

ICWA LETTERS

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**CE-16
THE AMERICAS**

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Looking Glass — Introspection on the Past —

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

December, 1999

By Chenoe Egawa

JUNE 1997

The week of interviews for fellowship contenders finished on a Friday in New York City, and I was off to New Rochelle for the final leg, the Institute of Current World Affairs (ICWA) Semi-Annual Board Meeting, that would take place that Saturday and Sunday. Looking back to June of 1997, I can still remember how energetic and inspired I felt during that entire week of interviews. There were 16 of them in all, I believe, one after the next for five consecutive days in both New York City and Washington DC with an impressive line-up of ICWA Trustees and Board Members. No matter what was going to happen in the end, I felt good that Friday. I had enjoyed each interview, meeting each Trustee and Board Member and especially talking with those who were ex-fellows about some of their adventures in the field.

When I arrived in New Rochelle in suburban New York, I thought I would be able to relax a bit, having finished all but one interview. That Friday evening, I went to bed early hoping to get a good night's sleep for the first time in a week. I slipped around on the dormitory mattress for a little while before finally dozing off. The Saturday morning meeting was not going to start until 9 a.m., so I planned to sleep in until 8. When I awoke, I peered out through the blinds to see the first rays of light spreading out across the skyline from the East. I looked at the clock and it was 6:00am. *You can get two more hours of sleep!* I thought. *Come on! Relax, please,* I grumbled to myself. I lay there in bed for another 45 minutes and finally drifted back off to sleep.

In those last couple hours, I had this dream. I was standing next to a car, on the driver's side. My mom was sitting in the back seat, and there were two people from ICWA standing outside the car on the passenger side. They were leaning into the back window and informing my mother that she had gotten the fellowship. I was really happy for her, because I knew that she would be well taken care of and I would not have to worry about her while I was gone. Relieved, I turned away and headed down to this river. It was about 100 feet wide. A suspension bridge made of rope and wooden planks stretched across, connecting the two riverbanks. I knew I had to go, and I walked onto the bridge. Several others were crossing too, and I followed them. Upstream was on my left, downstream on my right. When I was halfway across, I could see that the river had risen dramatically to my left, and it had formed a wall of water that loomed up at least 20 feet higher than the bridge I was on, stopping just short of completely consuming me and the others. It was as if the river was holding back its flow so that we could pass, and although this wall was holding itself firmly in place, the water it was made of was in motion.

Two young boys in front of me were marveling at this incredible wall of water and daring each other to touch it, to put their hands into it. I knew that they should not, because I could see how much power and force was churning within. If they touched it, I knew that the river would yank them abruptly into its current.

Stepping off the bridge onto the opposite bank, I walked over to a small, basic tent. It was mine. Three strangers approached me, greeted me like old friends and told me that they were there to help me pack. I did not know who they were, but they seemed to know me and I trusted them. We broke down the tent and quickly packed my bags — two modest backpacks — and they helped me carry them. We walked a ways before arriving at a house. My three companions knew the elderly Indian woman who lived there. This woman invited us in, brought us to her kitchen and offered us a seat at her breakfast nook. There on the table, she had several huge medicine plants drying. I had seen these plants before on many occasions, and I knew that they grow in the deserts of Texas and Northern Mexico, but I had never known them to grow anywhere near as large as the ones she had collected.

“Where did you get these?” I asked, surprised.

“Oh, just out there,” she said turning away from me and pointing off in the other direction. “They grow all over right outside of my house, there in the desert.”

We were in Mexico.

I left her house alone and headed back down to the river. My thoughts returned to my mother. I knew she had to cross this bridge later, and I wanted to make sure that the water was still holding back to allow her safe passage. Along the trail leading back to the river, I found three long red and turquoise-blue scarlet macaw feathers lying on the ground and stopped to pick them up. When I woke up later that Saturday morning, I knew already that I had won the fellowship.

