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ENCOUNTERS  
WITH  
POWER

Adventures and Misadventures  
on the Shamanic Path of Healing



sounds true  
BOULDER, COLORADO

# CONTENTS

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Introduction . . . ix

## **PART I Expression—Storyteller-Artist**

- 1 The Power of Prophecy: India and the Life-Changing Reading . . . 3
- 2 The Right Way to Die . . . 25
- 3 Lost in Mexico . . . 43
- 4 The Guatemala Test and Initiation . . . 51
- 5 Encounters with the Power of Aborigines and Songlines Down Under: Or “When the Student Is Not Ready” . . . 65

## **PART II Inspiration—Ceremonialist-Healer**

- 6 Q’eros: Encountering the Power of the Land and Its People . . . 83
- 7 Journeys for Power with Medicine: Visions with Ayahuasca . . . 99

- 8 The Power of Dieting in the Jungle: Plant Teachings . . . 111
- 9 The Power of Communion: A Magical Andes Wedding . . . 133
- 10 An Encounter with Power Through a Healing Crisis: The Natural Traveling Pharmacy . . . 141

### **PART III Action—Chief-Warrior**

- 11 An Encounter with Power: Completing a Huichol Apprenticeship with Sacred Peyote . . . 157
- 12 A Second Pilgrimage to Regalia: Encounters with the Dark Shaman . . . 175
- 13 An Encounter with the Dolphin Brujos . . . 201
- 14 Nevado Aconcagua: Pilgrimage to a Sacred Mountain for Power . . . 209
- 15 Traversing the Andes and Other Powerful Passages . . . 229

In Closing . . . 239

Acknowledgments . . . 241

About the Author . . . 243

# PART I

## EXPRESSION

### Storyteller-Artist

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The stories in part I best fit under the category of expression—the storyteller and artist. While each story in this book has elements of all the aspects of the shamanic map, the ones you will read in this section truly are tales of encounters with power and are the best examples of pure expression. They teach by going to many places, by shining light on all aspects of an experience.

The shaman storyteller teaches by telling riveting stories, funny stories, stories that carry lessons. The storyteller has to make the tales come alive, to get listeners on the edge of their seats, to fascinate and entertain them. Shaman storytellers must believe in their own stories, know them from the inside out, and sell them to a crowd that always wants more. They must also leave their stories with a bit of mystery, an aspect of the unknown that allows room for listeners to come up with their own understandings, lessons, and realizations.

For the artist shaman, living is an art, learning is an art, and all art can be expressed in myriad ways: through song, dance, and symbolic forms. This expresses to the people what cannot always be said in words.

# THE POWER OF PROPHECY

## India and the Life-Changing Reading

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**I**n July 1976 I quit my job as a psychiatric social worker at Napa State Hospital in Northern California, a foreboding collection of institutional-green concrete buildings with few windows. I had put in my two years of postgraduate work to gain enough hours to be licensed in the state of California as an independent practitioner. Functioning as the assistant ward administrator on an adolescent locked unit, I carried heavy skeleton keys that I used to lock myself into the ward as if I were going to prison every day. This unit included both psychotic teenagers and seriously sociopathic young people who were in the hospital for arson, prostitution, violence, drug dealing, murdering their parents and barbecuing them in the backyard, killing their siblings, and hijacking a jet.

Ronald Reagan had mandated a state hiring freeze during his tenure as governor, cutting the budget for mental health care and turning out thousands of mentally unstable people onto

the streets—an unconscionable cost-cutting act that was conveniently forgotten during his presidency. The result on my ward was that as staff left through attrition, they were not replaced.

The policy of the hospital was that a male staff member had to be present on the ward at all times to restrain violent patients. Eventually I became that one man, although I had never been trained to restrain anyone. I was not a psychiatric technician but rather a liaison between kids, parents, schools, probation officers, and the court system. Already, one male staff member had been permanently disabled by a violent six-foot-two eighteen-year-old who put him in the hospital. I figured it was only a matter of time until it was my turn.

At one point the hospital director shuffled staff and sent me to work on a ward with profoundly developmentally disabled children. I had no heart for this work, so when my two years were up I followed my supervisor's advice and quit. "Get in, get your training, and get out," she had told me, "or you'll become a lifer." "Lifers" were staff who were hard to distinguish from the patients, except that they had a set of keys and a salary.

On the day I quit I felt such relief—like the weight of ages had lifted from my shoulders. I was a free man, and I was determined to make the most of it. My relationship with Lena had been developing from housemates to boy- and girlfriend, but in a bold and risky move I stored my belongings and booked myself a flight to Hong Kong. I would embark on this adventure solo and with no plans to return at any particular point. I was twenty-eight, in my Saturn return, and for years I had wanted to see Asia, India, and Nepal. After a short visit to Hong Kong and a mind-blowing week in Thailand, I headed for my primary destination, India, where the spiritual comingled with the ordinary every day. I could hardly wait.

