



# *Culture, Community & Traditional Medicine: a Journey to the Heart of Mexico*

**BY LISA MERTZ, PHD**

*Imagine traveling to a remote beach where you could have the opportunity to expand your skills in touch therapies while supporting the health of indigenous people, where you could study with an international faculty doing groundbreaking work on a post graduate certificate or a Master's degree in Traditional Medicine. This unique program offers the socially active practitioner an opportunity to merge her or his emerging talents with advanced studies with indigenous peoples with the intention to heal self and others, and to create community.*

Twenty years ago, Leslie Korn's search for an outlet for her own creative energies took her out of her own culture to Yelapa, Mexico. There, she opened a children's school and began to attend the childbirths of the village women. Over the years, her work in Yelapa has evolved into the creation of *La Clinica* and the Center for Traditional Medicine. Dr. Korn has offered free public health education, practiced psychotherapy, polarity therapy, and massage, and exchanged knowledge of medicinal plants with the people who live in Yelapa. She began offering seminars and clinical internships for practitioners from the U.S. and Canada as a way to raise money to support the free

clinic. Now, in partnership with the Center for World Indigenous Studies, under the direction of Rudolph Rýser, Leslie Korn's clinic has expanded to include a retreat center where 20 faculty members will offer over a dozen seminars. Korn and Rýser have named their new retreat center *Casa Xipe Totec* (shee-PAY toe-TEK), after the Aztec god of renewal. On two acres of lush tropical garden land, Korn and Rýser offer a wide range of courses, internships, and fellowships, including the possibility to earn master's degrees in Fourth World Studies and Traditional Medicine. *La Clinica* still offers free health care and education to the residents of Yelapa and the neighboring fishing villages.

## **traditional medicine**

About 1,500 people live in the village of Yelapa. About 40 are expatriates. The Mexican Indian residents are descendants of the Aztecs. They are called *Nabua*, and their history tells us that they were forced to migrate down the coast from Baja during the Mexican revolution around the turn of the century. Over the years, their traditions have mixed with Catholicism to form new, syncretic religious practices.

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But many of the village women still work with the traditional knowledge of healing as it had been taught by their great grandmothers. A handful of them might be called *curanderas*, traditional healers.

Traditional medicine is a philosophical approach that encompasses healing methods that have been passed down orally and in written form, which find their roots in the relationship of humans with nature, with the local environment. Traditional medicine is deep-seated in an orientation to place. Using local plants, offering touch, and performing rituals empirically tested over time are characteristic methods of traditional healing. Leslie Korn has not only studied traditional medicine with the villagers who have come to her clinic for treatment, she also has conducted research at Harvard University on the ethnobotanical treatment of intestinal parasites. But it was living in the village and working with the people on a daily basis that has taught her to understand well-being and illness from their perspective, a perspective of 'tropical health.' One of her primary concerns has been the inappropriate use of antibiotics, and how to replace over-used drugs with medicinal plants and foods. Dr. Korn treats place-specific disorders with traditional remedies such as *papain* for parasites and abscesses, garlic for infections. "We also work with trauma," she explains, "and how it is stored in the body, and treat it through touch. In addition to interpersonal trauma like sexual assault and violence, there are also traumas associated with place or occupational accidents. An example would be a near-drowning when you're fishing or diving. There are no car accidents in Yelapa, but there are diving accidents and falls from 200 foot coconut trees or off a horse."

## community and healing

Often, as bodyworkers, we focus on healing the individual, curing individual illnesses, treating individual body parts. Dr. Korn advocates expanding our vision of what healing is, to begin to learn from the power of the community by stepping outside our own culture to exchange knowledge with others, then bringing what we learn back home.

Our European-American view of ourselves is basically individualistic. We conceive of ourselves as individuated, *egocentric*, separate. But from the perspective of a traditional society, the self might be experienced as *sociocentric*, extending beyond the boundaries of the individual, interacting fully with

the community. In traditional medicine, community is central, and the community extends into the environment. Roots of illness are seen not in an individual organ, for example, but holistically, in a wider context. Healing often involves members of the extended family, friends, plants, the total environment. Dr. Korn points out, "We integrate nature, water rehabilitation exercises, send people to the mountains to soak in waterfalls; every part of the environment is used toward healing."

