



**Umberta Telfener**

**Cradled by  
the spirits**

**Experiences with Ayahuasca  
and the pleasure of living**

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This book in Italian was published in 2019 and uploaded in many online book sites from which it is still possible to download it for free (shamanic healing experiences must be available and not mediated by money, in my opinion). My colleague Cinthe Lemmens, generously, helped me translate it into English (with a special sophisticated translator) and I decided to upload this version too. U. T.

© 2019 Umberta Telfener *In braccio agli spiriti. Esperienze con l'Ayahuasca e con il piacere di vivere*

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To my son, wishing him to ride life  
as one should ride Ayahuasca



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## Dear Umberta

Dear Umberta

My teacher once taught me that a wise person never promises. So not out of dogma but out of conviction of the rightness of this, I cannot guarantee that I will be able to come to Amsterdam and experience the medicine with you. But my wish is there, even if your introduction to Ayawaska is not the most peaceful to digest in all its physical/emotional implications.

I think you have done well not only to practice, but to share this experience; I think we have all experienced those moments with you, described with such humility and intelligence. Now I have to reflect on them.

It was good and useful that you approached us readers like this: you addressed people who want to see with their minds that there are other dimensions with other forms and many colorful variations of the five elements. With your intelligence and sensitivity you could help people who are suffering and cannot afford a psychologist, but would need psychological assistance born from involvement. So perhaps writing this experience also become a better acquisition for you, an understanding which I am sure you have already digested, otherwise you would not ask yourself so many questions about the “truth” to follow, an absolute truth, not relative, a permanent Center of gravity as the songwriter said. Experience sometimes teaches us to keep the most secret things to oneself as if preserving them in a golden box, so how can the energy of compassion get out of

this golden box without opening its spouts? You offered the sprouts to us.

The body is one of the vehicles for knowing the mind and vice versa, hence also the energy, that of the physical force and that which develops in the invisible channels directly connected to the whole Universe outside. Unfortunately, too often we unleash selfish (material) energy instead of compassionate mental energy. As humans we are extremely practical and do not believe in the power of the mind, but we rely on others to tell us what their experience has been in this vast world to explore, perhaps not to be driven like blind men in the traffic of a metropolis. If your words can be of relief and sufficient to convey the experience, it is because you have been able to reproduce in words a certain compassion for all creatures, a power discovered in your journey. If the intention is good, the fruit will also be good, and will bear more.

With my Tibetan master Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche we were in a friend's kitchen in Beijing in 1988 and she had a gas machine brought from Italy, which did not work with the heavy gas in Beijing at that time. So we called Chinese technicians, but they did not know what to do. The next morning, while the landlady and I were out, the master set about widening the gas nozzles, and in the evening we were able to cook chicken ourselves.

I must leave you now, though I may have time and opportunity to talk about your experience and mine some more another time.

Raimondo Bultrini<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Journalist in the Middle and Far East for the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica*.

# First experience with the medicine, 2010

## *The days before, the preparation*

Life is a unique journey we take now (Eskhart Tolle).

Hallucinogenic plants are hallucinogenic precisely because they contain the same chemical structure found in the human brain (George Devereux).

What matters most in the world is life.

## *December 2, 2010*

I am full of questions. This is also why I have always been interested in shamans and their power, their rituals<sup>1</sup>, their ability to heal. Shamanism is the most archaic form of connection with the sacred, the oldest technique of ecstasy and union with the divine, a process of transformative channeling. Shamans are not priests but teachers, community ecologists, companions on a journey of discovery that connects the two hemispheres of our brain. They are experts of the hidden world

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<sup>1</sup> Rituals are the oldest way to hold a community together and to keep it connected to the Spirit and to the ancestors. It is a way to hold body and soul together and to communicate in different forms of consciousness with countless worlds and beings. It is one of the most effective ways to achieve healing and a way to connect to the sacred: if a civilization rejects the sacred, it also rejects the elderly; if it rejects the elderly, it rejects the well-being of its young. The psyche is very attracted to rituals because there is a great ecstasy in them. They are moments of disorder and spontaneity. There are two moments in every ritual, one planned of preparing the area and choreography; the other spontaneous and unpredictable, involving those who participate.

and use plants<sup>2</sup>, songs<sup>3</sup>, myths<sup>4</sup>, to describe the special relationship with nature<sup>5</sup>, with Mother Earth<sup>6</sup>, with Heaven and the Beyond, with the “nagual” – as Castaneda called it – the extra-spatial and temporal area of the second attention, the area of our right hemisphere.

I was in Buryatia, Russia, the first time (1996) after glasnost: for Russian and Mongolian guardians it had become possible to

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<sup>2</sup> 74% of the drugs of plant composition in the modern pharmacopoeia have been discovered by “traditional” societies. To date, less than 2% of all plant species have undergone comprehensive laboratory tests, and the vast majority of the remaining 98% are found in the tropical forest. The Amazon River contains half of all plant species on earth (Narby 1998, p. 37).

<sup>3</sup> Interesting how American Indians believe they receive songs directly from Above, from the plants they diet. Shipibo rarely speak of the Creator while using plants as intermediaries, showing absolute faith in the icaros they have received from plants. For all Indians there is only one healer and that is the One who created the world, whatever name is given to him/her. The Shipibo speak of Ayahuasca as a moving principle even though they consider themselves to be intermediaries, people who prepare the ground for healing to take place.

<sup>4</sup> Is not a one-size-fits-all version, there is a lot of creativity and heterodoxy, true inventions left to personal flair. It used to be that myths were told and retold around the fire; now television (which we have also encountered in remote huts around the world) shatters the shared mythical vision so that the semantics change very quickly and lose their meaning as a result of contamination with the West. The archetypal symbols risk being dispersed, some old men and shamans take it upon themselves to hand down narratives that no longer match from one geographical area to another. This oral tradition is nevertheless kept alive by women and men. Most people seem to believe in the existence of animate essences – spirits – common to all life forms. This makes Narby (1998) say that Ayahuasca puts people in touch, allows access to the knowledge of the life principle, to the molecules of life, to the DNA double helix that is the same for all species.

visit the sacred island on Lake Baikal, where the first shaman<sup>7</sup>, an eagle<sup>8</sup>, is said to have been born. Over time I have been to Peru, to Cuzco (1999) – for the Incas the navel of the world, the cosmic gateway – I have been to North America, to Senegal (2004); I have worked with some shamans in Tuva<sup>9</sup> (1996, 2001, 2011, 2012), I have participated in the rites of Pachamama in the Andes (Pacha = time, space, earth as a spiritual entity), I have seen curators and soothsayers working in

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<sup>5</sup> Nature, endowed with profound intelligence, is the abode of humans, the house where the wisdom of the Universe is hidden. Cosmic awareness leads one to respect plants and animals as endowed with that intrinsic intelligence that needs no words. Nature teaches us that everything changes and evolves in cycles of birth and death.

<sup>6</sup> The respect that shamans around the world have for the Earth is so great that when they choose to take something from her (a shell, stone, the bark of a tree, an animal, medicinal plants, etc.) they always offer something in return, often tobacco, but also a nip of vodka, a penny. After making the offering they take what they need with respect, aware that everything is produced by Her and concerned about altering the face of Mother Earth. That is why they ensure that they use what they have taken for a noble cause, because everything on Earth is in a relationship of mutual dependence. It is no coincidence that shamans connect with the life principle that animates all living creatures, which comes from the cosmos and is endowed with intentionality. It is no coincidence that they speak “the language of all nature” that enables them to communicate with the spirits of plants, objects, animals, which are the essence of all living things.

<sup>7</sup> The word “shaman” is of Siberian origin and its etymology is unknown. For some it means “person who plays the drum” for others “witch” or “Buddhist monk”. Some say it comes from the Tangusa root – *sam*, which conveys the idea of body movement, or from the verb *sa-* (= to know), he who knows. Lévi-Strauss’s definition of this figure is beautiful: a creator of order who heals people by transforming incoherent suffering into an intelligible form.

various parts of the world: the Sufi Habiba (2002) who heals through the Suras of the Koran, medicine men and women in Cuzco, in Senegal, in Russia, herbal secret-keepers around the world, a Native American Dakota (2003), an esoteric Toltec curandero of pre-Columbian culture, Mother Meera in Balduinstein, Germany. And many others. I have participated in many different rituals, because ritual is the oldest way to connect people to each other and to connect to the Spirit, changing levels of attention and communicating with other worlds, an occasion to create healing and channel emotional energies, going beyond words.

I have made offerings of food, songs and thoughts in the woods, next to a stream, during nature's awakening or in a flat, enclosed by four walls. I have recharged my energy above the boulders of Machu Picchu, an archaeological site reached on foot with the backpack on my shoulders, full of strength drawn from the beauty of the places, the forest, the people around me; I have chewed coca leaves that make my mouth anaesthetized, to increase my energy in the strenuous climb from Colca Canyon in Peru. I built my *Eren*, protectors who accompany and safeguard. I praised nature with songs and thoughts and

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<sup>8</sup> For the Buryati the eagle is the prototype of the shaman, the *Gilyaki* of Siberia use the same word for eagle and shaman, other Siberian peoples associate the eagle with the Supreme Being, Creator of Light. Among the Finns, the first shaman was descended from the eagle and Odin was called "eagle".

<sup>9</sup> Both two of the shamans – Nadia Stephanova (Buryatia) and Vera Sazhina (Tuva) – the Sufi Habiba and the Native American Dakota and Toltec, I have seen them work within the "Healing Mother Earth" event organized by the Association *Where the eagles fly*, in Val d'Aosta in various years.

appealed to the helping spirits, animal spirits, and objects I built to protect me (the arrow – representing the possibility of flying to the sky and aiming for the goal; the knife to open the way and reach the heavens; the whip to chase away the spirits and fear<sup>10</sup>; the bear's tooth that frightens others; the map of my possible shamanic journey that guides me; the alter ego animal...). I have brought stones to build a fireside, wood for the fire, food to give to the spirits and protectors, fabrics of the five colors (white, red, blue, green and yellow) to put on the *Ovat* (a place of worship dedicated to Mother Earth, built in every place full of energy, glowing with nature). I have listened to poems invented on the spot – the *Algsch* – that suck up the bad spirits and appease our protectors, I have sewn/designed fabric maps for my shamanic journeys and dolls and protector animals... I have seen shamans meditate on the sea monsters that had led them to the realm of the ancestors, dance like a snake or a long-tailed *condus-condus*; use the *cusungù*, the mirror of the world that allows one to control energy; the *tolù*, a smaller mirror for personal defense; the *dungù* – the drum; the *orbà*, the hair-covered clapper; the *artish*, the wild juniper of the Taiga; and the *scacciapensieri* for purifying children (a mouth music instrument used in Peru and South America as well as in Sardinia, Italy). I have seen the shamans wear the *paltò* which is like a horse with wings that takes them to the sky, and tread the hat well, so as not to lose it in a gust of wind. I have asked soothsayers, sorcerers and readers of coca leaves and shells, animal bones and ivory fragments. I met western

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<sup>10</sup> Fear is a form of energy turned in a certain direction. It is an emotion like love, hate, anger. It is a trap that imprisons. Who learns to defeat it becomes master of his own life.



shamans capable of putting you in direct contact with the unconscious (then you are often overcome by an incredible and sudden sleep) and healers in Italy and particularly around Rome. Every year I set myself a goal of my own, a task to be carried out with concentration, to improve myself and to access the “other” world. I built with my imagination (a radar that is set in motion when you get to the end of what you know, a language to express things that still have no name) invisible masters and spirit guides who in a circular room of my mind would enter through closed doors and give me timely advice, allowing me to open up towards intuition, to increase possibilities and amplify my personal growth (“Masters are imaginary and can set in motion dormant areas of your mind and new potentialities; they are what our imagination does to open us up to other possibilities” claims Igor Sibaldi, a western shaman and wise man who allowed me this experience). I participated in initiation rites, I killed a dragon of my mind as a symbol of the difficult? past that wants to be present, as a symbol of undigested events. I have dialogued with monkeys in many temples in India, Mexico, Guatemala and on the top of Machu Pichu, sacred places with an air saturated with mysticism. Places to seek a way of life, because every encounter is a promise. I have tried to forgive myself and others and rid myself of all guilt. I realized that the main element of spirituality is LOVE<sup>11</sup>, which is

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<sup>11</sup> The main element of Peruvian spirituality is Love and it is first and foremost self-love. It is not about egoic attention but about connection with nature. For this to be possible, it is necessary to invest in life. Attunement with the larger context is love that is achieved through knowing, accepting and forgiving yourself; through allowing yourself to be as you are. “Our true self is pure love, pure light” shamans around the world will often say in an attempt to teach us Westerners about ritual, sharing, being centered and healing...

first of all towards oneself. I have realized that it is not about egoistic attention but about the network connection between people, animals and places, the connection with nature. I continue to try to perfect myself as an agent of love, to amplify the channel of connection with the divine. I have realized that for this to be possible, it is necessary to invest in life and not to be afraid of death, which we need to keep close to us, to remember that each day could be our last and to be able to appreciate it fully, by doing at least one thing each day that we enjoy and one that is a sign of respect to others. This serves to increase *dharma*, service and compassion, to amplify dignity and connection to the high and higher forces, at the expense of power. To increase *kabedud*, the *kabed* attitude, which in the Bible means “rich” in the sense of “heavy, who knows how to weigh things, who gives weight to things” that is developed through the ability to make no effort.

The intention of my research is not to become a sorcerer myself<sup>12</sup>, but to investigate alternative ways of healing and to aspire for balance and connection: I would like to give space to what is not usual, to understand the spiritual aspect that guides us when we step out of routine. In fact, I agree with Kespi (1997), president of the French Acupuncture Association, who

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<sup>12</sup> Anyone who performs healing in some form – shamans, healers, but also doctors and psychotherapists, rebirthers, health workers – is likely to have some kind of wound that they bury through their intention to help others. One part of oneself is the wounded animal, the other part is the healer. The advantage is to be able to keep these two parts together rather than split apart, to not become ill or acquire a “tragic” role in one’s life. This strategy allows each side to nourish the other, one becomes a “wounded healer” who uses one’s wound to connect with others.

argues that in order to cure<sup>13</sup>, the doctor must connect each person in front of him or her to the order of the world, to the sacred architecture of the universe and of life, and that one must subjectively consider oneself the instrument to achieve this harmony, the means that favors this connection, going along with Providence. I therefore seek elements of meaning in suffering, immediate reasons for pain and initiatory opportunities for understanding. The aim I pursue is to construct responses – culturally determined –, to enable the people who turn to me to take charge of themselves, to understand and take responsibility for their resources, to appreciate what is happening and to consider suffering an event that pushes them towards their evolution.

The intention is to look into the mystery, to attempt to enter into being, to access events of an archetypal order, transcending cultures. For I would always like to live honoring earth and sky, dreams and imagination. I look for ways to go beyond the limits of everyday life, so predictable; I believe that we are all born with the ability to connect to nature and to our souls: this ability, because of the life we lead, falls asleep and diminishes over time; the channels that would allow us this communication close, causing us to lose some of the spiritual potential in our lives, making us become more and more materialistic, as our western culture encourages us to do. I believe

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<sup>13</sup> According to anthropologists, shamans cure cultures bound syndromes, what in the West we would call psychosomatic diseases: *susto*, the loss of the soul; *danzo*, the feeling of envy that causes hemorrhages, muscle aches, fatigue, a sense of suffocation, tumors; *pulsario*, a ball in the stomach that blocks digestion and causes hyperactivity, anxiety, irritability; *mal de ojo*, evil eye, with nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, weight loss, insomnia and depression.

that life is a journey into the sea of what we do not know, in order to awaken our instincts and our balance, to get rid of fear, to trust ourselves more and more, using the sun, the moon, the trees<sup>14</sup>, the winds and the stars as guides. The limits as markers of the path, the people we meet as ever new stimuli.

A journey that has the form of a spiral whereby we return to places we have already travelled to but from a different vantage point.

We have a physical body, an emotional one, a mental and an etheric body, the most sensitive of all (Foster Perry speaks of solar, lunar, terrestrial and saturnine bodies and of an *Akashic Record*, a direct line between the past and the future, which connects all the memories accumulated and contained in the body. He believes that the blood contains the memories of the etheric trace of our becoming). I also believe that the survival of our planet depends on individual people and their relationship with ecology and consequently with the spiritual aspect of living, our contact with nature: an inner quest to find a place in the world, a place of connection and care that allows absolute respect for the cosmos we inhabit. I am always reminded of one of the pivotal teachings of the Buryati and Mongolian shamans: the existence of an inner space that is the seat of the soul; a psychic space with which each one of us is born and which gives meaning and coherence to all our lives, which are like a mandala that brings forth a design, with its ever more sophisticated harmony. This spiritual space is in danger of

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<sup>14</sup> The trees, the standing people, are for many shamans our mother and father: they listen to us and preserve our memories. Humans are born from trees and are therefore all brothers and sisters; birds are the messengers of the gods, they bring us their messages and carry them ours.

becoming smaller and smaller as we grow up and everyday life takes over. Everyday events invade and can drain the lake of the spirit, which becomes empty, as if dead.

Shamans have told us of a personal “duty” of each individual, that of creating a relationship with external reality in order to evolve, finding one’s own voice: the ability to accept the world and its conditions, while remaining sensitive to the divine and its possible influence. The ability to make the spirits of nature speak through our own voice of the heart, the only medium for this secret language.

I am a clinical psychologist and healing is my field of work, both through psychotherapy and through collective interventions in institutional settings. Interventions that are attentive to resources and based on the idea that every system has knowledge that must be brought out and then honored. I am therefore in some way also a “medicine woman” and a guardian. Why not inform myself about how other cultures cure? Why not go and see the places where shamanism is a religion (all of Russia, except the Kamchatka peninsula), the places where it is a mode of treatment that is sometimes more accessible and less expensive than hospital medicine (Senegal, Peru, many parts of South America)? Travelling for this purpose has become a passion for me, providing me with a focus and interest. It allows me continuous learning, motivated by the desire to access trans-personal development. I firmly believe that there are many possible paths in people’s lives; everyone has to choose their own and this has to be somewhere between joy and sadness.

## FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH THE MEDICINE

The goal is to keep alive the desire to see, to know, to do and to enjoy all of it. Only by knowing oneself can one become free, and only as free will one be able to face problems and dangers: it is self-confidence that becomes the shield that allows one to identify a path, increase awareness and protect oneself from the fear of daring. Only trust in oneself and one's own energy allows one to live fully and be well, to be able to connect with others.

I have learnt in my curious wanderings that the mystery of existence is the mystery of one's own soul.



The Ayahuasca vine.

This time I decided to go for an initiatory experience<sup>15</sup> through a medicine, to experience on my own skin the ritual of Ayahuasca (*aya* = spirit in Quechua, but also dead and ancestors; *huasca* = vine, climbing plant), the vine of the spirits. A substance that allows one to open up to the fourth dimension and contact the energies to heal, that makes one experience a “little death”. It is a vine (the *Banisteriopsis Coopi creeper*) which, when processed, allows one to absorb CHACRUNA<sup>16</sup>, which contains dimethyltriphosphate (N-dimethyltryptamine, the DMT<sup>17</sup> also secreted by the brain) and produces hallucinations as well as, according to shamans, sucking up diseases at the astral level. That substance – which William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg believed could be used to get out of addictions by increasing mental sensitivity – gives us access to the spiritual world. The function of A. is to block an enzyme in the

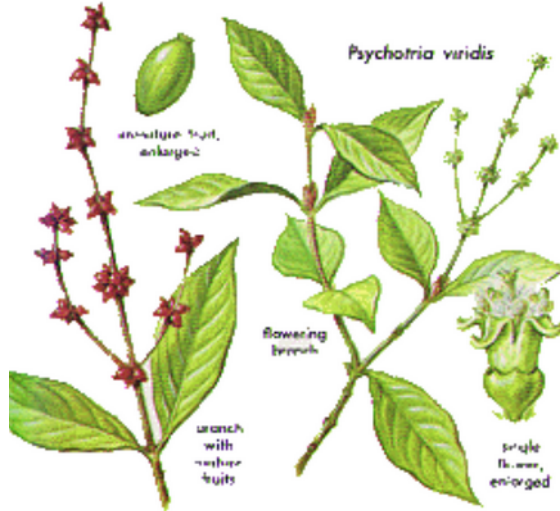
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<sup>15</sup> The use of hallucinogens, Jeremy Narby (1998) explains, is not uniform in the Amazon basin: out of 400 indigenous tribes, about 70 use Ayahuasca (western Amazon). In other parts there are other hallucinogens extracted from different plants, such as *Virola*, which is snorted in powder form. Some populations only use tobacco which has the power to show the reality of things and eliminate pain, whose hallucinogenic properties have been documented (Wilbert 1987), other cultures work on dreams.

<sup>16</sup> “How do you know if the leaves will have their power”, wonders Don José Campos (1999), “from the thorns they have in the back of the leaf. The more thorns there are, the more powerful will be the effect of the visions produced by the chacruna”.

<sup>17</sup> Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), is an endogenous hallucinogenic tryptamine found in the cerebrospinal fluid of humans, first synthesized in 1931 by chemist Richard Manske. Research claims that DMT release occurs 49 days after conception and marks the entry of the spirit into the fetus. Serotonin is a tryptamine that is not psychedelic. The pineal gland, reacting to stress, produces it. Hallucinogens act on the neocortex.

stomach so that the DMT contained in the Chacruna leaf – fuel that activates the pineal gland<sup>18</sup> – can influence our mind. As if to say that the A. has the power and the other contains the light.



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<sup>18</sup> The pineal gland is an organ located within the epithalamiums that is re-activated in meditation. It produces DMT, a substance that can lead to extra-temporal and extra-spatial travel. Prof. Sergio Felipe de Oliveira studies the relationship between phenomenology and mediumistic and spiritual powers (Youtube MJx1GINa680) and argues that our organism was born with an open door to mediumship (contact with spirituality, trance states, splitting, the possibility of healing and foresight, the desire to progress). The entrance door is the hypothalamus; the exit door is the cone from the pineal to the frontal lobe, which is the expression of our becoming, where ectoplasm is produced. This doctor demonstrates with the CT scan that the region of the pineal and the thalamus are more highlighted when one is in the splitting phase.





It is interesting that it was only in the 1990s that Western science discovered the chemical function of the union of the two plants, whereas shamans knew it all along and seem to know the molecular properties of plants and the art of combining them together. This is the so-called natural LSD<sup>19</sup> that has always been used by the Amazonian Indians<sup>20</sup> – in this case the SHIPIBO<sup>21</sup> INDIANS. The plant to access the spirit world and the sacred, the mother of all plants, called Yaje in Colombia, *Coopi* in Brazil and also used in Brazil and elsewhere by the *Santo Daimé Church*, the *União do Vegetal* and other religious sects. A doctor, the mother of all plants. A drug? No a “medicine” used to deepen spiritual research and to heal.

I will make a journey as an “amateur”, going to observe and interact with the knowledge that experts bring to the region of the sacred.

A month ago I took the decision to accompany two friends who had already had this experience six months earlier, namely Ampelio, a well known healer in Italy who uses subtle perceptions, and Stefano, an expert in third-generation bioenergetics,

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<sup>19</sup> LSD, mescaline, DMT are natural and/or synthetic substances that produce hallucinations, apparent, auditory and visual perceptions for which there is no external cause. Taken to alter, extend and change perception of reality, they are also called mind bending drugs.

<sup>20</sup> It is said that the term “Indians” comes from a comment made by Columbus who, on meeting them, was treated so well that he wrote in his diary *These are God’s people*. In his language he had written “*In Dios*”, Indios, Indian (Bear Heart 1996).

<sup>21</sup> I was told that the word “shipibo” comes from the conjunction of *shippi*, white-whiskered monkeys, and *conibo*, small-mouthed fish.

transpersonal psychology and dowsing (radio-aesthesia). We are going to Peru, north of Iquitos, inside the Amazon rainforest, to the TEMPLE OF THE WAY OF LIGHT, where they have already been. The minute they told me they were leaving again I decided to follow them and I have not questioned my choice since. I feel calm in this decision. The more people around me try to discourage me, the firmer I feel: the right time to have an experience is when it presents itself. The purpose is a kind of soul-hunting, as the soul must be conquered.

Today I begin the purification. In order to be able to have the experience, there are some foods I will be able to eat and many that are forbidden: alcohol, red meat, dairy products, added salt and sugar, spinach, pork, spices and chili peppers. And sex, for at least a week before the first ritual and for ten days after the stay in the forest, to maintain the vital energy contained within oneself.

### *December, 3*

The trip has started. I dreamt the whole night and woke up with the feeling that I had pulled out a toad and that the dream was so vivid that it seemed real. Usually I don't remember dreams, this morning I woke up with a feeling of an ancient anguish, which I was finally coming to terms with. Despair, horror, indignation, pain. I felt haunted, walking around a rationalist/bureaucratic building, looking for answers, in anguish, going up, down, raging, searching. Anguished. I woke up with my alarm clock going off and the feeling that the world was a raw, difficult, somewhat persecutory place to live.

*December, 4*

I feel like an armadillo without armor. Entering a toy shop where everyone was buying at the drop of a hat, I took pity on a poor migrant standing outside the door, in the rain. I gave him five euros (I am shrewd, even with myself) and when he told me, as I was leaving the shop with a tiny little package, that he lives with his family in a shack and that he would like to give his daughter a doll, I gave him another 20. I am crying for the injustices in the world, for my son's uncertain future, for the wrong choices I have made, for what is happening in the world. I am continuing to cry...

*December, 5*

I believe that dreaming is a sacred activity, a chance to get in touch with the spiritual world to receive advice, to connect with oneself and understand oneself better. Our ancestors have always attached importance to dreams, they considered them a transformative vision of everyday reality as well as an oracle regarding the future. I personally find it hard to remember them and would like to learn how to transform them during sleep<sup>22</sup>, as Carlos Castaneda advised in the books devoured during my adolescence. Dreaming, for all shamans, is a sign of long life.

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<sup>22</sup> I will later learn that for the Shipibo during sleep the individual is abandoned by his soul (Koya, the shadow image of the body, one's second self) which goes to play the flute and makes distant journeys during which it has to play constantly in order not to get lost or fall. It can also happen that she is hit by a hunter who wounds her with his rifle. It can be perceived when the soul leaves the body and re-enters it because the dreamer hears a sharp sound (Roe 1982).

*December, 6*

“Dearest, yesterday I didn’t get a chance to hug you, a quick trip to the bathroom and then I didn’t see you again. I wanted to wish you a wonderful journey: we take many, but no two are ever the same. There is no ocean depth, no heavenly vault, mountain peak or enchanted island that can compare with the journey to our essence. There in Peru you will connect with it. There is no more beautiful place to discover than the immensity, not of who we are but of who we can become. I hardly know you but I feel you dear, your tissue paper birds color my studio. A big hug, with affection. Yuli”<sup>23</sup>.

*December, 7*

Today I received a wonderful gift from an acquaintance: it is an e-mail with photos of the universe taken by the Hubble satellite, from a height of 593 km above sea level. The satellite goes at a speed of 28,000 km/hour and was launched into orbit on 24 April 1990. It sends back fantastic images of the universe. What a distance, what a precision, mystery is the key, and I interpret it as a message of my next journey.

*December, 9*

It is a beautiful day, the sun is out, the sky is blue, there is no wind, flowers in my window... When everything is so perfect for shamans in many countries of the world, it means that good news are coming.

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<sup>23</sup> Yuliana Arbelleiz Cardona is a friend, a rebirther and a spiritual traveler.

## FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH THE MEDICINE

*December, 14*

I continue my diet without salt and alcohol, I continue to dream and realize how lonely I am in my dreams. Everything that happens I experience completely in first person, those around me are peripheral, they do not share. I am sociable but I don't let others in beyond a certain distance, dreams constantly signal this to me. I wish I had time to reflect, perhaps to be able to change this internal state so entangled with my life.

I haven't had a dream as vivid as the first one but it is also true that I have been making some transgression with respect to salt<sup>24</sup>.



A corner of the field at the Temple of the Way of Light.

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<sup>24</sup> Salt is prohibited as it is chemically incompatible with A.: it blocks its hallucinogenic effect.

*December, 15*

“Dear Umberta, who knows if this is still your e-mail address and who knows if you read me from Lima or where you are. With deep and absolute respect for every religious interest, obviously including shamanism, which is the oldest form, I would however urge you to be very careful. If not, who will pick me up afterwards in the retirement home in which I am sure they will place me? Come back soon! Kisses, F.”

*December, 15*

Tonight I’m flying to Lima. Another synchronicity: before leaving I spent my free time searching for fractals on the Internet, for no apparent reason. I saved some on my desktop, filled my eyes and mind with them. I searched for them avidly, for the first time, gripped by curiosity to immerse myself in their graphics. I then realized that the images our mind presents us with when we drink the medicine are often fractals, images of shapes that are always identical to themselves.

*December, 18, at the Temple*

We arrived from Iquitos at the *Temple of the way of light* after an hour boat ride on the river and an equally long walk through the Amazon rainforest. Our luggage was brought to us by diligent natives. The trees are very tall, sunlight filters through the branches, clouds suddenly come and disappear, the noises are endless. The forest is overflowing with life. A dirt path shows us where to put our feet.

## FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH THE MEDICINE



The colorful jackets of the shamans.

When we arrive, we are introduced in a circle to the shamans we will be working with: Manuela, Ines, Olivia, Diogenes, Rosa, Antonio and Elia. They are all part of the Shipibo community, among the Amazonian tribes the best known, the most populous, the most recognizable. They talk to us about their social mission and tell us about their procedures, the years of experience to become healers: the *piripiri* (chilly) put in the eyes to see the energies and its patterns, also to run fast or become skilled fishermen; the different levels of *curanderia* (the VEGETALISTAS who cure with plants and the AYAHUASCHEROS who use the Medicine and work on its behalf, either by drinking it personally and accompanying the drinker,



or by acting as a go-between if the other does not drink); the ability to FOLLOW THE DIET on a plant (this is an initiation to become shamans and to prepare for other projects: they retreat into solitude and concentrate on one only plant at a time, in the forest, eating this plant, smoking it, using it on the body, in order to get to know it and master its gifts and receive its chants. ). They describe the ritual tools: the *PUSSANGA* – a bottle of rue cologne they have fortified with aromatic and medicinal herbs – the tobacco<sup>25</sup> and the pipe to smoke it<sup>26</sup>, the *MAPACHOS* of pure tobacco rolled by hand, the flute, the shamanic dress, the headdress made of multicolored beads, the bracelets and anklets with scanned designs woven by them, the *sarong* embroidered according to the grids they see projected on our bodies during the ceremonies and with which they make a diagnosis, the heavy belt also made of beads, the *maracas*

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<sup>25</sup> Tobacco and the pipe for smoking it are the tools for connecting with Heaven as the smoke goes up. It is what is offered as thanks for a cure and what is also offered to plants or the soil when one takes something from them. It is a request for permission, a donation, a token of appreciation, an exchange for medicine, a protection and a shield. Interesting how for the North American Indians the pipe is sacred, Bear Heart speaks: “Before we had the sacred Pipe, to commune with the Creator we touched a tree, for God created both us and the tree... it is not the earth and the tree we honor, but the Creator who created them”. Amazonian tobacco is grown without the use of chemical fertilizers or pesticides, and is very different from commercial cigarettes that contain about 10% toxic substances. In the Amazon, tobacco is considered a medicine and shaman is defined as “one who uses tobacco”. He is considered the husband of *Ayahuasca* and its complement.

