



# THIS WOMAN CAN TURN YOU INTO A UNICORN

*Jo Bowlby is a financier's daughter from Hampshire; she is also the secret shaman to this country's rich and powerful. She works her magic on Gavandra Hodge*

I am lying on a daybed with a crystal on my sternum and the smell of burning Amazonian wood in my nostrils. My shaman, who trained with the Q'ero tribe in Peru, is shaking a gourd rattle about my head while I am imagining riding a white horse, with wings (I think there might even be a horn), up to a distant star.

It's a pretty intense trip. But I am not in the rainforests of Peru, and my shaman is not a ponchoed tribal elder. I am in the basement of a rather fancy house overlooking Battersea Park, and my shaman is Jo Bowlby, who was raised in the countryside near Sunningdale, whose father was a financier, who went to Heathfield school, who loves riding and tennis. 'I never wanted to be the person with the job, the Volvo, the house in the country, the Labrador,' she says. 'The idea of settling for a conventional life without pursuing my interests terrified me.'

So, for the past 10 years, Jo has run a successful shamanic practice from her house, treating CEOs, pop stars, actors, SAS men, even banker friends of her father's in pinstriped suits with fob watches. She treats them with methods devised in the rainforests and mountains of Peru over 2,000 years ago to help people whose lives were so different from ours that it is almost impossible to imagine what they would have been like. No cars, no electricity, no mobile phones, no offices, no taxes, no school, no supermarkets, no government, no hospitals, no hot and cold running water – none of the things that we think make us civilised humans.

But let us forget, for a moment, the things that separate us from an Inca tribesman living in a hut and remember the things that connect us – love, loss, happiness, sadness, hopes, desires, imagination, fears. Jo treats these captains of industry, these high-achievers and millionaires, operating in our relentless, success-driven, hyper-connected, urban, 21st-century world, for exactly the same problems that her shaman predecessors would have seen their patients – anxiety, fatigue,

depression, disconnectedness. Because we are all human – wherever we live, whenever we live, tribesman or businessman – and have the same nervous system, the same physiognomy, the same physical and mental needs.

Shamanism is probably one of the oldest spiritual healing practices known to man, with variants of the tradition observed in different societies across the globe – from Finland to Korea to Peru. Originally, the shaman would have been a combination of doctor and therapist, the person villagers would go to for insight and healing, with a bit of magic thrown in for good measure. 'The first shamans were the ones who studied animals' migration patterns so they could tell the hunters where to go,' explains Jo. 'They learnt the cycles of nature and which plants and herbs could heal.'

With the encroachment of the modern world, many shamanic practices have been lost, but some remain in remote pockets of the globe. 'The story goes that when the conquistadors arrived in Peru in the 16th century, the Q'ero fled high into the Andes. Then, 60 years ago, they started to leave their villages and come back down to their sacred valley, their traditions and techniques intact and untarnished by state or religion.'

Q'ero shamans use rattles, crystals, woodsmoke, talking, storytelling and 'energy work' (in which the shaman, using touch, brings the body of the patient out of a state of overstimulated 'fight or flight' alertness). They also use 'plant medicines', in particular hallucinogenic ayahuasca, which contains DMT (dimethyltryptamine) and induces visions, sometimes unpleasant, sometimes blissful, sometimes perception-expanding. In this country, DMT is considered a Class A drug and is illegal. So, for the more spiritually adventurous and properly prepared, Jo also offers private 'healing journeys' to Peru to work with the master healers of the Amazon and the Andes, which can include taking ayahuasca under the guidance of a local *ayahuasquero* (a shaman trained in working with and administering the indigenous plants). She herself has taken ayahuasca many times, and it has changed her world.

Jo didn't enjoy Heathfield and has never responded well to authority figures, to being told to do something 'just because'. After school, aged 18, she went to work for an estate agent in Chelsea. At 19, she was headhunted by the actor/singer Adam Faith, who was setting up a business mediating between the worlds of showbusiness and the City, helping celebrities invest their riches more astutely. 'Lunch was either at Harry's Bar, the Savoy Grill or San Lorenzo – we always sat at table 19, the one at the bottom of the stairs.'

