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# Shaman, Healer, Sage

Alberto Villoldo



SHAMAN,



HEALER,



SAGE

HOW TO HEAL YOURSELF AND OTHERS WITH  
THE ENERGY MEDICINE OF THE AMERICAS

ALBERTO VILLOLDO, PH.D.



HARMONY BOOKS  
NEW YORK

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Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781407095561

[www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)

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Published by Harmony Books, New York, New York.  
Member of the Crown Publishing Group.  
Random House, Inc. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney,  
Auckland

[www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com)

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Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

*Design by Lauren Dong*

Illustrations by Nicole Kaufman

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Villoldo, Alberto.

Shaman, healer, sage : how to heal yourself and others  
with the energy medicine of the Americas / by Alberto  
Villoldo.—1st ed. Includes index.

1. Shamanism—South America. 2. Mental healing. I.  
Title. BF1622.S63 V55 2000  
299'.833—dc21

00-035010

ISBN 0-609-60544-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

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(edited with K. Dychtwald)



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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THERE ARE NO WORDS THAT CAN EXPRESS MY GRATITUDE TO THE PERSONS who made this book possible. First and foremost is my mentor, Don Antonio, who had the patience, vision, and endurance to train a young Western anthropologist in the shamanic arts. My editor, Patty Gift at Random House, has immersed herself in the medicine teachings, accompanying me to the highest mountains of the Andes to work with the last Inka elders. I owe her my immeasurable gratitude for making this book a reality. My heartfelt thanks to Laura Wood and Normandi Ellis, for helping shape the manuscript; to Stanley Krippner, for believing in me and supporting my research during my early years; and to my agent, Sue Berger, for her steadfast encouragement. Last, I want to acknowledge the contributions made by the students and faculty of the Healing the Light Body School in shaping the techniques and practices discussed herein, and Lisa Summerlot, for her untiring love and support.

## PROLOGUE

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THIS BOOK IS THE RESULT OF MY TRAVELS AND TRAINING WITH THE Inka shamans. One of the great civilizations of the Americas and the builders of Machu Picchu, the Inka lived in cities in the clouds with cobblestone streets that were cleaned every night by releases of water from the city's canal system. Inka shamans practiced energy medicine for more than five thousand years, transmitting this knowledge from one generation to the next through an oral tradition. For twenty-five years I studied with the finest Inka medicine men and women. The rites I underwent in the high mountains of the Andes and the Amazon adhered to ancient tradition and sometimes required months of preparation. They freed the apprentice from living in the grip of fear, greed, violence, and predatory sexuality. My quest was guided by an old Inka named Antonio Morales. My adventures in the Amazon and the Andean highlands with Don Antonio are documented in my earlier books, *Dance of the Four Winds* and *Island of the Sun*.

The techniques for healing with spirit and light in this book are my contemporary reinterpretation of ancient healing practices. Versions of the shaman's way of seeing that I call the Second Awareness and the Extraction Process are still in use in North and South America. The Death Rites originate in the Amazon and form part of a body of knowledge discovered by men and women who

have transcended our notions of time and death. The Illumination Process I developed with my mentor Don Antonio from the remnants of a nearly forgotten Inka practice for healing through the Luminous Energy Field. These techniques are extraordinarily powerful and effective. They must be used only with the strongest code of ethics and integrity.

[Part I](#) provides a background of the belief system on which these techniques are based. [Part II](#) provides techniques for learning the shaman's way of seeing and for creating sacred space and practices you can experiment with for your personal healing. Please do not use them with others without adequate training from a master practitioner. [Part III](#) describes advanced techniques that must be performed by a master practitioner, a person who has undergone an apprenticeship overseen by a skilled teacher. These chapters describe procedures used for unblocking the immune response, for extracting intrusive energies and entities, as well as assisting a loved one who is making his or her return journey to the Spirit world.

