



A Durable Weave

by Jessica M. Ebertz

Wilbur Quispe thought he would never go home. When he last left Paccca seventeen years earlier, the tiny Andean village was controlled by terrorists. There were few choices for a thirteen year old orphan boy. When, in 1989, the reign of the "Sendero Luminoso," or Shining Path, terrorist group culminated in a massacre in the once peaceful village, it seemed there may be no "home" to return to. And he'd moved so far away. But Wilbur never stopped thinking about it. He always dreamed of returning to the place he was born, where he lived with his parents and family until he was eight years old, and things fell apart. It took a long time, and a lot of work, but Wilbur finally did go home. It was the year 2000, and along with my brother and sister, I had the privilege of going home with him. Along the way, Wilbur told us about his life. His story, and the story of Paccca, contain the common threads of violence and sorrow wreaked upon much of Peru and its people by the Shining Path at the height of its power. But these interwoven stories also contain the strong, resilient threads of human will and dignity in the face of adversity.

Wilbur Quispe (KEY-spay) is a business associate and special friend of my sister Melanie, who owns a textile business based in Minnesota. Soon after she began her business in the mid-1980s, Melanie came to realize that the quality of the workmanship varied tremendously in the weaving markets of the Andes. She set out to find a superior weaver with whom she could establish a long-term working relationship. With this goal, Melanie visited the city of Ayacucho, the weaving capitol of Peru. At the time, however, the Ayacucho region was caught in the suffocating grip of the Shining Path. The Shining Path's reign of terror had brought commerce, and indeed normal life, to a halt. When Melanie visited in 1988, shop doors were locked and people lived in fear. No one was willing to talk, much less conduct business, with a stranger.

The 1992 capture of the Shining Path leader Abimael Guzman brought relief to the region and reopened it to commerce. Melanie returned to Ayacucho with renewed hope of meeting a talented artisan who could help her improve her textile business. At that very time, Wilbur was struggling to make enough money at weaving to support his family. He stood on the reluctant verge of abandoning his craft to become a laborer, when Melanie returned to Ayacucho and chanced to spy him through an open doorway, weaving at a volunteer workshop. Perhaps it was only luck or coincidence that these two happened to find each other, but considering how it changed his life, it is little wonder that Wilbur is convinced it was a "milagro" - a miracle.

Wilbur was born in 1970 in the countryside near Paccca. Paccca is a very small and remote village tucked in the southwestern Peruvian Andes near the city of Ayacucho. Wilbur was the middle of five children. Life was not easy - it rarely is for an Andean native - but it was peaceful and steady. Then in 1977, Wilbur's father died suddenly

of disease. With no father to support the family, Wilbur went with his oldest brother Fauvustino to find work in the jungle. The only work available to the boys was hard labor, clearing forestland for farming. After just a month the brothers returned to Paccca, only to find their mother now taken ill. Within another month, Wilbur and his four siblings were orphans.

Fauvustino, much older than Wilbur and with a young family of his own, tried his best to act as a father to his younger brothers and sisters. But he could not feed and clothe them all. So Wilbur went again to the jungle to find work and make his own way, this time accompanied by a neighbor from Paccca. The neighbor returned to Paccca before long but Wilbur stayed behind this time because the man he worked for failed to pay him, and he could not return home penniless.



Wilbur Quispe

Not knowing what else to do or how to get the money he'd earned for his work, Wilbur stayed and worked for this man, the "patrón." Though just a child himself, Wilbur ran the patrón's hacienda and took care of his six children. Every morning Wilbur had to be up before 5 o'clock to cook, clean, wash clothes and take care of the farm. If he overslept or otherwise failed to fulfill his duties the patrón beat him. Months stretched into years of Wilbur's childhood in servitude to the patrón. As a child accustomed to believing the adults in his life, Wilbur had faith that the patrón would keep his word and pay him for his work. But one day, Wilbur was too exhausted to awaken by 5 o'clock. As punishment, the patrón beat him and threw him out on the street with no food or clothing, and certainly none of the money he was owed. After several long years of labor for the patrón, young Wilbur had nothing to show but cuts and bruises, and he was once again on his own.

For a time Wilbur found shelter and work as a cook for the local police in a nearby town. There the Shining Path first touched his life. The policemen felt that it was too dangerous for Wilbur to

stay with them because of the growing presence in the region of this violent terrorist group. Once again Wilbur found himself put out on the streets. All he had was the sweater on his back. At night he climbed into a tree and wrapped himself in the leaves to keep from freezing.

