people. This vision also told him that in order to cure his badly injured nose, he would need to bathe it in a poultice of mud, which he would leave on for a period of time to protect and soothe his injury, and that during his recovery he would also need to drink much water. This treatment seemed to work, although his nose was forever afterward canted to one side and bore a rather dramatic slashing scar along the bridge. Following the directive of his vision, which had told him that due to his *don* he would need to spend the rest of his life healing sick and injured people, Don Pedrito immediately began to ply his new trade in Mexico, and his reputation as a healer subsequently followed him to Texas, where,

reformed from his previous illegal activities and fired with a new-found, almost evangelical fervor as a healer, he set up shop as a *curandero*, since there were few physicians in the area.

This story perhaps explains why so many of Don Pedrito's prescribed cures for supplicants who came to him seeking relief involved both water and mud. As I.Q. tells it, it seemed that most of Don Pedrito's cures involved some combination of water and soil and odd numbers. For example, one surviving prescription reads as follows: "Drink seven glasses of water a day for five weeks, beginning at sunrise, and go by the river and bathe at least three times a week at sunrise and sunset for nine weeks, using this special blessed and magical soap."

My own surmise about this use of water and mud is that because so many of his supplicants were very poor, and because there was a great draught going on during much of the time he practiced, many people may not have been drinking enough water or bathing often enough to be as healthy or clean as they might be. Water was, in spite of the draught, cost-free and readily available in the quantities necessary for a cure, and in a way I think Don Pedrito may have also intended to test people's faith by prescribing the simplest of cures. Don Pedrito, I believe – and I.Q. has said as much, too – also may have been a great believer in the power of the mind over the body, and may have understood something about the placebo effect without necessarily having medical knowledge of such a phenomenon. Also, hygiene during that time and in that impoverished part of the country was not well understood, and people may not have used water often enough to cleanse themselves and prevent infections, especially considering how scarce water was at times, or how scarce indoor plumbing was.

Another thing to keep in mind, too, as a factor in the efficacy of the mud treatment, is the high saline content of the soil around Falfurrias – as well as the abundance of other minerals such as calcium and iron that may have had beneficial effects when applied as a poultice or when people took mud baths.

Usually, Don Pedrito would ask that his patients take prescribed amounts of water over ordained periods of time. Often, a patient would be told to drink seven glasses of water daily for three months, beginning at sunrise and ending at sunset – and to begin each day by taking a bath using “mystery soap” that Don Pedrito would provide. (The soap was actually ordinary soap, but in keeping with his practice of adding an element of “magic” to the treatment, Don Pedrito called it “mystery soap.”) Again, my feeling is that, then as now, people were probably not drinking enough water on a daily basis to keep themselves properly hydrated; they were probably also not practicing healthy hygiene as often as they should have.

In prescribing simple hygiene and hydration to keep people healthy, Don Pedrito was once again probably ahead of his time.

“Cheo,” I.Q. said, pausing in his story and looking at me significantly, “this was a man who could not read or write.”

As I have already related above, Don Pedrito’s problem of corresponding with his many petitioners was (partly) solved by his timely purported adoption of a boy named Severiano Barrera, who had learned how to read and write. As the story goes, Severiano Barrera was a gift from a couple who were so grateful to Don Pedrito for his treatment that they gave him their own son to raise. Whether this is true or not nobody has been



able to substantiate; it does square, however, with the fact that Don Pedrito never married, and with the fact that the Barreras are listed as Don Pedrito's descendants.

“Imagine the gratitude of these simple people, Cheo,” I.Q. said to me. “Can you imagine being so grateful to somebody for saving you or for easing your pain that you would give him your child?”

One of the gifts that Don Pedrito possessed as a healer which makes him similar to El Niño was his psychic powers. Many of my friend I.Q.'s stories about Don Pedrito tell how the great healer was actually able to persuade his more skeptical patients of his special abilities by demonstrating that he could read their minds. For example, among I.Q.'s tales are stories of how some patients came to Don Pedrito suffering from *susto*, or magical fright, who did not tell the healer what had caused their trauma – and yet he was able to tell them what had caused their *susto*, purportedly by reading their minds. This ability was said to be one that he shared with two other great *curanderos*, El Niño Fidencio and Teresita, and involved not only mind-reading, but also other special psychic powers, including the ability to see into the past and future without being given any specifics about the person or persons for whom the reading was being performed.

I.Q. liked to talk about how Don Pedrito also had a wonderful sense of humor, just as El Niño did, that was sometimes demonstrated in his cures.

“Don Pedrito was something of a jokester, Cheo, and he would use pranks to test people's faith in his authority,” I.Q. said. “Once a woman who suffered from migraines sent an emissary instead of coming personally. Don Pedrito was bothered by this – by the fact that the woman did not condescend to come herself – and so he told the woman who came on behalf of the migraine-sufferer that the patient would need to cut off her

head and feed it to pigs. When the headache-sufferer heard Don Pedrito's response, the story has it that she was so angry that she never suffered from another migraine again! Another version of this story has it that Don Pedrito told the woman to dip her head in a bucket of water before going to sleep and then when she woke up, to put a crushed tomato in each shoe. In fact, many of the cures that Don Pedrito prescribed were allegedly so embarrassing that the patients refused to reveal them to anyone!"

According to I.Q., there were other stories that Don Pedrito would sometimes even prescribe large amounts of tequila to patients at times – and that this prescription worked. Actually, the tequila was used to cleanse infected wounds – with the remaining liquid consumed by the patient. At times, he prescribed tequila for severe depression and stress. Both Don Pedrito and El Niño had also been known at times to prescribe red wine, which is known now to dilate arteries and reduce cholesterol.

Another story has a man who swallowed a grass burr while drinking water suffering from great pain and discomfort in his intestines.

"A certain Dr. Sagg wanted to perform an operation to relieve the pain without knowing what the cause of the pain and discomfort was," I.Q. told me, "so the patient went to Don Pedrito for a second opinion. Don Pedrito prescribed large amounts of salt water. The man followed through and vomited up the burr which supposedly had already sprouted leaves, and experienced immediate relief from his pain. Needless to say, the surgery was no longer necessary." I.Q. punctuated stories like this one with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

Listening to I.Q.'s many stories about Don Pedrito reinforced my belief that faith plays a large role in healing. Even in modern, conventional medicine, if we don't believe

in the physician, we are sometimes not healed; we have all heard of people who fight illnesses with positive attitudes who survive against all odds. Conversely, sometimes we also hear tragic tales of patients who perish in spite of the fact that they have relatively routine illnesses or conditions, because they are already resigned to their demise. The power of the mind is very important. It may even be the case that something as simple as drinking several glasses of water daily may cure us of certain conditions of the kidneys and of other bodily organs that we would otherwise spend a great deal of money to get rid of by seeking expensive medical treatments.

Maybe this belief in the power of the mind as regards the body can best be summed up with a frequently cited admonition of Don Pedrito: “I can help you if you believe in me, but if you don’t believe in me, you had best go elsewhere.”

Even in conventional modern medicine, many doctors have come to believe that this same admonition applies.