

## 1998 COPECREST

Copecrest, also known as the Appalachian Cultural Center, is about four miles from Dillard, GA, near the North Carolina border. It is in a rain forest on beautiful Pickens Nose Mountain, and in the midst of the Nantahala Forest. The Cope family started it as a fishing camp four generations ago. It has grown to encompass a large complex of cabins and RC camps, three two story motel-style buildings and a central building to house the reception, a large dining room and meeting room. My purpose here is for an Elderhostel, but there are weekend packages and programs all year round. There is a pool (not in use in May) and hot tub, but no phones or television. Truly you get away from it all!

Sunday, May 3, 1998. I drove two hours from Atlanta with my good friends Connie and Seymour Smilowitz. We checked in and gathered in the lobby to meet our fellow students. It is a group of 35 and they come from all over. One is even from California. By far the majority are women, but there are nine or ten married couples.

They feed us a hearty mountain style Thanksgiving dinner and then brief us about the week to come. First we are divided into small groups and a "spokesperson" is asked to describe each group. In our group are Jane and John Bauer from Sarasota, FL. He is a recently retired teacher. At first we will study spring wildflowers with Glenn Barrett; Native American Spirituality with Barbara Vitale; and Xi Gong with Martha Sarasua. Later on in the week we will learn about mountain edibles and Cherokee medicine plants.

Monday, May 4. Glenn gives a lecture on how tectonic plates pushed up these mountains millions of years ago. They are the oldest in the United States and originally were much taller but have eroded away. This was followed by a slide show of flowers in the area. We then took a short walk where he pointed out the poison ivy and many flowers: trilliums, violets, and sweet shrub, even a gall growing on a sapling oak. Wasps caused the tree to create the gall and the larva of the wasp grows inside it.

Then we went down to the conference center where Barbara Vitale talked of the spirituality of the Native American people. She was adopted by the Lakota people and deeply believes in their native ceremonies and customs. She 'walks the native path' and feels she has no choice in the matter. She has no free will and must follow what the spirit dictates. She used sage to purify the air and "smudged" us all from a shell filled with smoldering sage. We were bathed in smoke to release our energy. She also explained several Indian ceremonial items that she had with her. Feathers, particularly eagle feathers, are important. Hers was an ordinary feather painted to look like an eagle's feather. The blue heron feather helps in childbirth. The coyote pelt represents her own symbol. While she was on a vision quest, a coyote came and sniffed her head. A vision quest is a four-day fast alone in the wilderness while you wait for a vision. Although she could not tell us everything she saw, she said she saw a more beautiful place than one could imagine for heaven.

The circle represents Indian spirituality. A Native American sees it as three-dimensional. Drumbeats are significant. Four beats are the four cardinal directions. Two beats are the sky and earth. You picture yourself in the center of a circle. Everything you see is the creator, or an expression of the creator, whose name is Wakatonka. Tucashila is all the spirits or the sun. Maka is the mother earth. The grandmother, Unchi, represents what is under the earth.

An Indian doesn't own anything except his body. When he pierces his skin or sacrifices himself, he is making the only gift he has to his creator.

There are many legends in the Indian culture, which resemble some Christian beliefs. White Buffalo Woman came some 2000 years ago and taught them many things. She and the other Lakota women served 500 people from four watermelons and three soup kettles because the "grandfather" told them to. They had food left over! Another legend is about the white buffalo. Now four white buffalo have been born and the natives believe this pre-omens the day of revelation when life as we know it is over.

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She told us about the Indian Sweat Lodges, which are like a sauna where Indians gather to sing and have visions. Pouring a sweat lodge puts you in charge of the proceedings. It is a great honor to be chosen.

It was a very compelling talk and we look forward to hearing more tomorrow.

After a hearty barbecue on the terrace, where it was hot in the sun but cold in the shade, we had a short time off to prepare for the afternoon Xi Gong lessons.

Martha Sarasua started off with a talk on holistic medicine and the principle that all matter is so much concentrated energy. "The way of the warrior" is to look within yourself to access your concentrated energy. You must sort out what is important and what is not. Use inner energy to heal yourself. Every action should be taken as if it were your last. Chi means life force energy and was originated by monks in their meditation. Xi Gong takes many forms and is for inner healing. Tai Chi is more a martial art. Our emphasis will be on the gentler Xi Gong.