As Wilbur struggled for survival, the Shining Path continued to strengthen its grip over the region. This Communist group was formed in 1970 in Ayacucho by philosophy professor Abimael Guzman. They espoused violence and warfare as their means to achieving their goal of overthrowing the government. The group's violent tactics did nothing to win the support of Peru's poor majorities, including the native Andeans, most of whom rejected the Shining Path. However, rebellion came with a price. The Shining Path considered the remote, inaccessible Andes, including the area around Paccca, to be their stronghold, and resistance was not





tolerated. They required the local population to provide food and shelter for “the cause,” leaving little or nothing for the locals to live on themselves. They often forced the enlistment of the young people of the villages into their armies. The consequences for refusing these mandates could be the burning and looting of homes or entire villages, or death to village leaders to set an example for neighboring populations.

Despite the bleak social and economic conditions caused by the Shining Path, Wilbur finally managed to find a paying job after his four years of fruitless labor for the patrón, and bare subsistence in the streets. Now twelve years old, he wanted nothing more than to return home, and he finally had the money to do it. Fauvustino and his family had remained in Pacccha and Wilbur was grateful to be among family again. His joy at returning home was short-lived, however. The Shining Path presence was so strong in Pacccha that as a young man Wilbur says he had just three choices, “I could join the Shining Path, be killed for not joining, or flee; but I could not live in my village in peace.” Wanting no part of the violence of the Shining Path, Wilbur fled back to Ayacucho and returned to life on the streets.



Wilbur sketching school plans for Melanie

However this time Wilbur’s fortunes finally took a turn for the better. A woman recognized him as the brother of the young orphan girl she had taken in from Pacccha, and reunited the two siblings. This kind woman also knew the whereabouts of a third sibling, Wilbur’s brother Charlie. He was working as a weaver in Santa Ana, the prominent weaving neighborhood in Ayacucho. At first sight, the young men did not recognize each other, so much time had passed. Soon, however, the brothers settled into a routine and Charlie began to pass on his weaving knowledge to Wilbur. In Ayacucho, learning first from Charlie and then from an older weaver who would become a mentor and father figure, Wilbur soon became proficient in the art and trade of weaving.

Trying to make the best of his own turbulent life, about a year after his reunion with Wilbur, Charlie left Ayacucho for Lima. It was hard for Wilbur to lose his brother again, but he stayed in Ayacucho, continuing his education and work in weaving. By 1985, however, he missed Charlie too much, and set off to Lima to find him. In the chaos of the big city it took Wilbur three years to find his brother. During that time, Wilbur settled in Lurin, a shantytown some 40 minutes south of Lima. Lima is located on Peru’s central coastline, in the narrow strip of desert between the Andes and the ocean. Whereas Lima, settled by the Spaniards in the 1500s, has been turned into an artificial oasis of sorts through irrigation, Lurin remains a town of the desert, stark and bleak. It was settled over the years by squatters who couldn’t obtain land in Lima. The houses of adobe and straw blend in with the desert, together forming a dramatic contrast to the fertility of the nearby Andes. In Lurin Wilbur was able to obtain work from a weaving factory. He worked independently, taking work from the weaving factory or wherever he could get it. The factory owner soon realized Wilbur’s talent and was willing to give him a year’s advance wages toward buying some government-owned land in Lurin, where Wilbur, then 17, eventually built a house and began raising his family. This loan tied him to the factory, which at first was acceptable, but over time the factory grew and often failed to treat its employees fairly. Wilbur wished he could strike out completely on his own.

Today Wilbur and his wife Pasquel have four children. In Lurin, he struggles to produce the highest quality of weavings, not for lack of

talent, but for lack of high quality supplies. Peruvian weaving originated in the Andes Mountains, where the plants and insects used for making dyes, and the wool itself, was abundant. Wilbur has difficulty acquiring the supplies for making dyes. He has ready access only to machine-spun yarn, from which he cannot produce as fine a finished product as he can with hand-spun yarn. He hopes to move his family back to Ayacucho, closer to his birthplace and with better access to weaving supplies. He also dreams of building a weaving workshop in Ayacucho to teach local communities, including Pacccha, to make a living from the traditional craft of weaving.

