

# *Near the Exit*

Travels with the  
Not-So-Grim Reaper

Lori Erickson

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*Sign for the cremation grounds in Crestone, Colorado*

(PHOTO CREDIT: BOB SESSIONS)

# 7

## *Returning to the Center*

Crestone, Colorado

In most towns, a broken-down vehicle wouldn't be taken as a spiritual sign—but most towns aren't Crestone, Colorado.

Bob and I showed up in Crestone after a long drive across the flat-as-a-pancake San Luis Valley, a 5,000-square-mile expanse of high desert in south central Colorado. We passed the turnoff for Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve and then drove through mile after mile of irrigated potato fields, grasslands interspersed with rabbitbrush and greasewood, and scattered communities of people eking out a living in one of the poorest parts of the state. The sky was so big that several weather systems were visible at once: huge thunderheads, blue sky, and low-hanging gray clouds each occupied their own corner of the horizon.

Turning off the main highway, we drove for another dozen miles until at last we came to a tiny town at the end of the road: Crestone. Tucked between the grasslands and the sharply rising slopes of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, this settlement of 150 people was the reason we'd spent two days on the road: it has more spiritual sites per square foot than any other place

in North America, including ashrams, temples, monasteries, retreat centers, chapels, labyrinths, and stupas. It's probably the only place in the United States where a ziggurat doesn't look entirely out of place.

It didn't take us long to scope out the town. Its business district consisted of a brewery, a handful of small shops, and a grocery store named Elephant Cloud with a couple of gas pumps out front. I was struck by the architectural contrasts: middle-class homes shared streets with ramshackle cabins and weathered buildings long abandoned. As we headed to the campground north of town, an unattended dog sitting at a curve in the road watched us with alert wariness.

After setting up camp in the national forest, we headed back into town for dinner. I was looking forward to visiting with Kairina Danforth, the mayor of Crestone, whom I'd met on a visit the previous fall when I was touring southern Colorado on a press trip. By the time our group got to town we were behind schedule and so had to zip between several of its spiritual centers at a brisk pace. It was during that all-too-brief visit that I had uttered the single most ridiculous thing I've ever said to a Zen monk: "I've got ten minutes. What can you tell me about Buddhism?"

Happy at the prospect of exploring Crestone at greater leisure, my thoughts were interrupted by Bob's exclamation.

"Damn! The engine light just came on."

Our minivan gave a sigh, a sound that had a vaguely martyred air. We slowed to a crawl.

"What's wrong?"

"I have no idea. But I can barely make it go."

As we inched into the parking lot of the Desert Sage Restaurant, we strategized about what to do. Crestone likely didn't have an auto repair shop, and we'd need to get our vehicle towed to the nearest good-sized town, which was an hour away.

"Just what we need, here in the middle of nowhere," Bob said. "Great timing."

But as we entered the restaurant, we resolved to make the most of the evening. We had towing insurance; we'd figure out

the details later. And so we greeted Kairina warmly and a short time later welcomed David Scott, a fellow Crestonian she'd asked to join us. After exchanging pleasantries, I steered the conversation to the reason why we'd traveled nearly a thousand miles from Iowa to this remote location.

"Why is Crestone a center for spirituality?" I asked Kairina and David. "Is there something different about this place, something inherently holy?"

"Well, it's like the broken-wagon-wheel story from Taos," David said. Seeing our puzzled expressions, he continued, "In the 1890s, two artists from the East Coast were passing through New Mexico when a wheel broke on their wagon. They got it fixed in the little village of Taos and liked the place so much they ended up staying there. So now the legend goes that if the mountain wants you to stay there, it will break your car down. Crestone is like that too. If the mountain wants you, it'll find a way to draw you in and keep you here."

"Well, that's interesting," I said. "Our car just broke down, right as we were driving to the restaurant. Does that mean we're supposed to stay?"

Kairina and David exchanged meaningful glances. The implication was clear. Crestone was calling us, and we needed to stay until we answered. Despite my worry about the vehicle, I felt a sense of pride. It's not just everybody who has car trouble in Crestone.

"It's a sign," I told Bob as we returned to our car after our dinner. "You could tell they thought so too."

