ALBERTO VILLOLDO, PH.D., is a Cuban-born psychologist and medical anthropologist who has spent more than 30 years studying the healing practices of Amazonian and Andean shamans in South America, as well as those of Native Americans in the southwestern United States. The New York Times famously called Villoldo the “Indiana Jones of the Spirit World.” His teachings bridge ancient shamanic wisdom (in a system he calls One Spirit Medicine) with the latest scientific developments in nutrition, biology, and neuroscience. Recently, he spoke with Unity Magazine editor KATY KOONTZ about why it’s vital that we recognize our connection not only with each other, but with the earth we all share.
KATY KOONZ: You describe One Spirit Medicine as a healthcare system. How does that system work?

ALBERTO VILLOLDO: I believe that the cause of all disease is a disconnection from nature—from our own nature as well as from the ecosystem. Health, then, is a result of a clear and collaborative relationship between nature and your own being, your own ecosystem, including your gut (which is an entire ecosystem inside your body). So if you create the conditions for balance, then disease simply goes away. Western medicine sees disease as happening in organs and tissues, whereas One Spirit Medicine sees disease as a symptom of your world being out of balance, manifesting through an organ or a tissue.

KK: Is it then similar in scope to the ancient Indian system of Ayurveda?

AV: There are 11 different systems of medicine on the planet. Ayurveda is one of the most ancient ones, and probably the closest and most similar one to One Spirit Medicine. Traditional Chinese Medicine is another one.

These systems are integrated and holistic. In the West, we have doctors who specialize in illnesses, like oncologists, and in organs, like cardiologists, but none who specialize in the whole being—not just the whole body, but the entire ecosystem. For example, if the bees are dying, then part of us is also dying. As the health and fate of the earth go, so go ours. We're interdependent.

KK: Does that also include inanimate things, like water and rocks?

AV: Absolutely. I trained as a medical anthropologist, and I spent many years in the Amazon. My initial funding came from Big Pharma, which saw the Amazon as nature's pharmacy and hoped to discover the next breakthrough cure for cancer, heart disease, or dementia there. But in all the villages I visited, I found no cases of heart disease, cancer, or Alzheimer's disease. These conditions are the products of our Western lifestyle, of pesticides and pollution in our air and water. For example, we may grow beautiful, organic food but because it's coming from depleted soil, it has much less nutritional value. The more we damage our ecosystem, the more we begin to express the illnesses that reflect that degraded system. The world is out of balance, and so we're out of balance.

KK: When you first learned about One Spirit Medicine from shamans, did it immediately make sense or did these ideas have to grow on you?

AV: Initially I thought our Western science was obviously superior to theirs and that they were primitive. But I discovered that we are the primitive ones. We so disregard the health of the earth that we have become a parasite in the system. Now the earth is getting rid of us in the same way our bodies activate our immune system to get rid of a parasite. The earth's immune system is not looking very kindly upon humanity right now.

KK: That's a striking way to put it.

AV: This is self-evident now, but it wasn't 40 years ago when I started talking about it.

KK: You teach that we have a biomagnetic field of light and vibration surrounding us that you call the "luminous energy field" and that it extends way beyond our bodies. Is this part of the reason we are truly all one, because these fields overlap?

AV: How do you know that we truly are one?

KK: I feel it in my bones.

AV: Good. What you're feeling in your bones is actually the interconnectedness of the field. Everything has a particle state, which is matter, and a field state, which is energy. At the level of the particle, we're separate. But at the level of the field, we overlap and interact with each other.

The field includes our personal energy field, which is created largely by our nervous system, but that field is also part of the greater quantum field that permeates everything, all the way to the farthest reaches of the universe. At that level, we are truly one.

KK: I like your description of the field being like the software that instructs our DNA, the hardware.

AV: DNA is the hardware that manufactures proteins. The software is in the field, which is made up of energy—information. If you don't upgrade the information or instructions in your energy field through prayer, meditation, a forgiveness practice, or some other type of energetic intervention, it's just going to repeat the instructions that ran in your family. So you're going to get sick the way your parents got sick and die the way they died, and you will repeat the same dramas that ran in your family.

But if you upgrade the information in the field, you could actually grow a new body that ages and heals differently, and you can break out of family patterns like heart disease. Our
genes account for only 10 percent of our health. The other 90 percent is from our lifestyle, what we eat, how we exercise, and our energy field.

**KK**: Where does the information in our energy fields originate?

**AV**: Imagine that you have two lineages. One is your biological lineage—your parents, your grandparents, and so on. That lineage contains psychological information and genetic information. The other lineage is all of your former lifetimes, which contain a lot of information about how you loved and were loved, how you killed or were killed, whether you were forgiven, what wisdom you acquired, and what your spiritual practice may have been. That lineage, that legacy, intersects with your biological lineage to create who you are today. That’s the information that’s in your field—the emotional, the psychological, and the reincarnatory.

When you upgrade the quality of your energy field, you upgrade your physical body and become free of the emotional patterns that follow you lifetime after lifetime.

