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HEALING AND SHAMANISM with ALBERTO VILLOLDO, Ph.D.

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. Today we're going to be exploring "Healing and Shamanism." We'll be looking at some of the most ancient healing traditions on this planet. With me is Dr. Alberto Villoldo. Alberto is the coauthor with Dr. Stanley Krippner of *Healing States* and also *Realms of Healing*. He is the co-editor with Ken Dychtwald of *Millennium: Glimpses into the 21st Century*. He is the director of the Four Winds Foundation in Sausalito, California, and is an adjunct professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at San Francisco State University.

Welcome, Alberto.

ALBERTO VILLOLDO, Ph.D.: Thank you, Jeff.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to be with you again.

VILLOLDO: Oh, it is, always.

MISHLOVE: You know, you've personally explored shamanistic practices extensively, particularly in Latin America, but also in other locations, and you've experienced and written about really extraordinary phenomena. It seems as if, as one gets into the depths of shamanism as you have, that you're dealing with something which is virtually incomprehensible from our normal American Western world view -- that one needs to enter into not only another reality, but another mythology.

VILLOLDO: Well, that's true in many, many different ways. Let me backtrack just a little bit. What took me to study shamanism was the study of the human brain, and no matter how you slice or dice the human brain or put it under the microscope, you cannot find mind. It's impossible to find it. My pursuit was in search of mind, and that's what took me to the Amazon and the jungles of South America, was to work with the men and women that had mastered the techniques for working with mind to its fullest, and healing and achieving extraordinary capabilities, and doing phenomena that to us are considered impossible. So the task here, when we look at these traditions, is not to look at them through the lenses of our culture, but to step into a reality where anything is possible and everything is possible.

MISHLOVE: It's as if, if we remain in our culture -- if you go into the Amazon, say, as a Western scientist, and you are trained as a Western scientist and attempt to report back to other Western scientists on what you've observed through your microscope, something fundamental would be missing. I suppose that fundamental thing is how you yourself have entered into the process and been changed by it.

VILLOLDO: Absolutely, absolutely. And what the shamans say is that before you can learn their ways of knowledge and power, that the first thing that we have to do is to learn how to step out of the type of cultural trance that we've all been educated into that limits the capabilities that we ascribe to the human mind, that limits us sexually, that limits us in terms of the kinds of relationships we can have with nature, with ourselves, with the divine, and that disconnects us from true power. See, they define knowledge as different from what we call knowledge. For the shaman, the medicine men and women that I've studied, to them the fact that we have all this academic training, that's only information, that's not real knowledge. Real knowledge is when you can exercise it powerfully. For example, they say that our approach to the study of knowledge is that we cannot understand how the cosmos works until we understand how a blade of grass works, how chlorophyll transforms light into energy and how capillary action takes chlorophyll up and down the leaves of grass.

MISHLOVE: This is the Western world view.

VILLOLDO: This is the Western world.

MISHLOVE: That we start by breaking things down into their smallest components.

VILLOLDO: Absolutely. And that you cannot understand the cosmos until you understand the workings of a blade of grass. Well, the medicine men and medicine women say that you cannot understand the workings of a blade of grass until you understand the workings of the cosmos. It's a completely different approach to knowledge. Until you're able to not only understand the forces of nature but interact with them -- make rain, create sunshine when it's overcast -- until you can exercise power, all that information is useless, it's not truly knowledge. And that power also has to do with healing yourself and healing others, as well as in some cases hurting others, because this power can also be used for sorcery, for black magic, for causing evil. It all comes down at the end to the sense of ethics, of course, of the individual.

MISHLOVE: You know, from the Western point of view, shamans were originally thought of as schizophrenic people who basically would be viewed in our culture as nut cases. And then later on we said, no, they're not just schizophrenic, they do have extraordinary powers, but it's all sorcery; it's sort of low-level, it's not elevated spiritually the way our Western religions are. And yet I get a sense, particularly from reading your books, that shamans see themselves as healers not just of individuals, but healers of the planet as a whole, healers working in behalf of mother earth, with whom they feel extremely connected. That seems to be, as I read in this area, the strongest point that comes through.

