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Sacred HOOP

CELEBRATING THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

SEEKING THE AUTHENTIC

THE PEOPLE OF THE REINDEER

The Dukha Shamans
of the Mongolian Taiga

Spirits and Possession

Caitlín Matthews:
Applying Shamanic Hygiene

Empowering the Elders

Reconnecting the Ancestors

Respecting Ayahuasca

Grounded use of Plant Medicine

Damjin Dorlig

Blacksmith Spirit of Mongolia



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Nicholas Breeze Wood and the Sacred Hoop Team

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THE FOUNDING INSPIRATION FOR SACRED HOOP MAGAZINE IN 1993

"Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and around and about me was the whole hoop of the world... I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit and the shapes of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the Sacred Hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight and in the centre grew one almighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father, and I saw that it was holy."

(From the vision of Nicholas Black Elk Lakota Holy Man: 1863 - 1950)

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SACRED HOOP seeks to network those wanting to learn the spiritual teachings of indigenous peoples as a living path of knowledge. Our contents cover the integration of both old and new ways, and insights that contribute to a balanced and sustainable lifestyle in today's world.

We honour all paths and peoples and do not include material from, or give support to, any individual or group which seeks to oppress or discriminate on grounds of race, lineage, age, sex, class or belief. Nor do we knowingly publish any material that is inaccurate.

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'The blacksmith and the shaman come from the same nest,' runs an old Siberian proverb. **Nicholas Breeze Wood** introduces Damjin Dorlig, the Mongolian-Buryat blacksmith spirit and shares how the spirit came into his life.

EDITORIAL

Well, Yule time is the time of reindeers in our culture, and as we head towards the mid-winter festival here in the Northern lands, Hoop seems to be invaded by them. Our first two articles are about the Dukha people (often miscalled the Tsaatan, which is not their real name), the reindeer shamans of Northern Mongolia.

But shamanism can be looked at as a common human heritage, as many parallel animistic and shamanic traditions occur all over the world, which is what our third article argues.

And of course, in all animistic and shamanic cultures, a wisdom and awareness of spirit beings is found, some of which are not very healthy to be around. Generally however, this is because they are in the wrong place, rather than because they are 'just plain bad' - as my old gardening teacher used to put it - 'a rose in a potato patch is a weed.'

But for wisdom to be strong in a culture, we need wise elders who will anchor that wisdom; and that is the theme of our next article. In Native American, and many other cultures, elders are seen as vastly important. What a contrast that is with Western culture where they are often thrown on the rubbish heap, as having outlived their usefulness.

The land gives us wisdom, elders have always known to go and listen to the rocks and the mountains and seek learning in wild places. In our next article wisdom comes from a cave, places our ancestors were spiritually active within, as all the cave art they left us shows.

I have heard it argued that cave art was created in reaction to hypnagogic images induced by 'teacher plants.' Whether this is the case or not, those using teacher plants nowadays need to be grounded in their practice for the wisdoms gained to be of any practical use, and

our next two articles explore this.

And finally we end with an article about a Southern Siberian blacksmith spirit - who is also the spirit responsible for machines and all electrical items - including computers - so I thank that spirit greatly for working with the spirit of the Apple Mac in order to get this, our 86th issue, out for you - and I hope you enjoy the read.

Blessings to all Beings

Nicholas Breeze Wood

REINDEER HERDERS IN MY HEART

Tales of life and drums amongst the Dukha Reindeer people of Northern Mongolia

Sas Carey

My dream is to meet an authentic shaman who can teach me how they touch the unknown, and I am finally in a place where that might be possible.

Battulga takes me to Sanjaa, nephew of Soyan, a 100-year-old shaman in the West Taiga, who tells me that footprints carry a person's individual vibration, recognised by the spirits, and rocks transmit Earth energies. Then he turns to me and asks, "Who is this Jesus? Do you have your god in your house? Who is stronger - Jesus or Buddha?"

When our conversation ends, he takes me to Punsil, an elderly woman who, after playing her jaw harp, says to me, "Your work will be good and you will be a success." Hanging from a pole in her urts¹ is her altar, made of khadags and strips of white, blue, and green material. Punsil reaches into the cloth strips and pulls out two eagle claws to show us. Neither Sanjaa nor Punsil is a practicing shaman, though.

Maybe meeting them is my first test, because now we are going to visit Tsend, the daughter of Soyan. Tsend, a 68-year-old woman who is blind from cataracts, is a practicing shaman.

She welcomes us into her urts with reindeer milk tea and lifts a yellow curtain to reveal her altar of blue khadags and cloth strips. The cloth strips represent ongods (ancestor spirits). Sitting on the ground, Tsend reaches behind the wide ribbons of cloth and pulls out a six-inch deep, one-sided drum. The hoop has nine sets of three bumps, or knuckles, under the skin. On the inside walls of the drum, Tsend points out khunkhinguur (jingle cones), which are pieces of metal that clang against each other so that when the drum moves, it is alive.

Tsend smudges with a smoldering juniper branch for purification, accepts a small tugrik (Mongolian money) offering from us, and puts her headdress on. It is a navy blue headband with white eyebrows, nose, and lips embroidered on it. Eagle feathers top the headdress and a blue, white, and turquoise fringe hangs over her face.

When she takes it off, she begins to unpack a plump reindeer skin bag, first removing her drumbeater. The beater is covered with the white furry hide from a wild sheep's tail, and has a strip of attached metal rings that rattle when the beater moves.

Soft boots come out of the bag - made of fur, silk, streamers, and tan corduroy material. The deel² costume is cotton with embroidered backbone, muscles, ribs, and breasts and decorated with streamers and silk ropes or cording of various colours, called *manjin*, representing whips or snakes. On the shoulders are feathers representing wings to fly away.

Tsend explains that the first time she put on her costume, she was young and so sick that she nearly died. Her mother told her to wear the costume that was made for her and begin to practice as a shaman. As soon as she started, she became well. Tsend is generous, sharing her sacred shaman objects, telling her story, and explaining how ceremonies should correspond with the phases of the moon. I am grateful to Tsend. She is the first shaman to share with me.

Leaving Tsend's urts, Tsogkhuu, one of our hosts, who is riding his reindeer back home, gets off and offers to let me try sitting on it. As the large antlers brush my face, I see the beauty of their lives, the landscape, the simplicity, and the interaction between people, who spend their time going from one urts to another to drink milk tea, hang out, and talk.

"Will you come back?" asks one of the West Taiga women we met, as we are preparing to leave. "No doctor here would talk to us so personally. We fell in love with you and don't want you to leave. Could we find you a taiga husband?"

I smile.

I give my newly made deel to Zorig. He can use it all year, and it is so thick I can't bend in it. I will have another one made in Ulaanbaatar for another time.

At night, on a back road to Ulaanbaatar, we spot a wolf running from the van. "Now we will have good luck," says our driver. For my part, I have already experienced the good luck of visiting the glowing taiga, connecting with nomadic reindeer herders, and meeting a shaman. I know I will return to the taiga next year.

A SHAMAN'S BEGINNING

Since the book and movie, 'The Horse Boy,' by Rupert Isaacson³, came out, tourists make the journey to the taiga so that Dukha shamans will heal their autistic family members. I met such a family today. They are from Italy - parents, sisters, and a brother with autism. They invite me to a ceremony. But I don't know who will do it. Then I hear that S. Ganbat, a new shaman will perform the ceremony. He studied

with Ganzorig. S. Ganbat, with his wide smile and warm eyes, has always been kind to my team and me. His family once gave me a sacred rock, which I keep below my computer screen. We often use his urts for health assessments.

Ganzorig, is the brother of Gosta, the shaman Rupert Isaacson came to see with his son. I wonder how he became a shaman.

"When did it start?" I ask Ganzorig. "My father was a famous shaman who had to hide during the forbidden days of the Soviet period. I grew up in a shaman family but never expected to become a shaman. When I was 22, I felt some spirits. At that time, I often left by myself to wander in the mountains. I felt strange things. I didn't think I was a shaman, but my mother asked a fortune teller about me and the woman said I was a shaman. When my father died, my older brother Gosta and my niece Khanda made shaman clothes for me. Gosta was my teacher."

Ganzorig and I share experiences. I tell him that in my practice, when I feel the spirit I sometimes cry. He says he feels that he loses control of himself. I say I can feel my own energy as well as the spirit's energy and that I don't completely surrender. He says it is good to feel both, that he would like to and if he could, he would have more control.

One way does not seem better than another to me. I think they are just different experiences. "Some shamans," he tells me, "can control the spirits. Those are the real shamans. I have to approach the spirits carefully and humbly to convince them to do what I want."

I am not so sure that one way is more real than another.

Ganzorig describes his experience of performing a ritual ceremony. "First I call the ongods. After they are inside of me, I connect with the mountain and nature. Those are my main ongods. They take me to other ongods. Generally, I don't know what happens until it is over and I depart from them."

GANZORIG'S CEREMONY

I want to feel the sun, but the ground is too damp to lie on, so I head down toward the river, past the golden Asian globeflowers, and notice a rocky island. It is actually a tiny rise of gravel and small pebbles, a couple of steps through the frigid water. The islet is barely big enough for me to lie with my knees raised. I have never felt it so warm here - I am wearing a thin cotton top. The sun pours down and the river runs by me. I feel the small stones - lumpy under me, but dry. Breathe.

I close my eyes. Last night for the first time in the taiga, I actually experienced a shaman ceremony! Everything that happened seems like a dream.

During the day, everyone was busy. Even Khanda, Ganzorig's niece, wasn't in her urts. I found her at Ganzorig's with his oldest daughter Tegshbayar, sewing a new skin onto Ganzorig's drum. Next, they put the drum in the sun to dry.

After dinner, Khanda made bread. Usually this happened in the morning. Unusual things were happening. Energy was building.

When the stars came out around midnight, we were invited into Ganzorig's urts. The urts was full of people - our team, Ganzorig's big family, and a few from the other settlement, including Dalai's elderly mother, Olzii, who is blind.

Someone lit a sprig of juniper from the stove fire, which filled the urts with incense and cleansed the space, the costume, the headdress, and the altar of cloth strips representing the ongods. My eyes felt itchy from the dense smoke.

