

# Saving the Indigenous Soul

Interview with Martín Prechtel

by Derrick Jensen

Published in “The Sun”, April 2001

**M**artín Prechtel was raised in New Mexico on a Pueblo Indian reservation where people still lived in the old, pre-European ways. His mother was a Canadian Indian who taught at the Pueblo school, and his father was a white paleontologist. Martín loved the culture there, and the land. “I spent the whole of my very early life,” he says, “in a state of weepy terror about the possibility of the total annihilation of this beautiful world at the hands of a few white men who couldn’t understand the beauty we had in this way of life.” He began to work against this dangerous, beauty-killing power. “The natives called it ‘white man ways,’ “ he says, “but it was more than that. Its infectious power had eaten the whites, too, and made them its obvious promoter. This horrible syndrome had no use for the truly natural, the wild nature of all peoples.”

In 1970, after his first marriage ended and his mother died, Prechtel went to Mexico to clear his head. Seemingly by accident, he ended up going into Guatemala. He traveled around that country for more than a year before he came to a village called Santiago Atitlán. The village was inhabited by the Tzutujil, one of many indigenous Mayan subcultures, each of which has its own distinct traditions, patterns of clothing, and language.

In Santiago Atitlán, a strange man came up to Prechtel and said, “What took you so long? For two years I’ve been calling you. Let’s get to work!” So began his apprenticeship to Nicolas Chiviliu, one of the greatest of the Tzutujil Mayan shamans.

The apprenticeship lasted several years. As a shaman, Prechtel would learn how to correct imbalances in people's relationships with the ancestors and the spirits. He also had to learn the Tzutujil language. (Women taught him at first, and because women and men talk differently, he was a great source of amusement when he began to speak in public.)

Though not a native, Prechtel became a full member of the village. He married a local woman and had three sons, one of whom died. When Chiviliu died, Prechtel took his place, becoming shaman to nearly thirty thousand people. He also rose to the public office of Nabey Mam, or first chief. One of his duties as chief was to lead the young village men through their long initiations into adulthood.

Prechtel wanted to stay in Santiago Atitlán forever, but during the time that he lived there, Guatemala was in the throes of a brutal civil war. The ruling government — with its U.S.-backed death squads — had outlawed the thousand-year-old Mayan rites. Ultimately, Prechtel was forced to flee for his life. “I was going to stay,” he says, “but before my teacher died, he asked me to leave so that I wouldn't get killed. He wanted me to carry on the knowledge that he had passed to me.”

Prechtel brought his family to the U.S., where they “just kind of starved for a while until Robert Bly and men like him found me.” (Bly, a poet active in the men's movement, has high praise for Prechtel, whom he describes as “a short kind of pony that gallops through the fields of human possibility with flowers dropping out of his mouth.”) Though Prechtel's wife decided to return to her native Guatemala, he remained in the U.S. with their children and currently lives not fifty miles from where he grew up.

Prechtel is the author of *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar* (Tarcher), in which he writes — musically, clearly, and respectfully — about the indigenous traditions in Santiago Atitlán. He gives glimpses of his training, yet never reveals details that would allow readers to steal the Mayans' spiritual traditions the way others have stolen their land. In his most recent book,

Long Life, Honey in the Heart (Tarcher), Prechtel describes the structure of the village, the Tzutujil priesthood, and everyday village life before the arrival of the death squads. In addition to his writing, Prechtel paints scenes from the daily activities and mythology of the Mayan people and is a musician who has recorded several cds.

Prechtel appears around the world at conferences on initiation for young men. (“I’m working with women on that, too,” he says, “but it’s a little bit slower — mostly because I’m not a woman.”) He also leads workshops that help people reconnect with their own sense of place and the sacredness of ordinary life. “Spirituality is an extremely practical thing,” he says. “It’s not just something you choose to do on the weekends. . . . It’s an everyday thing, as essential as eating or holding hands or keeping warm in the winter.”

When I went to interview Prechtel at his home in New Mexico, I was embarrassed to find that my tape recorder wasn’t working. Fortunately, his present wife, Hanna, had a recorder I could use. It worked for about forty minutes, then started to run backward. Martín apologized, saying this sort of thing happened all the time. “I just seem to have this effect on machines,” he said. “My dentist won’t let me come in his front door anymore, because I freeze up all his computers.”

I made a note never to travel with him.

Hanna was able to coax the recorder to work again, and we finished the interview. My own tape recorder began working again the next morning, when I was about seventy miles away.

**Jensen:** What is a shaman?

**Prechtel:** Shamans are sometimes considered healers or doctors, but really they are people who deal with the tears and holes we create in the net of life, the damage that we all cause in our search for survival. In a sense,

all of us — even the most untechnological, spiritual, and benign peoples — are constantly wrecking the world. The question is: how do we respond to that destruction? If we respond as we do in modern culture, by ignoring the spiritual debt that we create just by living, then that debt will come back to bite us, hard. But there are other ways to respond. One is to try to repay that debt by giving gifts of beauty and praise to the sacred, to the invisible world that gives us life. Shamans deal with the problems that arise when we forget the relationship that exists between us and the other world that feeds us, or when, for whatever reason, we don't feed the other world in return.

All of this may sound strange to modern, industrialized people, but for the majority of human history, shamans have simply been a part of ordinary life. They exist all over the world. It seems strange to Westerners now because they have systematically devalued the other world and no longer deal with it as part of their everyday lives.

**Jensen:** How are shamans from Siberia, for example, different from shamans in Guatemala?

**Prechtel:** There are as many different ways to be a shaman as there are different languages, but there's a commonality, as well, because we're all standing on one earth, and there's water in the ocean wherever we go, and there's ground underneath us wherever we go. So we all have, on some level, a commonality of experience. We are all still human beings. Some of us have buried our humanity deep inside, or medicated or anesthetized it, but every person alive today, tribal or modern, primal or domesticated, has a soul that is original, natural, and, above all, indigenous in one way or another. The indigenous soul of the modern person, though, either has been banished to the far reaches of the dream world or is under direct attack by the modern mind. The more you consciously remember your indigenous soul, the more you physically remember it.

Shamans are all trying to put right the effects of normal human stupidity

and repair relationships with the invisible sources of life. In many instances, the ways in which they go about this are also similar. For example, the Siberians have a trance method of entering the other world that is similar to one used in Africa.

