Living and Teaching Traditional Values in a Disconnected Age

Ann Kreilkamp interviews Angeles Arrien

Introduction

On August 30, 2007, I met with Angeles Arrien in her Sausalito office. I had not seen her for perhaps 15 years, and remember she had looked exhausted. This time, however, she looked wonderful, serene and radiant.

Angeles and I grew up together in Twin Falls, Idaho. She was two years older, graduating from high school in 1958; her sister Joanne was my good friend during grade school at St. Edwards.

I didn't see the Arrien sisters again until 1975. I had entered what turned out to be a brief, but loving marriage with my high school boy friend in our home town, and we visited them in their crowded little childhood home. A few months earlier, Angeles and Joanne had come back to take care of their father and mother, who were both ill. Their mother had since died, and they had stayed on with their father. They

had no idea when they would be able to return to California, but were dedicated to his care as their first priority.

I found out later that they stayed a year, and then returned to California with their Dad, where they installed his chair in the living room and Joanne cared for him continuously for the next seven years, until his death.

Joanne and Angeles have lived together in the same home for much of their adult life. While the older sister is very much the visible one, she relies very much on her younger sister's support. We coaxed Joanne to agree to have her photo taken for this issue of *Crone*, and want to honor Joanne and all the other women who selflessly and with very little recognition devote their lives to serving others behind the scenes. Thank you, Joanne! And thanks for being my dear friend so long ago.

Interview

Rather than talk about your books and your teaching, I'd like to uncover your process. I'm interested in your evolutionary history — in what makes you tick

and the fuel that drives you. And I think that is what our readers would like to know.

Let's begin with your ancestors, your heritage. Most Americans can't identify who their ancestors are. I certainly can't. I know my grandparents. That's it.

My known lineage goes back for generations.

You can go back that far! So unusual. Who are these people? What do they bring to you? What is their foundation in you.

I think all of my work has come out of them, out of the foundation of being immigrants raised by parents who spoke their own language at home.

You out started out speaking Basque. What do you know about this language.

Basque is non-Indo-European and that's all that is known about it. This language remains a mystery. There are lots of theories and you can speculate; but no one really knows other than we have the largest group with rh-negative blood type in the world and probably the oldest skull type.

The linguists Whorf and Sapir claimed that different languages have differing ways of seeing and experiencing the world built into them structurally. So that, for example, the "subject/predicate/object" grammatical structure of Indo-European languages makes it difficult for those who speak these languages to fully experience the present moment. What about the Basque language?

Basque and other indigenous languages worldwide add suffixes to verbs; the eternal presence is there. And, for most indigenous languages I know, including the Basque language, the focus is on unity or "we." It's about "our hand" or "our land." It's "our." It's not "I" or "mine;" it's "we" or "our" because it's so much based on survival.

And it's not just sentimental. We non-immigrant Americans tend to think of this focus as sentimental.

Yes. The Basque language and people are truly community oriented; everybody is involved in the children's upbringing — mother, father, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Were there Basque cities or was it all village-based?

It all was village-based. Now, of course, there are large towns — St. Sebastian, Bilbao.

And are they losing that "our" feeling?

The language always holds that; and there is now, among the Basque as among a lot of indigenous peoples, a huge revival around reclaiming and preserving the language. Preservation and conservation are at the heart of a lot of my work as a cross-cultural anthropologist. There are about 7,600 languages and we've already lost 900 and that number grows daily. It's interesting to watch where the roots are being retained despite globalization and acculturation, and how they're being retained through language and through old cultural practices. Every original culture keeps traditions and values alive through storytelling, or through song or dance, or through athletics, or through their beliefs.

Growing up in small-town Twin Falls, Idaho, you were bi-cultural. And were you aware? I mean, when did you wake up to the fact that this was strange, the way you were between worlds or that you had to combine them.

I was always aware. Oh, yes. Any immigrant family is always aware.

You and Joanne were first generation. When did your parents come over?

When they were in their early-20s.

How do you work with integrating the two cultures in yourself?

Well, it's the best of both worlds. There comes a time when you think you have to pick one over the other but there's a rich somethingness that happens; out of the basket of both comes something much greater than either could provide alone. I think the realization of that really happened in my early 30s.

