



Chellis
Glendinning

In Service to the Deities:

Chellis Glendinning and Jesús Sepúlveda Talk across Continents

Poet Jesús Sepúlveda and psychotherapist Chellis Glendinning sat down to talk. Well, sat down at keyboards on their respective continents: Sepúlveda in his native Chile, Glendinning from New Mexico USA.

Sepúlveda is known for his essay, The Garden of Peculiarities, published in Spanish and translated into English, French, Portuguese, and Italian. He is also the author of Hotel Marconi, Place of Origin, Pax Americana, Escrivania, and Correo negro. Glendinning is the author of six books, including My Name Is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization and Off the Map: An Expedition Deep into Empire and the Global Economy, and the bilingual folk opera De Un Lado Al Otro.

The following conversation took place in the summer of 2008.



Jesús: Che, in your writing, why do you use personal experience to explore ideas about the world?

Chellis: You know how every indigenous people has a sense of its place as the center of the world? Well, I think each person does too. And each person *is* the center of the world. Everyone sees and feels and experiences and knows in a unique way. Everyone is both an isolated organism and at the same time the totality of creation. I value individual experience as re-embodiment in the face of mass systems, as a bringing back of power and vitality to living beings. All my writing is about linking the personal with the political, the individual with the collective, the minute with the unfathomable.

I launched my efforts during the feminist movement in the 1970s. The basic tenet behind our power was “The Personal Is Political” – and it’s a marvelously potent concept. In spiritual reality each of us is the world, and in the political realm as well, every social predicament affects and defines us. No experience or feeling or thought, then, is without connection to something greater.

Jesús: The emergence of different realities, in the context of the uniform life of mass society, interests me a lot. I think we are defined and controlled by the process of socialization, inscribing in us an identity as well as a sensorial perception of the world, which must be homogenous to all individuals if the modern machine is to function.

Everybody must play a role to be part of the gears. Either you play this role willingly or the role is imposed. But the consequence is the same: you become a standardized subject who has to accept the industrial illness that this society produces in your body as well as in your mind and spirit. Then you have anxiety, rootlessness, depression, anger, frustration, emptiness – alienation – as a result of the disconnection from personal experience. And by this I mean, *direct* experience – not the one filtered through cultural consumption.

In civilization we are not connected with the cosmos, nature, community, or ourselves. Instead we are separated and isolated so that we can endure being just a commercial unit that functions, consumes, and produces.

But against this one-dimensional aspect of reality emerges the perception of multidimensional realities embedded in indigenous culture. It has to do with life here and now on the Earth and under the cosmos. This *multi-versal* dimension, which is inhabited by spirits and other invisible forms, is generally part of the daily reality of non-modern peoples. The extrapolation of this sense into modern life is a political act. But it is also, as you know, a way toward healing. And shamanic practices can be crucial if an individual wants to cross the threshold of modern life into a more natural, direct, and sensual experience.

Chellis: I know about shamanism in part because I have a client in my psychotherapy practice who is undergoing the strenuous training required to become a healer in a Latin American tradition; I've had the rare opportunity to walk alongside her through the process.

Jesús: My personal training started as a *psychonaut*, before I understood the sacred aspect of shamanism. I grew up in the metropolis of Santiago in a poor neighborhood under a military regime. I still remember the tremendous emotional impact that the first sweat lodge I attended had on me. I cried and felt a lightening of the burdens of my past: sadness, rancor, toxic thoughts. It unblocked what had petrified in me since I was a child.

Later on, I started studying the topic more seriously, so I could teach it in a university setting in Oregon, USA, and Valdivia, Chile. But really, I changed my way of perceiving reality as a whole through experiencing the shamanic ritual of ayahuasca.

Of course, civilization does not value experience as valid knowledge because its priorities are put on written and abstract conceptualizations. That creates an epistemological conflict between the Positivist-rationalist world and the magical-shamanic perception of the universe, and it's the reason I think it's important to include personal experience in your writing.

Experience is magical always. It keeps the sense of the amazing fresh. It nurtures life because the body is, in fact, the instrument of spells. Without experience, writing would become another entertainment or distraction.

Chellis: I've lived my life in social change movements. Civil rights, anti-war/peace, feminist, ecology, human potential, indigenous rights, anti-nuclear, natural foods, holistic healing, anti-EMF/microwave, Chicano land rights, immigrant rights, anti-globalization. Each makes its own analysis of how the dominant society has failed. By the early-1990s, I'd been in about eight or nine movements and I had eight or nine distinct analyses. I finally grasped that civilization itself is dysfunctional.

I was also meeting a great number of Native people. Two in particular – Larry Emerson of the Navajo and Jeannette Armstrong of the Okanagan – taught me about what we might call the “sociology” of indigenous life ways. I felt an urgent surge of desire to throw off the limitations and heal the wounds perpetrated by empire: that's how I thought up the notion of “recovery from Western civilization.”

