

Reflections on the Cosmic Serpent

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Abstract

The author takes Jeremy Narby's (1) recent publication as a source of reflection on the nature of healing, consciousness and awareness and how knowledge of these can be acquired. As a molecular biologist, the author was confronted with many challenges to his conventional world view when exploring (initially with some scepticism) Narby's research and experiences of working with the Ashaninca people of the Peruvian Amazon. What follows is a personal reflection on how knowledge and awareness can change when we have to face up to new possibilities which shatter our established way of looking at things.

Introduction

From time to time a book can really spark the imagination, and what began initially as a book review for this journal turned into a series of deeper reflections. But first of all I need to explain the lenses through which I view the world. I am trained as a molecular biologist and molecular endocrinologist. I have taken a residency in Clinical Pastoral Education (hospital chaplaincy), and a Family Therapy Internship. I am now enrolled in the Masters of Pastoral Psychology and Counseling degree at St. Stephen's College, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I facilitate meditation and contemplation groups in the context of healing and relationship. These classes have been in the tradition of Qi Gong and Centering Prayer. I am in the process of integrating the understanding and meaning I have derived from my scientific research experience with mysticism, theology, and martial arts. I am interested in bridging the gap in relationship between the body, mind and spirit. I am a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant who grew up in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

I came across Narby's "Cosmic Serpent" (1) in the new acquisitions area of the Medical Library at the University of Calgary. I looked at it and put it back. I made an assumption that it couldn't live up to its title - catchy, but just a catch to hook me and would just be some fluff. I had an interest in the interpretation of the serpent in myth and culture partly due to reading a book by Elaine Pagels (2) entitled, The Gnostic Gospels, not to mention my interest in the DNA aspect due to my training in Molecular Biology. The next time I was in the library I looked at the book again. I decided that I had to be more open-minded and finally signed the book out. I had to suspend judgement for a bit as I started to read it. It didn't take long before I felt like I could not put the book down. It really resonated with me as if the author, Narby, was speaking about my own story.

What the book was about

During the course of Narby's doctoral work in anthropology, he studied the Ashaninca, an indigenous people of the Peruvian Amazon in South America. The crux of the book was about the apparently absurd juxtaposition of the cosmic serpent with DNA. Both the serpent and the DNA are seen as origins of knowledge and wisdom in their respective cultures and traditions. The mediators of this knowledge and wisdom for the Ashaninca are the shamans in this indigenous culture of the Amazon as the molecular biologists might be viewed in the Western culture.

Despite the apparent initial lack of relationship between the two worlds, the author's insights allowed the two perspectives of shamanism and molecular biology to inform each other and grow through their relationship. This worked as well as it did because the author described very clearly his struggles to understand not only the Ashaninca culture and tradition, but his own as well. The reader sees the preconceptions that Narby, as a Western-educated student of anthropology, brought to the study of these simple, yet profoundly gifted interpreters of the natural world. The book unfolds as a collision of worldviews, between Narby's Western knowledge and education and the knowledge and understanding of the indigenous Ashaninca. Narby was open enough to allow their worldview to speak to him, and to inform him. Through dialogue between the two worlds, integration and growth occurred. The culmination of this dialogue is a new way of seeing the world, where both voices could be heard.

Reflection

I have selected several references from the book, and included several quotations from Elaine Pagels (2), Frederick Franck (3), and Helen M. Luke (4), among others to support my reflections. In this quotation from Elaine Pagel's book, Gnostic Gospels, she alludes to the point brought out very strongly by Narby, that there has been a reversal of the role of the serpent. The serpent has been recast in the role of villain from that of a creator god as mediator of knowledge and wisdom:-

When these same sources tell the story of the Garden of Eden, they characterize this God as the jealous master, whose tyranny the serpent (often, in ancient times a symbol of divine wisdom) taught Adam and Eve to resist ... (2).

