

The Circle of Healing

By Diana Fried, MAC, LAc, Dipl. Ac.

This past February, Acupuncturists Without Borders led a group of 11 acupuncturists from around the world to Oaxaca, Mexico on a World Healing Exchange (WHE) trip.

For 12 days, the group traveled from the colonial city of Oaxaca to the high, pine-clad mountains of the Sierras to the warm, semi-tropical beaches of Oaxaca's coast.

The program arose out of AWB Board Member Jeya Aerenson's deep love for Oaxaca and desire to help the local people. While visiting Oaxaca in 2010, Jeya's chance conversation on the front steps of a local bookstore in Oaxaca City led her to connect with Tierraventura, a niche ecotourism agency run by Claudia Schurr and Yves Chavan. Tierraventura put AWB in touch with CECIPROC, a local Non Governmental Organization that has been working with communities since 1992 to install ecological toilets that eliminate health problems arising from feces contamination in rural areas without sewage access. It is one of the first groups to support community gardens fertilized by composted human waste/excrement.

AWB, Tierraventura and CECIPROC joined together in organizing the WHE trip. This program was designed to provide a deep cultural immersion into Oaxacan traditional medicine for visiting acupuncturists while offering trauma treatment clinics with ear acupuncture in marginalized Oaxacan indigenous communities with limited access to healthcare.



Although Oaxaca is rich in natural beauty and cultural tradition, it is the second poorest state in México with over 76 percent of its population living in extreme poverty. Many of the local people lack basic necessities and have inadequate access to healthcare. For example, there is only one hospital bed for every 1,000 residents.

Approximately 33 percent of the population is indigenous, and it is among these groups that the deepest levels of social and economic marginalization prevail. The frequency of earthquakes, floods, and landslides exacerbates the existing social and economic vulnerability of these groups, and the area has a history of civil strife with indigenous groups advocating for support and fair treatment from the government.

Oaxaca is also home to 16 unique socio-cultural groups, each with their own cultural identity and language. Because of this, Oaxaca remains heavily steeped in its traditional forms of healing such as *curanderismo* (the Spanish word for "someone who cures").

During the 12-day trip in Oaxaca, the visiting acupuncturists participated in many cleansing rituals, received many teachings, and had deeply meaningful exchanges with the *curanderos* (traditional healers) who see illness as an imbalance of body, mind, and spirit.

It was a rare privilege to participate with the curanderos and the acupuncturists in Oaxaca.

We each experienced our own healing and growth as a result – I think more than any of us expected. Leaving your comfort zone, and your culture, and participating with healers who have such a deep understanding of spirituality and medicine, is unbelievably transformative and expanding.

The international team of acupuncturists who joined us included: two acupuncturists from Canada, two acupuncturists from Australia, one Japanese acupuncturist living in Hawaii, one Israeli acupuncturist living in Florida, and one student acupuncturist from Mexico living in San Diego, plus four acupuncturists from the United States.

Each person had their own unique reasons for choosing to become part of this trip including: wanting to be of service internationally before retiring; fulfilling a dream of being of service in their country of origin; learning about traditional medicine in Oaxaca; and reconnecting to the spiritual essence/dimension of healing and medicine.

Currently there are no regulations or licensing requirements for acupuncture in México.

Many of the people within the communities that AWB visited embraced the group's presence and welcomed the acupuncture treatments.

Many of the people treated were in need of basic medical attention. In every community where AWB provided services there were people who asked the acupuncturists to interpret medical tests or diagnoses that had been given to them without explanation.

Many said that even when they received a diagnosis, there was no medicine available or money to purchase it. The treatments had a very positive effect and the people treated always asked when AWB would be returning.



Below are excerpts from trip participants: Brigid Ting (Canada); Darren Spowart (Australia); Jeya Aerenson (Oregon); Guadalupe Martin (California) and Charlotte Gallagher (Minnesota). The following are some personal reflections from these acupuncturists and their experience on the trip.

Darren Spowart
Sydney, Australia

Even though my intention on this WHE trip was to come with an open heart and mind, I was instead worried about being the only male, having to be 24/7 in a group situation. I came with assumptions and reservations.

Our training in the NADA protocol, group dynamics, and an overview in the work of AWB commenced on day one. We were well informed and confident in what was ahead of us.

Our next initiation was in the healing arts of the curanderos, Oaxaca's traditional healers.