Was there a crossroads that you can identify, an event?

When I started to teach graduate students. But even before that . . . It hits you early because you do have to face that you are different and you do have to face prejudice.

Really? You don't look *different.*

Oh, but in Idaho? "Black Bascos," they called us.

Really!? I had no idea. Was that true at St. Edwards?

Oh, you bet. It was true all through school.

I remember the Mexican "wetbacks" being treated badly but I don't remember . . .

Oh, yes, the Basques. And often lumped as Mexicans.

Wow. I remember walking home from school in first grade with Fred Kolouch, remember him? Both kids of doctors— and I saw Lorenzo Ortega, this troublemaker wetback in our class, walking parallel to us on the other side of Addison Street, all three of us walking home. He was lonely, it was obvious. And all of a sudden I woke up to the fact that as a doctor's daughter I was privileged — and that there was no intrinsic reason for it.

Very interesting, and very subtle. There are very subtle shades of prejudice but I can identify them all.

I bet you can.

We lived in a tiny house on 2nd Street. My parents did very well, the best in years, and they were very good people. They always provided for their kids and

worked hard and did a great job but there were race and class issues.

I'm completely ignorant of that as far as you and Joanne were concerned as compared to the Mexicans.

Yes, because we were friends.

In high school, my friend Mary Robertson used to go out to the Mexican labor camps in the summertime to be with those kids. I went with her once and the experience of such poverty made me physically ill. I couldn't do it, I couldn't go back. I so much admired that she was able to put herself right there.

I feel really blessed that I had that upbringing because I've deeply valued everything that I've ever generated for myself.

So from the Basque culture you received all the values that have to do with community and holding together.

Yes. Community, family, the importance of family, integrity, having honor, keeping your word. Your personhood was more important than how much you had. If you were not a good person, the rest didn't mean a thing.

When somebody stepped out of line, what would happen?

The family and community would still try to keep working with them because the personhood was always more important. We were always told "Yes, you can go to so-and-so, you can go as far as you want, you can go to New York City, you can go to Paris, you can go to all of these places, but if you're not a good person, it's not going to mean anything to you." Over and over. Going to go to college? Well, okay. Going to go to college, you still need to be a good person. That's more important.

Growing up Catholic, I experienced "being good" as an external rule. That's really different than this intrinsic valuation. So what's the good of American culture that you see?

The ability to be as creative as you want to be, the incredible sense of how to carve out your own identity — and the choices, the incredible abundance of choices and opportunities rather than predictable village life. So expansive . . .

So you've got the root and the expansion. Whereas we non-immigrant Americans just get the expansion.

I look for the roots. I'm very fortunate. I've always liked my roots. And that's what I find so exciting; wherever people were born — there's something seminal in their journey around their own roots.

Even if extended family lineage is not *what you have. For example, I experienced my roots as the desert and my horse. That's what grounded me . . . So, in high school, you became a student leader. I remember when Joanne and I were both vying for student body secretary and she won and you were the one who had to come in to Algebra class and tell me.*

Oh, I remember that.

You were so sweet about it! One of the early tests of your diplomatic skills. Were you student body secretary at the time?

I can't remember. I may have been vice-president. I think my sophomore year I might have been class president.

In high school, did you have any idea of your future direction?

I always knew that I was going to teach and I always knew that I wanted to do something internationally but I just didn't know how that was going to happen. I'll never forget a conversation with the dean; he advised me — strongly advised me — not to go to college.

Because you were a girl?

No, he said that I was an overachiever and that's why I got good grades, and he suggested business school — probably because of my SAT scores. He realized that I was raised differently and that there could have been some cultural bias on the test but the scores were key, blah, blah blah. And I thought, "Huh? But I have good grades and I want to go to college and all I need to do is apply." So as I sat there I remember thinking, "Who is he to tell me — because I'd always been raised to feel I could do anything." That conversation was riveting.

So you walked out of there just feeling like "to hell with you" or did you feel a combination of that and "maybe I'm not worth what I thought?"

I had no doubt. I thought, "I'm going to college. No person can tell me I'm not going to college." I went

back to sit at my desk and thought, “Well, that’s one way to look at it but I’m still going.”

So it didn’t really affect you much.

