

## Julio Jerena, My Friend and Teacher, Has Passed 1916-2007

My friend and teacher, Don Julio Jerena Pineda, passed on January 19 at about 10 PM while in the Regional Hospital in Iquitos, Peru. He was 91 and his death wasn't unexpected: to me the only surprise was that he physically died rather than simply vanished. He was a walking light stick who glowed brighter each year I knew him since we met in 1985, and I always joked that he was becoming more and more see-through and that when his physical end finally came he would simply vanish in a blink of light. Julio was an ayahuasca curandero. To say he was from the old traditions isn't quite right. He wasn't born until the rubber boom was well underway in northwest Amazonia, and the boom had brought slavery and intermarriage to many, if not most, of the tribes of the region. So the old tradition, in his mestizo world, never really existed that he'd known. But in the modern era he was certainly an elder. True to his own tradition, he was the local doctor on the river on which he lived. For him, that was the Auchyacu, situated between Genaro Herrera and Requena on the Ucayali, just 100 km upriver from where the Ucayali is joined by the Marañon to become the Amazon. Auchyacu means Indian Water, and the river was periodically inhabited by the indigenous Matsigenkas, most of whom live further east, on several rivers near the Brazilian border. But they, like everyone else who lived on the Auchyacu, and many from further away, trusted Julio to fix their babies' tummies, mend broken legs, eliminate the venom from poisonous snake bites, find their lost souls, repair their broken marriages, clean ugliness and hatred from their hearts...sort of a general practitioner of the mind, body and spirit. And what a practitioner he was. If there is such a thing as bedside manners, Julio helped define the word. He was as gentle as a feather with children, but as tough as granite with adults who didn't follow his recommendations. He could tell a joke with anyone but a simple glare could stop me cold. One of the testimonies to him and the life he led is that he was still surrounded by his children and grandchildren to the end, and they are all wonderful people. Simple in the sense that they're not city sophisticates, but all are generous, honest, decent and full of good humor. The life Julio led began in Pucallpa, Peru. At the time he was born, in 1916, Pucallpa was little more than a jungle town, so he grew up traveling the river in dugout canoes, hunting, fishing and keeping chacras--the little farms people on the river in Peru keep. Wounded in a war with Ecuador, doctors wanted to cut off one of his legs from the knee down. He opted instead to visit a vegetalista curandero in Pucallpa. "At first he started to heal me," Julio said last year; "but then he began to poison me and my leg got worse, so I left him and took a boat to Iquitos." There, he visited an ayahuasca curandero. It was his first experience with ayahuasca and he found it exceptionally healing. Unfortunately, the healer disappeared, leaving Julio to learn about ayahuasca on his own. To that end, he built a little house in the jungle outside of Iquitos and tried to remember the plants the man had used to make the medicines. "I was there for a long time. First I learned how to make ayahuasca. Then I learned about the spirits in the trees and began to make tea from their barks and roots. I made friends with lupuna and catawa and chiric sanango and a lot of others. It took months, but it was the only way I knew because I had no teacher, no maestro teaching me." His leg finally healed and the war over, he moved to the Auchyacu and started a family. He had eight children that I know of; perhaps more I'm unaware of. He raised them all on the river, catching fish daily from his dugout canoe and keeping his chacras filled with yucca, plantain, corn and other jungle foods. For those lucky enough to have drunk ayahuasca with him, and those of us—and there are many—even luckier to have studied under his guidance, Julio was a marvel. He loved the deep woods and the river; he joked with the genios—spirit allies—he had; he worked on us deeply and compassionately. He taught us to take the medicine seriously but not ourselves. The capacity he had to work with ayahuasca was always a surprise. Years ago when I was drinking with him one night I got into a space where I realized how small and meaningless I was. And I realized that if I could see that meanness, so could Julio and my friend Larry who was drinking with me that night. I was so horrified at being seen for the useless being I was that I began to entertain the idea of killing them both and tossing their bodies in the river, then returning to Iquitos and saying they'd drowned and their bodies had been eaten by predators. And just when I was thinking that wretched thought, I felt hot breath and mapacho smoke on my face. I opened my eyes to see Julio's face just inches from mine. "We don't have to act on everything we see on ayahuasca," he chuckled. "Still, I think I'll put the machetes away." Another night, years later, my friend Lynn was drinking for the first time. I had a few other guests at Julio's as well, nearly all of them women. After the ceremony Lynn said that at some point he realized he was feeling nothing at all and silently asked Julio to show him "something, anything to show this isn't just a waste of time." And at that point, Lynn said, "Julio stood up and was 14 feet tall. His head almost touched the roof of the house. And his chakras began to glow, then spin, and then they began to throw off lights and the light fell all around me and on me. And then Julio, in English, asked: 'Now can I go back to the work I was doing on the women?'" I also saw Julio as a giant. Often. But one night in particular I saw him bigger than at other times. I'd been lain on my back by the medicine. I couldn't feel my body much less move it. Wind began to howl. From every direction. Not just howl, but howl like the wind at the four corners of the universe howls. And I realized that that's where I was, at the place where the wind begins. And in order not to be blown out of the universe I grabbed a coattail and held on for dear life. And I realized the coattail was worn by someone so large I couldn't see their knees. But I held on and let the wind rush through me, tearing me to glorious pieces. And then the sky opened up like a curtain being pulled back, and there was Julio, riding a bicycle as big as the sky. Attached to its rear wheel were two flaps that were being powered by the motion of the wheel. And the flaps were making the wind that was blowing through me, the wind that was at the beginning of all wind. And Julio was pedaling fast, keeping the wind blowing, and laughing the most gentle and giving of laughs. And in the morning he laughed when he asked if I liked his bicycle. I said I found it the most amazing thing. His laughter, generally a chuckle, was simply a part of him. One night I had two guests drinking with him, a couple, and while the wife had the most fantastic and visionary experience, the husband was reduced to vomiting, shitting and moaning for three or four hours. He had the most unbearable time and in the morning asked me to ask Julio how it was possible that his wife had visions while he had nothing but purging. Julio and I didn't talk much, but I agreed to ask and when I did Julio just chuckled. "Tell your friend that I was going to paint him with the colors of

ayahuasca, but that when I got inside him he was like a livingroom filled with garbage and broken furniture and peeling paint. Who could paint in a room like that? Now that I've got him ready, I'll paint him next time." To me, he was an extraordinary curandero. Perhaps the best testament I ever heard regarding his work--and I have heard hundreds--was a guest of mine who drank with Julio twice and wrote me six months later something to this effect: "How can I quantify the experience? Before the trip every day I woke up and wondered if this was the right day to put a pistol in my mouth and pull the trigger. Since drinking with Julio, I wake every day and think 'this is a great day to be alive.'" That's healing on a very deep level. It was my privilege to know him, to work with him, and at the end, to work on him to take away some of his pain. He's already missed.

## About the Author

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