There are dangers associated with energy healing, both for the client and for the healer. Far too many poorly trained practitioners dispense energy healing without understanding the mechanics of the human energy field. I have seen people diagnosed with cancer receive "energy healing" on their tumor, only to have the cancer spread throughout their body. To their disbelief, they discovered that cancer thrives on certain forms of energy. I have also seen persons suffering from serious psychological conditions who have been treated by unqualified healers, only to have their conditions exacerbated and the symptoms of their neuroses or their dysfunctional worldview reinforced. In one case, a woman came to see me after losing her child in an automobile accident. She had been to a psychic who said that her little girl was

always by her side, that all she had to do was to “be open” and she would feel the presence of her daughter. The woman felt an immediate sense of relief. Yet after a few days she began to suffer from insomnia. After a week of no sleep she came to see me. The first thing she said was that she wanted to die and was ready to take her own life. When I tested her for the presence of an intrusive entity (see [Chapter 8](#)), I discovered she tested positive. The girl’s spirit had attached itself to her mother’s Luminous Energy Field, seeking refuge from the confusion and agitation one experiences after a traumatic death. The healer’s advice to “be open,” although well intended, was keeping both mother and daughter in emotional turmoil and psychic pain.

In our first session the mother released her daughter to the luminous healers who would carry her to the light of the Spirit world. It was difficult for her to let go. During the Illumination Process she saw death as a doorway to infinity; she experienced that her daughter was separated from her only by a thin veil. Shortly thereafter she began sleeping soundly again. We then sealed the opening in her Luminous Energy Field through which the girl’s spirit had entered. Like an open wound, this tear in her energy field was an invitation to opportunistic spirit entities and disturbing energies. We then spent the next few sessions healing her grief. I encouraged her to go to a psychotherapist who specialized in treating persons recovering from loss. I’m convinced that the mother would have committed suicide had she continued to follow the psychic’s advice. Instead, she engaged her healing journey with courage and dedication. Today she is a gifted and compassionate healer, assisting others who have suffered loss and bereavement in their lives.

**BLACK AND WHITE MAGIC**

When I was in my early twenties, I was preparing for an expedition to the Amazon when I received a call from the foundation that sponsored my research. They needed an anthropologist to complete a study on Voodoo healers in Haiti. I was reluctant to go, as I knew very little of the African-derived healing practices in Haiti. The foundation officer explained that it would be for only ten days, to assist the senior anthropologist on the project, and persuaded me when he mentioned he was reviewing my grant application to return to the Amazon. Five days later I landed in Port-au-Prince. The senior anthropologist was a man in his late thirties who had spent the better part of a year in Haiti. He explained to me that the French who colonized the island had been the worst slave drivers in the New World. Whereas the average life expectancy of an African slave after he arrived in America was thirty years, the life expectancy of a slave who had the misfortune of landing in Haiti was only two years. He went on to explain that Voodoo was originally a healing practice from sub-Saharan Africa, and that in Haiti it was also used to harm one's foes, particularly the ruthless slave masters. The techniques were identical, he explained. The same practices you used to heal someone could be used to hurt someone. The same techniques that were used to stimulate the immune system to eradicate a cancerous tumor could be used to lay waste to the immune system so that your victim would die from pneumonia in a matter of weeks.

Being in my early twenties, I was convinced that I knew better. Black magic, I conjectured, could work only on those who believed in it. If you did not subscribe to the belief system, it could not affect you. I remember stating this matter-of-factly to the senior anthropologist as we sat at a small café by the waterfront. He looked at me and smiled. "I'm willing to put my money on that," I said. "Done," he replied. We agreed on a hundred-dollar wager

that Voodoo could not affect me. We headed off to the home of the Voodoo priest he had been working with. The old man lived in a ramshackle wooden hut on a hilltop overlooking the town. After casual introductions in the local Haitian Creole, which my colleague spoke fluently, he proceeded to explain to the man that I was a nonbeliever, that I thought the old man's magic was all make-believe, and that he wanted to teach me a lesson. I understood enough French to pick up some of the words. "Don't hurt him," he said. The old man turned to me and smiled. "You want believe?" he asked in broken English, and laughed loudly. We agreed that he would do his work on Monday of the following week, after I returned to California.