In Ayacucho, where we began our pilgrimage back to Pacccha, land is at a premium. It is an important hub for industry and trade in the area. Wilbur has had the opportunity to purchase land in Ayacucho only through his strong connections with the family of the man who was his mentor when he began his training as a young weaver. After his years of working with Melanie, he saved enough money to buy a very modest plot of land. He is currently saving and negotiating to purchase additional land, enough to build his envisioned workshop. Wilbur’s eyes light up as he describes how many people he could teach and employ, how many looms will be needed,

where they will gather materials for dye making, all as he sketches the workshop in the dirt of his new land with a stick.

The next day, the time finally arrived to start our journey. It was what we had ultimately come here for, the culmination of a friendship. The demanding 11-hour journey on foot, constantly climbing up over ridges and descending into deep valleys, at altitudes of up to 15,000 feet, was exhausting, but I wouldn’t trade the experience for anything. Besides being a part of this little piece of history and fulfillment of a dream, we were surrounded by the powerful and mystical beauty of the Andes. The people cultivate the land and build towns but the mountains are never quite tamed – they remain an entity that the people must respect. We made the journey on foot despite the fact that five years earlier a road was completed through this area and we could have reached Pacccha by bus in just two hours. Traveling on foot helped us better appreciate the journey of those fleeing from, and returning to, their homes during the tumultuous years of the Shining Path.

Just before darkness fell, we finally reached Wilbur’s pueblito. In the central plaza, we were greeted by Charlie and several of Wilbur’s cousins. We were led off to a cousin’s house, picking our way through the rough streets in the darkness. Pacccha is one of thousands of remote Andean villages that has yet to receive the modern convenience of electricity. The cousin’s house was made, as were all the houses in the little village, of mud and stone with a tin roof. We were handed mugs of warm liquid and bowls of steaming soup and shown to the only seats – rough wooden benches – in the tiny one-room house.

It was obviously a scramble for the little town to accommodate their visitors, particularly three gringos. As we sat contemplating our soup in the dark, each of us privately wondering what we were eating, we sensed the commotion our appearance had created. Our hosts turned their village upside down looking for a battery for the town’s only flashlight. Quiet voices debated where we should sleep that night. There was no question but that we should receive the best they had to offer. In short order, it was decided that we should have the use of someone’s house for the night. We were led off in the dark to our accommodations, where the family of three had already gathered





their belongings to go stay at relatives. The single room of their house served as kitchen, living room and bedroom. In the evening, the utensils of the daylight hours were tucked away into the corners and on this night the room had already been prepared for us to sleep in. The bed where Melanie and I slept was about the size of a twin bed and constructed of slats of wood, some placed inconveniently higher than others. On a normal night, the whole family slept here. My brother was provided with a pallet of sheepskins on the floor. From our perch on the hard, knobby bed, Melanie and I looked with some envy down at his nest. We assumed that normally the sheepskins were used to provide some cushion on the bed.

And so my sister and I huddled with our heads at opposite ends of the little bed, trying not to poke each other in the eyes with our toes, trying our best to keep warm under the inadequate blankets and, not least of all, trying not to think about what else we might be sharing the bed with. We all three spent a sleepless night, and were grateful for the coming of dawn, only to find our bodies covered with red, itchy bumps, bites from some unseen parasites.

Dawn brought the little girl of the house back to rummage furtively under the bed for foodstuffs and cooking utensils. Dressed in a miniature version of the traditional woman's colorful skirt, blouse and hat, she whispered to herself in Quechua (the local, pre-Columbian language) all the while moving expertly about beneath the bed. She had left the door ajar, inviting the entry of the family turkey, who also appeared to be looking for something in the dirt floor of the house. Soon Wilbur came and hustled us off to another house for a breakfast of rice and potatoes, with tea and sweet milk, which we ate outside as the Andean sun began to burn off the early morning mist. We noticed with embarrassment that the gringos received larger portions than anyone else did. It was difficult to know whether to express our gratitude by eating as much as we could, or save some in the hope that someone else would eat it. We were relieved when the food we did not finish was returned without comment to the cooking pots to be saved for the next person.

