NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Guadalupe: Transforming A Drunkard

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Building a grotto to La Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe:

Fifteen years ago or so, I moved myself and all my books and writings to a tiny blue house. From the point of view of some 'moderns,' there's one fast way to become a kind of "instant eccentric" in the increasingly gentrified southwest...

that is, to create a shrine to the Guadalupe in the old, time-honored tradition... by burying a bathtub up to the halfway mark in your front yard...

and then putting a sweet statue of Guadalupe inside the arch of the tub, and planting some real flowers around the porcelain where it meets the ground... but some strongly colored plastic flowers too, for Guadalupe miraculously made roses appear in the wintertime... and this is as close as miracle-challenged Latinas like me are ever likely to have roses blooming during winter.

You can imagine, either the tub or the Guadalupe can cause all kinds of 'vszq,' 'very serious zoning questions' to rise up amongst those who do not yet understand that each home place needs an able guardian of the soul --outdoors, under the open sky. Nonetheless, I began mentioning around the neighborhood that I was looking for a workman to come help me dig a hole for the old clawfoot tub I'd seen at the plumbing salvage joint.

I planned and drew, and pretty soon had a half-way presentable drawing of said tub and small concrete statue of Blessed Guadalupe I'd come by. Because the statue really was made of asphalt molded around a rod of rebar, I called her, "She who can hardly be lifted," ....even though La Señora, in reality, ever lifted others easily, no matter how much their problems or their hopes weighed.

Now I only needed a willing soul with strong muscles to help me dig down into the stubborn earth there, to a depth of more than three feet in order to seat a six foot tub on end. As an old believer and trusting that whatever good we are seeking is also seeking us, I prayed for the right soul to please stumble across my path and find Guadalupe and me.

The drunken man appears
Well, the stumble part came true almost right away. I was soon brought face to face with a drunken man who said he'd heard I was looking for someone to build something. He boasted that he was just the right 'muscle and might' needed to make a bathtub grotto for Guadalupe.

Really G!d? This was the 'right man' I prayed for? *The one* who should find me and my concrete Guadalupe and help us? Who says G!d has no humor? I had sort of been expecting a courtly old gent or perhaps a woman elder in the trades who just did little side jobs now that they were in their venerable 80s. But this man, unsteady on his feet, was only about 45 years old even though he looked about 900, had bad pasty skin, dirty hair, unshaven gray and brown beard hairs all sprouting in different directions.

As men who have been in some part of their lives, los borrochos, chronic drinkers-- when older and still drinking hard -- they also have that 'next day odor' coming through their pores.

Even though more or less sober for a few hours... older bodies often can't purify the way they once did, and that humus
smell of leaf rot hangs around the person like a cloud filled with wafts of sour sweat mixed with the smell of whiskey.

The helper I'd prayed to find me and my concrete Guadalupe was all this and more. He didn't just have the drinking
sickness. The drinking sickness had him. He'd drank everything; pulque, tequila, rum, shots, shooters, keggers. Like most with this illness, he'd never met an alcohol demon that didn't sweet talk him half-senseless inside an hour's time.

But the drunken man also came with a recommendation about his masonry skills from someone I trusted on earth... and
on the recommendation of someone I trusted in Heaven...she who whispered into my heart, 'Yes, this is the one I sent to you.'

And so, with my chin to my shoulder with a little self-doubt, I said, Yes. Even though a less promising partnership could hardly be imagined. Yet, something else seemed present too...

We proceeded to build the important parts first.

No talk about money or design. We began by trading stories. First the topographical ones, then the middle deep ones, and finally the 'want to set my hair afire and go screaming down the road forever' stories... the toughest ones
to hear and tell.

Of the last: This man who'd stumbled into my life, was a stone-mason by trade, and a soul who in childhood, lived in

institutions which had broken his spirit bones and left him for dead. You could see that he was physically strong from the waist up, from a lifetime of heaving brick and slapping frosting, working plumb lines to perfection.

