

## **POTTERS FOR PEACE: THROWING CLAY IN CENTRAL AMERICA**

*When Lynette Yetter volunteered to share her clay-working skills with potters in Central America, she didn't know she would be saving lives.*

How did I end up in Nicaragua, bouncing along a narrow dirt road in a crowded, battered blue pick-up, dodging potholes, with the dry season's hot dusty breath blowing over my bare arms and face? The Toyota truck I shared with my fellow potters and Ron Rivera, passed lumbering, wooden-wheeled ox carts and rolling grasslands sprinkled with bare-foot people tending to the activities of life amongst edible wild plants, medicinal herbs, handmade adobe houses, earthen beehive-shaped ovens, trees machete-pruned for firewood, fields of corn, beans, wheat and rice.

When I first started practicing the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin in 1985, my heart's desire was to win a sweepstakes so that I could live in a little house in the woods, make my art and not have to deal with society—a little like the reclusive Ted Kazinski.

Chanting, getting involved in SGI youth activities and studying the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and Daisaku Ikeda broadened my life condition until my heart's desire became to deeply involve myself with people and make life-to-life connections through art.

President Ikeda is my role model. He dedicates his life to world peace and is also a writer, photographer and poet laureate. Through his example, I became encouraged to “seek out hardship” and follow my heart's desire to create the Buddha Land here, now.

Since childhood, my heart has been drawn to the indigenous life of our ancestors and living close to the earth. That was how I got involved with Potters for Peace, a loose-knit group of altruistic people who work with mostly indigenous potters in Nicaragua. In the 1980s, the people of Nicaragua were suffering, not only due to a U.S.-sponsored war but an embargo that made medicine, toilet paper and other necessities unobtainable. The potters were the poorest of the poor. In solidarity with the craft, Potters for Peace was born, lending technical assistance, providing intercultural exchange, marketing and so forth. Once a year, Potters for Peace conducts “brigades,” guided introductory cultural-exchange trips between U.S. and Nicaraguan potters.

From my experience in Central America, I learned on a deeper level that world peace comes down to each one of us. When we make a change deep in our hearts, the external world reflects it like a perfect mirror. I also learned that no matter how important a project is, how altruistic, humanistic or worthy, there is never an excuse for not being kind to the people I work with.

My first journey with Potters for Peace was a two-week trip around Nicaragua in January 1994, led by Ron Rivera in his Toyota pick-up, meeting dozens and dozens of sister potters—most of the potters are women. We visited homes and workshops, communicating with the help of a translator. At the end of the two weeks, we did a joint project. During that work project, a few of the women eyed some potter's wheels so I gave them a lesson — and was invited to stay and be their teacher.

I couldn't stay, because I had teaching responsibilities in San Francisco, but I promised to return the next year.

And I did. In the meantime, based on prayerful consideration, I followed my heart and

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completely changed my five-year plan. Instead of trying to buy a home in Oakland, California, I sold half my possessions, put the other half in storage, quit my clay teaching job of five years, gave up my apartment in the Haight-Ashbury, and used what was to have been the down-payment for my house to travel and write.

However, before I could leave the country, I had to overcome huge family and personal obstacles. I was at my father's bedside in New Mexico when he took his last breath. Despite my grief, I had to comfort my stepmother and be a pillar of emotional support for my mom who was responsible for my grandparents, but she was losing it from a mixture of grief and as-yet-undiagnosed Alzheimer's. It was overwhelming.

I attended a Buddhist lecture that encouraged me to strengthen my prayers. The lecturer explained a Japanese folksaying that a mountain is an accumulation of particles of dust, but, he said, first Soka Gakkai President Makiguchi disagreed. "That's not how geology works! Great cataclysmic forces cause mountains! Uprusting tectonic plates! Volcanoes! THAT'S how mountains are formed!"

So I chanted with the determination that a new Sierra Nevada mountain range would rise up out of my family's plains of suffering. In one month my goals were met: We found reliable, affordable live-in care for my grandparents, my stepmother was surrounded with loving support groups, and my mother started seeing a grief counselor who, she said, "saved her life." Off I went to Antigua, Guatemala on schedule, to attend language school (Asociacion de Profesores Profesionales de Espanol) and live in Loma Panda, Nicaragua, to teach the skill of throwing on the potter's wheel to Angela, Marta, Maria, Timothea and Carmensa, my sister potters. I learned much more from these women than I could ever teach them. Though poor in possessions, they are rich in spirit, live with dignity and grace and work hard with joy.

When I returned to Nicaragua a couple of years later, the women of Loma Panda had utilized their brief training on the potter's wheel to the fullest. A new line of clay dolls with wheel-thrown bodies and moveable limbs had sprung from their imagination, inspired by photos I'd given them of Mexican pre-Columbian clay dolls. Twice as many family members were now working, producing dolls to fill orders from specialty stores in Nicaragua and around the world. Angela told me with pride, "The dolls built the workshop."

