

Don Felipe
by Valerie Cole

On Friday, I was finally able to get to a village called Oxkutzcab to see a curandero named Don Felipe. Two students, Michelle and Jessica, and a local woman acting as a guide, Carolina, went with me. We had already gone once to the village on Wednesday, but that was the Independence Day holiday and Don Felipe was at the fiesta and not working that day. So we came back on Friday, when they were expecting us.

There were quite a few people waiting when we got there. There are several huts in the area which house Don Felipe and his family, and the patients who are waiting are left in a hut near the hut where he works. There were two rooms, and in the inner room were bookshelves filled with what appeared to be various types of altar items, statues of saints and madonnas and animals, candles and books. A rather nice stereo system was in the middle of the items, and was playing loud Mexican music, probably to entertain the people as they were waiting. Don Felipe's wife bustled back and forth making sure there were enough chairs for everyone.

After the people left who were being treated when we arrived, Don Felipe's wife asked if it would be okay if the gringas sat in the treatment room while he worked with the others. I'm not sure if she asked the patients, or just Don Felipe, but in any case, we were invited to go in with the next family. They had a young girl, perhaps five years old, who was suffering from mal aire, or bad air. Don Felipe was sitting facing his altar, a long table covered with a plastic tablecloth on which were various candles, a couple of vases with flowers, mostly roses, and many statues and pictures of the Virgin

Mary and Jesus. A picture of a woman, possibly his mother, also faced him as he worked. Off to his left was the medicine chest, a series of small shelves, housing all sorts of medicines, from aspirin to bicarbonate of soda, most in the boxes in which they were sold at the pharmacy. Another chair was placed next to the end of the table, where his wife often sat when she wasn't attending to other duties. All around the hut were hammocks, strung up to be out of the way, and shoes hanging from the beams across the top. The shoes were of various sorts and sizes, from kid's sneakers to high heeled dress shoes to men's shined leather shoes. I couldn't imagine what all the shoes were for, but there were lots of them. Just outside the door in the compound area of the many huts were turkeys, chickens and dogs and several small children. Don Felipe's family seemed to feel perfectly free to come and go, and to interrupt his wife whenever they needed something. The door was of course open, if there was one, and several times someone would come in to talk with her, even a screaming child at one point who needed comforting. Meanwhile, Don Felipe just kept working.

The patients sat to his right, at a 90-degree angle to him. The wife made sure there were enough chairs for the whole family, although it was the patient who sat closest to him. Before they told him their problems, he implored the spirits to work with him. He invoked Jesus in many prayers and chants, some of which his wife helped him with. After he spoke with the parents (most of which I didn't understand), he grabbed some herbs that had been on the altar and began a *limpia* (a ritual cleansing) for the girl. He touched various parts of her body, including the top of her head, her shoulders and around her arms while he prayed. Eventually, he gave some rose

petals to the mother and suggested that she get some items from the drugstore for the girl. Meanwhile, the girl sat docilely on the mother's lap, looking tired and passive.

Next was a woman with asthma, another case of mal aire. Don Felipe again did a limpia and again suggested herbs as a prescription. Finally, a man who had previously suffered a stroke came in, helped to walk by his wife and his son on either side of him. The man's right hand was curled into a ball, and he was unable to talk. His wife spoke for him, as the son sat behind and looked on. Don Felipe's questioning of the wife, and his limpia of this person was more extensive than the other two. He again gave them rose petals, and suggested an herbal cure. In this case, he suggested that if the man's symptoms got much worse that he should see a medical doctor. During the various procedures, the wife floated around, handing out plastic bags filled with rose petals, chanting and singing with her husband, collecting the money, arranging chairs, and generally acting as the office manager for the doctor.

Finally, everyone left and Don Felipe turned around and invited us to ask questions. I asked whether he sees people with emotional problems and he told me about people with physical ailments. I assumed he answered that way because he doesn't see much difference between the two. Jessica asked some questions as well, including what were the herbs he used. Eventually, I told him that I would like a limpia because I had pain in my neck and shoulders.