**Jensen:** You've mentioned "the other world" a few times. Most modern people would not consciously acknowledge such a place. What is the other world?

**Prechtel:** If this world were a tree, then the other world would be the roots — the part of the plant we can't see, but that puts the sap into the tree's veins. The other world feeds this tangible world — the world that can feel pain, that can eat and drink, that can fail; the world that goes around in cycles; the world where we die. The other world is what makes this world work. And the way we help the other world continue is by feeding it with our beauty.

All human beings come from the other world, but we forget it a few months after we're born. This amnesia occurs because we are dazzled by the beauty and physicality of this world. We spend the rest of our lives putting back together our memories of the other world, enough to serve the greater good and to teach the new amnesiacs — the children — how to remember. Often, this lesson is taught during the initiation into adulthood.

The Mayans say that the other world sings us into being. We are its song. We're made of sound, and as the sound passes through the sieve between this world and the other world, it takes the shape of birds, grass, tables — all these things are made of sound. Human beings, with our own sounds, can feed the other world in return, to fatten those in the other world up, so they can continue to sing.

**Jensen:** Who are "they"?

**Prechtel:** All those beings who sing us alive. You could translate it as gods or as spirits. The Mayans simply call them "they."

**Jensen:** There's an old Aztec saying I read years ago: "That we come to this earth to live is untrue. We come to sleep and to dream." I wonder if you can help me understand it.

**Prechtel:** When you dream, you remember the other world, just as you did when you were a newborn baby. When you're awake, you're part of the dream of the other world. In the "waking" state, I am supposed to dedicate a certain amount of time to feeding the world I've come from. Similarly, when I die and leave this world and go on to the next, I'm supposed to feed this present dream with what I do in that one.

Dreaming is not about healing the person who's sleeping; it's about the person feeding the whole, remembering the other world, so that it can continue. The New Age falls pretty flat with the Mayans, because, to them, self-discovery is good only if it helps you to feed the whole.

**Jensen:** Where does the Mayan concept of debt fit in?

**Prechtel:** As Christians are born with original sin, Mayans are born with original debt. In the Mayan worldview, we are all born owing a spiritual debt to the other world for having created us, for having sung us into existence. It must be fed; otherwise, it's going to take its payment out of our lives.

**Jensen:** How does one repay this debt?

**Prechtel:** You have to give a gift to that which gives you life. It's an actual payment in kind. That's the spiritual economy of a village.

It's like my old teacher used to say: "You sit singing on a little rock in the middle of a pond, and your song makes a ripple that goes out to the shores where the spirits live. When it hits the shore, it sends an echo back toward you. That echo is the spiritual nutrition." When you send out a gift,

you send it out in all directions at once. And then it comes back to you from all directions.

**Jensen:** It must end up being a complex pattern, because as you're sending your song out, your neighbors are also sending theirs out, and you've got all these overlapping ripples.

**Prechtel:** It's an entangled net so enormous the mind cannot possibly comprehend it. No one knows what's connected to where.

**Jensen:** How does this relate to technology?

**Prechtel:** Technological inventions take from the earth but give nothing in return. Look at automobiles. They were, in a sense, dreamed up over a period of time, with different people adding on to each other's dreams — or, if you prefer, adding on to each other's studies and trials. But all along the way, very little, if anything, was given back to the hungry, invisible divinity that gave people the ability to invent those cars. Now, in a healthy culture, that's where the shamans would come in, because with every invention comes a spiritual debt that must be paid, either ritually, or else taken out of us in warfare, grief, or depression.

A knife, for instance, is a very minimal, almost primitive tool to people in a modern industrial society. But for the Mayan people, the spiritual debt that must be paid for the creation of such a tool is great. To start with, the person who is going to make the knife has to build a fire hot enough to produce coals. To pay for that, he's got to give a sacrificial gift to the fuel, to the fire.

**Jensen:** Like what?

**Prechtel:** Ideally, the gift should be something made by hand, which is the one thing humans have that spirits don't.

Once the fire is hot enough, the knife maker must smelt the iron ore out of the rock. The part that's left over, which gets thrown away in Western culture, is the most holy part in shamanic rituals. What's left over represents the debt, the hollowness that's been carved out of the universe by human ingenuity, and so must be refilled with human ingenuity. A ritual gift equal to the amount that was removed from the other world has to be put back to make up for the wound caused to the divine. Human ingenuity is a wonderful thing, but only so long as it's used to feed the deities that give us the ability to perform such extravagant feats in the first place.

So, just to get the iron, the shaman has to pay for the ore, the fire, the wind, and so on — not in dollars and cents, but in ritual activity equal to what's been given. Then that iron must be made into steel, and the steel has to be hammered into the shape of a knife, sharpened, and tempered, and a handle must be put on it. There is a deity to be fed for each part of the procedure. When the knife is finished, it is called the “tooth of earth.” It will cut wood, meat, and plants. But if the necessary sacrifices have been ignored in the name of rationalism, literalism, and human superiority, it will cut humans instead.

All of those ritual gifts make the knife enormously “expensive,” and make the process quite involved and time-consuming. The need for ritual makes some things too spiritually expensive to bother with. That's why the Mayans didn't invent space shuttles or shopping malls or backhoes. They live as they do not because it's a romantic way to live — it's not; it's enormously hard — but because it works.

Western culture believes that all material is dead, and so there is no debt incurred when human ingenuity removes something from the other world. Consequently, we end up with shopping malls and space shuttles and other examples of “advanced” technology, while the spirits who give us the ability to make those things are starving, becoming bony and thin, which is one reason why anorexia is such a problem: the young are acting out this image. The universe is in a state of starvation and emotional grief because it has



not been given what it needs in the form of ritual food and actual physical gifts. We think we're getting away with something by stealing from the other side, but it all leads to violence. The Greek oracle at Delphi saw this a long time ago and said, "Woe to humans, the invention of steel."

**Jensen:** Why does this theft lead to violence?

**Prechtel:** Though capable of feeding all creation, the spirit is not an omnipotent force, as Christianity would have us believe, but a natural force of great subtlety. When its subtlety is trespassed on by the clumsiness of human greed and conceit, then both human and divine nature are violated and made into hungry, devouring things. We become food for this monster our spiritual amnesia has created. The monster is fed by wars, psychological depression, self-hate, and bad world-trade practices that export misery to other places.