In her late 20s, she set up the *Evening Standard's* book-publishing division and went on to become a literary agent, specialising in books about finance and spirituality. But all the while she was seeking a deeper meaning. 'I hadn't found a way to shake an underlying unease that there was more to life than the path I was on. It felt two-dimensional, a bit empty and pointless. As a child, I had always been drawn to sages, wise old characters, like the guru in the film *Kim*.'

So she set herself the task of studying Zen, but found it too sterile (although she still has a miniature Zen garden on her desk). She learnt karate at the Budokwai, a martial-arts club in Fulham, where her training partner was Guy Ritchie. She attained her black belt in two years and then dedicated herself to yoga. She also studied psychotherapy at Regent's University London. But nothing quite hit the spot. 'I never wanted to escape into an ashram – I never wanted to give up my life, my friends and my family.' But she was sure there was something else, another level of perception, and she was desperate to find it.

Then a friend invited her to a talk given by the Cuban psychologist and medical anthropologist Alberto Villoldo, who has spent over 10 years working with the medicine men of the Amazon and who has written many books about shamanism. 'I immediately liked him because he was light-hearted and wearing a suit,' says Jo. 'I was relieved that he wasn't wearing a poncho, that he didn't have a beard to his knees. And everything he said fascinated me. He opened up this world ▶

◁ that was magical and very visual – the shamans use animals and nature to map and light up our inner world.’ Jo spent the next four years in America and Peru, training to be a shaman with Villoldo and the medicine men, participating in ayahuasca ceremonies, and received her final rites from the Q’ero elders on a mountain called Pachatusan, in 2006.

The Q’ero are not a literate people; they use visual symbols from the surrounding landscape to help patients gain a better understanding of themselves and of reality. In particular, they use the animals of the shamanic ‘medicine wheel’, including a snake, a jaguar, an eagle and a hummingbird. ‘The serpent relies on its instincts to survive and only sees what is literally straight in front of it,’ explains Jo. ‘At this level, we see our physical body but not our emotional, soul or spiritual selves. The jaguar represents the mind, where our beliefs, ideas and emotions affect how we interpret our reality. The serpent’s instincts are purely concerned with survival, but the jaguar is curious and inquisitive. The hummingbird represents the soul. We reach the soul through art, music, ritual, ceremony. The eagle represents the spirit, pure energy. There is no “I” at this level – we no longer see ourselves as individuals, everything is connected. This is best experienced in meditation. We are all familiar with the first two levels, the physical and the mind. They tend to get our full attention. We diet and exercise to look after our bodies, devote years to analysis and trying to understand our thoughts. But in today’s busy world, the soul and spirit tend to get ignored. We rarely give ourselves time to dream and visualise the future. When we do, we tend to squash our dreams and tell ourselves to be more realistic.’

According to the shaman, happiness and completeness can be achieved by moving between these four states, by having a balance between them, by not letting one of them consume all our energy. ‘Unless you’re the sort of person who wants to emigrate to the Himalayas and meditate 24/7, you don’t want to be permanently at the level of spirit. We have to live in everyday reality and pay the bills. Nor do you want to only experience life at the physical level, devoid of emotion, vision and dreams. Each level is equally important.’

Much of Jo’s time with a client is spent guiding them through different levels of perception using the symbols of the medicine wheel. Problems in one state can be resolved by moving to the next state and re-examining the issue from a different perspective. ‘Knowing the landscape is empowering,’ she says. ‘I use

what is going on in my clients’ lives to show them how to apply the four perceptions for themselves. We feel safe “in our flow” when these four levels are in balance. Knowing how to balance and shift perceptions is an important tool.’ But, she adds, ‘understanding often doesn’t change anything.’ We need to experience things for ourselves, which is why most sessions also involve ‘energy work’ – the rattles, the crystals, the laying on of hands. ‘The energy medicine is particularly effective because it gives the client a chance to get out of their story, out of their everyday life, to alter their consciousness. It may look like just a load of exotic paraphernalia, but they all have a purpose. Some are for cleansing, some