<sup>26</sup> Being purified with smoke and incense emanating from the fire is common to all shamanic cultures.

made from a gourd containing sound grains that accompany the chants.



Schipibo bracelets with the grids used by shamans to make diagnoses.

#### SHIPIBO

This is a population that lives along the *Nanay* (or *Yughiyali*) river; their capital is PUCALPA, a Kechua word for red earth. They use Ayahuasca to channel the spirits of the plant and make group decisions, pooling their visions. They have always lived along the river, which they use for cleaning, fishing, and feeding, and have – purely by chance – saved themselves from the arrival of the conquerors and the consequent “new” diseases: the river had been “conquered” by another tribe (*Kocama*) and they had had to retreat into the forest, deeper and deeper, thus managing not to be contaminated by viruses and to survive. They are adaptable people, able to assimilate and use

what they were offered, who have always tried to avoid being used for rubber harvesting (although still in the state of *Mater des Dios*, in Bolivia, one can meet Shipibo who had been made slaves). Polygamous, they marry within the same family. They have a matrilineal extended family organization: it is the man who enters the wife's family<sup>27</sup>. They appear sociable, every occasion is good for partying: **1.** to meet other people and drink *masato* together, a yucca beer made from boiled plants that are then chewed and boiled again; **2.** to share the fish caught (freshwater fish up to three meters long, flaccid and quite hideous); **3.** to honor and respect the rites of passage to puberty for women<sup>28</sup>, through the *Anishwati*, the feast of all feasts, in which

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<sup>27</sup> The opposition between male and female goes back to ancient times, as does that between good and evil. It is said that women in ancient times had a phallus in the form of an elongated clitoris and ruled over men. They had the secret of fire and this made them powerful. A man, with the help of an intermediary bird, killed the mythical animal and stole the culture of fire from Yoashico's daughter. The men killed Yoashico and the birds bathed in the blood of the dead serpent. In order to demonstrate at least a political dominance, the men symbolically castrated the women, so that their social power was denied at the ritual level and a complementarity of roles was recovered: they thus made them marriage partners, domesticated and adaptable (The cosmic zygote). It is the explanation of how the cosmos was constructed (COSMOLOGY) that represents the male-female relationship and in turn the division of roles that organizes the tribes is a consequence of the beliefs about creation, in a relationship of mutual influence. With respect to the world they thought the earth was flat, a circular disc traversed by rivers that reach the edge; a series of round discs one above the other where similar worlds dwell: three paradises where the dead go, the lowest connected to the world in which we live and invented for the white man (Farabee 1922). According to Peter G. Roe (1982) there are two worlds above and two below the earth united by the cosmic tree (*lupuna tree*) whose guardian is a tapir.

<sup>28</sup> They live in separate and adjoining houses, connected according to the logic of female bonds. They bear children, helped by the other women in

women now have their bangs cut off<sup>29</sup>. (Shipibo education prior to puberty is a little repressive, children are left to their own devices, little cared for, they practice early sex. Women are powerful, they have in them the power of water and of the abysses).

The shamans tell us about the ability to abstain from sex<sup>30</sup> as a test to become masters, to maintain the energy within oneself (“It’s just sex”, Diogenes repeats, smiling at our all-western

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a hut (Chakra) nearby but separate from the village huts. Until the 1950s, total clitoridectomy (*ani shreati*, big drink) was practiced at the first menstruation, a modality explained as useful to facilitate the birth of children (rational reason) more plausibly to keep women subjugated in a culture that called itself matrilineal. The ceremony lasted three days and the operation was performed by a woman on a full moon night (do women perform the ritual to appease males and to symbolically deny the status of power they occupy? Does their role need the males in a complementary position and do they therefore tranquillize them by becoming the performers of the rite that castrates them?); it was done under drunkenness and the girl (about 11/12 years old) became the focus of everyone’s attention, dressed as sumptuously as ever. He was also offered objects that usually belonged to men. Her hair was then cut to nothing and only when it had grown back could she marry. A clay sex was then constructed and placed in the vagina, representing in shape and size the penis of the boy they would marry. Since, fortunately, this rite has lapsed, no other rites of passage to adulthood are practiced.

<sup>29</sup> A hard board was placed on the forehead of the newborn so that *the skull would be flattened* and, *the shaman* told me with a smile, on the flat forehead it would be easy to cut straight fringes.

<sup>30</sup> The female genital organ is called in Quechua *paqarina* or *pakarina*, “place of birth”, but also “place where the destiny of humanity is kept”, “place of knowledge”. It is considered sacred. Grand Paqarina is also the name of the Great Spirit who offers immeasurable love. Making love is an act of getting in touch with the divine knowledge within each person and understanding universal laws. For many shamans, the man who ap-

overestimation). They tell us about the ICAROS<sup>31</sup>, sacred songs – a cross between a prayer and a chant – that they intone to connect to nature and to invoke the spirit of the plant, to transform the experience and make it healing; songs that they have received directly from the plants, which they will perform in front of us during rituals, explaining that the vibrations, frequencies, and tones of the songs stimulate the substance in the stomach and channel attention. They tell us how the sounds form a connection between heaven and earth, allowing us to sharpen our intentions, to think without thinking, to be inspired and to be healed. These are songs of vision from which they “are sung”, which pass through them by the energies they have invoked and amplify the effect of the plants themselves. They tell us about the *MASTER PLANTS*, about the substances used to foretell the future, for shamanic flights, to facilitate integration and sociability, to contact the dead and find water sources (trees have a spirit, humans a soul). They tell us that they got this knowledge directly from Nature, using hallucinogenic plants during their travels. They tell us that they used to speak

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proaches a woman’s body should do so with an attitude of adoration and reverence, because it is through the female door that one tends to the infinite. Mamani (2000) explains that in turn the woman should learn to stretch an energy bridge between her sex and her heart, the Pachachaka, to recover her creativity and the divine aspect of herself.

<sup>31</sup> Icaros in the language of the vegetalists means “cure”: “When you drink the plant you acquire the mariri which is an internal power that when mature and combined with chanting makes icaros effective. Icaros are power conduits and have the power to make you vomit”. The Peruvian shaman says that some icaros refer to dolphins and that when dolphins are mentioned, women start moaning because of dolphins’ sensuality (Don José Campos 1999, p. 22).

## FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH THE MEDICINE

to the stars and, through telepathy, to the *Deep Intelligence of the Earth* and to the *Great Mother*. They describe the Milky Way, the way to infinity, the milky serpent, the milky anaconda, the way of the soul. They tell of Venus, the evening star (*Ururi* in Quechua) and of the Moon, which is for them both masculine and feminine, an important presence. Finally, they tell us the ways to become shamans, by “choice” of spirits, by personal vocation and intentional search, by inheritance when the power is conferred directly by the souls of ancestors.



The maloca where the ceremonies take place.

They describe to us their COSMOGONY, the set of ideas that inhabit every cultural system and concern the language of nature and the composition of the world. Everything, they explain to us, possesses a spirit: the trees, the river, the MALOCA<sup>32</sup>, their collective hut. They offer us narratives that include spirits, sacred plants and animals, founding events and stubbornly handed down traditions. They tell us how the very medicines they extract from plants reconnect them with herbs and roots, with songs and spirits that are part of the Earth.



The roof of the maloca.

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<sup>32</sup> It is a large hut covered by a conical roof of palm leaves: a ritual space, a circular space because the circle has neither beginning nor end and when people come together in a circle, a spirit of unity, a sense of sacredness, is created. According to many tribes, the universe will remain in harmony as long as the Sacred Circle, the circle of life in which everything is connected, is honored.





One of them, Master **Diogenes**, 60 years old, began his diet at twelve and became a shaman at twenty. He is an expert in easing the lives of the sad with music (“Violence and abuse are common in western societies but are not found in the Shipibo community” he says). **Rosita** investigates malignant energies and drives them away; she is then a master of affairs of the heart. **Olivia** deals with physical illnesses and their origin, their roots. Ines is a real surgeon, especially in the gynecological area, she performs real operations as well as being very capable of extracting negative elements from the body. **Elias** opens up to the light and works with the

geometry of the body. Two of them (women) cannot tell us how old they are; they have all followed a path of preparation, to increase mental sensitivity and to heal. The common belief is that medicine cures the disease while the curandero “entertains” the patient with his songs, amplifying the effect of the substance.

When they come around to embrace us, the feeling is that of holding a soft, warm and helpless puppy in our arms; tender



and cheerful. Slippery. Playful children ready to be cuddled, with a wise old soul. It is a strange feeling. Short men and women, their foreheads squashed for aesthetic and ritual reasons, their legs crooked, speaking only their dialect. Smiling, full of energy, helpless even though so intuitively knowledgeable. They have all embarked on a road made up of stages and consecutive teachings, a journey within themselves that leads to taking responsibility for themselves and also for others. I am reminded of a book about the initiation of an orphaned Eskimo (Qupersiman, 1972) who, in order not to feel at the mercy of the elements and to acquire the courage to survive in such a hostile habitat, chooses to become a shaman, seeks out singular things, far from the settlements of humans, and thus meets and builds up spirit guides, guardians and protectors.

What are the steps to access the sacred, according to our maestros? I believe a correct relationship with oneself, then with the social, a connection to the natural world. Given these premises, the next step seems to be to be able to leave one's body: to fly, to have visions<sup>33</sup>, to explore new domains, to break out of the prison of thoughts and rationality. All through trials, initiations, the knowledge of plants and the privileged relationship with another healer; often even falling ill as a sign of the need to take this path. Then diets and fasts are needed because “only when you are empty can you be filled”.

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<sup>33</sup> Every people use vision to investigate illnesses and ailments. Eskimo shamans call it *amgakoq* and describe it as X-ray vision that allows one to see internal organs; African healers describe it as light. Shipibo describe it as grids, modern us as Auras that take on different colors.

*December, 19*

We are 20 guests who come from various parts of the world, many from the United States (there is an Israeli woman, two Rumanians, an Englishman, a Serbian, an Ecuadorean, a Mexican, the three of us Italians). The ages are just as varied, from twenty-three to sixty-five; there are also some young volunteers who exchange their work at the camp for the opportunity to participate in the rituals.

On the first day they make us drink a bowl of a green herb (lemongrass) and then swallow 6-7 bowls of lukewarm water in order to vomit, to clean ourselves energetically, to empty ourselves. Defensively I look around and interact with others in line. I drink the water too slowly, in small sips, and it passes into my digestive system. Twice the shaman Ines gives me a massage and twice I manage to vomit. The moves she made on me show an accurate knowledge of the human body: she stood behind me, clinging to my body, with her hands she massaged every internal organ, the stomach with movements from the bottom upwards.

The feeling is one of release, of letting out toxins and also of letting go. A nice metaphor for what is to happen tonight: letting go, trusting the medicine, actively surrendering to it, like a surfer who rides the waves and uses them to float. Now I have to fast for an hour. Breakfast will be at 8 a.m., lunch at 1 p.m., then no more food and little water for the whole day, because tonight<sup>34</sup> the first ritual with Ayahuasca is taking place. Some of the participants have already taken LSD and know the

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<sup>34</sup> Interesting how I was told that the same substance taken during the day has no effect because the anaconda is an animal that lives in the night.

sensations they can experience. It is, however, different to drink Ayahuasca, which is used for spiritual purposes, as a medicine that cures: the LSD process lacks the mystical aspects that A. allows access to.



Rosita, Olivia and Ines rest by embroidering.

What did I learn from this first purification experience? That sometimes I do not concentrate enough on myself and that I am incapable of forgetting about others. I realized that I need their approval and that I lean on their gaze. I experienced that even bad moments pass and that one soon gets well again. That I could intervene in unpleasant situations to speed them up, for example by putting two fingers down my throat and learning to vomit.

Every day at midday the women shaman will bathe us with flowers, to purify us with AGUA FLORIDA<sup>35</sup>. A Tibetan gong rings, we gather and line up. They take a bucket of brown, very dirty, very fragrant, ice-cold water and dump it on us, from our heads all over our bodies, and wash us as if we were children to be cared for. The water, which is cold, is softened by the flowers, so it leaves a nice smell on the skin and you have to let the air dry you, even on rainy days. The first time I feel as tense as a violin string, despite the clothes clinging to my body from the humidity and the scorching heat. I get annoyed as water too cold for me runs down my face, over my eyes, into my mouth. The shamans laugh<sup>36</sup> at my discomfort for going from hot to cold, from dry to wet, forcing me to reconsider my

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<sup>35</sup> Vomiting and sweating enable one to acquire a “clean” attitude of heart – mind – soul. The sweat lodge, swet lodge, for the North American Indians is a sacred place, in it they pray, think together and make decisions. Sweating is purifying, like being born again, erasing past mistakes. As they build the hole where they put the red-hot stones and as they build the structure, the Indians pray knowing that the people in a sacred place become sacred in turn. The relationship with fire is not the same in the different terrestrial hemispheres. Shipibo rituals do not contemplate fire as the climate is usually warm. It is lit, however, where the shamans dwell and where the Ayahuasca boils: the energy of the sun kept close and respected, the kindness and constancy in caring for it. Being clean inside and out is a common practice in the way of spirituality: bathing, sweating, vomiting, fasting, dieting on one plant, all purification strategies to present oneself before the Supreme Being (for the Indians of North America) and to be worthy of taking Ayahuasca (for our Peruvians). A custom of purification common to all ancient peoples. Thus the theme of the universal flood, a cathartic force that cleanses the universe of primordial evil.

<sup>36</sup> “The heart needs to laugh, laughter is like the wind on the tree crowns, it purifies them. The echo of laughter resounds in the other worlds” say the shamans.

complaints and put them into proportion. This is another small problem I can learn to overcome: cold water on a hot body will not be the end of the world! I would like to learn to approach this purification with the attitude of someone who goes to a party rather than a sacrifice: I would like to relax, to allow myself not to resist. It means letting go, being pampered, freeing oneself from the tyranny of thought: the shamans cleanse away the waste, one could feel cared for and pampered.



Tuc tuc with which you move around the towns.

### *The first ceremony*

Out of impatience man has lost paradise, out of laziness he does not return to it (Franz Kafka).

7 p.m.: I get ready as if going to a ball, wash myself in dirty water, put on comfortable clothes, brush my teeth with water from the bottle and prepare the things I will need: water that

tastes like chlorine to rinse my mouth, a blanket if it will get cold, a jumper, a torch to go to the communal hut where the ritual takes place, an extra pillow to be more comfortable. At 8 p.m. we are all there: mats in the exact number of the participants placed in a circle around a center of soft cushions that will serve the shamans (four women and three men plus a woman and a man in training to whom the heavy work is delegated: to the woman the daily care of the shamans, to the man the cooking of the medicine). They sit down together to relax before beginning their individual Icaros, to laugh, rest, chat, comment on what is happening and what they seem to see as if by radar. The women shamans on one side, the men on the other, inexorably divided. Then there is a corridor around, between the healers and us to move around, so that the volunteers (two, plus a facilitator who directs, a kind of director, all three of whom are not drinking on this occasion) can provide assistance to those who need it. Outside the maloca two from the native community are available to help in turn, in and out of the bathroom. Next to each mat there is a pit for vomiting, as Ayahuasca produces vomiting and diarrhea. It is the facilitator who has assigned the places and I think I am number 16. Stefano, a great tarot expert, tells me that it is the tower card<sup>37</sup>,

<sup>37</sup> The tower depicted could be the refractory oven in which the alchemists' alembic was placed for their work. The tarot card represents a lightning bolt that uncovers a tower: a force that breaks the balance between polarities, the breaking of continuity, a new arrangement at a higher level, the opening of the third eye, a warning about the risk of losing oneself in the outside world, living a life that is too superficial. It is a card that anticipates a project allowed by the heart and the belly: the art of discriminating false desires from healthy ones. It indicates that an unstoppable unconscious process has begun and there is a force of nature at work whereby one will surrender to navigation, getting rid of unnecessary bits and

enlightenment<sup>38</sup>, the death of the Ego. What he doesn't tell me is that in the tarot the lightning strikes a part of the tower and that the complementary meaning is madness.

I am lying on my mattress, two lanterns lit, half-light, the big full moon<sup>39</sup> outside produces images and shapes on the mosquito nets of the hut. I feel very calm, I don't explain it myself, I decide to ask for the illumination of the tower as my INTENTION, my purpose of investigation (every time you drink you need to identify an intention as the shamans believe that A. responds to people's needs in a timely manner and you can thus focus on even unusual themes). At nine o'clock the shamans arrive, the men first. As they enter, each one wishes us "Buena's noche" in a sort of light and deeply serious tone: they too wish each other a good night of songs and visions, of energy that circulates and brings introspection. One of them with mapachos, cigarettes made by them from very pure tobacco, cleans the space and comes to blow smoke in

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pieces.

<sup>38</sup> The concept of "enlightenment" is complex, non-unitary, even fallacious. It is common for shamans to feel an illumination in their heads and brains, enabling them to see the essence of things, the future and the secrets of the cosmos. The sun itself in many cultures is a symbol of the principle of total vision and the immanent fire of life. Solarization is the process of activating the "inner sun", the spiritual manifestation of totality. The poet Rilke speaks of cosmic consciousness and calls it "Openness".

<sup>39</sup> I have always felt the power of the moon to the extent that on full moon nights I find it hard to fall asleep, wherever I am. The moon is like a mirror that reflects the forces of the Cosmos and transforms them into energy that it projects onto the earth. It is also connected to the feminine and to the phases of every woman's biological cycle.

everyone's face. Two others produce sounds by blowing into empty plastic bottles, giving rise to a music of nature that is added to the millions of other noises, crickets, frogs in the pond and all the voices of the forest, the rustling of invisible animals, even seeds, nuts, leaves falling from the trees.

When the shamans are all inside, when each of them has wished us a good night, four small groups of six go to get the half portion of medicine contained in a large glass bottle, the one we will be given tonight to calibrate our compatibility to the drug. I am in the fourth group and number 23, happy because it is historically mine and my whole family's lucky number. We are given the small glass with the substance, we focus on our intentions and drink. I find the medicine bad and tasty, I thought worse. I manage to swallow it and return to my seat, standing with my back very straight so as not to give in to fear, inhaling through my nose and exhaling through my mouth, waiting with all my being for the anaconda snake to arrive. I concentrate on my breath, waiting, as if I were a container of emotions and desires, full of expectation. The lights are switched off, we are left with only the light of the moon.

#### THE SNAKE

The snake is an important character in the Amazon rainforest, in the Shipibo culture and in many Indian cultures. In Africa and Australia, for example, they speak of a great serpent that spreads rainbows around it and accompanied Mother Earth in her coming as she created mountains, valleys and stars. Thus Oroborus is believed to encircle the entire earth and circle around it spreading blessings. Its



power is symbolized by quartz crystals. In Judeo-Christian culture he is an “evil” character, the evil principle; for many other cultures such as Amazonia, Mexico, but also the Sumerians, Egypt, Persia, India, Crete, Greece and Scandinavia he is instead a beneficent symbol, the one who knows, who knows. Lord of the life principle it has no sex, it is male and female simultaneously, a twin of itself. The visible serpent appears to be the incarnation of the Great Invisible Serpent, outside of time, the life principle of all the forces of nature. Campbell (1959) recounts that even Zeus was initially depicted as a serpent; around 500 B.C. he became a snake-slayer as the slayer of Typhon, a huge snake-like monster who touches the stars with his head, the son of Gaia, goddess of the earth who embodies the forces of nature. We are at a turning point, the departure from nature, the rise of patriarchy and the victory of reason (Athena helping Zeus). The mythical serpents are huge. The first chapter of Chuang Tzu, the founder of philosophical Taoism, describes a huge, long fish that inhabits the celestial lake, turns into a bird and spirals up to the sky. The snake is associated everywhere with shamanic knowledge, even in places where snakes are not part of the habitat. Interestingly, not only primitive peoples propose a serpent as the creator of life, but also Francis Crick, Nobel Prize winner for DNA – the molecule containing the information about life – proposes a life principle of cosmic origin with serpentine features (1966). “DNA is the molecule containing the information of life and its true essence is to be both single and double, like the mythical serpents”, writes Narby (1998, p. 85). Connected to the cosmic serpent and the creation of life is the recurring image of a connection between earth and sky, the axis mundi. Eliade (1974) elaborated on this theme common to shamanic traditions. He calls it a “paradoxical passage” that gives access to the afterlife. Usually reserved for the dead, it is used by shamans in their path of knowledge. This passage is often controlled by a serpent or a dragon (think of the path in the works of initiation, of Dante Alighieri who in the Divine Comedy before meeting Virgil finds

himself in a dark forest and encounters three beasts that force him to walk all the way when he tries to go straight to Paradise; think of Aeneas in the *Odyssey*, of Ulysses crossing the river on his way home, but also of the Count of Monte Cristo, of Aladdin, of Alice in Wonderland. For the Shipibo-Conibo of the Amazon, the axis mundi is depicted as a stepladder – another image that reminds us of DNA – surrounded by the cosmic anaconda (Narby 1998). Finally, think of the caduceus, two snakes wrapped around an axis, a symbol connected to the art of healing (the ying and yang of the Taoists, the symbol of medicine and Mercury) and also a representation of the Ayahuasca vine.

I begin to perceive very strongly the smells of the swamp, the damp cold of the wet earth, the dark. I imagine myself as a small, solitary frog under a large leaf. The smells are very strong, the cold becomes more intense, the darkness too. I am comfortably encased as a frog, not afraid although my senses are alert and terribly amplified. Suddenly I feel a very strong pain in my cerebellum, an unbearable and unexpected pain, and I am hit by a kind of explosion, a flash followed by millions of lights that invade me and tell me (yes, there is an impersonal voice speaking in English) that I am irradiated. A spectacle of fireworks, incredible bright lights, shades of saturated colors that I had never noticed before in my life, of a vividness that is not of our everyday life. I am invaded by an obsessive and repetitive music, too much, too loud, a rhythmic pulsing, alive, mechanical, that fills my ears and penetrates my pores; later I will identify it with one of the shamans' icaros (enveloping melody), which I hear repeated endlessly and which I still hear the shamans have never actually sung (how do I know it?). The sounds and the four-dimensional geometric figures I see (tetra-

hedrons, rhombuses, polyhedrons with sides each of a different hue) bounce around, building patterns of energy, as if I were inside a kaleidoscope (acid green, shocking pink, silver, copper, colors with shades I have never seen so sharp and different). They are simultaneously architectural and alive, saturated, machines of life, overflowing with energy. Conscious.

I feel assailed by geometry, the world as it usually is seems forgotten. I focus on the lights that are initially white but with a thousand shades and on the very small shapes that – as in Escher's paintings<sup>40</sup> – vibrate and move, invading me, beyond imagination: mechanical structures but endowed with life. Tridimensional, even four-dimensional they appear. The bright colors, alive with a life of their own, seem to radiate outwards.



Maurits Cornelis Escher, *Eight heads*, 1922.

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<sup>40</sup> It is no coincidence that Escher's images are considered to be mandalas that the author created to pass higher-dimensional perceptions, in a process of acquiring multidimensional consciousness.

The space is vast, a kind of “everywhere”; the experience appears out of time and I feel weightless and formless, an ethereal being: I do not seem to have memory or identity. A dream? No, a conscious experience that is unfolding around and within me as I am part of it and participate in it, not being at all separate from it, no longer having an individual identity or body. I hear a voice telling me that I am full of light and that I can remain in this hyper uranium and become a healer. That I am beyond meaning: beyond meaning. I am not completely lost: a part of me remains vigilant. I live in two independent and simultaneous worlds. One part is in the limitless cosmos, disembodied, pure spirit floating in a seemingly serene environment, another part perceives the visions as if I were a spectator maintaining an awareness and a foot in my usual world.

I think that with the pain in my head all my synapses are burnt out. On the one hand there is this intense world, with the repetitive music and the too vivid colors that want to hold me (at least thirty different shades of each color, tones that I had never perceived before and that I cannot put into words), on the other hand I rehears my daily life with clients and students, writing, friends, trips to teach... I regret it already, I want it back. I tell myself that I won't be able to go on seminars any more, that I won't be able to quietly “dance” with the clients who teach me so much, or write... I would like to go back to my life. I am scared. I would give anything to get out of what I increasingly experience as a nightmare. I promise myself that if I can come back I will never drink again. Never again. The voices and lights attract me, the white light is getting brighter and brighter. I look up even higher and see a kind of Mother star, very bright, a sun in a white light that can be seen, high in the infi-

nite iridescent screen before me (the North Star that holds up the celestial curtain for many different People?). I am asked in a kind of language of thought if I feel like exploring this special star. I choose no, I am afraid to go even higher. I am fascinated and at the same time afraid of getting lost. A “rational” dialogue takes place between two parts of me at the same time as the performance goes on: one voice says that I will return psychotic at home and that I will never regain my lucidity, another that I do not have psychotic aspects and that therefore it will be ok or even worse, because if I had them I could cure them; not having them means being out forever and being doomed. I am afraid. My rationality tries to regain control. I know that I have thrown up powerfully, I hear myself moaning and grumbling that are not part of my usual repertoire. I call for help and want to sober up, I can’t restrain my thoughts. I hear Ampelio asking me to “let go”, to hold back only what I need. I try to explain to him that I only see lights and that I am beyond meaning. He yells at me to let go as he absorbs the negative energies hovering in the room and eliminates them, spitting and vomiting. “Let go, let go, let go”.

The facilitator arrives, asks me to speak in a lower voice and not to interject with the other participants, it is forbidden. She explains that I have shouted and asked for help; she asks me if I need help. I answer yes, that I want to become lucid again, that I have opened my eyes and continue to see the lights, that the chants invade my mind, that it is beyond meaning. I am invaded by sounds, geometric shapes and lights. She assures me that I will be able to become sober again. “Even the shamans are convinced of this” she tells me, “the medicine will just have to finish it’s effect”. She massages my shoulders, asks

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me to speak in a low voice, asks me what meaning this experience has for me and I get angry. I consider it a “stupid” question, I am beyond meaning. Everything is enlightened and I do not wish to rationalize anything. It is as if I give a literal meaning to all the colors in which I am immersed, I interpret my state as a “way of no return”, as if I inhabit a space/time which will completely change my life. I can’t think that it is the medicine that gives access to lights and sounds, the latter – repetitive and obsessive, at too high a volume – call out to me and invade me inexorably. I open my eyes and cannot see my companions, only lights and small geometric shapes. I feel increasingly frightened.



Graffiti on a wall of the maloca.

The dialogue between the parts of me continues. One voice says that I am strong and structured, another that I will return “artichoke” to my son (accompanying me to the plane he

advised me not to return as indefinite as an artichoke), a third that by now there is no return, that I will stay in the forest for a long time. The intense lights and sounds capture me. I am completely in my head. I ask my distant lover to help me get back “Help me get back, please!” I ask him in my mind 100 times. I hear Amperio asking me to let go. “Enough, I can’t take it anymore!” I hear myself saying. Instead, I have to make it, to overcome the seduction of this bodiless, place-less, time-less status. A shaman comes in front of me to chant an icaros, I can neither sit up straight and focus on the breath, nor can I lie down in the fetal position and enjoy it. I feel like it’s pulling me on all sides, the sounds echoes in my brain and seem to amplify, higher and higher in pitch, deeper and deeper they enter me, as if inhabiting me, invading me. I wish it would shut up, its singing bothers me – creating a dissonance with the other voices accentuates the process. I will then learn that because I was afraid the image got stuck and does not flow. How can this happen: hallucination if accepted is interactive, it maintains a connection with the self of the person undergoing it and allows one to communicate with one’s visions, to make them flow. I will have to learn. I tell myself that if the Ayahuasca is me and it is organized by my brain, I can control it and thus decrease its intensity; I tell myself both that I am structured enough to become rational again, and that when the “drug” wears off I will naturally become sober again. But I don’t want to wait. The music makes me sick to my stomach, it is obsessive and repetitive, very loud. I try to explain it to the facilitator who tells me that I create it that way and that obsessiveness is probably a psychic theme of mine. I get angry, feeling that she does not understand: I do not identify with her

explanation. I act perfectly conceited (my defense?), I feel superior and at the same time in the hyper uranium. I review my daily life in detail, I regret it, I miss small everyday things while feeling like a ball inside a pinball machine.

I am exhausted. I decide to leave the hut, I cannot stand up. F., a kind, silent, respectful, calm volunteer, helps me. I lean on him and he accentuates his breathing, synchronizes it with mine and concentrates on it. I ask him to walk, to go towards the areas lit by the almost full moon. I want to bathe in the moon, friend of women, responsible for the different phases, expert in the cycles of life. I begin to distinguish the trees, I see the red energy around the trunks and around each leaf. The frogs croak loudly. Yay, I distinguish them again, I welcome them with enthusiasm, I feel them as friends. I see a halo of light that signals to me which animal is expressing itself, in a very close dialogue between them, inside and outside the pond. I identify the light beams of floating energies. The sounds are still intolerably loud, voices of men and women speaking an unknown language (Shipibo?), chasing each other in repetitive dirges that touch low, intense and very high vibrations. I ask to walk. F. has to support me because I can't find my balance. We sit on a bench by the pond, lit by the moon. I ask him about his experiences with the medicine, he calmly tells me about them: the last time he came to terms with his character, with the fact that he appears superior, that he feels external to what is happening, that he defends himself too much from others and from events (does he also or does he not talk about me?). He tells me how this experience has been painful and seeing himself without false illusions a sting: he has analyzed what is uncontrollable, the facets of his character and his conception of



the world, his doubts and certainties. In a somewhat haughty manner I tell him about myself, in a respectful and calm manner he talks about himself. We try to return towards the common space but, as we approach, the confusion in my head and heart seems to intensify and the sounds in my head resume. We are forced to move away again. He puts a blanket over my shoulders because despite the heavy jumper I am cold. I rinse my mouth with water (I don't swallow it because the water might trigger the visions again), I continue to hear the amplified sounds but I calm down slowly, held by the hand like a child. F.'s tranquility makes me calm. He remains focused on our synchronized breathing, the conversation becomes pleasant.

I seem to see people "naked". Greg, one of the participants, arrives, I see him as a child of about five and a half, abandoned, who cannot become an adult because he does not accept his abandoned side (I later learn from him that when he was five his father left, his mother and grandfather put him and his two sisters in foster care for about eight years). I suggest to F. to help him instead of me, but F. remains calm and confident while I, with my psychological grids, point out people's weaknesses: those who work with energy have more respect for others and perhaps for the whole world and allow them to have their experience, without having to intervene. Greg almost falls to the ground and F. rushes to support him. Was I right? Maybe so, but too much in advance, I would like to learn to observe the process, welcoming it, until proven otherwise.