After a discussion about how deep breathing can lower blood pressure and heart beat, we were asked to stand and breathe correctly. Deep breaths and hand motions help bring the energy up from the floor and up to the sky then you exhale and bring the hands down. After a time she introduced a wider stance and more involved hand and arm motions, admonishing us all the time to not forget the breathing. The hardest part was when we progressed to standing on one foot. I have trouble doing this even when holding on to a chair! We are assured that with practice and breathing it will all become easier. The last exercise was to teach us how to walk. This was the hardest of all since it is done slow motion with us all in a circle. Balance on one leg, place the other heel first and don't move the first leg until all the weight is on the second one. I need to work on this.

I slept for almost two hours before dinner.

In the evening, Brenda Sue Whitmire presented an evening of drumming and chanting. Her drums are her special friends and each was covered with a different skin; elk, buffalo and deer. Some are sacred objects which we are not allowed to touch. She keeps them wrapped in red cloth. Each drum had its own distinct personality. The chanting was based on five vowel sounds and each chant lasted three minutes while we sat in dim light. Then we were asked to describe what we had envisioned during the chanting, or what vibrations we had felt, or even what we smelled. I found the whole process interesting but did not have any visions. Some of the others are really into this.

Tuesday, May 5, 1998. Marie Mellinger gave us a slide show on edible plants. I learned that many plants I had long disposed of as weeds were useful seasonings in salads. She brought along samples of some of the plants for us to smell and examine.

Then Barbara Vitale further enlightened us about Indian Spirituality. Red is the color of the earth and is holy. Things wrapped in red should not be touched. Fringed things are also holy because as you walk they move the air and remove negative energy. Women wear long skirts because they live in the center of the circle where there is great energy.

There are seven sacred rites: The Sweat Lodge, Sundance, Making of a Relative (adoption ceremony), Pipe ceremony, preparing a girl for Womanhood, Throwing of the Ball and the Vision Quest. Various objects were passed around. They are all considered alive: feathers, stones and knife. We were asked to experience their energy.

A medicine wheel or astrology chart is a large circle. East is the most sacred direction and its color is yellow. It is the direction of enlightenment. To the east is the morning sun or star, which brings hope and faith. The Elk "holder of the vision" is east. So is the spider and Ictari the

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trickster, who makes you say, "Why did I do that". Grandmother spider shows you the inner connection of all the 144 directions on the wheel. East also has the coyote, another trickster who convinces you to always look for the silver lining.

All that is gentle lives in the south where red is the color. Here is the deer (unconditioned love), heron, and rabbit. This is where you let go of your pride and is the road to an afterlife. In the south you communicate with the dead.

West is black and the healing direction. There are thunder beings and lightning and rain to stop the fire. Trees struck by lightning are powerful energy. Here lives the bear that eats the medicine herbs. He also hibernates because healing is done inwardly.

North is white and wisdom: White Buffalo Woman, Eagles, Buffalo, Wizards, and Crane. All the powerful animals live in the north,

By staying in the middle of the wheel, you achieve balance from all four directions. We are told to collect five stones and a stick or wand to make our own wheel.

After lunch we went down to the trout farm to catch our own dinner and then it was time for two hours of Xi Dong. Those naps before dinner are becoming a habit.

After dinner Barbara Vitale and her helpers held a pipe ceremony for us. The pipe is the most sacred object and when you smoke it, if you make a prayer it will come true. Each of us was had an opportunity to smoke the pipe. Then we had a question period and were told more experiences Barbara had had while "walking the way". She is sure I have a Native American ancestry. I am just as sure I do not. My coloring seems to come from my French/German heritage. When I go to the Middle East I am always accepted as one of them! It is a cross I bear.

Wednesday, May 7, 1998. Pancakes followed by Glen and a slide show of wildflowers and animals of the Appalachians. Then we took a nature walk and admired the many wildflowers in bloom: trillium, wild geraniums, violets, ladies slippers, wild azaleas, and mountain laurel. Copecrest is surrounded by a beautiful wood, which has been maintained in its wild state.

The main program of the day was a ride up the mountain on the Wildcat Express, a four-wheel track drive. We enjoyed the lovely vista through the trees. About halfway up we disembarked and were smudged before going down a tanbark single-file path to a sacred Cherokee cave. The woods were beautiful. A sacred tree with its heart rotted out as along the way. We were invited to make a prayer. Many ash trees had their roots wrapped around boulders and there were cavities in the trees where fairies were supposed to live.

