



**INDIE**

Issue 17. Summer 2013. £3.99

ISSN 2050-568X (Online)

**SHAMAN**  
FOR INDEPENDENT SPIRITS

**KING  
ARTHUR  
PENDRAGON  
AND THE  
CAMPAIGN FOR  
THE STONEHENGE  
ANCESTORS**

**WESTERN  
SHAMANISM:  
AN EVOLVING  
TRADITION**

**OGHAM RATTLES:  
A JOURNEY  
TO BRITAIN'S  
NATIVE  
SPIRITUALITY**

**STANLEY  
KRIPPNER, PHD  
INDIGENOUS DREAM  
MODELS IN SOUTH  
AMERICAN SHAMANIC  
CULTURES**

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## Article Feature Writers

Ceri Norman  
Eoghan Odinson  
Michele Fontaine  
Mike Williams  
Phil Cowley Jones  
Stanley Krippner, Ph.D.

## Columnist

Charlotte Shirvington

## Interview

By courtesy of and with thanks to King Arthur Pendragon. Interviewer June Kent. Photographs courtesy of: Gareth Davies, Urbane Magick Photography; Blue Crow and LAW.

## Photographers

Front Cover: Gareth Davies, Urbane Magick Photography (on Facebook)

Back Cover: Rochelle Kent-Ellis, Tsau Photography, tesau-photography.tumblr.com:

## 'Shay Mann'

Simon Harding

## Editorial and Production

Editor, Design & Production - June Kent  
Printing - Minuteman Press, Bristol  
Distribution - [www.indieshaman.co.uk](http://www.indieshaman.co.uk)

The Indie Shaman Magazine is published by Indie Shaman Limited, Publishing

[www.indieshaman.co.uk](http://www.indieshaman.co.uk)  
[www.facebook.com/IndieShaman](https://www.facebook.com/IndieShaman)  
<https://twitter.com/JuneKent>

# Once Felt, Never Forgotten



## On the Road to Bhakti ... a Pilgrimage to the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City

Michele Fontaine

"This your first pilgrimage?" I stage-whispered to a gal from my group. She giggled and nodded. After four hours of solemn shuffling alongside men carrying large framed images of the Virgin Mary lashed to their backs, my lapsed Catholic inner child was feeling mischievous. Monty Python mischievous.

In my 20 years of practicing yoga, I'd never understood why people took pilgrimages. Then a significant relationship in my life ended. I needed introspection and some divine assistance. The much-prophesied Solstice seemed like the perfect time, so I traveled to Mexico City and joined seven million fellow pilgrims for an eight hour odyssey.

~

Before we set off for our evening trek, I'd fretted over what to bring. Traveling light was a priority. Paranoid of pickpockets, I debated leaving my camera in the hotel safe as I stashed only enough money for taxi fare in my bra.

My roommate eyed me worriedly as she neatly laid out a matching TravelSmith outfit on her bed, "Did you know that at the 1954 Kumbh Mela pilgrimage in India, 500 people were killed in a stampede?" "Um, no..." I blurted. I hadn't considered claustrophobia or crowd crushing until just then. Suddenly it was 1985...

I'd arrived at the Providence Civic Center for a Kool and the Gang concert, and stood with other earlybirds by the closed glass doors to the auditorium. The crowd swelled significantly as showtime neared. Suddenly, far from me, a single door opened. The throng surged, lifting me off my feet and pinning me like a bug against a glass wall. Panic and utter helplessness washed over me as the glass gave, but thankfully did not break...And then other doors opened and my primal fear subsided as I stumbled in with the herd to see the show.

~



As we began our hike in Tlaltelolco—site of the Templo Mayor, one of the main Aztec temples—our trip leader gave us each a pack of six black and six white stones. Over the course of our walk he instructed us to assign each rock various traumas we'd experienced in childhood or at each milestone in our life. These were our prayer beads to ponder and worry throughout the evening, as we considered the things that held us back in our lives. The stones would be offered at the basilica, our destination, and the Virgin would release from us the heavy energy associated with these traumas—mending the holes in our souls—in a simple but elegant syncretism of faiths.

*Diorama on the steps to the original chapel*

Hanging low and swollen in the sky, a vermilion Jupiter was the first of many celestial wonders that night—the perfect lantern to light our way, as we hiked for seven miles from 7 p.m. to 3 a.m. on 12/12/12. It lined our passage to the ancient Temple of Tonantzin Coatlicue—Mother Earth and Goddess of Life and Death. The temple destroyed by the Spanish and rebuilt into the original chapel for the Virgin of Guadalupe.

