

SHAMANIC TRANSFORMATIONS

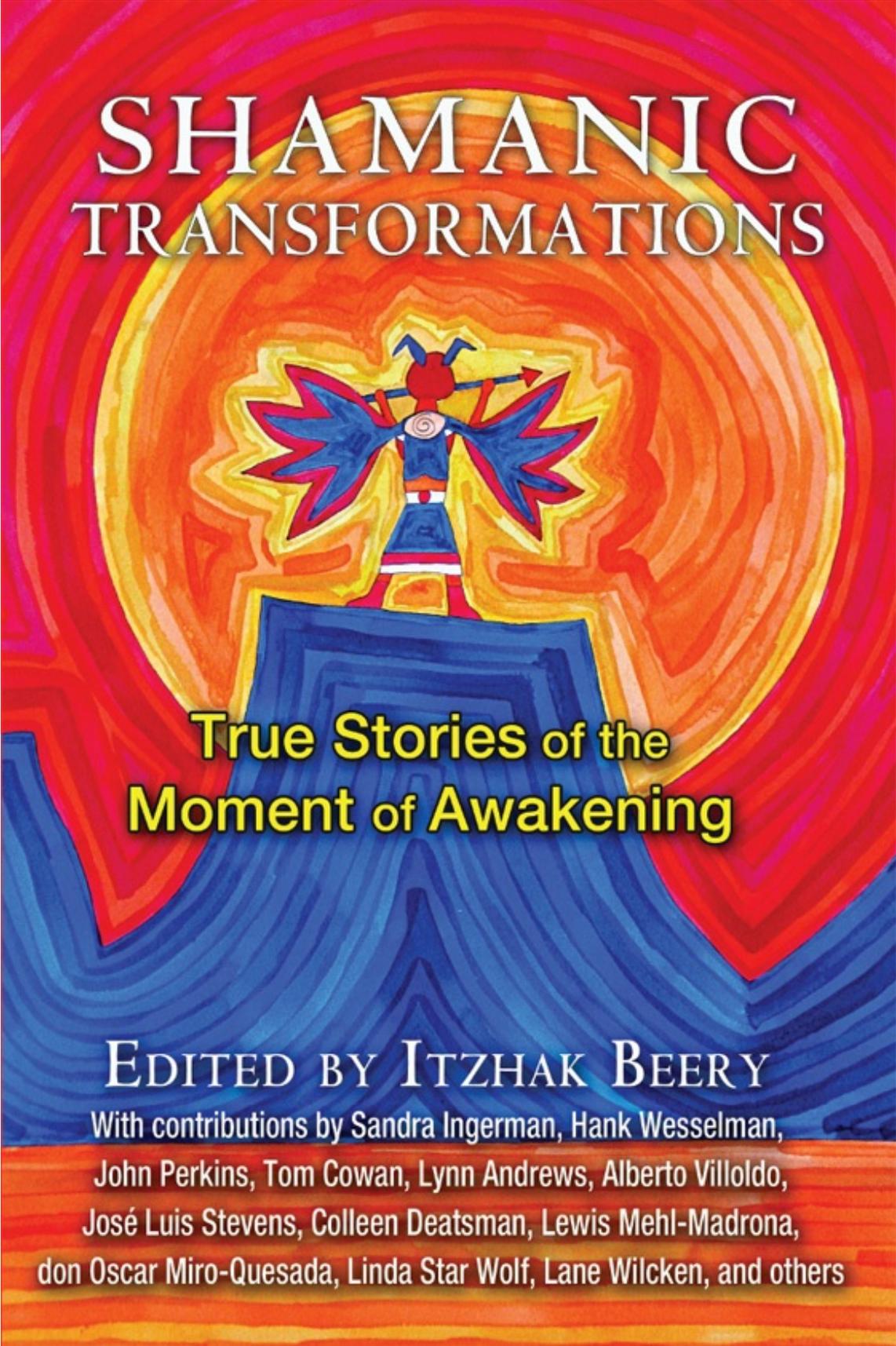


**True Stories of the
Moment of Awakening**

EDITED BY ITZHAK BEERY

With contributions by Sandra Ingerman, Hank Wesselman,
John Perkins, Tom Cowan, Lynn Andrews, Alberto Villoldo,
José Luis Stevens, Colleen Deatsman, Lewis Mehl-Madrona,
don Oscar Miro-Quesada, Linda Star Wolf, Lane Wilcken, and others

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*To my grandchildren, Ayela and Abraham May the Great Mystery guide you on
an awe-inspiring life journey.*

Acknowledgments



My deepest gratitude to all the shamanic teachers who came forward to share in this collection the most personal and intimate moment of their lives' transformations. Thank you for your trust and courage, and for believing in the importance of this book. I am in reverence to you and in awe of your journeys. I know they will inspire the readers as well.

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The Three Stages of Spiritual Unfolding



Hank Wesselman

In considering the initiatory experience of shamanic impact, many people are aware that my wife, Jill Kuykendall, and I were drawn into connection with a Hawaiian kahuna elder named Hale Makua; this occurred during the last eight years of his life. One of the things that Makua discussed with us during that time was our uniquely human experience of spiritual unfolding—a process in which we, as souls, grow and become more than we were, often through the experience of shamanic impact. His shared wisdom and our conversations with him have been published in my book *The Bowl of Light: Ancestral Wisdom from a Hawaiian Shaman*. Others such as Ken Wilber have addressed this phenomenon as well.

Allow me to now bring this topic up for consideration because when we understand fully what it is that we have stepped into—or as Makua was fond of saying, “what we have all signed up for”—the rest of our life may become increasingly clear.

THE FIRST STAGE: BELIEF

The first stage of our personal spiritual unfolding is belief. There can be many different kinds of beliefs: magical beliefs, mythic beliefs, rational beliefs, scientific beliefs, and so forth. Magical beliefs include the notion that we can dramatically affect the physical world, as well as other people and their lives, through the power of our ego—in other words, through our intentionality. Kids’ TV shows are filled with such beliefs—scenarios in which superheroes can leap tall buildings in a single bound, travel faster than a speeding bullet . . . or even heal others from life-threatening illness.

A couple of the latest New Age fads illustrate this nicely. The film called

The Secret is an example of magical belief systems in action. It draws upon the “power of intention” and “the law of attraction” so that we can manifest the things that we want and bring them into our lives. If one’s belief is strong enough, whatever one wants may magically appear. Through one’s focused intentionality, wealth, the perfect relationship, and a new BMW may all be manifested.

Without casting judgment, allow me to observe that such efforts, though worthy, rarely result in effects that are measurable, and we eventually come to understand (and accept) that we are not all-powerful, that we cannot affect the world (let alone the universe) through our egoic intentionality. It is usually at this point that we begin to embrace mythic beliefs in which we delegate authority for manifesting our requests to God or to Jesus or to various other saints and sages, deities, and spirits—including those compassionate archetypal forces usually anthropomorphized as winged super-humans called angels.

At the onset, we find much support for these mythic beliefs in unending avalanches of well-intentioned metaphysical books, seminars, and workshops, as well as in our organized religions. Yet at this level we are still dealing with beliefs, in this case the belief that the deities, including “the Creator,” have ultimate power over us and can be persuaded to serve us in various ways if our belief is strong enough, or we pray hard enough, or we do ritual and ceremony correctly or long enough.

Sound familiar? Here’s the rub: While magical and mythic beliefs can be greatly sustaining in the short term, we eventually notice that not much changes in our lives in the long term. The problem with belief systems, whether magical or mythic, rational or scientific, is that they are at best mental phenomena—collective thoughtforms with strong emotional sentiments attached to them. And as such, we can continually embrace beliefs without ever changing our present level of consciousness in the least—in other words, no growth. Because of this, our beliefs usually fail to compel us in the end. We can believe in God or spirits or angels for decades, yet little to nothing may really change in our lives in response. This is usually when the second stage of spiritual unfolding occurs—faith.

THE SECOND STAGE: FAITH

Faith soldiers on when our belief systems falter, and most people choose to remain at this level because faith is another great sustainer, another great

supporter. Yet faith can take us in two quite different directions. In one direction, faith can and does spiral us backward into belief. This is what fundamentalism is, and this includes the whole “born-again” phenomenon.

Fundamentalism—whether Judaic, Christian, Islamic, Animistic/Paganistic, or even Buddhist—is a trap of immense proportions on the spiritual path. This is because fundamentalism, despite all of its fervor and intention, ritual and rapture, proclamation and pontification, will not ultimately bring believers into connection with that which they are seeking. In truth, salvation lies in precisely the opposite direction.

When faith is doing its job correctly, our self-serving and self-limiting magical and mythic beliefs, including faith itself, are transcended. With this courageous act (of faith) we are drawn not back down the hill into narcissistic and egocentric belief systems once again, but forward and up the hill into the third stage of spiritual unfolding—direct experience.

THE THIRD STAGE: DIRECT EXPERIENCE

Direct experience of the transpersonal realms of the spirits lies beyond both belief and faith. This is the shaman’s realm. It is also completely and irreversibly life-changing, revealing why the shaman’s path is of such interest to members of the transformational community. What we’re talking about here is direct connection, but not with our culturally determined mental constructs of gods and goddesses and angels. Rather, at this stage we discover that each of us has the power to engage in authentic transpersonal experiences through which we may discover the real archetypes. . . . And because these forces are etheric in nature, they make take a form that is meaningful to the one with whom they have come into relationship . . . as Jesus or Athena or an angelic being, for instance. Or they may reveal themselves as they really are—as the light beyond the form, and the formless beyond the light.

Transpersonal in this sense implies that we are expanding beyond our personal self—and beyond those self-created mythical thoughtforms that usually tell us just what we want to hear. In this we are talking about what the philosopher Ken Wilber and others refer to as the “deep psychic,” through which our conscious awareness can expand exponentially, allowing us to directly experience the authentic spiritual worlds and the forces that reside within them.

In my small book *The Journey to the Sacred Garden*, it is revealed that most of us may be hardwired to be able to do this. When that genetic “program”

on our inner hard drive (your DNA) is double-clicked with the right mouse, the deep psychic kicks in and true transpersonal experience then becomes available to us. The ability to do this is a learned skill that improves with practice, which is why a deep immersion experience in shamanic journeywork forms the experiential centerpiece of our hands-on Visionseeker workshops.*1

Once learned, the shamanic method usually brings us into the experience of “Nature Mysticism.” This is an authentic spiritual path with heart that many of us experienced spontaneously as children through our contact with Nature. This is a path that may bring us as adults into direct connection with the spirits of Nature as well as with the World Soul—the same multileveled archetypal matrix and intelligence that many call Gaia or, following the Gnostics, the Sophia.

Often, this connection may be sensed as an immanent and user-friendly presence that makes us feel good. Some of us experience this presence on the golf course, a fishing trip, a weekend camping expedition, or a trip to the beach. Through such experiences we may sense that Nature is aware of us, and that it may express itself through those archetypal forces the traditional peoples call “the spirits.”

We’re not talking about belief systems here. We have now gone beyond them and beyond faith as well. We’re talking about the direct transpersonal connection with the sacred realms that define the mystic, and this is the realm of the shaman. As we mature spiritually, we are given more pieces of the puzzle to understand, and we eventually become aware that we have entered into communion with the Infinite.

This experience inevitably draws us into the fourth stage of our spiritual unfolding—personal transformation.

And nothing is ever the same after that.



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College and Adeola Odutola College in Nigeria, the University of California at San Diego, the West Hawaii branch of the University of Hawaii at Hilo, California State University at Sacramento, American River College, and Sierra College. He currently resides on Hawaii Island with his family on their small organic farm. He offers experiential workshops and presentations in core shamanism at centers such as the Esalen Institute in California and the Omega Institute near New York. He is the author of nine books on shamanism, including his critically acclaimed Spiritwalker trilogy, the award-winning *Awakening to the Spirit World* (with Sandra Ingerman), and *The Bowl of Light*. His website is www.sharedwisdom.com.

A Mountain's Light



Ginny Anderson

Mt. Hood, in the Cascade Range, is the highest point in Oregon. Some fifty-five years ago, it was the site of my initiation—the turning point that provided an expansion of consciousness and an orientation ultimately leading to the spiritual practice of shamanism, which I pursue to this day.

Seeding the path that would unfold over my lifetime, the journey began with an adventure—my first mountaineering expedition. Of my climbing partners, two men were experienced climbers and the third a novice like me. Entering the impressive Timberline Lodge on the shoulder of Mt. Hood in Oregon, we signed the climbing register. In front of a roaring fire in the huge stone fireplace, we organized ice axes, ropes, crampons, food, and water. Even before we stepped onto the snow, I felt the enormity of what we were about to do. In the middle of the night, the lodge was deserted; our words echoed in the enormous space.

At 2:00 a.m. we set out, the crisp snow crunching underfoot. Our time frame was dictated by the need to get past a certain steep avalanche-prone area close to the summit before the sun altered the snow conditions. Crisp snow crunched underfoot. Initially my focus was on getting accustomed to the equipment we were using—handling the ice ax and feeling the pleasure of finding a pace and a movement of limbs that came into a workable rhythm.

The night was crisp and clear and the inky canopy overhead focused our close attention on the terrain directly in front of us. The snow was illuminated by the moon and the stars; I'd never seen such a stellar spread. From the moment of our first steps, my heart was wide open to the expanding beauty surrounding us. The spaciousness of the night sky, the enormous vista, the wonder of our surroundings played no small part in what happened for me that night. I was naive about the world of Spirit at that point, but the opportunities that were to

come to me many years later through shamanism had their first expression in what took place that first evening on the mountain.

The early hours of our journey under the stars had led us through benign snowfields, but then the sky began to take on another quality of light and I paused as I realized that something quite magical was taking place. I could see farther now and everywhere I looked the violet light of the sky seemed to be spreading wings, illuminating and enfolding the undulations of the valleys, the peaks in the distance, and the fascinating shapes of distant fir trees emerging into view. I looked up toward the mountain's summit and felt myself being drawn *into* the lavender light that now totally surrounded me. A physical sensation of expanding beyond my body seemed to erase distinctions between my surroundings and me. The snow was lavender, the peak far ahead was lavender, and even my own body was encompassed by this beauty. The cluster of other climbers, as well as the stars overhead, were being swallowed into this beautiful color, and I envisioned them adding their illuminating power to the unusual violet light.

I was spellbound. We were one—the mountain, the snow, the forests, the sky, the stars, the climbers. We were not different, one life-form from another, but united. As the stars disappeared into the coming dawn, the quality of light changed—but I felt infused with its power, and I truly danced up that mountain.

Every sense was activated—every cell felt alive, receptive to the energy of the mountain, of the other climbers, of everything around me. I could only account for the energy that came into me for the climb from this sensation of fully participating in it. I was part of the mountain, part of everything. Because I was not separate, there was no effort—nothing to overcome. Even as the quality of light faded, the sensation of joy and full participation in the moment continued.