No, it didn’t. It just went right through. But I remember the conversation because I thought, “How could you do this? I’m entitled to go to college just as much as anybody else.”

A few years later they asked me to come back and speak at the Twin Falls High School graduation and I told the students that I had been counseled not to go to college. So, I told them, “I want to make sure that you all keep your options open and you really attend to your dreams and what you’d like to do and what’s really calling you.”

Where’d you go to college?

University of Idaho, graduated in the Humanities — English and Drama/Theater and minors in History and Psychology so I could teach a wide variety of subjects. I got my first job in the Bay Area, teaching junior high eighth grade social studies — and had a very positive experience. I got the job *because* I was Basque! The principal in that school district had grown up in Basque communities and his best friend

was Basque. He asked, “You’re Basque?” And I said “Yes, I’m Basque” and he said “You get the job because I know you’ll do a great job. Good work ethic, yada yada, I know you’ll do a fantastic job.”

Prejudice can cut both ways! But you still knew you wanted to work internationally.

Yes. But it was a big step just to come to the Bay Area. After teaching four years I thought, “Well, I really want to teach adults and I want to travel,” so I started having the kids read about different peoples and created special projects on geography and how to be prepared to be a global citizen some day, how to increase tolerance and understanding.

So that focus was in you from the beginning.

The very beginning.

And that’s why you wanted to teach internationally?

Yes.

Because you wanted to promote those values. You knew that innately. Nobody mentored you there.

Yes. So I started looking at “Where can I do this? How can I do this?”

One day I was sitting on the steps of a museum and this man came out and saw me, and said, “Gee, you’re really lost in thought.” I said “Yeah” (and waited for him to move on), and he said “No, I’m serious, what are you thinking about? You’re really lost in thought.”

I said “Well, if you really must know, I was thinking that if I was willing to go back to graduate school I would want to go back into something that would integrate music and philosophy and religion and cultures and international work.” And he said, “Oh, I know what that is” — and reached in his backpack, pulled out this catalog for UC-Berkeley and flipped it open to “Cultural Anthropology.”

I said, “You’re kidding!” and he said, “No, it’s not about digs. Cultural anthropology isn’t about digs. And it’s different from social and medical anthropology. It’s got comparative religions and international conflict resolution and music and art and dance and stories and cultures 101.” So, bingo. UC-Berkeley in the fall of 1968.

Oh my god.

Yeah. Right when the riots were happening on campus. Right after Mario Savio in ’67. But for me it was, “Oh, meetings are going on? Well, I’ll just go to class anyway.”

So you weren’t affected by or infected by the times?

No. I was very interested in what I was learning. The world as a whole was capturing my imagination. International work and diversity work were more interesting to me that what was happening nationally. I was affected by the assassination but not so much by the flower children or the drug culture or the media. Nor was I needing to liberate myself from the material world because that didn’t have value for me in the first place.

So then, teaching as a graduate student, I started to see how unconnected people were to themselves. People really were just not connected to themselves; for them what was out there made value rather than knowing that they were valuable anyway regardless of their stuff or status. I started to see how many people were driven by having more education than other people rather than going for education for the learning.

Even then that outside focus was beginning to be true and now it's totally true.

Now it's totally true. Unbelievable! So irrelevant.

But you knew that before. Yet now you were teaching these people and you couldn't connect with them, and they wouldn't connect to what you were saying.

Oh, they would connect. But what they would connect to was me rather than the material. So I wondered how to get them to connect to the material rather than to me. Because it was the skills and the tools and the practices that would really help them connect to themselves.

I imagine you still have that problem.

Well, not as much.

Right. But you are a charismatic personality. Maybe that's why your teaching and your books focus so much on structure — so that people can more easily ingest the information.

Yes, so that they can use the material rather than identify with me. For me, it's about the message, not about the person. Not about the messenger. So many

people get hooked on the messenger and now we have this whole celebrity culture and I ask, “What’s happening to character? What’s happening to development of values?” I do notice the start of a turn, a shift in values from power and status to wisdom.

At one point you got married. And at another you wrote a book on the Tarot. Tell me how those threads come in.

I was married when I was 23. That’s what brought me to San Francisco. I married a fifth generation San Franciscan.

