

Traveling *between* the Worlds

CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY SHAMANS



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Alex Stark's journey down the path of the shaman began early on in life when, at age eight, he found himself "looking through people's bodies and studying their bone structure." At age 40, after studying with such teachers as Michael Harner and Barbara Ann Brennan, Stark began to feel the need to clarify his life's purpose.

Following the example of many seekers before him, he embarked on a vision quest to pray for a sign that would further his growth. In the middle of his second night on the quest, Stark decided to take a walk through the forest. At about three o'clock in the morning, just as he entered a small glen, a sudden burst of ball lightning struck him from behind. The impact left him dazed but, incredibly, completely unharmed.

Realization of the significance was slow to come.

"It took me five years to realize what had happened," Stark says with a laugh. "I kept on praying the rest of the morning. What an idiot!"

Stark later discovered that in the Andean shamanic system—practiced by the tribal people of his native Peru—initiation by lightning is considered the first level of power, and is associated with both initiation and teaching.

As it turned out, no other induction into shamanism could have been more appropriate. In the ten years since, Stark has been working as a counselor and advisor on issues of shamanic transformation and healing, as well as guiding people through their own initiation processes. Stark's shamanic practice is an eclectic mix that includes South American curanderismo, Oriental geomancy, and Celtic mysticism.

Hillary Webb: In your practice you blend techniques from several different cultures—South American, Chinese, European, African. What is gained and what is lost when combining a number of different traditions?

Alex Stark: I think it's dangerous to mix and match unless you go back to the original principles. For example, all cultures are going to deal one way or another with the directions of the compass. All cultures are going to deal one way or another with the Upper, Middle, and Lower worlds. All cultures are going to have to deal with the concept of Will, with the concept of Intent, with the concept

of Power, with the concept of Love, and with the concept of Evil. You have to. There's no getting around that because those are just constituents of human life and of reality as a whole. All cultures are going to have to deal with issues of perception and of mind. What's the difference between consciousness? Between mind and perception? How do they connect? How do they relate to each other? And techniques are going to develop in all cultures to understand these issues.

It's wonderful to explore a number of traditions, but one of the great losses of our time is that because we are exposed to so many, we can never learn them completely. The level of in-depth penetration that was handed down over many centuries of work that contains the rituals, principles, practices, and so on of a given culture will be lost as societies become more homogeneous and world exposure becomes greater.

This is also a reflection of the degradation of the natural world. We're losing biodiversity; we're losing our knowledge and our connection to that whole level of activity. And it's very worrisome, because that level of knowledge results in tremendous amounts of connection with the land.

Hillary Webb: In indigenous cultures, people have that intimate connection with the natural world. They relate to rocks and trees as their brothers and sisters. How can we in the industrialized world begin to cultivate this kind of deep relationship with the spirit-in-all-things?

Alex Stark: The lesson is in children. Children will give their doll a name and believe that the doll is animate. I know a lot of people who give their cars names. Firefighters give their trucks names because they know at an intuitive level that the fire truck is not only important because it's their tool, but that it has an essence of its own that can be recognized and given a name. Name giving is a very important tradition which we in the West have lost. Children will do this automatically because they are in greater connection with the natural world and with supernatural phenomena. You don't have to go look for fairies in the woods. All you have to do is spend five minutes of silence in your bedroom and you'll realize that every single object in that room is imbued with spirit and partakes of the great spirit that unites everything. You can do shamanism in a prison cell.

Hillary Webb: So, when does someone actually "become" a shaman? How do you know when you're ready to begin working with others?

Stark Stark: You become a shaman when you start working. When you start actually using your talents on behalf of somebody else. That's true about any occupation. Of course, you always need to train more in order to move up along the category. The difference between a novice and a professional is, as always, in the experience, and in the dedication one gives to one's chosen path. It's unfortunate that in our society right now people do a little training and feel they are qualified to practice shamanism. That's very dangerous.