Yet. His one leg was the leg of a strong man... but the other leg, was the leg of a boy... thinner than thin, with an ankle like a child. Polio. He drag-limped whenever he took a step.

When he was eight years old, his parents, already down and out, left him at the polio people's door. His parents did not come back. Busted up and pinned for years afterward into foster care, and then unhooked and re-hung in various orphanages, the boy who survived polio became one of the children who kept brew under the cot, the only mother many would ever have to help them through the nights.

In those times abandoned children didn't smoke dope or do meth. They did Mother Beer. Mother Chianti. Mother Thunderbird. Cheap... 10% good in one way and 100% lethal in every other.

And these were the arterial stories inside stone-mason man when he came to me limping, red rimmed and bleary-eyed, smelly, slurring, unsteady... and somehow radiant. Seriously radiant. Anyone with the eyes to see, could see it.

The merest beginning of 'the transformative moment...'

We continued from there. How long would it take to make a grotto to Guadalupe? Just a little while. Stone-mason man and I drew plans on lots of pizza-stained paper napkins. He had the drinking disease so bad, his preferred meeting place was a saloon that had a restaurant on one side. As I told him stories about La Guadalupe, we worked our way from meeting at the scarred up bar to meeting at a yellow oak-topped table. I could see it was talking about La Señora, Guadalupe, that caused this small progression from drink only, to actual real food.

But this awkward and not unpainful re-centering into a holier heart, a greater than human heart alone-continued as
we continued. Gradually. I told him the story of Our Lady at the Hill at Tepyac, how she chose to appear to little thin-legged Don Diego whose real name was his Nahuatl name, (The Spanish called the Nahua people Aztecs).... his name was
Cuauhtlatoatzin. At that description and at the sound of the intricate sounding name, Cuauhtlatoatzin-- stone-mason man's ears perked up. And stayed up. You could see that something deep inside him was listening. Some meaningful connection that had been put to sleep for far too long was clearly awakening.

I told him how this little sweet man Cuauhtlatoatzin, had witnessed indescribable horror in the conquest of our ancestral people, yet somehow had survived with an unruined heart...

how Cuauhtlatoatzin was still afraid of all the 'higher ups,' how he had been beaten and hurt bad-seen his own relatives and neighbors slaughtered and mutilated right before his eyes, and all who survived then treated with scorn and flogging, indeed flaying, afterward -and only allowed to live by acting 'worthy' - that is, by taking the only way out...

becoming a slave, a bowing and scraping, shuffling, eyes-lowered slave...

As I shined a little candle on the under-stories behind the mystique of Guadalupe, stone-mason man took on the authentic visage of a child instead of that of a battered circus bear.

I told him about how Cuauhtlatoatzin, i.e., Don Diego's story has been cleaned up by various minds that were supposed to be looking out for Don Diego's and Guadalupe's numinous legacy, but somewhere made a wrong turn into budgets and brio for publicity' sake.

Stone-mason man nodded a weary warrior's nod, and said he understood that completely.

He wanted to know, what did Don Diego, Cuauhtlatoatzin, really look like?

I told him that nonetheless, what under girds numinous stories is incorrupt. Like the soul, numinous stories can be dented, scorched, dismembered, but they can never be killed. The real story still remains in any heart that has the eyes
to see it, the ears to hear it, the guts to strive to both shelter and follow it.

That was when stone-mason man asked what Don Diego really looked like. I wanted to say, 'He looks like you dear soul, he looks exactly like you. Crippled from the illnesses and the beatings, with long memories shredded into blood red ribbons, yet heartfully alive. He looked just like you.'

But I didn't say that. Didn't want to scare away an eagle who'd landed on the porch rail, so I said a different truth: That in reality, if one wanted to know what little Don Diego really was like, don't listen to the claptrap about him being 'the good Aztec who was converted to Christianity'... at the point of a Spanish hardened steel sword.