Completely present in that moment, I didn't think past it. I couldn't have imagined the significance this occurrence would hold for me as I journeyed forward in my life, or that a time would come when similar experiences could be learned and purposely practiced. But before that would come about, my life would unfold over the decades—through college and graduate school, marriage and motherhood, wild travels on several continents, exposure to meditation and mind-expanding experiences. Whether or not the sensation of light itself has been present, I've often recognized the power of the moment—in the sense of expansion past the separate self—as well as a focused awareness. My destiny is shaped by knowing that the potential exists to become one, cellularly and emotionally, with All That Is. Like beads on a precious necklace, ordinary life

has been punctuated by enough experiences of this kind to bring the reminder that anything is possible.

Over and over again, when peak experiences have come to me through yoga, through qigong, through physical adventures, through the survival of life-threatening experiences, the sensations that accompanied the lavender light blanket me again. This proffers upon me an instant knowing, a familiar acknowledgment of an expanded mind-body state without label or categorization. It's simply a privilege to experience the reminder again and again.

Once, when I was in graduate school, raising and supporting five children on my own, I felt very overwhelmed and sought out and worked with a yoga teacher in the tradition of the great yogi Dessica Char. During a breath meditation with Craig Wilson, my teacher, I suddenly felt the shift into that same expanded space. I rested in it, feeling the immediate peace of the moment, and surrendered into it. I was left with the tranquility to deal with the overload of my life without the attendant stress. This was a precious gift.

When the meditation ended, Craig knew without words what had happened. He, after all, had also been immersed in the expanded space. Without pressuring me, he intimated that I could delve more deeply into yoga and with that might come an amplification of the power I felt in these transcendent moments. At that point, however, I was only able to cope with what was already on my plate, and I set aside a deep immersion in yoga. But that moment, which I recognized as akin to the moment when the lavender light had united everything on Mt. Hood, was a gift of Spirit that helped me deal with the challenges I'd created for myself. Deep immersion in spiritual practice would come later.

Other moments of profound intensity accompanied by enveloping light have come to me a number of times, under quite different circumstances. An aura that may be characterized by lavender or golden light typically attends these moments. One of them occurred when I was traveling home in the fast lane of a busy California freeway. I was returning from a session with a shaman, which seemed to have left me no more at peace than when we'd begun. But suddenly on that freeway, I felt myself enveloped in golden light.

Alarmed, I initially wondered if I was having a heart attack, and I looked for a break in the traffic so I could safely pull over to the side of the highway. Cars zoomed forward next to me, and I couldn't change lanes. I sped forward with the flow of traffic in the fast lane, and my fear turned to wonder as I continued safely forward, with the light beginning to extend to everything

around me. The freeway, the cars, the dividers, and the buildings I sped past—all were bathed in light. The aura continued as I drove home, some thirty minutes away, and I felt empowered—as filled with joy and wonder by the radiance as I had been that day on the snowfields of Mt. Hood.

At home, I went into my garden, where I sat and marveled at the light and presence that surrounded me, and the sense of tranquility and peace that enveloped me. The issue I'd been concerned with simply disappeared in the sense of this greater well-being that permeated everything. I recognized the state of mind as that which had been brought on by the beauty of the lavender light on the mountain: all was one.

On other occasions, at times of great danger or threat of death, the light has arrived, together with an acceptance of the fullness of the moment and the sense of assurance of ultimate rightness. This sense of being fully present in the moment is complete unto itself, and from me it elicits an appropriate response that I could not have conjured or thought of on my own. Without doing anything to incur this other than spontaneously being open to the totality of the instant, my full self is invariably called into play. It seems that, when in this state, all the cells of my body become totally available to one another, resulting in a sense of effortless response that carries me toward the highest and best possible state of being. These experiences of light and total presence hold out reminders of ways to move forward through challenging times.

Some thirty years ago, a sense of feminist spirituality was emerging strongly in the Bay Area of California. When a life-threatening experience of violence (not the first) shook the form of my existence, a group of my friends assembled; they would become an important circle of fellow explorers. A framework of creating sacred space, and how to work with it, became the field in which we experimented for over twenty-five leaderless years, utilizing research, music, art, joy, and creativity in the process. Our experimental approach shaped many aspects of my personal work, as well as my work as a psychotherapist.

Later, overlapping this time frame, the threat of another dangerous circumstance brought out a need that was different from what could be provided in our circle. I sought out a shamanic teacher whose book I had recently read, and after searching all over the country for his whereabouts, I discovered that Alberto Villoldo lived two miles from my home. Over time, I began a spiritual journey with several shamanic teachers that led me to one of the primary forms of my work in the world. It returned me more definitively to the original source of my spiritual experience of Nature. The Peruvian shaman Americo Yabar and

Ruth Inge-Heinze were among these mentors.

Shamanism's approach, at once ancient and also new to many, brought me into deep and direct contact with Nature. My first spiritual opening had been a direct experience without the framework of a specific spiritual practice. Through shamanism, I now had that missing link; I realized that the experiences of union with the natural world that had begun for me on Mt. Hood could be fostered through shamanic practices. I returned again and again to the Andes, absorbing spiritual perspectives regarding how life is viewed on our planet, whether that life be stones, plants, animals, or the spirit of place itself.

I began to see clearly the relationship between human actions and their consequences, and I understood that time seemed to be racing forward toward a culmination of life on our planet. These insights made me want to participate in the transformation of consciousness necessary for the continuation of all life on Earth.

The concept of *ayni*, or reciprocity, is deeply embedded in the shamanic wisdom of the Incas. I began to consider how and what I might reciprocate, or give back, in gratitude for the many gifts of presence that have come to me over time. The shamanic approach to the natural world provides a means to do that.

The Bay Area, my home territory, is encompassed by the energy of six mountains. A group of friends and I searched out a series of sacred sites on these mountains, identifying places that could help people develop a better understanding of our connections to the complex web of life. One such traveler was Sandy Miranda, the producer of a world music radio program. She called these mountains "the pillars of our paradise," and indeed, they frame the space of one of the most sacred places on Earth.

An upshot of these explorations was that I began to develop a project called Circling the Bay, which offers a series of journeys to the sacred places that encircle our communities. After more than two decades of journeying in the territories of these mountains, the award-winning book *Circling San Francisco Bay: A Pilgrimage to Wild and Sacred Places* was published in 2006. The processes of relating to the natural world described in this book are adaptable everywhere. They've been used to expand connections to the natural world in Russia, Canada, Alaska, and elsewhere in the United States. Wherever we are, the intent to relate to the land on which we stand can help us enrich our bonds with the natural world.

Returning to the beauty and power of Nature is a constant affirmation of the simple yet profound importance of returning to right relationship with the

powers that sustain our very lives. Without direct experience of the natural world, it is much more difficult for people to comprehend that Nature's power to support or destroy our lives will be shaped through our own reciprocity.



GINNY ANDERSON, Ph.D., is an ecopsychologist who works with individuals and groups in outdoor settings to help them develop and expand relationships with each other and the natural world. A licensed psychologist with a doctorate from Stanford, she maintains her practice in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has worked at Stanford, UC Davis, and the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (now Sofia University). Ginny is the author of the award-winning book *Circling San Francisco Bay: A Pilgrimage to Wild and Sacred Places*. Her long life experience with feminist spirituality, shamanism, Buddhism, pilgrimages, and hospice all contribute to her practice. As world community evolves, she pays particular attention to the transforming role of women elders, weaving threads of lineage through traditional stories and their connection to nature's wisdom. You can visit her website at www.eco-psychology.com and find her therapist listing through *Psychology Today* at www.psychologytoday.com.

A Most Extraordinary Vision on the Power Path



José Luis Stevens

Some individuals walking the shamanic path have experienced a single, sudden opening that forever changed their perspective of reality. That has not been my experience. For me there have been many smaller awakenings, experiences that have opened my perception gradually, a little here and a little there. In some ways I have been very fortunate because these smaller openings have afforded me the opportunity to adjust little by little to a shift in my reality, unlike those who have been blown open suddenly and overwhelmingly.

While I was attending university in California in the 1960s, I had some eye-popping adventures in consciousness with the help of psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, and mescaline, accompanied by my voracious reading of the Carlos Castaneda books, the Seth books,^{*7} and Aldous Huxley. I saw that the world I had been taught to see by my conservative Catholic education was not by any means the world available to me through these deeply altered states. I would say that through these powerful journeys I had my first spiritual awakening and it had nothing to do with organized religion.

In graduate school at UC Berkeley I signed up for a special Werner Erhard EST training, which was designed specifically for psychotherapists. As it was meant to do, it completely and radically altered my perception of reality. For the first time I was able to see that I was totally responsible for my experience and that everything I perceived was the result of collective agreements, and that I truly was creating my own reality.

In my late twenties, after working in a state mental hospital for a couple of years, I took an extended four-month solo trip through India and Nepal, on a journey that absolutely turned my world upside down. I met people who could

do things that I had previously thought were impossible: people could read my mind, bend steel with their mind, and exhibit energy levels that could only be described as miraculous. I spent a month in Kathmandu studying with a Tibetan Buddhist lama and learned the fundamentals of Buddhist philosophy. I came back from this trip an entirely changed man.

Upon returning, I entered a doctoral program at CIIS (California Institute of Integral Studies) and began to formally apprentice with a Huichol *maracame* (shaman) in Mexico. Over the course of the next ten years, he showed me what my life's work on the shamanic path would be; it is something I have never veered away from since. But this was just the beginning of my transformation as a human being. Eventually, with his blessing, I was to travel to Peru over forty times to train with Shipibo *ayahuasqeros* and Andean paqos in their respective shamanic traditions.

It was during one of these trips that I had the life-changing experience I want to relate here.

During the early 1990s I was traveling to the Peruvian Amazon with regularity to work with an ayahuasqero whom I shall call Juan, a man I had met previously. My wife, Lena, and I had taken a good-size group to visit Cusco, the Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu, and a number of other sacred sights in the Andes. When the first part of this trip ended, a pared-down group flew to Pucallpa, a hardcore Peruvian jungle town in the Amazon, to work with Juan. We were scheduled to do a two-night ceremony in his ceremonial *maloka* (hut), which nested within beautiful botanical gardens that he had cultivated himself.

I don't remember much about the first evening ceremony, it being many years ago now, but I do remember the second one as if it were yesterday. Late in the evening, at approximately 10:00 p.m., we got started. Juan liked to start late because he felt that there would be less interference from local people, given that, at that time of night, most of them would no doubt be asleep in their beds. The evening was a warm one and there were just a few pesky mosquitos around.

We sat in a circle and took the bitter ayahuasca brew and then sat back to wait for the visions to begin. Although I was always excited about these ceremonies, I had no inkling how the evening would unfold. Taking ayahuasca can be like rolling the dice. Sometimes with this medicine the experience would be rough, with lots of purging and dissociation, and at other times it could be blissful and sublime.

On this particular evening, I had many colorful and pleasant visions that

lasted for several hours. At about three in the morning, or even later, I thought the experience was winding down. Suddenly I found myself in a visionary state approaching a temple, where I saw a mysterious but beautiful light emanating from the windows and doors. Upon arriving at the temple I discovered that it was packed with people. The people all had their hands raised up, reaching for a most extraordinary light that seemed to be streaming down from the great dome above. Somehow I knew that this was Christforce light pouring down, and I felt more motivated than I have ever been in my life to reach up and receive it. The problem was that there were so many people crushed together in the temple that it seemed almost impossible to get in. I squeezed in as hard as I could and all I could do was get my right arm and shoulder inside. Reaching my hand upward as hard as I could, I felt the extraordinary light streaming into it.

I have never felt any sensation like that ever in my life, before or since. It was an indescribable state of bliss—but I only felt it on the part of my body that was subjected to the light. The rest of me was out in the cold, so to speak. I stayed there for I don't know how long, marveling in the exquisite sensations flowing through my arm and shoulder. I wanted so badly to push on in and let my whole body experience the light, but it was simply not possible. You could say that it was, at the same moment, the most wonderful experience I had ever had and the worst torture at not being able to subject myself to it wholly.

It began to dawn on me that this experience was designed to offer me only a taste of what could be. I don't know how long I strained and basked in the light, but little by little the medicine began to fade and with it went the visionary experience of the temple. And then just like that it was over. But it wasn't over for me in the sense that I had tasted something so compelling that I could never be satisfied to be without it.

Unable to sleep, I sat in the warm damp night of the jungle listening to the dripping trees and the murmuring of the geckos until the sky began to lighten and a new day dawned. The experience was so personal, so unique, that I could not adequately share it with the other group members. It was an experience that just wouldn't translate in a way that would do it justice. Later I was able to discuss it with some very trusted friends whom I knew had had similar experiences. One of them, a very wise man, listened carefully and then after a pause said, "You are very fortunate that you had that experience. You may never have one like it again in your life. Or maybe you will. Just don't try to chase it. It was a gift." A part of me did not want to hear that, but I recognized the truth of his words. Although I found that I could reproduce the event very well in my mind, I could not quite reexperience the degree of intensity I felt that night.

It has been about twenty years since that vision and I have never forgotten the power of it, the beauty of it, the intensity of that light, and most importantly, I am aware of how much I would like to experience it again. That night I discovered what it was like to be in the absolute ecstasy of the light of the Christforce, and although I have not had such a direct experience of it since, I know what is possible, and that has changed my life indelibly.

For me it is very clear. This was no religious experience—not a conversion or anything associated with that. Yes, it was definitely a spiritual experience, but what I experienced was an extremely high frequency that is available to each one of us at any time whatsoever. This is a state of being that can only be described as a great blessing—a state that fulfills every desire, every wish, every yearning. In a word, it is a frequency that ends the state of separation, and yet interestingly I felt the light on my right side, the side that is typically associated with the male—the doing and the thinking. This is the part of me that is most dominated by what the Toltecs call the parasite, the ego, the false personality, which leads to feelings of separation. In this sense it was a great healing, for this is the side of me that needed this frequency the most. Since that time I have made much better friends with my feminine side (and yes, there is more work to do).

So, do I want to have that experience again? Of course I do, but I am not looking for it anymore. It will come when it comes, when it is right. I have learned some patience from that vision so many years ago. Since then I have had many indescribable, extraordinary experiences, and I truly feel like a most fortunate human being, extraordinarily blessed. I see now that the temple was too small to fit me entirely into it because I could not yet envision a temple large enough to hold me and everyone else. I now know that the temple can be as big as I need it to be and there is no shortage of space. Perhaps one day I will walk into a temple and although there will be millions of my brothers and sisters in there with me, there will be plenty of room for us. In fact, I now know that is not just a possibility, it is inevitable.



