

Reclaiming Our Gift of Humanness

Malidoma Somé is a medicine man of the Dagara people of West Africa. He is the rare combination of someone taken as a child into a Catholic seminary who then fled back to his village at the age of 20 to face full tribal initiation. Malidoma means ‘be friends with the stranger or enemy’. His vocation is to bring the wisdom teachings of his tribe to help heal the global disintegration of our time.

He is interviewed by Sarida Brown for Caduceus Magazine

Sarida Brown: Many people in this country have great respect for your work. Could you explain what is your purpose here?

Malidoma Somé: I work with reclaiming our intrinsic human nature - our humanness. We have to start by recovering or reinventing family and community, and redefining what is a purposeful life, and for this I rely on ancient, indigenous wisdom.

In the UK my work is about healing the wounds in current situations, and through that, restoring the values that are intrinsically human through connection with ancestors and spirits, and emphasis on family and community.

These appear very simple, however the chaos of the current system puts a lot of obstacles in the way. The power of our humanness should be capable of confronting these obstacles so that the true self of the human being can be honoured, respected and uplifted once again.

What can your particular traditional wisdom contribute to conditions here?

I am drawing from the tradition of the Dagara people now situated in Burkino Faso, central West Africa and Ghana. Their culture is profoundly rooted in connection with the earth, with nature, and with ancestors.

In the interest of continuity, they have designed a sophisticated way of involving the ‘dead’ in their daily lives: they believe that it takes the ‘other world’ to shed light in this world so that we can transform our fascination with harmful actions into one with healing actions, so that humans can become spiritually active and evil can be intimidated and eventually pushed away. This is how the community is able to affirm life, joy and abundance.

The Dagara people have an elaborate cosmology to support this. It begins with the idea that every child has returned from the world of the ancestors with a specific purpose to fulfil, which is regarded as a gift. So there is the assumption that people are born gifted, and that they are bringing this gift to the family, people and culture they are born into.

Members of their community do everything they can to support it and draw that gift out of the child, hence the establishment of initiatory rites of passage to allow the young ones to grow into their full purpose.

A varieties of other rituals have been created to support the concept of a life purpose and to allow it to continue to grow and be fulfilled.

This is the cosmology that I am bringing to the UK, in the midst of the chaos that modernity is experiencing. It has proven to be a very useful tool for exploring alternative ways of transcending the current stress into a kind of ease that allows people to look at each other from different perspectives, and

to reconsider the ancient possibilities of community and family.

In our culture we have little sense of the child entering the world with a purpose and gift. How do you bring this to consciousness and honour it?

First is the assumption that the incoming person is a traveller who has arrived with luggage. What luggage? The gifts. How do you find them? In the Dagara culture there is a ritual that precedes birth in the course of which it is possible to enquire and identify the nature of the gift.

These rituals are conducted by the elders in the presence of the pregnant mother. Using the voice of the mother who is put into trance, the elders converse with the ancestor who has taken on human form inside the body of the mother.

For this ritual to journey from the Dagara to the UK has required some changes. In the UK, we use the date of birth to situate the newborn within a cosmological chart which then reveals the gift that is intrinsic to that person.

The Dagara cosmology categorizes this gift into five types: vision; peace, reconciliation, nourishment and comfort. These are essentially connected with home; story telling and communication of idea.

The prebirth ritual will communicate encouragement and well wishes for the journey on this earth - as you would to a person who is going to fulfill a mission. The actual expression of the ritual will vary widely.

To approach an unborn human as a gifted person, as a carrier of something precious, sends a clear message that this world is worth coming into and dedicating oneself to improving it, to contribute to its blossoming. That alone should be exciting enough to make life worth singing about

In the West our truncated sense of relationship with the past makes the idea of communication with ancestors appear as 'spooky' and primitive. But what you are describing is the transmission of the wisdom of the tribe. Can you explain to a 'westerner' what the presence of the ancestors is to the living society?

It is important to realize that there is at least a remote possibility that the dead, those who have preceded us in this world and are no longer in physical forms, still have some residual energy, and are able to influence the quality of our day-to-day lives. It is that energy that we refer to as ancestral.

Indigenous people regard ancestors as spirits, in the sense of humans who have returned to the state of spirit after shedding their physical bodies and joined a community that is 'other worldly'.

Because they have their footprints on this earth and have left behind them descendants who are looking for ways to build on their own legacies, ancestors look forward to becoming involved in how we continue what they had started so that we don't have to reinvent the wheel.

So those of us who are aware of being the descendants of ancestors and are conscious of their helpful presence among us, like to precede any initiative with an invocation that invites, requests and sometimes even demands that ancestors be the source of our inspiration and initiative, that they be involved in whatever we do so that our own clumsiness can be made sacred and precious.

The ancestors are almost like deities that are expected to be involved in the day-to-day activities of those of us who are still in this dimension, and calling on the spirit of a deceased grandmother or grandfather is an acknowledgement of their continuing life in our life.

It is a matter of awakening into the reality that someone without a body is on standby to walk alongside us, to work with us and to be with us in times of joy and sorrow, and therefore to absolve by their presence any isolation or aloneness we might experience.