Barbara Vitale led the way to purify what was there. It was a fairly steep way down and toward the end someone had built stairs to help us. The cave was spectacular. A rushing stream and a huge overhang were created in an ancient earthquake. We were told it was a shaman's burial cave. I also heard it was where some of the Cherokees hid to avoid the Trail of Tears. Inside the cave was a wooden platform open to the sky. Barbara held a purification ceremony. We were given salt to hold and asked a prayer to release ourselves from all anger and conflict and to forgive anyone who had hurt us. At last we stepped on the platform, one at a time, and had prayers before the waterfall. It was all very moving and several of the group were in tears. Then it was back on the truck for the final ascent to the top where a picnic lunch awaited us.

Eight or none of us elected to walk back down. It was a three-quarter mile hike often following a rushing stream. Fighting the urge to sleep, Connie and I went into the town of Dillard to investigate a Native American shop, but we found nothing we wanted to buy.

Thursday, May 8, 1998. Glenn gave another slide lecture of the beautiful wildflowers and flowering trees. He brought back many memories when he talked of the rhododendrons on the

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Roan. I had a clear vision of my Dear John crawling on his hands and knees under the bushes to poach a coupe of seedlings for my garden! The morning walk was canceled because of rain. Thank goodness we did not have rain yesterday!

Then it was down to the convention center for another session with Barbara Vitale. She was wearing an 'altar' with representations in her jewelry of all the animals she needs for the day. She demonstrated kinesthesiology, which is how you can take energy from someone else to protect yourself from someone stealing energy from you. The secret is to make a circle. If you hug someone and don't touch your hands behind their back, they take energy from you. Shaking hands takes energy away unless you use a double clasp to protect yourself. Saying 'Thank You' is debilitating. Saying 'I appreciate that' preserves your energy. We tried the bear hug on each other and what she said was true. Holding out your arm, you were strong enough to resist the other pushing it down. Do the bear hug without touching your hands to form the circle and you had no resistance to the other pushing your arm down!

She passed around feathers for us to feel the energy from each one. The eagle takes your prayers to the spirit. If someone dies, the eagle releases the soul from the body. The turkey feather is the giveaway feather. Used in healing it gets way down into the problem. The raven is the messenger, o cone, and represents the underworld and the ancient ways of doing things. The owl sees through the illusions of an emotional problem. The blue heron is female and is used in birthing. The blue heron brought us down from heaven to earth. The emu feather is a gentle healing feather of the aborigines and makes you tingle. Everything has its own energy. She passed around various pelts and explained the energy from each one. The coyote is the trickster and if you touch it, it will change your life. The power of the buffalo is very evident. The deerskin is for gentleness and gets rid of ego. It is unconditional love. The elk is love and medicine. The rabbit, being humble, rids you of fear.

She then taught us to make tobacco ties. You make a prayer and burn the tobacco tie and the smoke carries your prayers to heaven. If you pray to a crystal, it will advise you of the minerals you need to cure you.

Finally she had us lie on the floor for a Shamanic journey and had us 'fly with eagles'. This is a form of self-hypnosis where you enter the eagle's body and soar into heaven where the spirit is. Then you return to earth and reenter your own body. At the end she told us that if anyone had difficulties coming back to the real world she was available to help us. I had trouble visioning myself as an eagle in the first place!

She was selling some of her jewelry to help the Indians. I bought a large two turquoise and silver ring two days ago. Today I bought the most beautiful necklace of lapis lazuli I had ever seen. Another lady wanted it, but I was lucky enough to win the toss. It was made in India and some of the work in it compliments my Afghan ring.

After lunch we had our last session of Xi Gong. I was actually able to let go of the chair for a moment and stand on one foot! I could even breathe while doing it! After the session, Barbara showed us how to make a medicine wheel with the stones we had collected and to show us how to face different directions to find solutions to problems.

I did not pick the week. Connie and Seymour did. I came with no preconceptions. I had heard a lot about holistic medicine and the ancient forms of Chinese exercise, but had never tried them. My eyes and ears were opened to new ideas, which in themselves are refreshing.

A highlight of the week was the entertainment at graduation on the last evening. Tine Look No More, a young Cherokee woman came and danced for us. She also explained her elaborate regalia, which she had made for her wedding. Her whole demeanor was shy and her looks so beautiful we were all enamored of her.

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Friday, May 9. The program concluded after breakfast and we headed home.

This was my second Elderhostel. The first was to Carlsbad Caverns. You certainly learn a lot, but sometimes it is more than you need. I believe I prefer a less strenuous vacation.

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