

BEYOND THE HIGH



-A Spiritual Quest-

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ARTWORK:

Huichol yarnwork "votive" painting (on cover) — depicts the sacred Blue Deer, who also appear as shamans on each side of the composition. — © Kinich Ramirez, 2006.

Source article: Traveling exhibit offers portal into Huichol world

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BY YASEER HANDALL

Cocaine and drug cartels. Hallucinogenic mushrooms and Peyote visions. Sweat lodges and spirit quests. The Blue Parrot and the Blue Deer. All just a part of my story, a true story.

We all take different paths in life. Our journey is our own. The question everyone faces is where does the road end?

This booklet shares a short story of my quest to survive. My struggle with personal demons and to find truth!

Yet my road nearly ended before it began at the age of 11. Already pierced, tattooed, and high on pot, I ran wild on streets of Mexico City. The Avenue of the Dead was my resting spot.

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Abandoned by my father, a Salvadoran Jew.
Abandoned by my stepfather who I thought was my father, I was “raised” by my mother, a Mexican, who suffered from a severe car accident and lay broken in bed. Left to fend for myself. I hung out with the older guys, learning the art of making a quick buck and surviving the streets.



At 15, I mastered this art, and money flowed. Using and selling drugs was a way of life until the other dealers wanted me out...as in *dead*. Kids like me disappeared all of



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the time. Like trash, we were gone.

After a year of looking over my shoulder, I decided to leave everyone and everything and start a new life on the white beaches of Cancun. But this new start led to an old habit when I met the most successful cocaine dealer in Cancun. This was serious drug dealing; drug cartels take their profits very seriously.

My new job as a bartender at the Blue Parrot was the perfect place to sell booze above the table and drugs under it. The party was on and my punk hair soon turned to dreads salted by the sea. Shorts, sandals, and tank tops replaced spiked leather. Every day, I was high on pot or cocaine, meeting new people...especially the young ladies.

“I can rest when I’m dead,” I would tell myself all too often, living the ultimate party life. Then something happened that nearly made that possible. Out of nowhere, a hurricane swamped the shores of Cancun. Never one to let an excuse for a party pass, all of my friends and I decided to lock ourselves in a house until the storm died or killed us. We searched for the ultimate high. It was 4 straight days, 24 hours of cocaine and everything else. On the fourth day, my mind drenched in drugs, the walls

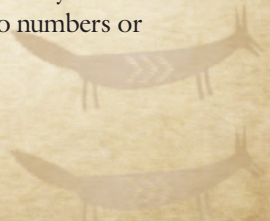


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began to close in. I felt every beat of my heart and paranoia was my master. I had to get out, even with the sounds of 100-plus mile-an-hour winds beating the house, somehow I rushed out of the door and ran across the sand, wind pushing me back and the storm's darkness instantly surrounding me. But I ran and ran until everything went terribly black.

I woke up on the shore the next day feeling physical pain that I never knew existed, yet the hurt in my soul caused the sharpest wound. Deep inside me a voice told me something I knew to be true...I had no real friends. Going back to the house only proved the point, everyone was still wasted, never knowing or caring that I nearly died.

Empty, alone, afraid—all words that never entered my vocabulary now described me. It was time to run again, but where? I got to my apartment and packed my stuff and grabbed all of the cash I hadn't blown. A piece of paper fell to the floor, it was a note from a Chiapas Mayan man who sold jewelry in Cancun three times a year. The note gave directions to his community, no numbers or address, only landmarks.



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“Go north on the road and turn right at the largest tree...” It went on like that and it intrigued me. In my heart I knew I had nothing to lose so I followed the note’s directions into a new journey hitchhiking from Cancun to Chiapas.

The newness of what was yet to come excited me. Not knowing what to expect gave me a high. For the past 3 years, white sands and clear blue water had surrounded me, but I never appreciated it. Now I gazed up at the night’s stars from a flatbed truck, amazed at the beauty.