From the point of the Fall from grace of the serpent, and Adam and Eve, we move on to the point where Jeremy Narby finds himself when he first hears about the shamans deriving their knowledge of medicinal properties of plants by drinking a "hallucinogenic brew", ayahuasca:-

The first time an Ashaninca man told me that he had learned the medicinal properties of plants by drinking a hallucinogenic brew, I thought he was joking. We were in the forest squatting next to a bush whose leaves, he claimed, could cure the bite of a deadly snake. "One learns these things by drinking ayahuasca," he said. But he was not smiling. (1).

It must have sounded absurd when Jeremy Narby heard this comment. I have selected the word absurd, derived from the Latin *ab* - completely and *surdus* - deaf, meaning a situation which was opposed to manifest reason of truth, irrational, ridiculous (5). This is the point where Narby exercises a certain obedience to an inner wisdom in not dismissing this perspective outright. He was obedient to this inner wisdom.

This next description puts one in a real bind. It would appear ridiculous to acknowledge that one can communicate with plants. At the same time it is as equally ridiculous to rationalize how such a combination of active ingredient and inhibitors could be arrived at to accomplish the goal of allowing the hallucinogen to reach the brain:-

The enigma was all the more intriguing because the botanical knowledge of indigenous Amazonians has long astonished scientists. The chemical composition of ayahuasca is a case in point. Amazonian shamans have been preparing ayahuasca for millennia. The brew is a necessary combination of two plants, which must be boiled together for hours. The first contains a hallucinogenic substance, dimethyltryptamine, which also seems to be secreted by the human brain; but this hallucinogen has no effect when swallowed, because the stomach enzyme called monoamine oxidase blocks it. The second plant, however, contains several substances that inactivate this precise stomach enzyme, allowing the hallucinogen to reach the brain. (1).

As we struggle to reconcile this paradox, we must take a look at our mirror or lenses. We have to acknowledge that we are viewing not only this paradox of plants speaking to a person through a hallucinogenic trance, but also the culture from which this tradition is derived from a very one-sided perspective. In the quotation below, I have inserted numbers to delineate the progression of the development of anthropology and the corresponding anthropological perceptions of the shaman:-

The answer lies in the mirror.

- 1. When anthropology was a young science, unsure of its own identity and unaware of the schizophrenic nature of its own methodology, it considered shamans to be mentally ill.*
- 2. When “structuralist” anthropology claimed to have attained the rank of science, and anthropologists busied themselves finding order in order, shamans became creators of order.*
- 3. When the discipline went into “poststructuralist” identity crisis, unable to decide whether it was a science or a form of interpretation, shamans started exercising all kinds of professions.*
- 4. Finally, some anthropologists began questioning their discipline’s obsessive search for order, and they saw shamans as those whose power lies in “insistently questioning and undermining the search for order.” (1).*

This evolution of anthropology and the lens through which it viewed those cultures it was studying begs the question, “What lenses do we use to view the world, others, and ourselves, not just professionally, but personally?”

Colleagues might ask, “You mean Indians claim they get molecularly verifiable information from their hallucinations? You don’t take them seriously, do you?” What could one answer? (1).

...there is nothing one can say without contradicting two fundamental principles of Western knowledge. (1).

What fundamental principles of Western Knowledge does this comment violate? What basic assumptions have we made which we take for granted as given and inviolate, or of which we are completely unaware?

First, hallucinations cannot be the source of real information because to consider them as such is the definition of psychosis. Western knowledge considers hallucinations to be at best illusions, at worst morbid phenomena.

Second, plants do not communicate like human beings. Scientific theories of communication consider that only human beings use abstract symbols like words and pictures and that plants do not relay information in the form of mental images. For science, the human brain is the source of hallucinations, which psychoactive plants trigger by way of the hallucinogenic molecules they contain. (1).

I would submit that the quotation described above is an example of a plank in the eye of the Western Knowledge base. In Luke 6: 41-42 (6), Christ speaks quite pointedly about the trouble that the planks in one’s own eye can cause, especially when one is doing their best to remove the speck from someone else’s eye:-

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's or sister's eye, but do not notice the plank that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Brother (or sister), let me take out the speck that is in your eye.", when you yourself do not see the plank that is in your own eye?