I sat in the chair next to him, and he invoked the saints and Jesus as usual and put some herbs in a glass of water on the altar. He began to ask me questions about my

symptoms, most of which I had to get translated for me. I was having a very hard time understanding him, but Jessica and Carolina were doing much better, and they were able to help me most of the time. He asked about fatigue (yes), pain in my extremities (yes), dizziness (no), nausea (no), and urinating frequently (yes). He asked the bad spirits, the mal aire, to leave me and prayed to the angels to tell him why I have such pain.

The angels told him, he said, that there were people that I work with that do not like me, and that envy me, and are sending me bad spirits. He described one person in Rochester, and also said there was one here as well. He offered to do a limpia (cleansing) of the bad spirits. He told me that the session was going to cost \$300 pesos (about \$30), much more than he had charged the others (from 20 to 40 pesos each) but I said yes anyway. Then began a very involved ritual that left me light-headed and open. I probably am not remembering it in the order it happened, but all of these parts occurred at some point or another.

He began by lighting a candle for me, and asking me to buy two candles which would represent the two people that are giving me trouble. Jessica went off with Carolina to get the candles, leaving me without an interpreter. His wife broke off some rose petals, put them in a plastic bag and gave them to me with a crucifix. I held the crucifix and the rose petals over my heart chakra in the center of my chest and his wife began wrapping string around me, thirteen times around. When Jessica returned, they lit the two candles and she held them next to me while Don Felipe and his wife sang and chanted and he brushed me with water and herbs, cleansing me. This went on for at least ten or fifteen

minutes. I couldn't understand much of what was said, and felt some pain in my chest, and tingling in my arms and legs.

His wife then took the rose petals and I held my hands out with the crucifix in the palms while he sprinkled me with water and continued to chant and sing. I was feeling very light-headed and he appeared to be almost in a trance. I kept hearing, "Jesu nació, Jesu murió, Jesu resucitó" (Jesus was born, Jesus died, Jesus was resurrected), although I know he said many other things as well. Jessica put her hand over mine while I held the crucifix, and said it was warm, but it felt cold to me.

Finally they unwrapped me, and continued singing and chanting and cleansing me. Eventually he finished, saying that they would say prayers for me for 17 days and that he will call me to see how I'm doing. There was quite a bit of discussion about how this phone call might happen, and I gave them my phone number, but I think it ended with me finding a friend who could speak Spanish fluently, and me calling them instead.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, Don Felipe suggested a lotion that I could use with massage to ease my pain. He sent someone out to buy the ingredients, and he mixed it up for me there. He told me to use the rose petals and holy water after my bath, and to massage myself with the lotion. He said that a young spirit of about nine years old was coming to help me, and that I would eventually feel better thanks to her. After he was done, we had a chance to ask more questions, and that was when I finally understood that the problem was envidia, being envied, by these two people, and that it was envidia that was causing my fatigue and pain. He also said the reason I feel like

my money is disappearing and I don't know where it is going is because of envidia as well. He said they are draining my energy from me.

They offered us Coca Cola and some snack food while the lotion was being prepared. I gave him money for the candles, for the lotion, and for the treatment. We talked about the man with the stroke, and whether or not we had visited the caves nearby. He asked where we were from, and I had a chance to ask a few more questions about my treatment. I left with the roses, a plastic bag full of holy water, a plastic Fanta bottle of lotion, and the four empty plastic bottles that held the ingredients for the lotion. The wife gave me a hug, as did Don Felipe, and I promised to call.

I don't know what Don Felipe actually did, especially since I had such a hard time understanding his Spanish. Part of the problem is that he mixes his Spanish words with Mayan words, and you need to be a local to get the whole thing. His description of the person in Rochester was quite recognizable, and the idea that I am being envied by someone here as well made sense to me. There was a click and I felt like I wanted to cry because he had touched something in me that needed to be touched. When I got home, I felt very open. I've used the rose petals a couple of times since my visit, and tried a bit of the lotion. My shoulders and back aren't hurting as much as they were, and I'm starting to feel a little bit more at peace. I will call him when I get home, and I trust that the candles he is burning on my behalf are helping, too.