We stayed outside for about two hours. The visions then lasted from about 9.30 p.m. to midnight and beyond. I had no conception of time, I was in my mind and in the hyper uranium. I did

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not believe that the brain could see so intensely and step outside the usual rationality, I did not know what it meant to become one with the universe.



Embroidered sarong.

The Maestros, as we call them, don't stop singing, it seems they are about to stop and the wave starts again and the energy rises again. Until 2.45, as long as there are emotions to let out. Finally there is silence, no light. The ritual is declared officially over and fruit awaits us in the hut where we usually eat. We find ourselves with the desire to tell and be told by others: no serious talk, though, the fear is that words will detract from the experience. I too stop the acoustic delirium and find myself calm, but I do not catch up with the others. I think that if I had managed to lose my head completely I would have had more fun and would have been able to enjoy the spectacle (it is no coincidence that decapitation is a symbol of enlightenment, of

the passage from the 4th to the 5th chakra<sup>41</sup>, of the access to reality with a new head). I will sleep in the maloca with other participants who cannot make it back to their huts until morning.

What do I think I learnt tonight? I had an embodied experience, with my mind and body, also with my heart. I was not able to switch off the mind: the thoughts and the fears that come from it are the real enemies. I experienced that there is a huge potential for knowledge beyond the normal boundaries we are used to. The experience was simultaneously wonderful and terrifying. I think I have begun to come to terms with acceptance, with saying yes to life, with trying to accept that the life I lead is my own and that it has an important meaning: what is happening to me affects me and I am also happy with it. I realized that when travelling with the spirit it is necessary to pay attention to every detail: to observe, listen, smell and record one's sensations, to strive to remember as much as possible, letting the senses absorb everything there is (the more details one observes the greater the concentration). That every little

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<sup>41</sup> In nature, there is an ocean of energy in which all living beings are immersed. There are 7 large windows in the body to absorb and discharge the energy of the universe. The chakras (Sanskrit word meaning whirlpools) are faculties of consciousness located on the spinal column. They are whirlpools, energy intakes, vortices in the energy field that rotate in both directions towards and away from the body. Although there are millions of windows, seven are the main frequencies on which we emit and receive energy, seven are conventionally the energy stations in our body representing the colors of the rainbow: red (I: the inner vitality), orange (II: the sexual organs), yellow (III: above the navel), green (IV: at heart height), blue (V: the throat), indigo (VI: nasal septum height), violet (VII: at the base of the skull). The high chakras refer to the subtle bodies and allow one to discover one's individuality and access the non-biological mind.

thing is of vital importance, that I could experience every single moment even more intensely. I realized that I have to close my eyes and find my center. Fear is the greatest obstacle in every aspect of life and is common to all humans, it is part of human nature. I have a new personal goal: to master fear without letting it mislead me (when one faces fear from the center of one's being, a force is released that transforms it into other feelings); to connect to my inner world and learn that I have power over myself. To let it flow, as Ampelio suggested to me.

#### THE AYAHUASCA STORY

A man had eaten a single plant all his life, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. When he became old, he asked his sons not to bury him and mourn him when he died; he asked them to tie him to the tree he had eaten from. When he died, his sons did exactly what he had asked and left him tied to the tree. When they returned six months later they found that sprouts had sprouted from his fingers and hair that went to the earth and twisted around the trunk. When they returned six months later they found that a vine had sprung from his body and wrapped itself around the trunk of the tree. This is how Ayahuasca was born, the plant that has a spirit, the substance that inspires the soul and that we find described in cave paintings from 500AC through depictions that are very similar to those of today's Ayahuaskeros. However, the A. needed to unite with a companion in order to take effect, so it was the Chakruna leaves that have so much sap and show it on each of the leaves, like the knots of a net.

When preparing the drink, the union of the two plants (the choice, the union of the plants, the doses and the ingredients to be added are like a cocktail that requires great professionalism), the two substances are simmered in a pot with about 50 liters of water until they become five. They are then reconstituted until they obtain about

one liter of medicine, which can be stronger or weaker, depending on the characteristics and proportions. At the Temple we had the pot boiling all day long, spewing out fragrant smoke, with one or two people constantly tending the fire, steeping the vine and mixing the substance.



The two plants boil together for hours.

### *The second ceremony*

I am sitting by the brown, sandy pond, it is very early in the morning, Olivia, one of the women shamans, sits next to me. She declares herself very MAREAD (drunc) after yesterday's ceremony, she is stunned, everything is spinning in her head like after a heavy hangover. Her head has not yet returned to rest on her neck. She is very well-groomed, wearing a frilly jacket in different colors (if designer Paul Smith saw it, he

would adopt it as the uniform of his next collection), a psychedelic-colored rag that she embroidered as a skirt – which reproduces the grids that shamans see projected on each other's bodies during ceremonies and which are used to make a diagnosis – many colored plastic and bone necklaces around her neck. She speaks a stunted Castilian and tries to explain to me that in the clearing where we are, she has sometimes encountered a water snake, a very large one, that goes in and out of the pond. She is disgusted by snakes, me too.

The thought makes me smile, the symbol of Ayahuasca is an anaconda and the snake for almost all shamans is the healing animal. She asks me if I am married and tells me that her husband died nine years earlier and that she used to take many flower baths to console herself: once the plants started talking to her and guiding her, pushing her through the process of becoming a shaman.

I think, like her, that the first rays of the sun are nourishment for all living beings and that the sun's rays, mixed with air, are the life-breath of Pachamama (mother earth, a spiritual entity that encompasses everything and considers individuals part of a cosmic gear, of a universal plan that includes everything created) that we all breathe. It is no coincidence that birds sing to life. Even this morning as I listen to it, as our words mingle, coming from different cultures and languages. I am distracted, invaded by a fixed thought, wondering whether or not to participate in the evening ceremony, tonight is the second of the seven rites. My brain ruminates incessantly, whoever is interacting with me. In the end I decide that I will participate by just having a drop of the medicine placed on my forehead and one on my tongue, I will use a homeopathic dose.

It is the facilitator who reformulates the groups each time, who gives the instructions, who guides, a Lady from the West, who suggests times and interventions as Mongolian shamans would never allow. Here the setting and the rules are given by her, who acts as hostess. The shamans are just the conduit between earth and heaven and that is why they let themselves be used. They also drink, after us, very small doses that allow them to see the other participants as if through a scanner, a grid of energies that reproduces those same patterns they put on the fabrics they cross-stitch. A woman shaman will anoint my forehead with some medicine and I will be able to return to my seat with the ability to observe and not lose control. What I wish to ask for today is surrender, letting go, the ability to be guided by Ayahuasca.

The lights go out, we remain silent. Someone is already vomiting, we hear spitting, mouth rinsing, sighing, moaning, I see many with their backs straight, focused on themselves. Even the shamans will remain silent for a time, waiting for the medicine to take effect. They will then sing an initial cleansing song and then continue bouncing the notes to each other in a circle, in the middle of the room, before making their rounds to all of us. Their singing dialogue in which I will find out that they exchange information about what is happening to us, the participants, has not yet begun. They then sing to individuals, spraying PUSSANGA on our heads and bodies: they put it in their mouths and spray it on the face and head of the person in front of them, sometimes they pour it on their hands and arms, on the other person's face.

I find myself reflecting that I don't want control to be my problem. It is as if A. is showing me all the areas of my life in

which I have absolutely no control and I am told (again I hear a voice clearly, this time speaking Italian, following my thoughts) that it is OK, that control is an invention of the Western culture, an excuse behind which to hide, an explanatory principle, like gravity. What is the problem then? – I manage to ask myself actively for the first time. It was the fear that a final stage in my personal journey had been accomplished, a kind of door, through which there was no turning back, a prejudice of mine, which led me to entrench myself defensively.

In the meantime the mosquito nets have become like screens, the light outside creates images like those of the kaleidoscope, sepia, brown, black. If I look up I see the starry sky as if the roof were not there. I see images projected on a screen in the distance, like a slide show opening and closing on a black screen. It looks like a theatre set, seen in the distance.

Two men and three women pass in front of me, they kneel down to face us who are on the ground. With the last shaman, I feel tired and curl up at her feet like a puppy. I am reminded that whenever I was sad my mother used to give me the *maccino*, a long rhythmical cradle formed by made-up words that constituted a moment of intimacy and consolation. The icaros are made-up words for me and the shaman continues to sing while, somewhat awkwardly, she strokes my head. I feel good, I am being cradled tonight, so many years after my mother's death. How long has it been before I can find the consolation I need! I think my intention for this ceremony – surrender – has been achieved. I surrendered to the chanting and the passing of the shamans, even to tiredness. While chanting, the shaman spits out or pretends to spit out the nega-



tive energies she takes from my body and frees me from them (the next day the floor of the hut will be clean). In some cases shamans suck and bite to extract foreign bodies that they feel are negative, in those cases they leave the teeth marks on the skin even for a few days. The purpose is to cleanse, to purify, through food, vomit and even sweat, that we expelled in the morning, covered in filthy rags and with a burning brazier under our legs.

Ampelio tells me that on his journey he was the guardian of the anaconda's children. There were so many of them and they ran all over the place, he had to feed them, keep them at bay, control them and look after them. They ate the waste that came out of people during the ceremony, the sort of dirty rags that lay on the floor, which the cubs considered delicacies, and by eating them they cleaned the environment. As they ate they grew bigger and bigger. He was worried, he did not want them to grow too big or die of hunger. As he tells me this, I imagine that he represented in the vision one of his usual preoccupations, that of caring for others and giving them the right amount of information/energy, so that their difficulties and sorrows become opportunities for growth and become generative.

I think that in some strange way everyone enters into paths which are idiosyncratic to who they are and what they face in their usual life scripts in their homes. Some people remain within their everyday domain, dealing with problems with their parents, with their extended family, with aspects of their character; others deal with issues that interest them, like Stefano who manages to gain important insights into tarot cards and their interpretation, while remaining "grounded" without access to visions. There are then people who "set off" on

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totally abductive, irrational journeys and wander through other, differently enlightened worlds.



Ayahuma tree.

### *Medical counselling*

Today is “medical” counselling day. We sit one at a time in front of all seven shamans seated around a table and although they appear distracted, they respond to our descriptions and

questions (translated by the facilitator) by naming discoveries and possible paths, absenting each other or adding a comment to their colleague's words. One speaks, the other expands, some nod in satisfaction, someone says the name of a preparation, the others get excited and seem to amplify the proposal, perhaps doubling down a dosage. A real consultation, without gowns and without instruments of power. They rely on what they have seen during the ritual, when the psychotropic substance allows them to see us as if we were glass.

The morphology of the cure is almost identical throughout South America (Eliade 1974): tobacco suffumigation, chanting, massage of the sick part, purpose-built medicines, identification of the cause of the illness with the help of Ayahuasca or auxiliary spirits, the extraction of the pathogenic element by sucking (CHUPAR).

Doing medicine, however, does not seem to mean only curing evil but also helping people to orientate themselves as to what is best for them, pointing them in a new direction, a new path to take.

Someone asks to proceed on previous work, on their back for example, and a medicine is proposed made from a tall, straight plant that has very strong roots, as a “powerful” back should become. Someone has a “serious” illness and has chosen not to go down the path that the West proposes – chemo and toxic preparations that stop the natural flow of energy. Some ask for a purification of the body, or an opening of the heart and the ability to connect with others. Others ask for help to see more clearly, or to be freed through chupar from cysts and other

physical problems of various kinds. We all ask what they perceive about us when they work.

When my turn comes, I explain that on the first day I had a very powerful vision: it was so strong that I did not want the icaros because they increased my confusion. I ask them if I should continue drinking and they say yes, but in minimal doses (“those who have less energy must drink less and those who have more must drink more” they say. I had thought the contrary!). They suggest a massage at seven o’clock in the morning both for the backache I feel in Italy and for the pain in my cerebellum that I felt during the first ceremony and today when I bathed with flowers (Ampelio and Stefano claim that my VI chakra is opening, the third eye, vision, intuition, Atlas, archive of memories since the age of reptiles). They prescribe honey and ginger to warm the muscles of my back; they also give me *tantirao* and *agua de azhar*, which according to Stefano is a mild sedative, because they distrust intellectuals with high energy. They suggest with some insistence that I buy *pussanga de miri*, a rue cologne that they enhance with healing herbs. They tell me it is made from the plants of love and activates the positive in life; it attracts the events one desires. They see some negative energy in me, but nothing bad: “You are a healer, you take negative energies upon you. We will help you, don’t worry, the medicines and icaros connect the body with heaven”. I leave the consultation feeling a little discouraged: what do they know about our culture? What do they know about us? I would have liked them to confirm my total sanity, I could have positioned myself distant from others, a little elusive, untouchable/ separated, distant and special, my usual role. No. I am like the others. I have needs, sorrows, loneliness

and fears like everyone else. Umberta, get off your pedestal, mix with others, get your hands dirty with life. Shamans are incredibly competent, no excuses.

When I go to take my medicine, I immediately feel like I've taken a powerful sedative. Aquarium effect, a slab, a screen between me and the whole world around me; immediate exhaustion, dizziness. It bothers me to be kept low on energy, it is true that I am a bit hyperactive and very cerebral, I am used to it. Trust them or go on the attack and challenge them? To be a know-it-all or to drink? It's my choice. Trusting means using these days to do what they tell me I am, not giving them credit is my usual script that keeps me away from others. I will try to trust, it is worth it to try to get off known and already usual path, tried too many times. I have come this far, I feel like doing things differently. Over the next few days I will appreciate the fact that the energy is channeled towards my body and that my head has stopped being a kind of analytical and critical laser, I will feel more centered, as if the tantirao gives me calm and makes me feel at peace with the world and with myself, absolutely present.

They also prescribed me *miel and kion* (honey with ginger) which I find even too tasty, difficult to swallow. It is supposed to be good for my back, warm my muscles and bones. In the meantime, some people do a camphor massage under the hands of Maestra Manuela who sinks her fingers into the flesh and seems to touch nerve points of great tension in a very powerful therapeutic act. She is almost blind, she does not know how old she is, and she is joined in her power as curandera by her father, a powerful shaman now dead. Manuela, with her flat face, her pipe, her beaded belt on the traditional rug; Manuela

who has taken the *ayahuma tree* as her reference plant. When she massages me, Manuela treats me with iron hands. I tell her the places in Rome where I get back pain “here, here, here” (“*qui, qui, qui*”). This makes her laugh and from now on she will also call me “here here” during ceremonies, to identify me on dark, moonless nights, whenever we meet. I am in a bikini, lying on a filthy mattress on which everyone has been lying. She thrusts her hands into my flesh, but while I hear many screaming, it only hurts on my very low back, almost on my left leg. When I scream she laughs blissfully, she finds it very funny. When she massages my neck I almost feel pleasure. I think that every time it will be different and I look forward to the next massages which always allows me to get up full of energy, feeling really good. “Umberta trust yourself and the healers!” That’s what I’m here for, to learn to trust myself, the Ayahuasca, the intuition of the healers, the remedies they give me. As the intention of the ritual I will ask for trust tonight.

#### MEDICINE

Where do they get their medicine? In the forest, which contains more than 200 healing plants. Each plant has its own built-in spirit that shapes the principle that defines it. Every tree has a mother and a soul. Most medicines have objective indications, the same for everyone, but all of them work as a result of a connection with the cosmic spirit in the individual patient: it is as if the choice of plant not only cures the symptoms but also implies, as an added value, the cause of the specific ailment, the deepening of the personal purpose in the particular moment of the life course and the energetic connection to the nature of the sick person. We could say that each remedy cures the symptoms precisely because the spirit returns to work through the plant. They know almost all of them, each shaman has

embarked on a diet of one or more plants, withdrawn into the forest eating the minimum, without salt and sugar, without sex and social relationships, eating and smoking parts of the same plant, for months, under the guidance of an experienced shaman.

One day they take us with them to “meet” the Master plants, to introduce us to them.

The first one we meet is the *Anaconda tree*, a straight trunk with the patterns of a snake’s mantle. It allows one to achieve vision and gain insight. You have to carve the bark to get out a white juice that is mixed with tobacco and smoked or added to food. The second plant is *Ayahuma*, which enables one to see and become a shaman. You diet it about three months and introduce it into the body in three ways: by cooking its bark, smoking it or putting tobacco in the trunk and waiting for the worms to form and then ingesting what remains. Red and black worms will be formed and discarded, the white ones are eaten alive to allow vision. Another interesting plant is a species of white liana parasitic on other trees, the *Abutas*, which is very powerful against cancer. *Horse-grass* is an intricate bush of green threads with which to make an infusion that is used to make hair grow; another is an incense for ceremonies, a silvery white trunk that burns easily. They show us the *Datura*<sup>42</sup>, a climbing bush with white campanulas, hallucinogenic, whose juice extracted from the stems is administered in Ecuador in initiation rites (Harner 1973) and which “the bad guys” in Peru use to cut Ayahuasca, using it in black magic

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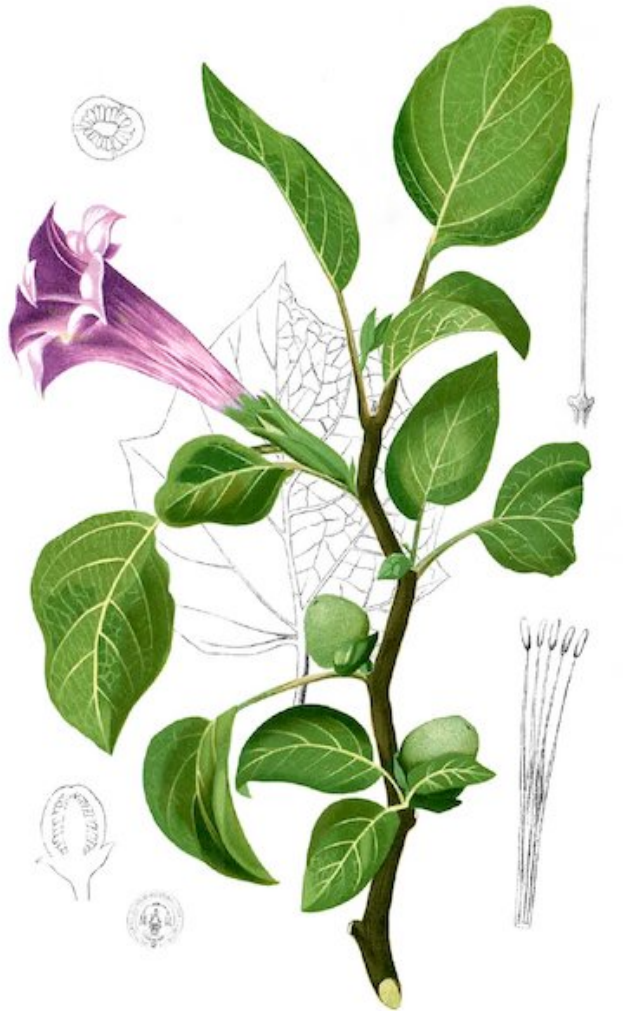
<sup>42</sup> This is what Baba Caesar – a rather sloppy Baba, moreover – says in Folco Terzani’s book (2011) about datura (*toé*): “Datura is for connoisseurs. Those who take it to dope themselves are raped by the negative effects. But at least it is not addictive. If you do it once you are reluctant to do it again, because it puts you in a dimension so out of the ordinary. It takes you into a dimension of spiritualism. The decoction smelled and tasted like cockroaches. It confused me. I could hear all these voices without knowing where they were coming from. Because in datura you have perception of the rotating movement of the earth” (p. 85).

(Peter Gorman says it is called “the wind that blows you to the ends of the earth”).

They show us the love plant, orange with deep purple seeds; another one is a kind of orchid clinging to an “innocent” tree, which they call the bonding plant: it helps to stay united but eventually kills the plant it rests on. We encounter a very large, wrinkled leaf with a kind of female sex symbolized at the beginning of the stem that serves, according to them, to protect children from the sexual potency of the mother in particular and the parents more generally. The Shipibo Indians seem to have a problem with sexuality, every opportunity is good to push it aside, to forbid it rather than make it sacred. Perhaps because they are part of a matrilineal society and men are afraid of the power of women? Strange, because the majority of shamans in the world believe that in women is contained the destiny of humanity, that it is the woman who is the molder of all humans, who embodies love and is the messenger of Pachamama, the divine mother who loves all things. Strange because an almost universal prophecy claims that in this cosmic cycle only the awakening of the feminine will allow our planet to be saved.

Important how they honor each plant and ask permission to explain it. Each one has its own intelligence, intuition and emotions and is endowed with a sensitive spirit interconnected with the whole: plant and forest spirits have a life essence that must be deeply respected. I have seen other shamans in other parts of the world honor in the same way the animal they would later kill, burying the entrails in a hole in the ground, sorry that the animal would no longer be able to run through the meadows and happy at the same time with the food it would provide for the whole community. The Shipibo offer tobacco to the plant every time they scratch its bark, bury it at its feet, place it between the lower leaves. In exactly the same way, Mongolian shamans sprinkle a little vodka in the four directions before drinking it and leave a prayer or a small gift at the place where they have collected a stone, seed or plant.





DATURA FASTUOSA.—LINN.—De Blanco.  
VAR.—RUBRA.—Des.  
- SUBVAR.—FLORIE PLENO.—Des.

L. C. Trichsp. del. 1844

### *The third ceremony*

It is 4.30 p.m., at 9 p.m. I will drink for my second time. I want to trust the plant, the shamans and the very restrained and protected place we are in. I remember the stories of my friend Yuliana, her trust in the substance and in the shamans: “The first ceremony in which I drank I remember well, the terrible taste of the medicine that tasted like whipped toad. I remember my intentions well: I rinsed my mouth and sat down to wait. The torches went out, even the ones outside, I checked my equipment and tested myself to see how I was: “so far so good” I told myself, waiting as I sat, listening to the song of the crickets. Here I am. I keep testing myself to feel how I am, I feel a burning in my esophagus, I feel fine, I have various thoughts that I check. I tell myself everything is normal. After an hour or so I think I have to go and get an addition of medicine. At that moment the shamans' icaros begin and I feel that my perception is completely altered. I vomit, I lie down, I feel catapulted into a three-dimensional universe with geometric figures forming a circle of strong colors. I realize I am out of body, like an observer looking at a set design I have never seen before. I am completely amazed and attracted by the colored circle. I realize that my body is not well. I know that I have to take care of it. I look at my lying body and see a hole in my stomach. I hear a voice saying that before enjoying the ceremony I must take care of the body. I return to my body and feel a terrible pain in my stomach, I feel a blockage in the mouth of my stomach, in my throat. I want to vomit but I can't, I want to drink but have been advised against it. I cannot speak, I am angry with myself because I feel powerless against this pain. I decide to give up and I know that I cannot do anything. I

have to trust, I have to trust the shamans and I have to trust the medicine. I have to trust me. “I just trust”. I mentally ask for the shamans to come to my aid: if telepathy works they will come. They really do come, as if I had called them. I mentally ask them to touch my belly and they do. I think that we are telepathically connected and that telepathically they listen to me. I tell them to touch my left shoulder and one of them does it, to move to the right and this also happens. I turn away from the pain, I am amazed as if I were participating in a funny game. Then the women shaman says to me, ‘enough, enough’ as if asking me to stop playing. At that point I no longer have any doubts and I trust them completely: they read me inside. I have all the shamans around me and instead of seeing one of them I see Master Yoda, the one from Star Wars, and the others I see as extraterrestrials. Still I am calm and I rely on them. They suck from my belly. They smoke their tobacco and suck the evil out of my belly. I see and feel the evil coming out of me. The shaman vomits instead of me and every time she does it I feel better. I thank her. I feel that she has taken away an old evil, from past lives and that it is not physical but on so many levels, an ancient pain. I feel better and better until I feel that there has been a great healing, a deep cleansing. I am happy but tired, five hours have passed, I had completely lost track of time. I sink into a sleep full of images... In the morning the fear of doing Ayahuasca again surfaces but I work with the pendulum, I explain it to the shaman and they take away all fear. At nine in the evening we repeat”.

I think back to Yuliana’s stories, I also remember her second evening, when “my whole body vibrates like music. I feel in the grace of God. I felt the emotions of others, I entered the

body of my two friends. I felt their emotions, they were not mine, until I felt absolute peace, infinite love and so much happiness. When the shamans start singing I feel an electric shock. A current that from the column reaches my feet and makes me get stuck, frozen. An explosion after which the journey begins. This time it is not me giving thanks but I feel the thanks and gratitude coming in waves. I think of all the good things I have done in life and I feel and see the perfection of my life. I feel a deep love for myself... the experience is very long and at two o'clock in the morning I feel I am still in the middle of the process"<sup>43</sup>.

And finally I think of his third experience what we amusedly call "the cosmic orgasm": "I take very little medicine this time, less than the usual half, because yesterday I had felt drunk, the impact had been too strong. After an hour the medicine starts to be effective, without me vomiting or feeling sick. Everything is going great and I feel happy and grateful. I feel a little animal walking inside me, moving towards the sacred. I visualize it as a mouse walking inside me. I am very intrigued by this strange feeling. I feel it rise slowly, tickling me along my spine; it positions itself between my neck and the nape of my neck – that space called the mouth of god. It explodes and I explode in this explosion and am completely smoldering in the universe. I hear

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<sup>43</sup> My friend Yuliana Arbelaez tells me that once during a ceremony she felt like she was sitting in the cinema and saw all the actions and all the thoughts she had carried out of integrity, up to the one in the morning at the temple when she had thought of taking possession of a mango. "The Medicine showed me how these episodes had taken away my energy and how they had been useless. Like a very enlightening lesson where I can see every moment when I acted out of integrity, what I could have learned and what opportunities I missed".

seven explosions and I can only say “oh my God, oh my God, oh my God”. I feel completely dissolved in the whole universe. Bliss and joy I have never felt before. I see at the end an enormous circle of light and it is like bricks of very intense light. An immense wheel with an aleph in the center and symbols that I don’t know and have never seen before. My heart is beating really fast and I tell myself to take it easy and let go. Oh God, oh God, oh God. A circle of light that feels like fire. I am in total bliss, in joy and happiness, in pleasure. I am in every part of the universe, I would like to retain this feeling and well-being for eternity. Fortunately it also lasts the next day”.

I think of my friend’s experiences, in the maloca F. approaches me and wishes me a good night. I feel like crying, but I straighten my spine and the fear disappears. I take a quarter of the dose, I can hardly get the taste out of my mouth, it is worse than I remember. I remain in the dark watching the others and repeat my intention to trust myself, the medicine, the shamans, the group and my Italian friends. The first thing that surprises me is a thought that is far from my usual way of thinking, the suggestion to trust a person I do not esteem, complete in its identification with name and surname. The thought surprises me and I let it flow.

The pain in my body begins, the trembling in my legs and muscles, the need to swing. The infinite cold. The feeling of being inside the earth, in the winter of the world begins. Of being underground and seeing the world from underneath. At times I also have the sensation of being in a cramped place, in a hole, so much so that I struggle to breathe, almost as if my lungs were blocked and I could die there. I fear for my integrity. Part of me keeps telling myself that I must not be

afraid, that I must trust and learn to let it flow. The smells are bitter, acrid, pungent, however intense. The colors are very charged, I see the shapes and textures of the leaves, the sap of the trees. Crazy colors, this time against a black background, interconnected. Not separate, geometric shapes like the first time, but the fabric of nature, imbued with patterns. First on blues, greens, turquoises, blues and yellows, then my favorite colors, the ones I call “warm”, oranges, reds, browns, purples in all possible shades. I have the feeling that I am exactly where Ayahuasca has taken me, a force greater than myself commanding me. I see fluorescent, colorful worms and snakes and I tell myself I can let go and the image changes. The coldness of the earth continues to spread over my body, I tremble. At one point I am shown a muddy, wet lane that enters the forest and goes downhill and I am asked if I want to take the path to the cure. Stupidly I say no and slowly the colors fade.

The tingling in my legs and arms, a kind of tickling, forces me to change position, I think it is the trance state induced by the substance. I return to the here and now and feel reassured, I have the feeling that I had visions of a more superficial nature – shapes, thoughts, associations – that I could control better. I look at what is happening around me. The shamans are working on the other side of the hut and I relax, lie down. I enter and exit the altered state of consciousness. I think I could have asked what the meaning of what I was seeing was, but even tonight I have the feeling that I am beyond meaning. Several times I see Ampelio reach the door on all fours, vomit up (metaphorically) all the blocks of negative energy with which he has loaded himself and return to the cot, light as a dragonfly, rejuvenated. I hear a fellow adventurer crying and

screaming and I want to go to him and hug him. It is forbidden. I send positive vibrations and thoughts to both of them. When the shamans come to me, first Diogenes then Master Elijah, staying so long, I pull myself up, I have the fantasy of being Ayahuasca myself. I respond to their humming by making my own, seeking my own chant and center. I sway as if I were a snake, trying to tune into their dance, feeling the need to mirror them, all beyond my will. I feel strong, but now that I reread I realize I still seek control. The songs become primitive sounds: if there was a music at the constitution of the world and the first ears that intercepted it, it was probably similar to the one I share in this maloca at this moment.

#### MUSIC

The acoustic component is very important, so much so that some anthropologists claim there are musical effects on consciousness due to high-pitched sounds produced by both icaros and whistling bottles that were found from 500 BC until the Spanish conquest. Men and women singing acoustically, conversing, out of tune, overlapping in high-pitched, deep tones that derive from their being in a trance, deeply connected with the Universe.

Think of the music at 342 Hertz or the music that heals us by bringing us into Theta.

Every so often it seems as if the singing is going to die, but one voice among many begins again, like crickets in a meadow where sometimes, in the silence, one begins to sing and ten, a hundred others join in, intermittently. When I open my eyes I see the grids on Diogenes' face, like scanner. In his icaros he

repeats incomprehensible words and some that I understand – “disease”, “hospital”, “ayahuasca”, “medicine”, “shaman”, which means being. I decide to trust, they are certainly not talking about my future illness but about the fact that medicine is the cure. I tell myself that I must trust and I actively choose to do so, letting go of all thoughts of illness. The mirroring becomes more refined with each passing shaman. By the fourth, however, I am totally present to myself and begin to be exhausted by both the chanting and the proxemics dialogue. When Manuela passes, I try to make her smile and relieve her tangible fatigue. She is in a trance and remains fixed in front of me, singing and spraying the pussanga. At this point I am as sticky as a spit candy. The two men and the two women have indeed flooded me with cologne: hands, face, hair, neck, the outfit, the blanket that warms me. They pour it, they spit it, they spread it. I become intoxicated by the alcohol it contains and so do they. I imagine them drinking it at times to increase their energy, as well as using it to “see”.

I hope the ceremony will end but each time the women rekindle the embers that are dying out, the chants start again as a wall of sound that goes higher and higher on the frequencies. Only when they are finished does Master Elias suck in a fellow traveler who has something bad in his stomach.