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Rappers Don't Go on Meditation Retreats



Bezi

Born and raised in Roxbury, Boston's equivalent of the South Bronx, or South Central Los Angeles, I thought of myself as carrying on the city's tradition of producing iconic black men along the lines of Crispus Attucks, David Walker, and Malcolm X. Having a dad who was a field organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the time they were organizing into the Black Panthers helped. He, as well as my mother and my aunts and uncles and their peers, was also involved in various singing groups and musical bands. Coming of age and becoming politicized in the 1980s (Reaganomics, apartheid, crack cocaine, etc.), it seemed destined for me to become a participant in the confrontational do-it-yourself subculture of hip-hop. In the winter of 2002, on the eve of the most decisive moment of my life, I was nothing less than thoroughly identified with my persona: *Sounds like fun, but some of us are too invested in the hard slog of dismantling the institutional superstructure, fighting the power. I'm a gate stormer, a social reformer . . . or, in a time of momentous upheaval, a potential martyr.*

As an inquisitor of apparent reality I was not averse to deep contemplation and intense inner work, so long as it yielded instantly obvious, practical, real-world results; to my mind, action and conflict generated meaningful change. A meditation retreat felt a bit too much like New Age, psychological escapism: white, middle-class, indulgent, privileged, and indifferent to the cries of the suffering masses. What did sitting on a mat have to do with "the struggle"?

I advance, not retreat . . .

But my ol' lady, a demonstrably psychic jewelry designer and daughter of classical Greek scholars, insisted that I begin to meditate with her. And since I'd

courted her (which was completely out of character), on an intuitive hunch that she'd fling open peculiar and thrilling new doors of discovery and possibility for me, it didn't take a strenuous effort on her part to convince me to join her.

The meditation, situated in the high desert town of Joshua Tree in Southern California, is known by its Sanskrit name of Vipassana. Roughly translated, Vipassana means "things as they really are"—in other words, an immaculately clear perception of what is true at the deepest level. At the time of my arrival on the chilly compound, I hadn't a clue as to what the implications or consequences of "things as they really are" might be and whether or not the ol' lady had intuited anything she never said. As it turned out, ignorance or, more charitably, "beginner's mind" (in the words of the great teacher and Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki) was probably my strongest suit going into it. Being very goal oriented then, knowing there was a specific kind of favored outcome, would have caused me to seek it instead of simply experiencing what came up naturally, which seems paramount to the exercise.

Learning the *silas*, the virtuous codes of conduct to be observed over the course of the meditation, was scarcely a concern. No killing, smoking, lying, or stealing? Hey, I don't do any of those things anyway! The instructions for Vipassana were in fact deceptively simple: meditate, eat, sleep, repeat. No television, no reading, no electronic communication, no talking? No problem! *These ten days will be a cakewalk*, I thought to myself.

The first two days were a languid dream in spite of a fairly rigorous schedule that consisted of hours spent sitting perfectly still and silent, watching the breath as it entered and exited my nose—"treels," as the honorable instructor S. N. Goenkaji called them, in his thick Burmese accent. With typical Capricorn conscientiousness, I attended every sitting, beginning at 5:00 a.m. in the morning, pushing through back and leg pain, boredom, sleepiness, ringing ears, discomfort from the cold, and periodic bouts of severe self-doubt. I was doggedly determined to give whatever was being offered a chance to manifest.

The first effect was a subtle shift in my sensitivity to time. Meditations, meals, meandering aimlessly across the arid, stunning desert grounds and back to my cabin at night felt less like planned, discrete activities and more like a single flowing event. By the third and fourth days, bizarre things were happening with my body. Certain thoughts, mostly memories, would cause me to go into violent and, in the beginning, terrifying convulsions. Invariably these were visions of various women I'd had unrequited sexual feelings toward; some I'd known and some not. A puzzling pattern emerged: I'd recall a certain woman and immediately be wracked by involuntary spasms that I knew instinctively

were related to past arousal, but which were not at all arousing in the moment.

Years later, I would come to understand that these were “karmic knots”—energy blobs of sorts that get lodged in the body as a result of unfulfilled desires, causing unconscious suffering. As disquieting as these were, I resolved to redouble my efforts; something powerful was definitely happening. Concurrently, the dusty wind on my skin had a new tactile presence; narrow bands of golden midday heat felt . . . intentional, benevolent. Stars in the crystalline midnight sky seemed closer than I ever remembered them being. Every taste, sound, and touch was more densely packed with sensation, with exquisiteness . . .

I spent the fifth and sixth days confronting the absolute loss of my sanity. After crouching behind a bush to avoid a helper banging a small gong summoning us to the meditation hall—fearing an instinctual urge to lunge at his throat like a cornered animal—I thought to myself, *Well now I’ve done it. I’ve gone and driven myself mad.* When I finally did drag myself back into the hall, we were collectively instructed to mentally “scan” our entire body from the top of our head to the tips of our toes and back up again.

Doing this, I discovered that the panging sensations had localized in the bottom half of my body, while enigmatic, tickling, swirling plasmas of sensation coursed through my torso and upper limbs. When Goenkaji predicted in his prerecorded remarks that “by now, you may be experiencing gross random sensations in one part of the body, together with subtle sensations in another . . .,” my imaginative capacity was driven to its outer limits. *What is this? I wondered. What’s going on here? And how does he know?*

On the eighth day, I took my place in the meditation hall exactly as before, fussed myself into an agreeable position for my back and legs, took some deep breaths, and began to scan my body. As if ignited by the turn of a key, the gross and subtle sensations began. And then, in the midst of these (which I’d fully come to expect), Goenkaji remarked: “At this point, you better pay attention to the spine . . .” Funny, I had not thought about my spine at all. When I did, all tactile experience as a distinct physical entity was sucked into my spine and ejected from the top of my head as if pushed from below and pulled from above by unseen forces.

Okay.

If I lived seventeen more lifetimes I don’t suppose I could summon the words to adequately articulate the state of awareness this particular set of circumstances left me in. But if I must make some poor two-dimensional

overture to a sort of description, and my assumption is that one would be useful, I'd say that it was complete unmitigated liberation, a seamless merging with the Ineffable, Immeasurable Substratum of Being Itself. All distinction between me as a perceiver and an external objective reality disappeared. There wasn't a single passing millisecond that registered to my consciousness anything less than absolutely interconnected Oneness with All.

As above, so below.

Accordingly, I spent the rest of the day in a state of blubbering incoherent bliss, a newborn infant tossed before the overwhelming grandeur and sublimity of it all. Every character artifact of the distinct, separate "I" that I had carefully constructed over the decades, all of my labels—"black," "male," "Bostonian," "rapper," "intellectual," "radical," "Capricorn"—fell away like colorful but lifeless leaves. "Bezi" per se had left the building . . . and couldn't be more pleased. In his absence the distant mountains breathed for the first time. The scramble of life under the parched desert floor resonated. Each element—wind, sky, and earth—embraced as if greeting a long-estranged brother. Undulating tree branches pantomimed "Hi."

Nineteenth-century scientist and writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe coined a phrase that seems apropos here: "delicate empiricism." Attunement to the ecology generates profound sensitivity. *How could the implicate order have been this premeditated, this sacredly and tenderly designed, this baldly obvious the whole time?* Apperceiving myself the hapless fool for missing truths explicit in every minute, I laughed aloud at myself. *What a misunderstanding that was!*

In the long run, this experience upended every conceivable dimension of my existence. When I've attempted to have others help me define what I experienced, whether it was nirvana, *samadhi*, satori, *jnana*, kundalini rising, or some such, I've had no luck. Thus I'll just call it an *awakening*, albeit one that has provided a fully substantiated master narrative for my life. Everything I've been through thus far hangs together in a coherent chronicle. My suspicion is that a "good story," as it were (and I realize now that that's *all* it really is), is pivotal in matters of self-actualization, of finding one's true purpose. I've tried several times to build a manuscript recounting this narrative but I always feel like I'm leaving out critical details of a still unfolding plot.

Stages and events in my life now fall into two basic categories: pre-Vipassana and post-Vipassana. Before Vipassana I was moving for certain in the direction of edification but hadn't yet found my "X factor," to use a hackneyed but

concise meme. I had what seemed to be vague inklings on where to search, although looking back in hindsight, these were actually pretty exact. When an opportunity presented itself to me, that of participating in something that felt important but guaranteed no concrete outcomes, I took a risk and, trusting my inner promptings and the integrity of the company I was keeping, pushed past my comfort zone. In the midst of riotous psychophysical reactions I stayed calm and redoubled my efforts, trusting again that there was an intelligible, benevolent logic at work. The payoff absolutely surpassed anything my imagination could generate.

My post-Vipassana lifestyle could be summarized as what philosopher Ken Wilber called “transcending and including”—simultaneously being whole and part of a greater cosmic whole, yet also being very much integral to the natural world and grounded in basic animal physicality. All the ethno-cultural affinity remained, but it was mediated by wisdom revealed through the prophetic visions of seers and saints. How fortunate it is that these have been passed down to shepherd our enlightenment in this moment when they’re desperately needed! And who knew? After years of trying fruitlessly to reconcile to Christianity and Islam, it turned out I was Buddhist the whole time! No other religion/philosophy/way of life speaks to me so convincingly, so forcefully; no other strikes me as being as empirically reliable as Buddhism. The new name my ol’ lady contrived for me—the black bodhisattva—feels apt.

Though this was *my* formula for transformation, I know it’s hardly the only one. I’m fond of the axiom “many base camps, one summit.” A bodhisattva employs whatever means s/he has at hand to assist the awakening of others, always tracking that each of us is as unique and indivisible as we are interconnected and familial.

Coincidentally, the similarity between a bodhisattva and a shaman is that both have powerful medicine gained in victory over some dire existential challenge (often internal) that they bring back to their communities. And as I ponder unprecedented drought, shrinking glaciers, disappearing forests, structural racism, child, sexual, and elder abuse, geopolitical turmoil, religious fanaticism, disappearing species, and beyond, it’s manifestly clear that wisdom gained in both the healing of the shaman’s core wound and the bodhisattva’s tending to the cries of the world will be indispensable in ameliorating the grim global situation we currently face.

In the final analysis, sitting on a mat had *everything* to do with the struggle, for it raised my personal ecology of meaningful change above anything that could be called “struggle” in the first place.



BEZI is a cofounder of the hip-hop groups Exile Society and The Subterraneanz. He is a multi-instrumentalist, singer/songwriter, producer/composer, documentarian, urban philosopher, strategist, activist, Vipassana practitioner, Zen student, and aspiring author. He was the filmmaker and editor for the short documentary *You Are Your Own Guru*, which can be found on YouTube. He launched a dharma-influenced political third party and was a Bernard Osher scholar at Berkeley City College. Bezi is certified by Master Stephen Co as a pranic healer. You can find Bezi's music at soundcloud.com/donmusic-2, and music from the group The Subterraneanz on YouTube.

There's Been a Whole Lot of Grace



Reverend C. Ayla Joyce

In the beginning
there was light.

It split me open and
showed me my plight.

Shocked I was, horrified at best, Stinking thinking—words that came to
mind, *You must be crazy,*
sick in the head, imagining such dreadful thoughts as these.

I know.

I agreed.

You're right, I must be.

But if I am, what an awful child I really must be.

Well, you are, your name is S-I-N-T-H-E-A, after all.

Remember you are bad and evil too?

*To imagine such things could happen to you. Your poor parents, you've
never stopped pushing them, hurting them, hammering away.*

And for what?

You want them to pay?

To pay for what?

No, I don't want them to pay. I want them to play . . .

Play what?

The game of truth—I tell, they listen.

But things happened—God got in the way many, many times. Really it's more than I can say.

The one big time
which was a turning key
happened

when my doctor said to me, on my nineteenth birthday, “You have scar tissue

thick as a wall. You've got two holes—who did this to you?”

I had no memory beyond a recent D&C.

“Could that be it?”

“No,” he said emphatically, “this is way too thick, and old.”

He continued, “To let the fetus pass through I have to remove this wall surgically, carefully. Oh and by the way, I've never seen this before.”

“Okay, Doc Petrie, do whatcha gotta do!”

“Oh and by the way, surrounding the surgical stadium there will be many eyes looking at you.”

He goes on to say,

“You're at a teaching hospital here, at MCV, and a vaginal septum removal we've never done before.”

“Go for it, Doc Petrie, do whatcha gotta do.”

Thirty-eight years later—in a hut made of bamboo, I visited a shaman hoping to heal this deep, ingrained taboo.

Can't love God—can't love the church—can't love the cross, that all crucified you.

Can't love me,
most certainly not.

Can't love me.

Mother ayahuasca running through my veins bring me back home
to the place of my first grace.

Sitting alone—shivering to the bone, I sat naked—topless—in a circle They
all sat around a pile of burning coal.

Warmth . . .

it offered,

but hardly enough.

Eyes once again, surrounding me—in the circle-shaped hut.

In front, I sat alone—shivering to the bone.

Teeth chattering,

was an altar made

not of stone

And before my eyes, was a crucifix—not meant to go inside of me.

The shaman was a priest,

he wore feathers instead of robes.

Musical bells replaced the buzzing drone, love songs serenaded, my heart
raw and open, by disciples meshed through their tinkling bells, weaving
their very magical spells.

All wearing all white, replacing the men in black, with hoods,
whose music sounded like angry drones.

Crucifix plunging in and out, “take away the innocence”—incense burning
— “bury the Light—woman—child—girl of delight.

You are the cause of the human plight and carry the reason why we must
fight,” happened fifty years ago.

In front of the altar—not made of stone— was a crucifix, beautiful, encased
in glass.

Small and delicate to my sight and leaves called *chappas* feathered my body
with incense of Palo Santo

burning—burning—burning

around my body, so beautiful.

Where the power of the crucifix before was used to hurt,
now a gentle shaman—priest with feathers on his head— made the sign of
the cross.

Gentle fingers touched my head, my shoulders, my heart, forehead, chest,
navel, back and head, my shoulders, my heart, forehead, chest, navel,
back and head, over and over again.

Clucking purrs softly filled my head.

Gaping holes torn before
now are filled with tenderness.

Smoke is blown, gentle words are spoken—welcome home—welcome home
—welcome home, shadows
you are free to go.

Loving purrs—tender touches—naked body upper, shivering to the bone,
chappas clearing, disciples singing love songs serenaded my soul back
home.

A plant with thorns is whacking me . . .

wake up—wake up—wake up—wake up, little one, it's safe to come home!

Wake up nervous system,
wake up and come back home.

Spiraling down my spine, searing through my brain, erasing all the evil spell
I heard the angels singing!

Welcome home, my little one.

A joyful welcome home

back to my birth, back to my worth, back to the joyful place of mirth through
my birth and the loving that brought me to this Earth.

I am home again, home again, jig-it-ty-jig.