A wealthy person?

Very.

Oh, such contrast!

Yes, contrast. And we’re still friends. It was very good, very positive — because he taught me that I could go into any social group and communicate person to person regardless of whether they are wealthy or not. That people are people. That was invaluable.

Talk about cultural anthropology!

Oh, it really was! We were married for nine years, and then separated when I went to graduate school. I figured that maybe I could work it out with him afterwards. But then, for my thesis, I decided to go back to Spain. I spent two months with my family there and my family in Idaho and then I made a decision that this was not my partner. Our marriage was an incredible plan and an incredible calling; he was somebody who had enriched my life, but he was not my partner. And so after graduate school and before starting to teach graduate school, we divorced.

That was when I started teaching at California School of Integrative Studies. They wanted me to teach on cross-cultural healing practices and also, because I had done a lot work with Joseph Campbell, wanted me to teach around symbols, myths, and archetypes. That's where Tarot started coming in.

Oh, okay. So you decided you would learn one of these symbolic languages?

Yes. Earlier, in graduate school. While I was writing my M.A. thesis on the psychology of superstition and using myself as a guinea pig. One day I picked up a Tarot book and didn't like it at all. I thought, "This is so irresponsible, that people are telling people what

to do with their lives." Then I thought, "How can you teach symbols in a way where people can discover which symbols are important to them and why and show them and teach them the symbolic map?" And this is still at the heart of every one of my books: I give them the materials and have them do the work; have them apply it and figure out meaning and relevance for them and then look again.

The summer after I graduated from Berkeley, I received an invitation, two summers in a row, to work with Joseph Campbell at an invitational seminar. That came out of meeting with Margaret Mead at UC-Berkeley. She suggested that with a lot of the work I was doing as a graduate student that I might want to work with Joseph Campbell. I also worked with Houston Smith on comparative religions. They were both big influences.

So on a personal level, your husband taught you that you could talk to anybody and there were people at Berkeley that you wanted to talk to.

That's exactly true. And I'm forever grateful because he opened up so many possibilities. With my Foundation in Cross-Cultural Education and Research I know how to talk to lots of people and donors, grants or money people who really want to

do good — because I learned from him that they really want to do good!

One other question before we move on. When you divorced, that was when, 1972? Was it a friendly divorce? A positive choice for both parties?

Oh, it was.

Did you know anybody else who had done that?

No. And it was the first divorce in my family. That was harder than getting divorced, trying to communicate that I'd made a mistake and that this was a friend, a colleague, and not somebody that was right in the way that marriage is with children. My parents' response? Just as long as I was okay and I was happy, they were fine. No judgment. Which was really great. They said he was welcome to come to our home at any time because he was like family. So I still stay in contact with him at least once a year. He's now married to a woman who makes him happy so that's really good.

What a pioneer you were! To divorce with love during the time when feminists were so angry with men.

Yeah, they were angry and I kept saying it's okay and he kept saying it's okay, and the rules in the community kept saying, "Take him to the cleaner!" and I had to say "No, I just want one thing. I just want my name back. That's all I want." And he said, "Now just until you get a new place to live, just until you get settled, let me give you $200 a month." I said "Okay, but just in this transition time." And that lasted a year.

Because you had intrinsic worth, you made choices in a completely different way than other people in this culture.

I never thought of it that way, but I think it's true.

You didn't have to grasp.

Yes, and it didn't affect me that much . . . It was just a very personal choice that this was not the right one. He was somebody that I loved but he just wasn't the right one.

You were by that time a relativist, culturally.

[laughs] That's true!

So you could see through cultural forms, including feminist forms. Okay, these stories really give a foundation for who you are.

Everything has come out of my background. Everything, totally. And the deep values around being a good person and how that's more valuable than how much money you have and what you accomplish. And I think it's made growing older or aging less difficult. In this second half of life I've seen so many people who are having real difficulty —because they had all the toys, all the materialism, and the appearance and however many tucks or abrasions or whatever to end up looking scary like a mannequin and it was like unbelievable so I thought "Yikes."

So you wrote your latest book, The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom (2007) *in response to that.*

Yes. And then add to that the breakdown between the generations which isn't sustained in other cultures but that's part of being a new culture.

