

AWARENESS

SO. CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST BI-MONTHLY HOLISTIC MAGAZINE

JULY/AUGUST 2007

VOLUME 14, NO. 4

**AWAKENING TO
GLOBAL COMMUNITY
HEYOKA
MERRIFIELD**

**ACCESSING THE WISDOM
OF OUR ANCESTORS
SOBONFU SOMÉ**

**THE MAYAN WORLD TREE
BARBARA HAND GLOW**



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Heyoka Merrifield

Awakening to Global Community

By Donna Strong

In talking to Heyoka Merrifield for this piece, I felt a deep sense of his own heartfelt sincerity to pass on the accumulated wisdom from his elders and share the harvest. There is richness in his perception and a pristine clarity that most of us would like to experience in daily life. Growing up in California, Heyoka was drawn to study art in college and graduated with a degree in sculpture.

After college though, it was the spirit in nature that called him and he lived in the Northwest wilderness for twenty years. It was his own way to regain a deeper sense of connection with his Native American 'genetic memory' as he so aptly phrases it, and open to a more transcendent experience of mysticism. It is now imbued in the forms of creative shamanism he practices, as he works with the potent power of spirit as an ally in his art making, storytelling and writing.

Although he was born with Cherokee blood, he is now a medicine man in the Crow tribe. A celebrated artist of multi-media work imbued with ceremonial energies, he is also author of the White Buffalo Woman Trilogy. His newly-published trio of stories expresses a coming home to an ancient knowing that we can all recognize, because it entwines the universal with the personal.

Awareness: You are an amazing storyteller and I want you to know I was moved to tears more than once by the beauty of these stories. So I just wanted to start by asking how you came to write The White Buffalo Woman Trilogy at this time?

Heyoka: I think that stories are important to humanity; stories are food, they are what made our communities alive. In modern cultures, the stories are sort of still there in our films and books, but the beautiful archetypal images aren't used in the sacred ways they were for most of human history.

When you go from a tribal community here or to Australia or Africa, these stories, are so similar it is amazing that the people didn't have physical contact. Stories were meant to make us feel comfortable with the mysteries of life and of our own energy systems in our body.

Yet they haven't been treated in a sacred way in the last few hundred years and I think our culture is suffering from it. So when I write, I try to write from the old tradition of deep mythology and deep archetypal images that are intended to bring healing to the imbalances I see in the world right now.

Awareness: I certainly felt it. In the trilogy, there is a ceremony described as the "giveaway," an honoring of the exchange of life and how the circle goes round. I am wondering what you would like to say about this form of living ceremony?

Heyoka: Again, it is such a part of our genetic memory to do ceremonies. For most of our history, ceremonies were the most important element in our community. We were either doing a ceremony, talking about the last one, or preparing for the next one. It was an ongoing thing and it was a way of honoring the circle of life, especially the hunter-gatherers, pictured in the Paleolithic caves.

You go into these caves and the way they depicted the animals artistically and ceremoniously, they are incredible works of art. They are the first works of art we have that provide any understanding of what our

ancestors were like. This art was asking the question — how do you justify the fact that we live on death? We have to kill animals and we have to pick the fruits or the grains to eat.

Somehow we have to come to terms with the fact that we have to kill to survive. In the Native American world, we have these deep ceremonies. When I go hunting I pray to the deer before I go, and I pray after I have killed it, and I pray for it again as I eat it. I mean it is a relationship, an honoring, showing appreciation for this circle of life.

If you go into life with this attitude it is totally different than like a lot of humans, who see themselves as these superior beings and it doesn't matter what they do to the trees or animals, or even minerals. When people show no appreciation and nature is just theirs for the taking, they lose this wonderful relationship that our ancestors had with life.

Through ceremony we close the circle again. Ceremonies are sometimes very simple. When a significant animal comes into our vision, such as when a bird lands at the time you were thinking of it, a bit of tobacco is given as a way of honoring this gift from an oracle of the earth.

At other times, during a ceremony like our sun dance — where we fast from food and water and we dance to a tree, all of us, for four days, you really feel your prayers and the healing going to and from the tree. People sometimes receive an amazing healing through this ceremony. I dance with the Crow people, but the prayers are going to people all over the world, since everybody has challenges they are going through.

Awareness: There is so much beauty in this kind of connection.

Heyoka: I can not imagine designing a better planet to live on. It is just a fact that we have to kill animals for food; it is what we were given to do on planet earth. But if you have the ceremonial contact with the appreciation, then, it is fuller. It is not that our modern culture is bad, it has just thrown away a lot of things from our roots that are necessary for really feeling connected to life, and it is very devastating.