Being beaten with herbs and flowers, smoked out by copal resin, and forcibly spat on with mescal were all new to me and something I strangely grew accustomed to.

The days that followed were long and full and I particularly enjoyed participating in the clinics.

Just when I was beginning to feel my necessity for solitude, we journeyed through the beautiful sierras to the Pacific coast.

On arrival, I volunteered to be in the first group of the temezcal, a purification ritual, a dry sauna like enclosure that was a turning point for me, a type of rebirth.

It was from this moment on that I felt changes were occurring in me and that I needed to be healed too.

These rituals using the four elements had a common thread of gratitude to nature and its healing properties.

It was a practice I knew I needed, but didn't know how to go about doing. I felt centered and at one with nature and with the group.

The acupuncture clinics on the coast were my favorite as we worked well as a team and communicated well with these remote communities.

A friend from Sydney had offered some clothes for donation and it was with the community leader in Charco Redondo where they found a home and were distributed.

The final part of the tour was on a coffee plantation where our rituals were intensified with an awesome healer named Elizabeth and her young protégés. Sitting in a cold river at 7 a.m. was one of the challenges, but I somehow felt ready for them. In the end, I was surprised to discover I was leaving with my heart and mind opened.

Before the trip, I prided myself as a practitioner on my technique and clinical professionalism. The curanderos have taught me I must connect with the 4-elements and give thanks to the Gods. I have greater respect for the rituals of cleansing and gratitude that the gifts of nature give, firstly to myself and through me to my patients.

I feel that I arrived in Oaxaca as a practitioner. I left Oaxaca as a curandero.

It was wonderful to volunteer my acupuncture skills to these beautiful communities, but I left grateful to the healers, and the 4 elements of nature.

Brigid Ting

Richmond, BC, Canada

My initial goal was to do some volunteer work with "third world" people, in a teaspoon of time before I retired. I felt comfortable with community acupuncture and the NADA 5 needle protocol because I'd worked for years in addictions programs in Richmond, BC, Canada. I used intention to deepen the treatment process and wanted to share that perspective. This "healing exchange" was a multifaceted experience, but I'll talk about the clinics. What moved and changed me was the opportunity to share and integrate my clinical and leadership skills with other open-minded acupuncturists and to have our presence and treatments so appreciated by the local villagers. It also opened my eyes to new possibilities in the future.

We held clinics for 20 – 80 people, which included newborn babies, toddlers, parents, grandparents, dogs and cockerels. Our settings included middle class urban Oaxaca; a village hall in the northern Sierras; a palm tree shelter in a small community of people descended from shipwrecked African slaves; a balcony overlooking a coffee plantation shaded by the jungle, and a women's co-op at the coastal village of La Luz.

In La Luz, there were 80 people in a haphazard circle, seated quietly in its shade. The adults had five needles in each ear and drifted off into a comfortable relaxed state of mind. Twenty-five children squatted on mats in the center, quietly observed and chatted as Lupita (our student acupuncturist) placed seeds on their ears. This was our last AWB clinic and we acupuncturists were confident and efficient taking on different roles of team leader, organizing supplies, greeting, documenting, providing treatments, or watching for the unexpected.

What an honor it was to have this community open itself up and trust us to treat their distress. What a joy to later hear the women speak with such pride about their achievements – dry toilets to control parasites, generating fertilizer for their gardens, a profitable village bakery. All these co-op initiatives contributed towards improved family health and education. A truly empowering exchange of ideas that touched my heart.

Charlotte Gallagher
Thunder, Minnesota

I would like to recount one day and capture a pearl of wisdom that will easily live with me.

We left the city accompanied by our incredible guides, Claudia and Ives, and two of the curanderos/healers with whom we had been spending time learning and experiencing their "practices." We ascended into the Northern Sierras to the Zapotec village of Cuajimoloyas at an elevation above 9,000 feet. It was beautiful, a mix of large pines, palm trees, and many plants. We embarked on an herb walk, stopping and discussing "the spirit" of many different plants and their unique medicinal value; truly being able to take in all the beauty by giving so much attention to the detail. After a delicious lunch we set up an acupuncture clinic for the local people, which appeared to go quite smoothly and was seemingly well received.