Dressing the shaman was the beginning of the ceremony. Khanda and Tegshbayar unfastened Ganzorig's deel buttons. Khanda slipped his left arm out and immediately Tegshbayar put the costume's left sleeve on him. It was like a smooth wave, daily clothes off, shaman costume on.

Khanda pulled off his heavy felt-lined boots and pulled up the soft brown suede ones. Ganzorig's costume was a gray deel with white streamers attached in the back with fingers and ribs embroidered above his own. Bits of other materials adorned the deel - khunkhinguur, feathers, and silk.

Lastly, Khanda and Tegshbayar took Ganzorig's knitted cap off his head and tied on a headdress. In the area of his forehead, a face was embroidered, and flowing from that was a fringe that hid his face. Eagle feathers decorated the top.

When his drum was placed into his hands, he began to gently, softly, pat the drum with the wild sheep tail beater. He added a soft chant. Then the chant and the drumming became louder and more frenzied. The ancestors came into Ganzorig's body. Ancestors require dark, a smoke, or maybe a drink of milk tea.

One after another Ganzorig welcomed seven ancestors - some benign, docile, peaceful, others demanding, disruptive. He jumped into the air, swirled around - all in the small space of the urts. His sons squatted between him and the hot wood stove with their arms spread open so he wouldn't fall or get too close to the fire while he was in the trance.

The air was thick with juniper incense. I nodded off and awoke each time a new ongod came. It was 2:30 in the morning. I felt the ancestors, one after another. The drum beat in my heart. Ganzorig was a bird, a wolf, and a spirit.

After half the night, he slowed down, threw his beater onto Olzii's deel, and gave her a message, then one to each person. I had a slightly panicked feeling as he came toward me. I didn't know what to expect, what I needed to do or say. I watched, spread my deel skirt open to catch the beater.

I needed to say something, but what? He threw the beater. Khanda prompted me. "Tuguu," I repeated as I handed the beater back.

He said something to me. Davaa translated. "Water is very precious. Don't pollute it."

Then he was done and the reverse was happening with his clothes. First, his hat and his boots were removed. His own brown deel was placed back on him, one arm at a time. He left the urts. When he returned, he was Ganzorig. We shared milk tea and bread, sitting on reindeer skins around the stove.

He turned to me and asked, "Was that okay?" I was thinking, Was that okay? You mean seeing, feeling, smelling, experiencing a shaman ceremony here in the taiga? Not just okay, it was the answer to a dream. What I have wanted for 12 years! Only that. But I didn't have the right words and maybe there weren't any right words, so I didn't say anything, just nodded.

I jump up from sunning on the river gravel, realising that I need to get back to the herders.

ANOTHER VISIT ANOTHER YEAR

My team on this visit will be three Mongolian friends, Bayara, Khongoroo, and Battulga. We are planning this year's trip to the taiga, discussing how many horses we will need, how long we will be there, and the current condition of the trails.

Out of the blue, Battulga asks, "Would you like to buy a shaman costume and drum, Sas?"

"Me?" I answer with a jolt and a question. "No."

I have learned that if you are a shaman in Mongolia, seven women in your family make your costume for you. And if you are a real shaman in the taiga, your male relatives make the drum for you. If you are a traditional shaman, you had mental problems or epilepsy when you were a teenager. If you are an authentic shaman, your ancestors were shamans. I do not meet these criteria. I am not a shaman. And since I am not a shaman, why would I want a costume?

Except...as Battulga knows, I have been seeking to meet and learn from shamans for many years - from the southern border of Mongolia, near China, to the north, near Tuva and Russia - finally finding them in the north. He knows that I want to touch the unknown that they know, get inside the mysteries, and learn how they connect to the on gods.

I will never be a shaman, but maybe I would learn more by experiencing my own drum and costume. When he asked me I did get a jolt. Maybe Battulga knows something I don't know.

Understanding shamanism, which has been an integral part of the Dukhas' culture for generations, gives me a fuller appreciation of their world. Plus I have a personal appreciation of the practice, as it gives me a chance to deepen my own spiritual healing work.

"I was in front of the post office in Ulaanbaatar the other day and someone was selling a shaman costume and drum. I thought of you. I have the phone number," continues Battulga.

I am tempted, because the shamans' costumes are one of the striking aspects of their practice, and the drum...wouldn't my son, who makes drums himself, be interested in seeing the type used by Mongolian shamans?

But I will be here for two months, and I don't know what expenses I might incur. I can't buy a shaman costume and drum. A little corner of me is still searching, craving to get closer, wanting to touch the mystery. I already do spiritual healing. Would a costume and drum get me closer?

"No," I repeat. "Why would I want a costume and drum? I'm not a shaman."

So Battulga drops the subject.

THE VOICE OF THE DRUM

It is that time of night when even the horses are quiet. There's only the occasional yip of a dog or wolf. Bayara and Battulga's tent is quiet. Khongoroo is asleep. I can't sleep; my eyes are open, staring into the darkness.

Then I think I hear a sound. Muffled. Boom, boom. Boom, boom. I lift my head. It's quiet. Then boom, boom. Boom, boom. Maybe the shaman is doing a ceremony? It must be. Or maybe there's a new shaman?

The drum continues. After the sound stops for a long time, I fall into a deep sleep. The next morning one of the herders visits us in the horse pasture. "Was there a ceremony last night?" I ask.

"No."

"Maybe there is a new shaman?"

"No."

"I heard drumming last night."

"Was it in your dreams?"

"No, I was awake."

"Must be the ancestors welcoming you," says the herder. "That happens sometimes."

That night Saintsetseg, a shaman newly graduated from the jaw harp to the drum, performs a ceremony. At the end, she looks at me and says, "Do you have any questions?"

"Yes," I say. That mysterious drumming has me confused.

"Should I get a shaman costume?"

Saintsetseg sits quietly, checks with the ancestors who are still around. Then she answers in Tuvan, her brother translates into Mongolian, and this is then translated into English.

"Yes, but if it has black on it, cut it off. It will absorb negativity."

"What about a drum?"

"A drum is no problem."

"Hey, Battulga," I say the next morning as we sit on the ground eating instant oatmeal, "Saintsetseg says I should get that costume and drum."

"Oh, that? I threw away the phone number before we left Ulaanbaatar."

"Oh, okay," I say, practicing the Buddhist tenet of non-attachment. This, of all things, is not to be forced.

A few days later, when we are in Murun to catch a plane back to Ulaanbaatar, Battulga says, "Hey, Sas, I found a drum."

"I can't buy it," I say right away. I don't have much money left. I shouldn't buy a drum.

"Well, I'm going to check it out," says Battulga.

"Maybe it's not the real thing."

When he leaves, I lie on my bed in the guesthouse and keep repeating to myself, "I will not buy the drum. I will not buy the drum. I will not buy the drum."

I feel drawn to it. Maybe it is a leading to get it. I feel my heart beating. I feel excited. I feel desire - this would not be a good quality if I were Buddhist.

Yet, I feel drawn toward the drum, holding it, taking it with me, learning from it as a way to understand the mysteries, embrace them, get inside them as much as possible. I want to know the ways others connect with the spirit.

The phone rings, Battulga says the drum is perfect. Three-year-old female deerskin with a wild sheep tail for the beater. The real thing.

"You aren't buying it, right?"

"Right," I gulp.

Having researched shaman equipment over these years, I know everything is right about this drum - the three-year-old female deerskin

it is made from, the wild sheep tail beater. Battulga knows it, too.

I use my cheap phone card to call my friend Eleanor in Vermont, who has studied shamanism and is a mentor to me. I talk to her about the trip, and when I finish, I say, "Oh, and there's a shaman's drum I could buy, but I'm not getting it."

"Don't feel guilty if you don't get it, but feel guilty if you don't get it."

I know she is purposely giving me a riddle.

Okay, I think, I will look at it.

Battulga's friend appears with the drum in an orange reinforced plastic bag.

"Hit it," he says after he unties the bag.

I pick up the drum with shaking hands. It has a raw, earthy smell. I tap - boom, boom. Boom, boom. It vibrates into my heart.

"No," he says, "I mean smack it."

Thunder... The deep, resonant sound shakes my heart, my soul, the room, waking the very walls - and the drum. I know it is mine. I put the drum back into its bag and place it carefully on an empty bed.

We go to bed early because we have a morning flight to Ulaanbaatar. I lie on my side, roll over, roll over, but I can't sleep. The drum is still vibrating.

Even though I do spiritual work, I am also very practical. I have never given an inanimate object live characteristics. But the drum is putting out a powerful energy. I get up and move it onto the windowsill, away from me. Still I can't sleep.

At 1:00 in the morning, when it is 1:00 in the afternoon in Vermont, I call Eleanor.

"I bought it."

"Oh, yes?"

"But we can't sleep."

"Oh, no. Did you feed it? It needs tobacco. Any sage there? Talk to it."

Doing a ritual for a drum is new to me, but so is a shaman's drum. Bayara donates tobacco from a cigarette. Khongoroo donates juniper incense from the taiga. We light the incense and circle it around the drum three times.

I say, "Please go back to sleep. Please be calm so I can take you to Vermont."

We sleep, but this is only the beginning of the drum making its presence known.

TRAVEL WITH A DRUM

We will fly to Ulaanbaatar on the last leg of our taiga journey. In the morning we cram our luggage into a small car - the only taxi available at this early hour - and drive to Murun Airport.

The drum doesn't have a case, so we can't check it, and it is too big to carry on. Fortunately, Battulga will stay in Murun a little longer. He says he can keep the drum with him, have a case made, and bring it to Ulaanbaatar when he comes in a week or two. I am disappointed that we can't take the drum, but it is okay because Battulga will take care of it.

Two weeks after we left him, Battulga arrives in Ulaanbaatar bearing the shaman drum in a square pine box, heavy enough to be a coffin. I can't lift it. I can't keep it in Munkhjin's room in Ulaanbaatar where I am staying. She explains that Buddhism and shamanism can't occupy the same room and she has Buddhist gods here.