"A sign of what? We're supposed to move here permanently?" Bob asked.

"A sign that we're supposed to be here."

With Kairina waiting in her car behind us in case she needed to give us a ride to our campsite, Bob turned the key. The engine light was still on, but the vehicle had more power than before. He cautiously eased it out of the parking lot. "I think we're OK on getting back to camp," he said, motioning to Kairina that she could leave.

The next morning, the engine light was off and the van worked fine. Bob thought the transmission had just gotten overheated from driving in the mountains, but he would say that, wouldn't he? As for me, I was grateful for two things: the fact that we didn't have to get it fixed and that our car troubles had opened a door into Crestone.

"It's a Crestone thing," Kairina told me when I relayed the story of the miraculous healing of our van. "That's what we say here when coincidences like this happen. And they happen a lot."

Here's another coincidence: I'd come to Crestone a second time somewhat on a whim, to follow up on my positive first impressions of it the previous year. We were going to be in Colorado anyway, and the town was sort of on the way to where we wanted to go, and I thought the town's reputation for spirituality might have something to offer my exploration of mortality.

So my writer's ears had perked up at dinner when Kairina mentioned that Crestone has the only nondenominational, open-air cremation grounds in the United States. "You don't have to be Buddhist or Hindu to have remains burned here—you just have to be from the area," she explained.

"OK, that seals it." I sent my own meaningful glance in Bob's direction. "We're supposed to be here."

## THE MYSTIC'S VISION

As is true of many holy places, you have to *want* to get to Crestone. At 7,500 feet in elevation and bordered by snowcapped mountains, the community is both beautiful and isolated, subject to extremes of weather, wind, and temperature. Bear, elk, and mountain lions live in the surrounding wilderness, while the Baca National Wildlife Refuge in the valley protects nearly 100,000 acres of wetlands and grasslands.

From the 1870s through the 1930s Crestone was a mining town, and then a center for ranching. But its identity underwent

a dramatic change in the 1970s when Maurice Strong, a Canadian businessman and United Nations diplomat, and his wife, Danish-born Hanne Marstrand Strong, purchased a 200,000-acre tract of land in the area. Its previous owners had hoped to make the land, known as the Baca Grande Development, into a retirement community. While the Stronges were deciding how to develop it, an elderly local mystic named Glenn Anderson showed up at their door. "I have been waiting for you to arrive," he said, and then explained that Crestone was destined to become an interfaith community where people from all the world's great religions would come to pray, learn, seek answers to the problems of the world, and come to a higher level of spiritual consciousness.

Crestone being Crestone, this information was received not with an escort to the front door, but instead with an invitation to go into more detail. After talking to the man over the course of four days, Hanne went on a vision quest in the mountains to contemplate what she'd heard and then sought additional guidance from elders she knew among the Hopi, a nation with ancestral roots in the San Luis Valley. Guided by their affirmation and her own intuition that the mystic had spoken the truth, she moved forward with plans to make his vision a reality. She and her husband established the nonprofit Manitou Foundation, which began donating land to religious groups that agreed to establish centers there. One by one they came: Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and seekers who followed a wide range of other paths. They built retreat centers, chapels, meditation halls, and religious landmarks ranging from stupas to labyrinths. Within a decade, remote Crestone had become an international spiritual mecca.

But in my conversations with local residents, many said that Crestone has been a power center for millennia. They told me about the immense aquifer that lies beneath the town, its water sitting atop a crystalline formation that some believe amplifies the vibrational energy in the area. Before white people came to the area, they said, it was known as the Bloodless Valley, a haven where members of different tribes could safely meet.



Such claims are difficult to prove, of course, but it's certainly true that the valley is filled with archaeological sites dating back thousands of years. And Mount Blanca, located sixty miles to the south of Crestone near the Great Sand Dunes, is regarded as one of the four sacred mountains of the Navajo and Hopi Nations. To them it is *Sisnaajini* (Eastern Mountain Where the Light Comes into the World).

And as further proof that there's something in this place that makes people think of spiritual matters, even the name of the nearby mountain range has religious significance. Early Spanish explorers named it the *Sangre de Cristo*, or Blood of Christ Mountains, after the red glow that often lights the peaks at sunset.