I am not of this Earth, but a star being at birth!

A star being,
on Earth.



REVEREND C. AYL A JOYCE lives in reciprocity bringing sacredness to the profane. She is highly skilled at tracking family lineage patterns that disturb the harmony within family systems. She is known as a “contemporary shaman” in her community at large. Her experience with indigenous medicine people began at age eighteen in Ecuador and has continued with the Lakota Sioux, the Qero and Shipibo of the Amazon jungle, and La Iglesia Episcopal as well as in Ecuador and Colombia, where she used the plant medicine ayahuasca. She is a Reiki master, certified massage therapist, sound healer, and creative. She is a channel for the presence of Christ and is humbled by the power that flows through her, opening the Way to our authentic Self and our sacred place within the web of life. She is a proud mother of two amazing young adults and a ya-ya to two special grandbabies. Through her children the path of LOVE awakened! Her website is www.aylajoyce.com.

An Experiential Journey toward Trust



Julie Dollman

How many times in life have you heard the words, “You only have to trust”? What does trusting actually mean, anyway?

I was a mother, wife, and working criminal analyst, among many other adopted roles, in her late forties, studying shamanism in the middle of Ireland in the early “noughties” (2000s). Each full-on training week was often challenging, profound, exhausting, and healing. During the times spent in class I remember holding the belief that anything was possible, even the ability to throw myself into the arena of “trusting.” Until, that was, I arrived home and everyday working life took me to its plentiful bosom once again.

The daily grind of a self-built reality held me tightly gripped in its icy fingers. I was working eight to ten hours a day in a job where I often battled with my own conscience. I was partnered with my husband as we worked to pay the endless bills so that we could live under the same roof in this somewhat civilized twentieth-century world. We were among thousands of others all doing the same.

One day in mid-2006 I decided to create a new reality for myself. I left a well-paying salaried job to step into the unknown realm of spiritual service. I aligned with what I believed to be part of my soul’s purpose, to become a shamanic healer and—boy oh boy—often during those early days did the “trust” word nip at my heels like the proverbial black dog! It seemed to want to constantly remind me that surely I must have ideas above my station, because does someone like me *really* leave a safe job to make a new life for herself? Many times my decision challenged my belief system, and its mantra that “It’s going to be alright” would be hung out like wet laundry to dry. If I am honest, did I believe that things would actually be okay? No, not really . . .

Life took on a momentum of its own within a couple of months of my departure from mainstream society; my husband, who is also on the shamanic path, became ill. Succumbing to his own life’s journey, he encountered the world of a breakdown, one that was to be both a challenging and life-changing path for him. Reality struck like a well-oiled bell and we both knew that the company he worked for wouldn’t support his illness in the long term. We sold our home of nineteen years and rented a home in rural Oxfordshire in England so that he could regroup for a while.

During that time I became the first shamanic practitioner on the high street in Henley-on-Thames. I came out of the broom closet and stood blatantly naked before all who wondered what I was up to. People, though curious, came to me to be healed from a lifetime of separation and woundings. Within eighteen months the building that housed the clinic was sold and we decided to move back to my ancestral home for a while. After a somewhat tense year we bought a thirty-six-foot, secondhand American RV, and like a boomerang, my old friend “trust” came nipping at my heels again. We placed most of our belongings in storage and, one early morning in November 2008, left the UK to travel to Ireland. We were welcomed by a farmer who bred racehorses and allowed us to park up on his land indefinitely.

What followed was what I can only describe as a time of pure magic and awakening. We lived happily in the RV with our Labrador retriever; we experienced what it felt like to really live “off grid”—we were almost untraceable. It was the closest we had ever come to real freedom. I offered my healing services and we managed to always keep warm, well fed, and well cared for.

We walked the ever-changing scenery of the wild beaches in all weather. My husband calls these rugged and beautiful beaches “the organizing principles of life and beyond.” His reason for saying this was because the beach and the ocean are never the same from day to day, which is just like life and the experiences we have requested in order to grow. We accepted the fact that we were both healing our own shadows, and we knew we had to be welcomed and accepted by the land of Ireland on her terms, not ours. It was during this time that we went through a baptism of inner fire, while coming to grips with an understanding of what it really meant to fully immerse oneself in a life lived in trust.

Our simple existence allowed even more magic to show itself to us. Often during the early hours of the morning one or both of us would awaken from a deep slumber to see what I could only describe as an entity that looked like a “green abyss” hovering above us. Neither of us could tell you what it was or what it required from us. These visions went on for months, and even when we had moved into a cottage one particularly cold winter, we still experienced visitations of energy. Sometimes it was the green abyss, and sometimes it was symbols and words written out in the blackness of the ether. Very soon images of people, or cartoonlike characters, would appear in what I can only describe as a TV screen in the dead of night. It was weird! I would catalog the visits to try

and make some sense of them all.

Eventually we bought a home in Ireland, and still the nightly visitations would appear. By this time, however, the interactions progressed a notch. The images had continued to appear as if on a flat-screen TV, sometimes weird, sometimes wonderful. But all of a sudden this changed as the entities that visited began interacting with *me*. All of this occurred while I was awake; they were not part of a dream! This wasn't all: My husband was having separate visitations. One night a woman dressed in ancient clothing whom he called the "star weaver" came to visit him. She was weaving colored energetic strands around the bed. Another night he saw a fairylike child laying flowers over my sleeping body.

This is when the aha moment finally came rushing in like a tsunami. We both now fully understood that the universe was responding and interacting with us in unusual ways. This did not make us fearful; instead we were grateful that what came to us came in a language that we could understand. What was this communication for? I believe it was to convey the truth of human and off-planet human existence. Our star brothers and sisters wanted to show themselves to us in order to reveal a bigger picture, to help us fully come to grips with the idea that anything is possible. My husband and I both had to leave the veils of "normal" society, its stresses and materialistic ways, in order to cleanse ourselves of the old way of life so that we would be accepting of the magic of other dimensions and realms.

I know I have learnt and experienced so much from these visitations. I wrote *Living Shamanism* during this time period and I have started writing a second book about our origins. What do I now think of the word "trust"?

I say to you, hand on heart, it isn't just about trusting. No, it's much deeper than that. I prefer the word "faith," because one must have complete and utter faith in one's soul path and how we draw experiences to us that align with our soul path. We all have to understand that there is a larger reason for our Earth-walk at this time. Faith allows us the ability to know that we are always guided and being cared for as we learn and live out our soul's purpose. Faith is a knowing, a heartfelt wisdom that we are one with the Great Spirit, the All That Is. There isn't any suffering or pain in this secret knowledge; it feels like blissful joy, as though we are an integral part of the expansiveness of the web of life.

Ah ho!



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A Visit from Apó Lákay



Lane Wilcken

I am of Filipino, English, and Scandinavian descent. On my maternal Filipino side, my family has been blessed with many gifted individuals whose practices would be classified as shamanistic. My maternal grandmother, Catalina Coloma Rivera, was a well-known *mangngilut*, or traditional midwife in the Tarlac Province of Luzon Island of the Philippines. In her lifetime she delivered thousands of babies, but her practice also included healing with herbs, the properties of which were revealed to her through communication with the spirit world. My great-great-grandmother Apo Honorata Eslabra was a *manganito* or spirit medium who also experienced spirit travel into other worlds. My own mother is gifted with insight, primarily through dreams, which we paid special attention to growing up.

My parents were good enough to raise me with an understanding of prayer and the nature of spirits, and to recognize when I was having a spiritual experience, and whether I was sensing a good or bad spirit. I grew up in the United States, however, and despite this blessed lineage and upbringing, I adhered to Western ways, rooted in rational thought. I prided myself on my intellectual prowess. I fancied that all things could be explained through scientific and logical thought.

As I look back on my life, I see that I was guided through a step-by-step preparation to a greater understanding and acceptance of what most would call shamanic practice. When I was nineteen, I moved from California to Hawaii. When the plane touched down on the island, I felt what I can only describe as a familiar spirit about the island, its people, and the culture there. I felt an immediate kinship with the Hawaiian people, although I couldn't explain this. I simply *felt* it.

While I lived there I found there were many correlations between the

Hawaiian culture and my Filipino heritage. As a hobby, I started making note of the cultural similarities, all motivated by this feeling of familiarity. Eventually, I moved back to the U.S. mainland, but I continued the hobby of researching cultural similarities between the Hawaiian culture and my own people. That research and the collection of cultural similarities became the basis of what would later become my first book, *Filipino Tattoos: Ancient to Modern*.

When I finally made the decision to write the book, I struggled to find scraps of indigenous knowledge that had been scattered by nearly four hundred years of Spanish colonialism. Frequently I found myself frustrated, stuck at a dead end. It was during one of these frustrating moments that I discovered the shamanic world. It was in the early spring of 2000 when I had my first powerful paradigm-changing experience.

I had gone to bed feeling thwarted in my research efforts to uncover the meaning of certain tattoo symbols. That night I had a dream that I was in the Philippines at some time in the past. I was wearing a *ba'ag* (loincloth) and was standing in a forest. I was greeted by a *lákay* (honorable old man) who wore a short white *ba'ag*; he beckoned me to follow him. We walked through the forest along a narrow winding trail until we came to a huge tree that had been felled, as if by a giant chain saw. I sat down with my back against the giant trunk of the fallen tree and the old *lákay* took my hand.

As he pulled it toward him, I saw that my arm was covered with tattoos! He then explained to me what each of the symbols meant. This was so vivid that I quickly realized that not only was I dreaming, but something supernatural was occurring.

I awoke with a start, fully conscious and alert. I immediately wrote down the information I remembered from the dream. The next evening a similar experience occurred. Again I was in the Philippine forest and the lesson with Apó Lákay was repeated. I recognized that this was my ancestor and one of the last of his lineage who understood the meanings of the tattoos, which had eventually been banned by the long arm of the Catholic Church.

Once again, when I awoke I jotted down what I had learned about the tattoo symbols in my dream. Throughout the day I pondered the possible meaning of the repeated dream, all the while remaining amazed at the experience. However, the following night I did not see Apó Lákay. So the next day doubt began to creep into my thoughts as my rational mind began to assert itself. I thought that perhaps the dreams were products of my subconscious, which no doubt was desperately trying to solve the impasse I was having in my

research.

That next night, as if in a response to these doubting thoughts, I dreamt of Apó Lá kay again, but this time I dreamed that I awoke in my bed to see him *standing in my bedroom!* There he stood next to my bed in my darkened room, clad in his white ba'ag, with a slightly disappointed look on his face. His demeanor was now quite serious.

I got up out of my bed and he ushered me to the bathroom mirror. As I looked into it, I saw that my face was covered with tattoos! Again he explained the symbols to me and I felt a great gratitude toward him. I awoke from this experience rather humbled.

The following night I went to bed with the full expectation of seeing him again, but instead, as I drifted between consciousness and sleep, I was whisked away to find myself in a great warehouse. I stood near the front of a line of innumerable young Filipino people waiting to be tattooed by an old Filipino woman whose arms were covered in traditional tattoos. The people in front of me were being tattooed with what looked like contemporary flowery designs. However, when I approached the old woman, she said that my tattoos would be traditional and she began to tap a tattoo into my skin with her hand.

Then the vision faded and I found myself again in my bed, wondering about the events of the past few days.



Over the course of the following months, I pondered my experiences. Although I had written them down, I felt that there was no way I could include them in my book, given that it was being written from a scholarly perspective. How could I even claim that I knew what these tattoo designs and symbols meant based on a few dreams I'd had? I felt that I would certainly be mocked for such a wild assertion!

But the old lá kay's information would prove to be true.

Several months later, I came across documentation in a book about Filipino textiles, *Sinaunang Habi: Philippine Ancestral Weave*, by Marian Pastor-Roces, that confirmed nearly everything he had told me! Years later, in the Philippines, I even met the old woman who had tattooed me in my dream. Today I know her as Apó Whang-od; I was traditionally tattooed by her in real life. My book has led thousands of mostly younger Filipinos to understand the nearly lost knowledge of our tattoos given to me from the other side of the veil. As I have

grown in my knowledge of my people's ancient spiritual traditions, I have recognized the depth of the symbolism of the tattoos that was offered up to me by my experiences with Apó Lákay.

Some of these symbolic meanings I will share here. Large trees in the Philippines were believed to house *anito* or ancestral spirits. Anciently, these ancestral spirits were believed to be active participants in the lives of their descendants. A giant fallen tree represented a break in culture and communication with the multitude of these ancestor spirits. Leaning up against a large fallen tree with my back against it symbolized a reestablishment of this connection, as the backbone itself is symbolic of the genealogical line of ancestor spirits extending through time. White clothing was traditionally reserved for the dead or those who are in mourning.

The white *ba'ag* represented Apó Lakay's condition of being disembodied and also his mourning for the lack of interaction with his descendants.

Seeing my face tattooed symbolized the achievement of a powerful relationship with the spirit world. In the past, tattooing of the face was an honor reserved for the bravest of warriors, with the understanding that their victories, success, and prosperity were achieved not on their own, but due to the collective influence of their *anito* family.

One would think that these experiences would be confirmation enough of my calling to serve my people, but apparently the Creator and the ancestors felt I needed additional confirmation. A few years ago I was invited by the Center for Babaylan Studies (a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and teaching of Filipino indigenous knowledge, systems, and practices) to be one of their core directors. At the first retreat that I was invited to participate in, I was asked to perform a closing ceremony of my choice for the group. The retreat was held in Sonoma, California.

I had meditated on which ceremony I should perform, and I felt through Spirit that I should construct the *taltalabong* spirit raft used for making offerings to the *anito* and the sons of Kadaklan, some of our primary ancestor-gods. Although I knew that this was the offering that was requested, I still felt a tinge of anxiety as to whether or not it would be accepted or acknowledged so far away from the islands. I wondered, "Would it be accepted when performed by a mixed descendant who grew up in America?"

Nevertheless, I constructed the *taltalabong* and loaded it with offerings. At sunset at a lake in Sonoma, I chanted in our Native language to invite the ancestors, the sons of Kadaklan, and the spirits of the land in California to share

in the offerings. I then launched the raft into the lake. Immediately, on the other side of the lake, several geese began honking and took to the air. A single white goose flew to the front of the black ones and formed a V formation.

I watched as they rounded the lake and flew from the left to the right, where we were all watching. They circled around and repeated the flight from left to right. In our culture, the flight of a bird from left to right is an omen indicating the approval of the spirits. Not only was the sign given by a flock of birds, it was also repeated! Finally the flock of geese flew off into the sunset, the traditional direction of the location of the abode of the ancestors. We stood in awe of these omens. I felt especially humbled that the Creator and the ancestors had allowed this traditional form of physical recognition to take place so far from the islands.