Awareness: I agree. As you were talking I was thinking about the “giveaway” ceremonies again. I am pretty much a vegetarian now although I do eat some salmon, and I am very aware of the gift of life to support mine, so I give thanks. In contrast, I have been thinking about the prevalence of factory farming and the disgraceful way animals are treated before they are forced to give their lives. People are affected by that whether they are aware of it or not, don't you think?

Heyoka: Absolutely. We are so interconnected energetically; I try never to eat animals that have been abused in any way in their raising. If you are eating an animal that has been really abused, you absorb that energy into your body. I was also a vegetarian for several years and it really didn't work for me physically, but it came about through my starting to feel the death I was eating. I didn't have a system to resolve it, so I tried being a vegetarian for several years and then I started feeling the same way about vegetables, that I was killing them.

At a certain point I realized that it is not the fact that I was killing something for food, but that I needed to create a good circle, like you say, of “giveaway,” of giving back something even if it is a prayer. Sometimes I think prayers are locked in our minds and they are not very deep, but when you do ceremony your whole body is involved. You are dancing, you are burning sweet grass, you are drumming, and you are offering tobacco or food. When you do that type of thing it is not just in your mind; your body is involved. So there is this incredible wisdom about life beneath our neck, our whole body has a mind.

Our brain is just one of the organs, although a wonderful one, but there are the heart, and all the different energy systems up and down our body. The Native Americans say that to be a whole human, all of our body's wisdom needs to be awake and functioning and a part of our decision-making in our life and our

relationships. If we are just using our brains we are missing this huge, amazing power we have.

Awareness: I really appreciate what can be unleashed when we are really connected to that potency of all of our living systems, because we are a community inside of ourselves as well. Another question... what is “medicine” from your perspective?

Heyoka: The Native Americans decided that “medicine” was the closest word that they felt approached spirituality, God, or healing. For me, medicine is just the flow of the universe, the way everything interacts, and is the energy of all that is. The way I keep in touch with this is I do ceremony everyday. Not a day goes by that I don’t do some ceremony and send prayers out to people I know who are in challenge and need some healing.

Awareness: Speaking of healing, one of the things that has been on my mind recently is what has been happening to the honeybees, with whole colonies disappearing and dying. People are starting to pay attention and offering prayers. So what would you say about the kind of earth medicine we need at this time?

Heyoka: I think we really need to find a way to create community; we need to get in a circle and pray for the honeybees. Up here, the trees are dying because of the earth’s changes. Well, if you get together in a circle and you pray for the bees, or for the trees, or for a war somewhere that is devastating a whole culture of people, something happens. It is the old way; the way we are used to. When we all got together and prayed we could heal things in the environment, even wars, basically, if enough people are praying and giving their attention to it.

Community is something we all have a need for it is almost a survival-type instinct, like food, to be in some kind of tribal community or a circle. There are different parts of our culture that satisfy this, but not in the deep way that our ancient ancestors had with this connection.

Awareness: So it sounds like at this point we finally are being asked to awaken to the bigger community of the whole planet.

Heyoka: Yeah, that is what the myth is showing me. We have been these little tribes and now we are becoming a global tribe and we are trying to figure out just how we get back to the place where when someone is sick everybody prays for them, or when there is a war we all pray, or when there is a whole segment of our culture that is downtrodden and living in a way that they feel trapped in a really uncomfortable lifestyle, that we all are responsible. They are all a part of us and we need to reset all these imbalances, just like we would in our own life.

There is an image above my altar in my studio. Seeing this picture of the earth, the first one that was taken from outer space, brought something new into our consciousness. She is just one beautiful being. She is our mother, and we are all part of her, and everything we do affects her; anything that happens to her affects us.

Awareness: That is poignantly true. Heyoka, you are not only a storyteller and medicine man, you are an accomplished artist. What called you to this form of expression?

Heyoka: I guess I would say that I wanted to do something to help. Through my art I try to reawaken the ancient tradition of art being a sacred circle where the artists were priests, priestesses, or shaman, and art was meant to be a way of connecting with transcendent powers.

Awareness: The first time I went to a museum in Santa Fe, they were having a show of lithographs from Australian abor-igine artists. When I walked in that place was packed full of spirit!