But when we leave it unaffirmed, it is a wasted potential?

It is a force that is left dormant. The danger, however, is that when ancestors are ignored, we find ourselves struggling with the same old problems in our day-to-day life, wondering why any kind of imagination applied to transcending short-comings always falls short of actually transcending them.

It is like continually banging at the same door and using the same tool thinking that eventually some day we will find a solution. There's an African saying that a log does not turn into a crocodile by staying long enough in water!

It is important to reconsider certain tools that we habitually use, and possibly abandon them for others that might yield better results. Ancestors may offer a resolution to the impasse that modern culture finds itself in.

The impasse of social disintegration?

That's right. Being on the brink of disintegration is a signal of this separation between the living and the dead, as if we can carry on without those who have preceded us. They had a better knowledge of the world that we live in; they know most of the obstacles that are there, having experienced them when they were in the same physical bodies that we now carry, so why not go to them with a mind that is open to sharing in their wisdom and knowledge so that whatever we do, however we do it, can become transcended by their blessing and the touch of their hand.

In the Christian culture there is God, and angels, saints and prophets, but the rungs of sacredness between these and humanity below have been cut away.

Yes. It limits the human desire to expand and blossom, and results in our wondering whether the after-life is even worth looking after! It also leaves us wondering whether we are actually entitled to the very thing that we dream about: a world in which there is more love, less violence, which our young ones are excited about being part of, and where we feel the satisfaction of belonging to a community. These very existential questions are hard to answer outside the involvement of ancestors.

I know that you are very concerned about what you call the new global village' and the need for global healing at this time.

The world has reached a point where globalism is gradually imposing itself on us - a globalism which is still defined in economic terms. This has to change, and globalism must emphasise community beyond economics. In order to arrive at the possibility of such a global village it is important to look back into the past to heal all the problems and ills that are stored there, and that are continuing to affect the current quality of life. They leave behind an energetic signature that acts as the underlying cause of wars, slavery, famine, and all the deaths caused by human carelessness and hatred.

The way to create a global village has to begin with a massive healing of all these aspects. We cannot keep looking to create a healing in the future while painting over the ills that have happened in the past. Radical honesty is required, acknowledging all those moments when humanity has taken the wrong steps, causing such rifts that they continue to have the impacts on the psyche that we are witnessing today: a propensity for separateness, disparity, violence, isolation, division - you name it!

These effects have to be dealt with through the help of the ancestors, particularly those who were the primary victims and perpetrators at the time. The prevailing consciousness on this side, which is divisive, violent and unsupportive of community and family, is nothing like the one on the other side: when one sheds one's body and becomes a spirit, a different consciousness does come in.

Can the ancestors hold out to us the possibility for a peaceful and just human society?

The human power to generate change is boosted manifold when assisted by the wisdom of the ancestors. We can gather all the intelligence necessary to implement something, but always fall short of a proper answer, intellectually or creatively. While we have that generativity within ourselves, it is always a good and humble gesture to acknowledge to the ancestors that we are limited, and therefore that we are seeking their contribution. By doing that we become the beneficiaries of ancestral participation in our own transformation.

What is your vision of the new global village?

It begins with acknowledging the need to grieve all the evil that has littered the roads of human evolution. We have to be able to express this emotion in a sacred fashion: to acknowledge the fact that we have not always done things in the best interests of human continuity and as a result we are seeking reparation or healing to stop us carrying this weight into the future and passing it on to innocent others who will have to figure it out in their turn.

This acknowledgment has to lead to a commitment to repair or mend. It is a daunting task. Our acknowledgement and commitment can motivate the ancestors to empower our ideas and imagination.

I dream of a world in which the human village is interested in drawing together all traditions of the world, to synthesise them into a tradition that is not compartmentalized, hierarchized or competitive; one that does not say that one tradition is better than the other; one that sees behind every obstacle and towards the kind of beauty that each culture has. It is possible that once synthesised it would reflect globalism and universalism. It is a big task and won't happen overnight. But it is worth tackling now, and the sooner the better because that is what will give us the greatest chance of bringing about the global village somewhere down the generations.

So how do we start?

It cannot be done individually; it has to be done collectively, by people gathering together, like the groups that I gather to address the wisdom of ancestors which open hearts and spirits to a new dimension. There is no popular manual that can give people a model to do that individually. Besides, even when done individually it still leaves the need for people to come together.

I am suggesting that as a first step people gather together in their own neighbourhoods to begin acknowledging that they have to transcend their own individualism and isolation into something that is more community-based.

It is important that such acknowledgment begin with an acknowledgment of each other, with curiosity about the gift that each person brings and has to offer others for the enrichment of the whole. While not fool-proof, this model has an expansion capability built in. Once there is such an acknowledgment, the human psyche expands and immediately new ideas come in and new directions show up that would not have come up unless this first step were taken. It therefore needs to be done incrementally.

Grieving all the ills, as you suggest, sounds like a very deep process. Does it need the power of ritual to accomplish it?