How you know when you are ready to work also depends on what you're going to do. You certainly don't have to work always at the highest level. You can work at the family level. You can work on the community level. It's the level of energy of your system and the frequency of vibration that you can handle that determines how many people you can carry energetically. Individuals who are responsible for lots of people obviously have more power. What happens to a lot of practitioners, though, is that they overextend themselves. They start becoming responsible for too many people and then they crash. This happens a lot to spiritual leaders. If the vibrational frequency is too high for the person's body, they have to lower the vibration in order to compensate. But because they are out of balance, they keep at it, and ignore the warning signs: fatigue, minor physical problems, impatience, and so on. If they keep this up they can actually crash all the way to the bottom. Then the Lower World steps up and the person gets involved in a sex scandal or a scam or just crashes physically.

If you keep your mind and your intuition open, the level of work will come to you at the right pace. As you learn more, the client or the case will come in to feed that knowledge. As long as your ego is not attached to the power of that assignment or of that client or of that particular problem, you will be handed the work in increasing order of complexity.

Hillary Webb: That brings up a good question. How do you know if your ego truly is out of the way? How can those of us doing this work trust that our motives are completely altruistic?

Alex Stark: You can know that your ego is out of the way if you're not attached to the outcome. If your ego is somehow connected, you're going to want the outcome to be a certain way. You are going to expect something to happen. To me, that is the most important clue. If you do your work according to the dictates of your heart, not your mind, you should be able to detach from the outcome.

Hillary Webb: So the shaman shouldn't be trying to create change for his or her own purposes. Because they're too invested.

Alex Stark: Yes, although at the highest level of shamanic practice it becomes very obvious that no matter what or who you are working with, fundamentally what you are trying to do is harmonize yourself.

There is a beautiful story told by Carl Jung about a rainmaker who was asked to come and make rain for this village. No other rainmaker had been successful, and the village was basically at the edge of starvation. The first thing the rainmaker did was ask to be given a hut, into which he secluded himself for four days and four nights. After that time, the rains came.

Of course, the villagers wanted to know how he had done this. Finally, after protesting that he had done nothing, the rainmaker said, "When I came into the village I noticed that the villagers were out of harmony with Heaven and Earth. All I did was place myself in harmony with Heaven and Earth."

You cannot work on the client. That's an illusion. You can only work on yourself. If you are aware of that, there is no need to worry about the ego, because you're dealing with it. Every client that has been put in front of you is a lesson not about the client necessarily, but about you. As long as you can recognize that, you're doing the work. And it works much faster that way. You get results.

Hillary Webb: It seems this would make the process a little easier, too.

Alex Stark: Well, sometimes. But sometimes you're being asked to look at stuff that you'd rather not look at.

Hillary Webb: In an essay on shamanism you wrote, "Once mastery is achieved, the shaman becomes a hollow vessel for the mystical forces of Nature to act through." This sounds beautiful and frightening all at once. Could you explain this statement further?

Alex Stark: Fundamentally, everybody is at the center of his or her singular reality. For you, I am basically a reflection of yourself. For me, you are a mirror that reflects my existence. And this is both frightening and empowering. You can use that knowledge to change the world, simply because the world that sur-

rounds you is really just a creation of your consciousness. Not in a metaphorical sense, but in a real sense. You know, you could make this world vanish. You could literally drop this world. In shamanic cultures that is known as “changing the assembly point.” This process is at the core of the meditational moment. Once you can stop reality, you can access the infinite.

This is a very interesting phenomenon, because it allows you to understand that the world that surrounds us is simply put there by our own consciousness as a way to help us through the process of life. Think of the power of that. If you are the center of all existence, then you contain the power of the cosmos. You contain the power of all the suns. In fact, you are the sun. And you are capable of channeling that energy. That is what is referred to in all traditions as Love. As a practitioner, you can use that quality of existence in order to help somebody else who’s having an issue in their own life i.e. their own consciousness. The giant paradox is that at the same time that we are fundamentally single, we are fundamentally connected. It’s by holding those two truths within yourself that you can help the other.

The Hindus have a beautiful way of describing this when they talk about the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is a being who has reached liberation from delusion but chooses to return to this plane—the Plane of Illusion—in order to help others on their path of liberation. And that, fundamentally, is what you’re doing as a shamanic practitioner. On the one hand, you are holding the reality that you have achieved the infinite, and, on the other, you’re holding the reality that there is a temporal limited existence that we know as the world. And you are in both at the same time.