I had originally thought that the purpose of Apó Lákay's visits was to teach me about our tattoos. But I now know that it was to educate me about the reality of the realms that exist in close proximity to our own, the world in which he dwells, and the ways to access these planes. My change of paradigm has affected all aspects of my life. Since these revelations, I have been able to develop my spiritual abilities. This has brought my family and me guidance, knowledge, and comfort, especially when our loved ones have passed away. My shamanic receptiveness has enabled me to enjoy visits from my deceased brother and father. We are able to continue the relationship that we had in the mortal realm, although the lines of communication are different.

I am no longer fearful of being ridiculed for the information I gain through my experiences and I actively request the help of my ancestors in the writing of my books. Ancestors from both my Filipino and European lines play a greater role in my life now. They were particularly involved with the naming of my last two sons. I am encompassed by the love they feel for me, a descendant who listens for their voices in a world where so many of my generation have turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the spiritual traditions of our inherited past. Fortunately, I have had many opportunities to teach others what I have learned, via my presentations at universities, museums, social clubs, and private forums.

Last, my ability to exercise healing energy has been awakened. This has been yet another blessing in a multitude of blessings that continue to unfold before me. Through these continuing experiences, my life is so much richer given that I have balanced my rational thought processes with open communication with the other realms of light. I now walk in grateful confidence before the worlds seen and unseen, ready to teach and to be taught.

Agyámanak ti adu kada kayó Apó Lákay kadagiti sirmatá nga imbingay yo kaniak.

(Thank you so much, Apó Lákay, for the vision you have shared with me.)



LANE WILCKEN is an independent researcher and scholar who has been studying the cultures of the Philippines and Pacific Islands for over twenty years. He is the author of *Filipino Tattoos: Ancient to Modern* and *The Forgotten Children of Maui: Filipino Myths, Tattoos and Rituals of a Demigod*. He serves as a *mambabatok*, a practitioner of Filipino ritual hand-tapped tattoos. Lane's grandmother Apo Catalina Lucas Coloma (Rivera) was a mangngilut and mangngagas (midwife and healer), and his grandfather Apo Roque Esmeralda Rivera was well versed in the oral traditions and practices of the past. Lane's great-great-grandmother Apo Honorata Eslabra Esmarelda was a mangnganito, or spirit medium. Lane graduated from Southern Utah University with a bachelor of science in sociology with a focus on symbolic interactionism. He resides in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Baby, I Was Born This Way



Linda Star Wolf

I was born into a loving family and grew up with the good, hardworking, salt of the earth, Christian folks of rural western Kentucky. Although there was fundamentalism, there was also an innate closeness to the land and to family. I spent most of my early childhood outside with my grandmother Mammy Jones, in the garden and with the animals; I mostly preferred them to other children.

Mammy recognized my overly sensitive nature and my psychic gifts and treated my “strangeness” as something special to be proud of, teaching me that it was a part of God’s gift to me. She helped to protect and cultivate my gifts and to connect the spiritual world to the beauty of the natural world and all of Creation. She helped me to see, hear, and interpret the world around me with shamanic eyes, to ground myself in the natural world, and to feel at home here on Earth. Mammy Jones infused me with her own special brand of faith, allowing me to trust that even though I was different, I was special, and I could do anything that my heart told me I could do.

Mammy also taught me to connect with the dreamworld and the art of dreaming. In the morning, as we ate breakfast, she always asked me about my dreams. We talked about what I saw and what that might mean. A few months before my twelfth birthday, I saw my Mammy’s death in a dream. It terrified me and I didn’t want to tell anyone because I was afraid that if I spoke it, it would come true. The following morning at breakfast Mammy sensed that I was upset about something and eventually got me to talk about what was bothering me. I told her the whole dream and she reassured me that everything would be okay. A few weeks later she became quite ill and her health declined rapidly. She eventually agreed to go to the hospital but she never came home. My beloved Mammy passed away a few weeks after my twelfth birthday.

Not only was the loss of my grandmother a shock, but it created a huge

psychic wound in me that lasted for many years. I secretly blamed myself for her death, believing that somehow I was responsible because I had seen the vision of it in my dreams. The pain of losing her was insurmountable and I was inconsolable. Although I knew my parents loved me, Mammy Jones was the one person in my life who really saw me for who I was.

As a teenager, I couldn't understand how to deal with my gifts without my Mammy to guide me so I wandered in the underworld for a long time. This was the turbulent '60s and '70s, and in my confusion, hurt, and grief, I ignored my sensitive nature and pushed my gifts underground as much as possible. I also developed several dysfunctional patterns for dealing with life, including addiction to substances and having a near-death experience with drugs before I was twenty years old.

The addictions turned out to be blessings in disguise and my early childhood and adolescent experiences eventually led me to a path of soulful sobriety. As I reclaimed my sanity and sobriety in my late twenties, I found that I was a natural wounded healer. I was working as a counselor in the addiction field at that time, and I sensed that there was more to be offered to those I worked with who were struggling as I had been. I could see myself in them; I understood that many of them were using substances to block out emotional pain and repress their sensitive spiritual souls. I became very determined to discover what that "something more" was—not only for me but for others who were seeking ways to live on this Earth that didn't involve being an addict and yet also didn't mean conforming to the mainstream status quo of what was considered acceptable and normal.

This yearning for something more led me to a path of radical transformation and reclaiming my lost soul parts through the healing power of breathwork. It led eventually to the shamanic path. I was doing a lot of breathwork journeying at that time and increasingly began to feel a call toward Native American, Mayan, and other indigenous teachings.

A Cherokee friend and teacher encouraged me to listen to a guided journey every day with the intention of finding a grandmother spirit who could help me heal my grandmother wound and give me the guidance to truly find myself and walk my path. During one of those journeys, a Native American grandmother whom I had never seen before came into my vision. She held my head in her lap and, stroking my hair, called me "gentle Star Wolf." I saw her face as clear as day and she felt incredibly real. When I came out of that journey, I was not sure if she was someone real that I needed to find in this realm or if she was a guide

from the spirit realm.

It would be several years before I tracked her down in the physical world—or perhaps it was she who tracked me down. She told me shortly after we met that she had been dogging my tracks for years! One day I traveled to the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation in upstate New York. As I got out of my car, Seneca Wolf Clan Grandmother Twylah Nitsch opened the door to her back porch and walked toward me. Taking hold of my shoulders, she looked penetratingly into my eyes and said the words that would change my world forever: “What took you so long?”

I looked back at her in shock. Even though there were others close by, they ceased to exist in that moment and there were only the two of us, suspended beyond time and space. The whole world went into slow motion and eventually I found my voice, saying, “It would have helped if you had told me your name and where you lived.”

“You were supposed to use your wolf nose, eyes, and ears to sniff me out,” she replied with a wry smile. Then she added, “I gave you a name. What is it?”

I answered shyly, in a questioning manner, “Star Wolf?”

Her face lit up and she said very firmly, “Yes. That’s right. Now come on inside and let’s get to it.”

There have been many shamanic moments of death, rebirth, and wisdom given to me during this life journey of almost sixty years. But my epic “no turning back” moment came that day on Grandmother Twylah’s porch when time stood still and I looked into the eyes of the woman I had seen in my vision. Up until that point I had wavered back and forth between faith and doubt as regards my mystical experiences and psychic gifts. They seemed so big at times and I wondered if they were real. Sometimes I would believe and trust my deep inner knowing. Other times I would think, *Maybe it’s just coincidence*, or *Why is this happening to me?*

When I met Twylah, the worlds collided and all doubt fell away. When worlds collide either you go psychotic or you evolve to the next level that’s large enough to hold the truth that the multidimensional world is real. From that moment forth, I was able to stop alternating back and forth between rejecting and embracing my shamanic spirit. I began to accept that my gifts and my shamanic calling were real indeed.

Gram told me later that she frequently appeared to people in dreams and visions like she did with me because she was a dream walker. She told me that I

was one, too.

We spent as much time together on the inner planes as we did on the outer ones—and she often confirmed what had happened during our inner connections when we would meet up again in person. She took me under her wing, called me her granddaughter, shared her teachings with me; she picked up where Mammy Jones had left off when I was twelve years old. I believed my own grandmother was in cahoots with Grandma Twylah to call out to me and guide me back onto my path. Gram confirmed that my Mammy Jones had sent me to her to help me heal the wounds of my past and to open to my shamanic gifts of the spirit.

Although I had been a counselor and teacher for many years, it was not until my reality shifted completely with the energetic exchanges between Grandmother Twylah and me that I found the inner strength to step fully into my true self and become who I was always meant to be. Gram helped me to complete the initiations that I needed in order to step forth into my sacred purpose as a shamanic Wolf Clan teacher and spiritual midwife for others. Grandma Twylah's message was clear: "Don't waste time. Be on your path and open up the path for others because that's what we are here to do. The Wolf finds the path and points the way but cannot make anyone get on the path."

Since that fateful time I found the courage to step out of the box of the mental health care system and the breathwork modality that I was teaching at that time and to birth a completely new form of breathwork: Shamanic Breathwork, which weaves together the best of everything I have learned. This includes my own direct experience with cutting-edge processes, from depth psychology and addiction recovery methods to ancient shamanic wisdom teachings that have been handed down to me. Through my nonprofit, Venus Rising Association for Transformation, I have ordained hundreds of shamanic ministers and taught thousands of people to awaken their own shaman within and walk in dignity with their sacred purpose. It is my great honor and pleasure in life to witness and support others in discovering and grounding their special gifts of Spirit into their beautiful shamanic path here on earth—as it is in heaven.

Mammy Jones passed from this realm in 1964. Grandmother Twylah passed over to the other side in August of 2007. My two grandmothers live on through me and in all those I've taught and counseled. Mammy Jones, Gram Twylah, and I all shared early December birthdays. Gram told me that we were all stubborn visionaries and Wolf women—pathfinders leading the way and clearing the path to help others from our own experiences as well as passing along the teachings that have been passed down to us. Whenever I find myself feeling in doubt in this turbulent world, I can still hear their peals of laughter

breaking through the veils from the other side as my two special grandmothers remind me that they are still right here, walking with me every step of the way on the Wolf path.



LINDA STAR WOLF, Ph.D., spiritual granddaughter of the late Seneca Wolf Clan elder Grandmother Twyla Nitsch, is a visionary teacher and shamanic guide to thousands. Her love for the Earth inspired her to write eight shamanic books and give birth to the Shamanic Breathwork process. Founder and director of the Venus Rising Association for Transformation and Venus Rising University, Star Wolf is a change agent dedicated to assisting others in releasing dysfunctional patterns and radically transforming their lives. She holds a doctorate of ministry and doctorate in spiritual psychology from the University of Integrative Learning and teaches people how to awaken to the bigger picture and step into a life of passionate purpose. Those who know her intimately see her as a powerful force of Nature and a catalyst for accelerated consciousness. Her website is www.shamanicbreathwork.org.

Pandora's Box



Wendy Whiteman

I have been a shamanic practitioner and a shamanic guide for others for fifteen years. I have had numerous experiences with Nature and its impact on the human condition. We must always remember that as a member of the human kingdom, we are made from the attributes of the three lower kingdoms . . . mineral, plant, and animal. It is no wonder that our reflection can be found in all of Nature and with our eyes wide open we can find our healing. I have seen some of the most wonderful healings take place with people who suffer from depression, addiction, fear, and poor self-esteem. If we approach Mother Nature and our own healing with the reverence they deserve, we will find healing.

I have had teachers who have been shamans, whether they called themselves that or not. The most influential was a Navajo (Diné) medicine man, a hand trembler,^{[*13](#)} and singer from the Gallup area of New Mexico. He was very traditional in his medicine ways and served his reservation as a medicine man for many years. Since I am a Caucasian woman, his approach with me was more shamanic than traditional Diné. His understanding of natural law and the mind-body connection was fascinating, considering that he was “uneducated” by Western society. What this shaman taught me is the important and necessary connection between ceremony and practice. One without the other is a disconnect from the laws of the universe. The practices bring the grounding and centering. The ceremony brings a reverence for the possibility of divine intervention.

The case that brought the most shamanic impact to both myself and my client came to me a few years ago when a group of people came to see me. They had come from the United Kingdom to New Mexico for a four-day retreat, which included medicine walks in the high desert of Taos, shamanic practices, and ceremony. Each person came with a particular issue that needed clarity.

A young lady, Sue, is the client I will focus on. She was in her twenties with a high-pressure modeling job. She spent too much time away from home, which made her feel rootless. Her other issues were her weight and issues having to do with eating. And she had a propensity for smoking pot. The young lady was ready for a change but found it very difficult to effect any kind of change in her life. We decided to start with the pot smoking, as she and I both agreed it was masking all of her other issues. Rather than having me choose the location for the medicine walk, I asked Sue to journey with the help of an ally to find a physical place where we would then go to perform her medicine walk. She was also to determine whether or not the ally would help her find some clarity on her issue.

When she returned from her journey, she described the place as being very rocky. A river was also a feature that she had seen. Her ally was a large raven who took her to this place. Sue said that she rode on his back and viewed the area from above. She felt confident that this was her medicine place and the raven was her guide.

The next day I took her to the Rio Grande Gorge, which is home to the Rio Grande. The gorge was filled with giant ancient volcanic rocks and the river was below. We put down a small altar and gave offerings to the spirits of the land. I always use an altar as an anchor for my client and myself. We start here and we end here.

Sue was smudged and then she was to leave the altar and me and start her medicine walk. She had as much time as she needed to walk and observe and listen to the voice within. She had made a prayer at the altar, asking that she find some understanding for her pot addiction and how to quit. She felt a sense of urgency that she had never felt before . . . like this was a make-or-break opportunity.

Sue walked down the mesa path through the large sage bushes, “scanning” as I had taught her to do. Scanning is a method of taking in as much of your environment as possible, through heightening your sense. This is a safety procedure, as well as an information-gathering technique. She was very nervous, as she was not an outdoorsy girl and this terrain was very foreign to her, even treacherous in many ways. She started to cry and said she felt hopeless. Sue remembered the raven in her journey and called out to her ally, asking for help.

Within minutes she saw a lone raven circling above her. She said she couldn’t believe it, even though ravens are common in New Mexico. As she walked down the path, Raven continued to circle above her. Sue then decided

that she wanted to follow the raven instead of having the raven follow her, so she sat down on the path. Raven circled and then veered off to the right, heading for an area filled with giant volcanic rocks and a view of the river. He landed on one of the rocks. Sue followed him down the slope, then climbed the giant rock. Raven was above, watching her.

Sue found an area that she felt drawn to and sat down to view the river and watch Raven. She said she no longer felt alone and was hopeful that some answers would come to her. She lay down on the rock to journey, but as she did so, something caught her eye. It was a little metal tin can that was lodged between two large rocks. It was out of her reach, though, so she decided to resume her attempts to journey. She lay on her back and looked up to the big blue New Mexico sky and her ally. Raven squawked at her, fiercely flapping his wings like a parent reprimanding a child.