Helen M. Luke (4) offers a wonderful means of dealing with specks, planks, boards of all sorts, and of obstructions that prevent us from seeing ourselves and others more truly as we are, in compassion and love. She speaks to the work of gaining consciousness when she writes: “We must free ourselves from identifying with others through projection.”

Projection bears a strong resemblance to attachment as described by Gerry May (7). “It involves the investment of energy in some object or cause, and it always relates to self-image.” The complications associated with projection and attachment is that, as Luke (4) says:

If you are projecting you are incapable of compassion, you are incapable of understanding that this person is behaving in this way for reasons that you cannot see, from problems that you know nothing about, but that we all share.

Practise - the most advanced form of theory

Under Ashaninca influence I had come to consider that practise was the most advanced form of theory. (1).

As an example of theory in practise, I have included this wonderful story. A correlate of this story is that teaching is best done by example rather than by explanation:-

I mentioned that I needed a new handle for my axe. He stopped in his tracks, saying "ah yes," and used his machete to cut a little hardwood tree a few steps off the path. Then he carved an impeccable handle that was to last longer than the axe itself. He spent about twenty minutes doing the bulk of the work right there in the forest and an additional twenty minutes at home doing the adjustments. Perfect work, carried out by eye alone. Up until then, I had always thought that axe handles came from hardware stores. People in Quirishari taught by example, rather than by explanation. (1).

This struck me as a wonderful example of being completely present to what was at hand. Rather than deliberate and procrastinate, this man, Raphael, moved into action instantaneously to effect the request made of him. I found this to be pure dynamite. It reminds me of a wonderful inscription on a church signboard here in Calgary. It says something to the effect, "I am not what I say I will do, but what I do." This is a wonderful example of being leading to action, and in the process teaching by example.

Conclusion - A Paradox

I had gone beyond the signs saying "you have reached the limits of science" and had found an irrational and subjective territory that was terrifying, yet filled with information. So I knew that the cul-de-sac had a passage that is normally hidden from the rational gaze and that leads to a world of surprising power.

However, I did not imagine for an instant that I could solve the enigma. I was convinced that I was dealing with an essentially paradoxical phenomenon that was not subject to solution. (1).

I am left with this quotation as a summary of Narby's efforts, and as a stepping off point for reflection. The paradoxical nature of the phenomenon Narby describes is analogous

to the description of koans that Franck (3) so eloquently portrays. Narby uses this paradox in just the manner described by Franck:-

The koan is used as a tool that cuts through all the conceits and rationalizations of the intellect by making it impossible to sidestep the central, existential questions by the usual stratagems of discursive reasoning. It lets the intellect struggle until it has to give up. One after the other of its crutches are kicked away. "In extremis", having given up all hope of "solving" the koan, but having become totally identified with it, one may break through the bottom of the empirical ego and encounter the self, that self which is not something that "I" am, nor a self contained within "me", but the self in which I am and have my being.

I have found Narby's book to be a very insightful description of the path that one can take to transformation and enlightenment. On the one hand this is a weighty mantle to carry, yet I believe that to call it anything less would be to misrepresent my impressions of the book. The other consideration in making this response to the book is that transformation and enlightenment unfolded in the context of practise, incorporating feedback, dialogue, and self-reflection. Although, as I have said, I believe the mantle of transformation and enlightenment to be a weighty one, the humility of the author over the course of the unfolding of this story has allowed me to let this impression stand.

The book has had a lasting impact upon the way that I construe my self-identity, how I interact with my-self and others, as well as where and how I see my life unfolding in the greater scheme of my relationship within the universe. There has been a very strong resonance between the writings of Jeremy Narby and my experiences. Reading this book has allowed me to feel that I am not alone, that we are not alone. Being a molecular biologist, and now trying to find my way into doing outcome-evidence-based research in the area of spiritual care has not been easy. This book has inspired me on my journey and in the difficult practise of patience and humility, two very important teachers in any endeavour one might aspire to on life's journey.

References

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