We inflict violence upon each other as a way to replace what we steal from nature because we've forgotten this old deal that our ancestors signed so long ago. Instead, we psychologize and objectify that relationship as a personal experience or pathology, rather than a spiritual obligation. At that point, our approach to spirituality becomes rationalist armoring, a psychology of protection for the part of us that creates the greed monster, which causes us to kill the world and each other. As individuals, we become depressed, because the beings of the other world take it out of our emotions.

**Jensen:** How so?

**Prechtel:** When we no longer maintain a relationship with the spirits, the spirits have to eat our psyches. And when the spirits are done eating our psyches, they eat our bodies. And when they're done with that, they move on to the people close to us.

When you have a culture that has for centuries, or longer, ignored these

relationships, depression becomes a way of life. We try to fix the depression through technology, but that's never going to work. Nor will it work to plunder other cultures, nor to kill the planet. All that is just an attempt not to be held accountable to the other world. If you're to succeed as a human being, you've got to live meaningfully, passionately, and fully, so that even your death becomes a meaningful sacrifice to the spirits, feeding them. Everybody's death was a meaningful sacrifice until people started to become "civilized" and began killing everybody else's gods in the name of monotheism. As you grow older, your life becomes more and more meaningful as a sacrifice, because you give more and more gifts to the other world, and the spirits are better fed by your speech and prayers.

**Jensen:** How do you respond to someone who says that the notion of paying a debt to the spirit world for making a knife is just inefficient, which is why we've wiped out all those cultures. In the time your group spends making one knife, my group will make three hundred knives and cut all your throats.

**Prechtel:** If you take up that strategy, then you will have to live with the ghosts of those you've murdered — which means you've got to make more and more knives, and you will become more and more depressed, all the while calling yourself "advanced" to rationalize your predicament.

**Jensen:** What are these ghosts?

**Prechtel:** Before we talk any more about ghosts, we have to talk about ancestors, because the two are related.

Often, you'll hear that you have to honor your ancestors, but I believe it's much more complex than that. Our ancestors weren't necessarily very smart. In many cases, they are the ones who left us this mess. Some of them were great, but others had huge prejudices. If these ancestors are given their due, then you don't have to live out their prejudices in your own life. But if you don't give the ancestors something, if you simply say, "I'm descended from these people, but they don't affect me very much; I'm a unique

individual,” then you’re cursed to spend your life either fighting your ancestors, or else riding the wave they started. You’ll have to do that long before you can be yourself and pursue what you believe is worth pursuing.

The Mayan way of dealing with this is to give the ancestors a place to live. You actually build houses for them — called “sleeping houses” — and put your ancestors in there. The houses are small, because the ancestors don’t take up any space, but they do need a designated place, just like anything else. Then you feed your ancestors with words and eloquence. We all have old, forgotten languages that our languages are descended from, and many of these languages are a great deal more ornate. But even with our current language, we still have the capacity to create strange, mysterious, poetic gifts to feed the ancestors, so that we won’t become depressed by their ghosts devouring our everyday lives.

If we can get past the prejudices of the last ten thousand years’ worth of ancestors, then we can find our way back to our indigenous souls and culture, where we are always at home and welcome.

**Jensen:** My ancestry is Danish, French, and Scottish, but I live in northern California, so how can I find my way back?

**Prechtel:** The problem is not that your ancestors migrated to North America but that, when they died, their debts were not properly paid with beauty, grief, and language. Whenever someone dies, that person’s spirit has to go on to the next world. If that person has not gone through an initiation and remembered where she came from and what she must do to go on, then she won’t know where to go. Also, when a person dies, her spirit must return what has been taken out to feed her existence while she was on earth. All of the old burial rituals are about paying back the debt to the other world and helping the spirit to move on.

One of the ways those who remain behind can help repay this spiritual debt is simply by missing the dead. Let’s say your beloved grandmother dies. Some

might say you shouldn't weep, because she's going to "a better place," and weeping is just pure selfishness. But people's longing for each other and for the terrain of home is so enormous that, if you do not weep to express it, you're poisoning the future with violence. If that longing is not expressed as a loud, beautiful wail, a song, or a piece of art that's given as a gift to the spirits, then it will turn into violence against other beings — and, more importantly, against the earth itself, because you will have no understanding of home. But if you are able to feed the other world with your grief, then you can live where your dead are buried, and they will become a part of the landscape in a way.

Many old cultures had funeral arrangements whereby the dead were annually fed by the living for as long as fifty years, with the living giving ritual payments back to the world and the earth for the debts incurred by the deceased. When that grief doesn't happen, the ancestors' ghosts begin to chase the culture.

It's difficult enough when you have only a few dead people to mourn, but what happens when there are too many dead, when there is no time to mourn them all? When you get not just one or two ghosts (which a shaman might be able to help you with), but hundreds, or thousands, or millions of ghosts, because not just your ancestors, but the beings who have been trespassed against — the women who have been raped, the animals who have been slaughtered for no reason, the ground that has been torn to shreds — have all become ghosts, too?

**Jensen:** Are you speaking metaphorically here?

**Prechtel:** No, I'm talking literally. The ghosts will actually chase you, and they always chase you toward the setting sun. That's why all the great migrations of the past several thousand years have been to the west: because people are running away from the ghosts. The people stop and try to live in a new place for a while, but the ghosts always catch up with them and create enormous wars and pain and problems, which feed the hungry hordes of ghosts.

Then the people continue on, always moving, never truly at home. Now we have an entire culture based on our fleeing or being devoured by ghosts.

**Jensen:** What can we do about the ghosts?

**Prechtel:** On a finite planet, we can't outrun them. We've tried to develop technology that will keep us safe: medicines to numb our grief, fortresses to keep the ghosts away. But none of it will work.

In a village, if a family is beset by a ghost, the shaman will capture the ghost, break it down into its component parts, and send them back to the other world one at a time. Then the shaman and the family will set up a regular maintenance program, to get back on track in their relationship with the other world. This is the maintenance way of living.

I'm not sure how Western culture could do this. How can members of a culture that considers the earth a dead thing possibly repay all that debt? How can they possibly get away from all those ghosts? With everything that has gone on for so long, can they ever really be at home again?

