



Eliot Cowan. Photo by Will Berliner.

*Eliot Cowan is a healer. Originally trained as an acupuncturist and herbalist, he rediscovered the ancient shamanic healing practice of appealing to the spirits of plants for help and healing. His book, Plant Spirit Medicine (Swan, Raven and Company) has had a life-changing effect on thousands of people. Several hundred of his students are currently practicing PSM in Australia, Britain, Canada, Mexico and the United States. A fully initiated shaman (tsauririkame) in the Huichol tradition—one of a very few of European heritage—he has taken on more than forty apprentices. I am one of them.*

*I have sat with Eliot around a hundred fires, listening and watching closely. His wisdom and guidance have utterly changed my life. I am constantly amazed at his ability to work steadily and tirelessly, never hurrying, but bringing forth incredible things. It is not too much to say that the Sacred Fire Community and this magazine have sprung from the work of Eliot Cowan.*

*Strangely, because it seems that he never has time to talk about himself at any of the many fires I've shared with him, this interview was taken by phone in October, 2006.* —JM

**Question** You were living a relatively stable life as an acupuncturist in California, what led you to go to be with the Huichol?

**Eliot Cowan** At that time I was doing quite well in my acupuncture practice. I was making good progress as a practitioner. But at the same time, I realized that if I were to continue to make progress at that rate, I would die before I could offer the healing that people needed. I went to my acupuncture teacher and, for several years, I tried to persuade, cajole and

bribe him to take me on with a few others in an apprenticeship program. Finally, he told me he wasn't interested and it wasn't going to happen. At that time, I began to pray and look for someone else who could be a guide for me.

It happened that I was sitting in someone's waiting room and picked up a magazine that was three years out of date. It had some articles about the Huichols. As I read the articles, I felt like I had been struck by lightning! I was unable to sleep that night, which surprised me, as sleeping is one of my great spiritual powers (laughter here). But I felt very strongly that there was something there for me. I immediately tried to get in touch with the author to see how I could meet those people. A year later I found myself in a Huichol village for the first time.

**Question** How did the Huichol receive you?

**Eliot Cowan** They received me well. I went with a group that was led by a guy who was connected to a Huichol shaman. I went ostensibly to attend a three-day ritual, but I arrived a few days before the ritual and stayed a few days after it. While I was there, I experienced a healing from a very great shaman. It was profound, a very profound healing I wrote about in my book.

Well, having had that experience, I realized that the guide that I was looking for was going to come from a traditional shamanic path, so I kept looking. Five years later I moved with my family to Mexico, and my teacher showed up soon after.

**Question** How did that occur?

**Eliot Cowan** On a previous visit I had met another Huichol shaman, José Benítez Sanchez, the most famous living Huichol

# OPENING THE SACRED DOORWAY

*An Interview with Eliot Cowan*

LOUISE BERLINER AND JONATHAN MERRITT

artist. After I moved there, I sought him out again, because I had been having dreams about a sacred site that had shown me some things and was helping me with my healing. I told him about my dreams and he listened very attentively. After I finished speaking, he confirmed the accuracy of the dreams. He said it would be good for me to make pilgrimage there and continue my learning. He couldn't take me because he didn't have a direct relationship with that site, but he had a relative who did. So we made a date and he introduced me to my teacher, Don Guadalupe González Rios.

**Question** What was your meeting with Don Guadalupe like?

**Eliot Cowan** That was interesting. By that time, I had met a number of indigenous elders from different traditions. These people always seemed to know why I was coming, but they never got around to talking about it. Sometimes those people sent me packing. Other times the message was, stay around for a few years, chop wood and carry water, and maybe we'll get around to talking about why you're here. With Don Guadalupe, it was different. He listened quite carefully, then he asked, "When do you want to go? Did you bring your stuff with you?" He took me to the site and got me started on my apprenticeship path, just like that.

**Question** Once you started making pilgrimages to that site, did you encounter difficulties? Did you ever doubt the validity of that path?