On the appointed day I was having dinner with friends, telling them about my Haiti experience and the healing power of Voodoo. I was pontificating on how belief was an important ingredient in the equation, both for healing the sick or harming adversaries. If you lived outside the belief system, I explained, it simply did not work, and I was living proof, as that very evening the meanest Voodoo priest in Haiti was working on me, to no avail. Everyone raised his or her glass of wine to my health. That was Monday evening. On Tuesday and Wednesday I felt fine, but come Thursday midafternoon I developed a headache that by early evening had turned into a migraine. By eight o'clock my gut had twisted into a knot, I was having intestinal spasms, and I was retching uncontrollably. At midnight the phone rang with a collect call from the anthropologist in Haiti. They had been unable to work on me on Monday, as we had agreed, but had done so that day. He had just returned to his hotel from the ceremony and wanted to know if I felt anything. I groaned into the phone and told him to go back to the Voodoo priest and ask him to undo whatever it was he had done. At that point, even death would have been a welcome relief.

By the following morning I was nearly recovered and managed to convince myself that I had picked up some intestinal bug. I went to the university health center, where my doctor ran tests and found that I was clear of any parasites. The lesson cost me a hundred dollars, which at that time was a lot of money for a graduate student, and one of the worst nights of my life. I discovered that just as you can help people through energy healing, you can also hurt them. I would later learn that energy healing from a poorly trained practitioner is often tantamount to black magic, regardless of how well-meaning the healer is. Black magic happens not only in Haiti and the bayous of Louisiana but anywhere well-meaning but poorly trained individuals lay their hands on others, attempting to perform healing, and unknowingly transmit toxic energy to them. Students will sometimes comment that this can't happen if you are sending love to another person, as this energy is supposedly pure and holy. I remind these students of the pain that we can inflict on others in the name of love. In time, I discovered another kind of black magic we do to ourselves: the negative thoughts and beliefs that keep us from our personal power and wreak havoc on our immune system.

The most important lesson for me that night, though, was the crucial role of the healer's ethics and intent. Much of the shaman's decade-long training is dedicated to developing a high ethic, a value system founded on a deep reverence for all life. Only then can the techniques be properly mastered. Similarly, a doctor of Western medicine spends at least five years learning his or her craft. Is it prudent to turn my health care over to someone who has taken a weekend workshop in energy medicine?

This is the quandary for Westerners who take a short training in energy medicine or shamanism. If you have a calling to practice energy medicine, take the time to train

with teachers whose integrity, wisdom, and technical knowledge will assist you to develop your own spiritual gifts.

My own journey into shamanism was guided by my desire to become whole. In healing my own soul wounds, I learned to love myself and others. I walked the path of the wounded healer and learned to transform the pain, grief, anger, and shame that lived within me into sources of strength and compassion. I was able to feel for another's pain because I knew what it was like to hurt. In the Healing the Light Body School every student embarks on a journey of self-healing in which he or she transforms soul wounds into sources of power. Students learn that this is one of the greatest gifts that they will later offer to their clients: the opportunity to discover the power within pain. Students also learn that healing is a journey their client embarks upon, not a procedure the healer performs.

Last, I want to state that the healing methods in this book are my own synthesis and interpretation of ancient healing practices. I do not speak for my teachers, for the Inka, or for Native American shamans. Although I had the privilege of training with the finest Inka medicine people, I make no claim to be presenting a body of Inka traditions. The healing practices described herein are what I learned in my training as a shaman, and I take full responsibility for their beauty and their shortcomings.



PART I

TEACHINGS

OF THE

SHAMANS



Native American shamans have practiced energy medicine for more than five thousand years. Some medicine people believe their spiritual lineage extends back even further. They remember stories handed down from grandmother to granddaughter that speak about when the Earth was young. Even though the Americas' early inhabitants had a complex astronomical knowledge, advanced mathematics, and sophisticated architecture, writing never developed in the Americas as it did elsewhere. Scholars overlooked the Native American spiritual traditions in favor of Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, which left behind written records. For example, while Western theologians have been studying Buddhism for more than two centuries, it has been only in the last forty years that any serious interest has emerged in the study of Native American spirituality. The study of shamanism was left to anthropologists, who, with notable exceptions such as Margaret Mead, were poorly trained to study the spirit.

The wholesale destruction of the North American Indians by the European settlers drove the remaining

Native Americans into disease-ridden reservations, where the elders carefully guarded the spiritual traditions. Understandably, the elders grew reluctant to share their heritage with the white dominators. The Indios in Peru fared no better. The Spanish conquistadors came to Peru seeking gold and therefore left the Inka spiritual traditions largely undisturbed. Yet what the conquistadors overlooked, the missionaries sought to obliterate.