I remembered what Kairina had told me when Bob and I joined her for dinner on our first night in Crestone. "We're the spiritual heart of North America," said Kairina. "Some people think we always have been."

While Crestone has just 150 residents, the surrounding county has about 1,500, most of whom live in the Baca Grande subdivision, known as the Baca by residents. The majority of the spiritual centers line a gravel road that marks the border between a residential area and the Rio Grande National Forest that covers the foothills of the *Sangre de Cristo* Mountains.

As Bob and I drove through the winding gravel lanes of the Baca, we saw how the architectural quirkiness of Crestone reaches its full flower in this subdivision. While people have to get a permit to build, the county doesn't have many regulations on *how* things get constructed. As a result, the buildings are a glorious hodgepodge of architectural styles, from straw bale houses where hobbits would feel right at home to high-end Southwestern-style mansions. One house had a yard full of statues ranging from the Virgin Mary to Taoist sages, for example, as well as a labyrinth, Norwegian trolls, and meditation seats where visitors can Zen out, surrounded by hundreds of crystals.

No matter where you are in the Baca, a holy site isn't far away. We did a circumambulation of a Buddhist stupa, a tall structure filled with holy relics, and visited the Nada Hermitage, a Carmelite retreat center with a sunlit chapel and cabins beautifully constructed of adobe. After paying our respects to Lakshmi (the Hindu goddess of prosperity and purity) at the Haidakhandi Universal Ashram, we climbed Crestone's ziggurat, a structure modeled after the ancient temples of Babylon. Later that afternoon we marveled at the beauty of a kiva—an underground sacred chamber—built in the style of the Pueblo Indians.

On my previous visit, I had visited the Vajra Vidra, one of several Tibetan Buddhist retreat centers in the area. Our guide there had said that Crestone's high-desert landscape framed by mountains reminds many Tibetans of their homeland. In Himalayan culture, it's considered auspicious to locate a monastery in such a landscape because the peaks' local deities can serve as protectors for the sacred space. In Crestone, he said, the nearby mountains shelter many people doing retreats, including a number who are doing the arduous three-year meditation retreat that's the gold standard of Tibetan Buddhist practice.

When I mentioned this to Kairina, she nodded. "Many of the spiritual centers here have practitioners on extended retreats," she said. "One of our more unusual occupations, in fact, is retreat master—the people who provide for their physical needs while they're meditating, like food and drink."

As we explored Crestone, my thoughts often turned to those brave spiritual adventurers in the mountains above me. My own fledgling meditation practice was inching forward. I prided myself on the fact that most days I was able to sit in silence for twenty minutes. But what would it be like to meditate day after day, month after month, year after year? For me, certainly, it would be crazy making. But if you want to meditate for three years, this Little Tibet seemed like a good place to do so, in this quiet oasis with its sweeping views of the San Luis Valley, the Sangre de Cristos at your back, and that aquifer of

water sitting atop a crystal underneath. And maybe, perhaps, some local mountain deities keeping watch over you as well.

The brewery and coffee shop were easy places to start conversations with the locals—in such a small community, visitors provide a welcome change of pace. We met people who had lived in Crestone for years and others who'd recently moved to town. It's a hard place to make a living, they said, but something about the place makes it worth it.

"I think a lot of us show up in Crestone and realize, 'This is the place I've been searching for all my life,'" one person told me.

One afternoon at the coffee shop, I was pleased to meet Hanne Strong, the woman who answered the door to the mystic in 1978, setting in motion a chain of events that had changed the town's history. She told me how pleased she was with how his initial vision had unfolded and of future plans for the area, including developing a pilgrimage route that would run from Crestone to Mount Blanca.

"Despite our isolation, people find their way here," she said. "We get about twenty thousand visitors a year, with nine thousand of them doing a retreat of some sort at one of our centers. Crestone has become a school of the spirit—that was the mystic's original vision, and I'm delighted at the ways it's become a reality."

Later that afternoon, I met another community elder: John P. Milton, an ecologist, author, and retreat leader who founded the Way of Nature, a program that offers meditation retreats and wilderness quests around the world. Based in Crestone, John has helped thousands of people deepen their connection to nature and spirituality through practices gleaned from a variety of traditions.