She closed her eyes and tried to journey again but that seemed to make Raven even more distraught. So Sue sat up and said, "Okay, Raven! Maybe the answer is right here before my very eyes." She then had a chill go through her and she knew it was associated with the tin can. She knew that she had to get it and open it up. So for an hour she tried everything she could think of to get that tin can. "My need became stronger and stronger," she said. "Like my desire for pot . . . when I really need it I will go anywhere and do anything to get some." Sue added that she was even performing some dangerous moves in order to obtain the tin.

With the help of a stick she was able to knock the tin out of the crevice and it fell a few feet farther down the rock pile. She straddled two rocks and finally got the tin between her fingertips. Slowly she was able to get herself back to an upright position. Her first thought was how obsessed she was over this little tin can, which was very old and quite rusted. "It was an old mint container like the ones you can buy at the grocery store checkout stand. I did all this for a silly can?" Sue said. She looked up to see if Raven was still there. She had been so obsessed with the retrieval of her tin that she had forgotten about Raven. He was gone!

She started to doubt herself and felt that she had wasted all her time with the silly mint can, which she couldn't even open because it was so rusted. The old pattern of doubting herself came back, as did her fear of failure. This was the moment in the pattern when Sue wished she had some pot, so she could escape her emotions. She decided to quit the medicine walk and return to me.

Sue climbed back out of the rocky area onto the mesa and found her path

to the altar. When Sue arrived she sat down with me by the altar and said, “This was a waste of time, mine and yours . . . this great Raven came to me and I followed him to this rocky area, just like in my journey yesterday, but then I got all caught up in trying to get this stupid tin can out from some rocks I was sitting on.”

Sue pulled the tin out from her pocket and handed it to me. I said, “Sue, did you open it?”

“No . . . it won’t open,” she replied. “It’s rusted shut.” She continued to berate herself as she told me what had transpired on her medicine walk. I could no longer hold a straight face and began to laugh . . . because I had seen this before with other clients. I asked her, “Why do you think that the medicine walk is over?”

At my question she looked really stunned. “Because I got nothing!” she finally replied.

I looked down at the tin, which was sitting on the altar. I said, “Really? This tin is nothing? You risked injury to get it and you still doubt your intuition and the process of the journey? Are you ready to open Pandora’s box? Everything you experienced today was part of your answer, but the clarity lies inside this tin. I think you will know it when you see it. I don’t know what is in this tin, maybe nothing, but then, *that* would be the answer you seek.”

I got out my knife and gave it to Sue. “Open . . . says me!”

Sue pried open the top of the can and then gasped, dropping the tin.

What rolled out was what changed my view of shamanic practices forever. Old marijuana buds . . . yes, pot!! Neither of us could speak, as this was beyond bizarre and bordered on being impossible and improbable. The chances of this happening were one in a million, but given that shamanic practice and guidance were involved, the odds drastically switched.

We discussed the unbelievable find of marijuana, the very symbol of her whole trip to America from the United Kingdom, and all of its meanings for her.

That night we did a sweat lodge for Sue. In the lodge, her emotions poured out of her. As a model, she was no longer living her authentic self. The job was killing her, literally. She told us about her professional life and the vices and pressures it included: little sleep, diet pills, uppers, downers, alcohol, sex with agents or no job, travel twenty-hours and hit the runway one hour later . . . It was not glamorous, it was hell. We discussed the invisible energy cords that ran from her to her addiction. They were so strong that she could travel thousands of

miles from one continent to another, sit on a rock in the desert, and still attract marijuana to her.

Sue saw that she no longer had control of her own life. She had given it over to so many other people and substances to maintain a life that was killing her. She was able to trace her lack of self-esteem and hopelessness to choices she had made in the past and understood that it was time to make choices again, albeit ones that were more appropriate for where she was now. The concept of “I am the victim here” had to go. She was able to see that the victim role was keeping her stuck and that she had to be the hero and the director of her own life. Her life had been a choice, not a lifelong sentence.

Sue spent the following day at the altar giving offerings to Raven and the rocks and developing a healthier and more productive reverence for pot. She did some more journeying and then we did a final release ceremony at the river with the tin of marijuana. She had opened Pandora’s box and in it had seen all the evils and illnesses of life she had succumbed to. But just as in the story of Pandora’s box, she found hope. Sue found her authentic self emerging and the strength to heal herself.

I stayed in touch with Sue for a couple of years. She went back to London and within those two years she broke ties with her old boyfriend, got married to another, moved to South Africa, had a baby, and left modeling. She was happy and had become the heroine of her own life.

Sue’s experience reinforced for me, a shamanic practitioner and guide, that there truly are no accidents. Receiving guidance from the ordinary and non-ordinary world requires working with the laws of the universe. This is not hocus-pocus. Although my Navajo teacher would not refer to the law of cause and effect, because he had not heard it put that way, he was a believer that we are responsible for everything that happens in our life. Every moment is a choice and we are capable of righting the wrongs and creating a balance in our life once again.



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has been in business for twenty years dealing with Native art and ceremonial herbs. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology, is a certified aromatherapist, artisan distiller, and author, and has participated in many years of ceremony and shamanic practice with teachers from the United States, Peru, and Mexico. Her website is www.wolfwalkercollection.com.

The Awakening of a Medicine Woman



Katherine Gomez

As I was growing up, even at a young age, I knew I was different from everyone else. I couldn't explain it, nor did I understand it. I didn't have many friends and people thought I was a little strange; I could sense their uneasiness around me. My mother had the "gift of knowing" and the "gift of healing." These gifts were something that no one in our family ever talked about. It was as though they were invisible, although I would hear my mother say over and over again, "I knew that was going to happen," or "Last night I dreamed . . . is going to happen," and sure enough, it did. I'm not entirely certain that my mother understood that these were gifts since she never talked about them as such. And because these occurrences were part of our everyday life, I considered them to be normal.

She had given birth to me when she was thirty-four, which was, in those days, considered late to have a baby. I had a very close relationship with her because I was the youngest of four; my three siblings had married before I reached my teens. Therefore, I felt like an only child. I loved listening to my mother speak about the *remedios* (remedies) she had learned from her mother and how and why they were used in our culture. I would pay attention and memorize everything she said and did as it pertained to these remedies. I was intrigued and fascinated when she spoke of old wives' tales and told stories of people who would go to *curanderas* (healers) for cleansing and for the healing of folk diseases such as *mal puesto* (curses), *mal ojo* (the evil eye), *envidia* (envy), *mala suerte* (bad luck), *susto* (soul loss), and *espanto* (fright), to name just a few.

After I married, I continued to share much of my time with my mother, in addition to being a mother myself as well as a busy wife who also held down a full-time job as a hospital medical transcriptionist. While I worked, my mother babysat our daughter, from the age of eighteen months until she was seven. When I was twenty-seven, my mother passed. This left a huge void in my heart,

and I felt very lost in life, as though I had no identity of my own, no purpose here in this world. I set out to discover my true identity and purpose by delving into everything esoteric that I could get my hands on . . . tarot cards, crystals, numerology, astrology, and runes were some of the tools I used, hoping to find my niche.

This went on for a few years, and while everything I delved into was quite interesting, nothing seemed to jump out and grab me. One thing I began to notice during this time of trial and error was that as I transcribed patient medical reports, specifically those for cancer patients, I was beginning to determine and/or “know” what treatment plans would or wouldn’t work regardless of what the doctors’ orders were. I also found that I could determine approximately when the patient would die. I would routinely check back with patient records to find that I was right. I found this not only frightening, but profound. Later down the road I realized that my intuition was kicking in as preparation for moving forward into the next steps of my spiritual journey.

Then our family lost a nephew at age twenty-nine to alcoholism, which was overwhelmingly devastating to all of us. In order for my brother-in-law Joseph Winterhawk—the boy’s father—to heal, he returned to his roots, to his Ute ancestry, for traditional healing. He participated in the sacred sweat lodge ceremony, and over time, he was trained to conduct them. He would invite me to participate, but being claustrophobic, I always declined. I couldn’t bear the thought of being all closed up in that small structure in the dark.

After six months of persuasion, and to appease my brother-in-law, and with the promise that I could get out of the lodge at any time if need be, I finally agreed to take part. On the day of the ceremony, I was feeling a little nervous and wanting to back out so I wouldn’t freak out and make a fool of myself. However, something impelled me to follow through with it.

Other people were there, some I knew, and some I didn’t. We all followed my brother-in-law’s guidance on what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. As I entered the sacred lodge and took my place, the doorway’s flap was still open and everything was fine. Then the flap was closed and the ceremony began to unfold, and something magical and mystical began to happen. I began to feel a loving, healing presence, an energy that embraced me with a love I’d never felt before. It was *amazing*! Instead of feeling all closed in, I felt like the universe was opening up to me, as if it were welcoming me home. The prayers and songs felt incredibly sacred, and the cleansing steam felt overwhelmingly purifying. The smell of the Earth was like nothing I had ever experienced before.

Throughout the ceremony, I grew to know that this loving presence and energy that embraced all of us was our ancestors sharing their wisdom, love, and healing, which each and every one of us so desperately needed. “This is it! This is it!” my inner voice shouted. “This is what I’ve been searching for; this will begin my Earth-walk!” The ancestors informed that they had connected me to my true self and that I needed to research my ancestry in order to move forward to fulfill my destiny.

I am forever grateful that I was persuaded to become part of this most sacred ceremony that enlightened me, that awakened my “memories” to who I truly am and to what my true Earth-walk is.

In researching my ancestry, I discovered that I was born into the Huache tribe of Mexico and that I come from a long bloodline of healers. My inheritance of curanderismo (an ancient healing art originating with the indigenous tribes of Mexico) has always been embedded deep within my heart and my soul through this ancestral bloodline.

Since participating in the sweat lodge, I have studied, trained, and apprenticed with many elders who have taught and trained me well. I am grateful for their love, guidance, and assistance on this most sacred journey. Today, I am a ceremonialist, shaman, and teacher, accomplished in the Native American, Incan, and Mayan traditions of our ancestors. I work with my gifts of knowing and healing to serve and teach others. This is a sacred path that I will always walk with the guidance of the Creator and our ancestors.

Aho!!



KATHERINE GOMEZ, ND, was born into the Huache tribe of Mexico. She began her true spiritual journey as a healer in 1991, becoming a Reiki master and teacher. In 1994 she became a massage therapist and she has organized and taught women’s healing circles since 1996. Her path has been inspired by her teacher Elder Joseph Winterhawk of the Southern Ute Tribe of Colorado, who gave her the name Walking Medicine Woman. Katherine became a naturopathic doctor, iridologist, and herbalist in 1996, which awakened an abundance of ancient memories of knowledge and wisdom. She is a graduate of the Four Winds Society. As a ceremonialist, shaman, and teacher accomplished in the Native American, Incan, and Mayan traditions, her heart’s calling is

the vital development of the well-being of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements for each individual.

Communal Song and the Art of Healing



Elizabeth Cosmos

Alberto Costas Aguas was born a brilliant healer. This was his gift and his mission in life, during which time he met the Guaraní, a people indigenous to the Amazon. Through knowledge passed down from their oral tradition, they knew he was coming. They entrusted to him sacred wisdom for healing with love and beseeched him to share their sacred teachings with the world. The teaching that they shared with him he called Ama-Deus, which is Latin for “to love God.”

I met Alberto and learned the Ama-Deus healing method when he was ailing. I did this in order to carry on his mission after his death—to teach, preserve, and spread the message of Ama-Deus to the world. In my personal practice and my teaching, many times the beauty and power of this healing method were demonstrated. However, when I was unexpectedly visiting a Guaraní village, I directly experienced the profound force of love in the same way that Alberto did. A definite shift occurred in my heart-center, expanding my consciousness to what I understand to be heart intelligence.

I had planned to return to Brazil to further my investigation into Alberto’s personal background and to make a third visit with the Guaraní in order to purchase some of their crafts. In anticipation of returning to the village, throughout the year clothing had been collected, which would be distributed among the village’s children. Upon returning to the village, the clothes and gifts for the *cacique* Tata Ti were dispersed through several hours of pleasantries, which produced a constant influx of people from the village.

When the formal etiquette and gift-giving were complete, Tata Ti had a large smile on his face and he repeated the word *aguyje*, which means “thank you” in Guaraní. In response, I told him, “Tere guahe porâte,” meaning, “You are welcome.”

I searched the small crowd for the women who made and sold the crafts.

They were normally out near the informal gathering, waiting for their turn to interact. I looked to my good friend and interpreter, Teodoro, with a question on my face.

“Teo! Where are the women with their crafts?” Teodoro gestured for me to go further into the village. “Are you coming with me?” I asked.

“They say it is okay for you to go to them. I will be there in a moment,” he replied. With apprehension, I moved into the interior of the village in search of the women with their crafts. The prospect of moving deeper into the village unescorted was new and I felt a little unsettled, but soon I felt lightness and an ease of acceptance as I walked further into the group of thatched houses. Stepping up a small hill and spotting the women with their shawls spread out on the ground, I wondered how they had known that I was coming to this specific spot. I hadn’t seen anyone run ahead to announce my arrival.

They smiled and gestured for me to come closer to look at their work. I sat on the ground with the women, and they talked with me and presented their crafts. The women with their infants wrapped on their bodies returned to nursing or playing with their babies as my eyes and hands sifted through and selected from all the wonderful, colorful handiwork of carved wooden animals, woven baskets, beautiful feathered earrings, and intricate beaded necklaces and bracelets. Teodoro eventually joined me to help me choose from the many items and translate the transaction.

Darkness descended quickly and we fumbled around in the semi-twilight, paying the women and helping them to pack up their things. The women quietly slipped away in the darkness. As Teodoro and I turned from the now empty space, I had no idea how to find our way back. Teodoro extended his hand and we carefully began to navigate our way through the thatched houses. A young man approached and exchanged words with Teodoro, who then turned and shrugged his shoulders, saying, “He wants us to follow him.”

I was grateful that someone had appeared to guide us. We descended the slope carefully in the dark, and I realized that we were passing near a large thatched dwelling. As we rounded the corner of the structure, the young man gestured for us to enter it. I held my breath as we passed through a small door and entered a large room that I knew instantly to be the Opy, the house of prayer. Neither Teodoro nor I spoke; we only looked at each other in amazement. I had no idea of the reason for this occurrence or what was going to happen next.

I was very touched to be there, to be included and accepted into this gathering.

The Guaraní hold the Opy to be sacred and usually outsiders are not allowed inside. My heart was pounding as I quickly scanned the dimly lit space. My eyes adjusted to the candlelight, and Teodoro and I followed the gesture from our escort to sit. The interior room had simple, low wooden benches along two sides and an altar opposite the entrance. It was about five feet high and composed of a narrow board set on two posts. On the altar were candles, rattles, and other musical instruments—including ones I had witnessed earlier, which had been played during our welcoming visit.

