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Being in Dreaming:

an introduction to TOLTEC SORCERY

an interview with Florinda Donner

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Late one afternoon at a coffee shop in Tucson, a woman sporting a peculiar hairstyle sits at the counter and orders a hamburger. In an effort to humiliate the cook for allegedly refusing to serve an Indian friend of hers, she deftly deposits a large, dead cockroach on her meal and shrieks in revulsion. The cook picks up the food and studies the woman intently. "Either this cockroach fell from the ceiling, he replies, looking at her, "or it dropped out of her wig." Before the woman can reply, she is offered any meal, compliments of the house, and so she humbly enjoys a steak and baked potato. Yet when she gets to her salad, she notices a rather large spider crawling in her lettuce. Looking up, she sees the cook waving to her, a dazzling smile lighting his face.

Scenes like this one occur frequently in a society where many different cultures are vying for acceptance and control. Upon further inspection, however, this episode is not as straightforward as it seems. It is an introductory chapter into a world that we normally don't perceive, a parallel world inhabited by brujas and brujos 施 orcerers descended from the Indians of the Oaxaca Valley prior to the Spanish conquest. You see, the cook's name is Joe Cort 関, known to his companions as Carlos Castaneda. The woman's friend is the nagual don Juan Matus.

Florinda Donner's introduction into this world, a world that we have filtered from our perception, a world that has been encrusted with layers of social norms and acceptance, pushed out of sight and forgotten, is the subject of her third book, *Being-in-Dreaming* (Harper-SanFrancisco, 1991). In it she tells her tale of the disruption of all her assumptions about space, time, reality, and femininity by a group of people who interact in a state of awareness that resides somewhere between being asleep and being awake. Drawn into this world through the energy of don Juan, Castaneda, and the female members of their group, Florinda experiences a clear, albeit confounding, perception of human ability and energy. Her experiences are not without discomfort, however, for she must reassess all her current knowledge and beliefs into a world that few are able to see.

I had the chance to speak with Florinda about her twenty-some years of association with don Juan and Castaneda, and it was easy to understand the benefits of being able to perceive that which we usually overlook. Highly spirited and energetic, Florinda is as comfortable talking about parallel realities as she is about her favorite pastime, going to the movies.

How do you describe yourself, and what are you currently doing?

Florinda Donner: I am an anthropologist who no longer practices anthropology, and I have an interest in non-Western healing practices. My work with the Yanomamo Indians in South America was the subject of my first book, *Shabono*. I then did another study in which I worked with a healer in Northern Venezuela. By that time I had already been exposed to the world of don Juan, and carried a desire to continue with it. I am no longer involved in academic research. What I am trying to do now, along with the other people who are involved in the same quest, is to work and live the way don Juan taught us, within a whole other world that he and his cohorts opened for us.

What is, or is there, an objective of sorcery?

Florinda: Sorcerers are interested in the inherent capacity to see energy directly. They describe their knowledge as the pursuit of this capacity to see the essence of things. What one normally does in everyday life is to perceive a world one already knows and just revalidate it. Apparently the job of civilization is to give one an a priori idea of thinking, and therefore no experiences are really new. People force their children to perceive the way they perceive, by hook or by crook. And once they have accomplished that, of course, their children are bona fide members of the group.

Once you are able to see energy in the environment around you, what do you do with that knowledge, that ability?

Florinda: Most people are limited in terms of what they see. What sorcerers, including myself, want to do is expand the limits, the parameters, of normal perception. Not only do sorcerers see energy directly, we relate to it differently than most people. Our whole spectrum of what we are capable of as human beings changes. One's choices in life are very limited, because the choices have been defined by the social order. Society sets up the options, and the individual does the rest, because the options are only those that have been made available. One's only source of

possibilities, it seems, comes from within those limitations. Sorcerer, the emphasis in the everyday world is to stay within socially accepted boundaries of perception.

How do you go about teaching people to enhance their perception?

Florinda: Whether we are trained as a male or a female, we are conditioned to react in a certain manner. If we can stop that, or at least examine it, we can free up an enormous amount of energy. That energy can then be utilized for dreaming. For don Juan the whole thing always boils down to having enough energy. In the United States we are conditioned for instant gratification; we want an instant formula that will work right now. On one level the immediacy is extremely appealing, but, on the other hand, nothing is good unless you can push a button and have it instantly.

So, a sorcerer tries to re-channel this energy?