We were then invited to the home of a local curandera. We settled into a one-room, boarded and corrugated steel structure with a dirt floor. We were quite cozy standing or sitting closely together on small chairs and stools. We engaged in dialogue and asked many questions of the three curanderos. They were open and forthright showing a great willingness to share their medicine and insights. A reoccurring theme was the importance of balancing the body, mind and spirit (sound familiar?) and our connection to Mother Earth. The mantra that I take away is when one curandera was asked "what can we do as healers in these chaotic times?" Her response without hesitation was succinct, "plant your feet on the Earth, do what you can, and remain positive." I am truly humbled by my time and experiences in Oaxaca as my intention was to go on

this trip and "give back." Little did I know that I would be receiving so much in return!

Guadalupe Martin
San Diego, California

I am still processing all that happened during the two weeks we spent in Oaxaca. What I can say moved me as a person was how connected we all truly are. Even though we came from different parts of the world, spoke different languages, we all gathered together to be part of a healing exchange. That's what happened, an exchange of information, of knowledge, wisdom, emotions, of healing modalities...we shared our lives together, how naturally healing it all was!

Jeya Aerenson
Eugene, Oregon

One of the things that I was able to take away is how a little can go such a long way in these communities. And how it goes both ways, we received so much joy from their offerings to us from fresh juice or tortillas to their smiles. I appreciated that people don't leave without saying good-bye to everyone with a handshake, a kiss or a hug. We felt welcomed and embraced and we had so much gratitude.

We had started the day with a community clinic in the community of La Luz. La Luz is another CECIPROC (a community-based non-governmental organization addressing health disparities in indigenous communities). They are a success story – with composting toilets, efficient stoves, and garden projects, the people in this community have had their lives greatly changed in the past eight years. They went from the majority of the community - perhaps 75 percent or more - having parasites and chronic diarrhea to only 15 percent being in that circumstance as of two years ago.

This was our largest clinic with almost 50 adults and 28 children. The children all sat in the center of the circle on mats receiving the ear seeds. It was beautiful. The adults appreciated what we did and afterwards gave testimonials about how the CECIPROC projects have changed their lives. It was a very positive, upbeat experience. They are a mix of indigenous groups as well as some African. They invited us to return, they would love more treatments, and offered to teach us how to bake bread.

In the afternoon two other curanderas spoke about how they work and gave demonstrations. I have never seen a couple of these techniques before – these are very, very powerful healers. One demonstration was more of a physical healing and the other was emotional/spiritual.

A thread that ran through the afternoon was about how healers can protect and take care of themselves while doing healing - how to stay in balance which is the most important thing. If someone cannot stay in balance, if they pick up any of the energy of their client – physical or emotional – they have no business doing healing work. (My interpretation of the discussion.) We talked about how preparation for a treatment involves cleansing oneself for protection and the need to cleanse oneself afterwards as well. We learned how critical this protection is in order not to absorb any negative energy during a session. The rituals they each used to do this were unique to their regions, yet similar. I think we could spend a week, or a lifetime, learning from any one of the four curanderos who were introduced to us on the trip.

A Rich Experience

As you can see overall, the feedback from the acupuncturists who visited Oaxaca was that the trip was very successful. The trip served as an opportunity to get to know Oaxaca and its local healers with the intention of coming back at a later time to do more in-depth training.

AWB is now looking toward raising the funds to return and train the local community health promoters AWB worked with on this first trip.

We believe the partnership with CECIPROC could provide a solid foundation for deepening of this work in Oaxaca. AWB is also considering doing another World Healing Exchange program in Oaxaca, possibly in 2012, to provide additional support to future trainees and expand local exposure to the benefits of acupuncture.

In the future, AWB also plans to support individual volunteers who wish to travel to Oaxaca and the other locations where AWB has sponsored WHE trips, to provide ongoing and more in-depth treatment for the local people.

AWB will be leading a World Healing Exchange trip to Nepal in late October.

For more information please contact Giselle Pérez at programs@acuwithoutborders.org or (505) 266-3878. You can also visit our website at www.ACWB.info.

Please contact AWB at info@acuwithoutborders.org if you would like to support AWB's WHE program in some capacity.

To read more excerpts from AWB Board Member Jeya Aerenson's blog, written while she was on the trip in Oaxaca, go to: www.awboaxaca2011.blog.com.

Diana Fried is the executive director of Acupuncturists Without Borders. She has worked in international grassroots community development (Oxfam America), including travel and work in Mexico, Central America and Africa.



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