As we sat after breakfast enjoying the bright, clear morning, two señoras of the village came by. Perhaps curiosity over the visitors prompted them to come. They stopped to chat and when they learned from Wilbur that we would be very interested in hearing of her experiences with the Shining Path, the older of the two women, Sinforosa, took a seat on the ground and prepared to tell us her story. She sat proudly on the ground in her traditional clothing, her legs and her skirts tucked modestly beneath her, a patch of brilliant sunlight dappling her shoulders slung with a bright-striped carrying cloth. Her eyes sparkled from beneath the brim of her hat, which shaded her handsome face from the sun. Despite this protection, she appeared much older and more careworn than her estimated age of 56. Her black hat held a single, fresh-cut flower of deepest pink, which she reached up to finger occasionally. As Sinforosa spoke, her friend crouched in the doorway of the house, washing quinoa - the prevalent, nutritious local grain. Her hands never stopped working the quinoa through the small tub of water in front of her, even when she would gaze off into the distance at the remembrance of an event or of a loved one. Occasionally she would add a few words to her friend's story or surreptitiously wipe away a tear with her sweated forearm.

Sinforosa tells us about the night in 1989 when the Shining Path came

to Paccca. In the middle of the night, they went from door to door, rounding up everyone in the village. She tells us of the fear and confusion she felt as she was separated from her husband and herded along with the other women and children into the one-room schoolhouse on the town's central plaza. She tells us how the women and children heard the cries of their menfolk, the sounds of gunshots, and other sounds too horrible to describe, and it became clear to them what was happening. That night the Shining Path executed 45 men, almost the entire adult male population of the village. Many were shot, but those who resisted the most had their heads beaten in with rocks, or their arms cut off. So many of the bodies were unrecognizable that the survivors finally decided to bury them together in a mass grave to spare themselves the agony of trying to figure out which mutilated body was that of their loved one.

Included among the dead was Sinforosa's husband, along with a brother and a nephew. Her steady voice finally wavers just a little as she tells us how hard it has been to watch her three children, the youngest of whom was just 8 months old at the time of the massacre, grow up not understanding what happened to their father. Her friend washing quinoa bends her head back to her task.

We learned from Wilbur that there were some men who did survive that terrible night. Quick thinking and the cover of dark allowed Wilbur's brother Fauvustino to escape into the hills with his eldest son. They were pursued by thirteen armed terrorists and only managed to finally escape when the terrorists caught up with some other unfortunate soul during the chase and, mistaking him for Fauvustino, wasted no time in executing him. To this day, Fauvustino walks with a limp from the broken leg he suffered during his flight. Wilbur, living in Lurin at the time, was certain that his brother was one of the victims of the massacre, which he read about in the newspaper. It was with shock and joy that Wilbur learned,

during a later trip to Ayacucho, that Fauvustino had survived. It took two years for the brothers to reunite.

The December 11, 1989, massacre in Paccca was not an isolated incident. That year the Shining Path made a concerted effort to bring the region under control. Five hundred of them marched through the valley, looting and burning entire villages, and killing unarmed villagers. Because it was brutally apparent that the Peruvian military was inadequate to protect them, the villagers began forming their own Civil Defense in the mid-80s. This only spurred the terrorists to increased violence and the unarmed Civil Defense was no match in the end.

Paccca, already bruised from a 1980 earthquake, which destroyed its large, lavish Catholic church, was dealt a telling blow by the massacre. The rubble of the fallen church remains, the cracked pieces of gilded altar and toppled stone pillars acting as a reminder of more prosperous days. The prospect of rebuilding the church, or even clearing the rubble from the central plaza,

which is otherwise brown and muddy, devoid of vegetation, is remote. After the massacre, the widows and their children were afraid to return to the town. They slept in groups in caves above the village, always speaking in whispers lest they be discovered by the terrorists. When the need for food drew them back and forced them to figure out on their own how to work the fields, they moved into whatever makeshift shelter they could find. Most of their homes had been destroyed and they did not have the knowledge to repair them.



Sinforosa





Many still live this way, in patchwork little huts with leaking roofs.

Every person in this village of about 100 was irreparably harmed by the massacre, every single person lost someone: husband, father, uncle, friend. All of the village leaders were killed. People have done their best to move on and leave the tragic past behind, but a shadow still hangs very heavy over this town. We could sense the urgency of the people who told us their stories. They feel they are at a crossroads, at a point where they must do something to keep their village from withering away. They speak especially about the need to keep the young people, particularly the young men, from leaving. There is little incentive to stay. Farming doesn't pay here, it is only for subsistence. Many of the young people are sent to Ayacucho or Lima for secondary school. Some that are now beginning to return to Pacccha are wondering what they will do with their lives. There seems little hope for a prosperous future here.