Florinda: Not only that, we try to break the barriers that block our potentials. It is possible to break those barriers by the rigor of self-examination. One of the first exercises all sorcerers do is the *barro* that I did not do for years because I did not believe in it. It is a recapitulation of their lives with all the people with whom they have had any kind of interaction. They start working on the present and work toward the past, and, of course, they end up with their parents. They don't, however, make a psychological interpretation. Sorcerers want to feel how they have interacted, what kinds of emotions they felt. As they go further and further back in time, they realize that the repetitiveness of their way of perceiving or interacting is so horrendously boring that there is nothing special about them.

Don Juan says there is this parallel world existing around us, a force of energy that we don't let in because we are too busy with upholding what the social order dictates. Dreaming is one of the main techniques for perceiving this parallel world. This "second attention," as Castaneda calls it, takes a lot of energy, energy which can only be gained by canceling the idea of the self. In dreaming, basically what we want to accomplish is the same control we have over the everyday world. The dream becomes as real as our everyday life. The gains are gigantic, tremendous, in terms of what we are capable of being. We realize that we are energetic beings.

Is lucid dreaming something similar to being-in-dreaming?

Florinda: In Carlos' books, he talks a great deal about what the sorcerers call the "assemblage point." Perception takes place wherever that assemblage point becomes static. The greatest accomplishment of our human upbringing is to lock our assemblage point on its habitual position. Once immobilized there, our perception can be walked and guided to interpret what we perceive. We learn to perceive in terms of our system first; then in terms of our senses.

In dreaming, one sees the body as a luminous egg of energy. The assemblage point shifts inside the egg and assembles different perceptions; perceptions produced by the energy filaments that traverse the egg. In dreaming, prior to that moment that one falls asleep, the assemblage point starts to flutter. The sorcerer tries to control where that assemblage point fixes itself. The sorcerer is interested in manipulating it and using it at will. Someone who is adept at lucid dreaming can go into their dream and totally control it. And that is exactly what don Juan wants to do. Through dreaming it's possible to accomplish the ultimate goal of sorcery: to liberate perception from its social bindings in order to perceive energy directly.

One of the differences between your initial experiences and those of Castaneda is the use and non-use of drugs. There is no mention of drugs in your book.

Florinda: Carlos was given psychotropic plants because it was so difficult for him to break through the barriers of perception. For a man it is much more difficult, if for no other reason than because they are the upholders and shapers of our definition of reality.

The conceptualization of reason has been done exclusively by man. This has allowed men to belittle women's gifts and accomplishments. Even worse, it has allowed men to exclude feminine traits from their conceptualized ideals. Women have been reared to believe that only men can be rational and coherent. Men define the very nature of knowledge and from it they have excluded all that is feminine. Though maybe we don't verbalize it, women instinctively know that man's rationale is not our own. Our commitment to this man-made reality, therefore, is not as strong as the male's. This gives us the ability to weave in and out of the parallel worlds, or to go more easily with the flow. The importance of women healers in the shamanistic practices has been ignored in the shamanistic literature. In the history of Western Medicine the role of women is not even acknowledged.

So how do you feel about male sorcerers?

Florinda: Don Juan was the nagual of a group of 14 sorcerers. Castaneda is the nagual of a much smaller group. The male sorcerers know that without the female sorcerers, there is nothing.

Don Juan and Castaneda are not the leaders in the sense that they are better or have more knowledge. The only reason that they are the leaders of their groups is that they have more energy. Don Juan knew that he did not have an inch of ground to stand on without the women. In that kind of relationship, men and women never take advantage of each other, because, energetically, they know that they need each other to such a large degree. The male sorcerers know that it is the female who has a direct link to whatever it is that is out there 杢 knowledge, spirit, energy, whatever you want to call it.

Carlos' books reflect a different process, a process he is still going through. Men build knowledge step-by-step; they "cone" toward knowledge. This coning process limits men as to how far they can reach. The male wants the order, the structure, first. The female plunges into something, and then she makes order out of it. In women, the cone is inverted; it is open like a funnel. Women are able to open themselves directly to the source, or rather, the source reaches them directly.

When you first came across Castaneda, he was working as a cook in Tucson as part of a task assigned to him by don Juan. Did you have an assigned task?