In Yelapa, there is no electricity besides what a few generators crank out; there are solar panels and there are propane tanks for fuel, but there are no artificial electro-magnetic waves. No noise pollution. No concrete. There are no cars and there is no road. To reach Yelapa, one travels down the coast from Puerto Vallarta by boat. *Casa Xipe Totec* sits where the river and ocean converge, a place rich in natural negative ions that promote relaxation and healing. Far removed from urban clamor, from everyday concerns, and from their own cultural perspectives, participants in the *Casa Xipe Totec* seminars will embark on a transformative adventure. Rýser and Korn emphasize the value of immersion in another culture. We get used to looking at the world through the same window, Rýser says, and if we can leave our houses to experience other, very different ways of life, we will be broadened. As we exercise our perceptions in this way, we become more resilient. We become more empathic. We become more effective as practitioners in a multi-cultural world.

Leslie Korn says, "One of the reasons I began the internship program in Mexico, where bodyworkers come for advanced training and to work in the village clinic, was to expose professionals to patients with different physical body problems and different ways

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of practice. It is very gratifying for our interns to climb the mountain to give a massage or a treatment to an old woman who has suffered a stroke and has chronic spasticity. Likewise it provides a great service and lasting friendships are forged. When people come to study with us in Mexico, it provides the opportunity to immerse yourself in a world that has yet other languages about touch, about the body, and about healing. We deepen our sense of purpose by understanding who we are in relation to peoples who live very differently. When we bridge our differences and explore our similarities through healing touch, we are healing ourselves."

### **treating the local residents**

People who live on the west coast are surrounded by the earth's bounty. The climate is mild, the growing season is long, and many of the villagers make their living fishing. But danger does exist within this idyllic life. For divers, the 'bends' is a prevalent disorder, and a serious one. The effects of too much nitrogen in the blood, 'bends' can cause paralysis, and may even be fatal. Dr. Korn is opening a specialized clinic to train people from fishing villages to treat diving-related disorders with decompression, exercise, and massage.

In her forthcoming book, *Rhythms of Recovery: Trauma, Nature, and the Body*, she describes working with Rafael after a diving accident: "One night Rafael, an ever-grinning, gold-toothed carpenter, whose wife Lorena made the best coconut pies in the village, was brought ashore. I was asked to his house where he lay in bed, inert and unable to urinate. I arrived amidst the crowd of neighbors ritually dropping emergency money onto his bed, body, and clothes. No one needed to mention that the delay in reaching the chartered medical flight to Acapulco, still an hour's boat ride away over rough, full moon seas, was due to lack of money. And while Rafael's pockets were stuffed, his pants half on, belly exposed and scarred from previous battles unknown to me, I placed needles in his abdomen according to Chinese tradition to help him relax while he waited.

"They said it was a miracle that Rafael survived. When he returned from the decompression chamber in Acapulco, he came for treatments. I worked on firmly muscled legs which betrayed his weakness only when he walked. As I pressed hard into the core of his calves and the *facia lata* on the outside of his thighs, he talked of the terror when he and his cousin Reubin were diving deep in search of sleeping lobsters and the hundred-foot hose choked off the air at the moment the panga stopped vibrating because the generator in the hull faltered too long."

### **studying in Yelapa**

The week-long seminars at *Casa Xipe Totec* will begin in January 1998. The first, *Stress and Pain Management*, is designed for small groups of no more than eight who wish to receive expert attention and care: treatment, exercise, good food, individual assessments, and above all fun, relaxation, and renewal. This will be followed by *Traditional Medicine*.

This winter, Dr. Korn will present *Advanced Somatic Therapies and Altered States of Consciousness: Healing the Bleeding Heart*, a popular seminar she has been offering annually for 14 years. About this workshop she says, "The bleeding heart' is a traditional Meso-American image of invasion and suffering, and the potential for restoration and compassion. *El Corazon Sangrante* provides an image for cross-cultural exploration for treating and understanding pain, (traumatic) stress, and dissociative disorders.