Is it? Part of the immigration process? The children become part of the new culture and leave their parents behind?

Yes. And because ours is such an ageist, unsustainable society, it has the horrific honor of having the highest suicide rate in both teens and elders than any other culture in the world.

And I know exactly why. It's because we're not drawing on the creativity and fresh eyes and energy of our youth and engaging them and we're not drawing on the experience and wisdom of our elders, instead putting them in way stations to play bingo. I'm starting to see, though, new trends, like the "Experience Corps" in California — people 60 and older mentoring youth and giving back to the community; or in Philadelphia, "Let Them Lead," a movement of youth leaders giving back.

I'd like to see this happen at an incredibly local basis. Street by street.

It has to. The more it happens locally, street by street, the more real it is. And then, to help huge regional problems dissolve, make sure you have young people on the councils as well as elders and mid-lifers — so that you can really work from that diversity. Make sure it's interdisciplinary and multicultural and intergenerational — those three different things are

what [knocks for emphasis] I keep harping on. [laughs]

And this is what you've always known.

Yes.

Because that's what you came out of.

Yes.

And it's sustainable.

Yes. Totally. And it's workable.

Here's the kind of question that you ask readers in your books . . . How do you work through challenges?

Well, I always go to nature, I always need alone time, for silence and reflection. Re-assess. Look within. Whether it's to the ocean or the forest or the mountains or the desert I always go into retreat.

And you're willing to stay in that liminal place for however long it takes?

Yes.

And is it scary sometimes?

I don't know if it's fear. I've always had to work more with patience than with trust. I've always been very, very trusting but I've had to work with patience — because I can see the possibilities.

I can just hear you talking to yourself: "I have so much work to do! This is not *about me!" [laughter]*

That's right! It's true! I see possibilities and I see the point. And I've been highly conditioned not to deny that I'm being challenged but not to indulge in it. That's my background again. I'll look at it, face it, but not wallow in it or dramatize over it. I'll ask myself, "What could be three creative solutions, or what is available, or how can I do this?"

You didn't mention feedback. I presume there are people you can call on?

Definitely. Especially Joanne. She gives me the straight shot [laughter] every time. But never first. Always after. I'll go as far as I can with myself first and then I'll say to Joanne, "This is what I've thought about and this is how far I've gone and this is where I'm stuck and, you know, I really need your honest opinion here" and then she'll say, "Have you thought

about this, this and this?" Or she'll say "Well, isn't it interesting that that's come back around again."

But that's also part of the conditioning. I rarely take it outside of the home. Besides Joanne, if my grandparents were still alive, I'd be going to them or if my aunts and uncles on both sides were still alive I'd be going to my favorites on both sides. Now it's cousins.

You are close to your cousins?

If something happened to Joanne, two or three of my cousins would be the next ones I'd approach. But that's heavy early conditioning — because I have lots of friends and colleagues for whom I'm a confidante . But, ah…

But it's not reciprocated. Because of the conditioning. But it works.

Yes, it does work. And if my cousins weren't there, my friends and colleagues would be the next ones; my family would then extend to them.

Do you journal?

I do journal, only afterwards.

Do you throw the Tarot?

I've done some cards. But it's mostly nature that I use.

So you ask, how would nature address this problem?

Yes.

Successfully, no doubt. [laughter]

Yes. Think of the resilience!

Do you ask for dreams?

I do ask for dreams. I also pay attention to where am I spending a lot of time during daydreaming and night dreaming. And I spend a lot of time in prayer — petitionary prayers or prayers of gratitude.

To a being? Separate from you? To . . .

. . . the mystery. I ask for help from the invisible world.

Can you tell us about your typical day?

Well, I'm working three days a week now, either on weekends, where I'm doing a workshop, or here in the office meeting with people. On a typical day I'm outside in the morning before I have breakfast, then I shower, but I always have to start the day outside.

I remember last time we met, 15 years ago?— Joanne was creating a flower garden.

Yes, yes! So I go out and start the day in our wonderful backyard. Then I come in and do what I call service — usually either teaching or reading. And, I might lunch with a colleague or friend or fly off to do a weekend workshop or go to see a booksigning person.

Do you have daily practices along with this?