In many ways, this two-year journey has been synonymous with that first dream. I knew that being chosen for this fellowship was a special blessing, a rare opportunity, both extraordinary and challenging. It has been a beautiful road, along which I have learned countless invaluable lessons. I have discovered my diverse strengths and worked to further develop them. I have become excruciatingly aware of my weaknesses, yet knowing them has provided me the chance to confront and begin to overcome them. I have fostered new skills. I have traveled a good distance on what I see as a lifelong journey to finding my own sense of peace, confidence and self-trust. During my two years away, I have crossed many rivers. Each one has taught me something new and helped me to deepen my vision and understanding of this life. Time and again I have had to confront my loneliness, my fears,

and the unknown. Learning how to motivate myself to continuously reach out to new people, to travel to new places, to discover hidden truths and to learn about some of the history and beliefs of the many cultures of Mexico and Guatemala have all been priceless gifts. The people I have met and the experiences they have shared will always remind me to be humble and thankful for each day. Being able to spend time in the *campo*, among lush, green mountains, steep volcanoes and vast cornfields has also given me a greater appreciation and respect for Guatemala's natural beauty.

Ever since I was a small child, I have been searching for something deeper and more meaningful in this life. I have been fortunate in so many ways. Unlike my parents', grandparents' and great grandparents' generations, I have had no real societal barriers that have prohibited me from pursuing my goals. I come from a generation, and more specifically from a family, that taught me that the world was completely open to me, and that I could achieve whatever it was that I dreamed. Even so, it was hard for my father to keep from steering me in a direction that he felt would bring me more prosperity; for example, he felt that a business degree was more valuable than an art degree. Even though he is an artist himself, he could not separate his own life experiences from what he envisioned would be best for me. My upbringing was such that I never even imagined *not* going on to college. Immediately after graduating from high school, I went on to the university and began studying business, instead of art, because “that is what would help me find a good-paying job.” My father was right in many ways. What I learned has certainly served me well and opened many doors, but it was only one aspect of the reality I was looking for.

In my family, we were not raised with any religious or spiritual teachings, but as I made my way into the mainstream, through university and on to a good-paying job, I was not satisfied. I knew there was a lot more to strive for. I always remember listening to my great-grandmother's stories about life at Lummi and Jamestown S'Klallam, stories from another time. I was thrilled by the magic that those stories contained, yet they also brought out feelings in me of profound sadness and deep loss. It just seemed like so many of the things that she knew and lived were gone forever. Where are those teachers today, the ones she used to talk about? Who still carries the wisdom, the dreams, the songs and the ceremonies that she spoke of? Many times since her death, I have wished to be with her again. I have so many questions that I would like to ask her.

Parallel to my studies at the university and my work in business, I began seeking ways to nourish my spirit, using my own heritage as a doorway to learn about another kind of knowledge. On an innate level, I knew that it was an important part of who I was and to ignore it would be to suffer. More than from my own tribe, I

learned from other tribes in the United States, Mexico, Central and South America. At home, I began to go to sweat lodge and Native American Church ceremonies. In those ceremonies I learned songs, prayers, and how to express myself from the heart. I would also listen to others and learn from what they shared. Through this kind of education, I began to understand how we, as human beings, have the ability of dreaming ourselves into the kind of individuals that we envision, and that there is great value in discovering and following one's own truth.

When I embarked on this fellowship, I carried with me the strength and support of family and friends. I recall another significant dream I had around Christmas of 1998. In that dream, I was washing my hair. As the water from the tap ran over my head, I heard this song — one of our ceremonial prayer songs — way off in the distance, accompanied by the deep resonating sound of the water drum. At first, it was faint, then it got louder and louder as if it were approaching me. Through the running water I tried to distinguish from which direction this song was coming, when all of a sudden, I heard the high, clear sound of the eagle-bone whistle. It blew four times, one time for each of the four directions. When I turned off the water to hear the song better, it stopped. I remember thinking that the song, the drum and the eagle-bone whistle had traveled to me through the water. Two days later, I spoke to a friend of mine from home on the phone and I told her about the dream. She said that on that same night she had been in an all-night ceremony and that she and other friends of mine had been remembering me and sending me prayers.

I started this fellowship with the plan of investigating business-development projects in Mayan communities, but my attention was drawn to many other areas. When I look back on these two years now, I do see a common thread that runs through the accumulation of all my experiences and that this time has been an important continuation of a path, that on some level, I had already chosen. What I have been looking for is the knowledge, skills and understanding of modern and traditional value systems, those teachings that will show me how to successfully live and work in both. In "Indian Country" back home in the United States, some people call this the ability to walk in both worlds, to know how to move in mainstream and traditional circles, to understand the mindset and beliefs of both, and to thus serve as a bridge between them.