For me, the process of recovery began in a simple way: I walked out the door. I spent time in the natural world – nothing dramatic or complicated. I simply met the world with observation and intuition. I had by then lived in the desert badlands of New Mexico for four years.

One August day I heard a bird's call in the sky. Without forethought I heard myself say: "It's too early for that bird to fly through here. That means it'll snow three weeks early."

Then my rational mind caught me. "*What?!* How on earth did I know at what precise date that bird flew here? I had never paid attention to such a detail. I didn't even know what kind of bird it was. And how on earth did I know that its early flight would mean an early winter?"

A good answer might be found in the phrase "*on earth.*" I mean -- embodied, infused with all the struggles and glories of being alive, part of this irreplaceable miracle. Come October, snow fell three weeks early.

Jesús: Being aware of the call of the birds is a recovery from the original trauma. The healing power of reconnection is beyond rational understanding.

But how can a society or a social group recover from the traumas provoked by civilization? How can the colonized recover from colonialism? How can survivors of torture overcome the pain?

Chellis: A trauma is an event that is so overwhelming it cannot be *experienced*. The senses, mind, and heart simply cannot take it in or invite it into normal memory.

Instead, the various aspects of the experience lose their integrity and become like lost and rootless fragments in the psyche. The event may be known, but the feelings are driven into repression. The place where the trauma occurred may be conscious, but not the actual event. One may be overwhelmed by feelings of terror, but not know why.

These disconnected fragments are like little dogs yapping at one's heels, trying to re-form the whole experience so that they can, at long last, pass to where they belong: memory. You have flashbacks; you suffer from trauma-generated thinking disorders; you feel disempowered; you project; you act hyper-vigilant, reactive, obsessed, the works.

The task is to round up the disparate elements – the narrative, the feeling, the sensual – and place them in the original experience. And then the emotional chaos loses its tumultuous charge. One can then live in the present -- really feel the touch of another, be spontaneous, hear the call of birds.

It's a travesty of history that so many people on the planet today have endured war, physical abuse, psychological violence, torture, terror, witness abuse, etc.

It's a further travesty that the global "culture" formulated by mega-economic and technological systems operates like a traumatized personality itself – with all the familiar fragmentation, hyper-vigilance, reactivity, projection, and thinking disorders of traumatic stress. It's insistent on this. And, like some very

damaged people, it's insistent on perpetrating *more* trauma through more war, more oppression, more exploitation.

Yet, curiously, the process of healing from this travesty may not be unlike what Larry Emerson describes as the way a shaman-in-training shatters, re-assembles, and, by the miracle of retrieval of the whole, gains the capacity to make visitation into realms that can be enlightening and healing.

Jesús: Yeah, I remember my hands sweating when crossing any checkpoint or even airport controls. Trauma is a kind of paranoia that accompanies you for a long time. And it's unconscious. I still break down whenever I read news about the disappeared in Chile. And it has been so long.

The *coups d'etat* instigated by the CIA in Latin American have traumatized generations: Paraguay and Guatemala in 1954; Brazil in 1964; Bolivia in 1971; Chile and Uruguay in 1973; Argentina in 1976. I can't imagine how the Iraqi population will deal with the trauma deposited in their unconsciousness by the desert storm and the final battle. Or how the prisoners of Guantánamo will go ahead with life if someday they are released.

I see trauma in the faces of people whenever I walk in the neighborhood where my parents live. Jorje Lagos Nilsson is a writer, journalist, and publisher in Chile. He escaped by jumping over the wall of the Mexican embassy, while his wife and daughters made it to Mexico days later not knowing if he was alive or not. Meanwhile, his nephews and niece – who were children at the time – were walking around the city with no direction or home, until someone took them to the Australian and Swedish embassies. They grew up in exile trying to make contact with their uncle. Their mother, Gloria Esther Lagos Nilsson, disappeared months after the coup in a torture center called Villa Grimaldi. She was three months pregnant.

Families, couples, neighborhoods, entire countries are traumatized by the political machine. As Chilean poet Juan Luis Martínez said: "The nation-state is the only one that is allowed to sacrifice its children in the name of the political father." And this is also true for the "Fourth World" – as Ward Churchill puts it – in the sense that indigenous peoples were sacrificed in the name of progress and civilization.

However, when trauma becomes conscious, and you are aware of what has happened to you, the pain can be released, opening the possibilities for healing. Art can be crucial for healing. I started to write poetry at the age of 12 as a healing therapy but also as a liberation process.

Years ago I wrote a poem called "The Drum," which was an exorcism of the pain I was dragging around from childhood. It's a long poem divided into seven stanzas. The second stanza says:

Every morning mom turns the corner
Dad works in the back
The drill and the emery make me nervous

The hair dryer and the floor polisher
I like to huddle up under the blankets as if it were winter
Now dad is sick
There are helicopters and a curfew

Chellis: Jesús, your young poem is so telling. I am speechless....

My own experience is a mirror image: being tortured and raped by *my own father*. We've got the same experience but opposite, north and south, inside and out.