Battulga lugs it up the four flights of stairs to Khongoroo's apartment where it can stay. We open the box.

Whoosh! The drum energy pours out - strong, pulsating. We feed it tobacco and burn incense and put it high on a shelf. We also order an instrument case lined in velvet with a handle - one that I can carry to the U.S.

Battulga doesn't tell us right away, but he has had his own adventures with the drum.

"That drum is strong, Sas. The older man I was staying with never slept for the 10 days it was at his place. Then I had a hard time finding a ride to Ulaanbaatar. I finally found one and put the box in the back of the van. The assistant driver was drunk and lifted the box.

'What is this?' he asked. 'Shamans drum,' I answered.

The drunken man dropped the box on the ground like a hot potato. I couldn't let someone insult the drum, so I kicked him as he was leaning over. My foot knocked out his two front teeth.

So I carried the box with me to the police station to report what I had done. The police asked if the man was drunk

I nodded. 'Then no problem,' said the police, 'he deserved it.'

Well, obviously, this is not Vermont, and Battulga is not a pacifist. The drum is alive and sacred - and people interact with it. I will have to be respectful of it. Then I start thinking about what that episode would look like in Vermont and how much those teeth would cost, plus lawsuits. Here it is like being in the Wild West.

With the drum in Ulaanbaatar, we now need to think about getting it out of Mongolia and transporting it to Vermont, as I am leaving in a week. I have had 'artifacts' confiscated at the airport, with fines, before. This year looks like it could be especially difficult, because riots destroyed a wing of the Central Palace of Culture a few days ago and many ancient instruments, costumes, and art objects were stolen, broken, or destroyed. It's not a good week to take artifacts out of the country.

We call customs and ask if we can take a shaman's drum out. "No, of course not," they tell us.

I call Munkhjin, who works for the Ministry of Education and Culture. She is at work and will know what to do.

"Hey, Munkhjin, could you find out if there is any legal way for us to take a drum out of Mongolia?" I ask.

And sure enough, there is. First, take a picture from the front and another angle. Second, write what you will use it for and that you collect Mongolian artifacts. Third, tell where you got it and that it is new.

Two days before I leave, I get the stamped permission, and the drum goes into the checked luggage on the plane. Even stored there, I can feel the vibration of that drum's energy as I cross the Pacific.

At U.S. customs, there is a question on the immigration form asking if I have any animal products.

"Yes," I mark the square.

"What do you have?" asks the immigration officer.

"A drum."

"Go through the red line."

The drum goes through the x-ray with everything else and out the other side, and now the drum and I are on the last lap of the trip, from Chicago to Burlington, to our final home in Vermont.

I guess it feels well taken care of, because it is peaceful. I know it still has much to teach me. Eleanor, my friend who gave me the riddle about getting the drum, invites me to take the drum to her house for a little ceremony to welcome it.

I am in awe of it and don't have any idea what to do with it now that I have it in Vermont. She has some women friends visiting, and each one gives an idea of what she perceives that the drum needs: flowers, incense, tobacco. Someone says my grandsons should be the first ones to play it and they are the first ones, on this side of the Pacific.

A few weeks after the drum welcoming, a client calls and asks for a healing, and I think it would be powerful to use the drum as part of his session. He lies on the massage table and I beat the drum, holding it in front of me as I stand over him. My arm gets tired. I sit down and beat the drum sitting down. It is so heavy. I beat it as long as I can, letting the rhythm and healing come through it. My arm hurts. I stop.

The client says his healing is amazing and leaves, but I can't move the next day. I can't twist my torso. It hurts to get into and out of my car. But still, I drive to my massage therapist. I hurt so much I can't wait for her to get to her office and meet her at home.

"How much does that drum weigh?" she asks me when I am lying on the table, groaning.

"About 25 pounds," I say, surely only something that heavy could cause this much pain, but when I get home I weigh the drum. When I see the number, it makes me laugh. Four pounds. How could I be so far off? And what made my side hurt so much?

I decide to wait for a leading to use the drum again. Then maybe it won't feel like it weighs 25 pounds. The experience changes my view of shaman ceremonies. The way they swing their drums around for three or four hours, they must be getting help from somewhere.

THE CLOTHES OF A SHAMAN

Back in Ulaanbaatar on another visit, someone points to a sign pasted to a city wall. It says,

'Shaman kits made to order.' Shaman kits? Are they that common?

I'm told it's probably not the real thing. I notice there is a lot of discussion using the word 'real' in relationship to shamans and all pertaining to them.

"Why don't we go talk to Sukhbat, my father's friend?" Khongoroo suggests. "He is the president of the Mongolian Shaman Association."

From my interviews in the taiga, I know there is some question about what makes an authentic shaman. Taiga shamans like Gosta ask what a Ph.D. in shamanism means. "Can you study it and become a shaman?" What exactly does the Mongolian Shaman Association do? I am paying attention to this throughout the interview we eventually have with Director Sukhbat.

"Are you a shaman?" he asks me after I buy an aman khuur (shaman's jaw harp).

"No," I answer.

"Why not?"

"It's not my culture. I am of European ancestry."

"There are shamans all over the world. I know Swedish, French, Spanish shamans. It is the most basic religion, the first religion."

"Well, I have a drum..."

"Listen. There is a woman in Ulaanbaatar who makes shaman costumes. She is a shaman herself."

He writes her number on a slip of paper. On the way out of his office, we dial the number.

"What is your shaman tradition?" the woman wants to know.

I have no idea what to answer.

"I am familiar with shamans in the taiga. My ancestors are European."

Is that an answer?

When she quotes a price, it is too high and I say,

"No. Never mind."

A few minutes later, she calls back. Do I need everything? I don't know what everything is. I don't need a drum. I need the costume and a headdress. "A headdress will be more," she says, and quotes half of the original price. She invites us over the following day so she can measure me.

The next day we take a taxi to an outlying district of Ulaanbaatar and phone her when we get there.

After we stand on the street for 20 minutes, a small woman with a deeply lined face and a cigarette in her hand motions. We follow her to a store where there are piles of dark material on tables. I don't see anything that looks like a shaman costume.

She leads us into the back, past a washing machine into a small, dark hallway. It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. Above a bed is an altar and beside it a shaman costume, hanging with the headdress looped over the deal.

"Don't touch it!" she warns us before we even get close.

I look at her thin, drawn face and the cigarette in her hand. This is not a healthy person - neither healthy nor happy. I need to be careful. I have contradictory thoughts. This one could do an evil spell - I know it...not that I am afraid of a spell...I know how to hold her in the Light.

"Now, what kind of costume do you want? Oh, you're a beginner. You need a blank costume. The ongod's will tell you what you need when you call them. Blue. Blue is a good colour. Go to the ongod's humbly. Take off your rings and earrings. You need pants. Green is good. A shirt. White. To go under the blue deal. Yes.

Do you want a headdress?" I nod. "That will be more," she repeats.

We return to her material store and she sits at a sewing machine with the cigarette dangling from her lips. She pulls out some *manjin* (the cloth snakes that hang from a costume). "You will need *manjin*."

You can't do a ceremony without a whip."

"I don't want black and red."

"How about blue and red and white? You need red."

"Okay."

"This is more."

"Do you need a wooden horse case for your aman khuur?"

"Yes."

"I will see if I can find the man who carves them. But maybe it will be hard to find him tonight."

It is Monday. I am leaving for the U.S. Wednesday, so I ask her if she can get it done by tomorrow.

"Yes, of course."

Mongolians love last-minute challenges.

Tuesday afternoon we take a taxi to her shop. The items are neatly folded beside her sewing machine. A royal blue deel, a white shirt, dark green pants, and, most amazing and beautiful of all, a headdress with an embroidered face on it!

She follows my eyes.

"That's your face!"

When I look, I don't see wide Asian eyes, but my own western ones.

"Maybe you could give a little extra gift for that? It took a long time."

I try everything on. The deel is the most comfortable one I have ever worn. The pants have an elastic top and slide on easily. But the white shirt is too small.

"Oh, you look a lot smaller than you are! Okay, I will make one, let's see, two sizes bigger. I can get it done by tomorrow."

The next morning we go to pick up the costume. She must have stayed up all night sewing. The shirt is done and it fits perfectly now. We run out of time, so we won't get the carved horse case for the aman khuur. A costume needs boots, too, so it looks like I will be back again next year.

My new costume came with me on the plane across the Pacific and over the North Pole with no problems and is now in Vermont, resting inside my drum. It is soft and perfect - and blank.

BLESSING THINGS ALIVE

Shaman accessories come to me one step at a time. The case I need for my aman khuur is a wooden carved horse, which will become 'animated,' which means it will become alive.

The word for personal spiritual power is *khiimor* (made up of the words for wind and horse). Wind in this connotation is similar to the Chinese word chi for energy.

Back in Mongolia, we ride to the northernmost settlement of the Dukha reindeer herders, called Orton. Some refer to it as the "far East Taiga camp". Battulga says that a herder here named Orchirbat is the best one to carve a case for my aman khuur. He is a tall, slender, shy reindeer herder and when I ask, he agrees. Word comes to me when he is about to start it. Do I want to watch? Of course.

I clear my throat to announce my presence, lift the door flap, and walk in. Orchirbat is sitting on the floor with a four-by-six-by-one-inch block of wood, marking the shape of a horse with a pencil. As I watch, he slowly carves, bit by bit, digging into the soft larch.

His children come in giggling with their friends and ask me questions in Mongolian, and I try to answer them back in Mongolian. They want to know the alphabet in English, then words like - house, friend, stove, father, mother, and land. They giggle some more as they try each one. I want to sit beside them forever.

A day later, Orchibat is finished with a proud-looking horse. It has an indentation on its back that is the shape of my aman khuur and a smooth base just the right size for holding. I am asked if I have a khadag, and one is tied onto the base, and wrapped around the horse.

Battulga says, "Sas, you still need boots to complete your shaman costume. The best person to make them is in this settlement - Orchibat's wife, Munkhtsetseg, daughter of shaman Tsend."