VILLOLDO: That's it. That's the basis of shamanism, is to become a caretaker of the earth. But they point out that you cannot become a caretaker of the earth until you are able to muster personal power, and until you can do that everything else is theory. So they have defined a series of steps that they describe in the medicine wheel as the four steps to power, the four steps to becoming a man or a

woman of knowledge, which have to do with facing fear, facing death, facing immortality, and claiming and achieving the possibility of exercising vision, discovering the power of vision, which is not only the vision to see into the cracks of time or space, which is one of the abilities that they cultivate, but the vision that's involved in envisioning the person that you're healing as healed -- that you not only need to go in there and repair what's gone wrong; that's a very Western way of healing, by doing laying on of hands to an affected organ or an affected part of the body, but rather by envisioning the individual in a healed state. And when you do that, the body responds, the body conforms to that image that you are able to summon of the healed state. It's similarly with the earth, that the healing of the earth has also to do with envisioning the possible -- not the probable, and not the steps that are involved in healing, but the possible. So that in the shamanic healing traditions, for example, you don't only want to return the individual to the state of health, but you want to get them to a place of extraordinary health, that when they come out of this healing process they're even healthier than before illness set in.

MISHLOVE: Isn't there a paradox, and I suspect some people may be thinking in the back of their minds that if these shamans with their cultures are so powerful, how did they allow themselves to become so overrun by the Western imperial countries?

VILLOLDO: They also recognize that cultures have their cycles, and many of the prophecies of the medicine men and women spoke about the end of their time. One of the prophecies, for example, talks about seven heavens of decreasing choice and nine hells of increasing doom, and then the Lord of the Dawn shall return. This is a Mayan and an Inca prophecy, and each one of these hells or heavens is a cycle of the Aztec calendar, fifty-two years. At the end of the seventh heaven of decreasing choice the Spaniards came and conquered Mexico, to the date. And that, according to the prophecy, marked the beginning of nine hells of increasing doom, nine times fifty-two years. And at the end of the eighth hell of increasing doom, the first atomic bomb was exploded in Hiroshima. So according to these traditions, which are shared by the Hopis, by the Mayans, by the Incas, they say that we're at the time of the end of the ninth hell of increasing doom, and at the beginning of the renaissance, the beginning of the return of the Lord of the Dawn, of a new kind of thinking, of a new quantum leap for our people, for our species. And they recognized the end of their people, they saw it coming; and that was just one of the cycles, like in the fall the leaves return back to the earth from the tree.

MISHLOVE: So the work that you're doing, which is bringing Americans and bringing Europeans to the shamans in Latin and South America, to receive initiation and to receive training by them, is also part of this larger cycle, perhaps.

VILLOLDO: In some way it's a returning of these traditions of knowledge to the West. The work that we do at the Foundation has to do with creating a bridge to this ancient knowledge, and actually to recognize the fact that the Native American, the American Indian, has been a caretaker of these ancient traditions of knowledge, and that even they now, their prophecies say that the new caretakers of the earth will come from the West, and as they hand this tradition of knowledge to us, who are the new caretakers of the earth, that we must also not only cultivate them but take them even to places that they themselves did not.

MISHLOVE: In your writings, Alberto, you have described events which I might call parapsychological, but as a parapsychologist myself I would say they even exceed what we generally see in the parapsychological literature. They border on, or might be considered, miraculous. I wonder if you could talk about these, because to me they somehow get at the heart of things.

