



## Mud & Mercy

Held by the Earth, Healed by the Heat

BY DIANNA VAGIANOS MILLER

THE FIRST TIME THAT I KNELT AND CRAWLED into the mud hut I knew that I was crawling into the earth womb, the one that would take me back into herself. My cousin invited me to a sacred lodge ceremony after September 11th. Sitting in the low structure with a central pit, mud floor and a dome of tree limbs and coverings, I was scared. In the round darkness, only my green towel separated my body from the cold hardening earth. Would the earth mother

accept me the way that I was: broken? When I asked for a cleansing, would the mud world heal me? Could I be honest with myself and pull out the muck that had rooted itself deeply into my body and heart?

Once everyone had crawled through the low entrance and seated themselves in a circle, the fire keeper brought in stone people that had been heating up beneath burning firewood for a few hours. "Welcome grand-

father," the people whispered after each stone was laid into the central pit. "Welcome grandmother." Women sprinkled ground sage and sweetgrass onto the stones, and the herbs burned orange, singing in the darkness, releasing their healing scent to our lungs. After the bucket of water was passed to Bruce, who would be pouring water on the hot stones, the flap that served as a door was closed and we all sat in darkness.

It was time to feel this unexplained force, this Wankan Tanka, Great Spirit, and let him undo all the twisting pain and tangled emotions that I allowed into my body after my self-image had been chipped away with what I loved most: words. I was 29 years old and had begun to reject my Greek family's dynamics and woe-ful choruses. There was a struggle going on as I pulled away to a place of privacy, a place of my own identity, and I felt torn between the love of family and the adult dance of seeking my own sacred space. Already I knew people who abandoned their families in the name of personal sanity, but I couldn't walk away from their love, as my love kept me tied to them.

The sacred lodge ceremony consists of four rounds. The first round, that night was individual prayer. Each person prayed out loud in the darkness. I was nervous. I hated hearing my voice as I spoke in front of strangers. I heard Bruce pour water on the stones after he made

People sang individually. Someone played her drum. At one point everyone made animal sounds so loudly, the dog on the farm came and howled at the lodge. I howled in a tiny voice. A hawk screeched. Eagle cried. Tears.

The intimacy of the lodge felt holy. Sitting in the dark on my towel sweating with a community of mostly strangers allowed me to remember others in my own prayers and thoughts. These brothers and sisters, their pain and depression, represented the people of other nations and continents, humans and animals, and somehow in the moist muddiness of the experience I understood the phrase *Aho Mi'takuye'Oyasin*, to all my relations. I was one soul in a universe of beings and somehow I was connected by my breath, thoughts and actions to those sitting with me, to those sharing the earth.

The third round was the scariest because no one talked. Each person sat in silence and pro-

es are gone," Bruce said. We all heard voices inside our hearts that would become our guidance, our healing. I heard words inside me telling me how to better deal with the family. My body felt different. I wanted to step out into the night and stretch and live in this new body with fewer kinks and burdens just as much as I wanted to sit still in the center of the earth and pray. And pray.

In the fourth round, each person spoke a prayer of thanksgiving. We all wanted to take this with us. This round was where I first saw light beings swirling in the black night of the lodge. I saw blue and green swirls, purple lights spiraling up toward the curved ceiling of the rounded dome. I thought I was hallucinating from not eating and being in the presence of these other not-so-worldly-minded people. Later that night Bruce said, "Did you see them? They are the spirit helpers." Going through this experience, I felt that I was so different from everyone else. As we emerged from what felt like the heart of the earth mother after the fourth and final round we all seemed startled. I wasn't so different from everyone else after all.

Stepping out of the mud hut into the moonlit sky, I was surprised that hours had passed. It felt like I had been cradled by the earth mother for a few moments. The cooler air filled my lungs as I walked outside with people who had crawled on the earth in prayer, who released illnesses and sang their animal spirits' songs. I knew that this ceremony was powerful in its simplicity and truth.

When I went home I felt calm and deeply healed. As I grew my hair out and begin to shed my lifestyle of worry and shame, guilt and fear, I walked tall with my feet grounded on my mother, my spirit reaching up towards the evening sky and the illumination that is the moon. But after a few weeks my body craved the mud world again. My cells, crevices and curves longed to sit on the warming spring earth curled like a fetus in a mother's womb. I missed the feeling of my flushed face releasing toxins back into the earth mother. The next time that I knelt in the mud in front of the sacred lodge, I knew I would make myself an offering to the Great Spirit who has shown me how to walk the earth. ☸

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his intentions. It sounded like the stones joined us with their own prayers as heat rose to meet my body. People shared their intentions and prayers. One voice flowed into the next until it was my turn. I felt like an outsider even in the lodge, inadequate in my words and responses to others. I don't remember what words my shaky voice made that first night, but I closed with "aho" as Bruce did and it seemed to mean "amen." Water danced on the stone people. At the end of the round Bruce said that we should forgive the terrorists so that we can heal.

I was dirty in the dark. My towel was soaked with sweat that was pouring from my skin soaking my t-shirt and skirt. My hair was as wet as it was when I swam in the ocean. I felt mud in between my fingers, on my bare feet. It made me want to live in the mud, in the earth. I needed this ceremony to balance the disparate aspects of my life because I couldn't make sense of everything alone. I longed for mud and mercy.

After the first round the flap was opened, and the fire keeper went outside to bring in more stones. Once again the stones were given an offering of herbs and the bucket of water was passed over the stone pit. The flap was closed again. This was a round of praises and songs.

cessed their individual intents as Bruce poured water on the stone people. The stones mounted higher in the pit as the intensity of heat paralleled the intensity of the ceremony. There was crying and coughing and deep breathing. I sat with my arms hugging my knees and cried. I listened to the voice inside of me and heard many things. I knew that I would have to do a lot of this work to cleanse myself before I could go out into the community as a poetry therapist and support others in their own healing journeys. In this round I knew that I had to hear my heart to heal it, to show people compassion but do not let them disturb my psychic space. I became a howling wolf.

I thought about my body pain. My once flat feet were curving into arches. My arthritic hip was letting go of her childhood anger. My spine was stretching straight up towards the grandfather sky as knots released, cracking and bursting into the lodge atmosphere. I didn't know if I could stand this much longer. My face was flushed and dripping with sweat. I wanted water and food. I wanted cold air not the hot air that rose from the stones. I wanted to be healed and illuminated. But I was still me.

In the mud womb, everyone sits, sweaty and muddy with intention and prayer. "Our illness-