Bob and I met John at the Thoreau-like cabin in the woods bordering North Crestone Creek where he has lived on and off for nearly forty years. As we followed him on a tour around the property, the gray-haired John using a staff as he trod the rough ground, I felt as if we were walking with a modern-day John Muir.

Resisting the urge to brag about the fact that our van had broken down on our first night in Crestone, I told him about my quest to come to terms with mortality by visiting sacred places. I mentioned a comment David Scott had made on our first evening in town—many people here, he said, had died before they died, meaning that they'd undergone some serious illness or deep suffering that had propelled them on the spiritual path.

The phrase clearly resonated with John, in part because of his own near-death experience. He told of being struck by lightning when he was forty-six, and of how he spent six hours suspended in a state between life and death. "That time gave me a sense for the clear, underlying light that I think we all experience when we die," John said. "When I returned to my body, I realized that most of what I'd thought was important really wasn't."

Most people don't have that dramatic of an experience, of course. But John said many people sign up for his programs as a way of coming to terms with mortality. He pointed toward a nearby clearing, where a dozen tents were set up for the participants in his current program. "Often they're dealing with their own aging, or the loss of someone they love," he said. "That's a common time to want to go deeper."

He described the various practices that he teaches, from Qigong to Taoist meditation, but then he admitted that the heart of his instruction is simply giving people the chance for extended time out-of-doors. "The more connections you make to the natural world, the more your inner blockages begin to be transformed," he said. "You begin to see things from a much longer perspective. You get a sense for the immense geologic sweep of time and realize how small you and your problems are. And I think something happens at a very deep, cellular level when we come in contact with the wildness of nature—for millions of years we've been tuned to that resonance, and returning to it is transformative and deeply healing."

I thought of my time among the Maori, who call themselves *tangata whenua*, people of the land. John's words were entirely consistent with their beliefs. And seeing the way he

looked around this piece of land tucked into a bend of the creek, I guessed John also felt a deep, loving kinship with its trees, rocks, and water. I was beginning to experience some serious envy of the people who were going to spend a couple of weeks in the company of this man.

“There’s a huge longing in our culture for a connection to spirit, but many people are so alienated from themselves, and from nature, that they don’t know how to respond,” John continued. “Connecting with the natural world is the oldest of all spiritual paths. No matter what your religious affiliation, this path is open to you. You can learn about life and death just by seeing the fallen trees returning to earth and the mushrooms growing after a rain. The earth is always willing to teach us, if we just pay attention.”

## ZEN AND THE ART OF CREMATION

There was one more person I needed to talk to in Crestone: Christian Dillo, the German-born Zen monk who serves as a resident teacher at the Crestone Mountain Zen Center, the man who made such a strong impression on me during my first visit. Recalling our meeting, I appreciated how he hadn’t made me feel stupid when I gave him a ten-minute time limit on our conversation. “The time we have together is what we have,” he’d said in classic Zen fashion. “Let us make it enough.” I was eager to learn more from this man with the intense gaze and serene manner.

After driving up a winding and bumpy gravel road past stands of juniper, pinyon, and ponderosa pines, Bob and I were greeted at the entrance to the center by Christian, who was dressed in Western-style clothes except for a bib-like garment known as a *rakusu*. Worn around the neck, it symbolizes the robe worn by the Buddha as well as the vows the person has taken to follow Buddhist precepts.

“Come to the teahouse,” Christian said. “It’s a good place to talk.”

Situated in an enclosed courtyard next to a dry Zen garden with artfully placed rocks, the tiny wooden house was cozy and peaceful. Inside, Christian lit a stick of incense and invited us to sit on the tatami mats that lined the floor. Silence fell. I appreciated the fact that I didn't have to fill it immediately (one of the benefits of being around monks, I've learned, is that conversations typically flow at a slower pace). I savored the austere lines of the room and the pleasant aroma of the incense.

"How can I help you?" Christian finally asked.

I explained about my writing project, telling him of my brother's death, my mother's dementia, and my travels around the world trying to make sense of them. I'd been drawn to Crestone without knowing quite why, I said, but thought it might have something to do with its cremation ground.