VILLOLDO: Well, they're miraculous only because they're foreign to us, they're foreign to our way of thinking. Let me stay with the shamanic level and the four steps of power. The first step is the work of the south, and it's associated with the spirit of the serpent. You learn how to shed your past, to erase your personal history, but not the way we do it psychologically, which is to shed one painful event of our past at a time, but to do it the way that the serpent does it, the way the serpent sheds its skin, and to learn at the same time to walk with our bellies against mother earth, to be close to the earth again. The second step is the work of the west, the work of the jaguar, and it's the place where you come to lose fear, and you lose fear through a very ancient ceremony of symbolic death, where you come to meet your death, and it's not talking about what it would feel like to die, or closing yourself off in a sealed box and going underground for a couple of days; no, it's done in a place of power. For example, let me tell you one of my experiences. We were in Machu Picchu, about to enter the City of Light of the Incas, and according to their traditions, you could not enter Machu Picchu until you had died, till you were a person that's already dead, that has no fear of death. There's a death stone outside the city, shaped like a canoe, pointing to the west, that the shamans would come and lie on, and would actually separate their physical bodies from their energy bodies, which would be launched to the west in a journey of symbolic death, taken by the spirit of this jaguar that came and took you, ripped you out of your body, and took you through a complete circle around the earth and brought you back from the east. Well, I always thought this was a very nice myth -- you know, the spirit of the jaguar coming and pulling you by your hair and going off to the west, and you going out of your body.

MISHLOVE: Kind of quaint, even.

VILLOLDO: Very quaint, very nice myth, and something I'd enjoy telling my kids about. Well, the first time I did this, I lay down on the stone and this old, old medicine man I was with looked at me and he said, "Alberto, belief is not something that is based on proof, like your sciences. It is something that you invest. However much of yourself you invest in the ceremony is what you're going to receive. Don't be an observer; participate. Dare to take a chance." I said, "OK, I'll give it a shot." I lay down on the stone, and he began to put his hands over each one of my chakras, over each one of the seven energy centers in my body, and to chant into them, and then took both of his hands over my body and just -- whooooo! -- made this throwing motion. I was looking at it through half open, half closed eyes. I didn't feel anything. He called in the spirit of this cat to come and take me; nothing. At a certain point I feel that he's done, and I get up, and I walk back to take my place in the circle with the other people there, and I see that everybody in the circle is still looking at the stone, and I turn around and I look back at the stone, and there's my physical body lying there, and there's this medicine man turned towards me and he's saying, "Come on back here; get back in there."

MISHLOVE: Get back in your body and start over.

VILLOLDO: Right. So I go back into my body, and I'm going, what if I can't get back in? I'm at the same time very curious and intrigued and getting a little nervous, you see. So I wiggle back into my body, and he says, "OK, you can get up now." And that was how the experience manifested for me -- not this archetypal mythical journey with a jaguar, but what from my own cultural perspective was a separation of my essence, of my energy essence, from this material covering, which could only happen when you lose your fear of death. Because death is the glue that binds these two together, and fear, according to their legends, is the greatest enemy of the shaman. And once you let go of fear, you can begin to truly receive those lessons of immortality; until then it's just a thought. If you

really experience disengaging from the physical and being conscious in that state, then everything else is just information, it's not knowledge.

MISHLOVE: So this is the kind of experience that the shamanic traditions are the custodians of.

VILLOLDO: Absolutely. And they have a tremendous amount to teach us today, I feel, in terms of how we can live our lives more fully, more powerfully, and in closer communion to nature and to the divine. But there are many, many other experiences, you know, that defy our concepts of reality.

MISHLOVE: Well, what you seem to be saying is that the particular phenomena aren't what's essential, because anything could happen, and it might be anything, and many, many things are reported -- that there's somehow a journey of the individual, the person, towards, as you've described it, knowledge and power, which is the key to this path.

VILLOLDO: Yes, absolutely. Another example is frequently, when I do programs, or when we do training programs at the Four Winds Foundation, and we're talking about healing, people ask us to teach them healing techniques, and I tell them that there's no such thing as a healing technique -- that the same technique that you use to heal someone you can use to kill someone, that the technique is not it; that the same energy that you can use to bring healing to someone, you can use the exact same movement, the exact same gesture, to kill someone. In fact some of the best healers that I've studied have been the voodoo priests in Haiti. They're like attorneys today; they'll make the case for whatever side pays them the most. Frequently they'll even do voodoo on you by shutting down one of your energy centers in your body, so that your immune system begins to malfunction, and then they'll put the word out in the community that they're the ones who did the job on you, so you come and pay them to undo it. But it's the exact same technique.