But we were soon to learn that the young men shared the desires of their elders to breathe life back into the town. After we thanked Sinforosa and the others for sharing with us their memories and their food, we picked our way back down into the central plaza to look at the ruined church. We were greeted there by a group of eight men, each approximately 25 to 30 years old. Wilbur explained that they wished to speak to us and that they would like to do so in the two-story building on the plaza which served as the town's civic center. We filed up the stairs after the men, to the second floor of the empty building. Chairs were found for my brother and sister and I to sit in. The young men took seats on the wood floor.



Each of the young men spoke in turn, often beginning with an explanation of his role in the village. Before us sat the leaders, the head of the Civil Defense, the Justice of the Peace. They seemed too young, and they were. They were just boys when the massacre took place. Out of necessity, they were thrust prematurely into roles of authority and responsibility. And here they sat before us, telling us that they willingly carry this mantle of responsibility and will fight for the survival of their village. They no longer want to live shadowed by the past. They want the world to know that their village and their people are good, industrious and peaceful. They dream of having electricity, of having work and a better life. They want to bring pride and prosperity back to their home, for these are the true qualities of their people.

The men explained to us that they have asked the government for help on several occasions, and help has been promised, but that the government does not follow through on its promises. Sometimes a government representative says he will come to meet the villagers, but none ever show up. They could not even obtain assistance from the government to help care for the 80 children who lost parents as a result of the massacre. The village wants desperately to help itself, to work itself out of its troubles, but with no tools to work with, they know they need some help.

When the men were finished speaking, Melanie spoke on our behalf. She thanked them for their hospitality and told them that we were, unfortunately, just three regular people. We were not from a government or private organization. We were there as friends of Wilbur. We were moved by their story, we respected their

determination to build a better life, and we would do our best to help, but we could not promise them anything. To my surprise, they seemed satisfied with this. As people used to broken promises from their own government, perhaps they respected our honesty.

When we were done with the meeting, someone suggested a game of soccer in the plaza. The men were surprised when my brother and I said we would join them. They had never seen a woman play soccer, and at first it struck them as funny. So funny that they would collapse into a fit of giggles whenever I touched the ball. Since this allowed me to go around them with some ease, it didn't last very long. But while it did, it reminded me that these were still young men who could be silly despite their troubles, and it was a joy to see. With a mostly deflated ball and chunks of cement for goalposts, we played in the dirt until the bus came to take me and my siblings back to Ayacucho.

Many things are needed in Pacccha. Clothing, shelter, sanitation and nutrition are just barely adequate here. People want electricity, and this simple amenity that most of us take for granted would greatly improve the quality of life. A secondary school would make it possible for children to obtain an education without moving away.

Many people, adults as well as children, would simply like to learn to read and write. The church lies where it fell more than 20 years ago during the earthquake. The central plaza is a muddy void, boasting none of the flowers, walkways and benches that are the trademark of even the most humble of Peruvian town plazas. Sometimes I think that rebuilding the plaza, clearing the rubble of the ruined church and

planting some flowers, might be one of the most important things to do here. The central plaza is the social heart of the Peruvian town, where people gather and things happen.

The dream of Wilbur Quispe is simple, but it epitomizes the industrious nature of his people. He wishes to help the people help themselves, to give them the tools to work as a village to address the needs and desires of the villagers. Wilbur's plan is to build a weaving workshop in Ayacucho with enough looms to teach several men at a time, from Pacccha and other villages in the region. At the same time, as more and more wool and dyeing materials become needed, the women of the villages will spin the wool and gather the plants, nuts, insects and other local materials necessary to make the dyes. The workshop, in addition to being a school, will eventually produce weavings to sell and provide a source of income to the weavers, and in turn the spinners and gatherers. Wilbur hopes that this will provide people with enough incentive, and enough income, to stay in the area and help rebuild and repopulate Pacccha and villages like it. The income, plus the pride and confidence that will come as a result of learning a craft and earning a living, will hopefully be just the first step forward. Eventually Pacccha and its people will heal, grow and prosper in peace, as Wilbur has done.

Produced by the friends of Wilbur Quispe and ArtAndes.