We moved silently to the far corner near the altar and sat on the low bench. I quietly set my bundle of crafts at my feet. A young boy who seemed to be around ten was smoking a pipe and praying while he circled the circumference of the room and passed in front of the altar and each person sitting on the benches. We both fixed our eyes on him so as to understand the meaning of his intentions.

As this was happening, the Opy was filling up with children and adults who positioned themselves on the small benches on either side. One man picked an instrument from the altar and sat opposite us. He began singing softly while playing.

The young boy made several full circles around the inside while chanting and smoking the pipe, passing close by all who were seated. Each time he passed the altar, he directed a forceful stream of air on each item on the altar and also on the larger musical instruments, the *takuá* (which looked and sounded like rain barrels) that lay propped below the altar. This boy was performing a preparatory cleansing ceremony. Soon after, everyone gathered and the door was locked from the inside.

The chanting youth then commenced the ceremony, beginning at the opposite side from where we sat. He inhaled from his pipe, then directed a forced breath directly on the top of each person's head at the fontanel spot of the cranium. The benches were low, which allowed the young boy to easily perform his cleansing movement on everyone—even on my friend who was of taller height.

Many of the gathered children were lined up facing the altar. The boys standing closest to it began to sing; some used rattles, the *mbaraká*. The girls lined up behind the boys and used the *takuá* by rhythmically pounding them on the ground in sync with the singing. The girls answered loudly to what the boys sang out, and both boys and girls moved their feet in specific ways and differently to different songs.

Cacique Tata Ti placed a jar of water with tobacco leaves on the altar and then returned to the end of our bench and began smoking a pipe near the door with another elder. As the children sang he smoked and prayed.

At one point during the singing, a young boy not more than five years old entered and looked for a place to sit. The only available space was a very small opening between me and another adolescent. This young child did not hesitate to squeeze himself in next to me. I expected him to feel a sense of repulsion when our skin touched, much like experiences with children at home when they had no choice but to sit by an unknown adult, but this child exuded no feeling of strangeness. This experience was so endearing. The feeling in my heart grew large and warm.

This heart feeling was a combination of being allowed to participate in this ceremony, the comfort of the child sitting next to me, and the accepting nature of all the people inside the room.

At this point, I ceased being an observer. Closing my eyes and listening to the children sing, feeling the pounding takuás and the shaking rattles, unified my senses.

The sound of the rattles was explosive in the house of prayer and the accompanying loud singing began to quiet my mind. The takuás were pounding out a reverberation that not only was projected onto my physical body, but also was coursing through my legs via my bare feet on the dirt floor. As I was first registering these physical experiences, it was as if the collective sounds swayed my body in a rhythm with the music. I let go and felt myself surrender into this swaying, feeling a release of tension in my body as I did so.

Recognizing familiar words such as “Ñande Ru” in the song, I joined in, chanting in a loud voice with the girls. Very quickly I felt in harmony with the group. Our collective intention of appealing to a higher power was all too evident and we easily slipped into a strong feeling of praise and gratitude for life.

At some point during this devotional singing, which lasted for more than an hour, I became aware of a pulsating, loving presence expanding my heart-center. There seemed to be no separation, and the feeling of oneness permeated the Opy. The group called out to God—Ñande Ru—with great yearning, asking Him to hear our prayers, and, blissfully intoxicated, I felt myself floating beyond the boundaries of my body.

After this expansive feeling I was brought back to my physical body as Teodoro moved from his spot. Without breaking from the singing I quickly

scanned the room, locating him with the cacique at the end of the bench by the door.

Cacique Tata Ti was praying over Teodoro's head, holding a jar of water and tobacco leaves. He dipped the tobacco leaves into the water and touched specific areas of Teodoro's body, particularly around the head and the back of the neck. He repeated touching these places while he prayed. Feeling peace and happiness for my friend, my heavy eyes closed easily, and I slipped effortlessly back into the rhythmic singing.

In a moment, however, the singing abruptly stopped, and Teodoro returned to his spot. Resting in silence, we watched as the instruments were placed on the altar and everyone silently cleared out of the Opy. The last to leave, we stepped out in a daze and found ourselves alone, amazed, and entranced. We stood in the light of a full moon in a cloudless sky.

The canopy of trees in moonlight silhouetted my friend as I looked around and spoke in quiet reverence, my first words since entering the Opy. "I feel overwhelmed with joy. I have no words, I just feel so wonderful. My heart feels like it will burst, and I'm so humbled with the sharing of these loving people."

Dreamily, Teodoro responded, "Hmm, yes, it was so wonderful."

Looking around, I saw there was no one in sight. "Where did everyone go?" I wondered aloud.

"I don't know, but we now have the moon to help us out of the village!"

"What just happened in there, Teo?"

"I received my Guaraní name, Karai Tupã."

I caught my breath, saying, "Really! What an honor! What does Karai Tupã mean?"

"It means 'God helper.' You know I have *you* to thank for this. I did not know my baptism would happen now."

I replied in a burst, "Oh no, it is I who need to thank you!"

"Please listen, I need to say thank you, and I will explain why." Standing in the moonlight surrounded by thatched huts and the stillness of the forest, Teo proceeded to explain. "The cacique said to me the reason the baptism took place tonight was because you were singing. The cacique summoned me when he saw you become immersed in song, and this action allowed my baptism."

I was speechless as I recalled my mentor Alberto's explanation of how the people felt that song brought them closer to God and how they came together

unconditionally every evening to sing. As soon as a certain feeling, or what Alberto explained as a specific vibration, was reached with the singing, then and only then would the ceremonies for healing take place.

I felt the unity Alberto described in surrendering to the pounding of the takuás, the shaking of the rattles, the smoke, and most of all, the singing.

In that moment, I understood that I would never fully comprehend the depth of all that had taken place. However, the expansion of joy and exuberance in my heart-center was genuine. For me, this encounter was a spiritual gift, an authenticated experience of Alberto's story about how people came together each night to sing songs of praise until a sense of harmonious connection was achieved, before proceeding with the ritual. Communally, the participants tapped into a stream of consciousness that was love.

My humbling experience in the Opy was a direct knowing of the power of their song, but more so, of the communal power of love and reciprocity. And this lives on in my heart. Alberto had begun every class by saying in his rich and passionate voice, "They are always giving, always sharing."

Teo and I walked away in awe of this beautiful evening spent with these gentle, giving people. We drove home in silent wonder.

This experience and the expansion of my heart-center opened me to better see the world through a prism of unconditional love.

The experience of love invokes the desire to know the Source as a continual living experience. The need to connect with others, to love and be loved during our earthly experience, is the force that directs us back to Source. I still hear Alberto's words ringing in my ears, "You cannot heal until you first love. Love is in all healing no matter what technique you use. Without the love, it is impossible to heal."

This simple, unexpected opportunity gave me a direct experience of heart intelligence. The importance of this intelligence of the heart is unfolding globally and is crucial to mankind's evolutionary path. I believe we are all created with a soul purpose: to love and be loved. In thinking love, my thoughts take me to the highest source of existence, what is understood to be the Source of All.

Then love becomes Love.



ELIZABETH COSMOS, author, teacher, and practitioner, has been involved in spiritual healing for more than thirty years. She was responsible for the founding and development of a comprehensive, hospital-based integrated medicine program for alternative therapies at Saint Mary's Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she lives. She is also the founder of the International Association of Ama-Deus, LLC. Her work has been featured in such international publications as *National Geographic*. Beth is an ordained minister in the Science of Mind Church for Spiritual Healing and earned her doctorate in energy medicine at Holos University Graduate Seminary. She is the author of *Ama-Deus: Healing with the Sacred Energies of the Universe*. Beth travels globally, teaching and sharing the Ama-Deus healing method. Her website is www.ama-deus-international.com.

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Direct Dialogue with Mother Earth



Michele Gieselman

I had never heard the term “shaman” or “shamanism,” until one day when an awareness of it became very strong. For no explicable reason, I felt an energy of excitement and longing connected to this new consciousness, this new word. What did it mean? I had to find out.

Then, it happened, as it does when you are being led. I was invited to lunch and during the course of the lunch, my friend shared with me that she had attended a course in shamanism and was excited to tell me that a course similar to the one she had taken was going to be presented in the valley where we lived.

Was I interested? she wanted to know.

“Yes!” I told her. At the end of our visit, I didn’t have a strong understanding about shamanism, but I knew I had to find out more. The excitement and longing were building.

The first moment I realized I was to be a part of these teachings happened when I walked into the initial session to join the circle. I felt I had come home; everything about the program seemed as if I had experienced it before. Little did I know the amount of gifts and affirmations I would receive during this journey.

As a child out in Nature, I always felt complete. I would swim in the river from late spring until late fall and welcome the autumn, with its rich earth smell and glorious colors. The first snowfall was enchanting; it was a white sparking blanket beckoning me to play. It was wondrous! There were times when I wanted to crawl inside the Earth to know how it would feel. That first weekend of the shamanic training I did find out.

It was January, and a typically cold and blustery Canadian winter. We held our seminar in a retreat center that was set out in the country and nestled right beside a beautiful lake. Before we arrived, we needed to find three stones that represented one of the four directions. At this seminar, we were focusing on the South direction. These stones needed to be retrieved from different areas of the land, depending on the direction we would be working on. In this case, I needed to select my stones from a body of water. Selecting my stones, my Khuyas, was a labour of love and a sweet connection to Mother Earth, our beautiful Pachamama. I was to bury these stones somewhere on the grounds of the center and visit them throughout the weekend. I chose to put my three stones down by the lake, around the roots of a tree.

Each time I went down to check on my stones, it was as if I was entering into another reality. The wind blew, the snow swirled around me, and I loved it. I knew that my Khuyas were absorbing the energies of the lake, the trees, the wind, the snow, and the cold. All of this magic would accompany me and my Khuyas when I brought them back to be part of my mesa (medicine bag). Creating this bundle awakened a memory that I had done this before.

The sacredness surrounding the creation of my medicine bundle was amazing. As I created it, I realized that Mother Nature would always be a part of me, and I would always be a part of Mother Nature. That was an aha moment for me. Through this experience, I felt a strong and permanent connection with the Earth and this has given me an invincible foundation.

My initial shamanic training took place over a period of two years. During that time, I participated in different ceremonies, rituals, and healing modalities. One of the ceremonies was the fire ceremony, which initially I didn't understand the significance of. I seemed to be spending a long time in the cold—rattling, singing, and doing my best to ignore my chilly feet. It took me a while to realize that coming to the fire was equivalent to being at the altar, communicating with Spirit or God.

At the ceremony, I asked the fire to take my heavy energy, *hucha*, and give it all to the flames and to Mother Earth. Every person receives this energy when they are living on Earth. It is not always negative, but it is a heavy energy that prevents one from functioning optimally. Hucha empowers Pachamama. To her it is food, not waste, and in return for her energetic meal, she offers Sami, refined energy, to the person doing the cleansing. In Joan Parisi Wilcox's *Keepers of the Ancient Knowledge*, priest Juan Nunez del Prado says, "When we give hucha to the Pachamama, we are giving her food. . . . When we are working with heavy energy, we are working with real, living energy, and this real, living energy empowers Mother Earth. She needs living energy, and if you release hucha to her you are empowering her. Also you are empowering yourself."¹⁴

Sweeping the heaviness into the flames and then receiving fresh new energy into my body filled me with gratitude. I was grateful for the fact that I could come to the altar and be cleansed in this sweet and powerful way. My heavy energy was pulled into the flames through my breath, and using a pushing action with my hands, I was able to pull it from my three centers: my stomach, chest, and head. In return, I received energy that was pure and light.

This was another aha moment for me, and today, each time I approach the

fire with my mesa, I feel love and a huge acceptance of who I am and what I have to offer.

Another one of the rituals I participated in was that of creating a *despacho*. This is another method that embraces the Pachamama and also engages the person involved. As I prepared a gift of love for the Earth, I was giving a piece of myself as well. In return, I received the Sami, the pure energy from Mother Earth. I gathered gifts and wrapped them in white and presented them to the Earth. In this, I included candy and chocolate and Native objects from where I live, which is important. What an extraordinary way to honour Pachamama!

In my healing practice I use the modalities that have been taught to me. The mesa, my medicine bundle, is paramount in all that I do. The use of my mesa, the breath, and the calling of the archetypes from the four directions is a gentle and very successful way to deal with a blockage or other issues a client may be experiencing. The shamanic journey has been a path of awakening for me and I know now that I am in touch with Spirit at all times.

The most influential instruction I received in my shamanic training was from Peruvian Jose Luis Herrera, who lives in the Sacred Valley in Peru and whose shamanic expertise is derived from a combination of much experience and detailed research. After many weekends spent enjoying the teachings of Jose, in 2008 I was very fortunate to take a trip to Peru with him. I was welcomed into his country with such graciousness and was invited to experience the magnificence of the mystical system of the Q'ero Indians of Peru. This experience for me was a journey to the Source, from whence the knowledge of Jose's shamanic teachings had come.

One of the rituals I was privileged to be a part of was creating a despacho in honor of Ausangate, which is the spirit of the mountain, otherwise known as the Apus or Lord of the Mountain. We hiked up the mountain and camped there for three days. We were honored to be in the presence of an *alto mesayoq*, a mover of the living energy of the universe, and a *pampa mesayoq*, a steward of the land. The alto mesayoq talk directly to the mountain spirits, the Apus; they are the keepers of ancient knowledge.

The despacho was as big as a dining room table. It was filled with fresh corn and many items from the land. When it was completed it resembled a small village. Each one of us put sixty prayers into the despacho. Each prayer, a K'intu, was offered up in the form of a fan made of three perfect coca leaves. After the despacho was created, Jose and several of the medicine people and fire

keepers carried the despacho to the sacred fire. In the ancient tradition, the medicine people and the fire keepers are the only people allowed to lay a despacho on the fire. We were asked to return to the base camp. The prayers and love that were put into that gift were then lifted up by the flames of the fire and sent to the Apus.

The next morning there was a lot of snow on the ground and I asked Jose if the Apus were happy. He joyfully answered, “Oh, yes! They are very happy! Now we will have water to fill the lagoons and reservoirs and water for irrigation!” The snow was a gift from the Apus and Mother Nature. Incredible!

After three days in the mountains, we returned to the Sacred Valley. I certainly was not the same person who had walked up the mountain three days earlier. I had witnessed a direct communication with Spirit, and in so doing, I became part of the landscape.