Since modern culture does not define itself as a grieving culture, it is daunting to approach a problem like this from the perspective of emotional outpouring, for people to express themselves from the heart. And yet it is this repression of human emotion that needs to be revisited, otherwise emotions take violent and dangerous forms. When locked in, emotion becomes amplified and finds its way out in anti-social types of behaviour that endanger society.

The current brink of self-destruction we have reached is symptomatic of this kind of self-repression in the face of a situation that actually was calling for the humble relief of whatever feeling was associated with that. This is a very daunting task because it is inviting people to act in a non-traditional fashion, in a way that might show their human frailty and weakness. Yet it is worth trying.

So that is the way beyond current violence, for example, in the Middle East?

The way beyond that is ritual and the revision and expansion of sacredness. It can be summed up in a few simple words: prayers and involvement of the ancestors in the resolution of the crisis. When over a million people walking in the streets in London failed to stop the war against Iraq, you have to ask why? My answer is that we are being told that the message we would like to send to the government and military hierarchy is best understood when delivered by our ancestors.

It is no longer possible for us human beings to be the carriers of the kind of message, that can avoid violence, prevent death and save lives. That is why I envision a day of ritual, involving the same number of people who came out on the streets in February 2003, in the course of which the issues that are destabilizing our consciousness are presented as offerings to the sacred shrine of our ancestors, with the request that they be taken to the right place in order to affect the right kind of change.

So you envision a million or more people coming together in a union of humans and ancestors together to forward the desire for peace, the desire to go beyond divisiveness and violence.

Yes. Because peace is an inalienable right bestowed upon us. When it starts to dwindle in our lives it is important that we consider whether it is the result of something we did that was wrong, or whether it is a message sent to us by forces beyond our human world showing us what we need to pay attention to.

I believe that in such a situation, a movement that begins with the creation of sacred shrines, where each individual is able to surrender his or her feelings, visions and wishes to spirits and ancestors of that shrine, carries a better chance of reaching the powers that be, in a manner that is not conventional and promises more lasting results closer to our expectations than anything else. That's why I am saying that the next cycle of human consciousness is going to be held by what I call spiritual activism.

Our streets have to be cleared of vehicles and decorated with sacred shrines. People could then go into prayers and chants, praises to ancestors and to spirits, presenting our intent to that world with a strong request that these intentions be received and transcended into gems of peace that will last a thousand years. It is important that we see our activism not as being directed by humans against other humans, but being transferred from this world to another world where it is processed and then returned here charged with the capacity to change the climate and spirit of our world.

How do you understand evil?

I understand evil as the energy that counter-acts the simplest, positive, life-giving thoughts that rule our lives - the thoughts of loving and of being loved, the thoughts of contributing something to this world.

Whenever these thoughts are stopped or dispersed by circumstantial events, I am suspicious about the presence of the evil behind this, because the greatest harm that can be done to a human being is the elimination of a person's potential and converting that person into a robotic entity.

Evil is that which dehumanizes, which has little consideration for the sacredness of human life, which maintains a *status quo* of tension, sleeplessness and stress in a culture and society that deserves better than that.

Where does evil come from?

Its source is just about everywhere and it can embody itself in human beings or take the form of circumstantial events whether led by humans or not. Evil loves to use humans as hosts for the carriage of its intentions: we become 'hired' by such forces to do something evil (that we may justify with all kinds of logic) but in the end because life was disregarded and respect was thrown out of the window, we can become the embodiments of evil. There is certainly more to the expression and manifestation of evil, but my mind is not capable of encompassing all of it. However, I know evil when I see it: that which is insidiously trying to obstruct human creativity and human desire to expand in a life-giving way towards community and family.

Is the source of evil in human faults and misdeeds, or is it a cosmic force?

I would not claim to know all about it, but when we become witness to violence, death, hatred, segregation, racism, etc. the question is worth raising: why are these things easier to do than their opposite?

I would conclude that evil in that kind of situation may have a certain cosmic dimension. But I would also have to tone that down by saying that it is very likely that such energies are directly the result of some kind of negligence that is destabilizing a situation and sending out all kinds of vibrations into human nature, systematically converting good into bad. That becomes what we call evil - not something that can be cornered somewhere as a separate entity and combated but an energy that eventually arises as the result of something we are not paying attention to.

By coming out like that it becomes the very thing that we pay more attention to. We notice that more of our media is oriented towards violence simply because, most of the time, violence sells; it gets people's attention. Why? There are ways in which evil attracts and galvanizes attention.

Therefore, if it is possible to view it as a message that something needs our attention, but not our indulgence, it makes it possible to transcend evil into good, bad into positive.

That is how I am willing to look at evil. I am certainly not looking at it in the Christian sense of the devil scheming to make people's lives worse. I want to look at it as a signal pointing to something that has been neglected.

Is there a final message you would like to give to our readers?

We are living in a very fragile time. It is important that we humans renew our trust in ourselves and our capacities, that we don't give up, and that we revisit our power to generate change - and affirm life over the threat of death.

Reproduced with kind permission from Caduceus Magazine : Issue 61(Nov 2003)
website: <http://www.caduceus.info/>

Institut Bewusstseinsstrategien
Website www.i-cons.info: „Publikationen“