**KK**: Detoxing is a big part of One Spirit Medicine. Is it truly possible to detox from the soup of stress hormones we live in today?

**AV**: Absolutely. Communing with nature upgrades the field, which then upgrades the body. But not if the body, particularly the brain and nervous system, is toxic. The most toxic things for the body are stress hormones—even more than exposure to bad water and air or heavy metals. You have to reset the body’s fight-or-flight system to get it to stop producing adrenaline and cortisol because of how damaging they are to the brain.

When your brain becomes toxic, you get brain fog, anxiety, depression, and even dementia. But when you’re able to detox the brain, it begins to repair itself and then you can upgrade your body. You can actually grow new brain cells and a whole new body because every molecule in your body is replaced every seven years. Otherwise you keep getting a photocopy of a photocopy, which eventually degrades into disease.

**KK**: You also teach the importance of good nutrition, which you say is much more than simply eating healthy food.

**AV**: You can have a fantastic diet but if your gut flora is wrecked from antibiotics, you cannot absorb nutrients. You have to begin with the ecosystem and repair your gut flora. Of the 100 trillion cells in your body, 90 trillion belong to your gut flora, the good bacteria. Eighty-five percent of your immune system is in your gut, for example. Your gut also produces almost all the serotonin your body manufactures. Serotonin is the happy molecule, and it also regulates sleep. But you won’t get it in your brain if your gut is broken.

**KK**: You’re a proponent of intermittent fasting. How does that benefit us?

**AV**: You ideally should have a feeding window that’s only six hours long—from noon to about 6 p.m.—and then you fast until noon the next day, giving the cells in your body 18 hours to recycle and eliminate waste. During the fasting period, drink lots of water. This helps detoxify on a cellular level and triggers the production of stem cells that repair the body. This won’t happen, by the way, if there’s sugar in your bloodstream, so you also have to cut back on sugars and get more of your nutrition from fat and protein.

**KK**: You teach that food has a spiritual aspect as well, yes?

**AV**: Every time I sit down to eat, I bless my food and I ask my food to bless me with the power of the divine feminine, the great mother—the earth, Gaia. You’re eating not only to get fuel and energy but also to participate in communion with the earth.

**KK**: The other key element of One Spirit Medicine is the vision quest. Is there a version that doesn’t involve staying outside in nature the way the indigenous cultures do?

**AV**: Start with a digital detox. Turn off your computer for three days. At the same time, improve your diet. If you want to push yourself, fast for those three days, and just drink water. You’ll clear the brain fog after one day and you’ll begin to see with clarity where you need to take your life. Do a vision quest whenever you need a new guiding vision, but it cannot be squeezed in-between your emails. You’re going to get out of it basically what you invest in it.
They were seen as witches and because women were so persecuted. AV: Why is that? KK: They're male in North America because women were so persecuted. They were seen as witches and burned at the stake. And in the U.S., unfortunately, much has been lost because the indigenous people have been on reservations for so long. But if you go to Central and South America, you will find more women doing this sacred work. Also, the fact that it's feminine doesn't mean it's gender-specific. We all have both a feminine and a masculine side. Shamanism is a feminine practice, but it's not circumscribed to women or to men.

KK: Has One Spirit Medicine evolved over time?

AV: The expression of One Spirit Medicine evolves, but the basic ideas stay the same. Our understanding changes and the form adapts to the moment, but not the core teachings.

KK: Do you think a true respect for ritual is missing from modern society?

AV: The problem with ritual today is that it has become so burdensome. It's repeating a formula, it's not spontaneous. It can keep you trapped in old, dead stories. Our rituals are generally the reenactment of an event, like the resurrection of Christ, or celebrating a great teacher. That's religious but it's not spiritual. The greatest rituals—the rites of passage into manhood, womanhood, motherhood, or marriage—have been forgotten. For example, go to California and you'll see it's full of 55-year-olds trying to look like 17-year-olds because we don't have the rites of passage to become the sage. We need to reclaim ritual, to spontaneously make a celebration of the sacred in the moment instead of a reflection of what occurred in the past.

KK: Do you think Western medicine is on track to evolve into a more holistic system like One Spirit Medicine?

AV: There are doctors who are trying to be more integrative and holistic, but Western medicine is not really a healthcare system. It's a disease care system with specific protocols for treating illness. One Spirit Medicine, on the other hand, says that if you create the conditions for health—emotionally, energetically, and nutritionally—disease goes away by itself. You don't need to treat disease. Western medicine is wonderful—it's the best medicine for trauma on the planet. But if you have a chronic condition or want to live a long and healthy life, it's not too helpful.

KK: I love that several big discoveries in neuroscience explain why some of these ancient truths are real and not just interesting stories.

AV: Discoveries like epigenetics, neurogenesis, and neuroplasticity are explaining how these ancient wisdom teachings work and why they are so powerful, but understanding them doesn't provide the personal empowerment needed to transform your life. That's the seduction of science. It explains things without allowing you to participate in the sacredness of it, forestalling the deep transformation we seek.