## INDIA

I had just left northern Thailand and my world had already been rocked by events beyond my comprehension, including witnessing a unique Buddhist ceremony where dancers stabbed themselves repeatedly with steel swords and suffered no injury. After flying for hours over green jungle with watercourses snaking into the distance below me, the plane left land for the ocean. Nothing could have prepared me for the experience of landing at the Delhi airport in northern India that fall after my twenty-eighth birthday.

The Vietnam War had recently ended and my thoughts were heavy with what had transpired there, just to the east of where I was now flying. I thought about friends who had died there and Jerry, the one who returned without a face. I had gone to see him at the VA hospital in San Diego and was forever sickened by what I saw. A man I had known and liked lay in a hospital bed with a small tube running out of a hole in the side of what used to be a mouth. His eyes and nose were gone. There were no identifiable features left on his face. His body was covered with lurid red scars where surgeons had removed shrapnel. Jerry had lived just down the hall of my college dorm, a friendly, handsome guy full of energy and vitality. We all knew he had a military dad who pressured him to “be a man,” join the Marines as he had, and go fight the enemies of the United States in Vietnam. That was in 1966 when the war was heating up. We students already knew it was about oil, competition, and ideologies, a serious waste of lives and money.

We all talked about how wrong the war was, so we were shocked the day Jerry went off to join the Marines. His dad's pressure had finally overpowered him and he wanted so much to prove himself to his father. We were horrified and very concerned for him. Three months later he had been torn to pieces by a mortar that blew up in his face and I was visiting him in

the hospital. Perhaps his father was proud, I thought, now that Jerry had come home a grossly disabled veteran.

As I flew toward India, I thought about Richard Nixon announcing the end of college exemptions from the draft and about watching the lottery on television with my college buddies. My birth date came up number 25, so low that I was certain to be drafted within a couple of months. We all got drunk that night. Two months later I was in the Oakland Induction Center standing naked in a long line of young guys who had received draft notices. Meanwhile, Vietnam had become carnage. Thousands of young men were dying over there and the war was only escalating. It was crystal clear to us that the war was a serious miscalculation and a mistake of horrific proportions, and only the administration wasn't getting it yet.

I had made plans to go to Canada if I passed the medical portion of the exam. I could not in good conscience kill people in a war I did not believe in. In fact, having been a soldier many times in past lives, I had had enough of war. I knew I had sent many men to their deaths in other times and places when I was a younger soul. War had never solved anything, and killing was not in my nature anymore. Fortunately, with heavy help from Spirit, I failed the medical exam and was given a permanent I-Y status, meaning that I would only be drafted in a national emergency. As it turned out, they did not want someone with a history of childhood eczema scrambling around in the jungles of Vietnam. I did not have to go to Canada after all, and I could go on to more productive endeavors. As I walked out of that induction center onto the noisy Oakland street, I felt a huge and tearful relief. I was twenty years old and very happy to be alive.

Now, a decade later as I flew toward the exotic destination of India, I realized why I had not gone to Vietnam. There were other more important things to do with my life. I had a destiny and it was unfolding before my eyes.



A landscape covered with a thick curtain of brown air appeared on the horizon, and I felt a rush of exhilaration. As I deplaned in the dusk, that hot brown air hit me like a wall, an oven thick with smoke and grit. The smells of burning charcoal and dung hung heavy in the air, tugging at a distant memory. *It was all so familiar.* I took a wild taxi ride from the airport, with incessant honking, oxcarts, bicycles, scooters, brown women dressed in saris with brass pots on their heads, and rumbling trucks. A painted elephant lent an unreal quality to the ancient chaos that is India. Fresh from the mysteries of Thailand, I was about to begin an adventure that would propel my growth to the breaking point.

If I had known then what I was in for, perhaps I would not have had the courage to go to India, but innocence is the fuel of adventure. Shortly after arriving, I became so ill I nearly died. I was lodged in a government guesthouse beside a railway station in an unknown village. Alone and gripped by fever in a hot, dark, windowless room with a rotating fan, all I could do was lie there and hallucinate. For four days, weakened by high fever, dysentery, and vomiting, I couldn't get out of bed. No one knew where I was, I had no way of contacting anyone, and I couldn't even get to a doctor because I was too sick to leave my room. Eventually the fever broke and I spewed thick green scum for several days before I was able to resume my travels.

I gradually made my way to Varanasi, also known as Banares, which is located on the banks of the Ganges River. Varanasi is the holiest of Indian cities and the sacred place where Hindus bring their dead and dying. At the river's edge were *ghats*—stone steps leading down to the river—upon which pyres towered with flames burning corpses to ash. As I made my way through the twisted streets, I glimpsed an unforgettable sight: a three-wheeled pedicab with a corpse propped up in the passenger's seat, the body wrapped in cotton strips

like a mummy. The unconcerned driver was calmly pedaling the cab down to the burning ghats.

Following the cab, I made my way down to the river's edge to view the throngs bathing beside the temples that lined the shore. I watched the rituals of the Hindu priests and the fires consuming the corpses. Day after day I visited this fascinating place, transfixed by the colorful but morbid display. I watched men from the untouchable class dive for gold teeth fillings, coins, and bits of valuables they could glean from the ashes dumped into the brackish waters of the Ganges. Skulls, hands, feet, and ribcages glowed in the coals of pyres as priests chanted, bells rang, and clouds of incense billowed skyward. Many years later I would learn that watching the burning of the dead was a Hindu practice of the highest order.