My premise continues to be “cocky”: it is easier for me to say that everything is fine, that I don’t need anything. I force myself to have more curiosity than need. I don’t see our maestros as saviors but as people struggling to turn their lives around and being exploited here, at least a little. I feel like giving them some of my energy, I don’t feel that I also have pressing and unheard needs, primarily from me. I am touching



my usual attitude of defending myself. Just choose intimate relationships as the intention and interesting and problematic insights would come out! I think that in my role as a curator, I look for each person's strengths. Does every person only have blockages and negativity? Is there always drama and problems? I start thinking about the people close to me and emphasize their positive aspects. When Diogenes leaves, he thanks me: "*Ira-q*". Will he have perceived the trust I have been able to give them and that I am beginning to feel towards myself?

The head is back, the trust is there even if it is still under construction. The shamans continue to chant. I am exhausted. I realized tonight that my erroneous premise is that I can only see shapes and colors (beyond meaning) and that the path to aspire to is very different from the one I already practice. Instead, I can refine my usual healing practice; I am considering their healing path, I compare it with the Western one and I see great similarities, cultural differences aside.

My curiosity increases: there are a million topics to ask Ayahuasca.

#### ANIMA

There are everyday aspects that can be addressed on a corporeal, social, psychological and spiritual level. These are different and not always communicating domains. The corporeal and the psychological are peculiar to our West. The concept of the unconscious has somehow diverted Westerners from the path to spirituality. Spiritual experiences for Freud are regressive experiences. Personally I do not consider them as such, on the contrary, I consider them an advancement in one's life path. They are about accessing pre-personal and trans-personal states of consciousness, about rediscovering the

cosmic understanding that we Westerners have lost and rejected. Stefano argues that the human is a creator being that emits/creates energy. We are antennae. The being is the traveler, the body is our companion, a precious collaborator, speaking through the emotions. The relationship between body and soul is like the relationship between the horse (the body) and the rider (the soul), with the saddle acting as the ego, the stupid little brother of the being. What is the soul? It is me when I am present. The soul commands and the nervous system is the antenna that connects the soul with the body? The soul is however a dimension not identified with the body. Being in the ego is different from being in being.

### *The fourth ceremony*

I arrive at 8 p.m. I have a certain curiosity about what the evening will be like. I am not quite sure what to ask for in my intention: I have two hot topics, one is unconditional love which I decode as connection with the world; the other is how best to have this experience, involving myself and letting myself go more and more. I choose the first.

I drink a third of the glass. I am number “18” to drink ( $1+8 = 9$ , my favorite number<sup>44</sup>), smiling I reassure myself. At first nothing happens. I see two rectangular panels invading my field of vision, black dotted with bright yellow-gold spheres.

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<sup>44</sup> I will be told by Stefano that the number 9 contains the idea of risk and is associated with crossing the desert: it is the number of the shaman. As an Arabic number it is the beginning of a growth spiral, it is the card of the threshold and requires that we shed our usual habits. It represents change, invention and growth through inspiration. Nine is humanitarian and was deemed of particular importance by the fact that it takes nine calendar months to gestate a child. Finally, nine represents numerical perfection.

Nothing else. I think my neighbor in her place next to me has “stolen” my ability to see. I gladly surrender to her who cares so much about this experience. I start thinking about the connections between me and others, about the relationships of things with each other. I hear my friend the frog croaking, the crickets, the moonlight and I see huge stars. I seem to “feel” the connections more than understanding them, from the visual I have moved to the tactile. I am lying in the fetal position, curled up in the blanket when a slap given to me by a hundred hands hits me: lights and colors, fractals, snakes, worms, protuberances invading the visual field and myself. Twisted roots of centuries-old trees, pieces of wood, blades of grass, in a muddy habitat that shimmers with different brilliance: many browns and terrifying colors. I am without ego in a non-space and non-time, as if I were an earthworm or an even smaller animal (which, however, sees both the particular and the whole), moving in a habitat that is alive and itself constantly changing. I have no identity, perhaps I am not even an animal but a microscopic core of awareness immersed in the experience. There remains a rational self that allows me to reassure myself and tell myself that I can let go of what I do not like and do not need. When the colored worms become too gross I can let them go and they are replaced by other protuberances, colors, tentacles, lights. In a square centimeter there will be 100 different colors and I can distinguish them all. At the same time, my body feels all the cold in the world, it shivers, it cannot stand still. A sense of extreme fatigue makes me doubt whether I will make it through the experience. I manage to calm myself down, but I am very, very cold. However, I am not afraid and I can let go. I hear the voices of the shamans who are chanting in the

dark, still in a group, in the center of the maloca. It is clear to me that they are exchanging information about what is happening to the group and I can clearly hear them saying in their language that the Italian, the “*doctorita*, sees”. It seems to me that they are singing for me, to increase my vision.

I am cold as if I was really under the earth, I am not afraid, I keep seeing the tentacles that are everywhere around me, I keep feeling fatigued. Difficulty breathing, weight, pain. I try to tell myself that the experience needs not to be so tiring, that I can relax and enjoy it. I do not seem to find the way for this to happen. I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders. Could it be that this is my everyday state, to feel the weight of the world on my shoulders? That this is my attitude towards life? I am not sure, but perhaps it is as I am feeling now.

Now it is time for the shamans to come to sing to each of us. This, which the others strongly desire, becomes an even greater effort for me, because I turn into a snake (a part of me still knows that this is only imagination) and I feel I MUST dance to the sound of their icaros. Master Elijah approaches me and says something like “*Luz, luz, no se preocupe*”. This means that both he and the others sense my state of mind. I know that it is a chemical response of my brain to the substance and I know that I am responding to my synapses. What I see are projections of my brain and of my thoughts and feelings. The images are uniquely mine, they are an emergence of my psyche<sup>45</sup>. I can let them go but I cannot do what I want with

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<sup>45</sup> The word psyche from psycho, I breathe was at first used as “life”, “vital substance” an interval between birth and death, identifying the property of breathing; it then came to mean “soul”, not life but that which exists after life has ceased, the spirit that goes to Hades, a concept – according to J.

them, at least not as long as I have this reverential respect for them. It is a path I have already travelled these days, since four ceremonies have already gone like this. How do I work with it? What does it all mean to me, besides the fatigue that is perhaps part of my life? Master Elijah sings, tries to calm me down, sprays pussanga on me, opens the seventh chakra – 10 cm above my head – the one that connects to the sky and allows me to see. He blows on it, seems to close the fountain with his hands, purifies hands and face, blows on hair. I have to move to the rhythm of his icaros, I can't help it. As soon as he finishes, I get into the fetal position and try to let go, to relax. The cold continues relentlessly, my muscles tremble, I feel tired. I sigh, but while the others frequently vomit or spit in the pit, I seem to be concentrated on the spot and don't move.

I connect with F., I often turn to his side (he is sitting behind me) and each time he lights the embers of his mapacho. On purpose? I think so, to reassure me and let me know he is connected. When I try to get up I lose my balance, besides the dark and somewhat confused world I keep seeing lights. He holds my arm and helps me. I feel him calm, supportive. I explain to him that I am totally inside the lights and fatigue. We stop to look at the moon, which I feel is friendly. When I return to the maloca, the drunkenness comes back on me with all its power. When the Maestras pass by again, I get up again to dance: lotus position and movements from the waist up. They blow on my head, wash me with pussanga and bless me.

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Jaynes (2003) – unknown in literature until Pindar (500 BC) and was perhaps introduced by Pythagorean philosophy. Hence the idea that the psyche is imprisoned in the soma as in a tomb, an idea that has been increasingly questioned over time.

## FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH THE MEDICINE

I think that tomorrow I will ask the maestras the reasons for this weight and how to overcome it. This intention calms me down. Eventually, I return to hear the frog croaking in the marsh and greet it fondly. I feel connected to nature. The sky has clouded over, it is thundering, it is about to start raining. The shamans sing, the woman have more energy than the males, they last longer, when there is thunder they are silent for a second, almost in respect of its energy. They heal us by reconnecting the threads that are broken, the thunderstorm heals the earth, wetting it.



A small solitary frog.

Around me there are those who burp, who gag, those who moan, who cry, but one also hears and sees smiles, arms to the sky, dance and yoga movements, thanks, chants. The ceremony has been going on for seven and a half hours and cannot end. It ends when everyone is silent: the energy of the group deter-

mines how long the ritual lasts as the Maestros enter a trance and seem to respond to the energies circulating. A single woman continues to sing, high notes that keep the ceremony alive. The storm is at its peak when the facilitator declares, after a long silence, that the last icaros will be sung.

### ***Personal intentions***

Shamans act as intermediaries with our unconscious and with our visions, with our understanding of ourselves; they are simultaneously humans who, through this work, economically maintain the extended, often very poor family. Their spiritual part is the result of a long journey, included in a role that others do not always accept and appreciate, the human part is made up of mood swings, vanity in dressing up, quarrels among themselves, envy, dyeing their hair with l'Oréal in order to have raven hair even at 83 years of age. The differences in character of these workers of the spirit are interesting to observe.

Most have very personal issues to deal with: delving into the organization of their work, problems that have caught them unawares, integrity in their lives. The areas for investigation are endless, it is we who often lack the imagination to come up with unusual ones. It is about the possibility of unburdening the mind and getting in touch with a cosmic self, of having experiences more intense than the lived experience itself. This is why the mental set, the personal attitude must be serious, just as the setting – the context in which one takes the substance – must be absolutely protective, safe and respectful, because one is putting oneself on the line. The protocol for taking the substance is very strict. There are rules that relate to the body,

others that relate to sociality, others that relate to the psyche, and still others that relate to the spirit, four different domains that we can address and deepen in this life but that need serious and ongoing work. The set that defines the series of personal intentions must be dense and light at the same time, which is why in the hut where we have lunch we chat about our lives but also joke about it, tease each other and the sound of the radio from the kitchen is tuned to very romantic and somewhat cloying melodies.

Everyone meets Ayahasca exactly where they are psychically. Medicine emphasizes the values and thoughts of the individual, there are no a priori established ways or paths. One thus becomes a psychonaut and opens one's personal treasure chest in an experience of emotional change in which one is prepared to search for the meaning of what is happening. We need to explicate the tacit values and automatic thoughts of the person having this experience. It is not about understanding how the world is made but how we are made as individuals living in the world. Ayahuasca is an emotional amplifier, a grid of psychic patterns that works by making us lose both body and psyche. Unlike LSD, it does not propose psychedelic games but a journey to seek the Divine, the Sacred within, the connection between parts of a whole.

Ayahuasca – according to shamans – allows access to the universal sense of love, to the essence, to one's own strength, condensing experiences and – with the help of shamans – accessing love. It is also true that we are creatures built to be adaptive and that our minds construct narratives that go in an adaptive direction.



One of the participants, a Rumanian man who, together with his wife, is studying to become a naturopath (he has a degree in economics but found the work too serious and mechanical) – upon request – describes to me his experience of accessing supreme cosmic love<sup>46</sup>:

“It is not easy to describe it because I am referring to pure emotions, never felt so intensely. It is difficult to describe the emotions I felt, I will try. The night I experienced unconditional love my intention was to find out what was behind the rational mind. Unbelievable. Up to that point my journeys had been quite bad. This one, on the other hand, was interesting because it was the first one in which I totally surrendered, let myself go and allowed myself to vomit (in the previous two ceremonies I had tried unsuccessfully). Afterwards I felt myself invaded by emotions of love. I did not feel love for someone or something... it was not my love and neither was it love sent to me by someone or something. It was pure, unadulterated and unconditional love, love that is available for each of us to be a part of, if we wish to connect with it. I am not making an argument or a sermon, I am simply trying to describe how I felt it, how it appeared to me. In the meantime I felt as if the medicine was playing with my brain, randomly opening drawers of my memory to very vividly open up places I had been in the past and make me remember people I cared

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<sup>46</sup> Alexander Eben (2012) talks about the same experience of cosmic love: “The message consisted of three parts and, if I had to translate it into earthly language, it would sound like this: ‘You will be loved and protected, affectionately, forever’. ‘You have nothing to fear’, ‘There is nothing wrong you can do’. That message flooded me with an intense, mad-denying feeling of relief. It was as if I had been handed the rules of a game I had been playing all my life without ever fully understanding it”.

about. Interestingly, it was bizarre because it also made me see places that were unimportant or that I had paid little attention to... fleeting flashes of past memories that I never thought were stopped in the hard drive of my memory. At the peak of my experience I felt so much love that it hurt... I could not understand how it was possible to feel such intense love, I also felt privileged to be able to experience it. After the ceremony I can testify that this positive energy, this expansion of consciousness stayed with me for a very long time. You also saw how I felt, you should have seen me earlier: the experience changed many things within me”.

Below are some intentions expressed by my fellow travelers and a description of how they worked on them during the ceremonies:

“To let go of who I thought I was, in order to become who I really am”.

“To cleanse themes already dealt with in order to arrive at new themes that concern me”.

“I dealt with guilt and all the events about which I should not feel guilty. Ayahuasca told me that it is perfectly OK for me to do what I am doing and that it will help me in the healing process”.

“Quitting marijuana. A. told me how to do it and how to lead my life, learning to be in the here and now instead of in my head”.

“I worked on my stomach – where a tumor was diagnosed – and my breathing. He told me that if I breathe consciously it

will cure me. Allow me to breathe you, don't be you breathing me", he told me.

"Taking care of my family. I spent the evening during the Ceremony with my grandparents and paternal relatives, they live in England, I met them one by one".

"Connecting with the Universe. After Master Diogenes sang me a very powerful icaros of very intense masculine energy, I worked on giving up control, using the energy force given to me by the ego. I realized and felt that we are plants and I felt that all things tend to unite and interact in a kind of symbiosis. I felt the body awkward and heavy".

"My creativity. I found myself making a drawing outside the maloca in the sand that was then swept away by the force of the storm".

"Purifying myself. I lived my life as a 'sacred whore' giving others what they needed from me, I acted it out in the sexual domain: sex, eroticism, attention, my addiction. My desire was to get to feel clean and free again. I felt compassion and understanding for myself".

"Appreciating nature. I believe there are three different domains, that of the spirit that will greet me after I die, the spirit of nature, the animals, the garden I can create, and – third – the world of the people I associate with. I saw a crocodile and a monkey, then other beautiful and unknown animals".

"I wondered how to serve/care for the world. I found out on this trip that I was expecting a child with my partner and I did not know how to come to terms with this information. I felt guilty for not being with her and not facing the news of the

responsibility of becoming a father with more enthusiasm and courage. A. suggested that I abandon the position of Peter Pan. How can I take care of the world? By taking care of my partner and the unborn child!?”.

I am told by the facilitators that there are repeating patterns that I have to go and look at: obsessiveness, fatigue, the weight of the world, the fear that someone (in this case the A.) will ask too much of me and in any case ask more than I am willing to give. Maestro Diogenes tells me instead that light indicates that I am capable of leaving my body and that this is a gift. That if I have begun to see light I will continue to do so. He tells me that I am so cold because until now I have been underground and that he can teach me to fly in dreams, helping me to go up and not stay underground. He will help me, I should work for it. He talks about the fact that sometimes they also tremble when they go from being in the here and now to the ether. He says that seeing the light is the ability to leave the body and navigate the astral realm. He then teaches me how to use pussanga, the flowery alcoholic glow that helps one to reach one's intentions: he asks me to take a small sip immediately after drinking the medicine, to wash my face, arms and head with it once I am back on my mat, and then to put it in front of the shaman who comes to visit us, so that he can sing his icaros to the substance as well.

### *The last ceremonies*

I will continue drinking. Tonight I have become curious to go and see, to relax more and more. I am certain of my decision as if it were the only one possible. My heart only trembles when they are about to call my group, but I become sure when I

make my intention clear to myself. Which one? Still the trust in A. and the ability to ride it and not be dominated by it. I drink a quarter of the potion.

Immediately the dotted screen with millions of yellow/white lights appears. It appears only once and I tell myself that perhaps I have taken too little substance. I relax, fetal position, concentrate on my intentions: confidence and lightness. It dawns on me that trust means trusting others, even my own son rather than worrying about his future, but also other people whom I may not value enough. It also occurs to me that trust and lightness are the ingredients for me to access pleasure and I begin to feel pleasure all over my body, a flow of energy reaching every corner of myself. Was't I told that for A. there should be neither pleasure nor sex during rituals? Even in the preparation before and processing afterwards? For the Shipibo, having sex dissipates energy. I ask the snake I see next to me (it is not a long, bloated anaconda, but a small snapping cobra, with its wings/ears and a tail that wags without frightening me; the cobra of the pyramid hieroglyphics). "Energy promotes union with the world... I am an animal, I continue the species, I mate when I have to mate. These are reasons invented by humans, they do not concern me" – the snake replies. I smile, the answer is very consistent with my way of thinking. I continue to reason, waiting for the cold and pain I have felt the other times. Around me the shamans chant in a group. Thick darkness, today the moon is hidden. They chant. It crosses my mind that they might be disappointed that I am not flying and I wonder if I should go and ask for a reinforcement of medicine. I decide against it. I feel the chants as opportunities to increase vision, mandalas that push towards the sky. Suddenly I realize that I am in the vision, that I see

colors (though more subdued than at other times), lights coming towards me, worms, colored snakes that I see and let go. It is as if I am walking through the forest with the shamans and the forest lights up from below with every step, almost like a film set, as if powerful floodlights illuminate the trunks, the foliage and the sky, while everything else is in absolute darkness. A thousand images and thoughts that I cannot remember but which I take in calmly and enjoy. I am happy because I am able to see without feeling the weight of the world and without shaking like a leaf. Without fear, without the need for control. I think that on the first day I was shown the sky, the ether, the Universe and that my fear prevented me from appreciating it. Now the sky does not manifest itself to me but I see scenes unfolding and I feel as if I am on the set of a film for which I am the set designer. Even if snakes and worms appear, they don't disgust me. I imagine that I have written a script about the dilemmas of a woman in her forties who is caught between her successful western life and the possibility of deepening her spirituality, and describes the path to reach her soul. A script that becomes more and more specific throughout the evening. I see a few scenes where the forest is lit up, many people are on the set, there are people, busyness, a common project, just what I would like: to be part of a collective emotional and exciting project. I feel very connected.

I go in and out of visions, I enjoy them, I relax, I stand up straight when a Maestro comes to sing in front of me. The first is Master Elias who asks me how I am and seems satisfied when I answer "*tranquila*". He replies that I am not afraid and that makes all the difference. I feel *mareada* (drunken) but without fear.

I see all the shamans go to Ampelio's station, carry him to the middle of the circle in procession, surround him, reverence him and ask him to stand with them in the middle, which he does by standing a palm away from the ground. I see this scene with extreme clarity and only later do I discover that it is a figment of my imagination, of my desire, of my reverence for him.

When one of the Maestras comes, I try to send her my energy, my lightness, the joy of being in the world: I perceive that I fill a space greater than that occupied by my body, I am aware of myself, I feel secure, serene, self-sufficient and at the same time expanded. I massage her feet, which are gnarled and dusty, with nails like claws. I imagine that she enjoys it. Meanwhile she sings to me, based on what she sees and what she thinks I need. She sings and sprays me with pussanga. All around us are sounds, noises, voices. It sounds like a twelve-tone concert, I think that if the big bang had a soundtrack, it will certainly have been the music of this evening, the shrill, out-of-tune sound of the creation of the world. An eerie, complicated, high-pitched melody that certainly stimulates the substance effects. The cosmic consciousness that I experienced in this ceremony, made of light, lightness and lack of boundaries, made me think that if after death one finds oneself in this domain, it would not be bad.

I also think of the Nazca lines and the hypothesis I read (Mizrach 1994) that they were created for ceremonial use, as signs for travelling shamans, like magnets to direct them to the places of the dead where pilgrims in their spiritual flight could

obtain drink; symbolic lines, imaginative paths for their journey. Stylized figures aligned with the Pleiades<sup>47</sup>.

During the last ceremony we were set the ARKANA, protective seals to keep the seeds of work, a solid and invisible crown so that others do not steal our icaros, so that spirits do not enter our psychic space, uninvited guests. A protection for the safety of the body. Master Elias comes first and puts his protective belt on me. I think about respect for myself, for the medicine, also for my son. It occurs to me that this attitude must come to terms with respect for life, which is to be lived and not wasted and for nature<sup>48</sup>. I reflect on this, on how to move while also managing to respect others, honoring the relationship with others. The three women come in a row, I try to thank them through my energy, and when the last one leaves me (I am sure it is Manuela as she says “here, here, here” as to connect and to tease me) I feel like a current rising from my head towards the Universe (a Hoover positioned above, sucking energy from

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<sup>47</sup> Many South American Indians believe they came from the distant Pleiades. Interestingly, in Siberia the Great Spirit is called by the archaic name Ulgen, which derives from Ulkar the ancient word for the constellation known in the West as the Pleiades. Other mythologies however involve stars: for the Dogon Sirius (the Wolf Star), for the Zulus the origin is from another solar system whereby “visitors of fire” brought their knowledge to earth.

<sup>48</sup> Sadly, while the shamans respect every aspect of nature, helicopters of usually Canadian oil companies often fly over our space. Having found oil in the area, they are dispossessing the inhabitants who do not own the land, depriving them of their living space. The foreigners are trying to buy up the land and drive out the natives. For the first time in their lives around the Amazon, people are starving due to groundwater pollution that has killed fish and rendered rivers unfit for human consumption.



me). I fall asleep like a stone. I struggle to wake up when the ceremony ends, but I go back to my tambo and immediately fall asleep again. Heavily again.



The Iquitos market where potions, plants and amulets are sold.

### *Some other stories*

In the shamanic world, everything that exists possesses within it a living force, a vital and divine energy that permeates everything. Therefore, the first story I would like to tell is about the animals at the Temple, because for me animals are the closest thing to angels, they are natural healers. They do not judge and are at the service of humanity, they act as filters against the self-destruction that we act: they believe in existence. In a world where everything that exists lives and even the

phenomena of the Universe and creatures have a personal identity, I would have expected more closeness with pets. Instead there are no dogs, if they arrive they are shabby, skinny as hell, flea-bitten and full of skin diseases. They seem to survive by a whisker and are shooed away badly. Harner (1973) in his book on the Conibo shamans of the Peruvian Amazon (*Ucayali* river) says that on the nights of the ritual the dogs are muzzled because their barking can drive those under the influence of medicine insane.

Two cats stay in a tambo and are given fish. Clean, self-reliant, not very cuddly, they come to the maloca on ritual evenings, as if to charge themselves with the energy that emerges from the shamans' chanting. Again, the attitude towards them is Spartan: they are forest animals and it is necessary for them to learn how to hunt and procure their sustenance. They are therefore fed the bare minimum and meow often out of hunger. Then there are the chickens, who live under the shamans' tambo and scratch around there, making do with straws and rare seeds. Every other day, one is missing from the roll-call because the shamans eat meat, while we only eat fish and eggs (sweet potatoes, lentils, cassava, bananas, avocados and other native legumes).

However, the forest is alive in every square inch: bats, frogs, fleas, mosquitoes, crickets, fireflies are the animals I encountered/clashed with on a daily basis. Fortunately, also beautiful huge butterflies (*mariposa*) with intense colors. The most beautiful are the *blue morph* with deep blue<sup>49</sup> wings; there are also

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<sup>49</sup> "They are blue in color because they were sent to earth by the Great Spirit and have the intense color of the sky" say the shamans.

many red dragonflies that mate in flight and lay their eggs on the surface of the pond. I would have liked there to also be multicolored parrots trained to stick around.

From the tambo of the maestros comes the music of the Diogenes flute, a less than perfect sound that nevertheless seems to summon invisible forces and create a state of harmony and connection with nature, precisely because of the imperfection of the sounds: animals and nature closely connected, open doors to access the spirit.

**Greg**, one of my travelling companions, was placed in foster care as a child by his mother who could not support her children once her husband left. Greg and his two older sisters were removed. Each of the children followed their own path, he went through about 10 families, moving from one to the other, until he was 16, when he went to live with his father. The mother kept only her youngest son with her. Greg is both an online poker player – who has never once lost – and an abandoned puppy looking for an owner and a kennel, as well as a 20-year-old boy seeking erotic contact with perfect strangers. He is a “vague” character whose right hand does not know what his left hand is doing. Body slouching as if he were always on the verge of falling over, he is at the same time such an expert in yoga that he can assume incredible positions. A person full of contradictions and non-integrated parts. A guy who would like to be driven because he doesn’t have the courage to drive, who constantly appears to be reliving his trauma, unable to read his emotions, let alone manage them. One of “our” ceremonial nights I hear screams, shouts and laughter coming from the bathroom, but also cries for help and signs of distress. We cannot tell if he is alone in the bathroom

or with someone who is helping him or whom he is trying to seduce. Who knows what is happening to him. We knock, ask him if he needs help. Very different voices emerge from the closet, we believe that he is in the company of more than one person and that a seduction is taking place. We later discover that he was alone and that he was talking to his organs (his kidneys, his heart, his lungs) and that he was producing the different voices, in a tight, pained and affectionate dialogue. He is completely naked. The facilitator goes to call the shamans to calm him down. Personally, I am worried that they will treat him with the same “medicine” that sent him over the edge; in my opinion, this solution risks amplifying the problem. We are faced with Greg with different hypotheses: I maintain that he has lost his rationality and that it is necessary to help him recover it; Stefano and Amperio think that he is possessed by an entity; the shamans that he has left for the hyper uranium and that he must be helped to return. There is no single explanation for Greg’s behavior; the hypotheses that could be made are even more. The important thing is that the next day he is smiling among us and explaining to me how this process he has been doing with the shamans for several months slowly increases his control over his life.

**Nurit** is a 40-year-old Jordanian woman who is a tour guide. Intelligent, ironic, rational, pragmatic, she arrives at the Temple without any awareness of what she is about to undertake. She has not gone on a diet, arriving she wonders if “her” room will have air conditioning, she has followed the fascination of the Amazon rainforest and the idea that shamans are exotic and interesting and can offer her stories to tell her clients. She is here because a European colleague and others

have told her about the place. I meet her in front of the Tambo we will share. She is sitting on the stairs and eating salted seeds. When, laughing, I explain to her the restrictive diet we had been asked to eat, she decides to eat them all so as not to be tempted later. She will pay for this levity by spending the first ceremonies sitting on the toilet, with no opportunity to work on herself, no visions and no flights. At the fourth ceremony, seven days on the forced diet, her psychological trip begins. At the end of the fourth ceremony I meet her very frightened: during the ceremony she had seen the souls of dead people. Among them she met, as if present, her grandson who has been dead for six years. She didn't get very upset, at first he didn't speak and she asked his forgiveness for not being present at his funeral (she didn't get permission). She performed a ritual to greet him, she put him back in the coffin and saw him sitting on the steps of the tambo when she arrived to sleep, while she was brushing her teeth he laid down on her bed, leaving her no room. She even tried to chase him away with some panache, to no avail. She ran to the social maloca and described herself as terrified. I explain to her that "the ceremony is like a typhoon and that even when the typhoon has passed its tail remains, which can sometimes be very long, even hundreds of kilometers, and still create turbulence". I also tell her that her grandson is a relative, he certainly loves her, just as she loves him: "take his hand, protect each other and sleep together, in peace". She will wake up in the morning and he will no longer be with her, I am sure. She calms down, the next morning the shamans will go and cleanse our tambo of all presence, spitting pussanga in every corner, singing and playing to cleanse it of all energies.

Interesting is the change that the rough and materialistic Nurit undergoes: as if in a psychological awakening, she appears more sensitive, much more psychologically sophisticated, more attentive, more curious, more involved in the process, more interested and participating. She stops calling the Temple “Guantanamo, my prison”, she starts smiling more, she shares her ironic sense, her face becomes more relaxed, she delves into the topics we discuss together, whereas before she fell asleep defensively. I call her smiling “the slimming shaman” and she, in turn smiling, calls me “the Italian princess”. When one of the last evenings, after the ceremony, she tells me that her bed is moving – thinking she was joking – I will reply lightly that the bed is rocking her. Without fear she will fall asleep.

**John** is a Swedish man who has come to the Temple to have “the” experience of his life. After a ceremony a Colombian co-participant tells him with some embarrassment, for fear of being invasive, that a woman appeared to her in a dream and told her in Spanish that she had a message for him and asked for his forgiveness. This spirit is satisfied with the path he is on, she considers this the best path for him. The Colombian messenger, on the other hand, feels uncomfortable because she feels she is invading John’s privacy. Imagine her astonishment when John tells her, after the message has been made explicit, that he was adopted by a Swedish family but was born in Colombia, and was abandoned at a very young age and adopted almost immediately. John will embrace the messenger with tears in his eyes, happy with the message.

**Elisa**, Cuban, a beautiful and intelligent woman, very much alive and bright, came to the temple with her husband because

she has been feeling sad, very sad, for a long time and – apart from her prestigious job in industry – feels no desires or cravings. Her mind, clear at work, is confused and full of fog in daily life and she does not understand who she is, being afraid to express what she feels and what she wants: she has not yet reached her integrity. She has been together with her partner for 11 years and they have been married for six. Her sadness started after her marriage. Her first experience with A. was pleasant, she felt connected to the group and had a good time. During the second experience she felt that her sorrow is not something that belongs to her personally but a weight she carries on her shoulders in place of her ancestors, who had suffered slavery, exploitation, disease. The Ayahuasca told her that she was chosen precisely because she was strong and able to work on past history. Interesting hypothesis! As a psychologist I would be able to work very well on such a theme: Schutzenberger's book (1998), *The Ancestor Syndrome*, which deals with psycho-genealogy from a systemic perspective, comes to mind. The shamans work with her using icaros and weaving disconnected plots, without access to a verbalized and explicit understanding. She accepts the hypotheses that they propose to her in the ceremony, she is thirsty for deepening, ready to modify her usual reading grids. She will have to change a lot to adapt to Master Diogenes who does not offer her a rational answer and will give her very little intellectual satisfaction. Personally I would have investigated her relationship with her husband, shamans do not disrupt the personal sphere, they do not introduce personal assumptions, they tend to maintain the social set-up of the people they take in and knowingly have not entered into this relational domain that

Elisa does not think of exploring. During her time at the Temple, Elisa gets her period and the shamans tell her that she will not be able to participate in the ceremonies. Although she came on purpose from Europe, she has to miss two shifts (three days out). The woman is impure during “this” period, she is told. We consider whether she should keep quiet and continue the rituals, taking responsibility for them herself. We discuss it together and she decides to “obey” and exclude herself from the rites. This disturbs me. I have travelled a long “cultural” road together with many women, to get away from the idea that the feminine is necessarily a sexual object, a childbearing machine, to set aside prejudices about free sexuality, to free myself from a sexuality identified with genitality, to free energy from sentimental relationships! It seems to me that shamans make plants tell their intentions and rules reflecting ancient beliefs deeply embedded in their culture.

I personally believe that the hormonal cycle brings us closer to nature and makes us stronger healing vehicles, certainly not impure women. I think of menstruation as a kind of shamanic death and monthly rebirth: each time the uterus renews its mucous membrane, like snakes we change our skin, shed our past and purify ourselves physically. If it is true that the earliest forms of shamanism were practiced in groups by women, I cannot think that blood was taboo, something to be hidden, but rather a sacred prohibition more focused on “sacredness”. Probably, as happens in very emotional groups among women who hang out daily, menstruation had synchronized and the women all had them at the same time.