Instead, look at Elie Wiesel, look into his face, his eyes, his imperfectly perfect heart, and see the Sorrow of the Ages and the Determination of the Universe. Look at any of the other WWII holocaust survivors still alive today who somehow have not collapsed into insanity or unmediated rage from all they have endured, but who still see the goodness in
others, who still strive to put an entire soul of a people back together, *including everyone -- not just one's own tribe -- but conquerors and conquered, both.*

That is Cuauhtlatoatzin. That is Don Diego personified. Real of heart, beleaguered, barely escaping with his life. No
cleaned up Indian with a good conduct medal. Instead a vulnerable and venerable heart on earth, who tried, as a result of Guadalupe's appearance to him, to bridge what seemed a cultural chasm of extreme opposites... to bring the souls
of the conquered and the souls of the conquerors together in peace, all in one place.

And that gathering place of peace was not in the palaces of the Spanish Bishops which were encrusted, both bishops and palaces, with the gold and jewels looted from the tribes. Rather, the ultimate gathering place was on

the plain dirt
ground of the hill of Tepyac... the exact place where The Great Woman appeared to the one considered far beneath the ruling class of The New World.

She chose not to appear to gilded men, but to he who represented the people she held most dear: the in some way abandoned, the in some way unloved, the 'untouchables.'

By then, stone-mason man had bowed his head and did that thing some men do when they feel tears coming up from the old
ancestral graves again... they put on their sunglasses even though they're indoors, and they pinch the bridge of their noses as though they're thinking deep thoughts, when in fact, they are weeping. Deeply.

And thus the grotto project grew and grew and grew...

So we went on, story after story, about how the Nahua people enslaved had died at the walls of the churches they built for their conquerors, how the old Nahua temple footers were kept, and how the bones of those who died there became
part of the cathedral walls themselves, never allowing a knowing person to gaze on those stone vaults without knowing humans were carelessly interred there. This too, stone-mason man just nodded, said 'I understand completely.'

Meanwhile, the Guadalupe grotto project had grown way beyond 'the bathtub concept' which had been left on the drafting room floor months earlier... Grotto now had a water well that stone-mason man called 'young Mary's well,' and a
resting pond with a little fountain, and a walkway, and a scale duplicate of the original part of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City...

But then, another structural problem arose. The little concrete Guadalupe statue I'd brought to put in the grotto was too small in comparison to the now much larger arch. So stone-mason man said he would create a larger Guadalupe, and he did... out of chicken wire over an armature, covered then in a creamy café y ochre stucco. And the grotto went on
from there... and stone-mason's man's reverence for Guadalupe grew as he worked, as he said to the stones as he laid them, 'This is for us, for her.' A softness had come into him. A pride. A willingness to be seen, wounded. These were the
inward, incontestable changes that began to glow in him outwardly now.

There were material changes too. He began to shave daily. He came to work dragging bucket and metal tools and now his hair washed and still wet every morning. For work, he wore his hair long in a braid down his back, or else rolled up at the back of his neck like samurai.

His hands, the same hands that carried a rifle in Vietnam-and used that rifle for what war rifles are used for... so that time of his life was one he could still barely mumble more than a few words about... those same hands became the very ones that fashioned a little copper dome for the grotto. Those hands that wrapped more around

a shot glass or a beer
can or a whiskey bottle than around people who could love him truly... with those hands this stonemason transformed a blank piece of earth into a tiny but fine refugio for La Señora, Our Lady.

And I kept feeding him. Food and more food. Stories and more stories.

And as he worked, she took greater shape, but more so, in his hands, in his so able and creative hands, she became more and more visible to him. As she and her grotto came into more magnitude in the small front yard of a nothing tiny house in the middle of much bigger houses... so did stone-mason man's heart and soul surface more and more clearly, despite all that had been overshadowing him.