When we were back in the Sacred Valley, Jose organized a ceremony to call in the mountain spirits. Jose sat with an alto mesayoq and together they called in the Apus. Sitting in the sacred darkness and hearing them come and talk to Jose in either Spanish or Quechua, the ancient language of Peru, was astounding, especially when Ausangate spoke to us during this ceremony. Jose would translate for me so I could understand what was being said. I was allowed to ask questions. The answers I received were enlightening and affirmed that on I was on the right path of learning shamanism. This was another aha moment for me.

During the ceremony, the Apus asked us to sing for them. We didn't know what to sing and then decided to sing “Amazing Grace.” They said they didn't understand what we were singing, but they liked the sound of our voices.

Peru was a gift to me, including the information and teaching I received every day, and it helped confirm to me that shamanism needs to be a part of my life. In Peru, the Apus were a miracle that I actually witnessed. I traveled to the Source and I communicated with Spirit. The rituals and ceremonies that were taught to me during these shamanic studies made even more sense when I participated in them directly. (I realized I had experienced some of them in meditation before traveling to Peru.) In these ceremonies, energy is gathered, which opens up the heart and the soul and gives access to the inner truth and to the Creator. The people of Peru live their lives according to these ceremonies and rituals. The despachos are gifts to the mountain spirits and the Pachamama. The sacred fires are for cleansing and to deliver the love and respect of the despacho as it is laid

on the fire.

It is difficult to explain shamanism because it is an experience. For me it has changed my life in a way that has allowed me to embrace myself as I embrace Mother Earth. We are all one. Spirit is in everything and everyone. According to Chief Seattle, “This we know: The earth does not belong to man. Man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites one family. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web he does to himself.”

The shamanic practice is now my reality, and as such, it is a daily reminder of the gentleness of Spirit, the power of ritual and prayer, the restoration of stillness, and the healing of the breath.



MICHELE GIESELMAN has worked as an intuitive healer and bodywork practitioner since 1998. Her interest in Earth-based medicine led her to pursue the shamanic teachings of the Inca tradition, sourced from the medicine people of Peru. In 2002 Michele completed the medicine wheel and is a full mesa carrier. She has since pursued master-level teachings with Jose Luis Herrera. She has over twenty years of experience in the field of health and wellness. Michele began her interest in the well-being of the body as a fitness instructor, Middle Eastern dance instructor, and personal trainer. She received her personal trainer certification from the British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association and has a tourism diploma from Thompson Rivers University. She assists her clients in working toward achieving balance and personal well-being.

The Slow Build of a Shamanic Path



Lewis Mehl-Madrona

We all have moments of change. Some are profound, others less so. In various stories shamans have moments of epiphany in which the world shifts and everything looks different. My story is not like that. I have worked at cultivating relationships with the spirits for years, and it has been a slow process. I would have wished for an expressway to them, but my path was a footpath. Each experience led me further along the journey. I want to tell some of these experiences.

I grew up in southeastern Kentucky, raised by traditional Cherokee grandparents and not knowing that most people in the United States didn't converse with spirits. I discovered this when my mother finally succeeded in raising the money to move us to Ohio and I began high school there. What a shock! I learned to keep quiet relatively quickly.

My great-grandmother was a healer and my grandmother talked to spirits. She put out coffee and tobacco for them every morning. She was relieved when they took the coffee. My mother tried to convince her that the coffee had disappeared due to evaporation but my grandmother replied that she didn't believe in evaporation. My grandfather took me fishing as an excuse to learn how to pray. We sat on the bank, smoking tobacco, and throwing all the fish back. Only much later did I realize that we were there to pray instead of to fish.

In college, I studied biophysics. I fell into that because it seemed the most spiritual discipline at Indiana University. Sir John Eccles, a Nobel Laureate, was in residence, and he taught a course on the neurophysiology of the soul. I remember sitting in pubs with him, debating the interrelationships of soul and matter. In the psychology department, B. F. Skinner was experimenting with pigeons. I wanted to be a healer because my grandmother was one, and so I decided to go on to medical school.

Because of my work on magnetic resonance imaging, I was admitted to Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, but not to any of my state schools. I happily went to Stanford, where I discovered there was no course on healing whatsoever. I remember the moment when I decided to study traditional healing seriously. I was sitting in pharmacology class, and the professor looked at us from high on the lecture podium, saying, “Boys, life is a relentless progression toward death, disease, and decay. The physician’s job is to slow the rate of decline.” I was shocked. My great-grandmother, the healer, would have turned over in her grave.

I ran over to the Stanford Indian Center and found a Cherokee healer to call. By the next weekend, I had gone to Kidla’s home for a visit. I eventually found another healer, Grandfather Roberts. Between these two men, I learned much. I embarked upon my alternative education in spiritual healing while studying conventional medicine at the same time.

My first moment of doing a ceremony without a teacher occurred about fourteen years after I started studying with healers. I was working as a general practitioner in San Francisco, but I was exploring as many alternative healing modalities as I could. I learned acupuncture. I learned Cherokee bodywork—a form of osteopathic healing. I practiced guided imagery and visualization. I realized that what I had absorbed from my grandmother and great-grandmother was really hypnosis and/ or storytelling by others, and I was pursuing both of those practices vigorously. I was learning homeopathy and was immersed, as were many of us in those days, in nutrition and the study of micronutrients.

One day a woman hobbled into my office on crutches. She had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis by specialists at the University of California at San Francisco Medical Center. She was from a higher socioeconomic status than what I was accustomed to seeing. I wondered why she had come.

She told me that she had received the best possible treatment that conventional medicine had to offer for rheumatoid arthritis, but she hadn’t improved. The doctors had little else to offer her. She had heard of me and knew that I performed ceremonies. She had decided that a ceremony would cure her and wanted me to do one for her. “If you do a ceremony, it will make me well,” she said.

I was taken aback. I had never had such a request before. I took all of her information and told her I would call my teacher for guidance and get back to her. That evening I finally reached Kidla. I could hear the coyotes howling behind his house. I told him everything she’d said.

“Fool,” he said. “Just do a ceremony and she will be well. She’s already told you that.”

“But what do I do?” I asked.

“Anything,” he said. “Anything will work. She’s already told you so.”

“Anything?” I asked.

“Anything,” he replied.

“But what *specifically* should I do?” I asked.

“Just pretend you are me,” he said. “Do what I would do. You’ve been studying with me for years. Just make it up. Be me. Perform me. Do *me*.”

So I did just that. When she returned, hobbling on crutches into my office on Sacramento Street, I welcomed her and laid out my sacred objects for doing a ceremony just as I imagined Kidla would do. I sang the songs he would have sung. I prayed in the way he would have prayed. I doctored her in the way he would have doctored her. I ended the ceremony with a pipe shared between us. I put my heart into this ceremony with the intent for her to receive what she wished. I asked the spirits to intervene.

One week later, this woman returned to my office without crutches. She could walk freely. “Your ceremony worked,” she said. “I can walk on my own.” Strangely, I was amazed. I didn’t really expect that it would be so dramatic. I just did what I imagined Kidla would do, and as he had predicted, she and the spirits did the rest. I excitedly called Kidla to tell him the news.

“Oh, ye of little faith,” he lovingly mocked. “I told you so. We are here to make the performance so that people and spirits can act on their faith. You did your calling. You performed the ceremony. It was perfect because the spirits liked it and did what they do and she is better. That’s how it works.”

That was my graduation of sorts, for at that point, I was ready to do my own ceremonies for people. It had only been a fourteen-year apprenticeship and there were more to come. In addition to studying with Kidla, I was studying with another healer, Marilyn, who was Arikara-Hidatsu (the Arikara-Hidatsu were indigenous peoples of the Dakotas) and performed the ceremonies of her people. I was carrying stones for her for sweat lodge ceremonies and generally serving as her assistant. She lived south of Santa Cruz and I visited her on many weekends. I was learning the Black Elk family style of purification lodge. I carried stones for Marilyn and assisted her for ten years, overlapping my fourteen years of study, before I did my first ceremony. I had amazing experiences with Marilyn. Spirits came to her fire, to her lodges, to her healings.

I saw those spirits and marveled. I spoke with them and sometimes, to my excitement, they spoke back to me.

After ten years of carrying stones, I got my chance to lead a purification ceremony in a sweat lodge. This is where we heat stones outside of the lodge, which is a dome-shaped structure made of willow saplings and covered with tarps and blankets. We bring the stones inside the structure and pour water over them. This produces steam, which we call *inipi*, the breath of life. This heals us.

I was doing a workshop in Nashville, Tennessee, and was invited to go to a purification ceremony at a spiritual community in Tennessee. I'd never miss a purification lodge, so off I went with five other people from the workshop. We drove the two hours to Somerville and showed up just in time. We found the site for the ceremony, and to my chagrin, I discovered that, instead of tobacco, marijuana would be used in the ceremonial pipe.

I argued with the people who had made this decision. "This isn't traditional!" I exclaimed. I began talking to the locals about what I understood to be appropriate and inappropriate during purification ceremonies. Apparently I really annoyed them.

"If you're so sacred," they said, "do it yourself. We're out of here." The heavily bearded, denim-clad locals marched away in a huff. What was I to do? The stones were hot. The lodge was there. Water was in the buckets. I had brought five people.

"Let's do it," I said. I pretended to be Marilyn. I imagined doing what she would have done. I loaded the pipe in the way she would have done, praying with the others over sage and putting tobacco into the pipe for each of the seven directions. I apologized to the spirits for any mistakes I might make, telling them that it was my first time and that I was leading the lodge due to unexpected circumstances.

During the ceremony, I did make mistakes. I sang some songs out of sequence and I reversed a couple directions. However, the intent was right. My heart was in the right place, and therefore it was a wonderful ceremony. The small mistakes didn't matter. I felt tolerated by the spirits, for my efforts were heartfelt.

After this, I continued to lead purification lodges. That was my initiation and approval.

During this time, I was also looking for my father, who was Lakota. The best I could do was find his best friend, who had married my mother after my

father's relationship with my mother had ended—having lasted only a matter of days. My father had sworn his best friend to secrecy about him, so all I could learn was that he was Lakota and Métis (French indigenous Canadian) from Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and that he hadn't wanted to ever be found by me. His friend for whom I was named—Lewis Eugene McKinley Jr.—would tell me no more except that my father had died in a car accident in South Dakota after returning from the Korean War.

Although I didn't find my father, what I *did* find was Lakota spirituality and Sonny Richards, who became my teacher. Sonny introduced me to the vision quest (*hanbleciya*) and the sun dance. In the *hanbleciya*, we sit in Nature for four days and nights and “cry for a vision.” I asked for assistance in becoming better at working with people to help them recover. In my most memorable *hanbleciya*, Sitting Bull appeared and asked me to pull buffalo skulls^{*15} for him in the sun dance. Since then I have pulled buffalo skulls around the sun dance ring every year as homage to Sitting Bull and as a request that he use his power to help others. I say to Sitting Bull, “If I do this, will you come and help the people I see?”

He says, “Yes.”

I have danced the sun dance now for fifteen years. I am a late starter in that I came to the Lakota ways later in life compared to some. In each of these dances, I imagine the sick and the wounded and ask myself to suffer for them, to dance for them so that they might heal. I have amazing experiences of the Tree of Life speaking to me and seeing her spirit in her leaves. And while that is wonderful, it's really all about deepening relationships with the spirits and not necessarily experiencing the epiphany that some people describe.

It is now 2012 and I have more spirit friends than ever, although it has taken me forty years to build them. These spirits tell me who they want me to believe they are. I have contact with the five men who taught healing to Walker in the late nineteenth century. Or do I? They say that's who they are, but are they? I don't know. I just accept what they say. I also have contact with Charles Eastman, the first Lakota physician.

Whenever I am trying to help someone, I call upon these spirits and anyone else who will come and I ask them to come whether we are in ceremony or not. I ask them to come for the most ordinary medical appointments and to do what they can for the people I'm treating.

I think spiritual healing is about many small encounters with the spirits

over many years, not about a grand epiphany in which everything changes. It's these many small encounters that build relationships in the spirit world that give us the capacity to help others. To me, that's what really matters.



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Footnotes

- *1. In Visionseeker workshops we examine the nature of the personal self, the self in service as a shamanic healer, and our immortal cosmic self—our Oversoul, a level that may bring us into connection with the Higher Organizing Intelligences.
- *2. For more on depression, visit the National Institute of Mental Health website at www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/index.shtml.
- *3. For more on shamanic ecstatic states, please see Shirley Nicholson's *Shamanism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1987).
- *4. For more on this, see Sudhir Kakar's *Shamans, Mystics & Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- *5. For Achterberg's complete article see *Revision* 14, no. 3 (1992): 158–65.
- *6. A mesa lodge is comprised of any number of Pachakuti Mesa Tradition practitioners with their individual mesas, or altars, arranged in precise geometric designs to maximize the flow of unseen energies to assist in healing work.
- *7. The Seth books are a channeled body of work by the medium Jane Roberts, the most famous of which is *Seth Speaks*.
- *8. Kayangate is a feminine Apu connected to Ausangate. For the Andean people, this is a powerful union of the masculine and feminine energies of the Earth.
- *9. For more on Jan EngelsSmith's work, please visit her website at www.janengelssmith.com.
- *10. For more on relational therapy theory, see Judith V. Jordan's *Relational-Cultural Therapy* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2009).
- *11. The primary resource for information on Shamanic Breathwork is Linda Star Wolf's *Shamanic Breathwork: Journeying beyond the Limits of the Self* (Rochester, Vt.: Bear and Company, 2009).

- *12. Erik Erikson's theories on developmental stages can be found in his seminal book, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).
- *13. Hand tremblers are diagnosticians who use the altar and divination skills to find out what is wrong with a patient.
- *14. See Joan Parisi Wilcox's *Keepers of the Ancient Knowledge: The Mystical World of the Q'ero Indians of Peru* (London: Vega, 2002).
- *15. Pulling buffalo skulls is a traditional practice in which skewers tied to buffalo skulls are pierced into a man's back. The man then drags the skulls around the circle as he dances. It is a form of self-sacrifice.
- †1. For the complete article, "What We Can Learn from Shamanic Healing: Brief Psychotherapy with Latino Immigrant Clients," see the *American Journal of Public Health* website at <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.92.10.1576>.
- †2. For information on Venus Rising Institute, visit www.shamanicbreathwork.org. Venus Rising is run by Linda Star Wolf, a shamanic healer (who is the author of the next chapter in this book).
- ‡1. See Daniel Foor's website, www.ancestralmedicine.org, for more on his work.

About the Author

[ITZHAK BEERY](#), is an internationally recognized shamanic healer and teacher. He was initiated into the Circle of 24 Yachaks by his Quechua teacher in Ecuador and by Amazonian Kanamari Pagè. He has also trained intensively with other elders from South and North America. The founder of ShamanPortal.org and cofounder of the New York Shamanic Circle, he is on the faculty of the New York Open Center. The author of *The Gift of Shamanism*, he lives in New York.

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