To be at home in a place, to live in a place well, we first have to understand where we are; we've got to look at our surroundings. Second, we've got to know our own histories. Third, we've got to feed our ancestors' ghosts, so that the ghosts aren't eating us or the people around us. Lastly, we've got to begin to grieve. Now, grief doesn't mean sitting around weeping every day. Rather, grief means using the gifts you've been given by the spirits to make beauty. Grief that's not expressed this way becomes a kind of toxic waste inside a person's body, and inside the culture as a whole, until it has to be put in containers and shipped someplace, the way they ship radioactive waste to New Mexico.

This locked-up grief has to be metabolized. As a culture and as individuals, we must begin feeling our grief — that delicious, fantastic, eloquent medicine. Then we can start giving spiritual gifts to the land we live on,

which might someday grant our grandchildren permission to live there.

**Jensen:** What's the relationship between grief and belonging to a place?

**Prechtel:** In the Guatemalan village where I lived, you don't belong someplace until your people have died there and the living have wept for them there. Until a few of your generations have died on the land and been buried there, and your soul has fed on the land, you're still a tourist, a visitor.

While I lived in this village, one of my sons, a baby, died of typhoid. When I lost a child, I mysteriously and suddenly became a true, welcomed resident of the land. It wasn't as if I owned the land, but I was an honorable renter who'd paid with grief, artistically expressed in ritual. My child had merged with the land, so now I was related to the rocks and the trees and the air in a bodily way that I hadn't been before. And since the other villagers were all related to these same rocks and trees and air, that made us all relatives.

Now, you might say that all your ancestors from Denmark, France, and Scotland have been put in the ground in North America, so why aren't you welcome here? Why aren't you related to the rocks and the trees and the air?

It's because your ancestors who died are most likely still ghosts, still uninitiated souls who have not yet become true ancestors, because their debts were not paid with grief and beauty. Once they become true ancestors, you merge with the region, and you begin to help this world live. At that point, you'll find that you have less need for toasters and machinery and computers — less need for everything. You'll finally be starting to live well.

For us to get to that stage, we have to study eloquence, grief, and sacrifice. I'm not just talking about the type of sacrifice where somebody takes three days off to work in the neighborhood, although that may be part

of it. I'm talking about giving to the nonhuman, as well as to the human.

**Jensen:** So you're saying that we need to deal with the ghosts, and once we've dealt with them . . .

**Prechtel:** Then we have to talk about maintenance, which is far more important than corrective measures. This culture is based on fixing things, as opposed to maintaining them. But once we start to maintain instead of constantly fix, the problems that vex us will become much easier to solve. It will no longer be a matter of fixing something as we think of it today. Right now, fixing something means getting our way. It should mean asking: "What do I need to do here?"

Our culture also emphasizes individual freedom, but such freedom can be enjoyed only when there is a waiting village of open-armed, laughing elders who know compassion and grasp the complexity of the spirit world well enough to catch us, keep us grounded, and protect us from ourselves.

If the modern world is to start maintaining things, it will have to redefine itself. A new culture will have to develop, in which neither humans and their inventions nor God is at the center of the universe. What should be at the center is a hollow place, an empty place where both God and humans can sing and weep together. Maybe, together, the diverse and combined excellence of all cultures could court the tree of life back from where it's been banished by our literalist minds and dogmatic religions.

**Jensen:** Speaking of dogmatic religions, how did the Mayan traditions survive the influx of Spanish missionaries?

**Prechtel:** The Spaniards came to our village in 1524 , but they couldn't get anybody to go to their church, so they demolished our old temple and used the stones to build a new church on the same site. (This was a common practice.) But the Tzutujil people are crafty. They watched as the old temple stones were used to build the new church, and they memorized where

each one went. As far as the Tzutujil were concerned, this strange, square European church was just a reconfiguration of the old. (When I was learning to be a shaman, I had to memorize where all those damn stones were, because they were all holy. It was like being a novice taxi driver in London.)

The Catholic priests abandoned the village in the 1600 s because of earthquakes and cholera, then came back fifty years later and found a big hole in the middle of the church. “What is that?” they said.

By then, the Indians knew the priests destroyed everything relating to the native religion, so the Indians said, “When we re-enact the crucifixion of Jesus, this is the hole where we put the cross.”

In truth, that hole was a hollow place that was never to be filled, because it led to another hollow place left over from the temple that had been there originally, and that place was connected to all the other layers of existence.

For four and a half centuries, the Indians kept their traditions intact in a way that the Europeans couldn't see or understand. If the Spaniards asked, “Where is your God?” the Indians would point to this empty hole. But when the American clergy came in the 1950s, they weren't fooled. They said, “This is paganism.” And so, eventually, they filled the empty place with concrete.

I was there when that happened, in 1976. I was livid. I went to the village council and ranted and raved about how terrible it was. The old men calmly smoked their cigars and agreed. After an hour or so, when I was out of breath, they started talking about something totally unrelated. I asked, “Doesn't anybody care about this?”

“Oh, yeah,” they said. “We care. But these Christians are idiots if they think they can just eradicate the conduit from this world to the next with a little mud. That's as ridiculous as you worrying about it. But if you must do something, here's a pick, shovel, and chisel. Dig it out.”



So some old men and I dug out the hole. Then the Catholics filled the hole back up, and two weeks later we dug it out again. We went back and forth this way five times until, finally, somebody made a stone cover for the hole, so the Catholics could pretend it wasn't there, and we could pull the cover off whenever we wanted to use it.

That's how the spirit is now in this country. The hole, the hollow place that must be fed, is still there, but it's covered over with spiritual amnesia. We try to fill up that beautiful hollow place with drugs, television, potato chips — anything. But it can't be filled. It needs to be kept hollow.

**Jensen:** Why is a hollow place holy?

**Prechtel:** The Mayan people understand that the world did not come out of a creator's hand, but grew out of this hollow place and became a tree whose fruit was diversity. Human beings weren't on that tree, but everything that was on that original tree eventually went into human beings. You have gourd seeds in you, and raccoons, and amoebas — everything.

When the tree finally grew to maturity, flowered, and bore fruit, the fruit was made of sound, and every piece of it that dropped to the ground sprouted and gave birth to the diverse kinds of life. Then the old tree died and became humus consisting of ancient sounds, out of which all things flourish to this day. Everything we feel, touch, and taste is actually a manifestation of that original diversity, which means that the tree isn't really dead, but dismembered, and it's constantly trying to "re-member" itself.

