

Way-Seeking
by Nan Cuba

In December 2000, I had been researching Mesoamerican spiritual beliefs for my novel, *Body and Bread*, when two archeological sites I was visiting in the Yucatan manifested the sacred. On the first morning of a ten-day trip, I walked from my thatched-roof cottage down a path to Chichen Itza. I had seen photographs and read descriptions, even using those images as models while writing scenes. I had also visited various cities in Mexico, seen European historical sites, and studied my city's Spanish missions. But when I rounded the path's final corner, the stone pyramids rose from arid ground like walls of a mighty cathedral, and I stopped, jolted, teary. Years before, as an unhappy college student, I had wandered into a small chapel on a particularly lonely night, and sitting in the dark, I thought I saw a diaphanous spirit flit across the front of the altar. Now, standing before what had been from A.D. 750 to 1200 a sophisticated urban center covering an area of almost two square miles, a similar sacred energy felt palpable.

I wandered from one restored ruin to another, silently reading plaques, imagining pre-Columbian Nahua worshipping there: the observatory, *El Caracol*, translated "The Snail" because of its spiral staircase inside the tower; The Temple of the Warriors flanked on its south and west sides by 200 round and square columns; *La Iglesia*, The Church, whose exterior frieze was decorated with a limestone masonry veneer made up of *Chac* masks, stepped frets, zigzag lines, and pilasters; the Stone Ring thirty feet about the floor of the Great Ballcourt; *Tzompantli*, the Skull Platform, with vertical rows of carved impaled skulls; and The Temple of *Kukulkan*, named for a Maya deity similar to the Aztec *Quetzalcoatl* or Feathered Serpent (quetzal bird + rattlesnake), who with his opposite, *Tezcatlipoca*, created the Aztec world. This last Maya pyramid, usually called *El Castillo*, or The Castle, was seventy-nine feet high, but its temple on top added another twenty feet. Each of the four sides was covered in a staircase; each base was 181 feet across, one covered in stone serpent heads. As instructed on the plaque, I clapped while standing in front, and an echo sounded like the "chirp of a quetzalcoatl," meaning the distinctive *kyow* of a brilliant red, blue and iridescent green quetzal, god of the air and symbol of freedom and wealth. In the 1930s, under the pyramid's north side, a small staircase was discovered that led to another temple below the current one, and inside that area at the top of the stairs, which was the pinnacle of the earlier pyramid, stood a high priest's throne in the shape of a jaguar,

painted red with eyes and spots made of inlaid jade. Images had been discovered in various locations of a priest wearing a jaguar skin, assuming the role of God L, the primary lord of the underworld, while he sat on a similar ceremonial bench.

Maya gods with jaguar attributes could move between the day world, which was the earth and the living, and the night world, which was the underworld of the ancestors. Since the jaguar image recurred throughout my novel as a metaphysical motif, mentioned first as an Aztec mask belonging to the narrator's brother before he committed suicide, I eagerly joined the line at the entrance. People packed the cave-like passageway, silently inching higher while another line descended after viewing the marvel, our shoulders rubbing, elbows bumped. As the air thinned and heat spread like fungus, my breaths shortened until I panted, an invisible fist pressing my chest, my head a detached weight, woozy. Determined to witness what had become a touchstone for my protagonist, I closed my eyes, inhaling, exhaling, stretching breaths, trying to calm but sensing only damp bodies and a tightening; so, I stopped, then bent over, trying to shift blood to my head but finally turning to the man climbing behind me. "I'm going to faint," I muttered, and he grabbed my elbow. We descended like swimmers rising through water, oxygen gradually filtering back into my lungs, until finally, I burst into open light, bystanders oblivious. The kind stranger had sacrificed his place in line, but I had sacrificed a holy encounter, missing this rare clue in my search for an understanding of the spiritual.

I knew the Nahua believed the cosmos was unified by *teotl*, a self-generating, transmuting energy force. *Teotl* was not a god, but a charged current like electricity, and it comprised everything, creating a seamless cosmic totality. Multiple gods were only features of this energy source. Much of its power derived from the cyclical oscillation of contrary yet mutually complementary, interdependent polarities, such as being/non-being, order/disorder, active/passive, animate/inanimate, earth/sky, male/female, life/death. When humans perceived these as dualities rather than aspects of the same regenerating process, *teotl* was masking itself. Nothing was temporal or theistic; everything was *teotl*. A person's goal was to be well-rooted in *teotl*, and in that way, live a balanced life that contributed to a cosmic balance.¹

My search for more clues took me to Ek Balam, translated "Black Jaguar," a Mayan city surrounded by jungle, dating from 100 BC to its height at A.D. 700-1,200. During our drive there, my guide said restoration had begun only a couple of years before, which meant few

tourists came, and in fact, we were the only people there that day. In the Central Plaza, the massive Acropolis pyramid, sometimes called *El Torre*, or The Tower, was 480 feet long, 180 feet wide, and 96 feet high, making it one of the largest structures ever excavated in the Yucatan. Its six levels had housed the city's governors and other dignitaries. Thatched-roof palapas protected multiple facades, and at my guide's urging, I followed him up the stairs toward one.