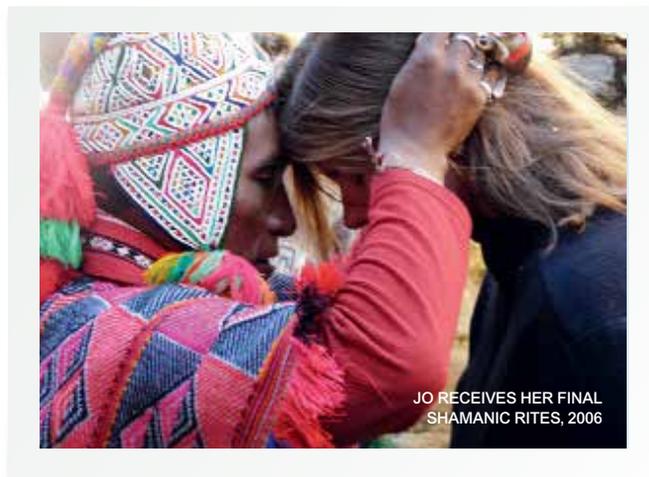
immediate difference. It’s very hard to describe but it is more than just relaxing.’

The most extreme shamanic experience, and, some say, the most transformative, is the ayahuasca ceremony, in which, following the ingestion of ‘ayahuasca tea’ (and then vomiting most of it up), people will face their demons, terrifying as these are, and, hopefully, conquer their fears and even experience divine visions. But ayahuasca tourism has increased hugely in South America in recent years, is unregulated and can be dangerous – last year a Canadian man killed a British man while they were both taking ayahuasca at a lodge near Iquitos. This is a powerful, mind-altering drug.

‘It is not a guaranteed journey of wonder and bliss – it can be quite the opposite,’ says Jo. ‘The *ayahuasqueros* are master herbalists. They have undergone an intense initiation and years of training. In the ceremony, they heal at the energetic level, guiding your journey with healing songs – and sometimes whistling, helping you when the visions get too tough. But to find a trained *ayahuasquero* is getting harder. They work within their community and they don’t advertise. Although the South American countries are taking great strides to stop the charlatans, it is still not difficult to find someone calling themselves a shaman offering an ayahuasca ceremony. It’s a pity, because the misuse not only tarnishes a sacred plant medicine, but is dangerous for the naive spiritual tourist.’

But you don’t have to go to Peru to have visions. In her Battersea basement, Jo also sets her clients off on imaginative journeys (flying through space on a white unicorn, in my case), essentially daydreams, that are very visual and self-created and can be examined afterwards for meaning. This sounds improbable, but in the relaxed, time-out-of-life state she induces, the mind wanders in the most interesting ways.

It is an empowering experience – you are creating your own fantasy narrative, playing with it, taking control of it. This is one of the things that attracted Jo to shamanism. There is no hierarchy, no spiritual leaders, no doctrine. It is democratic and flexible. As well as the masters of the universe Jo sees, she also treats ‘normal’ people from all over the country. Because, she feels, everyone can benefit from what the shamans can teach, which is essentially about creating a space inside you that enables you to live in the world, to see its magic, to find stillness in the mayhem. □  
*Traditional shamanic healing, £180 for 90 minutes (jobowlby.com).*



JO RECEIVES HER FINAL SHAMANIC RITES, 2006

## *The most extreme shamanic experience is the ayahuasca ceremony*

are for journeying – the sound of the rattle is primal, it quiets the mind, creating a trance-like state. And the hands-on work is for settling the nervous system.’

The ‘hands-on’ work involves Jo sliding her hands under your back as you lie on the bed. It feels strange at first, but she remains like this for such a long time that it is impossible not to relax into it eventually. ‘Possibly the most important technique I have learnt is how to release the body from the primitive response to fear. Fight or flight can be a life-saver in an emergency, allowing enhanced alertness and quickened reflexes, but it is damaging to remain in this high state of alert for an extended period. Over the years, I have seen that it doesn’t matter if a client has been in an actual life-or-death situation, is holding on to past traumatic experiences or is simply overstimulated from the pace of everyday life – the effects are the same. Their body gets stuck in a heightened state of emergency. I know from my own experience that when the body is released from fight or flight, you feel an