The scraggly band of gold seekers that arrived on the South American continent brought a set of beliefs that were incomprehensible to the Indios. The first was that all of the food of the world belonged by divine right to humans—specifically the Europeans—who were masters over the animals and plants of the Earth. The second belief was that humans could not speak to the rivers, to the animals, to the mountains, or to God. And the third was that humankind had to wait until the end of all time before tasting infinity.

Nothing could have seemed more absurd to the Native Americans. While the Europeans believed they had been cast out of the mythical Garden of Eden, the Indios understood they were the stewards and caretakers of the Garden. They still spoke with the thundering rivers and the whispering mountains and still heard the voice of God in the wind. The Spanish chroniclers in Peru wrote that when the conquistador Pizarro met the Inka ruler Atahualpa, he handed him the Bible, explaining to him that this was the word of God. The Inka brought the volume to his ear, listened carefully for a few moments, and then threw the holy book to the ground, exclaiming, “What kind of god is this that does not speak?”

In addition to the silence of the European God, the Native Americans were confounded by His gender. The conquistadors brought with them a patriarchal mythology that intimidated the Native American feminine traditions. Before the arrival of the Spanish, Mother Earth and her

feminine forms—the caves, lagoons, and other openings into the earth—represented the divine principles. The Europeans imposed the masculine divine principle—the phallus, or tree of life. Church steeples rose to heaven. The feminine Earth was no longer worshiped or respected. The trees, animals, and forests were available for plundering.

Today we still live in the grip of this disconnected worldview. We believe that if it does not breathe, move, or grow, it is not alive. We view energy from sources such as wood, oil, or coal as a fuel that we employ. In the ancient world, energy was considered the living fabric of the Universe. Energy was creation made manifest. Perhaps the most important contemporary expression of this belief was formulated by Albert Einstein when he described the relationship between energy and matter in his equation  $E = MC^2$ . In the West we identify with the side of matter, which is by nature finite. The shaman identifies with the side of energy, which is by nature infinite.

There is another fundamental difference between the ancient Americans and the modern ones. Today we are people of the precept. We are a rule-driven society that relies on documents such as the Constitution, the Ten Commandments, or laws passed by elected officials to bring order to our lives. We change precepts (rules or laws) when we want to change the world. The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, were people of the concept. They were interested not in rules but rather in ideas. They believed that a single idea could change the world and that there was nothing as powerful as an idea whose time had come. Shamans are people of the precept. When they want to change the world, they engage in perceptual shifts that change their relationship to life. They envision the possible, and the outer world changes. This is why a group of Inka elders will sit in meditation envisioning the kind of world they want their grandchildren to inherit.

One reason why the practices of energy healing have been kept so closely guarded is that they are often mistaken for a set of techniques, in the same way that Western medicine is sometimes regarded as a set of procedures. We mistakenly think that we can master energy healing by learning the rules. However, for the shaman it is not about the rules or ideas. It's about vision and Spirit. And while the healing practices often vary from village to village, the Spirit never varies. True healing is nothing less than an awakening to a vision of our healed nature and the experience of infinity.

## CHAPTER 1

# HEALING AND INFINITY



*We have been walking for days. I told Antonio that I did not mind paying for us to take a bus or even a taxi. But he would have nothing to do with it. Would not even let me hire horses. “My people have always walked,” he said. And he loves to point out how he can outwalk me even though he is nearly seventy.*

*Took my shoes off when we arrived at Sillustani, and soaked my feet in the icy lake. This is an eerie place, a cemetery extending over dozens of miles, like the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. Only shamans, kings, and queens are buried here, in gigantic stone towers at the edge of Lake Titicaca. The finest stonemasons came from this land. How did this technology develop here, at the lake on top of the world?*

*Antonio explained that the burial towers, or chulpas, not only commemorate the dead shamans but also are their temporary homes when they return to visit our world. They are completely liberated, powerful spirits who could materialize whenever they wished. This didn't make me feel any more at ease. We had come here to spend the night, to do ceremony to honor these ancient shamans.*

*“They’ve stepped outside of time,” he said. He explained that if my faith in reality was based on the belief that time runs in one direction only, then I will be shattered by an experience of my future. “It takes great skill to taste the future and not allow your knowledge to spoil your actions or the present.”*

