

THE REST OF THE EXPLOSIVE STORY BY
THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
CONFESSIONS OF AN ECONOMIC HIT MAN



TOUCHING THE JAGUAR

TRANSFORMING FEAR INTO ACTION
TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE AND THE WORLD



JOHN PERKINS

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THE JAGUAR

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Touching the Jaguar

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921

Tel: (510) 817-2277, Fax: (510) 817-2278

www.bkconnection.com

Ordering information for print editions

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the "Special Sales Department" at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

Individual sales. Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; www.bkconnection.com

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Distributed to the U.S. trade and internationally by Penguin Random House Publisher Services.

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First Edition

Hardcover print edition ISBN 978-1-5230-8986-4

PDF e-book 978-1-5230-8987-1

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-5230-8988-8

Digital audio ISBN 978-1-5230-8989-5

2020-1

Book producer and text designer: Happenstance Type-O-Rama

Cover designer: Wes Youssi, M80 Design

To the Indigenous people who are blazing
the trail to a future our children will want to
inherit, to Kiman Lucas, who has held my hand
as I walk that trail, and to my grandson, Grant
Miller, who inspires me to keep walking.

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Introduction

Meeting the Jaguar

"Touching the jaguar" means that you can identify your fears and barriers, confront them, alter your perceptions about them, accept their energy, and take actions to change yourself and the world.

I STARTED TO WRITE THIS BOOK as a bridge that would connect my previous books on Indigenous cultures, including *Shapeshifting*, to those on global economics, including *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*. I had no idea that it would turn out to be that and also become much more.

My journey began in 1968 when, as a US Peace Corps volunteer, I was sent into the Amazon jungles of Ecuador to form credit and savings cooperatives—something I soon learned was impossible. Once there, I met Indigenous people who were coming into contact with my world, the industrialized world, for the first time. They lived in harmony with nature and yet were constantly fighting their neighbors to protect their territories. Animosities dated back centuries. Then something unexpected happened.

Foreign oil and mining companies arrived and began to destroy their forests.

The Indigenous people realized that their only hope was to "touch the jaguar."

For the Aztec, Inca, and Maya, the jaguar represented power and valor, the epitome of physical strength and mental awareness. Today, in the Amazon, touching a jaguar during a vision quest symbolizes the courage to overcome doubts, challenge enemies, and break through obstacles. Because it can see through the blackness of night and has excellent peripheral vision, the jaguar is said to embody our ability to look into the dark parts of our souls, view all that is around us, determine our path to the future, and take actions that will guide us along that path. Local stories tell of lost hunters led back to the trail by a jaguar and of jaguars that saved lives by giving animals they had killed to incapacitated people starving in the jungle. Although the jaguar is dangerous, it is also known as a gift giver; its gifts may be physical, psychological, or spiritual.

An Amazonian shaman once told me, “‘Touching the jaguar’ means that you can identify your fears and barriers, confront them, alter your perceptions about them, accept their energy, and take actions to change yourself and the world.”

When the big oil and mining companies arrived, the people of the Amazon realized that the thing they most feared was no longer their neighbors; it was the invasion of their lands by foreign corporations. They had to confront that fear. They had to touch the jaguar that would give them the gift of wisdom and strength needed to break through the barriers of old biases and traditions. They had to change their perceptions about their neighbors; they had to take actions to form alliances with age-old enemies to protect their world.

Then they understood that the real threat was bigger than those companies; it came from the mind-sets of the nations that ravage the earth for its resources. They saw that their lands were in danger of being commandeered by outsiders who wanted to take control of their economies, lifestyles, minds, environment, and even their forms of government—in other words, outsiders who were determined to colonize them.

The newly formed alliances took it upon themselves to go to the thing they most feared—us, people from the world of the colonizers. They asked me to deliver a message to those people about the urgency of shifting the destructive patterns of the industrialized civilizations. They requested

that I bring them a small group of individuals who had the capacity to create networks for delivering this message globally.

Once our group arrived in the Amazon, we were challenged by Indigenous people to transform our perceptions of how we relate to them and to our home, the earth. They asked us to replace old values and systems based on social hierarchies and exploitation with ones that honor egalitarianism and compassion; they urged us to decolonize our own minds, economies, and lifestyles. And they counseled us to stop defining ourselves in terms of “us versus them.” They pointed out that if they, who had been enemies for so long, could join forces to protect their territory, then so could people from different countries, cultures, and economic and political systems, like the Americans, Russians, and Chinese. Old antagonisms could be dropped to confront a graver danger. They challenged us to join forces to create a world our children and grandchildren will want to inherit.

It became obvious that what the Indigenous people were asking us to do was something they themselves had already done. They had altered their perceptions to change their reality; now they were urging us to do the same.