"What do you think about it?" I asked. "Is it a good thing for the community?"

Christian, it turned out, was the perfect person to answer these questions, because he'd been on the town's planning and zoning commission when the cremation ground was proposed. I took a moment to appreciate the image of a Zen monk serving on a planning and zoning commission, then listened to his story.

"It was quite contentious at first," he recalled. "People had all sorts of concerns, including possible harmful emissions and the danger of sparks starting fires. But it's now become an accepted, and I think a valuable, part of life here."

The first cremation was done in 2008 on a site established and maintained by volunteers from the Crestone End of Life Project. At each one, the fire department stands guard to make sure the fire is kept under control. While people mark the ritual in a variety of ways, most often with drumming or singing, one element has become a tradition: each person in attendance places a juniper branch on the pyre.

"Most of the time in the West, cremations are done in secret, in places removed from the living," Christian said. "But other parts of the world have long recognized that this final death ritual should be open to those on a serious spiritual path."

From a Buddhist point of view, cremations provide a powerful teaching. Death, after all, is the ultimate lesson in impermanence. So I think it's a good thing to have this here. During a cremation, you can look around at people's faces and see how strong the experience is for them. You look at the body being cremated and you can feel the elemental power. You get it in your bones that this body is now gone."

We sat in silence some more. As the scent of the incense drifted through the room, I watched the smoke waft from the end of the stick and wondered what it would be like to see a body being burned.

Turning to less intense topics, I brought up something that had been bothering me. I'd spoken to a number of Crestone residents who were ambivalent about having attention drawn to it by the media, namely me. They feared it would become too popular, another trendy site for the spiritually adventurous. (So let me insert a Crestone public service announcement: it's hard to get to, the winters are harsh, jobs are scarce, and the mosquitoes can be ferocious.)

Reflecting his background in the no-nonsense traditions of both Germany and Zen, Christian was skeptical of the idea that Crestone is inherently special. And when I brought up the water-on-top-of-crystal theory, he looked at me with the same sort of patient but long-suffering expression he'd used when I'd given him a ten-minute limit to our conversation.

"I don't know what Crestone is; I choose to look at it like any other mountain town," he said, then backtracked a bit. "The remoteness is unusual, and the wildness of the land. We crave a connection to the wild—it reminds us of our shared embodied heritage with all living beings. And life is so precious here. This high alpine desert is surprisingly fragile. It's not like a jungle that grows back quickly. If you disturb the earth, it can take a hundred years for it to return to what it was."

Most of all, Christian said, people respond to the quiet. "That's what people notice most when they come here: how silent it is. We crave places like this. The problem is that they're easier than ever before to get to, but the more people

who go to them, the more they lose what draws us to them. It's a terrible paradox."

Unfolding his long legs with graceful ease, Christian stood up and invited us to join him for lunch. As we walked to the dining hall we began to chat about less weighty matters. I told him that I was learning how to meditate from an app on my phone and asked him what he, as a professional Buddhist, thought about that.

"You should use whatever works," he said. "But at a certain point, you might want to get a teacher. A good teacher speeds up the path."

Over a lunch of tofu and salad grown in the center's gardens, he elaborated, talking about his reservations about how trendy the concept of mindfulness has become. He was leery of it being reduced to just a technique that people used to de-stress. "Mindfulness is a powerful practice," he said, "but many people want to improve their life without transforming it. That's not really Buddhism."

"So what is the heart of Buddhist teaching?" I asked, then added, "This time I can give you more than ten minutes."

His smile told me he remembered our initial encounter. "Perhaps this: suffering equals pain times resistance. When pain is zero, suffering is zero, but we cannot get rid of pain once and for all, because to be a human body is to feel pain. The other factor is resistance. Unlike pain, it is in our control. Through meditation, you can learn to allow your experience as it is, to lessen your resistance. In Zen, in fact, some pain is part of the practice. When you do zazen, your legs hurt, your back aches, but if you learn to make space for those sensations and be kind to them, you will still feel the pain but you won't suffer."

Seeing my raised eyebrows, he added, "At least not as much."