Every year in my village, when it was still intact, the young men and women who were to be initiated into adulthood went down the hole into the other world to try to bring the parent tree back to life. They put the seeds of their holy sounds and their tears into that hole where the old tree used to

live long ago. And the tree grew back. But the rest of the year, the village devoured the tree's diverse forms, creating an annual need for new initiates to re-member the old provider tree back to life. The initiates were able to go down into that hollow place and restore the tree to life because they knew how to be eloquent, how to grieve, and how to fight death instead of fighting and killing other beings.

**Jensen:** When you say “fight death,” do you mean they resisted or denied its inevitability?

**Prechtel:** No, on the contrary, I mean they wrestled with death. In order for there to be life, there has to be a spiritual wrestling match with death; otherwise, it becomes a literal battle that can kill you.

The problem with death is that its gods are rationalists. The Mayans have thirteen goddesses and thirteen gods of death. These deities have no imagination, which is why they have to eat and kill us — to get our souls, our imagination. Once death has your soul, it is happy and stops killing for a while. But then you must go down and ask death — with all your eloquence — to please give back your soul. When death refuses, you've got to gamble with death, because death obeys only one rule: the rule of chance. And so you use gambling bones and try to beguile death with your eloquence. That's what we call “wrestling death.” You can't kill death, of course. The best you can hope for in such a match is to bring death to a standoff. Then death will say, “OK, I'll tell you what. I'm going to give you back your soul if you promise to continue to feed me this eloquence on a regular basis, and to die at your appointed hour.”

During initiation, when the young men and women wrestle death, what they're doing, essentially, is signing a contract that says, “I give up the idealistic notion that I should live forever.” Your soul is then returned, but you must ritually render a percentage of the fruit of your art, your eloquence, and your imagination to the other world. That's the only deal you're going to get from death. If you try to strike a better bargain,

you're going to end up killing a lot of people. When an entire culture tries to make a better deal, or refuses to wrestle death with eloquence, then death comes up to the surface to eat us in a literal way, with wars and depression.

**Jensen:** Tell me more about the indigenous soul.

**Prechtel:** Every individual in the world, regardless of cultural background or race, has an indigenous soul struggling to survive in an increasingly hostile environment created by that individual's mind. A modern person's body has become a battleground between the rationalist mind — which subscribes to the values of the machine age — and the native soul. This battle is the cause of a great deal of spiritual and physical illness.

Over the last several centuries, a heartless, culture-crushing mentality has enforced its so-called progress on the earth, devouring all peoples, nature, imagination, and spiritual knowledge. Like a bulldozer, it has left a flat, homogenized streak of civilization in its wake. Every human on this earth, whether from Africa, Asia, Europe, or the Americas, has ancestors whose stories, rituals, ingenuity, language, and life ways were taken away, enslaved, banned, exploited, twisted, or destroyed by this mentality. What is indigenous — in other words, natural, subtle, hard to explain, generous, gradual, and village oriented — in each of us has been banished to the ghettos of our heart, or hidden away from view on reservations inside the spiritual landscape. We're taught to believe that our thoughts are actually the center of our life. Like the conquering, modern culture we belong to, we understand the world only with the mind, not with the indigenous soul.

And this indigenous soul is not something that can be brought back in “wild man” or “wild woman” retreats on the weekend and then dropped when you put on your business suit. It's not something you take up because it's fun or trendy. It has to be authentic, and it has to be spiritually expensive.

**Jensen:** Let's talk for a moment about co-optation. There are two common

positions on the wider use of indigenous traditions. One is that there's nothing wrong with making a sweat lodge in your backyard for weekend retreats, while continuing to be a stockbroker on weekdays.

**Prechtel:** The consumer method.

**Jensen:** The other, which I subscribe to, is that we must respect the privacy of indigenous traditions and not mine them for our own purposes.

**Prechtel:** I've made a huge effort never to do that. The truth is that I never wanted to write books about Mayan traditions in the first place. On the Pueblo reservation where I grew up, it was taboo to write, because writing freezes knowledge, and also because much knowledge becomes useless when it is not kept secret and used only under sacred conditions. And often the things that are the most sacred are the most simple and ordinary. When this ordinariness is framed in subtle, time-honored ways, it becomes extraordinary and maintains its spiritual usefulness.

**Jensen:** The traditions you write about are not your native Southwestern traditions.

**Prechtel:** No, but I lived in Santiago Atitlán, in Guatemala, for many years and made my life there. I was married, with children. Then, when the U.S.-backed death squads came, more than eighteen hundred villagers were killed within seven years: shot, beaten, tortured, poisoned, chopped up, starved to death in holes, beheaded, disappeared. This took place in a village where, prior to 1979, most people had never heard a gunshot. I had a price on my head and was almost killed on three different occasions in the 1980s. I returned to the U.S. and brought my family with me. My wife later went back home, taking our two sons with her, and we separated. The boys soon returned to live with me and are now grown men.

Then, in 1992, there was another massacre, and I had to go back to Guatemala. Some young Tzutujil men met me in a pickup truck, which was

strange in itself: before, nobody had owned an automobile. They put me in the back with a bunch of squash, under a tarp. Whenever we came to an army roadblock, the soldiers saw just the squash and let us pass. They didn't look very hard. (Most of the soldiers really don't want to kill anybody: they have to be goaded into it. But they do kill.)

When we'd gotten past all the roadblocks, I got to sit up front. The other passengers were all kids. This was only eight years after I'd left, and already they had forgotten the name of my teacher, who had been one of the greatest and most famous shamans around.

As we drove, they'd ask, "Do you know the story of that mountain over there?"

"Yeah," I'd say, "that's called S'kuut. It was originally in the ocean and was brought up on land by the old goddess of the reptiles."

"Who's she?"

Pretty soon the truck was going about three miles an hour because they were rediscovering, through their ancestors' ancient stories, every mountain, ravine, and boulder along our route. After about two hours, I asked, "How come you don't know any of this?"

"Well," said one, "these two are Christians, so they're not allowed to know, and the rest of us don't have parents. They were killed in the 1980s."

So there I was, this blond half-breed from the U.S. — not even any blood relation to these kids — telling them their own people's stories. I realized then that these children, as well as my own two sons, would never know the richness of village life. They were losing their connection to this place. I had to write down what I knew, but I couldn't write down the specifics — that we went to the lake and did this and put this offering there — because then those rituals could be expropriated.

