

## **Cherif Chalakani: From being a lost child in exile to feeling at home in the body.**

### **About Cherif Chalakani**

*Cherif Chalakani is working with sensations, emotions and spaces of inner peaces and how we are in the world as much as how we are born into this world with a focusing on organic self-regulation. His therapeutic approach can be articulated around two complementary themes. On the one side biographical, dealing with the toxic relations present within the family of origin. Since the early 1990s he offers re-parentalization workshops, at first in Mexico and now in Spain, France and Germany. The second key theme of his profession is the experience of birth. Over the course of almost four decades, he has created and refined "Espacios Nacientes", a psychotherapeutic approach that tackles, with gentle attention to the body, the experiences of birth in its physical and metaphorical dimensions.*

*Cherif met the Chilean psychiatrist and peace Nobel prize nominee Dr. Claudio Naranjo, author of two Elicitiva publications in 1978 and since then has been his student and later his collaborator, participating in different modules of the SAT – a psycho spiritual program for unfolding human potential- since its beginnings in 1987 and has facilitated a module on parent-relationship during the Innsbruck Peace Studies present phase in summer 2015. His Spanish Biography "Renacer al Ser" reveals more about his therapeutic work and will be published in English later this year.*

***Thought of as a body artist and spiritual midwife Cherif Chalakani is a conflict transformer and peace artesian. His father was a journalist and fighter for peace in the Egyptian revolution. Cherif took a slightly more internal approach to peace by becoming a psychotherapist. Over the past 4 years Sophie Friedel assisted his work during the SAT program of Dr. Claudio Naranjo***

**You were born as a child of a Jewish mother and a Muslim father and moved around a lot, either for political or religious reasons. During the Suez Crisis in the 1950s, you migrated from Cairo to Switzerland at the age of 6, how has this affected you in the long term?**

My Sister and I moved to a boarding school in Switzerland. It was like a deep cut. I lost my Arabic; I lost my father; I partly lost my mother. The family completely split. My sister and I were lonely children in a very chaotic world. I was spaced out! with a big longing for belonging. I became French when I was 18 years old and was required to provide military service. I had studied Mathematics at a rather high level and the French military send me to teach mathematic at the University in Caracas. Suddenly, I experienced exile anew, all my old stories came up again and I began to be aware of my suffering. Prior to this, I had taken refuge in my head, doing mathematics with a closed heart. In Venezuela, I felt the hospitality and the heart of the people and that reminded me of my Egyptian emotional background. There I met my first therapist Rafael Estrada Villa from Mexico when I was 22, and realized that I was lost, and confused about my identity. Not knowing if I was Egyptian or French and not having a ground to stand on and to rest on.

**Can you elaborate on the relationship with your father?**

He was involved in an underground fight for social changes. He left the family when I was 3 years old and I met him again when I was 25. So, for a long time I had no relation with my father. I heard about him because a lot of his comrades form the social fights where talking about him when he went to jail and after to Algeria to help the Algerian revolution. So, I had

an absent father, and quite idealized, because he was the hero in my eyes. Not knowing him but having him to fight for the right of the people was like WOW.

I remember, when my therapist Rafael Villa asked: "What is your problem with your father?" and I just said: "I have no problem; I have no father." In my understanding no relation equals no problem. He just laughed at me and said: "Okay, we start from the beginning: your absent father is your problem!" He helped me through several intense and important transformational processes to make peace with him, with my family and with my circumstances. I slowly moved internally from chaos to meaning, from confusion to clarity, from fear to security. It has been a long journey.

### **What helped you to integrate those strong experiences of disintegration as a child?**

Through body-centered therapy I started to remember memories of my despair and with my therapist I could learn how to deal with birth processes. During my inner transformation I had a new vocation and so I moved from being a mathematician to therapist, with two main topics of interest: family integration and the birth experience as a biological and metaphorical experience.