MENSTRUAL BLOOD

Even today, Tibetan lamas use menstrual blood<sup>50</sup> in ceremonies for the Goddess Tara and consider a girl's first menstrual blood to be the most powerful healing medicine of all. I also hypothesize that menstrual blood replaced animal blood, as shamanic rituals still require blood in many parts of the world; I hypothesize that women in antiquity used menstruation, as well as pregnancies and child-births, to access visions, to increase their magical power as healers. I believe, and I am not alone, that making menarche a taboo was a political/ patriarchal move to diminish the power of women and to associate them with an element that would diminish them.

**Anne** grew up in a cult so she knows neither who her father nor her mother is. She lived in a sort of commune where roles were interchangeable. She found herself as a teenager without a family living promiscuously homeless. In her later years, she decided to live in the light and seek her own power. She imagines life as a tree trunk, half in the shade and half in the sun.

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<sup>50</sup> Menstrual blood is included in Tantric practices; in India a menstruating woman has access to the powers of the Dark Goddess (anger and passion are associated with women precisely because they are so connected to nature). In Africa and Australia the red earth is thought to be sacred: during Dream Time our ancestors wandered the world and menstrual blood, coagulating, became red ochre which was used to heal all illnesses. Tying a red ribbon around the waist, in some tribes, is a way to access fertility. For the Shipibo, women are identified with the aquatic realm. The color associated with them is black, night their realm, and the deep world of water is associated with sickness and death. They consider them vulnerable to aquatic seducers (dolphins, anacondas) and are more so when menstruating as they are polluted. Menstruation is considered the wickedness of the moon, the demonstration of the woman's animal soul, of her excessive openness (Roe 1982).

Currently her life is in the sun, that is her intention. She believes that it is essential to learn to live well in the here and now – the right relationship between balance and attention – and she tries to know what she wants in each moment, to try to achieve it. This is the reason why she is at the Temple as a volunteer, to work on her own and others' desires.

**Peter** is a competent, sociable and eager American. He tells us that he has already once been to take medicine here at the Temple and that having a lot of widespread anxiety he asked the shamans how to handle it. Rosa told him to stick to the diet for the next four months (no salt, sex, alcohol, red meat, spices, etc.). He managed to do this for three months and felt much better, finding himself connected to himself and others. When, for reasons of force majeure, he stopped the diet, the connection suddenly stopped. Stopping the diet meant interrupting the healing process. He makes us realize that his fear far outweighs his joy in life and shows us this by talking non-stop.

The last story is about me and what happened on the second last day of my stay at the Temple. I wake up at 6 a.m. in the tambo with two sentences in my head: “you have been playing with fire these twelve days” and “psychotic sleep”. I feel suspended in a light trance-like state, an unfamiliar energy permeates me, I feel myself being swept upwards by a vortex, as if it were gushing out of my head. I have just woken up and I have the feeling of losing contact with the world and losing control of my body. It seems to me that my body is on the bed but my mind, my spirit, my thought, my essence are in the hyper uranium and floating freely in the room. Everyday reality appears distant to me. From above, from the corner of the hut, I see the body lying on the bed. Terror, light-headed and

confused and at the same time pressure in my head that does not allow me to focus. I have been taught that leaving the body is an adjustment of time and space, but this rationalization does not help me: I am assailed by fear. I feel paralyzed and very frightened by a state of duality that has never happened to me before. I decide to get up in the hope of finding myself whole through movement. With difficulty I move my body and get up to go and wash myself, taking advantage of the rivulet of water coming out of the pond. Synchrony: I meet Master Elijah and try to explain my restlessness to him. He nods, not sure if he has understood. On the other hand, I am sure that Master Diogenes, who arrives shortly after, has not understood since he asks me for the number of the tambo, as if the problem came from there and not from me.

Back at the hut, I talk to Ampelio and then to Anne. According to her, 15 years earlier, on my return from Buryatia, I had a “shamanic call” which led me to fall ill from a tick bite (I had a rickets) and stay in hospital 32 days with a fever of 42°. I remember that during the fever I was as lucid and sharp as a scalpel, I felt my brain empowered and my judgement pure, the opposite of coming to terms with one’s own shadow zone, understood as a matrix of possibilities that we usually fail to consider; the opposite of coming out of the sleep of usual everyday perceptions. My mind was focused and lucid, far too much so. After that period I made many external changes (moving house, separating, starting to write) and internal changes (focusing on me, becoming more efficient, more intent on being well in the everyday). Always with the knowledge that I have so much to learn. She tells me that I think either here or there, either lucidly or confusedly, while the explana-

tions are much more subtle and I could learn to reconcile my previous life with my current spiritual needs. She tells me that I may have improved my intuition and that I will be able to use in Italy what I have learnt during these days in the forest. Among other things, outside of here the energy will be less and I will dissociate less easily<sup>51</sup>. It occurs to me that in the last two ceremonies I had given up control and what is happening to me now displeases me because it brings me back to the theme of control. If only I could take advantage of the confusion to let go! To learn to access the sea of potential we usually block through judgement and limit thoughts, through the reductive story we tell ourselves about ourselves and what happens to us; if only I could exasperate the unravelling of the ego, the decapitation of rationality, the abolition of conditioning and acts of consciousness. I feel that only by looking fear in the face, by not running away from it, by learning to integrate it, I can emerge from the pit and from blindness.

When my two friends reach me I still feel disassociated. They want to take me to the shamans but I ask Ampelio to work on me. He sees fear, so much fear, even the ancient fear that has accompanied me for so many years. According to him this is an opportunity to get rid of it. He suggests I focus on grounding<sup>52</sup> – on centering myself on the earth – and takes me for a walk

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<sup>51</sup> Dissociation, a psychic symptom, can occur in people when the tension is too high. During violence or rape, for example, nature is so perfect that it takes one elsewhere, to suffer less, and then brings one back to presence. I know people who learnt this in the enormous frustration of their childhood and then, without being aware of it, continue to function by dissociating.

<sup>52</sup> Grounding is the ability to discharge excess energy to the ground and let it flow out into the earth (ground).

around the Tambo to see the flowers, to appreciate their colors. It will be the market organized by the shamans to sell their artefacts that will distract me and make me relax, I will return at least momentarily to the here and now. I stood on the threshold of entering another domain, got scared – again – and turned back. What a shame!

The previous evening I had “discredited” the shamans with regard to the rules on diet following the rituals. What happened in the morning brought the focus back to their energy and their power to open my VII chakra.

### *Returning home*

With a small wheel of the Ayahuasca vine in our pocket, we left the forest and returned to our occupations. Back home. We were told that one can ask this washer for protection and information. You can place it on your heart or forehead to receive strength, because the plant we drank will work on us in the coming months, even years.

I have been writing for days, without contact with the outside world. I have no desire to go to the cinema, to see friends, I just want to delve into the subject of A., reading and remembering more, accessing the feelings and moments of total loss of myself (do I remember everything? It was an intense experience of which I think I remember about half). How can I integrate what I learnt at the Temple into my Western work and life? While it is true that traces of Ayahuasca can be found in the body even after eight to ten months, it is equally plausible

that the substance continues to have an effect on a psychic, social and spiritual level, as well as on the body.

My clients have noticed that I have done something: two of them at the session after the holidays comment “Today we did two sessions in one. We went fast, we worked hard!” Personally, I have the feeling that I read situations more clearly, sometimes too clearly. I get immediate insights, I see with the eyes of the imagination what is being told to me and I feel more than before that words can become scalpels to deconstruct entrenched situations and allow usual visions to be disrupted.

This aspect of the relationship with my work as a psychotherapist is of particular interest to me. I would say that there are two levels at which this experience influences me. One level is the professional level: I feel that I am doing concrete things to understand how the mind works, that I have embarked on a journey to deepen this aspect, so every client I meet helps me to grow in my understanding. The journey I have taken makes me feel more curious but also more legitimized to keep searching. Also on a professional level, having felt the whole Universe, I am much less afraid of delusions or hallucinations, in any case of the distortions of the mind. It occurs to me that I went all the way to Peru to hallucinate and that my clients are frightened of some bizarre ideas. The mind can do more, it is capable of much more extreme adventures and I am hardly afraid of them, on the contrary. They intrigue me.

On the other hand, the second level is personal and spiritual, dare I say cosmic. It is as if the substance has opened up perceptual pathways that were previously obscured and made

me perceive the connection with the whole Universe, in moments that used to flee immediately. It's as if I got a first answer to the question "Is that all there is, is there nothing else?" I saw "other" and I believe that this "other" is a position that each of us can assume in living, not an object domain to enter into, but the ability to connect the parts of one's life into a coherent whole (re-ligio, religion, experience of connection, even if one is an atheist). I imagine that this "other" can become the North Star that guides me on a new journey, a metaphor for the soul, as Richard Rohr writes in *Falling Upward: a spirituality for the two halves of life* (2011). We are part of a Mystery much bigger than ourselves.

One last consideration, the differences from the experience on Lake Bajkal with the Mongolian and Buriati shamans. In all shamanic therapies, the curandero is someone – man or woman – who is able to voluntarily enter a non-ordinary state of consciousness and make contact with the spirit world, while maintaining the ordinary state of consciousness in which s/he can interact with the "patient/client". The typical character of the shamanic conception of illness is that human beings are an integral part of an ordered system and that every illness is the consequence of disharmony with the cosmic order. Therapies insist on restoring harmony and balance within nature, in human relationships, and with the spiritual world. There are also geographical differences according to traditions, ethnicities, customs and beliefs. Western medicine tends to focus on biological mechanisms, shamanic medicine is interested in the socio-cultural context in which the infirmity occurs, while the disease process is almost ignored, put in the background. Human becomings are considered part of a living social group

and a cultural belief system in which spirits and ghosts can actively enter and interact in human affairs. The shamanic view of the human as part of a disordered system is in perfect agreement with the systemic approach to life. “Healing rituals”, my friend Lucia<sup>53</sup> points out, “can have the function of bringing unconscious conflicts and resistances to a conscious level, where a solution can be found, or they can work on a soul

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<sup>53</sup> My friend Lucia Pattarino points out to me that even in ancient Greece, healing was considered a social phenomenon and associated with many deities: Hygeia was concerned with the preservation of health, hence prevention, and Panacea was specialized in the knowledge of remedies, whether derived from plants or the earth. These were the two aspects of healing represented by Asclepius. Hippocrates was convinced that diseases were not caused by demons or supernatural forces, but were natural phenomena that could be studied scientifically and modified by therapeutic procedures and the wise conduct of one’s life. In the Eastern tradition, if we take Chinese medicine, we again have a concept of balance between yin and yang. Healthy individual and healthy society are integral parts of a large structured order; infirmity is disharmony on the individual and social level. In addition to the yin/yang symbolism, the Chinese use the system of the 5 elements (fire, water, wood, earth and metal). The body is an indivisible system of interrelated components. Illness is not conceived as the intrusion of an external agent but is due to causes that lead to disharmony and imbalance. Balance is a state into and out of which one continually enters: this is why traditional Chinese texts do not draw a clear line between health and illness. Good and bad health are natural aspects, aspects of the same process in which the individual organism is constantly changing in relation to the changing environment. Since infirmity is considered inevitable, perfect health is not the ultimate goal of either the patient or the physician. The aim is to achieve the best possible adaptation to the total environment of the individual. It is a holistic system in the sense that the individual is a living system whose components are interconnected and interdependent, while the interdependence between individual and environment is recognized in theory but ignored in therapy.



level, without in any way involving the patient's rationality, let alone his words. The shaman does not work with the patient's individual unconscious, but interacts with the collective unconscious. The well-being of individuals is influenced by environmental factors such as air, water, food, land, lifestyle. Health requires a state of balance between environmental influences, lifestyles and various components of human life: the connection between mind, body and environment is absolutely fundamental. The art of healing consists of the physician's effort to help these natural forces, creating the most favorable conditions for the healing process, which becomes an action, a choice, a decision, a happening".

#### AN EXPERIENCE IN BURYATIA

In Buryatia, there was vodka drunk already at the crack of dawn (the cold was intense, although it was June). The shamans were quite individualistic, in deep competition with one another. In some regions of Russia, shamanism is a religion as well as the only affordable way to cure oneself and others. The Buriati and Mongolian shamans had flocked to the lake because it was the first time after glasnost that it was possible to pray all together on the sacred island, instead of hiding their healing abilities and costumes<sup>54</sup>. During the time we were together, they gave us endless proof of parapsychological abilities, of accessing extra-sensory vision. For example, they entered my house in Rome and were amazed that it was "pink" (the walls were actually salmon-colored) and that it was so large

<sup>54</sup> In contrast to Buryatia and Mongolia, where masks, animal skins, bird feathers, bells, magic sticks, drums, shields, teeth, bones, rattles, stones, shells are used, and where the dressing of the shaman is *part of the ritual*, among the Shipibo the ritual costume is reduced to the bare bones and many practices are performed in their everyday clothes.

compared to their living standards. So the Mongolian shaman of the nine initiations, a guest in my home in Rome and for the first time abroad, perceived that there was “water and gold” underneath the flat where I was hosting him – my home –, elements that left me bewildered. I later found out that a branch of the Domus Aurea goes all the way under my house and that the walls of the Domus Aurea were all laminated with gold and water flowed in every room.

The Buryati shamans entered our lives, took up a definite position, treated us, built rituals to protect us, to help us connect with heaven and the underworld. Their explicit intent has been to disrupt our lives, constantly showing us their powers. The building of the hearth every day, the dressing with vestments weighing up to 60 kilos that lasted an infinite amount of time, the calling of the eagle during every ceremony, the ability to go into a trance to fly above the great birds and the eagle and still always return to us (“Red things, golden things, golden snake, black road, white road. When I turn into a cuckoo I still have 22 legs...” recited Vera Sazhina in one of her seminars). Their healing rituals were very elaborate, sometimes almost self-referential.

In the Amazon rainforest, the relationship was choral, the shamans acted as a conduit between the individual and the substance, their positioning was understated, each trying to understand aspects of themselves without their interference, perhaps getting help from others in the group. Everything is interpreted as a greater will of the individuals, there is a common reference to nature, an absolute respect. The shamans seem almost agitated by the visions, they seem unaccustomed to reflecting on the operations they do by tradition, which they enact almost automatically. They do, however, refer to Ayahuasca and to the other plants, they seem to work focused

on helping others achieve visions, well-being, the ability to move forward and to generate again.

They care in both contexts. We could say that the former take you out of yourself while the Shipibo take you in your soul. The former take interpretation upon themselves, the latter leave it to the individual to dig themselves in. The Buryati shamans would say: “You have anxiety because you have transgressed the rules of the clan or have not respected your guardian spirits enough (maintaining the natural order is very important to the Oriental)”; the Schipibo shamans would say: “If you have anxiety, follow the diet for four months, regardless of the cause, and rely on the visions the medicine sends you”. The Mongols seem to work on a macro level, the Shipibo on a micro level: small actions to respect the will of the plants and through the will of the plants, themselves.

## The journey continues. 2011...

The world is perfect, it is we who cannot see this perfection (Shipibo sayng).

We commit sin every time we refuse to continue growing (Saint Gregory of Nyssa).

### *Exchange of messages*

*From Umberta to Stefano. January 23, 2011. Confused*

Dear Stefano, I started reading one of the books you gave me in which, contrary to what was my belief, it is claimed that seeing lights is the first step, a sort of initiation. Instead, I had formed the idea that arriving at the lights was a kind of arrival point (not enlightenment in the traditional sense of the term, of course) and that being “beyond meanings” was a kind of finished line, at least on a personal level. I had created this idea for myself both out of my own prejudices, and probably out of my own defenses, and out of the reaction of the shamans in the circle who were telling each other who “saw”. This I had told myself, with a certain pride.

I do not particularly hold any position, indeed. If there is much more to work on, I would be intrigued. Is it just presumption on my part or defense and entrenchment due to fear/fatigue of putting myself out in the open? It could also be that I no longer know how to do it, my life being organized by a satisfying but intense routine. I am reasoning about the possibility of working with the medicine to get out of the rigid version of myself, to

get out of the fortress I have built in which I feel quite comfortable. WHAT IS YOUR IDEA?

My clinical perceptions have widened. After the many “visions” it seems harder to draw the line between dream and reality, I have a new, much broader idea of human potential. I then halved my attention to the word and its power: I realized with my whole body the need to use it in positive terms, to convey processuality and possible access to resources. I feel it is constructive. It was clear to me during the experience that Ayahuasca is not a “tool” to unveil and describe something that is there but the opportunity to build a new reality in the interactive dance with oneself, to create emotions and experiences that were not there prior, to start from scratch in the fatigue of knowing oneself. I feel it is important to share these experiences. I realized the importance of what I felt with my body, while words were flowing away like water. If words need to be utilized the experience taught me that I need to focus on what works rather than being critical and judgmental. I no longer desire to look for signs of objective states.

*From Stefano to Umberta. February 1, 2011. Confused*

You know I was just thinking about all of this, just today? I had given you that book at the Temple, picking it up in the library, after the first session, precisely because I remembered that it described luminous phenomenology and “living mandalas” as typical of many first experiences. I hoped this might reassure you. My personal rule is that if a work, an experience manages to interest me, I try to repeat it at least 10 to 20 times; it seems indispensable to me in order to have a sufficient amount of specific data to compare, to be able to strip away the inessen-

tial. That's why I lean towards going back to the Temple: the fewer variables, the better I concentrate. Medicine's "maieutic" according to me is very interesting, it surprises me a lot; the greatest gift this time was the perceptual "dissemination" of the last two ceremonies, in which the 'external' events (sounds, movements of the shamans, atmospheric events) came to me as a coherent spatial translation of my internal processes. I perceived a "diffuse self" – nothing to do with the invaded or besieged or exploded self of Searles' schizophrenics; rather, an access to a window on the mystery of time: the possibility of grasping the organizational workings of perception, so fast and subtle that, if one does not resist, one can "stay" on the thin ridge where feedback "becomes" synchronicity. This "takes one out" of time. I am really curious to see where the next round of journeys will take me – but I must say that when I returned from the first experience, my position was similar to yours: bored with the Temple's atmosphere, disgusted with the taste of the Medicine, in short, a lot of resistance – and yet a great deal of nostalgia. Even this time, if we return, I know there are many things there that disturb me. I have already mentioned them to you. I rehearsed them while reflecting on the fact that many people "lose their sight" on journeys and believe their bodies are dead. The phenomenon of "blind sight" came to mind, and more generally, the problem of the relationship between vision and consciousness (also, the "paradox" of the existence of consciousness, as Humphreys puts it: the fact that, evolutionarily, human self-consciousness apparently serves no purpose). We have a series of sensory servant-mechanisms that work completely apart from the "I", from waking consciousness. That sight is also one of them is striking,

because the “I” considers itself to be the guardian, and also the result of “higher” perceptual processes. Now, if it is true that the DMT is produced during the gestation phases before birth, perhaps Medicine takes us to a horizon where perceptual “packages” are chopped up and assembled according to very archaic, “animal” logics – a kind of lowest common multiple, or perceptual Esperanto. So far nothing strange; strange is that at that point not only does the “I” not disappear, but it “goes to school” in order to learn an infinitely more modulated, refined, branched language. Is it possible that such an “I” is not hypo-verbal, but hyper-verbal (as music is hyper in relation to language)? What’s the whole body listening and responding to? I don’t think just to the prefrontal cortex.

Excuse the didactic tone, I am also trying to describe some ideas to myself, ideas which are far from clear. However, I do know that when my analyst told me that this work with shamans, which was taking me beyond the “freakiness” of language towards the center of the body, was certainly doing me good (if – he says – I can get around the hyper-polarization of consciousness that words can sometimes produce up in the sky/down in the earth), I felt he was right. You used a beautiful word Saturday night at dinner, a word I don’t remember, to say that everyone’s experiences were consistent with their psychic “climate” – mine is certainly a bit obsessive. I can’t help it – I know that my lectures only begin to become interesting and “grow” after I repeat them many times; that is, they contain more new things, just as it sometimes seems to me that an icon, or a mandala or other codified iconography, is richer than a lot of modern and contemporary art, because it contains all of its own “tradition”, and is therefore a meta-image, a “system of

cross-references”. There is Nietzsche’s “pathos of distance”. I look for this echo, I would like to be able to say five words, in a way that is always different and fascinating, but always the same five – I realize that if I succeeded, it would no longer be “me” saying them, but the very game of life itself would manifest itself there a little.

Medicine is doing this with my obtusely non-visual perceptions: the weight of my body on the floor of the maloca, the muscular tensions, the sounds of the forest: how can they “contain” all that I find there, when I am in its arms?

In my opinion, your “lights” and “cold” could also be doors – on other, less purposive, more rhizomatic “modes”. For me, however, this “green thinking” as an animal is as beautiful as a dream – and I am amazed at its refinement, even if the Ego does not know what to do with it (or fears it has to “expand”). I don’t work on any theme, in the end – that’s what I wanted to say, too. But I think I asked for help in finding nourishment in perception, so that the water of repetition becomes wine. I think it is wonderful that you notice that you are also refining your “sonar” as a therapist – that you need less to understand more – and probably, do and say less to achieve more. I think if you hone your “non-verbal listening”, or “blind sight” you will “appear” to your patients...

Bon, I am delirious – thank you again for the beautiful two days in your house, which seems to me the prow of a fantastic ship, ready to take off. A very dear embrace.



*From Umberta to Stefano. February 3, 2011. Intrigued*

I have to decide and I don't know how to do it: to go with you or not? On the one hand there is the added value of continuing the experience with three friends who have common interests and the possibility of continuing to explore together, the sense of protection, the certainty of laughter. The deepening of our relationship.

On the other, a discomfort at the idea of continuing to experiment on me. The message I wanted to interpret with "beyond meanings" is that I can live without searching for meanings, without continuing to analyze my navel. I would like to respect that. It's one thing to do the San Pedro or the mushrooms, new information, new sensations, new experiences; it's another to go back to the Temple and have the same expectations, the same relationships, the same processes with the shamans (who are not so helpful and perhaps know nothing but Ayahuasca). I am sure it is me who needs to change my attitude, but can I do it simply by receiving more of the same? There is also the fear of "daring" and going back to the artichoke or staying in the lights, even though it would probably be to stay in the lights and enjoy it and be able to go and explore the Universe.

If I come, I have to force myself to take larger doses of *toma* because with those I'm definitely heading towards introspection rather than going on small doses and staying in the lights.

You saw how last time I was decisive and relentless. This time I hesitate. With respect then to what you say, it seems to me that you are talking about a non-egoic and non-conscious knowledge (reptilian perhaps, pre-verbal, certainly primitive and atavistic), on which life could acquire other nuances. The image I have is

one of accessing images transversal to humans, perhaps cosmic, that refer to the referentiality of our body/mind. Like being a cell and in a fractal way being inside one of the organs of our body, in social relationship with others and simultaneously with a meteorite in the universe. Perceptions similar to themselves and simultaneously transversal, recursive and repetitive. Access to basic patterns, to the building blocks of world-building. The “I” is annoying and limiting, getting out of the limitations of the “I” would be the experience I would ask for. However, I am afraid that the opening of the 7th chakra could lead me to the feeling of vagueness and fog that I felt the last day. Annoying because it is unknown or annoying in itself? Why am I so afraid of the invisible? The famous path of no return?

I would like to continue this dialogue with you, whether you leave or not. I would like to be able to consider the sacred an integral part of life. I am convinced that the more one understands oneself, the more one understands the world. How to decide?

*From Stefano to Umberta. February, 3 2011. mmmh...*  
not egoic BUT aware.

I too would love this dialogue to continue – let’s keep it going. I’ll try to skype you tomorrow – plausible times? I’m off, sorry for the hurry

*Marisa to Umberta. February, 3 2011*

I am on the train to Milan and I have your writing with me. Thank you so much for letting me share such an intimate journey. I will tell you...

*From Stefano to Umberta. April 24, 2011*

Night of dreams, ceremony with double drinking and healing of deep wounds... To you a river of this Energy. Pack your bags: August in Pucalpa from Diogenes

*Umberta to Stefano, April 28, 2011*

I remember what a wonderful rainbow greeted our departure from the Temple. For Andean shamans, the rainbow is a communication bridge that allows some spirits to access heaven and others to become matter and come to earth. Because nature communicates and it is important to know how to interpret it. Who knows what meaning the rainbow has for the Shipibo? How many things I do not know and have not asked!

In front of my window in Rome I see the Arch of Constantine. An arch of victory for the Romans. When entering many towns and villages, one has to pass through an arch, which makes one feel as if one is passing from one kingdom to another. Above my front door I have attached a symbol of peace and harmony consecrated to my ancestors, I don't think people entering notice it, I hope they emotionally perceive it. It is my personal solemn acknowledgement to the ancestors and protectors.

*Another experience*

About a year later I receive this e-mail: "Possibility Aya, few places, let me know". I immediately accept and involved Stefano and Ampelio. I look up the name of the shaman who will officiate at the ceremony on his website, the message that introduces him says: "Ayahuasca, the umbilical cord of the

Cosmos, emerges from the place of the jaguar, in the Maloca of the Cosmos, where the energy of the Anaconda and the Jaguar flow directly from the heart of Heaven and Earth. When Ayahuasca was first drunk, the world vibrated in spirit and following the word of the songs and ancestral music: the addictive power, the healing power and the spirit of dance". The jaguar, as well as the anaconda... maybe because the shaman is Colombian?

*June 2, 2012*

I am on the train, on my way to a ceremony that will take place tonight. I'm going after there have been cancellations, shifts and reconfirmations. I am happy and of course worried: I am still me. I think of Jeremy Narby's words: "In my opinion a full-blown hallucinatory session is more like a controlled nightmare than a form of entertainment and requires preparation, discipline and courage" (1998, p. 136). I fully agree with him, yet I am certain I want to go. I am calm because it is my decision and because I am curious to explore.

Last night I woke up several times wondering what my intention might be. What to ask? What skills to expand in order to participate more actively in the world? To connect with the Universe? Cosmic love as my Rumanian friend at the Temple asked? Expand my relationship with animals even further? What skills to bring into play for my next publishing project? How to expand the ability to feel? Each time I went back to sleep thinking that I will ask the shaman officiating at the ceremony for advice.

The fact that I forgot my mobile phone at home is a sign that I am agitated, I think, but also that I need to close in on myself, eliminate noise and contact with the world. Two days centered only on me: beautiful, intense, unusual.

This is a time when I feel in control of my life, involved in a thousand work projects. What am I looking for? It is as if my day-to-day is not enough for me and I want to investigate what is more, outside the here and now of the day and routine. Do I go looking for emotions? Knowledge and emotions. I go to explore access to an “other” world. That's just how it is. I have a zest for life, I enjoy the little things, I am curious about the world, I always have a thousand projects in the pipeline and I play on several tables at once. I have done so since childhood. But sometimes the world seems stark to me, almost impossible to live in. Sometimes I have the feeling of seeing the world from the other side of the sky, of seeing it 'naked', lacking that energy that makes it bearable and pleasant. As if it is stripped of all charm and appears to be a place where we have no free will but are hamsters in a large cage. I lose the purpose and it seems to me that humans are giving it for granted and that only our pride makes us feel good, while we destroy the world, lightly hearted but inexorable.

I am disgorging my omelet of oats, eggs and yoghurt, strictly without salt; the last meal of the day before the ceremony. In my carrier I have a sleeping bag, a mat to lie on, comfortable clothes and a night potty in case I feel like vomiting after drinking (not by chance it is called *the purge* because it stimulates physical, emotional and spiritual purification). The desire to understand is always with me. I am on the train, without a mobile phone. I like it, it is a time to relax and it is justified to

do nothing. I read the horoscope. “You like to get close to the mouth of the shadow and peek inside. Now and then you would stick your little foot of white Canovian marble in it. You wouldn't stick your whole body in it, though. As Dickinson would say, infinity has the latitude of home. Now you are able to defy all indifferent silence. As lovers you proceed beyond the phenomenal threshold, you see the soul. The unbridgeable is no longer impossible. But always with the humility of listening” (Pesadori, D di Repubblica 2.6.2012). Usually I don't believe in horoscopes, but today it seems to speak directly to me. And what will the others born in my sign do today? Will they, too, all take Ayahuasca, of all plants the mother?

We arrived at a somewhat bare spot that we slowly adapted to our needs. A cloth depicting the anaconda is hoisted up, everyone finds their own space in the circular tent and gathers the things they will need for the night. I also lay next to me the map of the shamanic journey that I embroidered myself in a seminar with the Tuvinian shaman Vera Sazhina. It depicts the sun, the moon, a winged horse to make the shamanic journey and a tree with solid roots, to always return home. The shaman carves out a space with a low table on which he places his tools of the trade, amulets, crystals, protectors, the medicine bottle. He is all dressed in white with two shoulder bags and a scarf that reproduces the mantle of the jaguar. He has comfortable fur slippers that make no noise when he walks and give him a plush stride. He has long hair, a cap decorated with beads, and begins to energetically clean up the place. He is Colombian, has a degree in anthropology and tells us that his whole family follows the tradition of medicine. His 14-year-old son cele-

brates the rituals and his newborn daughter – before her mother’s milk – was given a drop of the medicine, to allow her to connect forever with the Universe. He has been initiated into eight different ways of healing with the substance, on each occasion choosing the process best suited to the situation. On this occasion he performs syncretic operations, prays, uses a crystal to connect and smoke to purify, energizes the medicine after diluting it with a little water, offers basil tea to calm the stomach to receive it. He also considers Ayahuasca a doctor, a substance with a strong Spirit, an intelligent entity. His respect for the medicine is palpable.

Stefano, Ampelio and I, the usual trio, are curious to see the differences with the ceremonies we did in Peru. The atmosphere is very relaxed, the ceremony will begin at nightfall, the time is not defined. The shaman does not ask anything of us, he trusts each of us to approach the substance as s/he prefers, in silence, without rehearsal.

A fire is built outside the hut that will burn throughout the night and that will “clean” the surrounding space and perfume the environment for the COPPAL thrown into the flames. Some embers will be placed in a brazier in the center of the hut; a thick, perfumed smoke purifies us and tries to drive away the mosquitoes that consider us the meal of the night (will they also have had splendid colored dreams, having drunk our blood?). The shaman chants and prays. Never before have I realized what a medium he is, switching off both cerebral hemispheres and allowing the substance to speak for him. He shifts his attention level and begins to officiate the ceremony. Each of us is focused with respect to its own intentions.

Personally, I ask Ayahuasca to give me a gentle experience and let me understand what she feels I need to understand. I trust, I rely, however the lesson will be of value. I address Her<sup>1</sup>, calling her by name and greeting her with respect, but also as an old acquaintance.