JOURNALS



I ENTERED A CAREER IN PSYCHOLOGY AND, LATER, MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY with a fascination for the human mind. In the 1980s I spent hundreds of hours in anatomy laboratories. I wanted to know how the mind could influence the body to create either health or disease. At that time I had little interest in spirituality, whether of the traditional or New Age variety. I was convinced that science was the only reliable method for acquiring knowledge. One day at the University of California I was slicing brain tissue, preparing slides to examine under the microscope. The brain is the most bewildering organ in the body. Its crevasses make it resemble a three-pound walnut. These valleys and convolutions were the only way nature could accommodate a thin but extensive layer of neocortex (the word means “new brain”) into our heads without increasing the size of our skull. Human evolution had already run into an anatomically insurmountable obstacle in its search for a more intelligent brain: The pelvic girdle could not tolerate passing a larger head through the birth canal.

Under the microscope one can observe the millions of synapses that weave every brain cell with its neighbors in an extraordinary network of living fibers. These neural networks transmit vast amounts of motor and sensory data. Yet the fascination with the brain is uniquely Western. The Egyptians had very little use for it, liquefying it after death

and siphoning it off, even though the rest of the body's organs were mummified. The question we had been debating that day at the lab was whether the human mind was confined to the brain, or even to the body, for that matter. I knew that if the brain were simple enough for us to understand it, we would be so simple that we couldn't. Yet no matter how meticulously we examined slides of the brain, the mind kept eluding us. The more I learned about the brain, the more confounded I became about the mind.

I believed that the human race had managed to survive for a million years before the arrival of modern medicine because the body-mind knew the pathways to health. We survived cuts that became infected, and bones broken from falling down a ravine on the way to the watering hole. Until fifty years ago, going to a doctor was more dangerous to your health than staying home and letting your body-mind take its own course. By the early part of the twentieth century, medicine excelled only in the area of diagnosis. It still lacked the curative techniques, effective drugs, and surgical interventions that would not be developed until around the time of World War II. For example, penicillin, the first practical antibiotic, did not come into use until 1940. Given the dismal state of medicine until the mid-1900s, how did our ancestors manage to remain healthy for so many thousands of years? Did indigenous societies know something about mind and body, something very ancient that we had forgotten and were now trying to rediscover in the laboratory?

The concept of psychosomatic illness is now well established, but it originally was associated with hypochondria—"it's all in your head." The very real effects of the mind on the body have been confirmed by research. In a sense, we all became experts at developing psychosomatic disease very early in life. At the age of six I could create the symptoms of a cold in minutes if I did not

want to go to school. Psychosomatic disease goes against every survival instinct programmed into the body by three hundred million years of evolution. How powerful the mind must be to override all of these survival and self-preservation mechanisms. Imagine if we could marshal these resources to create psychosomatic health!

In the last few decades the field of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), which studies how our moods, thoughts, and emotions influence our health, has matured. PNI investigators discovered that the mind is not localized in the brain but rather is generalized throughout the body. Dr. Candace Pert found that neuropeptides, which are molecules that continually wash through our bloodstream, flooding the spaces in between each cell, respond almost instantaneously to every feeling and mood, effectively turning the entire body into vibrant, pulsing "mind." Our body as a whole experiences every emotion we have. The rift between mind and body had been resolved with the discovery of a single molecule. We also discovered how psychosomatic disease works. We know that when we become depressed every cell in our body feels it, our immune defenses are lowered, and we are more likely to become ill. We know that laughter, if not the best medicine, is near the top of the list. Years after I left the laboratory, PNI investigators discovered what shamans have long known, that the mind and the body are one. But investigators missed one element that is the crux of all shamanic healing: the Spirit.

## THE QUEST FOR SPIRIT

By my mid-twenties I was the youngest clinical professor at San Francisco State University. I was directing my own laboratory, the Biological Self-Regulation Lab, investigating how energy medicine and visualization could change the



chemistry of the brain. We were able to increase the production of endorphins, the natural brain chemicals responsible for reducing pain and for creating ecstatic states, by nearly 50 percent utilizing the techniques of energy healing. My students and I were making fascinating discoveries, yet I was growing increasingly disenchanted. We could influence brain chemistry but did not have the slightest clue how to help a person suffering from a life-threatening disease regain her health. We were like children who discovered that we could mix mud and water and turn it into clay. I wanted more than that. I wanted to discover how to build adobe houses, or at the very least to make pottery.