On a more practical side, this fellowship has helped me develop and round out many skills that will benefit me from a professional standpoint. Living in Central America has taught me to be more adaptable, flexible, patient and compassionate. It has also allowed me to polish and perfect my Spanish-speaking language ability. My perspective of this world, with all of its diverse cultural, political and religious forms of expression, has become much fuller. I remember the words of a dear friend of mine, who often told me to go outside myself when I

was lost in feelings of despair. "You only have to change your focus," he would tell me. "Step outside of your own small world and look at the big picture. You will see that your problems are minute in comparison." Living abroad has helped me immensely in this regard. It is as if life itself has opened up to me and shown me how to observe and examine each situation from many different angles. Going through feelings of isolation and loneliness and coming out the other side has taught me how to find comfort and security within. It has helped me to feel more at home in the world. I know that if I ever return to Mexico and Guatemala, I will be completely at ease in both countries, because I have learned how to live and operate within those systems.

Writing has its practical side too; although learning how to write is so much more than simply practical. The art of writing has not come easy to me. In fact, I have to admit that even though I have never given birth, I often wondered if it was similar to producing a newsletter. Almost every time I sent an article to Peter Martin via email, I went through internal turmoil and anxiously waited for his response. Part of this stress was created by the fact that I never knew who my audience was, and aside from family, close friends and very few ICWA members, I did not know how the newsletters were being received. It was a major challenge to write with so little feedback. At times, it was frustrating and even maddening, yet something good did come from this lacking. Eventually, I had to learn how to write for myself. If nobody was going to respond, then at least I knew that what I wrote had to be important enough to me at that point in time. I have been continuously surprised to discover how difficult it has been to reach that point of expressing myself, how I really feel, without worrying about what everyone else thinks. This fellowship is so rare in that regard. I do not know many other instances where a person is completely free to follow his/her heart and intuition. But even though I knew that this was a major part of this fellowship, it was still hard for me to break away from the need to fulfill expectations. In this case — with the exception of newsletters, expense reports and semi-annual reports — nobody had ever even mentioned any other expectations of me, yet I felt them just the same. I realized how ingrained this way of thinking had become for me, to try and accomplish what others would see as success and not give myself any credit for finding out what success meant to me on a personal level. This fellowship has allowed me to reform that way of thinking and become much freer to follow my own path. In this way, the process of writing has been extremely cathartic for me. I now find a lot of enjoyment in it.

Last, but definitely not least, my time here has been inestimably rich thanks to my association and friendship with traditional Mayan *Ajq'ij* [healers and spiritual guides] and Mayan people of the highlands, in general. From the onset of this fellowship I hoped to learn about Mayan traditions and spiritual beliefs. I have been fortu-

nate. During my time in Guatemala, I have come to know many Mayan people who still maintain and practice their traditions albeit often cloaked in, or mixed with Catholicism. They have shared their teachings and experiences with me and I, in turn, have been able to share some of our ways from the North, as well as stories of my travels in the South. Our exchanges have been significant. Last year, I was able to arrange for five Mayan women to travel to Washington State to visit my home, meet my family and participate in an intertribal trade fair and pow wow. Early this year, I was initiated into the Pocomam Mayan ceremonial ways — an opportunity I look upon as an opening, a beginning to yet another road to higher understanding. I have been able to participate in many rain, planting, harvest and healing ceremonies at people's homes and at sacred altars throughout Guatemala almost from the first week of my arrival. Native peoples throughout the Americas share many things in common, and as I have mentioned before, there is always an instant recognition of these similarities, resulting in a strong sense of kinship. Through continuously exploring and learning about the teachings of many indigenous cultures, I have been able to further define my own ideas and spiritual

beliefs. These searches have taught me how to be more open-minded, less judgmental and more respectful. They have also helped me become a more responsible and thoughtful person with regard to my actions and how they affect others. I have found that within the knowledge and wisdom of each and every culture, there lies — like a precious gem — an important piece of the truth about this life. We all have something to learn from others, just as we all have something to teach others.

When I return home in December at the end of my fellowship, I will be entering another phase of my life, stepping into the next series of major changes and adjustments. At this time, I do not have a job waiting for me there. In a sense, I will be starting over again, only this time around I am much better equipped. That first dream that marked the beginning of this two-year fellowship has remained very symbolic for me. My journey has been like that of a river. I have moved through many different landscapes, picking up something from each, rising and falling and rising again, moving towards some end that I cannot yet define and discovering along the way that it is the journey that is important. □

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