Still no drinking. The master sings to the plant to increase its power (less sharply than the Shipibo shamans), he blows smoke into it so that it is not contaminated by negative forces. He mixes it with a kitchen ladle and chants. One by one we drink our glass, followed by a glass of water to rinse our mouths and dispel the terrible taste. We each return to our beds. The shaman, after drinking in turn, starts waving a fan of dry leaves (*shacapa*) giving us the sensation of being among the leaves, inside a windy forest. The leaves rustle, I close my eyes and let myself be rocked until my legs tingle: as usual the plant from my feet goes up towards my brain and makes me see dots of green light, like a matrix. I am invaded by colors.

I find myself overwhelmed by the vision: symmetrical rounded and curved shapes, in constant motion, which seem to be made of many different metals, stand out against a lighter but dim background. The metals look like different alloys: copper, silver, bronze and others opaque, some very bright and shiny, textural. A thousand different nuances and a thousand different brightness 'shapes follow one another while glimpses of light illuminate with absurdly beautiful colorful scenes. Abstract figures follow one another quickly, I cannot grasp them, as if a veil were parting and I could see in the distance scenes of life that perhaps involve me. Some spaces appear distant and

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<sup>1</sup> For me Ayahuasca is a female snake, a lady anaconda.



bright, like the bottom of an illuminated swimming pool. I feel as if I am in a gothic setting, but am I there? I do not even try to establish this and enjoy what I see. I have the knowledge that these shapes come from my brain and I let myself go. In this first phase they tower over me, they command over me, they impose themselves. My ego is no longer there, this time without fear.

I do not know how long the process lasts. When the shaman stops chanting and making sounds (the leaves, whispering, whistling, a wordless humming), when he stops playing the drum, I find myself in the hut, admiring what my brain has produced. I go outside, join some people around the fire, feel perfectly oriented in time and space. I warm myself by the flames, exchange a few sounds with others, look at the sky, see fireflies and some rabbits moving freely in the meadow. When I hear the shaman's song begin again, I feel myself drawn towards the hut, I lie down again and the journey begins again. Colors, shapes, kaleidoscopic images, everyday objects with unusual colors and shapes assembled together like a dense collage, always changing. Images disconnected from each other. I am again inside the forest of my mind, at one with nature, with the songs, with the other participants. Passive and yet very comfortable. I feel strangely cared for by the substance, as if it were taking care of me, as if it were scanning me in every part of my body, entering every cell. I feel present and at the same time it is as if I have lost all awareness of my ego, every human and specific aspect of my personality. I could be a plant or a stone.

I am a cerebral person, my mind is constantly working, and yet I feel at ease in this time without thought, my vision expanded

out of all proportion. I can relax and feel good, three-dimensionally good. I open my eyes and see Ampelio's empty bed. He is probably standing by the fire charging himself, expelling all the negative energies who were circulating in the space around him, taking them upon himself, collecting them as a hoover, then purifying with heat. In his usual role as healer, he is toiling and working for us, feeling the weight of responsibility, emitting loud burps of purification. To my right, a man in his 50s is all cocooned in his sleeping bag so as not to be devoured by mosquitoes, and he moves like a caterpillar, with painful and sudden movements: a long amaranth sleeping bag that seems to have motion of its own.

The shaman meanwhile offers new medicine cups to those who ask for them. He is working with a woman who is rocking her head and complaining that she cannot keep her thoughts still, oppressed by negative and intrusive feelings, very scattered. The shaman does not lose heart, he does not seem at all frightened by the woman's explicit discomfort. He continues to chant, waving his fan and touching her head with various objects. He keeps singing, apparently increasing the effect of the substance.

The ceremony goes on, I feel tired, I see the world "raw". I think that I would like to feel lose from this subjective and egotistic world of me too centered around myself: the usual friends, the routine, friends of friends. I evaluate certain aspects of my daily life that come to mind in a seemingly random way and I realize that the judgement is timely, the resolutions explicit and immediate. I tell myself that it takes a strong ego structure to be able to let go. I will try harder. I would like to connect with my heart and body, to let go of the brain that has

become vigilant again, of the ego, of the hubris I have waged with life (a war I know well and which I am certainly fatigued by), I would like to go beyond the status quo, the homeostasis in which I feel imprisoned, which reifies a social positioning I can afford to go beyond. I would like to become absorbed in the relationship with the people all around me in order to enter the domain of the sacred mind, to access connection with others, all others, especially those in need, to become part of a supportive ecosystem, to remain in a generative and processual state and continue my journey even when I am far from here. I would like to participate more intensively in the recursive processes of life. I would like to get my hands dirty, to do for others, to abandon my status, to find myself elsewhere.

I open my eyes and find myself oriented in the here and now; I close them and form luminous silhouettes that at this point seem to be in time with the chants around me. Tiny colored shapes in motion, one piled on top of the other. Phosphines? I have to ask my friend Yuliana Arbelaez, who pursues the trail of the pineal gland and photons to further the journey. Images no longer possess me, I am back under my jurisdiction, they entertain me not dominate me. When I open my eyes one more time I realize it is morning, perhaps seven o'clock. I have travelled, I have had visions, I have slept, perhaps I have dreamt, I have lost all sense of time.

The shaman is sitting in his seat, he has watched over us all night, continuing to sing and play the drum and rattles. He nursed us, looked after us, asked the plant spirits – his allies – to work with us and for us. He greets us with a smile as if to reassure us that the world is a place of love and that after this experience we will live better, with more awareness.

When we gather to comment on the night together, he will advise us to always be aware that we are children of the Earth and of Life. He will remind us of our responsibility to try to save the world if we do not want it to end. Kahuyali will give a long and calm speech on the need to respect mother earth and the need to change our point of view and build positive social practices. On the need to manage what is around us. He will make us reflect on how many shamans from all parts of the earth are joining together to organize rituals everywhere, in order to raise awareness about living and the importance of survival for the World. Ayahuasca, he tells us, gave us tonight what we needed, not what we wanted.

### ***Experiences from the group***

The experiences of the people with me seem very different:

“I abandoned myself in the void. I was happy, I danced, sang and obeyed to the medicine. I played, I was happy”.

“It was a strong experience that started already a week ago. I was able to go inside myself to see more clearly and understand my fears. I am afraid of letting go and trusting. Each time with the medicine I realize that I take steps towards more trust”.

“It was a very important day for me. I came with a strong problem. In the Amazon, a curandero passed me some negative energy and I had a terrible time. I had the feeling of losing my mind and the desire to kill myself. I felt I had to come and do this ceremony to get rid of the negative energy. Tonight I felt the protection of the fire, the Master’s love and the Shaman’s

special relationship with the plant. He gave me a special cure. Now I feel on holiday and calm. I have recovered the will to live”.

“The medicine allows me each time to translate emotions into corporeity”.

“I am a woman who is afraid”, says Luisa, an artist, “I am too afraid even now that I am in love, which is the most beautiful thing in the world. The problem is not being ready to die but being ready to live. I have fear and difficulty in living. In the fire I felt the energy of the world and the energy of the masculine, of the father, of men, of all men”.

“It was a celebration of life. The experience confirmed for me the need to live moment by moment, to acquire childlike eyes and allow myself to make mistakes”.

“I learnt to tune into the body, because the body is the sacred temple and must be taken into account”.

“I perceived the explanation that defines us as human beings”.

“I saw an incredible white light, there was no longer any difference between me and the light. I was the light and everything became present”.

What did I gain/learn from this experience? A moment of connection with the essence of life, while looking at the moon in front of the fire, while it was cold and the fireflies seemed immense. I could not put this feeling into words, except to describe it as a peace that quieted all questions and transported me to the center of myself and simultaneously to the center of existence and life. I felt connected to myself and at the same

time in a no-place of images and sensations. It is not we who voluntarily construct this harmony, we find it in relation to the substance, perhaps we could learn to achieve it in relation to life itself. It is She who forces us to find our harmony, it is She who brings us into Her order, together with the whole group under the same medicine, the same ritual, the protection of the same Shaman. Shamans often call this consonance "LOVE". A feeling of presence and contact to which one can tacitly adapt, the opposite of the feeling with which I arrived. We could also call it "integrity", the ability to have more and more honest intentions, clearer rather than collusive ego-maintaining motives.

I have learnt the value of humility. I do not know where I should go from here, I do not lead but I defer to a will greater than myself and rely on the substance that knows where to take me. I accept what it gives me. I have learnt to tune into the substance, to dance with it, to accept it and follow it. Next time I promised myself to question it and explore the thousand questions it poses to me each time. To interact more with the Anaconda.

I would like to ask her if when we are born we possess a common and vast knowledge that shrinks according to the experiences we have after birth in the western culture that trivializes us, limits us, forces us to a judgmental way of thinking; I would like to explore the fractal form of each experience, ours and the world's, as if they were interconnected; I would like to understand what I have understood so far; I would like to access an extra 1% in the use of the brain, whatever it is (I aspire to extended consciousness phenomena).

Basically I feel good, centered, in touch with myself, comfortable in my own skin. Kajuyali Tsamani suggested I try to carry this feeling of joy and wholeness into everyday life, every day. Always.

I realized that I have to take an active part for this to happen: I have to remember and bring back this hot night, I have to practice, it is a training. I will continue drinking and learning the art of being in the world.

### *Another personal experience*

*January 3, 2014*

I am on the train again, destination this time a composition of Brazilian and Peruvian practices: PAJELANZA, a mixture of rituals and substances from the two countries. We will do the RAPE, a combination of chopped herbs that is inhaled into the nose by the curandero according to the person's needs; the KAMBO, the secretion of a particular frog that is put on the living skin and allows us to purify the body; the SANANGA, a kind of very burning chili that is put in the eyes and accentuates vision; and the Ayahuasca. Stefano and Ampelio have invited me, for now I feel external to the experience and I see the funny side of it: when you are not in the Amazon rainforest but in Europe, in a city, in an everyday context, you risk finding yourself in a Vanzina brothers' film<sup>2</sup>. A film in which well-to-do and fashionable guys, with a Porsche (or rather "the" Porsche) and a Ralph Loren T-shirt arrive without

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<sup>2</sup> These are Italian filmmaking brothers that produce and direct very superficial films on posh vacation places.

knowing anything about the sacredness of the ritual, to have the ultimate psychedelic experience in a place they don't even notice: they swallow what they are given, experience some random emotions, wake up, forget about it and go back to their work, to their habits, as if nothing had happened. They can then tell the adventure and feel fashionable. I believe in research, in working towards an ever more sophisticated awareness of the process of living, I believe in the dietary and behavioral prohibitions that shamans impose, and I don't believe Toma is just another experience. I don't want to do something that is becoming fashionable, I want to research and I want to go into the territory of shamans. Anyway, today I follow the advice of two people I trust. I go, I see...

*January 5, 2014*

Still by train, I'm heading home. This time I don't have much to tell. The *rapé*<sup>3</sup> made me as sick as if I were inside a blender: my head wouldn't stop spinning and I couldn't get back to the ground, to ground myself. During the ceremony my companions took it several times, each time mixed with a different plant that made them dance and move around the room, usually with great glee. For me, the first time was enough. After such a strong discomfort, Ayahuasca seemed to me a reassuring and peaceful experience. I began to see colors, images – as always – and I enjoyed the journey to which I could not give a specific meaning even though it was full of thoughts that I do not

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<sup>3</sup> *Rapé* takes its name from a highly prized variety of black snuff, which was originally obtained by rasping the dried and tanned tobacco leaves. For Brazilian shamans, it is a shredding of various leaves as needed, to be inhaled.



remember but which will surely work in the coming days/months. However, one thing is very significant: every time I do the A. I can feel connected to life again and I get back a charge of energy and enthusiasm that had been waning in recent months. It works as a powerful anti-depressant because it seems to give meaning to living, connecting me to the Universe. Cognitively and emotionally it is as if I feel connected to everything that flows again and see the added value of living. In my opinion, the Universe has a mind, like the galaxies, the earth, humans, and nature is the body of this conscious system where each flower or plant, each being has its own independent mind. We participate simultaneously in both the natural and mental aspects of life. It is as if the ceremony gives me new meaning and suggests a “new” project with respect to the phase of my life: a phase in which I have fulfilled the tasks of both biological and social generativity, I have strengthened my position, I have achieved results, and the recognition I have received externally allows me to move on to the next phase of my life project, that of dealing with “deep time” which includes present-future and past, all at the same time. I have built boundaries, identity, order, control, pleasure, certainty, security, knowledge, constructed hypotheses, received answers. I still do not know enough to be very curious. In my life so far I have answered questions about “who I am” and “what I should/would do”, received narcissistic gratification and positive feedback as well as critics and negative feedbacks. I feel I am strong enough to go further, I have a defined ego that I can try to put aside (this is a difficult project to achieve), I have a sense of my place in the world, I can enter into this new project that involves accessing the sacred. Para-

doxically, accessing the energy of Eros by looking into the face of Thanatos, trying to dialogue with both.

Every system in the Universe is self-organizing and potentially self-reflexive. Our conscious mind cohabits with infinite potentialities and it is we who choose between these possibilities. In choosing we discard some paths and choose others. It was the philosopher Alfred Whitehead who argued in his pan-psychic view that there is a mental causality that goes from the future to the present and a physical causality that goes from the past to the present. The two causalities meet in the here and now, according to him. When one does Ayahuasca one participates in this collective mind, in reflexivity, and at the same time one amplifies the here and now through the body and visions.

### ***Returning to Perú***

*July 18, 2014*

When did the journey begin? When I decided to do it, when I bought the tickets, the moment I set foot in Peru again, or when I made the first rapé and felt my awareness expand? Now that I am on the plane to Pucalpa where the shaman who will follow us lives, or tonight when I arrive at the place where we will stay; or again tomorrow that we will do the first ceremony and we will all meet in the maloca to drink together? The journey has never ended since I decided to come to Peru in 2010 and experience the substance for the first time. The journey has never ended since the first shaman I met in 1987 in Buryatia, since I began to reflect on the meaning of living. The quest has not stopped for a second. So the journey – I could say – began

when I was conceived and continues unabated. Since 2010 it is more focused, but nothing more. Lately I have then become aware that I have entered the second half of life: it was Jung who proposed to speak of two halves of life, describing their very different tasks: one till 60 years old, the other from 60 on. Everyone walks this kind of journey, sharpening their own beliefs and emotions, the density of living. One's lifestyle, idiosyncrasies, faults and qualities, the usual ways of reasoning, the inevitable collusions, relationships, encounters, loves and commitments: everyone has something to leave behind and something else to take and understand or to enhance: responsibilities, memories, emotions, resolutions, patterns of functioning, traumas...

I keep telling myself that I want to understand how the mind works. I can still expand my faculties, throw out some prejudices, diminish my critical sense, abolish some limits. Better still, I can get out of the homeostatic self-referentiality that characterized my previous journeys, in which I worked as if to reassure myself that everything was fine and everything had to stay the same. I could try to fly without a safety net this time, get out of the self-reference of "without meaning", out of the unconscious effort to keep myself in stable equilibrium. I might learn better to take life in its evolutionary direction rather than against the grain.

Who will be my travelling companions? I don't know them but I am sure they will positively influence the overall climate, because together we will form a collective mind, an organized system that will naturally be influenced by the context, the shaman, his behavior, his energy and our own, our collective worldview. It will be influenced by the relationship that will be

established between all the participants, including the many dogs present, the children of the natives, the helpers, the less restrictive food than usual. ALL TOGETHER.

*July 19, 2011*

Everything makes sense to me: the cleansing and detoxifying sauna in the morning, which takes away our tensions and tiredness, the explanation about plants, the sauna and the flordid water bath in the afternoon, the waiting. The mosquitoes that have not been there all day (too much wind?) and are now beginning to itch. The green drink we took around 12 and which set one of us off with lucid dreams, vomiting and now a crazy headache. The hammock in which I take refuge to reflect, the dog that has become attached to me and with whom I exchange fleas, the transparent bugs that fill me with bubbles and the red juice from a tree that smeared on my body soothes the itch. We all seem to go through the experience, adapting and looking for the positive aspects.

*Stories*

The shaman Roger was a teacher at school but decided to follow his desire. He bought the land, planted master plants, became an expert in Ayahuasca and healing. He receives no subsidies from the state but this is his passion and he welcomes people who want to follow the same path as him. He appears solid, competent, capable, essential. He would like to gather somewhat scattered young people here and help them, connecting them with their roots in life.

It was his paternal grandfather who initiated him. He was a powerful shaman. His mother initially did not drink even though she is a plant specialist. When he was nine years old, he started drinking while already attending ceremonies. In one of these, spiritual energy came to him and he felt he had to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, who in turn asked him to diet on a plant that no one usually knows about (*chaikunirò*) and grows in a place about seven hours away from where we are now, here in Suipino<sup>4</sup> (*sui* energy, *pine*: hummingbird; hummingbird that turned into a shaman). He has been on the diet for four years. It is a plant for the pain of living, for when affections disappear; a plant that puts you back in touch with the world and offers energy. You drink it, bathe in it, it is a plant that makes you dream and connects you with the earth, with water and with the anaconda. Grandfather also made his diet on this plant, without eating anything else, to unite with the spirits of the plant. They – the spirits – probably gave him more food, because Grandpa did not seem to suffer from hunger, he always seemed satiated. Grandpa did not like Roger asking him questions: “Don’t ask me questions, just listen and tonight both questions and answers will come. Don’t ask”, he would tell him. The spirits would come in canoes, talking to Grandfather as if they were real people. They smoked because tobacco is the substance's faithful friend and opens to visions. “Where do these people come from?” he wondered but he did not dare ask Grandpa and watched them from a distance. When

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<sup>4</sup> The shaman in Suipino has set up a project to regenerate the area through the cultivation of master plants and would also like to gather young people in difficulty and make them literate in master plants and their use.

he woke up in the morning, Grandpa was usually asleep. Alone.

He says that there are three levels of competence that shamans can reach:

- *drauna* is one who has the power to know the secrets of plants but is primarily a botanist and does not use these powers;
- *unaya* is s/he who takes the medicine, knows how to prepare it and sings; it is the level at which the body is healed;
- *muraya* is when one establishes a connection with the world of the invisible. The shaman is able at this stage to drink the toma, to hear the voice of the spirit saying what the person who is ill suffers from. This is a very high level.

Master plants allow connection on both the physical and psychic levels, there are then powers that one can possess and that shamans perfect over time:

- *maridi* is the power that the plant gives you, a personal power, a saliva (*carara*) that seems to burn and drowns you;
- *marupa* is the ability to operate without a scalpel. The equivalent of Pucalpa's *chupar*, which goes to remove the energy that is placed where the evil is.

“The masters arrive in dreams”, he tells us “and pass on their knowledge, indicating how to work on each sick person; sometimes chiaikuni, invisible individual spirits, arrive. The shaman tends to transform himself into the spirit of the plant and feels great respect for it, a guarantee of working in synergy, just as he feels respect for the social rules of coexistence”.

Roger tells how he uses the medicine in the different stages of the process: the first night of the ceremony is to get to know the people individually and the shamans chant on a general level; the second night is to see how the individual people relate to the substance and they chant on both a personal and a general level, so that people can also get closer to the substance and make friends with it, gaining security from it. “I prefer not to rush the work and would like everyone to answer the questions they came with. The second ceremony is done to make the journey smoother and break the barrier of fear”. He tells us about the different levels of the journey according to what happens:

- at a basic level there are lights and colors, you travel through space and explore the universe;
- at a more sophisticated level one connects with the spirit of the anaconda, with dragons, hummingbirds, the eagle and the jaguar;
- on a even higher dimensional level we connect with the ancient masters, with the spirits of the plants that bring us into the world of Ayahuasca.

He tells us about the master plants that he cultivates in Suipino, proud to recover and study them as well as save them from oblivion.

Personally I am aware that Roger uses plants in a very articulate way; he proposes more than one type of medicine, depending on what he wants to achieve, at what stage we are in our journey with the substance and the purification journey he wants to achieve. Some tomes are stronger and contain different plants, some contain plants to reduce the mental,

some to amplify the emotional. He mentions a very potent Ayahuasca *nigra* (black), which helps him to remove the invoices made on people. “Plants take you to a future of knowledge and healing. Each plant is a medium for healers and brujos<sup>5</sup>: they are of service and the intention is given by the person. Each plant has its specificity and its spirits, its icaros, and each has two parents. It is the spirits that pass on the icaros, which serve to raise or lower the plant’s energy. There are those that work on the physical part and others that serve to expand the psychic part. The shaman transforms him/herself into the spirit of the plant and – when s/he takes them on – it is they who enable him or her to deal with traumas and to identify where the problems lie, to guide the hand of the person doing the massages, to warn the shaman of who s/he is dealing with”.

Walter, Roger’s half-brother, focuses more on the modality of the work: healing means enabling a person to be well. Health, strength and knowledge are the capacities that each of us wishes to possess. Everything must flow in one’s life, the physical part and the mental one. There must be good communication between the different parts of oneself, including the spiritual. The spirit should be radiant. We have four dimensions: physical, mental, spiritual and etheric. The essence of life is the spirit which is accelerated according to matter; the material aspect is the means not the end. The A. first works on the body, when the body is purified and has let out the negative energy, the medicine moves to the spiritual plane and allows one to deepen and see.

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<sup>5</sup> The brujos are healers dedicated to black magic.



The pain experienced in the here and now is often a sign of a trauma from the past. We deal with it concretely, even when we do not explicitly talk about the problem. We usually give personal recommendations and to those who come to us for a whole month we also make a diagnosis. We have been trained towards the good, it is a spiritual diet that we propose, a purification diet to elevate the spirit. Our ability to see and heal is based on a will and faith in the plants that determine the path of the healer and the cured. We thus have the possibility of using diets in which we restrict the food taken in and prescribe the plants to be taken, sometimes we indicate a diet that enables the learning of healing.

“While we work we use neither strategies nor techniques but spontaneously use the moment, speak with love. Humility, honesty and a lot of love are the ingredients we use. While singing we are often in a trance and the icaros are not always the same. We each use our own melody and the shaman gets the melody of the plant on which s/he has been dieting”. Walter first drank at the age of fourteen, in the first vision he saw his path from birth on. He was able to see himself in his mother’s womb: “This first vision allowed me to value myself. My grandparents also appeared to me and confirmed that this is my journey. Through the different ceremonies I gradually felt that I was born spiritually. I was flying in the Universe. When I saw bad things, tears would well up in my eyes that became water to wash away the evil”. Walter like Stefano believes that A. gives you a split, you see spiritual death and then you have to be reborn with new ideas, evolve. It is a spiritual rebirth and for that you have to die, pass through the barrier of darkness, of the negative (let us realize that Hercules, Ulysses, Aeneas,

Orpheus, Psyche, Dante, Jesus, all went to Hades, to the realm of the dead and then returned: many myths include a descent into the underworld and a transformation following this descent). Negative effects are part of the experience and involve the fear of visions, the feeling of being trapped, of not returning, the experience of leaving the body, discovering aspects one does not want to know about oneself, tension, sadness, connection with dark parts. The positive effects generally involve a greater sense of self, less fear of death, a greater appreciation of life, a greater ability to relax. Sometimes one drastically changes friends and lifestyles, makes innovative choices and takes responsibility for a more conscious daily life. Personally, I feel this last aspect very strongly.

I like the metaphor of Ayahuasca as a ritual of losing oneself (perhaps death is precisely the ability to lose oneself and find oneself in another dimension), to move forward it is always necessary to let go of something (to forgive oneself, to give up, to sacrifice, to redefine, to make it flow...). Because it is especially when the ego is deconstructed that space is made for new assumptions and there is the possibility of being perturbed. Because we need an external authority<sup>6</sup> (the Ayahuasca) to push us to reflect on ourselves. The opposite of rational is not necessarily irrational, it can also be “trans-rational”, something greater than what the rational mind can process, something like love, death, suffering but also intergalactic travel, loss of self, contact with the infinite. “Because the trans-rational has the

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<sup>6</sup> Authority and power are functions of old age, the elder deserves respect and honors for the wisdom he embodies, and living to old age is a privilege granted by the Supreme Creator. Elders are considered close to ancestors and spirits.

ability to keep us within an open system and a broader horizon so that the soul, heart and mind do not close in a constricting space. The rational mind is inevitably dualistic and divides the field at any given moment between what can be understood in the present moment and what it assesses as ‘wrong’ or implausible. The rational mind has difficulty processing love and suffering, it tends to avoid them, to deny them and attributes unwanted things to external causes. Love and suffering, on the other hand, are very powerful spiritual teachers, provided we allow them to be” (Rohr 2003).

*Lucia’s story*



Lucia Pattarino says: “I face the journey to Ayahuasca and Peru going through ups and downs. To avoid admitting my fear of the plant, I invent side fears, almost all of them without substance, apart from the one about snakes, the only one that might

make sense. Everything dissolves a few days before departure and suddenly it is wonderful to perceive the substantial unknown that awaits me. Yes, I have already taken the substance twice, but in a domestic setting, with South American folklore songs recorded instead of icaros, a context that necessarily reduced the impact of the experience”.

The first ceremony at the camp is interlocutory. At least that is how I perceive it. The two Italian experiences had produced completely different effects on me, so I can expect anything. The tales of two friends who have experienced several ceremonies in Iquitos, one of them with a particular “sensitivity” towards the otherworldly, risk leading me astray and setting me on the path of performance anxiety, of the series “I also want to see what they saw”. I decide to get out of this trap before I have my first fateful drink and also to stop listening to the various opinions circulating about the “right” way to react to the plant. I try to leave the ego at least out of it. Ayahuasca tastes disgusting. Some consider it “blasphemous” to say that it tastes vomitus, but I am sure that the spirit of Ayahuasca, in which I believe without difficulty, will distinguish and appreciate the value of sincerity and will be as horrified by hairy hypocrisy as any evolved spirit. I lie down out of caution. I have few expectations, but one of them is that the substance here is stronger than the one I have already been given, even though the quantities seem to be the same. Gradually I enter into a sort of daze and visions of snakes moving sinuously, as if in predefined paths, begin. They have pastel colors, mostly white to ochre, they have letters of the alphabet, Western and Hebrew, printed on their bodies. They remind me of a painting by Gustavo Rol, a red and white forest in which every element, seen up close, is composed of alphabetical signs. I make this analysis with the lucid part of my brain still functioning, as it did the first two times, even in the thickest moments of visions. The icaros come like a dagger to the cerebellum. As soon as they start, substantial and uncontrollable effects concatenate. The voice of Ayda – the mother of the shaman Roger, head of

the village – resonates with me with particular power, it fascinates and disturbs me at the same time. I feel as if hypnotized by a rattlesnake: I perceive it as something that only heals if you guess the dose, but can serenely kill if you cross it. I spend the entire ceremony lying in the fetal position. I am cold and uncomfortable: it has been raining all day and I have not brought anything heavy, so shortly after the ceremony begins I start shivering convulsively from the dampness rising from the ground. I think I'm going to die of pneumonia, an amazing thought for someone who goes to the most remote places on the planet without medication, doesn't do check-ups and when she broke her ankle in three places, she walked around on it for five days before going, obliquely, for an X-ray. I sense that I am being a whiner because it is something else I miss, the warmth of love and not atmospheric warmth. I came to do these ceremonies with a couple of very specific questions in my head: one is about DNA realignment and the other is about the integration and acceptance of my feminine side. I have also given myself a task, that of getting something from the shamans, which I don't even know how or whether to ask for. I keep seeing snakes, but after a while I am tempted to think that yes, OK, everything is so plastic and scenic, but it has no meaning. Then I look closer and see that the snakes are moving in the pattern of the body's skeleton and I hope that it is my own, that they are basically going through every fiber of me to realign the DNA to the original one with which I was designed for this human experience, as I have been suggested to do.

Just as I stop wishing for a clearer, more meaningful vision to appear before me, two warriors appear side by side, much taller than me, both holding two spears in their outer hands, their

bodies stylized into two large triangles that join at the waist from the tip. The heads are also rhomboidal. They emanate a strong light and seem full of peace, but when they declare loudly, with a hieratic air of apparent appreciation towards me, that I am “a warrior of Rome” I feel it is a trap. Ever since I was a child, I have only ever associated ancient and modern Rome with emotions of aggression, arrogance, violent domination and impunity and I proudly and dryly reply: “NO! I am a warrior only of Love and Light”. They leave and the brightness of my vision disappears too, but I feel serene and I know I have given the most honest answer. In fact afterwards the anaconda arrives and I take it as an acknowledgement that I have deserved.

When the ceremony ends I remain over an hour undecided whether to leave or not. I'm afraid to move at night in the forest in the dark, I think it's madness, plus I'm groping. I can't find the lamp and my roommate can't get up. I too feel with a buzzing head and little balance, unheard of sensations compared to the first two times, but my bladder is bursting and a death chill has penetrated every bone. To avoid touching the floor with my body, especially at the level of my lungs, at a certain point I put myself in the Muslim prayer position and try to resist by sleeping leaning only on my lower legs and forehead. I don't even last ten minutes and then decide to go back to the tambo at any price. The 80 meters that separate me from the hut where I sleep are a nightmare. I can't balance myself and I have visual hallucinations. I am madly terrified of putting my feet on something that crawls or worse, so I go on with the force of desperation. I pass the man walking around the camp with the rifle, not sure whether to protect the guests from the

jaguars or from the crime that might penetrate from outside, and I feel relieved. I feel that he follows me from afar with his gaze and makes sure that I slip into the right hut. Entering the small room and seeing my sleeping bag gives me an indescribable sense of relief. Except that I still have to go pee and that means leaving the hut and going into the adjoining bathroom, whose door remains constantly open and so could have become a refuge for who knows what animals. I enter it with a terror that I don't remember ever feeling before and I immediately see it confirmed by hallucinations. I see a snake coiled under the washbasin and I jump back, then the lucid part of my brain tells me it can't be real since it is the ghostly whitish color of the lights I have been seeing all along. When I see another animal near the toilet, therefore, I get less scared. The bladder stimulus is unbearable and helps to speed up the path to lucidity. I make it. I go back to the hut and slip into my sleeping bag on the bed, arranging the mosquito net around me. I hear all kinds of noises, but I am still not suggestible from the stories of the others and I don't think they are "spirits". For me they are real animals or hallucinations, but I do not distinguish. I think that a jaguar could easily break through the mosquito net that replaces the window pane and tear me apart in minutes, before the armed guard notices. Then I hear footsteps around the tambo. I begin to experience a fear that does not belong to me. Eventually, almost instinctively with thought I call the shamans for protection and shortly afterwards I fall asleep. It is only a couple of days later that I discover that the shamans suggest spending the whole night in maloca, after the ceremony, until dawn, because outside they are unable to protect us. Ayahuasca mobilizes spirits and forces that, evidently, can

be controlled up to a certain point, in a specific sacred and circumscribed place. The morning after the first ceremony, Walter, Roger's half-brother, says a phrase that seems to me the key to the whole work: "After last night we know you all personally, one by one, but we still don't even know your names". When I repeat it to fellow experiencers in the following days or in the stories back from Peru I often see it met with indifference, a sign of how the experience of research is highly subjective. For me it sounded like a revelation and a wonderful declaration of love from Ayahuasca: knowing that someone sees me in my soul, for what I really am, naked and raw, gives me a great sense of relief.