My decision to leave out the details of the rituals has irritated many people in the U.S. They insist I tell them “how to do it.” I always respond, “It’s not technology.”

**Jensen:** You’ve said explicitly that the power of shamanism is not in the specific words or the prayers.

**Prechtel:** My teacher always said that, if there is to be any hope whatsoever of living well on this earth, we have to take the ancient root and put new sap in it. That doesn’t mean we need to do something new, but to do something old in a new way, which takes great courage.

I decided that if I could write these books such that the oral tradition is evident to readers, memories of their own indigenous souls might begin to arise. Of course, I tell people not to get on a plane and go to Guatemala. That would bring nothing but more heartbreak and plundering. The answer must be found in your own backyard, where you live. The only reason to explore another culture is to be able to smell the poverty in your own. Even if you go to another culture and are accepted in some way, you still have an obligation not to abandon your own culture, but to return to your homeland and try to coax its alienated indigenous traditions back into everyday life and away from tribalism, fundamentalism, and corporatized, nihilistic greed.

This is true whether we’re talking about traditions or natural resources. Right now, “genetic prospectors” are going to Brazil to study plants used by indigenous peoples. Why? So they can save rich, white North Americans from diseases caused by the stupidities of their own culture. They’re mining other peoples’ traditions to fix, mechanically, illnesses that would be much better addressed if they stayed home and dealt with their own culture’s lack of imagination and grace, grieving collectively about the inescapable reality of their mortality.

People should also be aware that many things that are touted as indigenous

are not. Many of the sweat-lodge ceremonies, for example, are about as Jesuit as you can get. No Indian had ever heard of the Great Spirit before the 1850s. That's all from the Jesuits.

**Jensen:** You've said that one problem with Western culture is its use of the verb to be.

**Prechtel:** When I was a child, I spoke a Pueblo language called Keres, which doesn't have the verb to be. It was basically a language of adjectives. One of the secrets of my ability to survive and thrive in Santiago Atitlán was that the Tzutujil language, too, has no verb to be. Tzutujil is a language of carrying and belonging, not a language of being. Without to be, there's no sense that something is absolutely this or that. If two people argue, they're said to be "split," like firewood, but both sides are still of the same substance. Some of the rights and wrongs that nations have fought and died to defend or obtain are not even relevant concepts to traditional Tzutujil. This isn't because the Tzutujil are somehow too "primitive" to understand right and wrong, but because their lives aren't based on absolute states or permanence. Mayans believe nothing will last on its own. That's why their lives are oriented toward maintenance rather than creation.

"Belonging to" is as close to "being" as the Tzutujil language gets. One cannot say, "She is a mother," for instance. In Tzutujil, you can only call someone a mother by saying whose mother she is, whom she belongs to. Likewise, one cannot say, "He is a shaman." One says instead, "The way of tracking belongs to him."

In order for modern Western culture to really take hold in Santiago Atitlán, the frustrated religious, business, and political leaders first had to undermine the language. Language is the glue that holds the layers of the Mayan universe together: the eloquence of the speech, the ancestral lifeline of the mythologies. The speech of the gods was in our very bones. But once the Westerners forced the verb to be upon our young, the whole archaic Mayan world disappeared into the jaws of the modern age.

In a culture with the verb to be, one is always concerned with identity. To determine who you are, you must also determine who you are not. In a culture based on belonging, however, you must bond with others. You are defined by where you stand and whom you stand with. The verb to be also reduces a language, taking away its adornment and beauty. But the language becomes more efficient. The verb to be is very efficient. It allows you to build things.

Rather than build things, Mayans cultivate a climate that allows for the possibility of their appearance, as for a fruit or a vine. They take care of things. In the past, when they built big monuments, it wasn't, as in modern culture, to force the world to be a certain way, but rather to repay the world with a currency proportionate to the immense gifts the gods had given the people. Mayans don't force the world to be what they want it to be: they make friends with it; they belong to life.

**Jensen:** You've spoken a lot today about the importance of maintenance. How does that relate to the Tzutujil practice of building flimsy houses?

**Prechtel:** In the village, people used to build their houses out of traditional materials, using no iron or lumber or nails, but the houses were magnificent. Many were sewn together out of bark and fiber. Like the house of the body, the house that a person sleeps in must be very beautiful and sturdy, but not so sturdy that it won't fall apart after a while. If your house doesn't fall apart, then there will be no reason to renew it. And it is this renewability that makes something valuable. The maintenance gives it meaning.

The secret of village togetherness and happiness has always been the generosity of the people, but the key to that generosity is inefficiency and decay. Because our village huts were not built to last very long, they had to be regularly renewed. To do this, villagers came together, at least once a year, to work on somebody's hut. When your house was falling down, you



invited all the folks over. The little kids ran around messing up what everybody was doing. The young women brought the water. The young men carried the stones. The older men told everybody what to do, and the older women told the older men that they weren't doing it right. Once the house was back together again, everyone ate together, praised the house, laughed, and cried. In a few days, they moved on to the next house. In this way, each family's place in the village was re-established and remembered. This is how it always was.

Then the missionaries and the businessmen and the politicians brought in tin and lumber and sturdy houses. Now the houses last, but the relationships don't.

In some ways, crises bring communities together. Even nowadays, if there's a flood, or if somebody is going to put a highway through a neighborhood, people come together to solve the problem. Mayans don't wait for a crisis to occur; they make a crisis. Their spirituality is based on choreographed disasters — otherwise known as rituals — in which everyone has to work together to remake their clothing, or each other's houses, or the community, or the world. Everything has to be maintained because it was originally made so delicately that it eventually falls apart. It is the putting back together again, the renewing, that ultimately makes something strong. That is true of our houses, our language, our relationships.

It's a fine balance, making something that is not so flimsy that it falls apart too soon, yet not so solid that it is permanent. It requires a sort of grace. We all want to make something that's going to live beyond us, but that thing shouldn't be a house, or some other physical object. It should be a village that can continue to maintain itself. That sort of constant renewal is the only permanence we should wish to attain.



# A Conversation with Martin Prechtel

---

*A discussion by a shaman healer, initiator and chief of the difference between  
Mayan worldview and that of the West - including the place of courtesy in  
spirituality.*

---

**The Monthly Aspectarian:** Martin, I know you've worked as a shaman healer and chief, and that you have a really interesting story. Why don't we just start out by giving me the short version?