Now, to train for that, what you do is you visualize the Center Pillar. The Center Pillar is the “All”—your innermost essence, the point of all beginnings, the center of the world, eternity. It is nowhere, the void, the “unmanifest.” It is the ladder that connects you with the other worlds; the smoke hole through which both you and Spirit journey. It is the crown of your head and your spine through which your soul enters and leaves the body. All shamanic training involves opening up the crown and becoming the Center Pillar. It’s fundamental to any shamanic practice. If you don’t practice that exercise you will never achieve anything.

Actually, I should qualify that. It can sometimes happen spontaneously, depending on the level of your soul’s preparedness for this journey.

Hillary Webb: Earlier you talked about the Upper, Middle and Lower Worlds as a basic tenet of all shamanic practice. What exactly are you talking about when you refer to these worlds?

Alex Stark: Well, the Middle, Lower and Upper worlds are ways of expressing the fact that there are three vibrational levels within that Center Pillar. Actually, there are infinite levels of vibration, but for practical purposes, you can discern three broad categories. One category, the Middle World, is the one that we are attuned to when we are awake. The Upper World feeds this particular inner consciousness. This is the vibrational level of light and, of course, of love. Then there is a vibrational level that is lower than both of those—one that is associated to the darker impulses. That is the Lower World.

Really, when we talk about these worlds, we are just talking about vibration. An energetic level of intensity. And then, of course, because we need to understand it, at that point words kick in as an attempt to explain this phenomenon that is primarily felt in the body. So we talk about good and evil—good being the higher level of vibration and evil being the lower level of vibration. Different cultures have developed different words. At the beginning when I talk to students about shamanism, I refer to the Middle, Lower, and Upper Worlds because that's the easiest way to connect to it. It's all talk, really, but it's wonderful talk because through the ritualistic process you are now engaging in a dialogue with those energies. The catch is to be able to tune into these various levels with your body and your consciousness, so that you can dispense with the words.

Hillary Webb: In what way does ritual act as a dialogue?

Alex Stark: Ritual is the language of the sacred. You cannot approach the sacred without ritual. The sacred is continuously interacting with us. It warns us by making us fall on our butt. It rewards us by giving us our daily bread. There is continuous interaction, and if you want to learn to manage that interaction, you have to use ritual. So for practitioners, for people like you and me who are interacting with the forces of the cosmos daily, ritual is essential. You cannot do this work without it.

Hillary Webb: Here's another quote from that same essay: "To maintain this stature is arduous work, as the rules and norms of conduct of society and Cosmos must be faithfully adhered to. Failure to do so creates great danger. The

shaman, however, cannot turn back, as his life carries him or her on into deeper and deeper layers of the cosmic vision he is now embodying.”

Alex Stark: The whole journey of life is fundamentally an attempt to remember that, at the most intimate personal level, we are the center of the world. We are the Pillar. We are the center of the Cosmos. We are the Light. We are Love. We are Power. We are God. It takes time to remember that, because after the initial period of childhood, you forget it.

The other problem is that our ego (ego being attached to the material world, to the manifestation on the physical plane of that light) wants that process to stop, because remembering requires that you abandon all of your attachments. And that can hurt, because it requires that you acknowledge that your consciousness is the only one that matters, that you are alone, and that all these objects, habits and relationships you have accumulated in your life to bolster and support you, to justify who you are, are useless if you do not love yourself. And that is the hardest thing to do! But once that door has opened and you see that new light, baby, let me tell you, you can not go back! Because that’s what you came here to do in the first place, and you are finally doing it!

People always misunderstand that one. They think that there’s some force that’s not going to let them go back. But that force is you. There’s no going back. You just can’t. Because you’ve already turned that corner. Other people may live their entire life without any glimmers of what we are talking about. They’ll have to wait for another incarnation. Now, on the other hand, in order for you to be successful at seeing the human condition or the world condition as it really is, you have to be fully committed to your life on this plane. Which means that you have to be committed to your principles, you have to be committed to your society, and you have to live according to the rules that you agreed to when you entered this world. Which means you can’t lie, you can’t steal, you can’t kill—the Ten Commandments, in other words. Moses went to the mountain and had a conversation with fire. In fact, the burning bush represents the Center Pillar of the World.