The first ceremony then served the shamans to read our energy, to understand why we are here and to take the measure of the work they can do in the coming days. I trust them instinctively and find it reassuring to be known by these strangers more than by my own mother. A long habit of considering love as something meant for others and not for me, makes me feel accepted and honored as a human being for the first time. It is a wonderful feeling, even if part of me understands that it is only the result of a deep misunderstanding that I have come to work on. The leader of this spiritual camp, Roger, in particular gives me a strong sense of protection and loving-kindness. I find myself thinking that the other male being in the world who has given me the same feelings is the Dalai Lama and I regret that they are both out of reach of secular love, I am however grateful to life for letting me walk a little piece of my path in the vicinity of both of them. This fleeting and extreme thought also signals to me that there is still some way to go to recover



my esteem for the male gender, much less solid than I have always told myself.

At the second ceremony I arrive pissed off like a puma. I started in the afternoon, feeling sick and trying to go to bed thinking back to Roger and Walter's lectures. To "diet" a healing plant and become a curandero, it can take two to five years of effort and sacrifice alone, depending on the plant, while a plant that allows one to have powers of black magic and perform evil deeds gives its effects after only 15 days of dieting. This is the difficulty, but also the greatest responsibility in self-seeking: never lose compassion for the other, even when you detest him or her or s/he irritates you, until you realize that there is no difference between "me" and "you". In these years of research I have heard tales of people who have had all kinds of experiences and have used every possible substance to gain awareness, but often show that they do so with the same eagerness and rapaciousness as any other desire of the ego. In practice they do not show themselves capable of stopping to look into the eyes and recognize the other as equal to themselves and feel compassion for them. I go into the maloca discharging the aggressiveness of life experiences on ayahuasca and tell myself that I really don't want to drink that filthy stuff. It bothers me to have the others around, especially those who flaunt that they are constantly in ecstasy, as if to emphasize their superior degree of wisdom compared to the rest of the group. I wish I wasn't there. Maybe it is just a panic attack, but at that moment I am unable to define it lucidly. The shamans do a round of shots and I am so furious that I have to restrain myself so as not to risk spitting the liquid into the pit or throwing it at their heads. Surprisingly it goes down with ease and the taste is almost pleasant. Relief overtakes

me, but it lasts five minutes. The shamans have thought of first giving a round of another substance, the *Incaic marusa* – to the innkeeper's health – a plant that intervenes to calm the thirst for understanding and rationality that we inevitably carry with us. When I discover that I still have to deal with the toma, just when I thought I had escaped it, the anger rises fiercely again. Outraged at the world, for fear of being sick, I lie on my back and remain motionless throughout the ceremony, until 1.30 a.m. Completely paralyzed despite the visions, the noises, the urges, the sensations and the usual snakes. I hold my hands cautiously above and below the point where I feel my ayahuasca stopped, just above the third chakra. I know very well what happens to me if I put my hand on it and in fact I do so as soon as the chanting subsides and the ceremony is declared over: my right hand, active with Reiki, rests on the spot where the ayahuasca has stopped and like a champagne cork a burst of congestive gags starts that makes me spit it all out. It is the first time I vomit ayahuasca and it will also remain the only one.

The path of the ceremonies is marked by the shamans according to what they feel in our collective energy path. Halfway through our stay, the most powerful and meaningful ceremony takes place for me, at which the group arrives with an energy of love, joy and mild excitement that infects almost everyone, excluding those fiercely chasing their own private enlightenment. Perhaps there is also a bit of panic that the giggles try to exorcise. The drink goes down well and gives me the certainty that this time I will do the whole ceremony in the lotus position, alternating open eyes with more introspection. As soon as the round of drinks is completed, it becomes clear that this ceremony will be special. Yet I keep my promises to

myself and remain seated. After the ayahuasca begins to take effect, I look towards the roof of the maloca and see a series of protective nets, spread out loosely like fishing nets, their usual whitish color. I see their meshes and details, despite closing and reopening my eyes several times during the ceremony to check that I am not imagining them.

The next day, three or four of us will compare the “vision” and find it identical. In fact, someone will add that they saw a white thread connecting the nets to each of us. The interpretation we all give is that they are nets to protect the work and Roger, with whom I have since become a little more familiar, confirms this when I hazard a question. Just before entering the flow of the sacred drink, my usual intentions change, I let go of DNA and the feminine side and I tell myself that in this ceremony I want to go and verify and finish the work of cleaning the family tree that I started with psycho-genealogy and family constellations. The ayahuasca listens to me and the ceremony appears to me as a kind of “descent to the underworld” and ascent, in which, through the metaphor of the ancestors (another version of that of our past lives) I go through all my knots, wounds and talents. When one of the shamans steps in front of me with his chants, perhaps Almerigo, I feel my father physically inside me, in my stomach, and I burst into a fit of weeping, until I feel that I have “digested” him and only love remains. Of other deceased people, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, I relive some experiences that emerged with family constellations and psycho-genealogy, but with less emotional involvement.

The ceremony is loud and the “usual spirits” who speak to us and blow in our ears, pass running and riding around us (where in reality there would be no physical space to do so) seem to

have increased in number and appear hyperactive. At one point the stresses seem too much and too strong, I mentally ask for breath. But then I open my eyes and look at the shamans, feeling protected by their net and their love. The next day, when Roger asks me how it went, I will tell him in detail for the first time about all my wanderings of the soul. He will confirm to me that in that ceremony they called the spirits of all their ancestors to protect us and to guide us on our way beyond the gates that separate this world from the others. When he leaves I think that his question only served to reassure me and give me the confirmation I needed, because it is clear that they know exactly what happens in the ceremony to each of us. I feel even more gratitude for their attention and delicacy.

At the last ceremony I arrive with a lot of expectations. I expect a Rossinian crescendo of special effects, some revelation, a bang. Instead, it is a quieter ceremony, in which even the intake of the drink has lost much of its terrifying color and is perfectly feasible, especially with a few dried grapes to chew immediately afterwards and then spit out, just to mask the taste. I find myself thinking that I am safe because the shamans are there with us (as usual, Roger will sleep until dawn with the group, in the maloca) and I am happy with the many expressions of affection among some of the people in the group with whom we have become very close in the space of a few days.

I am grateful to Ayahuasca, but also to the other plants and to the place. I am glad that Ayda has not been with us for a couple of ceremonies, kept away by a slight indisposition, because I am no longer so convinced of the purity of her intent in participating in her son's ceremonies with strangers, while it is clear to me – and somewhat frightening. how powerful she is. The

male-only presences reassure me. Again I realize that the *silbidos*, the soft whistling-like sounds in a bottleneck with which the shaman attacks the ceremony, take me to another dimension of peace and bliss. There is still the anaconda that gives me very personal information about my path, making me feel protected. I fall asleep as if in an embrace, with only the sadness of having to leave here tomorrow. When I wake up, a final moment of gratitude and joy for the experience.

Here in Peru, Ayahuasca was only one part of the cure, as far as I am concerned. The other part was the saunas and showers, the drinking, living among the master plants, but also the context, living with the shipibo, the adaptability we put in place and the instinctive reactions we had to this other world and this different way of conceiving life. The impact with our huts was for me a source of joyful discovery. It revealed my total openness to receive and multiply the love of those who seemed equally predisposed, and the immediate and instinctive decision to put everything in common, objects, clothes, nudity, needs, pain, throwing away modesty and individualism. One last feeling. As I wrote these notes the ayahuasca was reactivated in me and strong reactions began. I relived everything emotionally and found myself with many questions that will continue to work within me. On the future path with Ayahuasca I will not pronounce myself: life will decide.

*Continuing the stories*

I, Umberta, will continue the stories: we are at a moment in history when consciences are expanding and awakening. Many are not satisfied that life is exhausted with materiality and are looking for something else. There is greater awareness and a

desire to find other dimensions to existence. Everyone is looking for something: one seeks a personal and a collective meaning and seeks them through many possible venues. Ayahuasca is one of them: it imposes dietary and behavioral sacrifices, it suggests preparation, an intention, a dialogue with oneself through it, but it is very powerful. I have met people who ask for feedback on themselves on a first-come-first-served basis, who rely on others, on anyone else, as long as they talk about themselves, without caring about the quality of the person and the relationship they have with the person they are talking to, sometimes not even questioning where/what they are talking about. Other people who choose carefully whom to ask for advice and who open up more cautiously, still others who choose to have a privileged relationship above all with themselves, write a diary, have a few chosen interlocutors, enter psychotherapy, and have sometimes very important experiences. The lowest common denominator is access to feeling and trust (of the world, of oneself, of life, of others). All people seek themselves, they hope that this extreme experience increases the connection between personal history and sense of self; it also increases the connection with the Universe, with nature, even with others. Some others follow a very detailed path and each journey becomes a piece of a project dialogue that brings knowledge and insight. Some people arrived here in an “easy” way, following an instinct, trusting the urge to follow it. Some I have met seem completely self-referential and seem to find in the dialogue what they do not find in everyday life. Others seem to be here by chance: they did not think they were coming, they received the information and accepted it as inevitable. Some come as a challenge to themselves, to life, to be able to tell their story and say “I was there”.

Someone else to heal or improve themselves. Each experience becomes specific, encapsulated in the story of that particular person and their absolutely subjective journey.

Personally, I have the feeling that I have accommodated some rituals in order not to get into them completely, I have not completely trusted them or believed in them. This time I want to trust because when I wake up in the morning after a ceremony I feel much more centered and connected to the world, more sensitive to the beauty of nature, of relationships; If the big bang is the DNA of the Universe, the experience with A. has put me in touch with the essence of myself and with my habitual patterns of behavior. That I need to change.

Do we need suffering to grow and change? Personally, I don't think it is necessary to suffer in order to feel good: even the ability to find a smile makes sense and helps; it is like a test, a game with oneself, a deepening of contact with one's own essence. This process, so laborious each time different – so refined and subtle – simultaneously attracts and repels me. I do not believe at all that the Lady is a mother. I believe that she establishes a self-referential process in which it becomes necessary to come to terms with oneself and re-establish a non-definitive order from the disorder that the substance introduces. Each of us has to make a leap of complexity, connect things not connected before and find a new order. And this is not obvious and not easy. The energy comes from the vegetal, the healer – and the choice of the shaman to go to is very delicate – with their energy, their intent, the belief in their own power. I think that much depends on the shaman's ability to transmit energy and healing through the icaros and his presence

in spirit. We need to believe in what we are doing, in the context we are sharing.

I wish to share some blinks of memory: towards the end of the first ceremony I realize that Ayda is at my feet. I rise and sit in front of her. She flails, she blows, she sings (*sinchi sinchi/ medicine/ yari-ri*), she messes my hair, she opens and closes my fountain (or at least I hear/imagine so). When she passes to my neighbor I lie down and start again with my colorful, choral and incomprehensible visions.

During the second ceremony I feel pain in my teeth, neck (as if choking) and head. My mouth seems to be full of blood, I check but I am clean. I honor this experience instead of being afraid, the pain continues but it has diminished. I try to relax. It is interesting how the body helps in the process, the pain and the confused visions force me to center myself in the body and try to sit upright, to feel the weight on my buttocks, to breathe deeply. It's as if I trust my body more than usual and it responds immediately (I'm not used to that!) and becomes my point of reference: from the sensations of a body being able to relax to ideas, instead of the other way round as is usual for me.

I dialogue with the medicine instead of passively accepting every image I receive: when I don't like an image I can change it, what the next one will be is up to Her. I have learnt to interrupt the process. The moment a "curious person" (another term for shaman) starts singing in front of me, very late in the night, I feel the urge to vomit and I realize that there is no history, that it is She who is always in charge in the healing relationship. It is as it should be and I honor her for that!



During the third night I receive as usual my portion of medicine. The skyline is made up of silhouettes of trees, clouds and palm trees. In the darkness, sighs, groans, gasps, the sound of someone seemingly snoring begin. I lie down. Until... an overwhelming force invades me. It comes each time like a wave rising from my feet, overtaking me, making me lose myself in it. Incredible colors, an energy impossible to counteract. I asked to experience the connection with the whole, the cosmic harmony, and I am amazed when I find myself walking through an immense forest with very tall and colorful palm trees. Each part of the palm tree is made up of a thousand moving snakes, each on its own. The skin of each snake is made up of octagons. Three colors each snake: blue, black and white. 100 different types of black, blue and white that I can see in their differences, in their infinite nuances. Blue, black and silver; green, yellow and turquoise; brick red, pale pink and red... so many combinations, one more beautiful than the other. Blue, black and silver are the predominant colors throughout the night. I see self-propelled palms made of snakes. I am amazed. I asked for harmony and these images at first glance do not seem to answer my intent. I turn to the Lady and each time the scenery changes, as if listening to me. The colors continue, the shapes as well. The intensity is incredible. A force seems to have taken possession of the brain and seems to organize it in spite of me. The shamans have been in perfect silence so far, at the back of the room, as always, leaning against the wall, in a row. There are six of them, there are two women. Some of them begin to make a guttural sound rise from their throats, high or deep, that seems to come from the bowels of the earth. Sounds as if to test one's vocal chords...

the tones are different, each one his own timbre. The icaros begin to establish and amplify contact with the medicine. There are 22 of us in the circle. We are joined by a young Japanese man who will stay five months at the camp to diet a plant and become its interpreter, to become a curandero.

I hear chants coming from every corner of the room, evidently the shamans have scattered. Different sounds, words, melodies, tones and timbres create an incredible dissonance, somehow harmonious. I open my eyes and tell myself with astonishment and joy that harmony is not made of order, silence, predictability but of disorder, chaos, differences. This thought gives me incredible joy. I begin to smile, I feel happy: then I am receiving exactly what I asked for! Whether I keep my eyes closed or open, the colorful, tiny octagons invade my field of vision. In one case they invade it, in the other they overlap what I can glimpse in the darkness. I breathe deeply to keep the medicine inside me. With the icaros its power has increased. One of the shamans comes in front of me. I sense him as I lie down and approach him to face him. I sit while he chants and waves his arms in front of me. He imposes the *arkana* on me, the protection for my departure. It is as if they “open” you spiritually while you work with them and feel the need to “close” your vulnerability when you return home, so that you are not invaded by malevolent forces. It is no coincidence that they close your 7th chakra. The shaman flaps above and around my head with its arms, leaves rustling. He chants. I recognize the words *arkana*, *medicine*, *ayahuasca* he speaks his language, *shipinawa*. I am grateful to him, I feel him paying attention, he is addressing me. He sees me. Perhaps he sees more of me than I know, even if he will not tell me. He stays for what seems to

me a long and necessary time, then he moves on to the next fleecy bed. This ritual is performed twice during the night. Each time I return to my visions, they are so specific and individuated, they become more vague in memory. Hours pass, the shamans have finished chanting and we find ourselves in silence and darkness. A few hours have passed – 4, 5 maybe 6 – Roger sleeps with us tonight. It is an honor, we usually hear the sound of one man’s big motorbike and Roger’s scraggly gizmo pulling away as the dogs bark behind him.

## The integration of the experience

No problem can be solved by the same awareness that caused it in the first place (Albert Einstein).

The greatest and most important problems in life are fundamentally unsolvable. They can never be solved, they can only be overcome (Carl Jung).

I have always liked the concept proposed by Erik Erikson of the “generative person” (1966), that is, one who is concerned about the next generation and not only about him/herself. I believe that as humans we must pass on the lessons we have learnt to others and not keep them to ourselves. This is how we honor the gift that life has given us, how we use the energies we have accumulated, the lessons we have learnt through the hardships of the internal and external journeys we have made. This is why I have chosen to write this testimony and to continue in this third part, providing some hypotheses of my understanding, following in the footsteps of what many of today’s shamans have chosen to do, disobeying the teachings of their grandparents who considered their knowledge a secret not to be disclosed, least of all to people of a different culture.

One of the orders that inexorably guide those who come to meetings with the Lady is the need to balance between giving and taking. I have almost always met people with a smile on their lips, a conscious walk and the intention to overcome their selfishness. It may be the sharing of a project outside the usual cultural channels; it may be that we find ourselves together, belonging to a secret sect of a spiritual movement that gathers few. It may be that a shared dimension is established, a move-

ment of love towards the substance but also towards Mother Earth, ourselves and consequently the others people present; it may be that we perceive even for a moment how nature is endowed with intentionality. Whatever the cause, the participants are usually interested, attentive and sharing. It seems characteristic of the substance to amplify the love of life, just as it is characteristic of humans to seek order in disorder, to trace a harmony made of awareness.

What I like about the atmosphere at the camp is that the nights can also be difficult and tiring – each time you think at least once that this will be your last experience with the substance – but you always come back to plan the next encounter with longing and desire. Because one feels an interactive exchange with the medicine that always demands a deepening. What one receives is a “participation” in the things of the world. As Jeremy Narby writes in the book *The Cosmic Serpent* (1998), which among the books on Ayahuasca I particularly liked: “The molecule of life is the same for all species, and the genetic information contained in a rose, a bacterium or a human being is encoded in a universal language made up of four letters, A, G, C, T, which are four chemical compounds, contained in the DNA double helix” (p. 58). “The structure of which we are made is the same as that of the plant world. I had never really thought about it in such a concrete way. The day after the ayahuasca session, I felt like a new being, in union with nature, proud to be human and to belong to the grandiose fabric of life that surrounds the planet. Once again, this was a totally new and constructive perspective for me, since I was a materialistic humanist” (p. 105). In this book, the author argues that shamans seem to know about the molecular properties of plants and the art of combining

them, and that this knowledge comes directly from hallucinogenic plants as they consider the visions to be as real as the reality we perceive every day (“Nature and spirits speak to us through the visions that plants provide. Contact with spirits confers the power to heal, but also to harm”). According to the author, the idea of DNA is at the origin of shamanic knowledge, and under the effect of the substance we see snakes, ladders, ropes, climbing plants, spirals, crystals that have the same shape as the aperiodic crystal of DNA.

We could tell the same experience – in neurophysiological terms – through an enhancement of perceptual activity. An enormous participation of the vegetative (cold, well-being) and cenesthetic (smells, taste of the earth) states. According to some experts in the hierarchical theory of the mind, not just one hierarchical level is activated but the whole system is reorganized, as in matrioskas when the small one in a group of dolls becomes the largest and relationships change. While the reptilian brain is activated to the maximum by the substance (hence the excruciating pain in the cerebellum before starting with the visions), the limbic brain (hearing the shamans chanting before they started chanting) and reflexivity also made me stay inside and outside the experience, simultaneously. The experience of waking up outside the body could instead be read as the expression of a disintegration between levels of mental activity. During the coma one sees lights, it happens to wake up and feel paralyzed for two or three seconds, it happened to me that I found myself completely conscious while the motor activity was asleep; this disorientation was possibly amplified by my fear. This “bilocation” then occurred to me again, either because of the fear of being “out”,

or because as a psychologist I read it as a sign of a psychotic state, or because my memory returned to the episode and replayed it, or again because of an oscillation in cellular metabolic activity, such as fear of fear. This is a possible scientific explanation, but I prefer to imagine that we have powers that we do not know how to use consciously. Personally, I prefer to think that there are more things between heaven and earth than our imaginations can conjecture, than we still don't know. I am comfortable in the position of the one who does not know.

The images I saw came from my mind. They were geometric figures that I had never even imagined and that presented themselves to me despite my inability to imagine spaces and my lack of vision. According to Emanuele Mocarelli, the mind  $\theta$  (theta, around 4 Hertz) does not separate the subject from sensations, but applies a sort of pruning, whereby it brings attention to sensory reports, gives access to endorphinic perceptions, highly colored colors, deep perceptive intensity devoid of time and space; an experience in which thought proceeds by abductions and one feels connected to the network of life by analogies, as in lucid dreaming (extended consciousness is networked). It is a state in which we determine reality and can do with the mind what we want, we guide it. There is a mind  $\theta$ , present in the light concentrate, in which we connect with the love/peace/light dimension. Already the pre-theta state is a state of connection. As humans, on the other hand, we are usually in the  $\beta$ -frequency (30-50 Hertz), the state of consciousness in which perceptions are suffered, in which the world falls on us like perceptual hail. Elements such as I/me, space/time, social space/time and language defend the  $\beta$  state, which is often dominated by fear. The  $\alpha$  state (10 Hertz) is that of relaxation and relationship, in

which we lose the ego and are in a state of intense attention, in which the shadow can surface and integrate.

***What have I learnt from these experiences?***

Being present (presencing) means pre-sensing, feeling first, bringing to awareness (presence) and in the present your highest future potentials. It is not just “the future” in an abstract sense but my possibilities with respect to the future as a human being (Otto Scharmer).

I had an embodied experience that made me different. I absorbed the experience, it made me perceive the limitlessness of the possibilities of mind and life. The existence of another world, many planes in a unified experience. On this path I am learning that medicine is myself, through my emotions, my mind, my gaze, my attitude, the words I use, the thoughts, the actions, the chants, the incense I light; through the positivity I manage to maintain and the openness to possibilities even in dark moments. This path has taught me to seek balance in the very balance of the Universe, has made me realize that there are positive and necessary pains and others that are solely the result of old habits and obsolete premises. This path has helped me to look, to try to understand, sometimes to accept, to have faith in the process of life, to have willingness and desire to help others; it has put me in touch with my responsibilities. “We come from eternity, we have a few moments together and then we return to eternity. My religion is love and gentleness; the true language of the soul is the heart and strength serves the heart. Peace depends on feeling good about oneself. The earth is our cathedral”, Mary Thunder, a Native American, once said at a gathering on Mont Blanc orga-



nized by *Where the eagles fly*, the Association of my friend Costanzo Allione. Taking a hallucinogen opened me up to the potential of the mind, I believe it made me more intuitive, more able to tune in to others.

I amplified my view of the world. I tested my ability to be in the here and now, to let go of the past in order to live fully in the present, the ability not to wish to be elsewhere. I learnt that A. is perceptive and even through visions alone it shows you where you are. I have seen the sky and the Universe but initial fear meant that the experience was limited: I was not always able to ride it, using its energy to my advantage.

Every time you drink you learn something new anyway; being in a group then amplified the emotions because the time spent together builds a warm solidarity and a safe mutual protection. For me it also meant an attitude instilled by curiosity and amplified by pietas (joy and singing are stimulated from the heart). I enhanced a specific aspect of mine, an awareness of the essence of life in every animate creature, plants, animals – even the smallest and uncultivated. It is no coincidence that friends have always teased me because I feel sadness for a dog or a parrot, I feel their moods as if they were speaking to my heart, I know almost telepathically the traces of the passages of their lives, I participate in their suffering and rejoice in their freedom.

I then learned, and for me it was fundamental, not to try to understand everything, not to rack my brains to understand, not to judge relying on the few elements in my possession, not to draw hasty conclusions. I realized that I have to integrate the two worlds, not by rejecting the West, not by denying my culture but by taking it with me: at any given moment we are free to make

an infinite number of choices instead of following the usual narrow habits and remaining slaves to them. This experience allowed me to see that there are different planes of reality and that it is wrong to follow a fixed pattern. It is a bit like discovering that I have been walking around blindfolded while there are possible worlds and the whole universe to explore.

I felt comfortable with myself, even among others, I had no need to show myself to be different from how I think I am. With respect to fear I understood that it should not be endorsed but rather overcome, never ignored: it took individuals many years to learn to be afraid and this helped them to survive, now we should all learn to let go of it, to progress, to not get trapped in the usual scripts. I realized that we use a very small part of our thinking, that we could achieve much more ambitious goals. I experienced for a few seconds how thinking and knowing are the same thing. I touched on the presence of “owners” (Tobie Nathan 1995) and personal attachments: people but also prejudices and ideas that possess us by having a limiting influence on us and keep us immobile with respect to values, superstitions and assumptions. Ideas that we are afraid to let go of, preconceptions and habits that tacitly organize our lives; programs and behaviors induced by habits, agreements that we have accepted in order to feel loved, to avoid conflict with significant others.

I had to come to terms with my ambivalence and tendency to understand rather than experience. A. taught me the difference between mind, brain, body and spirit, allowing me to add this dimension, neglected by the West and sometimes inaccessible. I have also developed my senses and become more receptive to the secrets of the human soul. Sometimes I feel as if I am

reading them like books opening up in front of me. I seem to have amplified the “ease” of seeing the processes that organize people’s lives, the narratives that organize the meaning we give to what happens. I have always thought that acting means being alive and having the courage to express one’s dreams/ desires/ curiosities. I have noticed a kind of constant paradox in experience: feeling extremely strong because of the richness of experience and at the same time extremely weak for the same reason, at the mercy of experience. This conflict between the rational part and the “automatic” seeing part is echoed in the literature: one part wants to see, to go deeper, to move forward, the other wants to go right back and take refuge in a safe place. It occurs to me that the experience of A. is like childbirth: you are in pain, you go into labor, you suffer, you have to know how to breathe and don’t forget to do it, your bones ache, you tremble, you would give anything to be somewhere else, but when the experience is over a hormone is triggered that makes you forget the pain and suffering (which if you didn’t forget wouldn’t lead you to repeat it) and you are ready to participate again in the reproductive cycle. A sort of compulsion to know, to go on, to explore, more and more. Is this a useful attitude? The question is “wrong”. This is how we are.

### *Comparison with psychotherapy*

The longest road you will ever walk is the sacred journey from your head to your heart (Phil Lane, Native American)

In my travels I have come across Peruvian, Colombian, Senegalese, Tuvinian, Mongolian, Indo-American curanderos and

others. Where you go traditions you find, both in interpreting the relationships between human and nature, between individuals and evolutionary moments (birth, growth, reaching maturity, ageing, death), and in finding an evolutionary explanation and solution to suffering and problems. Isn't psychotherapy another way of interpreting the world, of getting out of stuck situations and allowing meanings to flow? It is no coincidence that in psychotherapy training we teach how to redefine positively, how not to block situations that are brought to us, how not to photograph the status quo, how to process pathology and people's stories; how to speak a language of hope, love and evolution? The word to describe what we do in both spheres is co-creation, understood as the ability to bring forth a new story, new connections that have never been explored, the ability to emphasize resources over constraints.

I realized that shamans operate in similar ways to what we do in psychotherapy and that A. is in some ways an accelerator of the evolutionary process. It is about creating disorder and then new order, learning to make increasingly sophisticated connections between elements that might appear as random and increasing levels of recursiveness.

Both during the ceremonies and in psychotherapy, individuals learn not to be subjected to what life proposes but to be proactive, interacting with events and with Ayahuasca itself. Last time I too was able to interact with the medicine instead of passively accepting and submitting to it: I had a dialogue with her and every time I understood something the images changed dramatically, as if to confirm that the topic was dealt with and I could move on (it takes time to understand this, luckily the medicine continues to work even in the following months). It is

the same process as for those who do not fall prey to their symptoms, do not accept them as they are, do not allow themselves to be invaded but the suffering part of themselves and use pain as a stimulus to better understand themselves and their relationships, to change their lives. The position of one who does not regard illness and health as two incommensurable and separate realms but as dimensions along a continuum, whereby one can be well even when ill and sick, as much as when healthy.

Both settings – psychotherapy and shamanic journey – propose a process in which we make our energy available to ourselves, we use it to have the strength to go and see and seek alternatives. In both processes, connections are made between memories and events, painful aspects are linked to meanings in order to offer other points of view and free from those usual explanations that make us feel bad. It is a process of deconstruction: in both cases memories, habits, connections are let go, scripts and observation schemes, usual experiences, abused categories are deconstructed. One works on removing, taking away, skimming, rather than adding meanings and memories. When Ayahuasca tells me each time that I am "beyond meanings" it is simply informing me that I can behave like in the ceremonies less intellectualizing, less using rationality.

People react to life according to which senses they use most frequently: those who are auditory will usually hear a sound followed by visions and in session will tend to give a lot of space to their narrative. Those who are cenesthetic will feel a sensation of warmth or cold and will favor sensory perceptions also in the sessions, they will often crying, look for the explication of emotions, look for intensity. Those who are visual will immediately start with images and lights and in the session will

tend to paint a picture of the situation and react very well to visual metaphors; those who are above all rational and use reasoning as an organ of connection to the world (mind) will be able to remain attached to it and start very interesting, intellectual and abstract elucubrations. Stefano, for example, perfected his already sophisticated theories on tarot cards and Kabbalah during Ayahuasca nights.

I would propose a non-value distinction between those professionals and those disciplines who interpret in the first person and those who offer tools of interpretation and accompany others in their quest; those who know/see/define the themes brought and those who know they do not know and are willing to co-construct a path, far from the a priori truth, though certainly plausible. A pattern more or less like this:

	<b>I know</b>	<b>I don't know</b>
<b>Interpreter</b>	The medical paradigm & some healers, Some forms of psychotherapy	Shamans, Magicians, Card reader, Coca leaf, Shells interpreters, Some other forms of psychotherapy
<b>Co-constructor</b>	Those who work with energy, Some new age interventions	Ayahuascheros, Ethical therapists, Systemic psychotherapists

Shamans put in rules both before, during and after the experience. Some might call them fiscal (salt, alcohol, sex, use of mobile phones...) Personally, beyond the chemical aspects related to the intake of the substance and its continuing to work within us, I hypothesized that these prescriptions are also a defi-

inition of the relationship with us, in order to become more authoritative and to be able to help us better. As in psychotherapy where the clinician has to win the battle of the first relationship and put some rules in place before entering into an even if unstable relationship with the client. For our interventions to be effective we must build our authority (that is different from power), shamans instinctively seem to do the same. Not exaggeration therefore on the part of the shamans, absolutely not, the sharing of their beliefs and their tacit culture and the request to conform to ancient rules, so as to show respect for their culture and the process we are about to enter. It is also plausible that salt, as well as a chemical element that functions as a deterrent, was a symbol of wealth in the Amazon rainforest and to ask to do without it is a way to free the individual from the frustration of obtaining it and not possessing enough.

The coordination between clinician and client, between shaman and western researcher establishes, even though the limits imposed, a dance that can become increasingly harmonized and satisfying, precisely as a result of respecting the rules set and imposed. The relationship in both contexts could be seen as analyzing the multiple levels of the problems presented: the problem, the relationship between the problem and the person and his or her behavior, the relationship also with the extended social context and with the family of origin and the three-generational family, the relationship between the problem and the shared premises, the relationship with the group that the shamans are working with (less explicit). Each of the participants in the relationship enters a personal domain in which they interact and feel vulnerable in their relationship with the other.

The concept of time would require a separate reflection. In a session time is circular and closed on itself, on the one hand it is an explicit and agreed constraint (sessions last 50-60 minutes not as long as one wants) on the other it is as if it not as important and emerges from the shared narrative. Both in psychotherapy and in sessions with medicine we are faced with a frozen time in which past and future can be present at the same time. Even in the Ayahuasca ritual, it seems that time is that of experience, not the linear time of life: causality moves in both directions and time is perceived differently depending on the people involved. The linear time of the clock of the everyday, material world seems to be contrasted with a subjective time that is absolutely personal and private. Each its own process, each its own characteristic time. The past and the future in both contexts can be found in the present time of the relationship in therapy, of the ceremony for medicine (in this case presented by the physical sensations involved in sitting in a circle, all together).