**Martin Prechtel:** First of all, I'm from New Mexico and grew up on an Indian reservation. I don't want its name in print because they're very old-time, the most conservative of all . . . they haven't lost any of their old pre-European-contact ways. I grew up on that reservation because my mother was a teacher there. She herself was a Native American—not a native United States American, but a native Canadian Indian, and my father is an Anglo whose parents are Swiss and Irish. I spoke the native tongue on the reservation, and Spanish and English, then later, Mayan.

When I was 20 or so, after my mother passed on, I was headed towards Mexico just to air out my mind from a bad marriage and all of the things that a young man tries to heroically achieve . . . failing at every single one of them. I went to Mexico just to try to cool out a little bit. I felt very, very comfortable there, and had a series of very interesting adventures—some of which I had dreamed in actual sleeping dreams before I got there. These adventures ended up being a special kind of grooming for a shamanic initiation which I eventually received in Guatemala.

I ended up going to Guatemala totally by accident—at least it seemed to me totally by accident! I guess the spirits had figured it out long ago. But I ended up in Guatemala in the beginning of the 1970s after just kind of meandering around

for about a year and a half, getting lost and almost dying, and doing this, that and whatever. I ended up in a village called Santiago Atitlan, which is the village of Tzutujil, a form of southern Mayans—of which there are only about 50,000. Most of the things that I deal with in doing my workshops come from the Mayan culture—but there's a lot of Mayan cultures, thirty-five of them in Guatemala alone. In Mexico and Honduras and in other places, there are other Mayans and other beliefs.

When I got to the village, this old fellow named Nicholas was waiting for me. And he said, "Hey, Curly, how come you came so late? I've been waiting for you for two years. Don't be lazy, let's get to work!" So on the third day I was in the village, I became his friend and his apprentice, his novice, and eight years later took over everything that he did. He died a little after that. But in the meantime, I was—well, it's not really like "student," because Indians don't do things like that. You don't just sign on. You're chosen. It isn't like you decide to have a career as a shaman! But this man was a famous shaman, medicine man. As a result, I became kind of a novelty in the village, but I married into the village and had two sons, actually three; one of them died, and two live sons who are still with me, and became a chief also.

A chief cannot be confused with being a shaman, because they're two different things. One is a public position and one is a private position. It's sort of like the difference between being a healer and being a leader. Since Americans don't have corresponding institutions, they usually think a shaman is a leader, but that's not so. No leadership thing in it at all. It's kind of a doctor, a spirit doctor or a fix-it man, whereas the leaders are more like priests. Anyway, I served as priest and leader for several years, too. I was initiated as a shaman and initiated into manhood also, and then I became initiator of young people.

There was at that time a war that ensued in Guatemala. I was going to stay, but before my teacher died, he asked me to leave so that I wouldn't get killed. He wanted me to carry the bundles and the knowledge that he had passed on to me. I went through a lot of troubles in getting my family out but we finally came to the States in the mid-'80s and just kind of starved for a while until Robert Bly and

men like him found me out in the bushes after hearing about me and what I did. I slowly came to prominence as a healer and also as a leader.

**TMA:** Are you still in touch with the people in Guatemala?

**MP:** Yes, I stay in touch the best I can with the village, you better believe it.

**TMA:** But you don't have those duties any more?

**MP:** I have duties, but those duties are not always in the village. They have a belief that the world is changing in 2012, and that there's certain things that have to be maintained . . . in other words, what they call "ritually fed." I am the custodian of one of these things that is to be ritually fed as a virtual being. I take care of that—and it doesn't matter where you are living when you do that, as long as the world is continually fed. There are thirteen others like myself who are doing the same.

**TMA:** Thirteen others out of the same group of Mayans?

**MP:** Well, it's all very secret.

**TMA:** How much about it can you say?

**MP:** Nothing! So we'll move on. Actually there's a book coming out next March where some of that is explained, but I don't like to explain it short, because unless the subtleties are in there, the rest of it becomes quite immaterial and it makes it trivialized—and I don't want to do that. It's the most important thing in life, outside of the fact that I have a girlfriend now who is so magnificent that's made all that other stuff not so painful.

I came out of Guatemala in a time of pain, in a time of war, in a time of difficulty, and being the great warrior that I was, my teacher said, "No fighting for you, Jack. You have to carry this bundle with no weapons, and you can't fight their bullets." I had to walk through the destruction of 1,800 of our villagers and the deaths of 19 of my friends in 45 seconds, and me getting machine gunned in order to carry this bundle to safety in the United States. The things I offer the people in

this country come at a very, very high price. Lots of people have died in the last four centuries to keep it alive.

In Guatemala, shamanism is actually on the books as being illegal, a federal offense. In 1968, [many] died for it. So it's not like something that is practiced openly like some sort of entertainment. It's a very serious endeavor. As I said, it's also not a career choice; you can't just choose to be one. You have to be chosen by your birth. So when I bring the things to the States, that's what it's all about.

I wasn't actually planning on [being a shaman] here in the States but my teacher, before he died, said that's a good thing to do over there, to teach certain things . . . but mostly, not so much to teach it, but to do what we do. In other words, like if a plumber comes to your house, he doesn't teach you how to be a plumber. He fixes the leaks. I'm like a spiritual leak fixer. I go fix the leak, but I don't tell everybody how to do it, because it's a lost art.

**TMA:** So what *is* the work you're doing here?

**MP:** That's another long story! One is to work with people who are ill. We use our old-time methods and being close to these bundles and to these spiritual things that we have. Another thing I do which is more well known is a lot of what you might call workshops. I don't like the word "workshop"; they're gatherings. People get together and we take their stories and their lives and their dreams and we put them into a village-like context. Each person's particular unique soul fits into an ecology that is very much like nature. You see, Mayans don't believe humans have human souls but that they have natural souls, nature souls, if you will. And so, for instance, if your soul was a certain kind of tree, and my soul was a certain kind of wind, and somebody else's soul was like a jaguar and another one's was like a deer, there's a symbiosis, sort of an ecology that works out in the village. Each one's uniqueness makes the village function instead of everybody being homogenized into one sort of way.

In the workshops, we take those kinds of stories and we make them into a unity so that each diverse thing becomes part of one thing, and that oneness, we call the

third thing. It's neither just the spirit nor just the physical world, but it's the third beautiful thing that's called life that's born from chaos and order.