"This seminar presents innovations in somatic therapies that arise out of three interrelated movements of the past 30 years: feminism, traumatology, and the convergence of traditional systems of healing with conventional psychotherapy and medicine. The emphasis will be on working with people who experience chronic and acute pain, stress disorders (including occupational and traumatic), and survivors of interpersonal and social violence."

In March, Dr. Korn will co-teach *Secondary Trauma*, with Melissa Farley. This workshop addresses the needs of bodyworkers and therapists who have become secondarily traumatized working with people with trauma. Secondary trauma is a natural response to empathic understanding and common to everyone to one degree or another.

In April, Dr. Korn will lead a class on *Energy Medicine*. She teaches this seminar both in Yelapa and at San Francisco's California Institute of Integral studies where she is an Associate Professor. Dr. Korn teaches from a multi-disciplinary perspective. She says, "I am passionate about supporting touch therapy healers to navigate successfully in several professional worlds at once. To do this, practitioners must speak multiple disciplinary languages so that psychologists can understand the role of touch in their own language of mental health, or administrators understand decreased utilization of services as a result of touch therapy successes. When you talk about energy to a physicist, you better know the field. (No pun intended!) When you talk about energy to a clinician, you need to explain the concepts so they don't sound flaky. However, it is also important to know the history. I examine the oldest records of touch and healing in the Goddess traditions, traditions we still see today in the cult of the Virgin of

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Guadalupe and in the cult of the Black Madonna among the Huichol Indians of Mexico. Likewise, many HMO psychologists are using energy medicine when they refer people for light treatment for seasonal affective disorder, but they don't know that this is one of many forms of energy medicine available in the repertoire of healing. When polarity therapists give public talks, it's important to know the scientific research on the effects of bioenergy transfer between healer and patient. I delight in helping touch therapy professionals expand their professional practices by being able to traverse many professional arenas."

The Center for World Indigenous Studies includes both the Center for Traditional Medicine and the Fourth World Institute. Korn and Rýser's philosophy of education is holistic. They offer learning and research opportunities which integrate theory and practice, and also emphasize the integration of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual development. Master's degree programs are offered through Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a fully accredited graduate school, which allows students to design their own program of study based on their individual personal and professional needs.

The seminars at *Casa Xipe Totec* are organized within three certificate programs. Fourth World Studies is a cross-cultural program, exploring knowledge systems, history, society, philosophy, law, and politics from the perspectives of Fourth World Nations. The Interdisciplinary Program investigates environmental issues including the impact of nuclear power, human population growth, and technology. The Traditional Medicine Program provides a progressive approach to health care, honoring healing arts from cultures around the world. The Traditional Medicine Program emphasizes touch therapies, and how illness and treatment are shaped by culture. The program links health care policy with issues of gender, public health, and ethics.

Leslie Korn has long been involved with bridging different worlds. She is a senior polarity practitioner and teacher of teachers. She served as a clinical fellow and instructor at Harvard Medical School, introducing the integration of Polarity Therapy and psychotherapy for the treatment of serious mental illness. She was an original member of the Pain and Stress Clinic of the Lemuel Shattuck Hospital where she treated women diagnosed with schizophrenia using Polarity Therapy instead of tranquilizers. Dr. Korn has served as a consultant in the trauma clinic where she has taught how touch can alter nervous system function in people with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. For ten years, Dr. Korn has served the state of Massachusetts by providing Wellness Programs, including massage therapy, to low-income residents. More recently she has served as a clinical supervisor on a Kaiser Permanente research study implementing somatic approaches within group therapy settings for people with chronic pain and illness. ■

#### *How to Apply*

*For information, write to the Center for World Indigenous Studies, 1001 Cooper Point Road, SW, Suite 140-214, Olympia, WA 98502-1107; or call toll free 888/286-CWIS (888/286-2947). In Massachusetts, call 617/643-1918. The e-mail address is <[cwislka@wco.com](mailto:cwislka@wco.com)>. See the web site at <[www.halcyon.com/FWDP/cwisinfo.html](http://www.halcyon.com/FWDP/cwisinfo.html)>.*

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