#### PARALLELISMS BETWEEN THE TWO DOMAINS

- Both allow one to reflect on the interconnection between part and whole, dealing simultaneously with the collective and the individual level, transcending the dichotomy between the two levels.
- They propose to investigate the sense of self and belonging
- Both envisage a processual integrity by investigating the capacity to make choices in order to fit into evolution.
- They allow one to perceive one's own premises to recognize and actualize new realities.



- In both, the stories told give form to the reality experienced, proposing a co-creative process, they offer a process of deconstruction of values and beliefs creating disorder and then new order.
- They increase the levels of recursiveness of context and individual mental operations.
- Both processualize personal narratives.
- They enable the overcoming of the duality I/world, encouraging intrapsychic work.
- They allow us to consider the generative process that involves us creating new domains of understanding opening up future possibilities to see the bigger picture that includes us, to make assumptions about our own collusive processes (what do I do to keep things the way they are?).
- Both allow one to see with the heart and from a position within one's own system using nature as a guide (especially Ayahuasca), considering the process of life as it unfolds, connecting with present reality, investing in a constant increase in awareness, breaking down the boundaries between nature and the ego.
- They foster access to primary, emotional and spontaneous knowledge, they work on the sense of interpersonal and ecological connection creating a defined and explicit context with rules that contain proposing a professional that does not need to be in control.
- Not either/or rather and/and, the complementarity between theories and points of view, between head and heart, giving value to the adaptive aspects.

*The collusive aspect*

It is not possible to measure a relationship (Fritjof Capra).

Freedom and destiny are only connected through meaning (Martin Buber).

Every work with A. amplifies an individual script, a kind of repetitive identity project that is expressed in the experiences that the substance allows us to have. In my opinion, each of us experiences A. in a way that is consistent with our own formamendis and approach to life, with the categories we already possess and with which we are presented to experience. I wonder whether this collusive aspect should be allowed to flow or whether it would be useful to disrupt people precisely by reasoning about the collusions displayed during the ceremony, trying to interrupt them or at least to reason about them.

An example: Ampelio is an established healer. In order to heal, he maintains control of the relationship and acts an authoritative and protective role, which he constantly nurtures. Even in ceremonies Ampelio “heals” others and each time the anaconda – his privileged interlocutor – seems to confirm to him this ability to care and cure. Ayahuasca seems to ask him to accompany her in helping others, to replace her, in any case to take the same responsibility in the ritual that Ampelio takes on daily with patients at home. He has played many ceremonies in the role of caregiver, because this is the most meaningful task of his life, the one that gives him identity. In one ceremony he dreamt that 18 cubs were born from the mother anaconda and he had to control them, manage them and choose the right amount of food for them, exactly what he does daily with his

clients: control them, manage their problems and choose together with them. I too, during a ceremony, imagined the shamans picking him up and bringing him into the middle of the circle with them, paying him every honor. I too colluded with the image I, himself and the others shared of him. It's good that Ampelio this last time didn't keep healing all night, swallowing negative energy, taking it out, expelling it and going back in the room to perform more. The shamans exempted him from his usual role and he had to look for a new function as a human being instead of that of a constant healer. I do believe that this impediment operated explicitly by the maestros allowed him to make a quantum leap in his awareness and I am grateful to Roger who forced this difference.

Another example: Luca needs to make others happy. He told us his story in this sense, an interminable procession of adaptations to the wishes of the people important to him: first his parents, then his partner and finally a son whom he did not want and who does not appreciate him, that constantly challenges him. Even with shamans he offers them attention, he does everything in his power to adapt to their needs, to confirm them, to please them. Even during the ritual he pleases and reassures the process, he agrees with A., with a kind of urgency to confirm the anaconda's proposals. But isn't this exactly the same script he has come to overcome and he would like to interrupt?

Donald is told by the A. that he will have to love only one woman. Usual script for a narcissistic man used to seducing them all, dreaming of a unique and fantastic love. A script of overestimating an exceptional investment and then inexorably disappointing himself and needing to leave, reassuring himself

that "it will be for next time." Speaking of reified scripts, he makes an idealized desire explicit to himself, verbalizes it in public and seals it through the voice of the substance. I hope this is not true, but as a clinical psychologist I can speculate that he will be disappointed every time and will fail to fulfil his idealized dream, continuing in his search for the perfect "love", who will perhaps only be the substance.

Does the A. then allow for elaboration? If elaboration means reading the word and looking at the wound, as Stefano says, in my opinion yes. It does allow the researcher to recognize, experience and decode the dysfunctional emotion, it allows to go through the emotions that this awareness entails, it allows to construct a narrative around a specific problem or theme. I am not sure that it allows to change one's script. Shamans claim that medicine offers an opportunity to redefine one's script through connection with love, as it can offer the experience of having been loved all along. Like the hypnotherapist Milton Erickson who put people under hypnosis to fictitiously construct a parenthesis of love in their lonely and abused past, arguing that if people can remember a "warm home", a satisfying relationship, they can better cope with their problems in the here and now.

In EMDR, a newly invented neuropsychological technique (Shapiro 1918), an attempt is made to make the two hemispheres of the brain talk to each other, in the empirical belief that only if the two parts are connected does the individual arrive at an optimal, process-oriented solution to the problem at hand, which he or she had not thought of before. The same thing could happen with A.: the drinking context, the curative and protective setting, the lack of judgement, the acceptance,

the extraordinariness of the pathway, could allow a redefinition of the problem, a reinterpretation in possibly adaptive and processual terms. In the Amazonian context, the grids for interpreting the problem are changed and the usual human drive, almost reflexive, to seek the processual meaning of events is activated. Perhaps – as in EMDR – there is a pragmatic readiness to step outside the usual patterns and redefine in adaptive terms what has happened in life. In this case, shamans would not heal but would be channels, trammels, amplifiers of the individual's capacity to heal themselves. It is no coincidence that they are the only guardians of the mystery: they ask us to be, like them, humble and ready to learn. They accompany us into a world of which we know nothing.

If it is true that we only use 10% of our brain, it would be enough to use 1% more to open up other sensations and perceptions. This is what I did in Peru each time, this is what I hope to continue doing through western experiences with native gurus and healers. In Peru I entered another universe of sounds and shapes, lights, intense smells. I had access to the usual thoughts but condensed and presented in a more synco-pated way. I felt more whole and centered than ever before. I felt more focused; also more intuitive and more able to tune into others. It is as if the medicine has expanded who I am, allowed my creative and vital side to emerge even more.

#### INVISIBLE MASTERS

Some time ago I attended a course by Igor Sibaldi on the *Invisible Masters*, his personal exploration of psychic structures, beyond the usual perceptions. He calls himself a scholar of theology, a philolo-

gist; personally I would describe him as a very skilled researcher of the psyche. During the meetings, he proposed that we imagine within us some invisible Masters who protect us, give us strength and advise us in the course of our future lives. We do this through psychodynamic imagination, which is a perception, a radar that is set in motion by going beyond the limits of what we know, beyond the concept of Ego. *Spirit Guides* are spirits of knowledge that increase our possibilities and amplify personal growth: the Masters become a tool of our imagination to open us up to other possibilities, a tactic to set our power in motion and not be limited by conventions, self- and hetero-imposed limits and learnings. A device to expand self-discovery. At the seminar I experienced the possibility of accessing a shared field of consciousness, what Sheldrake calls the MORPHOGENETIC FIELD (2003), whereby events and sensations become shared memory. As Emanuele Mocarelli often repeats: “When you go into  $\alpha$ , consciousness goes online”.

### ***The ritualistic aspect***

Rituals are ceremonies with a spiritual and magical purpose and a symbolic value. They are ceremonial acts that allow us to abandon the Ego and go into an altered state of consciousness from which it is possible to access an extra-dimensional wavelength: a means of feeling connected with the universe and with the community that participates in the ritual. In addition to our internal psychic world and the external social world, we could speak of another one, intangible, extra-dimensional world, the one that makes us say that there is something else beyond every day's life and makes us seek this “other” in art, religion, love, shamanic paths, contact with

nature... According to the expert Luc Sala<sup>1</sup> (2014) rituals and fire were the first engines of evolution, while now the importance of ritualization has been sidelined and this is a collective impoverishment. Going to the forest is in itself a ritual, the organization of the day, the medicine plants one seeks/recognizes/cooks/drinks, the saunas one takes, the communal meal, the dilated time in which one lives are all rituals. Then there is the ritual of the medicine and the taking of it: in the last place I went to, it was the shaman who filled the glass, who brought the dose personally to each person in his or her stall, having chosen which plant and which mixture to give to each one of us.

Rituals work precisely because they allow one to connect to this extra-dimensional world that has a different time, a time made present by the magical practice of the ritual itself. Indeed, rituals allow access to the Alpha and Theta states and to let go of the Ego in order to approach a psychic place where we can feel connected to each other and to the Whole and – at times – perceive what is going to happen in the future, opening up to precognitions. Ayahuasca, which unites body and mind, is not just a ceremony but has an important non-verbal and non-rational ritual aspect, i.e. it goes beyond rationality and connects with the collective unconscious. That is, it allows us to influence the psychic world and connect the three worlds psychic/inner, social/outer and spiritual/other world/altered state of consciousness. (Sala speculates that it is self-awareness that prevents us humans from feeling constantly connected).

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<sup>1</sup> Sala speaks of magic in sacred and extra-dimensional terms, not with the Western understanding of it as something that is not in our power and has a derogatory connotation.

The shared purpose, the sounds, the organization of the process, the actors, being in a group, the smells, the sequence, the repetition of gestures over and over again, the structure of each night, the stages of the process, everyone's intentions, the ability to predict what will happen in the process, the expectations, the planned behavior, the state of mind with which one participates, the curiosity for what will happen, the fear, are all elements that help connect the senses with the extradimensional state. This is how it has been for us: we arrive in the dark at the maloca ceremony site, we slowly concentrate on ourselves, we wait for the shamans to arrive, we listen to them talking to each other in words we do not understand, we tolerate the waiting time, we become increasingly silent, concentrating on ourselves, we wait for the purifying smoke, and the sound of the wind that comes from whistling in the empty bottle, we wait for the shaman to come by and give us the toma, we long for the darkness, then the waiting again starts, begins from scratch. The aim is the transformation of each of us, often through the process of becoming aware of what we see/perceive and beyond. Even the toma will work without us having to know what it does: medicine works in spite of us! It is no coincidence that it reaches everyone where they are and where they think they need to work, according to their own intention, their own expectations, their own psychic development. Does the medicine in each healing session work especially on one of the individual person's chakras? It is a hypothesis, it should be tested.

The synchronicity of each ritual allows minds to synchronize and can create a purposeful state of mind that loosens the boundaries between self and group, bringing out a cybernetic



brain (Bateson 1979), a collective brain more powerful than the one of each individual. It is a matter of reaching together, precisely as a result of the ritual, a liminal state, the possibility of being in a space “between”, sometimes evolved further than the awareness of the single individual. A space of transition between known and unknown, a space on the border between different worlds (“Ritual as an act of transgression of known boundaries”). It is no coincidence that Sala speaks of different stages of each ritual liturgy based on three variables: the individual emotional and cognitive set, the group and environmental setting, and the correspondences with the extradimensional that define the magical aspect. At each stage a particular energy is active, which can be traced back to the tree of life or, referring to the chakras, from the roots through the opening of the heart to the crown chakra. As if the structure of this energy work were similar to that of the Kundalini rising from the more earthly phase to the more spiritual one.

The aim is to focus on personal issues and allow the Lady to disturb us as best she can, achieving a “supra-human” connection between the participants, a collective mind aimed at personal and group benefit. It is a matter of individually and contemporarily climbing a ladder to heaven together. It is also, through this out-of-the-ordinary experience, the possibility of stepping out of the status quo, of attempting to go beyond it, to reach a new understanding of oneself and – as an ultimate goal – to achieve an extended awareness, a union with the divine aspect of life.

*The dimension of the sacred*

I firmly believe that shamanism is the way, together with Kabbalah, to relate to the sacred, because it is not an experience enclosed in itself but opens up to a conversion within oneself and with the community that is having this experience and believes in the dimension of the sacred. Being in the forest allows for a continuous dialogue in the here and now of life with people who cohabit with the medicine, who use it to prophecy, to cure and heal, to access knowledge. It is a matter of interacting with them, of coming to terms with being Western and materialistic and be able to consider the forces at work. Medicine asks one to expose oneself and to stop, to look inside oneself and to put oneself out there in the open. “Like the Kabbalah”, my friend Lucia Pattarino points out, “it is not a dogma, it does not assign pre-packaged concepts, but provides a method of investigation that focuses on connecting with one's self and with a collective mind, in order to reach the sacred”.

We often carry within us a legacy that does not make us live well but at enmity with ourselves, with others and with what happens. Accessing the shamanic world brings and at the same time requires us to acquire a different way of being, to appreciate what our ancestors have left us, to connect with the elements of nature outside of us (“O sky look at me, O moon that gives light to us all, O sun that warms the earth mother for us all, O mother earth that welcomes us and offers us..., O sea, O great blue and white sky..., recites a sura of Habiba, a Sufi woman from Uzbekistan); to take a humble stance in the face of forces greater than ourselves, to prepare the world for the next generation, and to thank the Universe as a whole for life

and for what we have. Each of us possesses a treasure, which is the possibility of accessing the process that allows us to contact our knowledge, to surpass ourselves, to believe in the ability to live according to our desires (“perfection will be reached when the human being is able to create everything he is capable of thinking” the Mexican Toltec Pakeler once told us).

Music, painting, plants, animals, the wind, the sun, the elements all heal, and the medicine is ourselves: we can heal with our hands, with energy, with psychic strength, with introspection, with awareness, with the ability to attune ourselves to others. The sacred was the focus of the journey. But what is the sacred? Fellow psychologist Kenny and Gardner (1988) defines it as “a vision of complex wholeness, an understanding of self-regulation, self-production, self-correction, self-maintenance and self-healing”. A definition that puts us in first person in inseparable relationship with the Universe and proposes a vision of unity in which outside and inside exist in the same time/space, subject and object become inseparable. What a revolution, what a responsibility! Let us reassure ourselves. We can only use this viewpoint when we need it, not when crossing the street or interacting with people in a bureaucratic setting, for example.

I too will want to continue this journey towards love as a connection to the intangible, as a state of transcendence that opens to spirituality. For now I would very much like a master to take me by the hand and guide me on this journey, but I know instead that it will be up to me – alone – both to contact my inner master, the invisible master, and the wise people I will meet on the long journey I intend to make in the world (inshalla, god permitting). I will have to continue learning,

putting myself in the disposition of spirit to be amazed by what surrounds me, to give thanks for what comes my way; a daily exercise of feeling myself at once pupil and teacher, curious and capable of appreciating what happens. Because everyone has their own path or, as they say in Peru, everyone has their own star. It is no coincidence that the course on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, on Kabbalah and on the tree of life, which I have been attending for five years now, insists on the work one must do on oneself (the first three triangles of the tree of life, those of the intellect, will and memory) and on/in the world (the next three) to arrive at the seventh, the cosmic triangle, the sum of all spiritual work to evolve.

Attention is the organ of love. The feeling of being at one with the Universe and of being connected through love to others has touched me in these experiences, I will have to work daily to recreate this feeling in relationships, in everyday life, in city routines. To be able to change as the world changes, maintaining my balance. The shamans, gentle and always ready to smile, lighten emotions and doubts by saying *acushaman* (*Good spirit! Good life*). I, too, would like to keep reminding myself of this concept and with it I take my leave of the reader: *acushaman!*

## **The spirits, Umberta and us**

*Maria Cristina Koch, systemic thinker*

The experience of so-called “magic” traverses, contradictory and disturbing, the history of human communities and of every single person: that oscillation that disrupts between the everyday, the known, the shared, and those sudden and unconscious incursions that do not just turn our everyday life upside down (for we can understand and accept this, heck, we are not stupid, are we? We know how to see beyond our noses!) but, instead, go in directions that are all strange and alienating. And yet, here is the trap in which we stand astonished and bewildered, these are directions, ways, thoughts and actions that we find ourselves recognizing, that belong to us. Which we deeply understand.

Of course, we have gone there, we have entered areas guided by others who offer us words, objects, drugs, and we have gone there precisely because we were looking for it, that other world, and they seemed capable of guiding us into it. However, we come out of that experience a little grateful, a little confused, a little annoyed because we needed an intermediary: of course, we tell ourselves that it is nice to be able to trust, that it is a great thing to rely on, that we cannot know everything, that we are brave to believe in others and that we have drawn from them completely new thoughts and perspectives, but we feel a little like we have lost the government of our existence.

I think of psychotherapy as much as of hallucinogenic mushrooms: the only important difference is that, socially,

psychotherapy is recognized and accepted magic in our world and Ayahuasca is not. In our world, we tend to keep control of our existence and drugs (and I am not referring to the grocer's spices although...) at least officially are not approved. Drugs, however, yes, but they must not be doping if you want to compete in sport. Training yes, it is legitimate, indeed it is a sign of commitment, tenacity, discipline, all qualities to be rewarded. Vitamins and "healthy" food yes, they are good, running and exercising is a good use of one's day and one's body, but so is taking care of others, studying to improve one's work: all activities that put us among the good, in a social framework with precise rules and purposes that perhaps we have not fully explored and clarified if we are constantly complaining about this world of ours, if we would like it to be different. So different that it satisfies us but not so different that we feel lost, without points of orientation.

Perhaps it would be better, more simply, to think that every civilization, every culture, has its other world, but that, at the same time, every society and every culture has an everyday life whose details and components can be highly magical in the eyes of other civilizations and cultures. An ultrasound scan could enchant a person who has never known anything about it, just as the lucid clairvoyance of Mahdi, trade-practicien of Senegal, makes that large blond bowl of dried gourd in which the water places small pieces of wood differently depending on the person in front of it appear enchanted. How can it be said that Mahdi is before our "progress" when he can do things that we cannot even imagine? How can one call the Egyptian world "before progress" when they built pyramids, still standing today, carefully aligning the course of the Nile to reflect the

course of the Milky Way? While the pyramids built later, by the advanced Egyptians, have practically all collapsed? While our buildings need constant restoration and the bridges built by the ancient Romans still clear rivers and valleys?

What to say, then? With a grateful thought to the divine Bateson, I like to free myself from the worn-out vertical dimension that composes hierarchies (I before, you before, he better than, in a jumbled chase in which if you are worthy, I am not capable, if I am, you are surpassed) all oriented towards the top and lean into a horizontal dimension with a thousand and more spheres, each regulated by norms, traditions, magic, profound ignorance, rites and ways of transmitting knowledge.

Let us, therefore, happily dance in spheres far from our own, remembering to forget everything we know in order to have space and mind free to accommodate fresh thoughts and experiences. Because it is true that a bell tower always points upwards and invites us to look up, but every bell tower is different: let us take the luxury of enjoying it with joy, not without apprehension for what we will experience without wanting to forcibly relate it to universal rules. Which are there but are completely banal, teaching us nothing, stripped of that specific marvelousness that only in that sphere has been bred and preserved. Magical!

*One book, several strands*

*Cradled by the spirits* is a complex book, as befits, after all, those who know how to look beyond the boundaries of so many spheres, Umberta novella Achab who tenaciously pursues her truth for a long time, always putting the harpoon in

her body and each time watching her recede with her tail plunging into the ocean. At least, I have identified four: there is the theme of the narration (or perhaps it would be more correct to say: narratives) of what has happened, the theme of the presentation in which Umberta presents herself at the proscenium: here I am, this is me. These are my coordinates, these are my most important ingredients.

Then the scientific description enters, as if to say, hands up, look that science and magic are sides of the same event, the plant that makes you enter the other world has a respectable name, written in the lists, perhaps in Latin. With a whiff of pharmacy and galenic preparations, the scientific terms seem to comfort the reader, almost an echo, perhaps, of the dismay that the writer too must have felt, if the contrast with those who, for her sake, of course, wanted her to be civilized and decent, without madness or unnecessary risks, composed in her study, recognizable and usual.

And then, of course, the technical, professional thinking of the psychotherapist, who observes and comments behind the shoulders of experience, who wonders how to handle and define that strange thing that is happening with the more scientific categories of the professional, the psychotherapist who evaluates, with an attitude between the maternal and the restless, ready to intervene should she deem it opportune, solicitous in holding the hand of those who should put themselves at risk, but also lucid in reading the web of relationships, the everlasting game of power, the submissions that count as promotions, the rebellions that are appeased with the same ancestral patience one would use with childish whims.



But, on the other hand, how could several levels of interpretation not coexist, how could an experience not intersect so many of them? And, more to the point, wasn't this exactly one of the aims in the challenge with a Gasconian vein: "I have made up my mind and no longer question my choice?" To live an experience that encompassed it at every level, that tolerated, even, being redistributed and sorted into so many shelves, to be able to study it once at home.

And, if it is true that what we ask of the other in essence is "tell me about yourself, tell", how can there be narratives that do not encompass multiple complexities, how can there be literature that does not flow in so many rivers all coexisting as we stroll along the bank? I like to think that we narrate if there is a listener, that we only know what we feel and think if another asks, that to narrate is to know oneself. That, too, we narrate about others as if they were scattered fragments of our own to be recombined. Narratives, all narratives include and imply others. We readers.

To whom Umberta presents herself, precisely, without fear and without complacency, visible and readable without silly displays but without the false modesty of one who assumes the guise of the peasant woman who does not know. No, Umberta knows very well what she is doing: she wants to narrate her experiences, she wants to unravel and recompose them before our eyes, perhaps even for our eyes. So that she too can see and know more. This is what artists do, they exhibit outside so that they too can see, they sculpt to touch a modelled marble, they compose music to give voice and knowledge to emotions. They write books to reflect on an experience. Without pretending, without exhibiting a false naivety but asking, demanding, the

participation and collaboration of the presence of the other. I often wonder to what extent we psychotherapists realize that we are above all an opportunity for the other to tell his or her story and listen to himself or herself in his or her narration, even if we hasten to clothe it with the protective definition of a therapeutic relationship. The other is the author, director and interpreter of a story that he or she is composing in his or her own narration. And which we psychotherapists have the privilege of listening to as it unfolds, of helping to compose, precisely, the opportunity for wonderful creativity.

One last note: science takes its cue from curiosity, to heal a demand for knowledge. It is precisely the culture and scientific dimension of the professional Umberta, psychotherapist and scholar, that makes the Ayahuasca experience meaningful and, indeed, founded its inception. It has been said, and it is always so true! that the essential point is not the answers, the crucial importance is nested and enshrined in the questions. It is the formulation of the question that prompts the thought and arouses the ferment from which the answer will be born. Not because psychotherapy, in its variegated and interwoven complex, does not contain satisfactory answers for Umberta, not because her solid professionalism, of which she gives us eloquent brushstrokes, is not from a lack that she moves but, rather, from a fullness, from the almost physical pleasure of tasting the opening of new possibilities, of reading across, of experiencing astonishment, bewilderment, wonder. As after having tasted an excellent flavor, one seeks it, one wants it again: what new, different, unpredictable practice of magic can Umberta pour into her professionalism? With what unfamiliar

reality will she confront her thinking, in a repeated, continuous, unprecedented court debut?

Perhaps this angle also opens up an understanding of why Umberta gives us and offers us this new book of hers, so singular.

*The magic of the limit*

*Cradled by the spirits* recalls an affectionate familiarity, devoid of fear. That terror of the unknown, of the world so “other” from our own and so different from another world.

Because, precisely, it does not overturn or deny our world, it does much worse: it disregards it. It is there that we get bogged down, that we stand restless and at the same time restless on the threshold, torn between the arrogant challenge of those who do not consider us, who do not need our precious culture to exist and do great things, and, at the same time, who offer themselves to us with an irritating simplicity: we cannot give our assent, we do not know the codes to read (and interpret, of course!), and therefore we do not even know what to be afraid of. A world disinterested in us has no difficulty with us coming into contact with it. There is no reciprocity! No, there is not, this is the first serious step into the void, here the foot and the heart are missing. If we want it, we will have to invent it with our own equipment by accumulating universal sharing’s wasted by use as clothes and shields to protect us. Or, and this is a big one, to have no reference protection at all: be careful, Umberta, said and begged our friends in Rome, be careful, you don’t know what can happen to you! Nothing could be truer, you don’t know what can happen to you. Literally, in much

harsher and more decisive terms than the friends could have imagined.

But that is why the human person continues to push his or her limits, why he or she offers his or her face to the whisper and mist of the unknown: to think and try and experience and perhaps even understand things never even imagined. The lofty dream of the visionary, whether prophet or entrepreneur, sculptor, scholar or musician, explorer or therapist. With the blessed attitude of serendipity: searching but not knowing what; yet finding it, recognizing it.

Forcing one's own limits, the limits assigned to us by our history: stepping out of our inherited history and life to create a new one in which to be the protagonist. With the strong and beautiful contrast of creating one's own and entirely personal life by relying on others and on something else, renouncing mythical control.

The magic of the imaginary. This irresistible and indispensable drive that makes us cross walls and cultural barriers, stumbling and flaying, but every scar will tell a story. Every difference will give us an extra curl to add to our hair in pursuit of the mythical hair of Berenice. We want to become stars too, each and every one of us.

Because what is not true is not necessarily false: it can also be fake. And the difference is insurmountable. That which is false, confirms the true, rivets it like a nail, securing it for good.

The fake, on the other hand, is not true until we integrate it, until we make it our own: fiction is derived from fictional art, it is literature, it is art, it is thought that looks into the empty

anchor to mold a thought, a creation. It is the tale, the fable, the myth, the legend. When we do psychotherapy, the least of our worries is whether what is being told to us can be called true: when, in conversation, we say, “yes, it is true”, we mean “I agree with you”.

Magic cannot be realized without an agreement: whose content we do not know. That is why it is exciting, why we seek it out, fear it, discourage it and, at the same time, are already achingly nostalgic for it if our step backs off.

And yet the limits are, in fact, only inherited: we have always known that there is another world, we have always invoked it with regret and hope. We know that the very idea of our person is far more complex than how we lazily tell ourselves about it.

We carefully line up the body, the mind, the psyche, the soul as merchandise divided on the counter. Someone, a century ago he was even a scientist, wanted to claim that everything is energy: but we know it's just a figure of speech, a shaman could make a statement like that, a magician's stuff, couldn't he? And, yes, we know that we are all one, that our skin surrounds us and guards our immune system and builds our contact with the world, that every cell of ours quivers with our thought or emotion and shapes it, but do you want to put the solid certainty of that helix that wraps around, of that DNA that already tells us and knows everything about us, just as the relationship with our mother we will carry practically intact or barely scratched to the grave?

This is what I was referring to, hinting at the idea of the horizontal dimension: there are so many spheres, perhaps even as infinite as universes, but if we inhabit one of them, as we stand

there, the others are like the houses and countries we can glimpse when we look into the distance; and we can only imagine them as a little different from where we are but made of the same substance. The only one we know. If you go to Malta and enter the palace of the grand masters of the Order, the thick stone walls speak to you in an unmistakable language: large and mighty, they certainly guard the shady coolness of the rooms within. The stifling heat that assaults your throat disconcerts and strangles you: the guide explains that yes, this is Malta stone, hot in summer. And you realize that you never asked, stone is stone, right? Then you tell about it on the way back and in the eyes of the others you see the effort, impossible, to really imagine a wall more than a metre thick... that it is hot! But that does not make you a liar.

The limit, then, which marks one sphere from the other, is boundary, it joins and separates. But beware, even if little by little customs are disappearing, (not all of them, of course), even within our spheres of knowledge it seems to me that we still have to know how to imagine and respect them. Borders like this are not crossed lightly and carelessly. The preparation that Umberta tells us is like issuing a passport: it is done at home, looking abroad. Thus, the choice of clothes, of things to take with you: nothing? Anything? What if I don't know? The usual climate of the place tells me nothing, we cannot know where we will go. The questions that take shape prompt the traits of what we will want as answers.

The house we are still inhabiting is transformed as if deforming itself and centering itself on the open luggage on the bed, so our thoughts are always drawn back to that magnet. Then we realize that we are entering that no man's land in which we are

walking strangely, light baggage that tells of us at home and different ground beneath our feet. And we have entered the other land, but the first details we do not know how to read, Cyrillic characters posing as readable by anyone. And, finally, we can take the luxury of relying on an intermediary, a guide, yes. And it is then that we have truly entered the journey.

Because the usual world knows that the other world exists, but it acts as if it did not exist, as if it were not possible. And, yet, the journey to Peru must be a journey, albeit with the preparation, the vigil of arms that seals the unique importance of that event.

Maybe it's just me, but I felt less emotional enchantment in the subsequent intake of Ayahuasca: it should be different, shouldn't it? I still want it because I loved it, I go back to it because I savored it. But, after the first time, the experience is marked by the rhythms of learning: sacrosanct but no longer enchanted. Like learning to read: that wonder, that miracle suddenly appears, composing the whole world before our eyes. But the first time is unique. Even the distance, the train versus the plane, has its weight, in the train the breath of the usual, of the everyday, chases us too closely. So much so that Umberta has to "forget" her mobile phone at home to get away. It is another experience: one can compare, deepen, study.

*What to do with it?*

How does one return? How do you live again? And do we return or go for a new first time to the house that we considered ours, our home, before the journey? Can we still inhabit it as if nothing had happened? And after the house, our loved ones,

our work, the psychotherapy that Umberta practices? She gives a precise account of this: “My clinical perceptions have broadened... I have a new, much broader idea of human potential... I have then redoubled my attention to speech and its power”.

But hadn't she taken a substance that took her out of herself? The importance of the word is Western stuff, we, the Europeans, are the literary greats, are we not?

Here, in these reactions, in these questions lies the extraordinary miracle of storytelling, the impervious effort of participating in one's own experience, the concreteness of the smooth and imperturbable wall that separates us, the will and desire to place the story, and therefore oneself, in the hands and heart of the other through storytelling. Be it literary work, fiction, artistic artefact or scientific account of a research. Remember? The man asked the computer: will you ever reason like me? And the computer replied: this reminds me of a story.

Once again, we can read and enjoy Umberta's narrative as we glide through its various strands, careful to place our foot safely across the border, it seems easy, smooth, but the danger is there if we do not notice and respect it.

Using measure for us too, modelling Umberta's narrative on our measure, making sure that she speaks precisely, exclusively to us. In private, her voice rising in emotion and whispering when she speaks of darkness, of fear, of lights gone mad.

With the appropriate time, our own, going back over escaped details that now demand prominence to understand, to feel. A time that beats the deadline to our rhythm.



And, as with the octopus community, will Umberta's Peruvian (and other) experience transpire in me? As she learnt, understood, saw the other world and curled up in the arms of the spirits, will it also happen to me? Or will it be an invitation for me too to follow a path that will be entirely personal and yet in the footsteps of what she tells me?

Perhaps Umberta would like us to use and enjoy it in as wide and varied a range as possible, climbing into the arms of our own, of spirits: sometimes familiar, sometimes fearful, each one modelling a trait of the person.

And ringing tales with her in a chat that was as festive as it was deeply serious.

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