Florinda: My task was to finish school, get a Ph.D., and continue to study. From the sorcerers point of view it is useless not to utilize what the world has to offer. The way the rational mind has been developed, and works, is one of the most exquisite things we have. To negate that is criminal. It is very important to be very well trained both from the perceptual level and the rational level, for we can only reject something, or find its flaws, if we understand it to perfection. I had always thought, "I don't care." Why should I go through with my academic education if I'm not going to use it?" the sorcerers made me see how important it is to embody rational knowledge the same way I embody sorcery. We cannot reject it, because the best that man has to offer is his intellectual achievements. All the people of this group have upper degrees, because when you plunge into the darkness, if your mind is not so keen and so well trained from a rational point of view, you cannot make sense out of what you find in the darkness.

Even if the object is to understand it from a non-rational point of view?

Florinda: In order for us to make sense as human beings, we have to be rational. If you have a keen intellect you can very easily go from one stage to another. From don Juan's point of view, we are "reasonable men," but not "men of reason." That is our own fault. We have the capacity for incredible intellectual possibilities. We haven't really profited from them because we don't take it's possibilities at face-value. The world of the sorcerer is a sophisticated world; it is not enough to understand its principles intuitively. One needs to absorb them intellectually. Contrary to what people believe, sorcerers are not practitioners of obscure, esoteric rituals. Sorcerers are men of reason. They have a romance with ideas. They have cultivated reason to its limits, for they believe that only by fully understanding the intellect can they embody the principles of sorcery without losing sight of their own sobriety and integrity. This is where sorcerers differ drastically from other people. Most people have very little sobriety and even less integrity.

That is quite a difficult change for most people to comprehend.

Florinda: Yes, because what we are trying to do is reduce our involvement with the world by changing our routine ways of interacting and being in the world. You see, we always want to be the protagonist, we always want to be the "I." Every story, everything we see, everything we perceive, everything we tell, is always through the "I." If you can curtail the "I," and truly see as a witness, it is more enchanting. The enjoyment of experiencing the ability of a human being is gigantic. Any kind of normal situation becomes an event, becomes a story. It is very interesting to let the other person be the protagonist.

That is not something that Western culture tends to allow.

Florinda: Of course. If you want to analyze it, the whole idea of the West is succeeding the "I," of seeing what you think. Yet what we don't see, which exists just as well, is limitless.

Your idea sound analogous to Buddhism's idea of no-self.

Florinda: Except that Buddhism is a system that works inside the social order. Sorcery doesn't work within the social order. To truly embody sorcery, one has to be almost outside the social order. It is not that one is a deviant, but that one has to extract oneself. One has to truly see, to look from the bridge. Trying to grow by retreating to a monastery or to the desert is useless. Only by being challenged by our daily life, by what we know, will we be able to change. The pressure always becomes such that we cannot uphold this new rationale, precisely because we are being pressured. And we are only going to be pressured by the world we know. The thing is not to hook into our routine ways. To accomplish that one needs energy. The important thing is to convince ourselves of the need to modify our deep socialization in order to acquire that energy.

So sorcery is action, not just thought.

Florinda: Exactly. Sorcery is not illusory; it is abstract. Sorcery is an abstract pursuit of re-making ourselves outside the parameters of what the social order has defined and allowed us to be.

We talked about the social value of sorcery before, but it doesn't seem that your work would have an effect on a large amount of people.

Florinda: We, as individuals, have to change in order for us to assume that we can change anybody else.

And we can't just have intellectual change.

Florinda: No. Intellectually we are willing to tease ourselves with the idea that culture predetermines who we are, how we behave, what we are willing to know, what we are able to feel. But we are not willing to embody this idea, to accept it as a concrete practical proposition. And the reason for this is that we are not willing to accept that culture also predetermines what we are able to perceive. On a practical level, we want everybody else to change, but we ourselves don't change. The civil wars in Central America, for instance, are not changes. They are merely switches in power. It is the same thing in this country. We haven't changed. The one hope is that people begin to realize that their predetermined world doesn't make sense. Collectively, we know that something is terribly wrong. What we have done to the Earth has already been done, and we can't change that. The Earth will continue its existence whether we are here or not. We are not doomed because the Earth is doomed; we are doomed because of our unwillingness to change.

To break with our habitual patterns, we need energy and the commitment that we truly want to do it. Don Juan was extremely forceful in the sense that he could practically grab you by the neck and put you into another world. Castaneda is different. All he is interested in is the person's commitment. It has to be your decision. He will not influence you. He will help you if something has to be explained, but he is not interested in coercion or in trying to brow-beat somebody into changing the world we live in. The change has to come from within first.

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