When the truck stopped to let me off, I was picked up by a small car filled with a young family, yet they squeezed me in. They laughed and told stories driving



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down the dirt road. I nearly forgot what family was; I had to remember what it was like to be real.

I finally found the man who gave me the piece of paper. Marzo was a Lacandon Mayan who spoke 5 languages. He taught me his values on life, read history and philosophy, all without drugs. I became part of the community maintaining the vegetable garden. People there traded food, goods, and work. Mayans and non-Mayans lived there. Those who were from "The City" were called "jipitecas" — a word blending hippie with Aztecs. Soon I learned to make jewelry and sold it to tourists throughout Mexico.



Life's journey had slowed down. It was a pace I liked. It allowed me to seek deeper things such as the meaning of life. As I traveled, I crossed paths with many

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indigenous cultures of Mexico. I was attracted to their spiritual identity and grew hungry to learn more. Though I stopped using processed drugs, I turned to hallucinogenic mushrooms and Peyote. The high was euphoric, like I was melting into everything around me, seeing vivid colors and feeling the breath of the nature that was around me. I was now addicted to the journey of seeking the greatest trips of all, those that were connected to entering other dimensions to see the supernatural, perhaps a true god. And it was cool that people like John Lennon and Bob Dylan had been here to experience a similar high.



Once, I went off alone into the desert to the sacred

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place of the Huicholes named Las Animas. It took me more than 5 days by train and 10 hours walking. I ate Peyote and gave offerings to the Creator. I made a fire and wrapped myself in a blanket. I was told that this was the high I searched for. Among the many visions I had, I watched the universe through a window. The sky filled with red, orange, and yellow. Amid the explosion of colors and visions pranced a blue deer. The deer ran through each of my visions causing a burst of color with each of its steps. I saw the god of the Huicholes and thought I found what I was looking for.

But there was still such emptiness, a void inside me. I went deeper into Peyote ceremonies to find answers to





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my purpose, my meaning. Some trips were not all pretty colors and fluffy clouds. One extended high took me to the underworld of lost souls being tormented by fire. I felt the pain and the agonizing fear of people walking like zombies, lost for eternity.

During this time, there was a political uprising with the Zapatista revolutionaries fighting laws that took advantage of the Mayan way of life. We were often surrounded by military troops and our peaceful commune was shattered by the threat of violence and death.

Despite it all, I kept getting high. Part old habit, part spirit quest. But soon, a new experience crossed my path in the form of a beautiful American girl named Monique. She was studying Native American history at her university and was working on a video documentary.

We shared a love for art, culture, and even getting high. We walked through the jungles and explored Mayan ruins, our senses exploding from the effects of the shrooms. We sought spiritual purification together. Inside a sweat lodge, during a ceremony, Monique began to hum a song from her childhood. Its tune fascinated me and I asked her where she had learned it. She explained that it



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was a song from her childhood, a song from the church of her parents that she had left long ago. She remembered the words easily,

*“Purify my heart,
Let me be as gold and precious silver.
Refiner’s fire, my heart’s one desire,
Is to be holy, set a part for you Lord.
I choose to be holy
Purify my heart, cleanse me from
my sin, deep within.”*

It was beautiful. I knew what it meant to purify gold and silver. It took great heat to bring the imperfections of the precious metals to the top to be removed. I wanted to be pure. I yearned for it but I didn’t want anyone being my master.

But I was in love, so Monique and I married in a ceremony with only us overlooking a valley near an ancient pyramid. Monique wore her white linen Huipil and I dressed in my white linen pants. We smudged our faces with copal, made vows to each other, and prayed to the Creator. As we threw our precious stones down the valley

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to seal the ceremony, two eagles flew up the canyon wall circling each other as if they were caught in a whirlwind. It was magical.

The path we took together would eventually lead us to the United States, a world so different from the dusty roads of the Tzeltal people. I thought often of my friend Marzo, the native peoples, and the appreciation of the earth.