I get fitted for boots. A day later, they are ready - made of reindeer skin, lined with white cotton. They have leather fringes around the tops and some fringes on the sides - for the khunkhinguur - jingle cones - to be attached. They smell like a taiga home - reindeer skin mixed with tangy reindeer milk, earth, and medicinal plants.

On the way from the taiga, we get out of the hot van at shaman Davaajav's wooden home. We see a padlock on the door and know no one is inside. Our driver walks around in back and returns with Davaajav, shirtless and with big round glasses on. Embarrassed that we caught him like this, he explains that today is the day for shearing his sheep. He just finished, so if we give him a minute, he would love to see us.

I met Davaajav last year when he did a ceremony for Khongoroo. This year we are returning with photos we took of him and his family - and requesting help. When he is ready, I meet with him to ask if he will animate, or endow with khiimor, the aman khuur and reindeer boots to make them sacred.

There is not a long ceremony or even a change of clothes from the brown deel he has put on. I sit facing him on the floor. Davaajav asks if we are fooling around or if I truly want it animated. Truly, I say. The shaman ties a string on my aman khuur and attaches it to the horse and a blue khadag. Throwing the khadag over his shoulder he asks if he can play the instrument. I nod.

"If you are doing a treatment, use your lips, like this. If you are calling an ongod, put it against your teeth."

He prays over it, then softly plays it. He blows into my crown chakra at the top of my head. It feels like a soft blast of energy. Then he hands the aman khuur to me.

"About the reindeer boots - they need khunkhinguur. I can make them for you. Do you have khunkhinguur on your costume? You will need some there, too. Let's see, I think I will have time to make them tomorrow and the next day. Why don't you come back the next day? The khunkhinguur will jingle each time they are moved. This means they are alive."

When we return to Davaajav in two days, the khunkhinguur are finished. Now I have every item a taiga shaman uses for a ceremony - costume, drum, beater, mirror, manjin, headdress, boots, juniper incense, and even some things I don't have names for.

Only...I am not a shaman.

Through the process of getting shaman paraphernalia, I learn to honour the properties of each one - how they, like all of nature, are alive. While I will never be a shaman, my goal is to understand it as fully as possible so I can share the knowledge with others.

Shamanism represents a kind of mysticism, a connection to the unknown, that makes me want to get inside it. This is not a new feeling for me. I always embrace life's mysteries. Connecting with the ancestors, using the drum, having energy flow into the shaman - what do these feel like? What happens? I wonder. My leading has brought me this far.

"Could I be your student?" I ask Davaajav. It is a risky question. There is a big chance he will say no.

"Will you be back next year?"

"Yes," I say, believing I will.

He agrees.

I hand him an offering, for it is a great honour to be allowed to be his student. I am very grateful.

Only one other time have I put on my shaman costume and headdress and beat the drum. When I did, I began to feel the pulse of another dimension. I don't yet know what I am to learn from that dimension. I am waiting for a leading to tell me when to put the costume on again and what's next. The drum is quiet now.

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Sas has worked as a health education consultant for the Mongolian office of the United Nations Development Programme, and has directed three films about Mongolia: 'Gobi Women's Song,' 'Taiga Heart Song' (on YouTube), and 'Steppe Herbs, Mare's Milk and Jelly Jars: A Journey to Mongolian Medicine.' She is the author of the book, 'Reindeer Herders in My Heart.'

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Nomadicare will release two movies in 2015. One is 'Migration' and the other is 'Ceremony.'

NOTES:

1: Urts, the traditional tipi-like dwelling of the Dukha people.

2: Deel, the traditional long coats worn by Mongolians.

3: For an article by Rupert Isaacson see Sacred Hoop Issue 64.

IN THE LODGES OF THE REINDEER PEOPLE

In search of the shamans of Northern Mongolia

Rebecca Singer

We crouched on a peak in the Altai Mountains, bracing against a storm that had swept in, bringing stinging sleet along with operatic thunder and lightning. The horses who carried our gear stood tied to a tree and the herders gathered with the horses, huddled among them, muttering calming words to the nervous animals.

My partner Wil and I had been riding toward the Reindeer People, the Dukha, whom the Mongolians call the Tsaatan, through the rough mountains and forests, across rivers, and over steep landscapes, terrain that these Mongolian horses crossed effortlessly.

It was a ten-to twelve-hour ride to the summer camp of the Dukha, where I hoped to sit face to face with a woman shaman, a direct descendent of the first shamans on earth. It would be the culmination of a dream for me. Now the sleet was turning to snow, and the winds were picking up.

It was the first time I had ever seen lightning in a snowfall. I was cold and my spine ached. Our saddles were Russian, about the size of a small pillow, consisting only of a few layers of padding covered with leather. The stirrups were set high, and I was glad we had brought our own stirrup straps from the States, that could be lengthened to fit our legs, but the back of the saddle had a metal loop that served as a backrest, and mine hit just above my tailbone. I could feel the oozing of painful blisters from the continual chafing.

Wil looked pale and sick, dizzy and weakened from cold and lack of protein. While I was grateful that we had layers of the right gear to wear, I still wondered if we were going to die there.

The heavy sky poured its freezing burden down on us, sleet scoured our faces raw, and thunder deafened us just moments after lightning flashed. What if we were struck by lightning? We were up too high, vulnerable, without refuge. I began to pray. For the first time in many years, I felt really scared, my heart beating wildly.

But in just a few minutes the storm shifted, and the herders signaled we were to mount the horses and continue. Riding into a gentler sleet, we were all relieved to be moving.

At the top of the mountain ridge the view opened up, revealing grand snow-covered mountains and a green valley below. The rushing streams were behind us now, as were the tall, black-fly-infested forests that reminded me of scenes from Dr. Zhivago.

We rode on, the steep muddy trail down the mountainside being hard to negotiate. From time to time, I had to dismount and step carefully alongside my horse.

Below us, I could barely see the tiny dots of the Dukha's, tipi-like,urts dwellings in the valley floor, shining in the setting sun. I was relieved, thinking we would be there before dark. But the trail down to the Tsataan camp was slow going. It was hours later, long after dark, that we stumbled from the horses into a urts known as the 'Hotel,' and lay on the damp ground.

We were soaked; everything was soaked, our clothes, gear, everything. And we were cold. The floor of the urts was uneven. And cold.

Immediately the herders came in with wood and made a fire in the small rusty woodstove that stood at the center of the urts. The herders began hanging our belongings and clothes on strips of cloth, crossing the urts inside, till the roof hung with a wet web of everything. Wil and I lay on the ground, spent.

Two members of the tribe brought us warm bread and cheese, and it took all our strength to sit up and thank them, and then more effort to chew. The women returned with warm reindeer milk to wash down the bread and cheese, and our bodies slowly thawed, the food and drink reviving us enough for us to have the energy to reach for dry clothes, which were wrapped in garbage bags, deep inside one of the packs. Closing the urts's flap, we changed, and spread dry sleeping pads over the wet ground and then the warmed sleeping bags over the pads.

I was aware of bleeding blisters on my back, low on my spine, but, too tired to do anything about them, I lay on my side with closed eyes, imagining the horses stepping back up the mountains.

But now Wil wasn't lying down, he was pacing, and I realised that he was really ill, ill and angry - a rare mood for easygoing Wil. I knew he was angry at the lack of help on the way up the mountain, and angry at being ill.

I made him lie down and gave him more reindeer milk, and he finally settled, like an animal exhausted from charging over and over against an immovable target.

Slowly, through the haze of fatigue, cold, and pain, I realised that many people had come and gone to make us warm and give us food - people who had next to nothing. People had welcomed us, children peeked in and giggled. The herders had tied the horses, hung our belongings above the fire.

As I gradually warmed, it began to sink in: I was finally here. Our twelve-hour horseback journey was over, and we were here - here, at last, after all the years of yearning, of longing to actually meet a woman shaman descended from the original shamans.

Now I was sitting in an urts among them. Overwhelmed with wonder, gratitude, and exhaustion, I lay down again and fell asleep immediately, too tired to dream.

LIFE IN THE REINDEER CAMP

Next morning, stepping out among the urts and reindeer into the pre-dawn light, I oriented myself by the faint glow that was the promise of a rising sun. Everyone was asleep, but the young reindeer, who had been tied down at night close to camp, so the wolves wouldn't hunt them. I looked at the taiga, the stream, the surrounding hills and the urts

Moving quietly, so the dogs wouldn't bark, I walked to the stream and dipped in a hand to test the water; cold, very cold. Although it was June, there was a dusting of snow on the hills, and a chill on my face as I walked back to my urts.

Before coming here, I learned that this tribe had lived in northern Mongolia since the 1947 closing of the Russian-Mongolian border. Like so many hunter-gatherers, the culture and very existence of these nomadic people are threatened. Although the democratic reforms of the 1990's gave the tribes ownership of their herds once again, the herds are terribly depleted, since the people are forced to sell or barter the animals that are their only real currency.

Now I could see first-hand what daily life was like for them. It was a grinding series of daily chores necessary for bare survival: fetch water, boil water, bake bread, clean urts, carry wood, separate wood, release the reindeer, carve moulted reindeer antlers for visiting tourists, mend clothing, gather the reindeer, milk the reindeer...

As I sat thinking about this, Saya, a young Mongolian woman, entered our urts. Saya had been to America, where she had learned English. A few years ago, while visiting the Dukha and working with them through a Non-Governmental Organisation, she had fallen in love and married one of the young men of the tribe. Now she lived among them, following the traditions of the Dukha women, and serving as an interpreter for visiting tourists.

"How was your night?" Saya asked. "Did you enjoy the urts hotel?"

"Fine. We are fine," I answered.

Wil was still sleeping, and I was grateful to notice that his skin looked less chalky, more alive.

"I hope I'm not being rude," I said, "but I would really love to speak with the shaman sometime today if possible. Would you be so kind as to ask her if she would speak with me?"

Saya looked down at the ground, and chewed on a piece of bread. Her tough, stout frame, dressed in western sweatshirt and pants, made her look like a she-bear.

"The shaman is shy, she doesn't like to talk with strangers. Sorry. I know you came a long way, but that's the way it is."

"I understand, but I think the shaman might be willing, would you mind asking her later, when she has a moment? Is asking her possible?"

