

**Long Life, Honey in the Heart: a spiritual teaching by A Sisay**  
a chief in a Guatemalan village

**CONTEXT FOR SPEECH**

Growing up in the U.S. southwest during the 1960s and 1970s, Martin Prechtel became depressed and culturally disconnected following the death of his mother (when he was about 19). He started traveling in Mexico and Central America. After two years he found himself in a Guatemalan village, high in the mountains.

He lived there for 25 years, training to be a village shaman and becoming a "chief". He married and had two sons (a third died stillborn). One of his great gifts to the village itself was his desire to maintain the tradition of year-long initiations for young people (not having had such cultural support back in the U.S.).

This speech takes place some time after Martin's first leadership of the year-long initiation for boys becoming adults. (The boys' initiation takes place simultaneous to the girls' initiation. It sounds like the year-long processes are coordinated but mostly separate.) The initiation involves many ceremonies, rituals, and travels, all of which require offerings to the spirits, ceremonial dress, the help of many other villagers, etc. Hence the discussion of money and resources.

From ***Long Life, Honey in the Heart***

A Story of Initiation and Eloquence from the Shores of a Mayan Lake  
by Martin Prechtel, 1999

pages 344-50

The speech actually begins on p. 346, but Prechtel's introductory words help set the scene. This seems a good place to start.

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**The knowledge, beauty, and wonderment of our indigenous souls**

does not usually make it to the modern consciousness. Instead, it is banished into the realm of the deepest recesses of the mind's Underworld, along with the rest of people's ancestral Gods, tribal stories, and the ancestors themselves.

Our souls wait there, held hostage deep inside the underworld of rationalism and bad religion, swimming in generations of grief and frustration, waiting to be courted and rescued, clumsily or expertly, by the eloquence and courage of our hearts. Our indigenous souls hope for the day when, adorned with orchids and lilies, they too can arrive tired and unique out of this Underworld to be welcomed back into some kind of village. Only then will our spirits be able to marry our lives, and only then will we, with our hearts intact, be able to truly love our spouses. Modern people seem to be proud of their despair, entirely imprisoned by their complacent respect for the overwhelming power of meaninglessness so popular today. The only thing that seems to have meaning is no meaning. Modern people are proud of it, and to them everything besides meaninglessness is meaningless.

It is too much to ask, I know. After all, modern culture refuses to spend any of its vast resources to crown the queen of our souls, much less initiate its youth or dig out the concrete it poured into that sacred Hole. Like uninitiated children, modern people like depression better. Depression doesn't take any effort and you don't owe anybody anything. But what modern people do not understand anymore is that by making gifts for the Spirit from their personal resources and by sharing with one another, they can feed life and keep their hearts alive.

A Sisay said it better one day right after my year-long service as an initiating chief had come to a close. Right from the beginning the *teoneli*, teachers of chiefs, the ex-chiefs, advisors, and ex-initiating chiefs and ladies would always remain talking long after the numerous preparatory meetings that the hierarchy held for all of us who were involved during the year-long ritual of initiation.

They would banter on and on about how much good luck the spirits had accorded them the year following their service: "Make sure you never say anything bad about the ceremony for one year, no matter how hard it gets. Then you'll see later, when you're not in charge anymore, they'll send a gift to you," they said, referring to the Gods.

One ex-chief had received special tomato seeds from an unknown man in the village market. When he planted them, the plants that came up were miraculously abundant and long-producing, making him very financial secure to that day, ten years later.

Another had found a special corn seed spilled in his granary, which, when he planted it, grew plants that produced five immense ears per stalk, making him one of the richest corn farmers in the village.

One woman found stacks of skirt material tied up in her load, enough to start her off in a cloth-selling business, which she'd been managing for twenty years.

These stories never ended. Old men and middle-aged men and women chiefs, everyone who'd held my position before, told of how they'd been compensated for having been flattened financial and exhausted physically. To me, these were the loyal testimonials of faith from those in love with the beauty of the ritual, but I never thought of them much in reference to myself until after I'd given over my old position to the new chief.

About two days after the end of the initiations, I was once again as financially broke as I'd ever been. I was trying to conjure up a way to make a living again, when, miraculously and unsolicited, outsiders started showing up to buy paintings from me. Down by the lake in an old hut, I had forty forgotten paintings accumulated from years before. And, just like the old chiefs said, the spirits had not forgotten me.

Crowds of ambassadors and international counsels started appearing at my hut to see which of my works of art they could get. By the end of a week, I had thousands of dollars. Certain individuals took unfinished, unsigned painting without my knowledge, and just left money in their place. That irritated me. But I had a lot of money now, enough to pay off my debts with plenty to live on.

