

Weaving and Planting— Lessons for Life

- *brother Michael*

Weaving

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A FIRE MADE FROM A CIRCLE OF cinnamon sticks, red, white and dark blue candles, with rosemary sprigs, salt, sugar and sage? All of these ingredients made up the Thanksgiving Fire that Elena and Felipe hosted as a gesture of fond farewell to their adopted home in Weston.

The early morning was overcast with the green of spring made translucent by the rain falling ever so gently yet persistently. A small group of friends gathered with the Weston brothers and Felipe and Elena in a familial circle not far from the Casa Guadalupe pond. I wondered, "How can this mound of symbolic elements ever burn? There is no wood. There is no real fuel." Elena took two long red candles and lit them. She placed them horizontally over the arrangement and spontaneously began to pray. Felipe invited everyone to light small white tapers from the flaming candles and to place them in the fire circle. Soon the individual candles coalesced into a hot pool of flame. There was no question of the fire going out.

Twenty-five years ago, Felipe and Elena Ixcot and their five young children arrived by refugee caravan at Weston Priory. It was the culmination of diverse experiences. In the previous year, the brothers had traveled to Mexico. Accompanied by a few of the Mexican Benedictine Sisters, they journeyed to the Guatemalan border at the south of Mexico. In the dark of night, they entered a humble temporary dwelling of a Guatemalan refugee family. In shadow and whispers the frightened refugees shared their horror filled story. They witnessed chaos, the killing of family members, crops destroyed, catechists murdered by the army. The systematic destruction of the Mayan people and their culture that was taking place was beyond their grasp. The forces of repression had gathered into a raging fury which led to the death of countless innocent Mayan brothers and sisters. They fled their homeland in order



to preserve their lives. Their story foreshadowed for the brothers the similar story of Felipe and Elena.

On March 24, 1984, when the Ixcot family arrived in Weston, this land was sleeping in the grip of a cold winter. There were no leaves on the trees. Only months later Elena shared, "When we came here we were so frightened! We looked at the trees and thought they were all dead."

Soon the buds of the trees opened and spring burst forth. Yet, in public, the family wore bandanas to cover their faces. Fear of being recognized, or of a picture falling into the wrong hands, could mean death for family members left behind in the highlands. In a new world, with persons they came to trust, they opened their lives. Friendships formed, tears flowed.

Elena started to weave again. She wept. In her village back in Guatemala the women gathered together to weave. They talked. They laughed. Now she had only her little family and the mountain stream that gurgled alongside their dwelling.

Then, with shy simplicity, she taught a group of brothers to weave. With branches selected from the forest, brightly colored thread, and amazing skill, she introduced the brothers to the Guatemalan craft of back-strap weaving. She conveyed more than a technique. Elena's weaving was filled with spirit and meaning. The design and color of every weaving held stories within them. Some were happy stories. Others were so sad. Deep lessons for the brothers: the patience required to learn this art and to sit for hours doing simple work creates an opportunity to quietly address and heal the wounds of the past. Hand-made

weavings come from the heart!

With time and experience, brothers came to prize these hand-made weavings. Elena and practice proved to be generous teachers. If you wonder whether a cloth is hand-woven, there is a simple way to find out. Here is what the community discovered.

On a community trip to Guatemala, we went to a huge market. Everything was on sale, from food, to televisions, to fabrics and trinkets of all kinds. At the sight of United States tourists, the dealers in the fabric stalls held up beautifully woven pieces and exclaimed, "*Hecho a mano!*" – made by hand. But how could you tell?

The secret? Look at the edges. Are they uneven? Are there irregularities in the continuous warp threads as they weave into the edges of the weft? Can you see and feel the continuous warp threads going back into the heart of the weaving and not the perfectly straight hemmed edge of a machine? – Weaving Wisdom!

Planting

WHEN BIG AGRIBUSINESS, WITH THE SUPPORT OF A greedy government, absorbed much of the fertile land, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides became the norm in the fields in Guatemala. Organic gardening was not an option to be learned. Productivity and economics became the rule of the land as the indigenous people were harassed, displaced, and driven to the highlands and forests. Many, like Felipe and Elena, were threatened for supporting and educating their people, and for this reason they had to flee their country.

The gardens at Casa Guadalupe, the home of the Ixcot family at Weston Priory, quickly began to flourish. The name Ixcot, in their Mayan tongue, means "People of Corn." Like weaving, gardening is hand-work too! To watch Felipe work with a machete is like watching the string section of an orchestra. Graceful movement, co-ordination, and relaxed attentiveness! And you wonder, "Maybe I can do that too!" Then you try. Well, some gifts are rooted deep in the heart and history of a person.

To plant and to harvest corn or potatoes, to weed a flower garden, is a common activity and everyone who does it enjoys it, at least most of the time. After all, if we don't enjoy it, we have the option to do something else. But when interaction with the earth is a fundamental dimension of living a fully human life, as it is for the Mayan people, those actions take on special meaning and become part of one's identity. It is possible to be uprooted from one's home and family and native country. It is not possible to uproot one's heart and still be "at home." So when Felipe and Elena planted their gardens in the Green Mountains of Vermont, in our Mother Earth, the roots went deep. To



be connected to a sacred mystery that goes beyond grief and authentic pain was integral to the growth that occurred in our 25 years together.

When we experience upheaval in our lives there is usually a sense of loss. There is also the possibility of new horizons. Felipe and Elena's life was radically fractured when they had to flee from Guatemala. Felipe was a catechist. Many of his fellow Mayan catechists had already been murdered by the army. There was loss and fear. Through church connections Felipe was in touch with the National Sanctuary Movement. In 1984 Weston Priory became the 100th publicly declared Sanctuary in the United States. New possibilities opened. Why was this Sanctuary so successful? Many Sanctuaries dissolved within months or a few years. How is it that Felipe, Elena and their family have finally returned to ground their lives in Guatemala?

Unless a fire is tended to and cared for, it turns into cold grey ash. The fire of gratefulness, the fire of the heart, needs to be nurtured in silence, in prayer, in deeds done with sacred intention and motivation. The fire needs daily attention. We know the fire is alive when we are surprised by the play of dawn – the birth of each new day.

We added to our fire of cinnamon and sage, sugar and salt, the fresh cut sprigs of a nearby spruce tree. Felipe asked us to put our branches slowly on the fire. The unconsumed greens formed a wreath around the flaming center. A luminous pillar of white smoke rose straight up from the center of the circle. We had been standing together for over an hour – or was it a few moments – or was it twenty-five years? We all felt prepared to move forward into further transformations with gratitude, courage and confidence. ■