Yes, I meditate and pray every day. I walk every day. Joanne and I have discovered birding. There are marshlands just 10 minutes away from where we live, in Petaluma, 200 acres of marshlands. It's so incredible! You can't ignore them. We're not binocular kind of birders but we've been doing a two-mile walk every morning before I start work. And if we don't make it during the week we make it up on the weekend.

You said you work three days a week.

Yes, I work three days a week and then a fourth day is for research and writing and preparatory work for if I have to do a weekend or weeklong or twelve-day program.

And then you still have three days left.

Yes. And fortunately, because when you last saw me and said I looked tired I was overworking.

You don't look tired and burdened now; you look light!

I've shed a lot of work and gotten really good help. I was working alone for a long time, with Joanne's help, but that wasn't enough.

In one of your earlier books, The Four-Fold Way: Walking the Paths of Warrior, Healer, Teacher and Visionary*, which do you identify with most strongly, or can you say? Teacher?*

Teacher-Healer I would say for the first half of my life. For the second half I've been more a visionary Leader.

And which holds the shadow more than the others?

I think the one that was probably the most difficult . . . I like leading behind the scenes. I think becoming more visible.

What's your astrological chart say? You don't have it in the office, do you?

No. What would that be?

I remember you were a Jupiter-Saturn-Uranus-in-Taurus person. One of those born between 1940 and early 1942 who would have the kind of energy that can set new foundations.

Oh, interesting. Well I think that's what my life has been about, setting foundations.

Resetting an old foundation with diversity built into it somehow.

Yes.

So, if we were to create a myth for our times, what would it look like?

That's interesting, because I've been looking at myths and thinking how every culture seems to have a salvation myth and they have the Armageddon myths. So I began wondering about bridging myths, because I think that's what we need now — both/and rather than either/or.

I began looking at bridging myths and found one that I think is where we are right now — the Pandora Myth. In most cultures, the myth is very much the same. They talk about how the goddesses of that culture were bored and wanted to fashion a creature that was put together by all of their gifts and can live in both worlds, both the invisible and visible worlds — also symbolic of the interior and the exterior.

And then they gave the creature something with a taboo, a gift that they were forbidden to open, a treasure box or vase. And because the interior world and the external world are both involved, what the various Pandoras in the myths have in common is great insatiable curiosity. So curiosity opened the treasure box or the vase, and all the evils and ills spilled out into the world.

But what really interests me about the Pandora Myth is that something is left in the bottom of the totally open box. In Western cultures, what was overlooked

was Hope and in Eastern cultures what was overlooked was Compassion and in indigenous societies what was overlooked was Truth. So I thought to myself, “Well, aren’t these the three golden keys of this time?” Because basically the positives and the negatives are out there full-blown — the box has been opened, the shadow is as dark as the light is bright. But we’re at a place where we’re going to have to hold paradox rather than choosing.

So Hope is the third thing that brings Compassion and Truth together? A lot of people talk about compassion and truth. No one talks about hope and that’s what we need most in this culture.

Oh, totally. During the Velvet Revolution in Poland, someone asked Vaclav Havel, “Are you an optimist or a pessimist?” He responded: “I’m not an optimist because I don’t believe everything’s always going to turn out well and I’m not a pessimist because I don’t believe everything’s always going to turn out horribly. But I do cultivate hope in my heart because I feel it is the only antidote to cynicism, apathy, malaise, and fear.” So the cultivation of hope — you’re dead on about that, I think. The cultivation of hope everywhere may be the key that links compassion, which is heart-based, and authenticity, which is more essence-based.

One final question. What gives you hope?

Oh! I'm hopeful about what I see with young people, a returning to meaning more than ambition. They want things to be meaningful or they don't want to get involved. And I'm very hopeful about what's being done around the environment at this time. I'm hopeful about more people getting involved with community-building locally and I'm really hopeful about the international consortiums that are taking place, like the European Alliance and the Latin American alliance — all sorts of alliances, people coming together to work collaboratively.

So I have more hope than not. And I think this is an exciting time in history. The aperture is really huge right now. For the first time ever we have an opportunity to make a huge difference within just a few years. That to me, is very exciting and hopeful. I want to be around for that. I really want to be here.