I too hadn't forgotten all the ex-chiefs and their wives, and chieftesses who'd pitched in to help me when I was flattened economically. I decided to pay them back first with my new money. I'd give them a little extra to show my appreciation for their having come to my rescue.

I went from house to house during the day while most of the men were still out in their fields or down by the lake, leaving the money with a younger daughter or son-in-law. By the time I reached the seventh hut, one of the older hierarchy ladies who'd loaned me fifty *quetzals* was actually home. I began a flowery speech in the tone of a chief to express to her my great appreciation for her loan, but was

interrupted by her bitter scolding, pushed bodily out of her house and chased out of her compound into the street by her and all her livid female relatives who chattered hateful insults as they did so.

Soon some of the women in the other huts got wind of what was happened and, within two minutes, a rain of pebbles and wood whistled past my ears and I had to run to dodge them, perplexed by the inexplicable anger and humiliation of my assailants.

About then, another group of old ladies returning from the market, all of whom had graciously loaned me money and goods during my time of need, joined the first group, continuing to chase me down the street, kicking at me, slapping their hands and throwing whatever they could. Normally noble and kind women, they'd turned into a crazed, tearful mob of screaming, rock-tossing lunatics.

Running now in earnest, they came at me like a herd of enraged tusk-gnashing peccaries. I ran all the way to the bottom of the village, turned the corner and ducked into my *teonel's* hut. Luckily for me, A Sisay was home. Observing the sanctuary of his house, the yelling women didn't enter, though it seemed they might invade any minute, as they continued to yell angry threats at me from without.

[The speech begins.]

“What did you do to these poor women, Brother Parent?”

A Sisay asked me, scowling, almost ready to smile.

“I've done nothing, Brother Parent. I was simply going house to house returning the money I had to borrow from them to complete the initiation ritual properly, plus—“ And I was roundly interrupted by old A Sisay himself, who began chewing me out in the same tone as the ladies. Everyone joined in. The resolute nature of the onslaught was impossible to counter for its fierce loudness and sheer numbers. Bewildered and unwilling to fight, I hung my head and covered it with my arms.

Finally, A Sisay silenced everyone. He turned and addressed me, lifting my face, “What's wrong with you, anyway? Don't you want to be one of us? All of a sudden you want to be alone, an orphan again?”

Almost crying, his eyebrows brushing the air, a very indignant old A Sisay, my loyal advisor, went on to explain. All the others looked on, quietly listening to his words, which I shall never forget: “Yesterday and the days before, when you came here as an orphan huddled against the cold at dawn, we saw your face and sat you with us at the mouth of the fire.

“But now you push us away, you refuse us. There's not one thorn at your face. Shamelessly, you pretend to forget us. Why are you doing this?”

“*Kas-limaal*, that's what we call it, *kas-limaal*, mutual indebtedness, mutual insparkedness.

“Everything comes into this Earth hungry and interdependence on all other things, animals, and people, so they can eat, be warmed, not be lonely, and survive. I know you know this, but why do you push it all away now? We don't have a word for that kind of death, that isolation of not belonging to all life.

“You see, every young man's chief, every initiator, every first grandchild chief has to watch his money dwindle away, has to watch the corn in his granaries empty to the bare ground until even the mice and crickets move out. He has to watch the people in his compound holding their tongues and keeping their worried eyes averted, waiting quietly. His relatives are terrific of starving and losing prestige, but they say nothing for fear of ruining the initiation for the village by complaining. The initiation which is bigger than any one of us, upon which the whole village survives, brings us rain and food and more children.

“The young chief you’ve been watches and wrestles with his imminent poverty and his doubts, keeping focused on the bigger needs of the village, while the patient people and the women in his compound show their honor for him by not complaining.

“Your initiation into an adult begins with this sacrifice, which you know full well and have done admirably.

The crowd, somewhat mollified, nodded and hummed in agreement, some through hot tears. Then A Sisay gathered himself together to continue. “Every year as the young initiates struggle and pull and gasp for air, as their hides loosen and their loads grow heavier, as they ripen their desire into seeds for food and ripen our seeds for planting, the chief further ripens his own initiated soul into a well-rooted, strong tree to which the youth can tether their hearts as they thrash in the painful and stormy changes they must go through.

“The young initiates must learn to stop being those who are fed, and become feeders of the village. They must cease suckling the village breast and begin to be the breast. The chiefs like you are chosen because they know how to be milk, they know how to give away to the point of having nothing. That is why a man and woman always serve together, each understanding and in agreement with the fact that they will be economically leveled by the challenge of bringing the youth to fruition This is the initiation of the chiefs.

