

Open page ad
p.116

Knocking at Heaven's Door

Garden of the Goddess, New Mexico



You've driven Highway 14 dozens of times between Santa Fe and Madrid, each time speeding in ignorance past heaven's gate. In haste, you may have caught only a glimpse of the pink sandstone towers marking the rumored Garden of the Gods that no one seems to have the key to enter.

Well, let us enlighten you now. Through an unmarked cattle gate north of the village of Cerrillos lives the goddess of the garden, la Doña. Hers is a spot nested deep in a view. Drive up the gravel path, and she emerges from her adobe haven wearing a cotton caftan and broad smile, waving you into her hidden oasis.

The Garden of the Goddess Retreat Center, "a place of physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental integration," houses not just Gini Gentry, who bills thus her com-

pound and is your hostess today in a conversation about what brought her to this address identified only by mile markers. There are two guesthouses, two yurts, and two vintage Airstream trailers plastered over in brown stucco with a pueblo-deco design along their perimeter. There are goddess statues—Kuan-yin and others—and a post engraved with an ode to the sun, all tasteful touches of latter-day hippiedom. Fountains tinkle. Christmas lights shimmer around the swaying cottonwoods; hollyhock stalks shoot up 12 feet.

The owner and designer of this unlikely Shangri-la herself exudes some otherworldly qualities that feel larger than life, larger even than her luxuriant head of jet black hair that, with high cheekbones and green eyes, gives her Liz Taylor divadom. "I can't tell you why this place has a certain energetic resonance—but it does,"

she says, adding with a laugh that such sentiments are sure to brand her as some kind of New Age nut.

Still, when she bought the place in 1990, Gentry had a dream about where to find a new source of water, and this prophecy has allowed her to stay. The quartz bed on which the 30-acre compound sits has long been a Native pilgrimage site, and whenever people come for workshops or retreats, they are affected "by a sense of well-being and wonder," Gentry says. "It's a 'Holy Toledo!' kind of thing."

For Gentry, the flowering of the Garden is more than just an 18-year labor of love; it is the physical manifestation of a spiritual awakening—her Taj Mahal, her Teotihuacán. The story of how she transformed a dilapidated (she prefers "rustic") chicken ranch into a heavenly oasis is intertwined with her own evolution from university

executive in midlife crisis to Nagual woman in the lineage of Eagle Knight, the Toltec former teaching partner of Don Miguel Ruiz.

One of the yurts on the property belonged to "Miguel" himself, until his book *The Four Agreements* made him so famous he no longer needed to sleep in yurts. It was in large part Ruiz who led Gentry to where she is today, physically and spiritually. But it was in equal measure Gentry who led Ruiz to where he is—rocketed to fame by Oprah and Ellen DeGeneres—though it has been many



Caption

years since she has even spoken with him.

"When fame fame came calling, he had other obligations," she says of her former business partner. They met in Peru in 1988, during the period of her midlife crisis. A lifelong political activist, Gentry had always worked to save the world; now she realized that she had to "save herself first," and this meant "dismantling" her identity. She quit her job in organizational development at the University of California at Davis, sold her house and designer wardrobe, and vowed to start over.

SANTA FE CUSTOM WORKS



7600 1st Street, NE, Albuquerque, NM 87109

www.stcustomworks.com



CABINETS • FURNITURE • BOOKCASES
ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS • OFFICES

(505) 344-2551 • 3717 HIGH STREET NE • ALBUQU, NM • 87107



Caption

La Mesa

This led her, naturally, to New Mexico, where she ended up staying a mile from the Garden of Gods in 1990. Spying the sandstone formations from a hill, Gentry declared it the most beautiful place she had ever seen, one that she would gladly buy if she could.

“It took a while to talk myself into it,” she says, “but there was no place else I could be. I came to feel I was to keep this land available for spiritual practices.” Her new mission: to build a retreat center to access the Toltec wisdom taught by Ruiz.

Meanwhile, Ruiz’s then-wife, Gaia, had a dream that Gentry would make him famous, which led him to hire her as his manager. Gentry began booking his workshops and talks, and by 1996 she had risen to become his teaching partner.

“I would say I was the least likely person to ‘wake up,’” she says of his followers, citing her innocence to his philosophical mes-

sage—and yet she admits also to a strong sense of obligation because of Gaia’s dream. When it came time for Ruiz to choose a book topic, for example, Gentry had a dream of her own.

“Do it on the Four Agreements,” she told him.

By this time, her progress on the ranch had gone from retrofitting one trailer to tearing down walls and digging up linoleum flooring. An old photo shows how the property looked before she bought it from “the Egg Man,” as he was known throughout Santa Fe: floors and roofs made of dirt, electrical wires snaking across walls, a chicken coop built against sandstone rock.

Over the next two decades, the site evolved from rustic to historic, as Gentry preserved such gems as the slanted chicken coop ceiling, sandstone back wall, and vintage adobe Airstreams. It was important to





Caption



preserve the integrity of the place, she says, and to respect its history.

She calls the resulting work of art “a living example of surrender” that reflects her understanding of how to give up control. To an outsider, though, it all looks perfectly deliberate, immaculately refurbished, and peacefully empty of guests on a recent weekday—the perfect retreat for its owner, who is just now finishing writing two books about her own spiritual journey.

The garden may yet present her with the ultimate exercise in surrender, however, as Gentry believes a degenerating spinal disc will force her to sell the place before long. “I have never had any plans, but I’m not sure

how long my stewardship here will be,” she says wistfully. “And I had to work very hard, because I held it so tenaciously! But I can’t keep it from its natural evolution.”

As to her remaining connection to Ruiz, Toltec wisdom, and Teotihuacán (the pyramid complex of what was once the largest city in the Americas, north of Mexico City), Gentry thinks a long time about how to explain, picking her words as carefully as flowers. It has to do with silent knowledge, she says, which is available to everyone as universal consciousness, though we interpret it differently. She continues to teach the central truth held by all mystery traditions—that we are much more than the

attributes that make up our identity—on group pilgrimages to Teotihuacán.

She designed the Garden of the Goddess to be a northern outpost of Teotihuacán, in fact—a monument not only to the landscape but also to what it awakened in her. “I have tried to be in harmony with it, rather than have it be in harmony with me,” Gentry says of her renovation philosophy. “The physical beauty of this place is a reflection of a particular energy here, and I wanted it to look like it felt: a perfect reflection.” ❁

Full page ad
p.123