“Don't turn down anything people give you!” my trip leader instructed. “You'll hurt their feelings, and these gifts are offered from the kindness of their hearts.” My first present was a card handed to me by a calm smiling man. This being my first boon,



*Steps to the Tonantzin Coatlicue Temple in the Daytime*

I felt excited as a kid who'd fished out the Cracker Jack prize. The card bore an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on one side, and a prayer to her on the other.

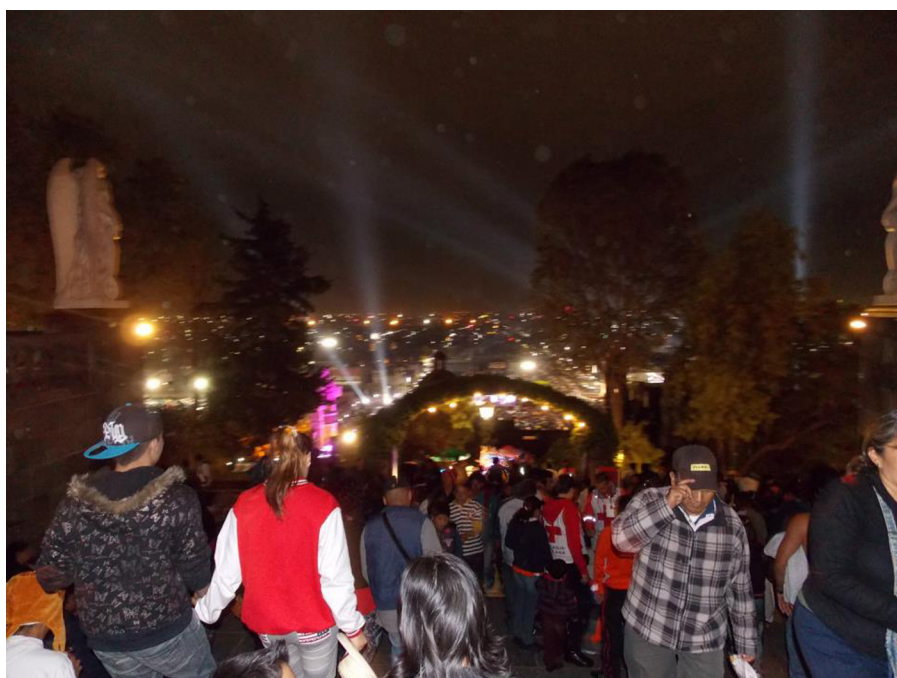


*Crosses for Sale at the Chalma Marketplace near Guadalupe*

Soon, however, my growling stomach reminded me that I hadn't had dinner. With a pang, I noticed a young couple from our group to my left holding SANDWICHES. They seemed to be debating whether they dared eat them or not. I craned my neck left to right like a starving baby bird, but soon became distracted by a 40-something local man dragging a wooden box by a rope with a rapt look on his face. The regular appearance of men toting four foot crosses on their shoulders—complete with grim Jesus—also took my mind off my tummy. It was lucky that I forgot about the treats so near and yet so far, because food was not to find its way to me that night. I would arrive at our destination in proper fasted form...

At one point my food radar caused me to be in a perplexing place. Without thinking, I'd accepted a very full cup of black coffee that...I realized a second later, I didn't want. As I hurried to rejoin my group, the obsidian liquid sloshed dangerously close to the edge. The coffee giver had so enthusiastically proffered his gift, and with the trip leader's directive drumming through my head... how could I refuse? I debated being rude to the tradition... What would HAPPEN if someone threw away their boon? I considered my options. Cups, wrappers, and all manifestations of trash were piled high on the sidewalk to my right and left. Dumping the liquid in the street simply wasn't an option—I would've wetted many pilgrim toes...including mine. My San Francisco recycler mentality agonized over the spec of litter I'd be adding to the tonnage that lay strewn everywhere. I finally found a space on the sidewalk to set down the brimming cup, and bounded guiltily onward.

Over time, the parade my group had merged with bottlenecked from a 20-shoulder-across street to a 5-across pedestrian walkway in the middle of an avenue. Diminutive police officers stood on bollards lining the thin causeway every 10 feet, providing a constant presence. The gateway to the Vegas-lit basilica complex allowed just three-shoulders-across entry. Once inside, we were reduced to a singular serpentine shuffle.



