

Explorations

in Consciousness

As a child growing up in Salem, Mass., Hillary Smith found fertile ground for cultivating an interest in spirituality.

"Because of Salem's reputation as the site of the infamous Salem witch trials, it has become a kind of mecca for people interested in alternative spirituality and philosophy," Hillary says. "So, as a kid, I had easy access to these ideas as well as the people who practice them." She would spend her days combing the local witches' markets and bookstores, searching for information on ESP, reincarnation, astral projection—"any subject dealing with the mystical or metaphysical."

Today, as a student in Goddard's individualized studies MA program, Hillary is still searching, still delving into "the mysteries of the unknown and unseen." Her musings have evolved somewhat since her days in Salem, and she has focused her master's program on consciousness studies.

"I began my Goddard studies with the question, 'What does it take for large shifts of consciousness to take place within society and within the individual?'"

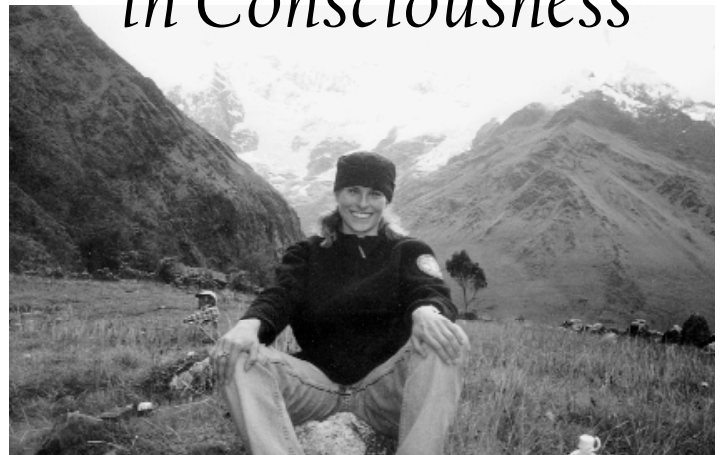
Her thesis, which she says emerged from Goddard's organic, "magical process" of following your instincts and following the path of your learning, concentrates on "Paradox and the Reconciliation of Opposites." It looks at the different, sometimes antagonistic forces that exist within the individual and explores how one might bring them into a complementary existence, or "oneness."

She likens it to the Jungian psychology of bringing opposites of the self into wholeness, "instead of getting sucked into the confusion and chaos of feeling like you're separated into two different people." Although this may seem a weighty subject, Hillary is no stranger to intellectually-challenging puzzles. She has spent her life grappling with the intangible.

After leaving her native Salem and earning a bachelor's degree in journalism from New York University, Hillary left the East Coast and landed a job in New Mexico as a writer and editor for an alternative weekly magazine. For two years, she explored and wrote about metaphysical subjects, gathering a group of friends with interests similar to her own. Although her magazine writing gave her a chance to delve into her own spiritual interests, she found it, likewise, to be limiting.

"Writing has been a passion of mine for a long time," she says. "I think I decided at one point that I wanted to get out of journalism as my career because it was taking away from my own creative juices."

It was then that her path took another turn and she was introduced to shamanism, or the spirituality of indigenous



Hillary Smith during her time with shamans in the Peruvian Andes.

peoples. "I found that it really spoke to me and called to me," she says. For the next several years, she threw herself into shamanism, studying and taking workshops on the subject and finally traveling to Peru to study with shamans living in the Andes Mountains.

"The shaman is an individual who has the ability to go into altered states of consciousness and gain extrasensory knowledge and healing power," she explains. "They're the healers and visionaries for their community."

She worked with the Q'ero people, the last of the Incas who live in the High Andes, and spent time in the jungle as well. Her experiences led her to write two books on the subject, both under the name Hillary S. Webb (Webb is her middle name): *Exploring Shamanism* and *Traveling Between the Worlds: Conversations with Contemporary Shamans*. The latter is a compilation of interviews with medicine people from around the world.

"One of the great things about shamanism is it's provided me a set of tools for having some extraordinary experiences with consciousness," she says.

She found the consciousness studies program at Goddard almost by chance, through a link on a website she was visiting. She says the program has given her the chance to stretch her previous experiences into new areas. "You're there with people who can speak at such interesting and deep levels."

With her August graduation just around the corner, Hillary says she is ready to move on to "whatever is next," but she is going to miss Goddard and its people tremendously. "I'm completely in my element when I'm at Goddard." ■

—by Kelly Collar