“But at this point, the village men and women who have served as chiefs and are already elders come secretly to fill the initiation courtyard to the top with meat, corn, tomatoes, chili, firewood, and money. The young chiefs, in the interests of the village heart, must swallow their pride and accept this wealth. That is why in our language we call our wealth ‘our poverty’. True wealth lies in being loved enough for giving, being humble enough to be filled by the older people in the village, and by being smart enough to know it must all go to the youths’ fruition. It also means being old enough to know that all you get to keep in this village life that won’t rot away or be eaten by insects is the prestige the village accords you for having the caring and courage to be flattened economically in order to lead the Flowers and Sprouts, the youth, into life. That is what a true warrior, a true village man, a true chief does and is remembered for. Not for getting what he wants or hoarding or being secure, not for being a good businessman or plundering the neighboring tribe but for being willing to be wounded, willing to fail and to live insecurely so that others can live, so that the village can survive.

“Always the Spirits, the Gods, the Saints, the Many and the One will come through the people to help you. When you learn to trust in this, you realize how all true survival relies on this mutual indebtedness, and then you have become an adult. By hoarding, you kill the village and so you must be made to distribute. The regular man and woman go with their pride to mound up corn and firewood, wealth and clothing, to warm and feed their children. The extraordinary man and woman distribute all they have to feed the village, as if it were their own family, and that’s why they called you the Husband of the village.

“After the ceremonies and struggles have ceased, and your service is finished, the spirits almost always give the chief mysterious good luck, often replacing what you’ve spent and distributed uncomplainingly, ten- or a hundred-fold, so that ex-chiefs have plenty again and then some. But this only happens if they went about their business honorably and were willing to give all.

“So here you are, having had everything you exhausted replaced a hundred times more than you expected by the good graces of the spirits, the Gods, the Saints, the Many, the One, and you go around trying to give back to what fed you in your time of need. But that’s no good, you see. Not because you don’t owe us, which you do, but because you must remain in our debt, keeping the Hole open, the wound unhealed, to be a fully initiated chief! You have to be indebted to as many ex-chiefs as possible to be part of our village. The knowledge that every animal, plant, person, wind, and season is indebted

to the fruit of everything else is an adult knowledge. To get out of debt means you don't want to be part of life, and you don't want to grow into an adult.

"Initiated youth are only half-cooked. They make babies, feed families, and struggle for air, maybe succeeding at rising above others with mounds of goods, in debt to no-one, giving to no one outside their own.

"But a further-initiated man and woman become struck with spiritual lightning, their tree full of honey cracked open by the sharp tooth of the needs of the village. And then the Honey in their Hearts can run freely into the greater Village Heart. When you owe every chief in the village and do not pay it back, this means that every chief in the village has conspired to be closer to you than a blood relative. In this way, he and his wife feel perfectly comfortable calling on you again in the future to serve the Village Heart in some deeper sacred position, having obligated you to do so by your debt. They too were put deep into each other's debt by the chiefs before them. You can only properly buy your way out of village indebtedness by more service, which alleviates the initial debt but sets you deeper and deeper into debt with the village itself and to other heavier chiefs and spirits.

"The idea is to get so entangled in debt that no normal human can possibly remember who owes whom what, and how much. In our business dealings, we keep close tabs on all exchanges, but in sacred dealings we think just like nature, where all is entangled and deliciously confused, dedicated to making the Earth flower in a bigger plan of spirit beyond our minds and understandings.

"So here you are trying to ruin the system by returning what you owe to the old chiefs and chieftesses, which says to them, 'I want out. I don't want to be obligated to you.' That voids the young men's initiation, your initiation, and the village flowering! The whole initiation would mean nothing if you had succeeded in giving everything back. Everything would have been voided.

"At the same time, as an ex-chief, don't forget that the new chiefs will soon be economically flattened. Because the spirits have rewarded you for your service, you will now have the means to fatten their ceremonies as these old ones did for you. Then these new chiefs will become hopelessly obligated to you. And when you get appointed to another position and need sacred helpers, you can feel free to call on them, as we want to feel free to call on you to help us again. Be one of us, hopelessly indebted to us, and we to you, each to the other. Do not buy your way back into being a cold little orphan with a big pile of money, unindebted but friendless. Please!? The Sun's eyes are bees that weep honey; the Honey in our Heart comes from the tears of village indebtedness."

The women had calmed down and were weeping and smiling now. Turning to me with their hands outstretched, their palms up, showing their corn-grinding calluses, they beseeched me not to kill their lives with my arrogance and modern independence. With tears streaming down my face, I fell sitting onto the little bench with the dog's head carved on it, and quietly expressed my understanding. Laughing and relieved, all of us were filled with hope and the good feeling of belonging to each other. They hadn't thrown me away. They had forced me to be their friend and relative. Finally I understood something that made the scary, bitter storms of my life turn to Honey in my Heart, and in that instant I became a true village man.