### **Is there a place that you would call home today?**

Now I feel at home in my body. I feel sustained and contained in my body. I am no longer lost, I am finally grounded, and have slowly developed a sense of inner security. I am very much engaged in the awareness of sensation, awareness of movement, awareness of emotion as a concrete way to grasp reality. I have an intuition of what my next step may be, being aware that I am more than my body, I am the awareness itself. Consciousness will then be my new home, a generous space involving all possibilities. My deep country is maybe the land of awareness, the land of mystery. Consciousness is a mystery.

### **When you work with people on your "*Espacios Nacientes*" or when you do the conscious-movement-bodywork during SAT what is important for you?**

I am working on birth and perinatal memories and on the importance of the quality of the transition, from in to out, from the water to the air, from dark to light. I am not only talking about the biological birth, also about transformation to new steps in life.

In our society, where babies are born in busy hospitals with neon lights and stress, that first transition often takes place in quite a fearful and violent process not respecting the organismic rhythm of the mother and the baby. When we face a change in our life, either small or big, my assumption is that the traumatic memory of the first transition, embodied in our cells, may be reactivated. If this is the case we will change with fear, not respecting the organismic auto regulation, we will enter the world without trust and instead with violence.

To take care of the birth process, is to take care of the therapeutic change. It is one same process. I facilitate experiences where people can re-embodiment new ways of being born and changing. My belief is that a birth without violence, as Dr. Leboyer<sup>1</sup> put it, is possible and will be a first peaceful step in the world.

*"For me the first step in working for peace is taking care of the prenatal space and of this transition in a peaceful, trusty, organismic and nonviolent way."*

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. -Frédéric Leboyer was a French obstetrician. He is well known for his book "Birth Without Violence", which popularized gentle birthing technique

**Your work also builds on Claudio Naranjo's theory of the inner family system. Both of you offer a powerful means for change by proposing an integrated balance between the inner family triad; the mother love, the father love and the child love. Can you please elaborate on how a healthy inner family supports peace workers when working in conflict?**

As Claudio says: "In the relation with our parents we get sick, and in relations with people, including our parents we may heal." The therapeutic group experience is a very powerful context to explore new possibilities of encounter, to establish new rules of relations. It is a way to experiment alternative options. In that setting I try to create spaces of acceptance, benevolence and compassion, so that we may attend to the conflicting parties of our inner family, and so that we also may get out of our sick and repetitive patterns.

Part of my work is to give birth to an inner family that can go further than our biological family. We were not sufficiently loved because our parents were also not loved enough. It is a kind of generational "plague" that keeps us in pain, in frustration and with anger. My motivation is to create an inner "ground of reconciliation" towards our parents and to be able to tell them with an open heart: "I am at peace with you."

I allow new information, new resources, new inner skills to "embody", establishing mental, emotional and sensorial connections. By cultivating a state of presence, I promote inner and external movements so we are able to incorporate an intention into gesture. The words are literally invited to "incarnate". So, for example, we may experience a felt "sense" of what the word *kindness* is pointing to, switching from the mental to the physical realm, through body expression and contact.

"This is my way to create an inner space of "auto-mothering and auto-fathering" our wounded inner child."

**Is making peace with our parents necessary to live peacefully?**

Yes, it is, but how we deal with pain is also an important question. I started my own process willing to eradicate my pain, entering a kind of paradise. This was a very deep illusion. That is not what therapeutic work is about and that is not what mature transformation is offering. Polarity and conflicts, love and hate are present, and we need to deal with all those elements without thinking that we will finally arrive to a state without pain and conflicts. Peace will rest on our ability to embrace pain and conflict with an open and continuous awareness.

*"Life is not an easy game," he says and we both laugh.*

**With the magazine's topic being on journalism, do you have a comment for the journalist?**

My father was also a journalist and I know through his direct experience how challenging it is to express truth objectively. I would like to use this to honour the courage of my father and of so many journalists who offer their contribution to social changes and transformations, sometime risking their own life.

Sophie Friedel is author of the Master of Peace monography: "The Art of Living Sideways", after graduating from the MA Program for Peace Studies at the University of Innsbruck she moved to Freiburg to assist in the SAT program. She is training to become a Gestalttherapist and founded the skateboard school "Rollbrettworkshop" where she teaches the art of living sideways.

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