I have returned to Central America every year since, usually for two months, continued to study Spanish and do volunteer work with Potters for Peace. I write and give slide presentations about my experiences of having lived and worked with these potters of Loma Panda, in hopes that others will know them too, so that if our U.S. government decides to support a war again, we will say "No! They are our friends!"

My most recent experience was this year, from January to March 1999, when I volunteered in both Nicaragua and Guatemala. My journal of these two months is a book-length manuscript, and the experiences of the journey were so numerous and intense that I can only give a synopsis here.

One of Potters for Peace's ongoing projects has been developing a ceramic water filter impregnated with colloidal silver. The leading cause of death for children in Third-World countries is diarrhea caused by contaminated drinking water. This simple filter saves lives, is easy to make and provides another source of revenue for artisans.

My assignment was to do what was considered next to impossible. I had to research the history of the water filter and related projects in various countries and figure out what to do differently so the filters would continue to be made and used after a funded project ended. Based on the new insight I would gain, I was to redesign the water filter project and

write a grant proposal to fund it.

I did it.

I interviewed the Guatemalan inventor of the filter, Fernando Mazariegos, and Dominique Wilson, the director of AFA Guatemala, (Association of the Families of the Americas), who conducted a year-long comprehensive field study on the effectiveness of the filter with more than 600 Guatemalan families. The study proved that the filter halved the incidence of diarrhea in children under five. I researched the thick archives of Potters for Peace in Managua, Nicaragua, and read grant proposals, final reports, lab-test findings, articles, correspondence—everything about the project, which spanned fifteen years and four countries, in English and Spanish. I researched United Nations archives in Managua, bleary-eyed, pulling out every document relating to technology and water in Third-World countries. I hired and supervised eight people — even though I was an unpaid volunteer. I trained women of San Juan de Oriente’s pottery community to throw the five-gallon vessels necessary to hold the filtered water, then supervised the design and construction of a production workshop for the filter. I hired Spanish teachers to transcribe the taped interviews. I also hired an archaeologist, Carlos Ericastilla, and the former project coordinator, Dora Chew, to work together on follow-up interviews with fifty families who had participated in the year-long study (which had ended over four years before), then supervised the interview report. From all that work, I saw the direction we needed to go and wrote a grant proposal to the Canadian Friends Service Committee. Despite little experience writing grants, I was determined that I could do it, based on daimoku and hard work.

We received the funding.

Many times I wanted to give up and easily could have done so. Ron, the Potters for Peace coordinator, seemed not to believe my task could be accomplished. Ron told me it would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain interviews with Fernando Mazariegos and Dominique Wilson. But with prayer inspired by President Ikeda’s poem “The Sun of *Jiyu* Over a New Land,” I chanted daimoku to break the hard shell of the lesser self and deepen my awareness of our true common roots of humanity, where all are friends and comrades. I not only obtained the interviews but also was received with open arms, and Dominique said she wants to work in clay with me when I return. When she mentioned that her uncle was the president of Guatemala, I decided to become the kind of world citizen with the life-condition to comfortably converse heart-to-heart with heads of state and be an exemplary representative of the SGI. I am striving to live President Ikeda’s guidance, to live as if I am the president of the Soka Gakkai, as he encourages each of us to do.

As a result of these intense two months using my Buddhist practice to help others, I want to continue expanding my life to create a path that balances venting my creative juices (for my personal happiness as well as to inspire others) with conducting more international cultural exchanges on a one-on-one level—creating those bonds of friendship that will truly make us a global village. We are the heart and soul of society. My prayer is that we will all continue growing together, courageously ignoring the limiting boxes our lesser selves sometimes try to place on our spirits. I hope we will continue seeking to know and follow our paths, found in the deepest recesses of our hearts, and with courage, wisdom and compassion, dance our own unique, joyous dance of life. □

**For more on Potters for Peace:**

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*The following sections are excerpts from my journal: January–March 1999*

## **WHAT IS BEAUTY?**

My friend Rayne in San Francisco e-mailed me with the question, “What is considered beautiful in Nicaragua? Avon pancake make-up or a flower behind the ear?”

Well, both.

In the city, Managua, there is a lot of mascara and the whole nine yards of face paint. Among the middle class and up, that is.

The poor, in both the city and the *campo* (rural areas) don’t wear make-up. But I’m constantly struck by how freshly scrubbed and pressed everyone is.

This reminds me of a previous visit when I was living with a family of potters in Loma Panda, Nicaragua. Going to town involved a half-day walk down a mountain, wading across a river, up another mountain and down the other side on dusty, rocky footpaths traversed by donkeys and scrawny horses with homemade saddles of anything from a sack of grain to a pair of wooden “V’s” with a flap of home-cured leather draped over them, and of course, people—barefoot, shod in molded-plastic shoes, irregular sandals of old tires and leather strips

or flapping ancient work shoes, with me in my sturdy hiking boots.

To prepare for the dusty journey, the family awoke before dawn (as usual), and heated the cast-iron, iron in the cooking fire that crackled in the adobe stove. In the smoky light of a kerosene lamp, the “going to town” clothes were carefully ironed to the satisfaction of any French maid.