While writing this book, I discovered that I was telling stories of true events that are so bizarre they seem like fiction. Amazonian people who were officially uncontacted when I first entered their territory came to see something about us that we did not understand about ourselves. They recognized that our drive to colonize others was causing us serious harm. It was creating a global economic system that was consuming itself into extinction, a Death Economy. Driven by a goal of maximizing short-term profits, regardless of the social and environmental costs, this Death Economy had been aggressively promoted by economists and politicians in the 1970s and 1980s. Prior to that, when I was in business school in the late 1960s, CEOs had been taught to take good care of their employees, suppliers, and customers and the communities where their businesses operated and to earn reasonable returns for their investors.

As a former economic hit man who contributed to the expansion of the Death Economy and as one who has lived with the people of the Amazon and apprenticed with shamans, I’ve come to understand my obligation

to change my own perceptions and to do everything I can to help transform dysfunctional systems into ones that will serve us—all life on this planet. I take heart in the knowledge that for most of human history our ancestors created social-governmental-economic systems that focused on long-term benefits for people and nature and were themselves renewable resources. The Indigenous people who still live that way were and are urging us to transform the Death Economy into one that cleans up pollution, regenerates destroyed ecosystems, recycles, and creates technologies that restore resources and that benefit, rather than ravage, the environment—a Life Economy.

I want to make it clear that I don't idealize or villainize individual Indigenous people. My own experiences have taught me that there are treacherous and virtuous ones, brutal and peaceful ones, and psychotic and well-balanced ones, just as there are in all cultures. What I respect is their communal commitments to the long term. Their philosophies and actions are dedicated to taking care of their environments, their cultures, and their offspring. The stories that Indigenous people have long told their children—and now us—such as the Prophecy of the Eagle and the Condor, the Mayan Prophecy of 2012, and the Legend of Etsaa and the Evias, offer powerful teachings about the ability each of us has to overcome obstacles, to change our perceptions, and in so doing, to alter reality. In this regard, those stories have much in common with the myths embedded in cultures around the world and with the practices of modern psychotherapy and quantum physics.

This book discusses the damage I perpetrated as an economic hit man and the reality-changing lessons I learned in the Amazon. It goes on to describe the work I've done for the past forty years to meet my jaguars and apply the lessons I learned to alleviate the harm I helped cause. It delves into the problems that current greed and short-term perspectives are causing. And, perhaps most important of all, it presents actions that you, the reader, can take to change your life and help all of us humans live more harmoniously with nature and each other.

Prologue

American Colonialism, Guatemala, 1993

Empires had been colonizing tribes and nations for centuries, appropriating their economies, their lands, their peoples, their governments, and their minds . . . in the name of religion, civilization, and westernization. This time it had been done under the subterfuge of spreading democracy. . . .

"EIGHT MEN WERE ASSASSINATED here last week." The Land Rover slowed into the curve. "Guatemalan soldiers stopped a bus at this very spot." Jorge, our Mayan-to-Spanish interpreter, peered over the back of his seat at Lynne Twist, who was behind him, and then at me, next to her. "They dragged those eight Mayan men off. Shot and killed them. One by one." He pointed at a cluster of scrawny bushes just outside his window. "Right there. Last week."

I stared out at the bushes. My heart raced. The Land Rover drove on.

"The civil war still rages," Jorge continued. "It's lasted more than thirty years." He glanced from Lynne to me. "Those soldiers were trained by the US military," he stared at me, "to help the rich families here who want to destroy the Mayan culture and support exploitation of our resources by US companies. It's the latest example of American colonialism."

American colonialism. My intestines knotted.

"Genocide," Lynne said. She too was watching me.

I glanced through the window on my side of the Land Rover, fighting back the sickening taste of bile. I'd been an economic hit man, an ally of those rich families Jorge talked about, a person whose job it was to promote colonialism. As I would later write in *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*,

Economic hit men (EHMs) are highly paid professionals who cheat countries around the globe out of trillions of dollars. They funnel money from the World Bank, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and other foreign-aid organizations into the coffers of huge corporations and the pockets of a few wealthy families who control the planet's natural resources. Their tools include fraudulent financial reports, rigged elections, payoffs, extortion, sex, and murder. They play a game as old as empire, but one that has taken on new and terrifying dimensions during this time of globalization.

I should know; I was an EHM.¹

I had officially retired from the EHM ranks in 1980, but here I was, thirteen years later, back in Guatemala. I was working as a consultant to a corporation that was an integral part of the system Jorge had identified as colonialism. At the same time, during this trip I was serving on the board of a nonprofit organization that helped the Mayan people during this terrible civil war. The irony struck me. I justified my consulting work as a way to support my family. I told myself that I would convince my corporate clients to be environmentally and socially conscious of what they were doing in Guatemala and elsewhere. However, the facts about the Maya challenged my attempts at justifying my position.

