

Jaguar Medicine

Alberto Villoldo PhD

Until 1971, it was thought that the Nile was the longest river in the world. That year, *National Geographic* explorer Loren McIntyre, along with a local Indian guide and a friend who owned a pick-up truck, set out to discover the source of the Amazon. On October 15, 1971, McIntyre and his party reached a summit 18,200 feet in altitude, an icy ridge called Choquecorao from which they spotted a body of water 1,000 feet below them. Thirsty, they decided to descend to this small lake, and as they looked at the five brooks that trickled outward and down the mountainside, McIntyre realized they had found the origin of the great Amazon. This daring expedition would lead to the revelation that the twisting and turning river is longer than the Nile by nearly 100 kilometers, and would stir interest in uncovering the mysteries of this region of the world that had been almost completely hidden to westerners. (1)

McIntyre was an old-school explorer who relied more on guts, brawn, and instinct than on technology to help him navigate. I remember meeting him near the town of Pucalpa, Peru, the last navigable Amazon port. It was late in the spring of 1979, and I was an eager young man with a fresh PhD looking for an unexplored niche in anthropology. I had already spent nearly six years traveling to the Peruvian Andes and Amazon and had become a regular in the “Last Friday” club, a once-a-month gathering at the last waterhole in the jungle that served cold beer. At that time, many of us westerners who had come to the edge of the unexplored Amazon were searching for the legendary Mayoruna, a shy and elusive people who foraged and hunted in the deep jungle, so that we could study their ways. What made the Mayoruna so exotic to us was that they believed themselves to be jaguars who inhabited the bodies of men and women, and who tattooed their faces to look like jungle cats, even wearing whiskers during their ceremonies. Moreover, we were enticed by the rumor that they were able to “beam,” transmitting their thoughts telepathically to each other. (2) The possibility that we might uncover and understand the secrets of the Mayoruna was exhilarating.

The only way for us budget explorers to launch an expedition to the remote regions where there were reported Mayoruna sightings was to hire one of the Irish pilots who worked at the local Christian mission to fly us on their seaplane on a Saturday, their day off, and pick us up the following week at the same spot. These extraordinary flyers risked their

lives, and ours, as they landed their aircraft in turbulent river waters where logs the size of trees floated by. By far the biggest challenge, however, was getting them to remember the following week where they had dropped you off, as this was before GPS technology existed, and every bend in the river looked exactly like the next. We used to carry an emergency flare that we hoped would be dry enough to light the following week when the buzzing of the single engine plane circling above could be heard again. Needless to say, McIntyre not only found the Mayoruna before any of the rest of us did, he traveled with them for many months as they sought the source of their own river and what they called “the beginning of time itself.”

During those years traipsing around the Amazon, inspired by McIntyre’s discoveries, I came across the opportunity to study with many shamans and healers. Many of them were masters who worked with the *ayahuasca* vine, a plant with hallucinogenic qualities that is used ritualistically in their culture, which fascinated me. I remember observing one of these shamans, don Ramon, during his nighttime healing ceremonies, as he would load his pipe with jungle tobacco and turn to one of his patients and “sing his jaguar down from the tree.” I asked him what he meant and he explained that like many people, the patient lived in constant fear, and that this fear was the result of a trauma experienced early in life that had not healed. He said, “This man’s soul is like a terrified cat who escaped danger and quickly clambered up a tree, where it remains, hissing at anyone who comes near. The cat must come down, relax, and resume walking on the *terra firma* of the rainforest, or there will be no healing of the illness this fear has engendered in him.”

As he worked with his patients, don Ramon would speak to them softly, reassuring them that their family was safe, that they were safe. Sometimes, he would massage a patient’s belly, explaining to that “here is where the jaguar resides within each of us.” I told him that in the west, we call the primitive, fearful response to trauma the “fight-or-flight” response, because it causes a creature to run away from danger or lash out in self-protection. The old shaman nodded, and said, “Yes, but when the danger has gone, an animal no longer holds on to its fear, while people will often remain in this state for many years.”

The more I thought about it, the more excited I became about the potential of don Ramon’s jaguar medicine. His explanation made total sense. Resetting a fight-or-flight response could free a patient from the devastating physiological effects of stress. While the fight-or-flight response can save our life in an emergency, we know that it is damaging

to remain in that state for an extended period. During fight-or-flight the body produces and releases cortisol, adrenaline, and norepinephrine, hormones that shut down noncritical functions in favor of high energy bursts, enhanced alertness, quickened reflexes, and faster blood clotting, all of which are needed in times of danger.

The danger is that our physiological response to chronic stress is the same as during instances of danger. Our fight-or-flight hormones continue to wash through our system, and we soon have an oversupply of cortisol and adrenaline. Excess levels of cortisol break down tissues in virtually every corner of the body, accelerating the aging process. High cortisol levels weaken ligaments, muscle, blood vessels, and bone and can cause elevated blood sugar levels and high blood pressure, eventually leading to easy bruising and thin, nearly transparent skin that we associate with the elderly. Abnormal function of the fight-or-flight system has also been correlated with inflammatory diseases and deficient immune function. While in this state, the body suppresses the healing hormones we need to recover from stress. And while most animals have systems that allow them to shake off the fight-or-flight response as soon as danger has passed, we humans seem to have lost that ability.