He offered the corollary as we stood up to begin our leave-taking: "Suffering can also come from grasping at pleasure. We suffer because we want to cling to it, to keep it from disappearing. But like pain, pleasure will pass as well. We can learn not to attach to either of them."



Christian's words echoed in my mind as we headed back into town, retracing our route down the steep gravel road and then making our way to the brewery in the middle of Crestone. Our week here—a time period that felt both much shorter and much longer than seven days—was ending. I hoped our van would have enough oomph to take us out of town the next morning, but at the same time I was sorry at the thought of leaving.

I watched as a man walked past me into the brewery wearing a bright green plush bathrobe, his legs and feet bare underneath. That's so Crestone, I thought, and smiled.

In the late afternoon, we drove to the cremation ground, heading out of town for several miles and turning right at a sign that bore a single word: Pyre. The old-fashioned word was evocative of much older traditions, from pyres on the banks of the Ganges River in India to pre-Christian funeral rites in the British Isles. Fire has always been an essential part of religious ceremonies. Add the element of death and you have a powerful combination indeed.

To be honest, I was bracing myself for my first sight of the cremation ground. As much as I appreciated the homemade aesthetic of many of the buildings here—as well as the creative reuses of old school buses—I mentally prepared myself for the fact that this place might be simply depressing and ramshackle.

Instead, I found it deeply moving.

The sign at its entrance set the tone: "You have entered a sacred space," it read. "Please enter this place with reverence, honoring those whose lives were celebrated here."

A circular fence of bamboo surrounded the site, with a half-dozen openings into an inner courtyard. Stepping inside, my eyes were immediately drawn to the structure in the center: a rectangular platform made of heat-resistant bricks, about three feet high and ten feet long. There were scorch marks on it, but no other sign of its use. Brilliantly blooming yellow flowers filled the rest of the space, their stalks swaying gently in the wind. I thought of the Day of the Dead altars filled with mari-golds, another flower the color of sunshine.

Walking the perimeter, I read the handcrafted copper plaques nailed to the posts. Each featured the name of someone who had been cremated here; most also contained some other design as well, from an Irish harp to a yin-yang symbol. Above the fence, I could see the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the distance, their peaks obscured by late-afternoon clouds. The site was silent except for the muted sound of the wind.

It wasn't grim or depressing at all; instead it felt like liminal space. It was different, somehow, from the rest of Crestone, existing in a betwixt-and-between place, on the border between prairie and mountain and life and death.

I remembered Kairina's description of the final days of her husband, Harold Danforth, a death that seemed as perfect a send-off into eternity as I could imagine. During the last six weeks of his life, volunteers from the Crestone End of Life Project had provided support and comfort to both of them. After his passing, they helped her wash and anoint his body, which was kept at home for three days, a period during which friends and loved ones came to pay their respects. He was never left alone, even at night, harking back to much older traditions. Very early on the morning of the third day, his body was transported to the cremation site, and as the first fingers of dawn started to be visible on the horizon, the fire was lit.

"It was in winter, so the air was cold, and the scene was very somber," Kairina remembered. "But the fire brought warmth and light, and gradually the mood shifted. Everyone was given a branch of juniper and came forward to place it on the pyre, and then people came forward one by one to share stories about my husband. There was drumming and singing and clapping. The cremation took about two hours, and by the end of it the mood had changed. It was almost a kind of alchemy. I felt enveloped in love and compassion. The entire process helped me move beyond my grief into a place of acceptance and even joy."

As I was leaving the cremation ground, I chose an exit at random, one in the general direction of our van. Before I left the courtyard, I stopped for one last look at the pyre, trying to

imprint upon my mind this remarkable sacred site blending death and life, this place adorned by brilliant yellow flowers and watched over by the brooding peaks of the Sangre de Cristos.

Then I turned and saw a plaque, one of the many nailed to the fence. The name on it startled me: Davita Decorah. Decorah was the name of the small Iowa town where I'd grown up. And there it was, the last thing I saw as I left the enclosure.

It goes without saying that this was a Crestone thing. But I think it was more than that: it was a reminder that in some inexplicable way, the cremation ground is my home too.

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