**Eliot Cowan** That particular site is a mountain, so it was physically demanding, and emotionally demanding as well. It was incredibly difficult. Yet, I was never plagued by doubt that

I was doing the right thing. It just felt right and I felt something moving me along.

**Question** How important is it for a person seeking a spiritual path to have a teacher?

**Eliot Cowan** I'd say it's not just important, you can't do without it. It's imperative.

Here's a little story:

My first interest in healing had to do with plants. I started reading books and using local plants to help with the health problems that popped up with my friends, my animals, and myself. I had some very encouraging successes. But I also found that there was a lot more I needed to know if I was going to be really helpful to people. I found myself at a dead end with the self-study thing.

At that point, I started looking for a teacher, somebody who could show me things that I sensed but couldn't quite articulate and introduce me to those areas that were unknown to me. After a lot of looking around, and a lot of discouragement, I finally found what I was looking for in the person of Professor Worsley, the acupuncturist. Even though he didn't teach herbalism, he offered the wisdom and experience I was looking for about various aspects of healing.

Later on, after studying and practicing acupuncture for 10 years, I wanted to apply what I had learned toward working with plant medicines in a different way. After a while my self-study once again led me to a blind alley. Finally, a friend suggested, "Eliot, why don't you look into this shamanism thing? They say shamans can talk to the spirits, so maybe they



David Wiley, Don José Sandoval de la Cruz and Eliot Cowan. Photo by Rob Norris.

could teach you to talk with plants and learn from them.” It sounded like a good idea.

I went to a workshop and I was given the exercise of making a dream journey to meet with the spirit of a plant, and, hopefully, to have a conversation. I wasn’t disappointed. The plant started teaching me and indicated that his brother and sister plants were happy to teach me also. So I began spending all my free time talking to the weeds around my house. That was really the birth of what I now call Plant Spirit Medicine.

But the point of the story is that I did that little exercise with fourteen or fifteen others. Although the other people reported that they had conversations with plant spirits, I was the only person for whom that conversation went further than the exercise. It wasn’t that I had any special aptitude or special powers. The only advantage I had was my connection with a teacher who was connected to a tradition of healing, and the fact that I practiced that medicine under his guidance. I had someone who could judge where I needed correction and show me the things I didn’t see and the things I didn’t know I couldn’t see. All that gave me a whole new way of relating to plants. So you might say, I knew the right questions to ask, based on that teacher, based on that authentic connection to an ancestral healing tradition.

I want to talk a bit about ancestral traditions, because I’m convinced that everyone, whether or not they are interested in doing healing work, needs a connection to their tradition. I say this because we humans are prone to forgetting ourselves, our relatedness to the world, our belonging.

The way I see it, ancestral traditions are paths that take us to special sacred doorways. The doors open, we pass through, and—Surprise!—we find ourselves still in the ordinary world. We discover that this world is a place of ineffable mystery, and we belong to it, we are part of it, we are related to everything.

Even though it may seem that much has been lost, really the doorways and pathways are as much a part of the world as mountains and valleys. They are just as permanent. And technology hasn’t really changed much of anything; the world still moves according to the same laws as it did in ancient times. Human nature still is what it is. So it is still a matter of engaging our ancestral traditions. We don’t have to try to invent new ways to find ourselves.

When someone does engage an ancestral spiritual path, she really needs a teacher, a living person who has walked the path and knows in human terms what it takes. It’s so easy to delude yourself. Any spiritual path—not limited to healing—involves breaking down the illusion of separateness. That illusion is created by our ego mind, so all spiritual paths are a confrontation to the ego mind.

Now, the ego mind doesn’t really want to get involved with this kind of confrontation. Chances are that when the going gets tough, which it must in any serious spiritual practice, the ego mind is going to dodge the issue, or alter the spiritual path, or seek an alternate path that seems less confrontational. That’s why a teacher is indispensable. A teacher can guide the person through the difficult parts and show her how she is kidding herself and help her make the necessary corrections.