I watched don Ramon and other shamans “bring the jaguar down from the tree,” during their healing rituals and saw the immediate difference in their patients, who were visibly more relaxed and energized. Later, the healers would employ certain core processes including what they called “extraction” and “soul retrieval.”

The extraction process draws out the “heavy” or noxious energies that have settled in the patient’s body or his “luminous energy field” (LEF): the energetic envelope, or information field, that surrounds the physical body. This is the detoxification stage of healing, and it sometimes also involves ingesting plants that induce vomiting or herbs that cleanse the GI tract. The shamans explained to me that these illness-causing, energies were often the result of envy or anger that had been directed at the patient by someone else. When lodged in the LEF or in the outer layers of the skin, these energies had to be sucked out of the patient. The shaman would place his mouth over the affected area of the body, suck audibly, then turn and spit out the invisible poisons. Sometimes, the shaman would even vomit fiercely as his physical body rejected the noxious energies he had removed from his patient. Other times, the shaman would use a stone or crystal to extract and contain them.

Many of the shamans I studied during my tenure in the Amazon, and later in the Andes, explained to me that the (LEF) contains a blueprint for how we will age, how we will heal, and how we might die. Encoded within this matrix are all the gifts and ailments we inherit from our parents, as well as data from all the traumas we have suffered in our lifetimes. Stories of betrayal, abandonment, and loss are stored in a holographic fashion in the tides and streams of life-force swirling about in the luminous field, creating dark, heavy spots among the whirls of lighter energy. If we have a family history for heart disease or breast cancer, this information is encoded in our LEF until we are healed of this legacy. In the Amazon, they refer to such legacies as “generational curses” handed down from parent to child to grandchild. The shamans explained to me that when a sorcerer wants to inflict harm on a victim, he merely needs to activate the codes in the LEF to manifest a generational disease in that person. Conversely, a healer could also trigger the gifts latent within a clients LEF. In effect, these shamans believe that the LEF provides instructions to our DNA to express certain genes.

For many years, I considered their stories about creating health or disease in others to be implausible, but then I wondered, if diet, exercise, meditation, and stress can inform gene expression, couldn't intention do the same? What about the well documented power of prayer to heal? Could someone with a malevolent intention send that toxic desire to exploit another's weaknesses, in the same way that a benevolent prayer could heal?

After the resetting the fight-or-flight system and the detoxifying the patient, the shaman practices what is called “soul-retrieval.” This process summons the parts of the self that the patient has lost as a result of previous traumas. Don Ramon believed that these events, which the shaman called *susto* or “fright,” may have split off parts of the patient's soul when she was an infant, or even *in utero*. Jealous spouses or competitors could also have stolen these soul parts—the confident self, the trusting self, the self who loves freely and feels worthy of being loved in return—in the patient's adulthood.

To retrieve these talents, possibilities, and potentials that have retreated to the hidden recesses of the patient's psyche, the healer will enter a trance state and allow his consciousness to temporarily depart from his body and journey to the “lower world,” or what we might identify as the collective unconscious. There, the healer can discover and bring back those qualities of the personality that have been disowned, and that will allow a patient to embark upon their destiny. At this stage of the

healing, the shaman will also prescribe certain herbs and foods that will help the body to rebuild and restore physical health.

Shamans say that the soul has such a longing for wholeness that it will recreate the conditions that caused the soul loss, because it hopes that another opportunity for healing will result in our integrating these fragmented aspects of the self. Unaware of their soul's wounding, the person will change jobs but end up with a similar boss, move to another city and wonder at how she ended up with neighbors who are just like those she left behind, or divorce the abusive spouse and end up in an identical marriage. If the shaman can discover the source of the original wounding, he can heal it, and break the self-destructive patterns. He does this by recovering the quanta of life force that was lost and returning it to its rightful place in the patient's LEF.

Shamanic medicine is not a panacea, and shamans themselves will go to the emergency room when they have an acute condition. Western medicine remains the best trauma medicine that we know. Yet shamanic healing, with its emphasis on treating the body, mind, and soul as inseparable and continually influencing each other, can offer us fresh perspectives on dealing with the chronic conditions that afflict so many.

Recently, I invited a small group of travelers with me on a trip to the Amazon. Among these was a retired neurosurgeon who had suffered a stroke several years earlier and had lost significant motor function on the right side of his body. He was unable to set his right heel down, and had to walk very slowly with the aid of a walking stick. After a session with a renowned jungle shaman, he was able to set down his right heel for the first time in years. The following week, he accompanied me in an expedition to the Andes where he hiked up a mountain at 10,000 feet altitude unassisted. When I asked him what had happened, he simply said, "I have my stride back." The lost self who could walk forward confidently and unimpeded had returned, and his body was reflecting this profound change in the state of his soul.

Alberto Villoldo PhD is a medical anthropologist who has spent the last 30 years investigating the healing practices of the shamans of the Amazon and the Andes. He is the founder and director of the Four Winds Society, and author of *Shaman, Healer, Sage, Mending the Past and Healing the Future with Soul Retrieval*, *The Four Insights* and *Yoga, Power and Spirit*.

His next book, *Courageous Dreaming* will be available in bookstores April 2008. His website is thefourwinds.com.

1. McIntyre, L. "Amazon: The River Sea" *National Geographic Magazine*, 1972.
2. Popescu, Petru. *Amazon Beaming*. Penguin, 1992.