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We lived with Monique's parents, Christians who were good people, but I had to hide my altar of eagle feathers, amber, copal, medicine wheel, and hawk's feet. No one recognized our ceremony as a marriage. I also had to hide my pot smoking. I immersed myself in all things Native American, participating in their sacred ceremonies, never really feeling a part of my new American family.

I worked in a tire shop and Monique made smoothies. My life had become completely opposite of everything I knew. No one walked, they only drove. No community, just malls. No jungles except for the asphalt ones. The only thing that remained was Monique's unconditional love for me.

But my journey would take an unexpected turn at a birthday party full of English-speaking Americans.

The meal was done, the gifts had been opened and I wanted to leave. The guest of honor, Monique's childhood pastor, shook my hand as we began to leave. He wouldn't let go. Worse yet he asked me, through an interpreter, if I knew "Jesus." I pulled my hand away and said, "Yes." But added both sarcastically and seriously, "... the Jesus who brought people over to steal the land from



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innocent people?”

His response was sympathetic and genuine, but didn't deter me. I was angry, “The Jesus who allowed women to be raped in the name of Christianity?” I went on, “His priests who intentionally killed Native people with smallpox to eliminate a race!”

Never raising his voice or defending history, he lovingly quoted verses from the Bible. For two hours, he tenderly guided me, for the first time, to the love of God and His plan for humanity...and His plan for me.

I allowed myself to be open to this new spiritual path, but my skepticism made me test this Jesus...I challenged him.

“If the God you are talking about is real, He will heal me from all of my addiction and take away the pain from my past.”

I repeated the words “Be in my heart and become my Savior.” In that moment, I felt relief and a peace I could not explain. My heart began to pound and I wept. Nothing I had ever experienced before, not the visions, the highs, even Monique's love, compared.

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Monique, listening to this whole exchange was angry with me, having experienced the negative side of religion; but I wanted to learn more about this decision. Habits die hard, so as usual I rolled a joint and lit it up, but the smell made me want to throw up—that was a miracle!

I went to the pastor's church to learn more and Monique had to translate for me. Her hard heart began to melt and my new faith only grew. In fact, a missionary, speaking to the church, saw me and told me I would become a pastor and a "Joseph" to my people. I didn't know what that last part meant so I studied about him.

It would take a while, but one day I learned what a "Joseph" was and who were "my people."





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It has been a long road from being a teenage drug dealer to a pastor of a growing church. The Jesus I now serve is nothing like those misguided people who enslaved Native people, “my people,” in His name. In fact, He has come to set “the captives free.”

As the legendary Bob Dylan wrote, we all “have to serve somebody...it might be the devil or it might be the Lord but you’re gonna serve somebody.”

For years, I served my fear and loneliness and fed my soul with drugs to search for the highest high. Instead, my quest helped me find Grace. What does that mean? You and I, everyone, don’t deserve the free gift of forgiveness God gives us through His son Jesus.

Jesus makes us holy, pure before God. All we must do is accept this awesome gift by believing in Him and deciding to follow His path.

We will fall during our journey and make mistakes, but His love is greater than our sin. His grace is greater than all our weakness. Just get up and keep walking, following Jesus’ path.

No drugs, no high, can match it.



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I hope you will decide to join me and millions of others around the world and follow this Jesus...your life will never be the same.

Your friend,

Yaseer Handall

PS. If I can help guide you on your path towards true love and forgiveness, please write me at **pastoryas@hotmail.com**

Pastor Yas, besides being a committed family man and pastor, has dedicated his life's work to Native peoples. He is available to speak to churches, youth groups, school assemblies, and, of course, one on one.



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At age 11, Yaseer Handall started on a road to satisfy all of his desires. His path led him from the streets of Mexico City to the paradise of Cancun and the communes of Chiapas.

His hunger for more than just physical pleasure took him on an extraordinary spiritual quest.

The pages inside this booklet recount a portion of that journey.

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