Taking that to the final conclusion is that it makes a big blessing and a big offering to feed the spirit itself. The modern idea is mostly concerned with what can I get for myself or what can I get for my family, whereas the Mayan's spirituality is based on distribution. It's based on taking a certain percentage of what you get from the spirit—which would consider everything, including our lives—and then we have to give back to the gods themselves, because the gods are hungry . . . and if they don't get fed, they can't do their jobs . . . just like we can't if we're not fed. We become malnourished. So the gods, when they haven't been fed—and they have very rarely been fed in the modern world—become very sick, or they get very grumpy and angry and make all these wars and all of this destruction we see around us. As long as they're being fed, then they're being maintained. When they're not being fed, then the culture goes awry and we need corrective rituals, which the shaman is the specialist for.

Once the corrective rituals have been invoked, then a maintenance way can set in, and that's what everybody's really after, I think—to get a way of life that can be maintained spiritually instead of something that is constantly having to be corrected.

In the workshops, we try to do that in a sort of microcosmic way, where the people in these gatherings become like a little nomadic kind of village that comes together for a few days and we get to that happy place. Everybody, whatever is their pain, their happiness, their uniqueness, all of that becomes a vital part of that particular village at that point in time, so that their minds sort of wake and be [initiated].

Another thing I do is lead men's conferences all around the world, based on Robert Bly's and Michael Mead's type of things. We're doing these conferences in England and Australia and the United States and all around, and what we're using is basically the knowledge that I was able to participate in, of initiating men into adulthood. That has become very, very prominent and is really heartening.

I'm also working with women on that, but it's a little bit slower—mostly, of course, because I'm not a woman.

A fourth thing that's not as important probably, but is important to me, is I'm also a musician. I have several CDs out and do a lot of concerts around the world. I usually combine them with lectures and my workshop. You know: I have a lecture on Thursday, a concert on Friday and a workshop on the weekend, and Monday I fall apart and Tuesday I'm with my girlfriend all day and Wednesday I get ready to do the next week. And then I ride my horses all the time. I'm a good horseman.

**TMA:** I see you're doing a presentation on spiritualism and courtesy. How does courtesy figure into spirituality?

**MP:** Well, courtesy is the basis of all shamanism. If you take the word more in a pre-Renaissance sense, the idea of courtesy is the approach to spirit. In other words, the people don't own the spirit and they don't own their own spirit. So in order to get a spirit on your side, you have to be courteous. The whole idea of ceremonializing and "feeding" something, it's like courting a woman or courting a man. You're not just going to go up to some lady and put her in chains and throw her in your trunk then think she's going to love you. There's no way she's going to love you like that. But that's what people do to God. They just say, "This is mine, give me a new pick-up truck." And so courtesy comes in with the approach to spirit.

That's why in a ceremony we use certain words, certain songs, and a certain method of approach. Sometimes some ceremonies look just like a guy going courting. He'll have a big armload of flowers and candles and little gifts, and even chocolate—Mayans invented chocolate—and sugar, and all that, and we burn this and put this here and put that there and make these altars so that the spirit comes in the form that is different than this thundering god.

So the idea of a young man, especially men who court the spirit—they usually court their own souls as they would court a bride. That's why then when they marry women they don't mistake the woman for the goddess and expect her to be



all kinds of grandiose things that women can never be . . . except in isolated instances.

The idea of courtesy and the approach to life from the point of view of courting—I think courtesy and courting go together—is very much a Mayan concept because . . . they really don't live in a democracy and they don't live in tyranny. They live in what you might call kind of an animistic theocracy, where their own lives are paradigms of lives of deities. They live in a way of eloquence. The enforcement of eloquence by the elders upon the youth is not by force, but by the fact that the youth will never obtain from the elders what they want until they can speak deliciously and they can charm their way through without being insincere. That's where the courtly aspect comes in. There's a lot more to it, of course.

**TMA:** True courtesy wouldn't require a consciousness of being courteous.

**MP:** Yeah, absolutely. Of course. That's the bottom line. But the problem with the word "consciousness" is that it implies a whole lot of things that are very unconscious. It's a culture story, you know: you have to know who you're talking to. And how you say it.

**TMA:** What else would you like to say, or let people know about what you're doing?

**MP:** Mostly, I would like the people to know that what I'm doing is just *there*; it's not just something that can just be chosen.

The culture and the world as it is now is in a very interesting place. One place, I think, is very hopeful and in another place, destruction is very possible. At that kind of crossroads is the greatest opportunity of all: because it's like the time when a person is a teenager and falls in love. It's like an adolescent thing where there's a possibility that they're going to drive themselves over the cliff and kill themselves. There's also the possibility that the sort of sweet subversion of falling in love for the first time, feeling all these things and making all these discoveries, can possibly make an opening space for things that have been forgotten and thrown away long ago to come back in a new form. We like to say, maybe this is the time when the old tree trunk gets new sap and grows a new kind of flower

that's never been seen before . . . because this is simultaneously a great time of opportunity and great time of possibility of destruction. People consciously making some sort of approach to life as opposed to just sitting and watching: "Well is it going to blow up or not?" If you look at the cities, you've got all these people who don't want to look at what's going on inside with the kids and all that . . . and these people are part of the problem.

The big thing I want to say is that spirituality is an extremely practical thing. It's not a thing that you choose to do on the weekends. Spirituality is the thing that has to come to some degree of social accountability, no matter what layer of life you're stuck in or aiming at. The main thing is to know is that spirituality is accountable to everyday life and it's only in everyday life that spirituality makes a difference. Otherwise, if spirituality is an entertainment or something that is removed from life itself, then it's ceases to become spiritual and it becomes entertainment.

I think spirituality is as essential as eating or holding hands or being warm in the winter or being together as a village. It's all in there. Among a million other things, that's one of the main things I'd like to say.

---

*Martin Prechtel was raised on a reservation in New Mexico where his mother was an educator. Martin traveled to Guatemala in 1971 and was chosen by Mayan shaman Nicolas Chiviliu to be his student and to learn the ancient Mayan traditions. He became an initiated shaman in the mid 1970s and Head Young Men's Chief in 1978, serving different hierarchy posts in Santiago Atitlan in the Chiefdom hierarchy. As a shaman, he worked as a healer for 40,000 Tzutijil Mayans. As Chief, he has twelve sub-chiefs and had to initiate all eligible young men into manhood on long, ancient ceremonial events.*