What this means is that you have to live your life in a particular way if you expect to see God. A lot of people think that once they have discovered a little bit of this and a little bit of that, they can forget the rules of this world because there’s a bigger world somewhere else. Think again. There is no other world, remember? You’re it!

Hillary Webb: OK, so say I've seen the light. I've studied with all kinds of teachers and I've acquired a bunch of shamanic wisdom. How do I incorporate it into this world?

Alex Stark: There's a Hassidic story about three rabbis who were taken by the archangel to witness the Wheel of Ezekiel, which is at the highest order of reality. And at that level they were shown the seven vaults in the seventh heaven—the abode of God himself. They became participants in the great mysteries and then were brought back to Earth. One of the rabbis couldn't handle it and went mad. The second rabbi didn't know what to do with that information, and he became a cynic. He attributed the whole thing to his imagination. The third rabbi did nothing with the information at first, but in the days and months that followed, he wrote songs, which he then sang to his wife and daughter.

That story captures the essence of this work in terms of its relation to daily life. You have to make it useful in the daily world. You can't hold it. Seeking to hold this knowledge—not to turn it into art, dance, music, poetry, philosophy, whatever your inclination might be—is tantamount to suicide.

Hillary Webb: What do you mean “suicide”?

Alex Stark: You would become lost. You would lose your path. You would stop enjoying the world. That's why in a lot of the Andean teachings they recommend that as soon as you gain knowledge, you share it. Because knowledge is meant to be shared. Power is meant to be applied as work. Riches are meant to be given back. There's always a recycling through the basic principle of reciprocity. Reciprocity being the fundamental karmic rule of existence. If you hold onto anything, you stop the flow of juice in the Cosmos, you interfere with the movement of energy that animates, supports, and feeds us. So if you hold, you, and those around you, get stuck, like mud in a river. What makes more sense: to have clean, free-flowing water that can nurture the fields so that crops can grow, or streams that are clogged with silt, and debris? Holding is like that, and all shamanic practice is meant to increase that flow, to really let the waters run so that we, our communities, and the planet can be healthy, peaceful, and free.

Hillary Webb: What's the best way for someone to begin incorporating shamanic practice into their lives?

Alex Stark: Fundamentally, all shamanic teaching is a reevaluation of your

perceptual apparatus. You have to learn to perceive the world in a different way. We're at a huge disadvantage in this society because we have to reprogram ourselves to understand reality in a different way. In order to do that, you have to have huge gobs of discipline. You have to be steady on your practice. You have to be willing to accept that ritual is going to become a part of your life. You have to have an admiration for the mystery that you behold continuously, a willingness to take chances and a willingness to be ready to face the unknown at any moment. To look at reality with beginner's mind, with innocence, takes awhile to discover.

For a lot of people shamanism is something that fuels their ego side, something that fulfills certain lacks, certain needs that are partly ego, maybe karmic as well. And that's fine, because whatever gets you to where you're going is what gets you to where you're going! But you have to remember that ultimately, shamanic practice is a practice of service, that we are here to help, to heal, and to get out of the way of the Cosmos, so that Nature and its forces can work. Success, health, happiness, are all intimately tied in with freedom, not the freedom to do what ever we want to, but the freedom to be at the Center, to feel reality fully in our bodies, and to rejoice with others in this discovery.

Hillary Webb: And the ego part of it, the parts that aren't quite "pure," will be adjusted accordingly?

Alex Stark: Yeah, eventually you start to realize that the mechanism of existence includes making mistakes. It includes going into it for the wrong reasons. Because at the initial stages of your discovery of this thing, you're just a moron like everybody else. For example, I started studying Feng Shui as a way to pay bills, I had no idea at that point that what I was getting involved with was of a whole other caliber of experience. That it really was about me, and not about paying bills or finding some sort of financial power.

Everybody's route is going to be a little different. Everybody's path is going to be original. It's always your very own path.

*Hillary S. Webb is the author of **Exploring Shamanism: Using Ancient Rites to Discover the Unlimited Healing Powers of Cosmos and Consciousness**. She also writes for **DreamChange Magazine**.*