"I will ask. But don't expect much. I am going to get you some reindeer milk, and enough for your husband. We are glad you came, and later you can see the carvings the men make from the reindeer antlers. There will probably be something you will like to buy."

Saya's manner was abrupt, the expression in her eyes almost stern. Possibly the arrival of more and more tourists to this remote area was a drain. It was obvious that the 'Hotel' was a money-making venture, and I was sure the Hotel had been Saya's idea. Being the only one who had bridged the world of the Dukha and the outside world, the young Mongolian had knowledge that no one else in the tribe could imagine.

Tourists would want to be in an urts, they would want a fire and warm bread. So give these things to them, and made them pay. Call it a 'hotel,' and - voila - money!

As the sun rose, camp life revealed its morning rhythms; fires were lit in wood stoves, reindeer were set loose to graze. Women came out of the urts and made offerings of reindeer milk to the four directions, the dogs barked and were thrown scraps of food. Then the men set off up the mountainside to gather wood. It was a warm day, and many of the reindeer stayed in camp, circling the urts to avoid the flies.

I walked a respectful distance away to lift my skirt, squat, and pee. To my dismay, a group of reindeer came running full speed towards me. I thought I was going to be trampled and, as I fell backwards, I managed a laugh at the thought of the headline: 'Woman Killed while Peeing in Reindeer Camp.'

The reindeer came to a sudden halt, and waited for me to gather myself together and leave. It was the salt in the urine they were after. Future trips to pee went smoothly as I watched them approach and talked with them. "Hang on there, folks. Urine comin' right up. Just hold on to your antlers."

A MEETING WITH THE SHAMAN

Saya appeared in our urts a few hours later as we were munching some almonds and dried fruit which we had brought with us. Wil had made several forays along the river, exploring our immediate surroundings, and he had created order out of chaos in the 'Hotel.' Obviously he was feeling better. Now Saya parted the flaps and spoke to me.

"Saintsetseg the shaman says she will see you. She says she saw you coming, and is happy to talk with you. I will interpret if you like, or you can go in by yourself."

"Please come. I would appreciate your help this first meeting," I said. "When?"

"Now."

And we were off, Saya leading the way.

The two of us walked across the camp, the tiny grasses and weeds alternating with areas of bare dirt and dust. There were reindeer droppings everywhere, and as I picked my way, the elder women of the tribe watched while we approached the shaman's urts, which was a bit removed from the others.

Saya opened the flap and we stepped in. It was only just light enough to see. A smell of earth and pungent juniper filled the air. This was the smell of a shaman's world. I recognised it, and suddenly felt slightly disoriented, out of place and time, with a sense of being both in and out of my body at the same moment.

On a wooden bench, tending the fire, sat Saintsetseg. She was dressed in her traditional deel, a thick silk robe, that served to keep out both the heat and cold.

Her deel was a brilliant blue, the colour of the silk khadags tied to ovoos as offerings, in honour of the sky spirits. Since the sky was worshiped throughout the whole region, ovoos could be found on almost any hillside, and when you came upon one, you were to walk three times around it clockwise, and give thanks.

In contrast to her sky-blue deel, Saintsetseg's eyes were small, dark, and warm, deeply sunken in her round face.

The shaman gestured for Saya to sit to her left, and for me to sit across. I had the feeling there were more people in the urts than the three of us. The shaman's energy was very held within, as though her belly contained a personal fire made of glowing coals.

As Saya had said, she was indeed shy. She offered bread, and cups of reindeer milk. We sat in silence for a few heartbeats. Then I broke the silence.

"Please tell her I am grateful that she would see me."

Saya translated, then replied. "Saintsetseg knows you to be a shaman, and is happy to meet you. She could see you coming up the mountain. You are welcome here."

I carefully reached for a tiny crystal I had brought with me all the way across the ocean, through the mountains and forests, to this camp.

"Please offer her this."

Next I brought a small leather bag filled with sage out of my coat.

"And this."

And finally a bag of loose tobacco.

"And this, in the way of saying hello."

Saintsetseg nodded and made a low sound: hmmm. She regarded the gifts slowly, examining each one, nodding her head up and down.

Still without saying anything, she turned sideways and carefully reached for a carving of a fish on the end of a strip of leather and offered it. It was a salmon, beautifully etched in gorgeous detail. Then the shaman picked up a bag of antelope skin, and offered a handful of crushed flowers.

Her hands were thick and blistered, witness to a life of hard work. Although she was a small, sturdy woman, Saintsetseg had a powerful presence and was very present in her body. A long black braid hung over her shoulder like a rope that held stories.

As we exchanged gifts, we simply looked at one another, across time, across continents, over space, through eons. Generations passing. Silence. Women had been sitting like this forever, before time, before body.

We sat. The smells surrounded us, and held us in some other world, out of time. Light wove us together through time and space. I felt at home.

Then came her soft words.

Saya translated, "Saintsetseg says she can feel your heart. She is happy you are here, she says, later, perhaps we can exchange readings."

"I would be honoured," I replied. "Please ask if she likes chocolate."

A broad smile transformed the shaman's features into childish glee, her eyes opening wide to reveal both depth and light.

"Please tell her she is welcome in the 'Hotel' any time, and also my partner is in there, and that he would be happy to meet her too. Please tell her to bring anyone she likes."

Saintsetseg listened and nodded. Saya gestured towards the door, and we opened the flap to be greeted by a bright sun and busy camp life.

I walked to the stream and began wandering upstream. Something in my soul had slipped into place, an essential part. I had the sense that if I died today, it would be fine, complete. Not that I wanted to die, but it was such a feeling of wholeness, like a circle closing, one that I had drawn as a child, but not complete till now, like a gear slipping into place, a sentence dotted with a full stop, an exhale of an inhale begun many years ago.

Later on, Saintsetseg and I had several visits, mostly communicating through gesture, with no translator present. We talked about how we journeyed, our drums, our shaman's robes, our herbs. We talked about the heart of a shaman, the death of Saintsetseg's son, how she became a shaman and how she loved her daughter and was teaching her shamanism.

We giggled over chocolate and Russian jam on bread. We sang; Saintsetseg trying to teach me words in Tuvan - her language. We hummed, we shared, we exchanged readings. And Saintsetseg played her *amun khuur* (shaman's jaw harp) and told me what it had to say.

TALK OF CHANGING TIMES

One morning, Saintsetseg entered the 'Hotel' with two elderly women of the tribe, indicating that one of them needed a massage.

This woman looked to be in her late 80's, although she was actually only 65 years old. There was no one to care for her teeth, and many were missing, and she had been injured while riding a reindeer years ago, resulting in her leg being set at an odd angle. Her back was bent with ice and age.

As the woman slowly lay down, Saya came into theurts to watch.

The old woman welcomed the massage I gave her with sounds of contentment. Saintsetseg mumbled softly to her elderly friend, and the woman said something back which Saya translated.

"She says she can feel the snow melting in her side."

The elderly woman began to snore and Saintsetseg laughed lightly, giving a sign that meant 'good!' Everyone sat quietly, listening to the breathing of the elderly woman, mingled with the sounds of the reindeer outside, and horses munching on grasses nearby.

Later, with Saya's help, the shaman and I spoke of the growing needs of the tribe. We talked about the onslaught of tourists, who demanded ceremonies without knowing that there were good days for the shamans to do ceremony and other days when their spirits forbade it.

Because money had been introduced to the tribe, and because they were so poor, the shamans felt compelled to offer something, even on bad days, and, not wanting to become ill, or to anger the spirits, they had begun offering ceremonies that were really just performances. Tourists seem pleased enough with these, and so now, Saintsetseg put on her robe, got out a special drum which she never used in any real ceremony, and put on shows for them.

On our last day, I promised to send Saintsetseg a truly warm coat. We talked further about what was happening with the shamans of the tribe, and how Saintsetseg was passing her knowledge to her daughter. She also told me how one of their most powerful shamans was dying after doing a ceremony for an autistic child on a day when he should not have done it.

Several years ago, the Tsataan had been introduced to the Western world, and I felt strongly that, as a result, the tribe was near its end.

Although well-intentioned, such disruption of a nomadic people, with no overarching plan, led to chaos. Now, bits of plastic from well-meaning tourists littered the landscape; antibiotics had been randomly left behind for them to take, and the children often came into theurts to beg, a learned behavior brought about by contact with the tourists.

Saintsetseg told me that many of the Tsataan now spent the winter in a small town instead of in the traditional camps, which was weakening the links within the tribe.

They were in conflict about offering ceremonies for tourists too, some were willing to do so for the money, but others in the tribe opposed this. Saintsetseg pointed out, that after all, a shaman was dying as a result of him offering ceremonies on days when his spirits were not in agreement.

I felt that Wil and I were witnessing the last of the tribe, which now numbered only 300 families in total.

Before leaving, we promised to return and buy many carvings, take them to the States, sell them, and give the tribe the money.

We agreed to return in a year, and live with the Dukha for a month, bring material for aurts which we would leave for the tribe.

As Wil and I mounted our horses for the ride back up the mountain, I paused and looked at Saintsetseg.

"I see your heart," I signaled with my hands.

Saintsetseg nodded in agreement.

She signaled, "I see your heart."

I knew that when I returned, it would be a true home-coming.

Rebecca Singer is trained in ancient healing ways, taught by shamans and healers from the Lakota of South Dakota, indigenous tribespeople of the Costa Rican rainforests, and the Dukha in the northern mountains of Mongolia, who all passed their healing wisdom on to her. Rebecca has treated thousands of people, and travels internationally, offering ceremonies, healing sessions, and workshops. She currently lives in upstate New York where she is working on her memoir.

Rebecca and Wil were recently married.

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SHAMANISM: A COMMON HUMAN HERITAGE

Bhola Nath Banstola

Honoured ancestors, teachers and friends of 'The Common Path;' I am writing to try to clear up some misconceptions and misunderstandings about the term 'shaman' and the shamanic path. I am writing from my own viewpoint and addressing shamanism not only as it is practiced in Nepal and the Himalayan regions, but also throughout the world.