Heyoka: Yes, and when you walk into the caves in Europe it is the same way. It is so powerful you can not deny it. In more modern times, there are certain artists that have help from the spirit world, or the muses as the Greeks called them, or whatever you call inspiration.

When I write, create art or do ceremony, there is no doubt in my mind that I have help. When you are connected with that shamanistic, otherworldly, spirit world, whatever you want to call it, then your art, your healing ceremony, your writings, the stories that you are telling, it is inter-dimensional, it is transcendent. We come out of spirit and we are in these bodies for a while, then we go back to spirit. So there is a whole other huge world, much larger than this physical world that we connect into as an artist or a teacher.

You can feel it when it is happening. You put your hands on someone to heal, and you get chills all over your body and you know that something is helping; you have more resources to heal or to teach than you actually physically own. Again, I try to honor spirit. When I do a piece of jewelry or write a book I want it to be more than just an amusing entertainment or a decorative adornment for your body. I want it to heal someone or provide protection, or to bring about some kind of teaching with one of the archetypal energies. As an artist I have this huge responsibility because I am creating archetypal images and I could change the way people feel or think. If I were to use that to sell products I would consider myself a black magician, someone who was abusing sacred power.

We all are shamans. We all are priests and priestesses. We try to delegate all this stuff to certain people, but we all have that connection with spirit. All we have to do is accept it.

I take what I do very seriously; it is a huge responsibility. Whether you are writing a book or doing a piece of art, you are dealing with incredible powers and to abuse those powers is a horrible imbalance. We all have those powers and they are often chaotic because very few people even acknowledge them in our culture. People have these negative feelings and emotions and thoughts; unguided energy they throw out into the world. We all need to take responsibility for what is happening in our environment, our lives, our communities and the world, because we are all responsible for it.

Corporations put so many archetypes in a film and know they are going to make millions of dollars, but are they really thinking about how it is going to affect the children? The Native American world says everything you do should be considered by how it is going to affect children for seven generations.

Awareness: Agreed. We must learn to be far more responsible, and think forward if we want to seed continuity. I am reminded of words from my mother Vella, who said, “Nobody is in charge, and everybody is responsible.”

Heyoka: Oh, boy, that is so true. We all have to take responsibility in our own lives to somehow touch into that ancient balance. It is so obvious all around us now that we have lived in a way that is not honoring to the natural rhythms of the earth, how the environment has been degraded and it is affecting the plants and the animals.

I do not think we can go totally back to living primitively again, but we have to realize that the balance is necessary for our survival, and of all the creatures and plants. The balance is very delicate, so we need to start thinking about it, and taking action, whether it is recycling or growing a garden.

Awareness: One of the remarkable qualities about this trilogy is the magical way it takes you outside of that straight linear frame of the modern-day world that is so unbalanced and taps into an underlying coherence that people were aware of in the ancient world.

Heyoka: That so pleases me for you to say that. Along with passing on the wisdom of my elders, it is one of the things I tried to write into the books. A lot of people have never had the opportunity to be out in nature

for weeks or months at a time like I have. There is another way of walking through the world and it has to do more with cycles and seasons. In the ancient cultures, if you got through the winter you were another year older. They had no concept of what we consider “time,” which basic-ally rules our life. ‘Time’ is foreign to our genetic memory and yet it has just consumed much of our life.

I am an artist and run a fairly large business so I struggle with it myself, yet I try to keep some kind of balance. With all the demands I get overwhelmed, but in and amongst that I also have a garden where I grow corn. Some of my Native American elders say that if we do not keep growing corn then there is no way we can keep a balance with ourselves, it is part of how we are going to survive through these difficult times we are in right now. As a medicine person who really listens to the Earth, I will just go up to the mountains I can see from my home, spend a few days and come back renewed. To me it is a meditation and a way of praying to the Earth and listening to her oracle of life; listening to what the trees are saying, the rocks, the animals, for everything in nature has consciousness and I want to be one with her.

Awareness: Coming full circle with our time together, any final comment?

Heyoka: This is a time of opportunity when humankind can achieve a greater balance with nature, each other and the universe. The myths of the Tibetans, Incas, Mayans and Hopi all speak of the passing from the Age of Pisces into the Age of Aquarius as a new beginning. The teachings and wisdom of our ancestors hold pieces of a puzzle that we need to reassemble in the new world, where every person may discover what their gift is to make a better place for themselves, their children and humanity’s future generations.

For more information about Heyoka’s books, visit www.beyondword.com To view more of Heyoka’s artwork, go to www.heyoka-art.com

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