MISHLOVE: In other words, you're saying that working with this type of energy might be like working with electricity. It's indifferent to our sense of ethics.

VILLOLDO: Absolutely. But from our perspective, which is a very logical, rational one, we look at techniques -- if you do this, healing will happen. And I've seen so many cases where people with the best intentions have begun to channel energy to someone else, and have ended up doing sorcery, hurting someone. Because it's not the technique; it's the development and the ethics and the intent of the person that's doing the healing. And if you look at it from the perspective of the shaman, the perspective of the feminine, which is not so rational or logical, it's not the technique, it's the degree of vision and of consciousness that you bring into the healing process.

MISHLOVE: Intention somehow seems to be crucial.

VILLOLDO: Intention and integrity.

MISHLOVE: In other words, if you're not in your own nature a nurturing individual, then the techniques which you might be taught won't really heal.

VILLOLDO: Yes. For example, I remember years back when I was practicing and working with people more directly, I worked with a number of people that were cancer patients, that had gone to see a psychic healer who had done laying on of hands on them. And what happened is that the cancer had metastasized all over their body, because cancer loves energy; it just spread all over the body. Here again was an example of trying to do spiritual healing from a Western, allopathic, medical perspective. Instead of ten milligrams of medicine, we'll do ten minutes of laying on of hands, instead of looking at what the cause of the situation is.

MISHLOVE: And the cancer got healed.

VILLOLDO: Right. The cancer did great. So it points to looking at what the underlying causes are -- what transformational journey must that person undergo to recover their health, how much they heal themselves. Because in shamanism all healing is self-healing, and as you know, all healing truly is self-healing.

MISHLOVE: And the shaman tends to look at the spiritual cause, then, of illness.

VILLOLDO: Tends to look at the spiritual cause, and also at the journey that the person must do to recover their soul. They say that illness has set in because you've lost part of your soul somewhere in the past. It could be a spot where you suffer from fright, for example, and part of your soul fled. Or, to translate that into our setting, maybe it was a relationship where you lost part of your spirit, part of your juices, where you became jaded in some way, you lost part of your life force; and to go back and recover that before healing can fully take place.

MISHLOVE: It sounds like what we're getting at is some sense of the integrity of the person.

VILLOLDO: No, it's the integrity with a sense of responsibility -- responsibility for not only healing ourselves, but for healing the earth, for caretaking the earth. But I have found that this model that we spoke about, the medicine wheel and the four steps of erasing your personal history -- of shedding your past so your present is no longer created by the momentum of your personal past; of facing fear, and of facing the fear of death, and going beyond that; of coming to a direct communion with the divine, the work of the north, coming to direct communion with the masters, not following anybody else's footsteps, following your own, settling for nothing short of that direct experience of the divine; and then the work of the east, of being able to be a visionary, to hold that image of the possible, for yourself, for your community, for the species, for the planet -- that at that point the individual is not only healed, but he becomes an example of what perhaps our species is becoming in the future.

MISHLOVE: Shamans are often referred to as the wounded healer, and part of what is necessary often in the initiation process is to heal oneself. I suppose, until we're all acting in that level of precise knowledge and power and courage that you've described, we're all wounded in a sense. And we're all capable of rising to that level, I suppose, through these practices -- perhaps practices isn't the right word; through this intention.

VILLOLDO: But look at another example. I was trained in psychology, and psychology tells you that you're not fully complete until you resolve this issue with mommy and daddy -- till you can reconcile yourself with your mom and forgive her for abandoning you and ripping you off her breast -- all these complicated theories that we create around this. Shamanic traditions say that you can never, ever fully be reconciled with your mother until you bond with the Great Mother, with the mother earth. In fact, we're never going to solve this mommy issue until we can connect with the Great Mother. You never resolve this issue of relationship with father until you connect with the Great Father, with the Great Spirit. And they have rites of passage and rituals that allow us to make this bond with the earth, to learn how to think globally and planetarily.