Miracle at the grotto

There's no other way to say it, than just straight out. Less than halfway through the making of the grotto, stone-mason man stopped drinking. Quit stone cold. Just stopped.

There was no 'intervention,' no packing him off to rehab though goodness knows that would have helped greatly in time. I did speak quietly to him one night about how the broken glass in my heart rattled when I saw his great beauty and creativity so deeply marred by his alcoholic haze. But that only let him know he was loved, noticed, asked after by someone who cared.

It was more than that. Part was certainly his finding meaning, finding passionate devotion to something that mattered more to him than what had, time out of mind, made him into the least of himself... 'the lying devil in the bottom of the bottle.'

But, the rest of how-why, I think is, as my beloved madwomen in black (our nuns), used to say about the spiritually
incomprehensible, "It's a mystery." Perhaps some part of stone-mason man's miraculous right turn away from drinking himself dead, was this too: That little house where we built the grotto was what used to be called "a broken-dream house."

There were few of these houses left on the roads in the neighborhood there. They were tiny houses set back all the way to the alley where the trash cans and incinerators of eld were kept. These alley houses were hand-made rather than builder designed.

Therefore, each one still in existence was wildly idiosyncratic, often with a sleeping porch with no insulation, and the entire house built on a sill plate straight atop the ground without foundation or crawl space. This one was made of cement block stuccoed over to look kind of like a plain lady with lots of make up on. This one had ancient black iron pipe
for plumbing, and with no basement, the big silver painted iron furnace was practically right in the living room.

These oddly built little houses were eventually called "broken-dream houses," because the plan by their owners long ago had been to build this diminutive one-bedroom-no-garage house, and live in it until enough money

could be saved back to build 'the big house' out front....usually, a two bedroom, one bath, one-story brick bungalow.

But, for some, that dream never came to be.

The parallels of all that was not lost on stone-mason man nor me, that such beautiful Guadalupe shrine, and also such
beauty from stone-mason man's his own soul, could surface perhaps only at The House of Broken Dreams. Had the 'big house' been built, there'd have been no room for Guadalupe or her grotto.

Sometimes, emptiness is not vacancy, but rather a long gestation. Gestation by ego's measure is always too long. But, by soul's measure, the length of the waiting and making within before it shows on the outside, is ever just right.

The grotto project that was to be only 8 weeks long?

It became a year long project. Let's just say although it is complete, it is not finished even yet. Who is ever finished with La nuestra Señora de Guadalupe? Where would one start in order to be finished with her? How would one know one
was done? When are we old enough to stop being our Mother's child, to be done with needing 'a blessing mother' to rain down over our lives? Never.

That's one of the clearest-cut messages from Guadalupe. We could make her messages fancy, we could define them with
hundred-dollar words, but in the end, Guadalupe is the quintessential mother... and she does not encourage her sons and daughters who have been broken to walk as weaklings in this world... but rather for broken beings to walk as warriors... who are devoted to speak of her and for her in this world, to enact her holy heart by unfurling the ancient virtues of strength and sheltering, speaking up, standing up and doing... for the sake of goodness.

It is not by accident that she is called, La Conquista, the mother of the conquered. Else, why would she have poured her famous blessing down on us, her words calling us to stop mis-thinking we stand alone in our challenges, when in fact, she ever stands with us; that we should ever flee to her side, ever call her by the name every human being learns before
they can feed themselves, before they can even walk: Madre. Mother. Mami. Mi madre. My mother. The mother who says to us now, exactly as she said to Don Diego at Tepyac hill some 500 years ago:

Do not be afraid.

Have you forgotten?

I am your Mother.

You are not alone.

You are under my protection.

Anything you need,

Ask me.

Do not worry about anything.

*Am I not here_*

I who am your mother?

Have you forgotten?

I love you,

and you are under my protection.

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Source URL (retrieved on *10/08/2015 - 12:40*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/el-rio-debajo-del-rio/guadalupe-transforming-drunkard