

Spiritual Travels

Practical Advice For Soulful Journeys

At Machu Picchu, Where the Veil is Thin

Posted on [March 22, 2015](#) by [lori](#)



The mountains surrounding Machu Picchu are often wreathed in clouds. (Lori Erickson photo)

The ancient Celts of Ireland described holy sites as “thin places” where the veil between heaven and earth is transparent. In exploring spiritual destinations around the world, I’ve never come across a better description for why certain places simply feel *different* from other sites.

I think that’s why Machu Picchu, despite its exotic setting, seemed familiar to me in some ways. I felt something there that I’ve experienced at other holy sites, from Lourdes and Ephesus to Kyoto—a kind of *frisson*, that wonderful French word that describes a blend of physical and emotional responses, a sensation that sends a shiver of recognition through one’s soul.

Part of my reaction came from Machu Picchu itself, because (as I wrote in my last post) this outpost in the clouds was likely created in part for spiritual purposes. But I had another reason for experiencing the thinness of the veil at Machu Picchu. I hope my experiences there may relate to your own journeys of the heart.

Shortly before I left for Peru, a dear friend of mine died after a nine-year battle with a rare form of sinus cancer. Rich Oberfoell was 46 and had been in the peak of health prior to his diagnosis. He was gregarious, full of life, and adventuresome, a person who laughed often and made friends easily.

I got to know Rich just as he was starting his battle with cancer. During those years, he endured more surgeries, medical procedures and cancer treatments than anyone I've ever known. His determination to live was especially fierce because of his love for his young son, Xavier, and wife, Sun Hee. But in the end even his iron will wasn't enough to sustain him.

A couple of weeks before he died, I visited Rich in the hospital. "Where are you going next?" he asked me. When he learned that I was making plans to visit Machu Picchu, his gaunt face lit up.

"I loved Machu Picchu!" he said, and proceeded to tell me of his visit there when he was teaching in Venezuela in his 20s. He described the rigors of hiking the Inca Trail and how moved he was when he finally came through the Sun Gate to see Machu Picchu for the first time. Then he said this: "When you go there, take me with you."

I remember how his words hung in the air of the hospital room, for clearly there were no more trips in Rich's future. But I told him that I would, and we both knew without saying that it would be in spirit only.



Rich Oberfoell

When I traveled in Peru, I kept in my backpack the card from Rich's funeral. Its pictures showed a different Rich than the one battered by cancer. He was young, handsome, athletic. As I journeyed, I thought often of his travels in South America and how he had seen many of the sites in Cusco and Lima that I was enjoying.

Have you ever taken a trip with someone who was not present in body? It's a curious thing, this intertwining of past and present, self and other. It's a kind of pilgrimage that I haven't written about before for *Spiritual Travels*, but I think it's a more common journey than many realize. There's a kind of bifurcation of awareness that happens, as your travels evoke thoughts of their experiences. "I bet Rich loved this place," I remember thinking as I walked the aisles of the market in Cusco, a dizzying blend of sights, smells, and sounds, from pig's heads hanging from hooks to baskets overflowing with spices and fruits.

When I got to Machu Picchu, memories of Rich were especially strong. At first I did the standard tourist routine, listening to a guide, taking pictures, and exploring its twists and turns on my own. But I was looking for something all the while, a quiet spot where I could sit undisturbed. By the time I found it the rain had ended and sun was peeking out from behind the clouds. I settled into the out-of-the-way place overlooking the mountains, and I sat there for almost an hour, just looking, feeling the sun on my face, watching as the clouds swirled around the peaks and birds glided past, buoyed by updrafts from the valley below.

Sitting there, I came to suspect that the reason the Inca rulers had chosen this spot for a settlement was not because of its beauty alone. It was, perhaps, because the mountains demanded it. Something about them kept drawing my gaze. Maybe Machu Picchu was built at this spot simply to make it easy for people to sit as I was doing and gaze upon those mountains, mesmerized.

In Chinese Taoism, there's a long tradition of painting such landscapes, for it is believed that contemplating mountains, both in nature and in art, nurtures the spirit. I love the ways in which

humans are included in these paintings only as tiny figures at the base of the peaks. They provide a sense of scale, showing the vastness of the mountains in relation to humans, but there is also a kind of alchemy that is created between the high elevations and the traveler, as if the two need each other to fully express their true natures. Perhaps that was why the mountains here had demanded that Machu Picchu be built.



At Machu Picchu, I was reminded of traditional Chinese landscape paintings. (Wikimedia Commons image)

As I sat on the side of the mountain with Rich's picture in my hand, I found myself thinking of one of the last walks we had taken through the palliative care unit of the hospital. I remembered how each step was a struggle for Rich and the laboriousness of his breathing. I realized that probably that short walk had required as much determination and strength as the entire Inca Trail had for him years before.

I had a visceral sense, sitting there, of how my own travels will cease one day. They may end swiftly through an accident, or slowly, as a result of illness or advanced age. It was now my turn to sit and bask in the sunlight at Machu Picchu, but eventually I would yield my spot at such places to other travelers.

While this probably sounds depressing, the overwhelming emotion I experienced was gratitude. For Rich's life and all he had experienced. For the fact that when he was near death, he could still take great joy in his memories of places like this. And for my own experiences of beauty around the world.

And I realized that I had been present with Rich in another thin place: the palliative care unit in the hospital as he was dying. At birth and death we stand on holy ground as sacred as Jerusalem or

Machu Picchu, peering into another world, yearning to see more clearly through the veil, humbled and awed by what we glimpse.

Before I left that spot, I took a photo of Rich and wedged it into a crack in the wall (which was hard to do, because those Inca masons were exceedingly good at their jobs). Then I stood for a long time with my hand over the opening, saying one last goodbye to my friend, bidding him to keep watch over those holy mountains. I think that part of Rich is there at Machu Picchu, gliding with those birds, released at last from the prison of his broken body.



Machu Picchu, a thin place (Lori Erickson photo)

Link to article: <http://www.spiritualtravels.info/2015/03/22/at-machu-picchu-where-the-veil-is-thin/>