I'm reminded of Frantz Fanon's insight that whereas in the colony the violence takes place in public and so resides in consciousness, within the empire the violence is perpetrated secretly and so resides in repression. I am left wondering about parallels between healing from trauma and the challenge of re-assembly at the base of shamanistic training – as if to go on, all of us traumatized creatures must in some sense become like shamans.

Jesús : We must all become like shamans if we want to survive the effects of industrial life. We all have shamanic capacities to connect with nature. We can all heal ourselves, and by doing this, we heal others.

When I arrived in the US 13 years ago, I became a roommate of Manche Maquehue, a Mapuche friend who was on parole and on his personal path of recovery from ethnic discrimination, political persecution, and years in jail. During that time Manche was healing himself, but he also helped me to start healing myself. He introduced me to sacred common sense and to being more connected with my dreams and intuitions. He invited me to Native American ceremonies and told me stories that now make sense. He has now recovered and accepted his call to be a shaman in Brazil where he travels all over South America taking care of people.

In contrast, disconnected people who perpetuate alienated physical and mental corrals are oblivious and disempowered. The last time (and I mean *the* last time) I visited a zoo, I saw a guy throwing a plastic bottle at a bear to wake him up so he could see the poor bear spacing out neurotically in his cage. I have seen people throw dirty diapers through bus windows onto the freeway with no consciousness of their environment. The list could keep going on and on.

In the cities people perceive reality through screens: TV, soap operas, giant screens on the streets and in the metro. These are unhealthy behaviors of oblivious and sad people with no means or imagination to live a different life. Their senses are blocked. Their intuition has been numbed. Their connection with other living beings is almost non-existent. They are individualistic, pragmatic, self-centered, unhappy, neurotic, depressed, empty, stressed, anxious, and perfectly functional within the system. This is madness. In this world there is no consciousness of the movement of the cosmos, the ancestral memory of our body, the wisdom of the earth.

The shaman can hear the message of the planet. That is the main difference between the sick modern existence and the magical shamanic life. The shaman can heal with plants because s/he hears what the plants have to say. The shaman knows when it is time to close the loop because s/he lives in cycles instead of being patterned by the dead-line of “progress.” The shaman perceives the direction of the wind, the energy that trees have, the moon cycles, the health of the soil, the language of animals, the aperture of dimensional portals – or electromagnetic fields. The shaman is in contact with the world of presences and apparitions who function as allies in the process of unveiling the illusions of the modern world.

Connection is crucial because without it, we forget we are all interwoven. The clearest example is if we cut all the trees, which are living organisms, the soil dries, there is drought, erosion, loss of the watershed and habitat for other species, etc., and life becomes unsustainable – which means humans can no longer survive either. There is a consequence of what we do, how we live, what we eat and drink, the way we interact, what we say and think, and how we resonate. Shamans and earth peoples are more aware of this, and act accordingly.

You know about this interdependence very well. Your essay on cell phone towers “Hear Tell: Invisibility, Invasiveness, and the Cell Phone” [2002] explains very clearly how those waves and Wi-Fi zones are screwing up our bodies and minds. In this context, and in relation to climate change and global warming, I wonder how we can protect our communities and save the seeds for the next crop?

Chellis: You speak waterfalls of truth. The spirit is our wellspring ... *still*. The task is to remember. To *re-member*. But how? The question has been asked for millennia, ever since the first split of oppression. It’s a conundrum – for so many before us have given their lives to addressing this same predicament of power – and yet we still have the same problems.

I am reminded of a book by Andrew Schmookler, *The Parable of the Tribes*. He says that as long as one group uses the force of violence against another, a predictable dynamic with predictable contradictions comes to be. The unfurling of traumatic stress in both oppressor and oppressed, for instance. The dilemma between reform, revolution, disobedience, or secession is another.

I just heard another horror about the state of the planet. Unprecedented dust is stirred up on the plains of Mongolia due to overgrazing so more goats can produce more wool for the cashmere of a new line of clothes at Wal-Mart.

The dust blows into Beijing where it becomes wrapped in layers upon layers of coal residues, petroleum, oxides, and chemicals from China’s burgeoning coal-fired plants, industries, and automobiles. People breathe the stuff and drop dead. People eat the meats and vegetables hanging in the markets

- also covered in toxic dust - and drop dead. The lethal particles then blow across land and ocean to affect every living being in their global path.

The Personal Is Political - eh? We Are All One?

I wish I could propose a strategy that would save us, Jesús. Strategies encouraging local organic food sovereignty are right-on, of course. There will be no more food brought in from elsewhere - and besides, such strategies return us to our propensity to human-scale *experience* as guide, sustenance, and power.

But I feel strongly that it is time now to ride the bucking bronco of the ancient prophesies. And if there is anything to dedicate ourselves to beyond healing our wounds and community-building, it is to make sure that creation has a few beings who consciously stand in right relation to her. Which, to my mind, is a strategy of *human-scale experience* - with an emphasis on caring, listening, working hard, and staying in service to the deities.