*The Pilgrimage through approaching the Basilica*



*The Glowing Basilica*

Inside the compound, the press of devout seekers covered every square inch of pavement. I stepped carefully over the feet of family after family camped out on the steps of the church, clearly exhausted after their long trek from their home village (some had walked for months). Not a single baby cried among seven million pilgrims. My mind staggered with the enormity of that many hushed children...and where were the bathrooms?

***A trust and gentleness pervaded as families slept atop blankets they'd placed on sidewalks, stairs and street corners....any place out of the immediate flow of foot traffic.***

I soon realized my earlier paranoia of pickpockets, stampedes, and crowd crushing was totally unfounded, as all the men I passed, bumped into, or witnessed were peaceful, reverent, and deferential. I was never pushed or regarded suggestively the entire evening.

We climbed up to the Temple of Tonantzin Coatlique, past Virgin dioramas one could pose by for pictures. At the top we were greeted by domed rooftops and breathtaking views of the snaking streets below feeding the devout into the basilica. Joining the rapt, upturned faces of the faithful, I entered the chapel. A sweet, light energy filled the high-ceilinged edifice, which was tiled in blue and white and bursting with flowers. The circa 16th century statuary backed by suns, moons and stars—and especially the Virgin statue, sitting atop a crescent moon and containing complex indigenous spiritual symbolism that our trip leader had explained to us—pleased my inner Pagan greatly.



*Statue of Jesus in the old chapel*



Daytime view from Tonantzin Coatlique Temple

I exited into the strobe-illuminated night to see fireworks create a number "7" in the sky...Aztec symbol of healing. With that auspicious omen, I tossed my stones over a low stone wall, beyond which was a grassy hillside—sending my prayers, and my traumas to the Mother's healing. I descended the stairs. At the base of the old Temple, I felt suddenly washed with a lightness and release. It reminded me of *hucha mikuy*, the Peruvian shamanic method of transforming heavy energy into light, refined energy. Or, if you like, the transubstantiation performed with a chalice at either a pagan ritual or a Christian mass.

As we milled slowly around the main basilica yard in the out-stream, I followed many pilgrim arms pointing to the heavens and gasped. Hovering low and large over the modern basilica, soundlessly flashing a green oval of lights, then a white one was something extremely nonordinary. Occasionally the spectre darted with impossible speed to the right or left. It seemed to be studying this epicenter of human empathy for its uniqueness and beauty in stark contrast to all the other nastiness on the planet; hovering for the longest time over the basilica. I blinked and it was gone.

My gaze traveled to the gold-framed, original *tilma* in the modern basilica—the cape of Juan Diego—to whom the Virgin had appeared, and with which he had carried the impossible Castillian roses at the Virgin's request to the local church, to validate his vision. The image of Mary had remained on the cape when he shook the roses out. In 1951 photographers discovered a reflection in the Virgin's eyes, which on magnification, revealed all 14 witnesses present when the *tilma* was first revealed to the padre in 1531, including a small family. Interestingly, Hernán Cortés, the conquistador who overthrew the Aztec Empire in 1521, was from Extremadura, Spain, home to Our Lady of Guadalupe, Extremadura—one of three black Madonnas in Spain. Was her well-timed Mexican appearance a political move or a miracle? The *tilma* has not been studied scientifically since 1982.



Thongs departing from the Basilica compound

Our return trek created a feeling of expansiveness as personal space once again emerged. The inbound crowd became threadier and younger, more exuberant; many of them high-fiving or waving to the tall men in our group who were risking loss of blood to limbs by maintaining upraised arms to signal our group's edges, and not lose any weary trekkers.

Later that day, back at the hotel room and after some much-needed rest, I unrolled my yoga mat and flicked on some kirtan music. Suddenly, just a few notes into the first song, exquisite ecstasy flooded my body like a megadose of endorphins... And I got it... Why people take pilgrimages. That same vibration can be triggered so easily afterwards! My heart expanded as if an inner sun were shining within me. I began my Ujayyi breathing and let the feeling deepen as I stretched into my first pose ... grateful for such incredible beauty in the midst of such unassuming pilgrims.

Once felt, it is never forgotten.

**Author's Bio**

*A graduate of YogaWorks Teacher Training, initiated Andean and Wiccan priestess, and shamanic practitioner (trained by Sandra Ingerman and Michael Harner) specializing in Soul Retrieval, Michele Fontaine is an award-winning author of novels and short stories. She can be reached at [MBFontaine@aol.com](mailto:MBFontaine@aol.com) and [www.michelefontaine.com](http://www.michelefontaine.com)*



*Michele Fontaine with Death (a dancer)*