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THE SEARCH FOR NATIVE INTELLIGENCE A NIGHT-LONG PEYOTE CIRCLE RITUAL WITH A MEXICAN HUICHOL INDIAN SHAMAN

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Like the arms of a much feared enemy reaching out to crush me in a surrealistic dream, the long, slow moving shadows of the wooded mountains crept across the valley floor as the sun dropped lower and lower in the western sky. To say I was afraid was an under statement. I was afraid, but also quite excited as I walked toward the clearing where the ritual would occur. Thirty men and women had gathered from around the world to take part in the coming ceremony. The Huichol Indian Shaman, Don Caterino, had come from North central Mexico to be our guardian and guide in this night-long drumming and chanting ritual called a Peyote Circle. In the hushed and darkening silence of this remote wilderness setting, hidden high in the mountains above the Big Sur coast of California, I was afraid and excited as I waited for it to begin.

How had I gotten here? In May, 1975, I was Director of a training institute called New England Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. I was conducting seminars, workshops and retreats throughout the United States and Canada in various aspects of Transpersonal Psychology and Psychosynthesis. Both on a personal and a professional level I was interested in the effects of drug and non-drug methods for heightening, expanding, and exploring consciousness. For two years I had worked as the Head Counselor for a Federal Drug Abuse Clinic in Catonsville, Maryland, and focused my counseling on helping adolescents understand and integrate their psychedelic experiences. I had also recently completed an intense training program in the clinical use of psychedelic substances at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Catonsville, Maryland. When I heard there would be a six week training program on the West coast examining how various cultures train and reinforce certain levels of perception but inhibit others, and which would also explore the field of altered states of consciousness in great detail, I left my place of work for two months and journeyed westward.

I looked around at the people who were sitting in the circle and noticed that they, too, were anxious and excited. Like me, most of them were mental health professionals. Like me, there were deeply committed to the search for excellence in their own lives, and were exploring the frontiers of their own human resource development to be better therapist, guides, and consultants for the people and organizations with which they worked.

We made a thorough preparation for this Peyote Circle. For four weeks we had studied a vast amount of information about altered states of consciousness and accelerated learning processes, generated at the finest research centers in the world. We were struggling to understand how people throughout time, and trans-culturally, had approached these same concerns; how they had facilitates powerful journeys into the unconscious for themselves, and what they allegedly had learned. Of course, we also wondered about and articulated our own personal and professional reasons for approaching these realms.

With careful guidance we learned to use a wide array of methods and techniques for provoking unusual states of awareness: the sensory isolation tank, the witch's cradle, yogic and meditative practices, a hyperventilation technique called Pranayama, stroboscopic lights and brain wave drivers, visualization and guided imagery, among others.

The masters of these techniques, one by one, had come to introduce and instruct us in these methods. We carefully documented their words. In our journals we wrote about our own inner experiences with the methods and drew images of the inner visions that came to us. We learned to take great care and much time integrating these inner journeys, so that they might be practically useful in the difficult job of changing personality patterns, so that we could express more of our human potential in our lives.

Then, with sleeping bags and tents, we walked into the wilderness. On a diet of miso soup, nuts and fruit, bread and cheese, we spent ten days letting go of time and our own cultural patterns preparing for this ritual. To strengthen our sense of community, we spent two days enacting a Native American ritual of decision by consensus called The Bone Game. We fasted for two days immediately preceding the Peyote Circle, built a sweat lodge near a little stream underneath giant redwood trees, and purified our bodies, minds and spirits in its cleansing heat. Then the Shaman came...

I had heard about the ritual called the Peyote Circle for many years. Intoxicated on the mescaline obtained from chewing a foul tasting cactus, peyote, native people would drum, chant and sing from sundown to sunup in this ancient rite of passage, seeking contact with what they called the spirit world. Here, now, was an authentic Shaman, from a living native culture, with his rattles, drum, hand made violin, and beautiful hand stitched clothing, and a fresh supply of peyote. And here I was about to take part in the experience.

Obviously I had no cultural context for this experience, not being a Huichol Indian. My parents, friends, professional colleagues would have been frightened for me had they known what I was about to do, and most certainly would not have taken part themselves, had they had the chance. But, although I was frightened, I was also fascinated, committed, ready, and willing.

We were told there were several important rules of conduct to follow during the course of the night. No matter what happened, we could not leave the circle unless and until Don Caterino gave permission. It could be dangerous for ourselves, each other, and the spirit of the ritual if anyone were to wander off into the wilderness and into the night alone, under the influence of the sacred medicine.

We could not lie down during the night and thus risk falling asleep. This would cause us to lose a very important opportunity of making a journey into altered states of consciousness, and would dishonor both the ritual and the Shaman. We could not talk to anyone during the night but we could, when so instructed, dance or shake our rattles or sing along with Don Caterino. For the most part, however, we were to listen to his music and his songs and let them guide us through the night.