An estimated two hundred thousand Maya had been killed or "disappeared" by a government that was backed by Washington and US corporations. Many more had fled as refugees.² Dozens of villages had been razed. Families had been driven off their small farms and replaced by large American-owned or -supported agribusinesses. In addition to Maya, victims also included student activists, labor leaders, and Catholic priests who participated in nonviolent movements. More people were killed in this conflict than in any other twentieth century Latin American war—a fact that was unknown by most Americans.³

Now I was taking Lynne into the mountains that were the stronghold of the very people we EHMs had exploited and killed. “Yes, genocide,” I repeated. I tried to swallow away that sour taste in my mouth, tried to fight down the feelings of guilt I felt over the things I’d done and the fear of what lay ahead of us. I stared through the window at the bleak mountains and the road as we sped away from those bushes where the unforgivable had happened.

“Sometimes it’s hard to be an American,” Lynne said. She had been introduced to me as a philanthropic activist and chief fundraiser for the Hunger Project. This was before she’d written her bestselling book, *The Soul of Money*, received the United Nations Woman of Distinction award, become an advisor to the Nobel Women’s Institute, been featured on *Oprah*, and been honored with many other accolades.

It was also before colonialism took on the appalling and tragic aspects that would emerge in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The world would be haunted by extreme anti-immigrant attitudes and actions, the growth of white supremacist and nationalist movements, increasing income inequality, escalating social and community divisions, and the denial of climate change. It also was a time before the growing power and influence of China around the world.

Lynne touched my arm. “What does it feel like for you—being back here?”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want to admit to the sour taste in my mouth, the ache in my heart, or the knot in my stomach. I felt torn between my job as a corporate hit man and my role as a defender of Indigenous rights. “Weird,” I said at last. “Very weird.” Then I looked at her. “Like a man caught between two worlds.”

I studied the road ahead and the dark clouds beyond that had gathered over the mountains, our destination. I thought about the role I’d played in colonizing the world on behalf of the United States and its corporations. Empires had been colonizing tribes and nations for centuries, appropriating their economies, their lands, their peoples, their governments, and their minds. It had been done in the name of religion, civilization, and westernization. This time it had been done under the subterfuge of spreading democracy, even when “spreading democracy” meant overthrowing

or assassinating democratically elected presidents in places as diverse as Iran and Panama—if those presidents and their policies appeared to threaten US businesses or hegemony—while at the same time defending brutal dictators in places as diverse as Chile and Saudi Arabia who did support the US. And it had produced what we would come to realize was a failed economic system.

Lynne's hand on my arm brought me back to the present. "You worked for the Guatemalan government during the war here, didn't you?" Lurking beneath those words, I heard an accusation: *The one that kills Maya*.

"Well . . ." I searched for something to say. "I never actually worked for the government. Not really anyway." I looked at her and then back through the window, as I tried to figure out how to describe my complicated story.

I'd grown up the son of a teacher at a New Hampshire boarding school for wealthy boys. I'd done what was expected of me, received a full scholarship to college, and scaled the corporate ladder to become chief economist at Chas. T. Main (MAIN), a Boston-based consulting firm, before I turned thirty. Disillusioned and distraught by the consequences of the work I did there, I quit after only a decade at that job. I then became a writer and teacher and now was a board member of Katalysis, a nonprofit that helped Mayan women organize themselves into microcredit cooperatives. I knew that she had read that much in my bio. But how much more had she learned? Even after leaving the chief economist role behind, I'd been silent all these years about the fact that, in my case, "chief economist" was a cover for "economic hit man." I'd tried to keep that fact hidden.

"I was a consultant," I told Lynne, avoiding her eyes. "In the '70s I came here to arrange World Bank loans." I turned toward her and forced a smile. "That's about it."

"I thought you were here recently . . ."

"Oh yes. Of course . . ." Where had she heard that? "But just as an advisor to a US engineering company, Stone and Webster." I paused.

She sat there beside me, waiting . . .

"I was supposed to negotiate a deal with a Guatemalan company, to develop a geothermal project," I added.

"Guatemalan company?" Her voice seemed to ask the unspoken question.

"Yes, that company was owned by one of the ruling families." I nodded toward the back of Jorge's head. "Not something I can talk about right now."

She smiled gently. "I understand, but if you do feel like talking, I'd love to hear your story . . ." She sat back, closed her eyes, and then said, "Sometimes it helps to talk."

Hearing those words, I realized that I did want to talk. For the first time, in the back of a Land Rover, speeding toward the mountains, I began to tell my story . . .