There are many names and terms used for a traditional shaman in the Himalayas: *dhami, jhankri, janne manchhe, guruji, guruba, guruju, herne, dekhne, jharwa, baidhang, dhanmantari, jyotoshi, jaishi, dangre, dhyangre, janapa, khelwa, chalwa, ban jhankri, bonpa, lhapa, pau, khepny, bijuwa, baidhya, ojha, kulko dhami, phukwa, phuk-phake*, and many others.

These names designate and honour a person as a healer, spiritual helper, herbalist, astrologer or diviner. Most of the time, it is the community, their family, or the healer's clients who bestow these honourary terms of respect upon the shaman.

When the ancestral deities call the 'shaman-to-be', the lineage teacher accompanies the neophyte at all their different levels of learning. When an ancestral-deity calls a shaman, not only does that shaman do shamanic work for his family and lineage, but also for everyone in the society.

Once the ancestral lineage's shamanic instruction or training is completed, the lineage teacher and the community bestow a shamanic title of honour on the person.

In times of personal or spiritual crisis people seek the support of a temple priest; a wandering mendicant; a robbed monk or a nun; a cremation ground dwelling aghori 'baba,' a sadhu; a yogin; a learned brahmin; an astrologer; a religious teacher or preacher; a wise old village man or woman; or a shaman etc.

The purity of the shaman's heart and the blessings of the ancestors and tutelary deities have a pivotal role in healings. Whoever it may be; man or woman, young or old, regardless of faith, the focus is on bringing health, harmony, peace and balance to an individual's soul parts, the individual's family, the environment and the spiritual connection.

Shamans bear the title of 'shaman,' and the respect that accompanies this title when healings take place, but if the spirits do not support the shaman, and healings do not occur - or there is something beyond the abilities of the shaman - then they are likely to lose their position.

Word of mouth is the best publicity for a shamanic healer. It does not take long for a healer to gain respect, and it does not take long to lose that respect if the shaman loses the regard of their community.

As the news of the healing wisdom of a person spreads, hundreds of people will start visiting the shaman with great expectations and hopes of resolving every obstacle of their lives. But everyone's expectations may not be met due to many factors.

If this is the case, the unsatisfied people may pass on bad rumours about the incompetency of the shaman, who previously may have had great respect as a healer. In situations like this, a healer may lose all his clientele because of miscommunication or a lack of understanding about their shamanic practice.

From my personal point of view, no teacher, or spiritual healer, or shaman would ever self-promote if they have not undergone a long training, or have a lot of first hand experiential experiences.

It is the clients who spread the healing results of the healer. A healer does not say "Come to me and I will heal you." It is the client who seeks out the shaman.

The teachings vary, according to the time, the land, the culture, the traditions, and the need of the concerned community. Above all, the healer-teacher has to respect the law of the land and the values of the community where the healing or the teachings take place.

A healer uses every possible shamanic skill, personal power and universal energy to help the needy. On the other hand the needy must focus on receiving the healing. What matters is the purity, clarity, openness, and the focus of the healer.

GIVING AND RECEIVING

If we speak about shamanism - or as I know it *jhankrism* - it is a 'way of life.'

Shamanic practice helps us to be more in ourselves, to be more appreciative, to honour and to express gratitude in our daily lives. It helps us to open the fountain of wisdom that comes from the source, to know ourselves better, and to be one with our environment. The shamanic path encourages and helps us to create harmony and balance in our daily lives. It allows us to be open and to flow with the river of life and to be aware, and live, in the present moment.

The shamanic path is not limited to certain techniques, terms, paraphernalia, drums, dresses, rituals, ceremonies, or types of offering. It is deeper, more profound and complete in itself.

We are still at the periphery of what I think of as the 'Common Human Heritage.' I use this term because it is not the property of one single ethnic or tribal group, but of us all.

Every human tribe or ethnic group has had this spiritual practice in their daily lives. Some groups, however, have forgotten it, while others have only fragments of their tradition left. Fortunately, however, some peoples still live with their ancient sacred traditions in a deep and profound way.

If a shamanic tradition is shared in a discreet way and transmitted at the right time, it is not too late to recover and reinstall what has been forgotten.

Shamanism is not only a healing technique or practice, it is the way of life! The person who lives on the path, and practices it in their everyday life, can transmit and share the wisdom, regardless of the origin of the teacher and the teachings.

A recipient of this ancestral wisdom can be anyone, if they are curious and ready to experience what Spirit brings, and if they are focused and dedicated to the path.

A true spiritual path exists outside of time and space, it does not depend on how much we can work, or how blessed we are by the

ancestors and the spirits, or how much family and community support and acceptance we are given.

A CHANGING PHENOMENON

None of our ancestors lived in any one place for any length of time. By constantly traveling from place to place they left behind some of their practices and incorporated new ideas and skills into their own traditions.

There were times when different groups met and lived together for several centuries as a close community. This allowed the sharing and exchanging of ideas about their respective paths and faiths. When they continued to move in different directions, they carried a new essence of wisdom.

That is why we find many common practices in cultures far off, which we presume never had any contact between them. What we have to understand is that, we all 'drank from the same fountain' in different realities and life times.

A most important concept for shamanic practitioners to understand is that when a person is contacted by either the lineage deity, deities, or by universal elemental spirits, their spiritual body becomes fragile and prone to any outside spiritual attacks.

If this happens, the person might have been contacted or challenged by the spirits of a new location. If this is the case, one must respect and honour the keepers of the new place and must invoke them first.

A shamanic spiritual call is not rigid and enclosed within a box. As we change, everything changes both inside and outside of ourselves. Only the institutionalised or liturgical practices are fixed and rigid. The shamanic path is flexible, and thus capable of changing with time, needs and location.

A spiritual seeker is like a football: learning does not need to be limited to one teacher or coach. The teachers are like the football players, taking different positions and roles. We are the football, being passed from one to the other.

To certain degrees we can compare a sick person to a spiritual aspirant, for the 'healing rites of passage' and the 'learning rites of passages' are quite identical.

The body holds the universe, for it is made up of different vibrations and resonances. Because we do not know where, when and how the right resonance takes place, we should not limit our experiences. A teacher's responsibility is to create a safe space where curious souls can let go and have experiential, first hand experiences.

Shamanism is neither a single person's cult nor a dogma, and does not have a hierarchy. The practitioner goes to the 'source' for self revelations and wisdom.

As the practitioner starts opening to spirits, transmission can be received in different situations, and from different realities and sources. Because of this, it is very important to consult a shamanic teacher in order to gain clarity and support about one's experiences.

SEEKING A COMMON GROUND

All of us, who are on the path, must find a commonality, as this will bind us all together as a strong and supportive community.

Shamanic traditions may appear different because of different interpretations, offerings, dresses, etc. The highest goal, however, is to understand the essence of the teachings. For example, we must ask ourselves if we truly need to reproduce or copy a ceremony or tradition; for by doing so we may limit our experience.

Let us then walk hand-in-hand by clearing the darkness, and by respectfully supporting each other. Let us support each other in journeying to the 'source,' and nurture and feed the shamanic path as a 'Common Human Heritage.'

The deeper I go on this path I realise there is so much more to unfold. I see that I am nothing; no more than a drop of water in the immense ocean of wisdom.

Hail the Ancestors, Spirits and Shamans. Namaste

Bhola Nath Banstola is simple person who carries a part of the wisdom of the ancestors, which he shares with the world community. His path and search have been to find the common grounds of coexistence and to foster the message of peace through shamanism.

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INTRUSIONS PARASITES AND OTHER BEASTIES

Spiritual Hygiene In Shamanic Healing

Caitlín Matthews

Back in the days when chemist and microbiologist, Louis Pasteur, was still proving the connections between dirt and cross-infection, some French hospitals were staffed by nuns. They would assure him that everything in their ward was spotlessly clean: after all, hadn't they meticulously laundered all the linen, scrubbed and polished the floors until they shone?

Louis knew otherwise. This was the era when surgical instruments were not boiled between procedures, when midwives didn't wash their hands when examining women in labour, when surgeons wore an old frock coat in which to perform operations - so that any blood spatter wasn't a problem!

Pasteur, along with Robert Koch and Joseph Lister, showed the world that the presence of micro-organisms had their own agenda.

It wasn't until the days of compound microscopes, which enabled enough magnification, that people could observe the micro-organisms that lived all around us. This was quite a shocking discovery for the Age of Reason, which had only recently put behind it, images of demons and devils. Such visions evoked paranoia.

In a global society where people move freely from country to country, we now understand how diseases and contagions can spread beyond the boundaries of their origins, as is clear from the present Ebola virus.

But with our faith in cutting-edge medical practice, we believe that such threats to our physiology will find a cure, or that preventative measures will contain them. After all, we live in the world of immunology where germs, bacteria and other invisible presences are well understood. We all know how to take simple preventative measures against dirt, infection and disease, how to separate what is clean and whole, from what is dirty and unwholesome.

In shamanic healing, we observe the same principle of separation. The two hands of healing are about taking away and bringing things back: returning what is healthy, but only after we have taken away what is unhealthy.

Just as you would clean the grazed knee of grit before anointing it with salve or bandages, so too the removal of intrusions precedes the return of power or soul, ensuring that the system is clean.

Both procedures are as important as the other but, to read much shamanic literature, you would imagine that it is only the glamorous, re-empowering side of healing that is important. Shamanic students are often keener to learn how to return soul fragments, than they are about learning how to remove intrusions.

WHAT ARE INTRUSIONS?

Shamanically speaking, everything has power and spirit. Power and spirit are not 'evil' in themselves, they are neutral, but when they are in the wrong place, we experience this as an 'evil.'

Take beetles, for example. While beetles are fine in the garden where they eat away diseased foliage, beetles in your bed or on your plate are another matter; I'm sure we would all agree.

Throughout the world, there are clear boundaries about keeping things separate from each other: most cultures, for example, keep a strict barrier between the living and the dead, with people of a certain caste or skill-set there to attend to the deceased's body.

Similarly, when it comes to matters of psychic health and spiritual hygiene, shamans and medicine people have their own craft in separating what has become mixed and bringing clarity and integrity once again.