MISHLOVE: I get the sense that the shamanic tradition has really a more fully evolved model of optimal human functioning. In psychology we talk about the well-adjusted human being, which is a far cry, I should think, from the man or woman of power that the shamans speak of.

VILLOLDO: Yes, absolutely. It's not a well-adapted individual, but an individual that dares to take a chance, that dares to make a fool out of himself. In fact I often think what the first shaman must have been like -- that first woman or man who perhaps came back to the tribe with a burning stick that they picked up from the site where a lightning bolt had struck a tree, and brought fire back to the community. That person's neurological circuitry, their brain circuitry, must have been rewired in that instant, and they must have taken a quantum leap that their tribe would not take for another thousand or two thousand years. And similarly, in the past the shaman, the prophet, the visionary, has been an individual who's been an example of who the rest of the community would become a thousand or two thousand or five thousand years down the line. They were the first myth makers, the first scientists, the first careful observers of nature. And whereas we have been working with the human mind for -- what? -- less than a century now, they've been working with the human mind for a hundred thousand years.

MISHLOVE: So rather than viewing the shaman as sort of a vestige of some savage and primitive world view, you're suggesting that in truth they're harbingers of the future evolution of humanity.

VILLOLDO: Absolutely -- that they have developed methods, techniques for not only looking through this crack between the worlds, looking at the mechanisms of destiny, but in the process of looking at them, as quantum mechanics, quantum physics tells us, they actually begin to influence that. They begin to influence the course of destiny, and today, as you know, we're in extraordinary need of visionaries, individuals who can envision a possible future -- not the probable future of pollution and nuclear holocaust, but what's possible for us.

MISHLOVE: Well, as we're beginning to face global ecological issues, it seems to me that the vision of the shaman, of us working together healing the planet and getting in touch with our tribal sense of connectivity there, is a very positive one for humanity.

VILLOLDO: Absolutely, and looking at the earth as a single community that's a member of a greater community, and that consciousness exists everywhere -- in the trees, in the rivers, in the mountains, in the ravines, in the great canyons, as well as in space, as well as that there are other communities of more evolved beings than us that we can commune with, that we can have access to, that we can enter into dialogue with.

MISHLOVE: We typically in Western culture think of this as primitive animism, but what you're suggesting is that our view of it is really an expression of how we are actually cut off from the life force, cut off from our own power.

VILLOLDO: The word animism itself is an interesting word. Animism comes from anima, the soul, the feminine, and it refers to a time when the world was enchanted -- when trees had spirits, when clouds had spirits and you could speak to them, you could dialogue and interact with them. And through our scientific revolution and the reductionistic education that we've had, we have created a world that is no longer enchanted. I think that one of the tasks that we have today is to reenchant the world. It's the reenchantment of the world, like Morris Berman says in his book -- again, not to be at the peril and at the mercy of the spirits of the trees or the clouds or the rocks that are going to take your soul away; we're beyond that. The human brain has evolved to a place where we no longer need to be adrift in the sea of superstition that our ancestors were, because there was a tremendous amount of fear that we were exposed to, whether we call it the devil or the spirit of the rock. But we're now in the position to recognize the magic of the planet that we live in, of our own lives.

MISHLOVE: What you're suggesting, then, is that in order to escape from our fear of these psychic powers we disenchant the world, rather than confronting that fear internally, which is truly the act of the shaman.

VILLOLDO: That's the path, the power of the shaman, right there.

MISHLOVE: Alberto, it's been a real pleasure having you here with me. I have to say I really admire the way in which you've been able to combine this ancient life style into that of a modern international citizen. Thanks so much for being with me.

VILLOLDO: Thank you, Jeff.

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