The ritual began at sundown with the lighting of the fire. The Shaman sat at the western point of the circle, facing east, watching through the night for the return of the sun. Don Caterino began to chant and sing while his assistant kept time on a drum. A large wooden bowl began to circulate, in which fresh peyote buttons were found. We were to eat as much as we wanted during the night, not an easy task, since peyote is really awful tasting due to a number of alkaloids found in it. Several members of the group, including myself, became very nauseated and vomited a number of times during the night but, by the time this happened, the mescaline was in our systems and the altered states which resulted were infinitely more commanding than the sickness.

Ten years later, what do I remember most from that night? I remember how the stars became crystal points of light in a vast unending sky, bright and shining, close to me, just out of reach. I remember understanding the songs Don Caterino sang, although he sang in his own native language. He sang to the deer, to the rabbit, to the spirit of the redwood trees looming large above us, to the moon, to Grandfather fire, to the night, to the sacred medicine, peyote. He prayed to his many gods that we be healed, become whole, that, by this ritual, the planet would remember her wholeness in us. But one memory, most powerful of all, will remain with me forever.

Halfway through the night, unable to lie down according to the ritual rules, but desperately wanting to, I felt extremely unusual and disconnected from the world around me. I put my sleeping bag over my head and entered a world of total darkness, total isolation. The Shaman's songs were all I had to hold onto as even my sense of self dissolved and disappeared in this special state. Suddenly, profoundly, I experienced myself as a sperm. There was a gigantic, totally magnetic sphere toward which I swam, faster and faster. There could be no purpose but to join with it. With strength and determination I propelled myself toward this goal until I exploded in brilliant ecstasy when I hit the outer surface of the sphere.

I remember my own unique consciousness as the sperm expand to include the very alien consciousness of the entity which I now know to have been an ovum. One consciousness became two, then four, then 16, then 256, then without number these cells divided and multiplied in explosive ecstasy and growth! I remember, out of the unthinkable vastness of this growth, separate organs emerged. I was each one, separate and unique, conscious, with a specific job to do, connected in joyous union with my fellow organs. Slowly, slowly, a total body formed, and a unique unitive awareness emerged out of the harmony of connected parts. Eventually I became aware of my self again, sitting on the ground, warm and in total darkness, listening to the Shaman drum and sing. I was crying with awe and wonder at this mystery of life called me.

It was a very different world to which I returned when I lifted off the sleeping bag and looked around. The fire was alive! The stars were alive! The Shaman and the people in the circle were alive, connected--everything connected like the cells, muscles, organs of my body. A great secret had been experienced and revealed. I was separate and unique, and yet all of this was part of me, and I, a part of it.

Shortly, Don Caterino instructed us to stand up and stretch. We could walk around the meadow for a few moments and experience the environment. I stood up, left the circle and wandered into the moon drenched meadow. The crickets and tree frogs continued the music of the rattles everywhere. The field was alive. I was alive. I began to do a slow, spontaneous dance to life and, as I did, I felt powerful cascades of energy flow through me. Suddenly, as I danced, someone else was beside me, dancing just like me. We came together, began to mirror one another's movements. She and I embraced and began to do a dance of unity. I lifted her off the ground, she lifted me. We pulled against one another with equal force, two bodies of equal strength, two souls sharing a common vision, locked in one harmonious dance of life.

I lifted her onto my back, back to back, and held her there. It was as if she were a slain deer and I was the hunter. It was as if the hunter and the hunted had become one. It seemed as if I had taken the life of this deer so that I might live, yet in the full knowledge that my life, too, would someday be sacrificed so that Life would continue on, forever. Life and death were one. Male and female, one. The stars and the sparks of fire were one. The moon shadows of the giant redwood trees and the darkness of the night, one. One. ONE!!!

The title of this article is, "The Search for Native Intelligence". Webster defines these terms thus. Native: inborn or innate rather than acquired. Intelligence: the ability to learn or understand from experience. Native intelligence is the ability to learn from or understand that which is inborn or innate. The Huichol culture, like most native and primitive cultures, values inner wisdom and experience far more highly than knowledge about the external world. In fact, their point of view would be that one can only know the outer world by acquiring an intimate

understanding of the inner realms of consciousness, and by taking such journeys into this 'spirit world'.

All the work going on regarding altered states of consciousness, accelerated learning processes, left/right brain synchronization, visualization, meditation and so forth are the ways people in this culture, in this layer and level of time, are employing to tap and access native intelligence. From a psychological point of view, these techniques and methods help us develop our latent human resources such as imagination, intuition, inspiration, insight. We can learn to search within ourselves for the truth of a matter at hand, then come from that truth in our actions in the world, rather than simply, perhaps neurotically, leading with facts and information.

In the Peyote Circle, once I had experienced the unity of my own life, on the inner plane, I could experience and perceive the unity around me. I have come to learn that when we seek the connections between things, we discover their inherent wholeness. When we unlock our own human potential, we discover that each of us can be a story teller, musician, artist, healer, leader, lover, friend. We expand our awareness of our own possibilities, begin to grow and develop our own humanness and, almost as if by magic, find compassion and support for others engaged in similar struggles.

It was a great privilege to have been invited to participate in the Peyote Circle, but this is not a form that will ever be acceptable in our culture. But we must find competent people within our own cultural context to be guides and companions to us on creative explorations of inner space. And over time, with dedication and commitment to the work, we can be those guides and companions for others.