**Question** In our last issue Thom Hartmann spoke about how all the ancestral European spiritual pathways have been lost, subverted, conquered and destroyed by the Celts, the Romans and the Christians. Some people, through channeling, dream journeys, and imaginative recreations, have retrieved pieces of those ancestral traditions. Today, many people seriously engage in spiritual practices they associate with pre-Christian Europe, gathering as modern day Wiccans and performing Druidic or Pagan rituals. Is this a way that people can reclaim their ancestral wisdom?

# Ancestral traditions are paths that take us to special sacred doorways.



**Elliot Cowan** In a way, yes, but there are pitfalls. Let me put it this way. Retrieving material through dreaming, channeling and journeying, through visionary experience, it's good. The problem is that, without elders, without guides to sort through the material in a non-egoistic way to make sure that the mind doesn't introduce distortions, and also to fill in the missing pieces—because I don't think anybody gets the whole deal—it gets very tricky. But it is true that ancestral pathways don't really die out. As long as there are descendants of those original connected people, the paths and the doorways do not disappear. They're part of our souls.

When the time and conditions are right for ancestral wisdom to be reintroduced, it is reintroduced. Right now, there are some very interesting reclamation projects quietly going on in Europe. But, for an ancestral tradition to find its way back without elders, it requires extra special help from Divine. Grandfather Fire sees that the time and conditions are right in Europe and in North America. So He's providing some special help.

**Question** So what you're saying is that, beyond the prayers and desires of the people, beyond the "struggling in the wilderness," it requires divine intervention to restore the lost ancestral wisdom.

**Elliot Cowan** Yes. It takes special help. And it's big news that this is happening in Europe. But one thing that needs to be kept in mind is that all ancestral traditions are related. They are like one family with different branches, and they do recognize each other.

For example, years ago, I brought my shamanic teacher, Don Guadalupe, to this country. It was the first time he'd been more than 200 miles from his homeland. He wanted to visit the sacred sites and see what the gods had to say in this part of the world. On one occasion, I took him to a sacred site in California. When we got close to it, he looked at it for two minutes and then told me in great detail what the nature of that site was, what was available there, what the offerings were, and how they were to be given. He went on and on for some time.

Later, I shared some of what he said with a person who had spent his life in those mountains and who considered

them to be a great spiritual teacher, though he didn't have the benefit of a human teacher himself. But he had researched the old stories that were still extant from the indigenous people who used to visit the site. As I told him what Don Guadalupe had told me, his jaw dropped! Everything Don Guadalupe had said was something he had already read about in his research, or learned by talking to people whose grandmothers had made offerings to that place.

That's another ace in the hole in this matter of reviving ancestral wisdom where local people no longer maintain the traditions. If a person who has a certain standing with the gods visits a sacred site, the gods can get very chatty and open up the doorways. This is a great benefit, a

pathway that provides for the rebirth of lost traditions. But again, it brings us back to the importance of living human teachers.

**Question** Since most people of European ancestry in the United States are mutts—that is, we are not genetic descendants of a single tribe or nation—how can we discover our particular ancestral traditions? How can we find living teachers?

**Elliot Cowan** My best advice is to be persistent and patient about praying and asking for guidance. It is especially effective to make your requests in front of the fire or before a candle because, in all traditions, fire carries our prayers to the Divine. Then watch and listen for when and where the guidance shows up. And be open to discovering it in unexpected places.

When people make a sincere request such as—"Please give me guidance. Please show me my tradition," or "Please help me make a relationship with the gods and spirits where I live"—at the right time, guidance shows up—sometimes in the most surprising ways, like finding an out-of-date magazine in a waiting room.

And when the guidance comes, you need to be willing to accept it and follow through with what is asked of you. Remember, engaging in a spiritual practice or tradition is not just about what you want. It is about relationship. The ancestral traditions know that balance and balanced relationships are what the world—and therefore, spirituality—is all about. ♡