The stone steps were uneven and narrow, so I was looking at my feet when I moved sideways underneath the overhang. As the vision registered, I leaned back, taking in more, muttering "Incredible," laughing. I could have been standing next to Harrison Ford inside a movie set, searching for the lost Ark. These ancient set designers had sculpted stucco and limestone mortar into a fantastic wall frieze of alto-relief forms and painted over them. Three dimensional glyphs surrounded warriors (a headless one above the doorway), anthropomorphic figures, a woman sitting sideways, skulls, stylized serpents and plants, towering, I guessed, about twenty feet high and forty feet across. The doorway was bordered by a row of thigh-sized fangs, which also bordered flooring that formed a stage representing a giant jaguar's open mouth to the underworld. Sacrifices had been made there to Ek Balam's powerful ruler Ukil-Kan-Lek-Tok, the highest official during the city's peak in A.D. 800. A pair of 6.5 feet statues of Winged Guards, with clearly visible hair braids, loin cloth patterns, and carved skulls on their belts, stood on pedestals, protecting this, their ruler's tomb.

Because the Nahua believed each person's lifelong goal was to maintain "balance upon the slippery earth," their religion can be called way-seeking rather than truth-seeking. And in this way, it's more like Taoism or classical Confucianism than European philosophies. ⁱⁱ Gnosticism, the early Christian sect, was also way-seeking, and like the Nahua struggling for a balanced physical existence, Gnostics wanted to escape the "poverty" of "unknowing." The way to free yourself was to attain gnosis, or self-knowledge, which might be called insight. They believed that you must go on a spiritual quest to discover that you are a child of God like Jesus. When you know yourself at that level, you will also come to know God, because you will discover that the divine is within you and identical in quality with God himself. Therefore, death is no longer a problem, but death is a solution, because the true self will be liberated to a state that's no longer dependent on physical life. Instead of coming to save us from sin, Gnostics thought Jesus came as a guide who opened access to spiritual understanding, much like the living Buddha. In fact,

some wonder whether the Hindu or Buddhist traditions influenced Gnosticism, since the religions were not clearly differentiated 2,000 years ago. In A.D. 80-200 when trade routes between the Greco-Roman world and the Far East opened, Gnosticism flourished, and Buddhist missionaries had been proselytizing in Alexandria for generations before that. ⁱⁱⁱ

According to Ronald A. Barnett, Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at the University of London:

If we compare the Mesoamerican concept of the prime deity or *God* with that of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or with the abstract first principle of Hinduism, the Aztec concept does not seem quite so strange any more. For example, *Ometeotl* "invents" or "thinks" itself into existence. Similarly the *YHWH* of the Old Testament means "I am what I am." Like the Muslims with their 99 known names of Allah (+ the 100th mystery name), the Aztecs had many names for the different existential attributes of their prime deity. The Aztecs also believed that the priest was the god's image or replica on earth...Compare this with the transubstantiation of the Catholic mass or the idea of God's representative on earth in Christianity. ^{iv}

According to an *American Psychological Association* cover story, "A Reason to Believe," brain researchers think religions are the result of "our cognitive tendencies to seek order from chaos, to anthropomorphize our environment and to believe the world around us was created for our use." ^v Although this may be true, my mystical experiences at Chichen Itza and Ek Balam energized my own way-seeking. Writing my novel helped me accept that some questions will forever go unanswered, finally bringing me to this conversation I am having with you.

ⁱ "Aztec Philosophy," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aztec>, (June 23, 2017).

ⁱⁱ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aztec>, (June 23, 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱ Elaine Pagels, "Excerpt from: *The Gnostic Gospels*, *The Gnostic Society Library*, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/Pagels-Gnostic-Gospels.html>, (June 23, 2017).

^{iv} Ronald A. Barnett, "Mesoamerican Religious Concepts: Part Two," *Mexconnect*, <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/546-mesoamerican-religious-concepts-part-two>, (June 23, 2017).

^v Beth Azar, "A Reason to Believe," *American Psychological Association*, <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2010/12/believe.aspx>, (June 23, 2017).