One day in the biology laboratory, I realized that my investigations had to get bigger instead of smaller. The microscope was the wrong instrument to answer the questions I was asking. I needed to find a system larger than the neural networks of the brain. Many others were already studying the hardware. I wanted to learn to program the system. If there were experts alive who knew how to draw upon the extraordinary capabilities of the human mind to heal the body, I wanted to find them. I needed to know what they knew. Anthropological stories hinted that there were peoples around the globe who claimed to know such things, including the Aborigines in Australia and the Inka in Peru.

A few weeks later I resigned my post at the university. My colleagues thought I was mad, that I was throwing away a promising career in academia. I traded my laboratory for a pair of hiking boots and a ticket to the Amazon. I set off to learn from researchers whose vision had not been confined to the lens of a microscope, from people whose body of knowledge encompassed more than the measurable, material world that I had been taught was the only reality. I wanted to meet the people who sensed

the spaces between things and perceived the luminous strands that animate all life. I wanted to study with investigators who knew the energy side of Einstein's equation  $E = MC^2$ .

My research would eventually take me from the Amazon rain forest to the Andes Mountains in Peru, where I met Don Antonio, then in his late sixties. He was poor by Western standards. He had no television, not even electricity. But he claimed to have tasted infinity. "We are luminous beings on a journey to the stars," Don Antonio once said to me. "But you have to experience infinity to understand this." I remember smiling when the medicine man first told me how we were star travelers who have existed since the beginning of time. Quaint folklore, I thought, the ruminations of an old man hesitant to face the certainty of his death. I believed that Don Antonio's musings were akin to the archetypal structures of the psyche as described by Carl Jung. Antonio interpreted his myths literally, not symbolically, as I did. But I didn't challenge him then. I thought of trying to explain to my very Catholic grandmother that the Virgin Mary did not really have a virgin birth, that this was a metaphor for Christ's having been born enlightened, the Son of God in the fullest sense of the word. She would never accept it. For her the virgin birth was a historical fact. I believed the same to be the case with Don Antonio's musing about infinity. For both a nice metaphor had turned into dogma. The mythologist Joseph Campbell used to say that reality is made up of those myths that we can't quite see through. That's why it's so easy to be an anthropologist in another culture—everything is transparent to the outsider, like the emperor's new clothes.

At times I attempted to show Antonio that the emperor *was* naked, that he was confusing mythology for fact. That is, until I sat with him while he helped a missionary to die.

*Tucked into a hillside, the village was built around and incorporated a substantial Inka ruin. Sections of the city's granite block walls were so expertly cut and fitted together that friction alone had held them in place for centuries.*

*Near the edge of the altiplano the Inkas had built a hamlet, an outpost of their civilization. Now, a thousand years later, their descendants lived among ruins, farming the terraces that sloped down the hill from their village. In the courtyard, chickens, pigs, and a llama grazed. An Indian woman was grinding maize in one of the mortars. An old man led us to one of the huts. The shadows were growing long, and it took a moment for our eyes to adjust to the darkness of the room. A woman, her head covered by a black shawl, stood holding a candle and murmuring at the head of a bed, a pallet supported by two wooden crates in the center of the room.*

*There was a woman lying there, stretched out on the pallet, an Indian blanket pulled up to her chin. It was impossible to judge her age, she was so emaciated. Her skin was yellow with jaundice and stretched taut over the bones of her face; the tendons in her neck were sharp ridges. Her hair was short and gray; her eyes stared blankly at the ceiling from hollowed-out sockets. She made no movement, no telltale sign of awareness, nothing to show us that she knew we were there.*

*Antonio turned and looked at me, held up the candle, and I stepped forward and took it. He passed his hand over her face, and her eyes remained fixed on the ceiling. A silver crucifix at the end of a string of rosary beads lay on her chest and around her neck.*

*"A missionary," he whispered. "She was brought here two days ago by the Indians from below." He gestured toward the hillside and beyond it, toward the jungle.*