There I was, rumpled, tangled and frumpy, in contrast to the erect posture and wrinkle-free clothes of these poor but proud, dignified people with precisely combed hair pulled back from shining faces, clear eyes gazing directly into mine.

That is what is considered beautiful. Pride in one’s self.

## **ENCOURAGEMENT IS THE KEY**

Reid Harvey in Africa has definitely been a “Buddhist god,” a protective, encouraging entity for me. (He is developing another version of the silver-impregnated ceramic water filter on the Ivory Coast.) A few years ago, when I first heard of the filter project, I was underwhelmed. I was looking for indigenous culture projects that appealed to my sense of romanticism. That is why, on my previous forays to Central America as a volunteer with Potters for Peace, I lived and worked with a family of indigenous potters in Nicaragua, sharing our pottery techniques and our lives.

But because of Hurricane Mitch, my interest in the water filter project grew, due to

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Ron Rivera's patient prodding. The more I learned about it, the more I was aware of its importance. But the knowledge came in bits and pieces, in letters from Ron via e-mail.

The turning point for me was an e-mail from Reid Harvey in Africa. He opened by saying that he was jealous that I was here in Guatemala, doing what he had wanted to do. He then went on to explain why—an outpouring of his passionate desire that people not suffer any more because they don't have clean water to drink.

I chanted to be able to fulfill this mission well, because I didn't feel anywhere near as passionate as Reid did. In fact, I had been struggling with my tendency to be passive, to give in, thinking, "Ron says it's hard and may not be possible, it's okay if it doesn't work out."

By chanting, I changed that mode of thinking to: "This IS going to work out. The people of the world are going to have access to these filters and cholera will be a disease of the past."

Nichiren Daishonin wrote, "The voice does the Buddha's work" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 708), or in this case, the e-mail did the Buddha's work.

President Ikeda explains that "Sincere words of encouragement have the power to give people hope and courage to go on living." *For Today and Tomorrow*, Daisaku Ikeda, December 19th).

Reid's words of encouragement ignited my inspiration, sense of purpose and determination so that I could accomplish all that I did, playing a part in opening a new stage of happiness, health and peace.

## **IT'S ALL HOW YOU LOOK AT IT**

How quickly the world can change; our perception seems to create the reality.

Life-condition. It's been said that we are in the Buddha land, or hell, or anywhere in between, depending on where our head is at.

Life bursting out of the soil and the gentle faces of the people. Riots of green, flowers, humongous trees. A great throbbing of awareness in the volcanoes, thalo blue sky, white and grey clouds bounding about in joyous profusion—the steady activity of industrious people who take the time to smile and laugh. An interconnectedness of nature and people, bare feet on hard packed dirt floor; a toddler contentedly plays with her collection of bug carcasses next to the homemade potter's wheel where her 52 year-old grandmother, Juanita Cano, rests her foot on the split log nailed to the frame as her other foot pushes the wooden fly-wheel around, the wheel bearings hum as she centers the fifteen pounds of earth dug from near her house. Juanita's face is creased with lines of gentleness wrought from years of confronting and overcoming the harshness of life lived.

With a high life-condition, I enjoy it. I even enjoy the billowing black omnipresent diesel exhaust from the sagging pick-up creeping up the hill ahead, as an embellishment on the canvas of active life.

But, with a low life-condition, like today, the Buddha land disappears and is replaced by a cacophony of muffler-less buses on suicide missions; claustrophobic crowds of desperate strangers who cloister around your car at every light, waving lottery tickets in your face, smearing your windshield with grimy cloths then demanding money;

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cardboard displays of sunglasses waved a foot from your head; woven baskets filled with fly-specked sugar and coconut thrust toward you... all accompanied by raw-throated cries of “compra compra compra buy, buy, buy).”

In the lower life-condition, my mind is filled with complaints; I’m tired, hungry, in unfamiliar places; I’m being beeped at by a train of taxis, pick-ups and Toyotas that appear out of nowhere, like a laser from an unseen enemy aimed straight at me. All I see is the dusty faded pink, blue, yellow of the plastic shopping bags lining the roadside, smelling the acrid-black smoke of the piles of burning trash amidst the roadside landfill of garbage that flutters from passing bus windows, cars, pedestrians, and gathers in the ditches like colored dandruff that just won’t go away, no matter what you do.

Gone is the joy, the forward momentum of growing plants and vibrant people.

But in a moment, an inner shift of perspective, I smile as I politely refuse each white-line vendor, gazing into eyes that are a mirror of my own. I see each of the beautiful souls. A brown face smiles back. A driver with kindly eyes slows down and waves me in. A breeze seems to pick up and color comes back into the gray world.

And the fleabites around my ankles hardly itch at all.

### **Tucked in for the night.**

The Masaya Volcano has been billowing out white columns of earth breath that hang over the verdant, lumpy landscape like a diaphanous canopy over a fluffy comforter of banana trees, palms and philodendrons. □