For most healers, spiritual cleanliness and clearing are akin to housework: we all need to do a little cleaning everyday so that our home environment stays healthy.

When we encounter vomit, cat-pee or germ-laden sinks, we have the ability to deal with it, forthrightly and without fuss. This is a helpful analogy to bear in mind when we encounter mixed realities in our shamanic work. When spirit intrusions, residues, and miasmas are present in our souls, we can feel unclean, polluted or invaded.

So what is an intrusion? An intrusion can be anything in spirit form that enters, invades or clusters within its host. What do intrusions look like? How do we recognise them? The inheritance of dualistic faiths in our society can still fuel our paranoia, shaping intrusion in human imagination into many monstrous forms.

Both the demons and homunculi of medieval times, as well as the resurrected Gothic horrors of the Romantic era, inform our cultural imagination, veering uneasily between the thought of suppressed psychological entities, or forms of uncleanly fears and fancies. Some intrusions can have the appearance of insects, many-legged, or serpentine beings, which is one of the reasons that some shamanic teachers instruct beginners not to bring back an insect, spider or serpent as a primary power animal when they first learn to journey, in case they mistake an intrusion for an animal ally.

In actuality, some people will indeed have helpful allies and power animals that may be bees, butterflies, spiders or snakes, but these will feel very different in character from intrusive spirits, though not every beginner may be so discerning!

Intrusions can have the appearance of a host or swarm of colonisers, like the gatherings of dirt or residue that you find in a long-forgotten outbuilding where cobwebs and other detritus pile up.

An intrusion can also have humanoid forms: ancestral presences who are lost or astray, or who still hold undue influence over the host, or residues of abusive people still alive, whose lives have tangled with our own. Intrusions are rarely depicted, for good reason.

Some of the most notable drawings of spirits and intrusions were those made by Knud Rasmussen from descriptions of spirits given to him when he went among the Inuit in the early 20th century.

Students and clients often ask me, but how did the intrusion get there?

Opportunism is the name of the intrusions' game. If we leave an opening, something may come in. Sometimes it is invited in, because the host believes that some benefit may accrue. Or an intrusion may take residency out of coercion - as in the case of abuse, or due to a violation.

We can easily see how the spirits of addictions come to fill up empty spaces in our lives. Too much TV, or food and binge drinking, substance abuse or other kinds of behaviour can invite a spirit of intrusion to take up residence within us, when we have suffered a loss, or are not fulfilling our life to its fullest extent.

While we can be unconsciously collusive with the opportunity that an intrusion has taken, largely speaking, intrusion does not come about with our conscious consent. It is something that starts small and grows.

What does having an intrusion feel like? Take the analogy of the person who wears contact lenses: they know which is their eye and which is their contact lens. But should the wind then blow grit into their eye as well, they will also be painfully aware of what is a piece of grit. This sense of a 'foreign body' in their space, or being, is often very clear to the host, who will report feeling a strange displacement that they can't account for.

They may also feel 'overseen,' stalked, or 'uncomfortable' in an undefined way, overshadowed or in the presence of something alien.

Some people have even described this discomfort with a metaphor of indigestion, 'it's like I've eaten something bad, it just sits there, it doesn't move, but it feels toxic.'

The nature of dirt of any kind is that it builds up and accumulates. The same kind of thing happens when we do not observe psychic hygiene in our own beings. When there is a gap or space in our power or soul, intrusion can build up there and become a more serious matter.

THE FORMATION OF ENTITIES

Because we live in a sanitised world of tidied-up order, our society has purged the imagination of the kinds of beings that our ancestors feared, beings that they called by a variety of names: demons, imps, incubi etc.

Such names are not so helpful to us now because they make us demonise intrusions. We do not have to subscribe to Christian or other beliefs to understand that intrusions can take on an intelligence and life of their own when they are left unchecked. These kinds of accumulated intrusions can become parasitic entities in their own right, whose life is dependent upon that of a human being or an unhappy dwelling.

Let me give you an example. A few years back I went to spiritually clear a house for a 93 year old woman. She lived in a one bedroom upstairs flat from which she hadn't moved for some years, and she was a hoarder. Not only did she keep everything – and I mean everything – she also had the contents from her deceased parents' house stored in the flat also.

I began to wonder whether this lady had misunderstood my function when I first came through the door, as I could certainly have brought my mop, bin-bags and cleaning fluids, rather than my house-clearing and shamanic kit!

It became clear that, before any spiritual cleaning, I would have to simply clear a space to set up a pocket handkerchief shrine to work from, as there wasn't a clear surface anywhere. The flat, which was more like a repository than a home, seriously needed a cleaner to physically clean it first, but apparently the council regarded her flat as too dangerous for their operatives to enter and so this fragile old woman had had no help to get straight.

Her habit had begun life as a wise economy when, in her youth, her parents had inculcated in her the necessity to keep and reuse things. In the nineteen forties and fifties this was a fine habit, but in the throw-away culture of the 21st century, the effects of this habit were gross: used tea-bags lined the sink to 'dry out,' soiled food cartons accumulated in skyscraper piles in which families of flies had taken up residence.

The helpers who brought her food rarely took away any rubbish when they left, so I did what I could to make a clean space in her kitchen and living area, to remove some of the unhygienic nastiness and began to go systematically around the flat to check what else had taken up residence there, having to climb over stacked boxes and piles of newspapers that were piled to waist level, to do so.

Just as her flat was physically full of stuff that had never been cleared away regularly, so in her bedroom, the doubts and fears of many years had created an entity of their own which sat on her bed. The entity wasn't greatly intelligent, it wasn't evil. It brooded there by her pillow, where years of anxiety, loneliness and depression had accumulated in this one spot, where she spent unhappy and comfortless nights prey to this entity, which was feeding off her fears and growing in magnitude.

This was clearly what needed to be tackled before anything else, since without its removal, no-one stood a chance of getting this flat cleared and clean on any level.

With the help of spirit helpers, who enclosed it, the entity was removed and dispersed. Then I cleansed the bedroom thoroughly, bringing in blessing to fill up the space.

Shamanic healing was given to the old lady herself as an important part of the task. Having done my best for her, I decided to leave my little shrine with her, both the cloth itself and the objects upon it, including a little ceramic dove, to act as a reminder of the hope and spiritual support that had been invoked there, so that the blessed spirits would have a seat in that most beleaguered of homes.

DIAGNOSING INTRUSION

This was obviously an extreme case of intrusion, both in the soul and in the home of this lady. We can see how it was given opportunity by her loneliness and her habit of hoarding.

Interestingly, when I first spoke to her over the phone and asked what symptoms she was experiencing, she said she had the sense of being spied upon. Rationalising this uneasy feeling, she said that a radio mast had been recently erected at the end of her road and, though she knew it sounded stupid, wondered if her strange feeling emanated from this?

This is where it's necessary to be cautious, of course, because when a client speaks like this, you need to check for mental stability. But because the concept of intrusion is not commonly understood in our society, the metaphors describing it can often sound very paranoid – people will often giggle uneasily when making comparisons of this kind, knowing that these statements sound bizarre to their own ears.

This sense of uneasy humour is a good guide to the client's condition: it shows that they are aware of something being wrong, but that they equally know that proper explanation is beyond their conceptual language or current understanding.

Because the sense of 'a foreign body' in diagnosing intrusion can also describe a whole raft of physiological conditions, we also need to eliminate ordinary physical causation before we proceed.

I well remember a man who came for shamanic healing who, when asked to describe his symptoms of intrusion burst out in a snarling voice: "I am the devil" and vomited violently and copiously into a hastily-proffered intrusion bowl that I keep handy.

It was clear from the context that this was not a 'demonic possession' but a cry for help. I immediately got medical assistance for him and he was rushed to hospital where, after a battery of tests, a brain tumour was diagnosed. End of 'demonic possession,' and feelings of intrusion which, in this case, was of physical causation!

This raises the idea that people experience their intrusion as a 'spirit possession.'

Possessory intrusions that dominate a person's soul have historically been seen as 'demonic possession' in many cultures, including our

own. Disease has spirit and when that spirit becomes more dominant than the person hosting it, then we have problems. Unfortunately, the only models for intrusion in our culture tend to be found in horror movies; because of this, a client often comes with great fear if they have any awareness of their condition.

Another rationale of intrusion can be the rather prevalent assertion that the client 'has been cursed' or is 'under psychic attack.' I will write more in another article about the effects of actual sorcery, but suffice it to say here that, when most people speak like this, they are expressing, via this emotive language, their sense of invasion.

The sense that something is living or lodging inside you or in your soul is scary. This is why we must be so careful not to demonise an intrusion or use language that is going to freak out the client. 'Intrusion' is a neutral word and in dialogue with a client, I draw an unjudgemental analogy between intrusion and dirt, which most people easily understand.

REMOVAL OF INTRUSIONS

Methods of removing intrusions are various: they usually fall into two categories: either where the intrusion is removed from the body of the client, or where it is removed within the course of a shamanic journey: sometimes both are necessary.

Having spirit helpers who specialise in extraction can help you as a first resort, of course. They are the experts and will often step between the practitioner and the intrusion, so that you do not touch what is removed.

However, having a good extraction kit is helpful. Things that help you get to grips with the intrusion and enable it to leave the client's being may include the spirits of herbs or smoke, as well as tools which you've been shown to make by your spirit helpers. These tools induce the intrusive spirits to leave, and you may also have special songs that you sing and rituals that you perform, all of which have been given to you by the spirits too.

Extraction tools are often kept separate from your other shamanic kit. My tools consist of a steel bowl that can be easily cleaned: like a Hindu, I wouldn't even think of using ceramic.

Into this bowl anything I remove is placed and instantly covered with a cloth and taken out of my work area into the garden. The stones, feathers, smoke, stones, rattles, knives, and other tools are all cleaned before and after use.

Any liquids or food offerings left in the room after an extraction are removed immediately, as these are possible sites on which intrusion might fall.

With miasmatic intrusions that cannot be removed easily outside the journey, any removal is done with the help of one's spirit helpers, who conduct the intrusion safely away within the journey.

