Aside from alcohol, Carl Greer had never consumed a mood-altering substance in his life. However, while sitting in a jungle hut in the Amazonian rain forest near the Mother of God River in Peru, the 60-something Jungian analyst found himself contemplating drinking a foul-tasting hallucinogenic brew that’s been part of indigenous shamanic rituals for millennia. Greer knew that the concoction, made from the boiled root of the sacred Ayahuasca vine, had a reputation for making participants violently ill—as well as triggering profound altered-state experiences. Ultimately, he decided to brave it.

The shaman leading the ceremony began chanting in a breathy singsong fashion, asking (and giving thanks) for healing and protection for the group. Then he shared the potent ceremonial drink with those gathered. For a while Greer experienced nothing out of the ordinary. But then geometric shapes began to appear and shift in front of his eyes.

“I had various experiences, some frightening and some not, and I continued to see … a kaleidoscopic set of images,” he writes in his book, Change Your Story, Change Your Life: Using Shamanic and Jungian Tools to Achieve Personal Transformation (Findhorn Press, 2014). “Suddenly, I heard a very loud noise. I had the sense that a membrane in the universe was breaking … I found myself in a blackness punctuated by an infinite number of globes of light, all connected to the others. I instantly knew that I was in the presence of the matrix,” which he describes as containing all facts and information—past, present, and future—usually hidden from our awareness.

“I realized that we, and all of creation, are all part of the matrix, and that everything in the matrix influences and is influenced by everything else,” he continues in the account. “This was not an idea that I pondered but a reality I experienced as an inner knowing.”

Same Thing … Just Different

Shamans believe dreams, spirits, angels, demons, and dark energies have a life of their own. Jungian therapists believe these same elements are part of our inner unconscious landscape. Both groups believe that wherever these manifestations reside, they have profound meaning and messages that can bring mental, emotional, and physical healing (the vast majority of the time without the help of hallucinogens).

Unfortunately, most of us are socialized to be “realistic.” We’re expected to have our feet on the ground by third grade. Dropping deeply ingrained, scientifically based social
programming as adults in order to get in touch with the inner psyche can prove problematic.

To expand his own spiritual horizons and make opening inner doorways easier for clients, Greer—who earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University and a second doctorate in clinical psychology from the Illinois School of Professional Psychology—decided to add “shaman” to his list of credentials. For years he studied with medicine men and women in the United States as well as Canada, South America, Australia, Ethiopia, and Outer Mongolia, eventually training under the supervision of Alberto Villoldo, Ph.D., at the Light Body School in Miami, Florida.

Now Greer’s healing toolkit overflows.

Whether it’s ritual ceremony, connection to a higher power through prayer, meditation, shamanic journeys, imaginal play, guided imagery, or Jungian dream analysis—it all works, he says, because the intent is the same: helping a person free themselves to be flexible and available to act in accord with their spirit’s destiny.

“The reason people aren’t always able to do that is because things from their past are influencing them unconsciously, keeping them in bad habits, bad relationships, and so on,” he says. “So the work is to be as free as possible from those past influences … not to change the past, but learn how you can change the way the past lives within you to free yourself up a little bit.”

Different techniques work for different people, he explains. Jungian therapy is, in some ways, rather passive. Patients wait for dreams to analyze or for insights to surface through imaginal play. Shamanism is more active and evocative.

“Shamans believe you can get information and energy and insight from relating to nature with plants, animals, rocks, recognizing that they all have the awareness and intelligence that one can connect with to gain insights,” Greer says. “They would say we are all living in the midst of transpersonal realms.”

This means shamans have long known what modern quantum physicists are just discovering—all life is interconnected, and the Universe is actually a sea of intangible energetic information fields. Nothing is separate from anything else. And when nature—however it shows up—gets involved in therapy, things get shaken up in really powerful ways.

For example, one of Greer’s clients was having difficulty in facing the fact that she was aging. During an inner meditative journey (one that didn’t involve any mind-altering substances), a cobra showed itself to her as her power animal. “I have been waiting for you for a long time,” the cobra told her. “I will protect you. I am fearless, and I shed my skin. As you shed your skin, I will guard you and help you to transform fearlessly.”

Although the experience was powerful, after the journey the woman still felt uncertain about herself and her ability to change. She also doubted the snake’s promise of protection. Then she realized the shawl she had been wearing during her journey had two snakes woven into the fabric—a design element she never noticed before. Later, while describing her journey experience to a friend, she noticed a snakeskin hanging on a tree limb directly overhead.

Both synchronicities were potent reminders of the “realness” of her inner landscapes and visions. The woman kept the snakeskin and to this day it remains a comforting reminder of the support she now knows she can count on as she embraces aging and transformation.

Integration Matters

Shamans understand that external energies affect what Greer terms the “soul body,” which is connected to our psychological/mental/emotional body, which is in turn connected to our physical body. “To have deep lasting healing you have to start at the most effective place, which the shaman would say is the energy body,” he says. “So you do an energetic intervention to clear, for example, sludge or heaviness from that energetic body and reform it to a start place that will reset the spiritual, psychological, and physical bodies.”

Unless the person actually makes lifestyle changes after the clearing, however, the energetic “sludge” from various influences can reset and start affecting
the person again. “That’s where psychotherapy is very valuable to integrate the changes,” Greer says. “That’s really my whole interest: How can you take these profound spiritual experiences and make differences that last in your everyday life?”

Greer wrote *Change Your Story, Change Your Life* to help people do just that. Through a variety of exercises, the book coaches readers in uncovering their personal stories—the interweaving archetypal themes that influence which people, events, and situations become part of their lives.

Many, he discovered, have a story of ongoing exhaustion that saps the joy and energy from life. Others have stories of chronic ill health or disappointment. “People I count on inevitably let me down,” he explains, “you may be surprised by how naturally your circumstances change when you write a new story informed by fresh insights and you alter the energies that are influencing you.”

Keeping a dream journal and mentally journeying into your life and your future—emotionally experiencing things the way you want them to be—are also deeply empowering. Creating both outer and inner sacred spaces and evoking a sense of reverence and awe cleanses your energy field and eliminates negative energies. Establishing a relationship with the various energies you encounter on your journeys, as Greer’s patient did with the cobra, provides insight and comfort—as long as you can stay objective and receive the information without becoming frightened.

Unfortunately, as Greer points out, religion has instilled many stories about devils and demons that frighten us. Rather than realizing that everything that shows up, scary or otherwise, is actually a part of themselves, many people spend a lot of energy keeping “dark forces” at bay—an approach that actually feeds those forces, giving them power over them. In comparison, Greer encourages embracing seeming “darkness” as a natural part of life—the complementary force inherent to living in a duality-based physical reality.

The bottom line is that integration and inclusion, not separation and fear, are what finally permit us to heal. “Listen to your witness consciousness,” Greer advises. “Don’t act on [inner] advice that doesn’t feel right to you even if you feel the message comes directly from Source and must not be questioned.” Be open to the possibility that transformation has many faces.

“For me, shamanism is a spiritual practice that gets me closer to Source and helps me to live a better life,” Greer notes. “My shamanic experiences have allowed me to see into other realms and dimensions and to perceive the everyday world with new eyes. As a result I have a better appreciation for its complexity, a deeper compassion for my fellow beings, and a profound sense of gratitude for being able to participate in the mystery of life.”

The Universe is actually a sea of intangible energetic information fields. Nothing is separate from anything else.

Carl Greer, Ph.D., Psy.D., is a practicing Jungian analyst and clinical psychologist. He’s worked as an entrepreneur and university professor and is currently a practitioner and teacher of Peruvian shamanism.

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