Before I left the United States, a psychiatrist friend gave me the name of a professor of Ayurvedic medicine at the world-renowned Banares Hindu University in Varanasi. I was to look up the psychiatrist's colleague, Harish Shukla, and say hello. I tracked down the professor and the serious-looking older gentleman immediately invited me to his home, an impressive two-story structure on a major street. We spoke for many hours about philosophy, the nature of reality, and Hindu beliefs, and he invited me to return the next day for more discussions. I did, and again we engaged in animated talks for most of the day.

He took pains to point out that our thoughts and intentions manipulate reality on a minute-by-minute basis. He explained at length how we each create our own reality in this fashion and that it is our individual responsibility to control our thoughts and fantasies, lest we inadvertently create our worst fears instead of what we truly want. I found that his explanations were in alignment with the supernatural events I had witnessed on my recent visit to Thailand—but they were dramatically different from the nature of reality I had been taught in my Catholic upbringing.

These talks were magical, and I marveled at how fortunate I was to be having them. I considered the fact that I had created this whole trip from my intent and that it was not simply a random set of events I was reacting to. I played with the idea that I was meant to meet this professor and that perhaps we had a deeper relationship than I had considered at first. He certainly had an impact on my whole outlook on life.

## CONVERSATIONS WITH DR. SHUKLA

Dr. Shukla, a yogi himself, regaled me with philosophical observations and stories about his guru, who he said could raise people from the dead and appear anywhere at will, and who had announced his own death beforehand. One time Dr. Shukla asked his guru to show him the great light of the source. His guru told him he was not ready but showed him anyway by producing a powerful sound vibration. Dr. Shukla told me he was so terrified by it that he ran screaming into the night, tripped, and hurt himself. He went on to explain that the body-mind must be prepared for this vibration or the energy from the blast can be deadly. He said,

How can a two-horsepower motor handle ten thousand volts? The average man is merely a beast, but we are capable of being divine. Only a few make it during their lifetime. We must accept our violence, competitiveness, irritation, and suffering and then go beyond it to the next higher mind-set that ultimately includes none of them. We are everything and nothing. As men we must slave to increase our power and divinity.

He then explained that there is an upsurge in mental suffering when one searches deeply within and that this is natural.

“The more I read Gandhi’s book on peace,” he noted, “the more I realized violence was within me. The obstacles within me began to rear their heads.”

Dr. Shukla told me life was like ordering food for a meal but we only remember the very last thing we ordered:

A man may order bread but then forgets and orders fruit, meat, cheese, and coffee and then whisky. Then he notices all of them on the table in front of him and doesn’t know what to do because he doesn’t remember that he ordered all these things and some of them are contradictory, like coffee and whisky. He then becomes upset and blames the waiter. However, he can laugh, select what he wants, and give the rest away.

After some tea, the lessons resumed:

The physical world is experiential because it arises from a state of resistance. It has to pretend to be “not Spirit” or separate. Our bodies arise out of this resistance and therefore we suffer in them. But this is not bad and we need not suffer. All we need to do is remember that we are Spirit and that all separateness is merely an illusion. In this way we come out of resistance to the divine. People in a great state of resistance are more subject to gravity because, in a way, they have more material mass. They are depressed and bent over from the increased gravitational pull. We must grow light so that gravity exerts less force upon us. Then we will step lively and our posture will be straight.

Man is limited by his belief systems. Thus, a man who believes only in a heaven or hell is limited to expand only within this framework. It is necessary to create a belief system that is expansive enough to include every

possibility, known and unknown. In this way we short-circuit the limitation of the belief system that ego seems to need in order to operate. This is the quantum leap out of ego back to godhead, or Spirit. This is the biggest math set of all.

At this point I was deeply emotional and had my fill of fascinating things to consider. Then at the perfect moment Dr. Shukla's son, Anil, a handsome young man in his early twenties, arrived. After we made introductions, Dr. Shukla excused himself for a few minutes and the conversation began anew with Anil. He spoke very good English, like his father. I learned that he was an astrologer with degrees in math, physics, and chemistry, and that he was also a whiz at chess.

Anil said, with a hint of warning in his voice, "Varanasi is a place of power. It was founded on coordinates that are perfectly adjusted, making it the perfect place to create matter out of thought. One must be careful what one desires because consequences and conditions can occur that were not anticipated."

To illustrate, he told me that his father once took pity on an old woman with tuberculosis of the joints. He laid his hands on her and healed her overnight, but soon the daughter of his guru came down with tuberculosis of the jaw because someone had to take up the slack. Then Anil told me more about his father. At his guru's touch he went into a blissful state that lasted for a full year. This became too much for him to handle because he couldn't get anything done, so he asked his guru to remove the state—which he did with a single touch.

After several days of very interesting discussions, the professor proposed that I meet Ananda, the son of the family's former guru who had become the family's spiritual guide after the guru passed. First Dr. Shukla showed me a photograph of their late guru. I saw a man in a loincloth sitting in lotus position with a