The elements may play their part in this work, as fire transforms, waters cleanse, earth absorbs and winds clear away. I also use salt and herbs extensively.

What is dirt to our eyes, may be food to extraction spirit helpers, who can often take the forms of scavenger animals: just as dogs, vultures and other carrion eaters can absorb and change what would be toxic to the rest of us.

Where intrusions are removed or taken to, is not usually something I enquire about, as long as it is not back into my client. I am assured that they go back to their rightful place, or are dispersed or changed.

This is not work to do around babies or young children, and if the client is pregnant, I've been shown a method of extraction that ensures that the child is shielded.

When something has come into your being, it is essential that you have a good sense that this intrusion has left it! We can see how shamans in traditional cultures often deal with intrusion by passing it into a stone or other object as part of the extraction.

Anthropologists have accused shamans of 'palming' an object, like any conjuror, in order to 'convince' the client that the intrusion has departed and that they have 'taken the object' out of the client's body. The fact that the removal of intrusion is often accompanied by a loud shout or song, and the intrusion disposed of with a flourish, may have led anthropologists into confusing a sense of showmanship with the trickery of a conjuror, but at least the client is clear that the intrusion is gone!

So how can we avoid intrusion? Without physical rest or regular spiritual nourishment, we can unconsciously create the optimum conditions for intrusion to flourish.

While we are engaged, connected strongly with the spirits who inspire us, we can live without fear of intrusion, because these things fill us up with the power to live. It is in the vacant moments, when doubt, fear or uncertainty enter into the emptiness that intrusions can enter in, or when we are under compulsion or coercion. To be as full with power and soul as we can be is the best preventative.

If you are practising your shamanic craft, then you can journey regularly to maintain the pathways of life clearly and keep your practice bright. Good missions to journey on include:

- 'Show me how to be true to my vocation.'
- 'Help me to let go of what doesn't serve my life.'
- 'What needs to be cleared away so that life can flow once again?'
- 'Help me to transform fear into power.'
- 'Reconnect me more strongly with the sources of power and inspiration.'

In this way, in the words of Gandhi:

*'Your beliefs become your thoughts
Your thoughts become your words
Your words become your actions
Your actions become your habits
Your habits become your values
Your values become your destiny.'*

When we are living our beliefs, then everything works to the full and we need not be afraid of long-legged intrusions and other beasties.

ELDERS AS CULTURE KEEPERS

Safeguarding the Continuation of Life

Salvatore Gencarelle

I recently had a conversation with a dear friend, who is an older woman and someone who I would call an elder; as a matter of fact I refer to her as 'Grandmother.'

I un-ceremonially gave her this title on a starry night, while sitting around a campfire. I had just attended a presentation about nature connection and community development, and during the speeches I was sitting in the back of the circle of chairs which surrounded the fire. I had enough room around me that I kicked up my feet on a stump and leaned way back in my chair. In this position I could listen to the hosts with my face looking up towards the stars. Occasionally I would glance towards the fire, or at the circle of people in rapt attention, but mostly I just closed my eyes and drifted off into a calm thought.

To this day I can't remember what she said, but I can remember that the power of her words made my feet drop to the ground and I sat straight up, like I had been hit by electricity.

Her statement arose memories in me, of a dear mentor, whom I called Grandma Chipps, and these flooded back into my mind.

I was extremely fortunate to have met Grandma Chipps, who was an elder of the Lakota Sioux tribe. Grandma was instrumental in my education and growth as a human being - as she was an elder of the highest calibre.

She had been raised traditionally by her family on a Native American reservation in South Dakota, and in her late teens she had become a ceremonial assistant to a renowned healer credited with saving Lakota spirituality from extinction. She became so learned and wise, that later in life, even her own children called her Grandma out of respect for all she knew. She was an archetypal woman elder.

Now, sitting at this campfire, within the words of this as-of-yet unknown woman, I heard the same kind of wisdom, strength, and love that I had only known once before, from Grandma. That was what prompted me to approach her, and give her the recognition of her 'elder' qualities.

So, once the presentation was over, I walked to where this woman now stood. She was speaking to a number of people in line, and I waited my turn. When she was ready, I ask her for a moment, quickly explaining my background and relationship with Grandma Chipps.

I said "I identify you as a Grandmother and elder, and I will call you Grandmother."

She broke down in tears, as unknown to me, she was struggling with this very subject, what it is to be an elder. And so, over the next few hours we talked about being an elder, and the importance of recognising and supporting the development of elders, and we continue this discourse together even to this day.

ANCESTRAL CONNECTION

I consider the healing of the relationship between the youth and the elders to be one of the greatest needs of the modern age.

The struggles between our youth and the elders is a symptom of a great disconnection that has occurred in the human relationship to the world. In my experience, one of the most important relationships a person can have, is with their elders and ancestors.

Within the indigenous culture which I am most steeped in, the Lakota Sioux, elders and ancestors are held with the highest respect. They are loved and cared for, and upon passing through the veil of death, they become spirit guides and helpers.

The connection to the ancestors extends back for countless generations, even to the first ancestors, and this relationship even encompasses 'non-human ancestors' - the elements of creation from which we arose. Ancestral connection is incredibly important in every indigenous culture I know, and even many contemporary societies still hold this as important.

So how did we get to this place? How did we become so far removed from the natural state of honouring and respecting elders? How has our modern society become so removed from this natural and innate way of being?

If it feels like the ropes of connection to our ancestors have been cut, it is because they were. And the reason that most people don't realise this, until it is pointed out to them, is because it occurred long before we were born.

Many, many generations ago, we were all indigenous people. We lived with the land, moved with the seasons, cared for our extended family in a tribal system, and honoured our elders and ancestors.

As a young child we would have learned about nature, about family and about ourselves from our grandparents. They would have instilled in us healthy and fulfilling patterns of conduct. They would have taught us respect and would have been intolerant of anything but the highest behaviour, yet they would have been the most profound mentors of love. They would have transferred to us all the wisdom they held.

Now, fast forward to a common occurrence in many of our pasts - an incident of historic trauma which we still are experiencing, and for some, reliving in new forms.

At some point in the past an ancestor of yours survived a terrible event. This traumatic event was perpetrated upon your ancestor by people who had already become disconnected from their elders.

These disconnected people were a small group at first, but over time became large enough to spread their grief and trauma to others. They came to your tribal ancestors and decided to use them as they saw fit - often done with extreme violence, and often involving the enslavement of the survivors.

It was this time of violence, trauma, and enslavement that created the 'society of disconnection' we currently exist within. The actions of this trauma are still being played out. We are still trying to learn from experience, but we've forgotten what started it to begin with.

THE DARKNESS OF THE PAST

At one point in my search for what instigated this whole process, I realised I needed to search beyond the confines of recorded history; and so I decided to look within my genetic memory, to see how this all began.

I set clear intention to know what happened, and created parameters to look down my father's ancestral line. Once my clear intentions and desire was properly framed, I went into a meditative state, quieting my mind and slipping between thoughts into a peaceful place within me. I then repeated my question in the empty space between thoughts.

My question dissolved into the darkness, and slowly images began to form. Out of the darkness I began to see a shape, which became the silhouette of my father. I looked down upon his shape as if I was floating above him, and from that angle I could see that there were other humans behind him; a row of human forms, standing in a line. I knew each person was a generation, a line of paternal ancestors extending to the distant horizon.

I began to float above these ancestors, going back in time and space as I moved down the line. I travelled across the land and sea, eventually ending up in what I assume was an arid land in Africa.

There I came to the end of the line, and I saw, behind the last person, a trail of footprints in the sand. Being a tracker, I examined the trail, and noticed it had an aimless, wandering motion. I sensed great sadness, anger, fear, and hopelessness in those wandering tracks.

At this point I stopped the exercise, I had begun to cry without even knowing why, and all I could feel was a welling up of emotions out of the pit of my stomach. These emotions overwhelmed me too much to continue at that moment.

SICKNESS OF DISCONNECTION

A short time later I repeated the exercise, this time with the intention to track this ancestor's footprints, and see where he came from.

I was prepared to feel the emotions that had originally caught me off guard, and once again I went into the meditative state and slipped between thought into the familiar quiet place of darkness. There I sent out the request as before. Quickly I travelled the line of ancestors, arriving once more to the set of tracks in the desert I had seen before. As I began to follow the trail, the same emotions welled within me, and I saw desperation play out in the footprints of my ancestor.

The trail wandered aimlessly through the wilderness. The heel and toe drag marks of the print indicated exhaustion; the pattern indicated a lack of purpose. At times the trail looked to be almost suicidal, going along places where large predators were sure to be, but eventually I tracked the footprints back to a village.

The village appeared to be an extended family group staying in mud huts near a stream. In this village there were elders, children, mothers, and fathers. For all intents and purposes it was a vibrant culture.

I then recognised the source of the emotions that I felt from my wandering ancestor. I realised that he had been given a virtual death sentence, as he had been expelled from his people. I saw that in his life there had been a wound that festered until some incident occurred, something that was so bad to this community that they handed down a death sentence to him. He was forced to leave his people, his mother, his father, his siblings, his children, his grandparents: he wasn't just forced to leave the village by strangers, it was his own loved ones who sentenced him to death.

It was this culture's practice to expel people into the wilderness as a form of capital punishment. Previously, all other people that had been pushed into the wilderness had died, not just of exposure but also of a broken heart - a hopelessness so deep that it killed. But not this time; the death sentence wasn't completed and my ancestor, somehow, survived. He survived, and he met another in the wilderness.

These two shared a common destiny and a common past. They were like two wolves, joined together for survival.

Over time, other outcasts joined them, some willingly, some by force. They formed a new tribe, a band of disconnection, carrying the wounds of their people and their expulsions.

Eventually they grew in strength and size. They became so large in number that this motley gang could even threaten other tribes.

It wasn't long before they considered themselves superior to the tribal peoples, and soon attacked them, taking whatever they considered of value, such as woman to increase their number with, and children to become their slaves - a penance for the sparing of their lives.

I saw it as a 'disconnection sickness,' which began to grow and spread. Over time, this 'tribe of disconnection' became more efficient. They quickly realised that the tribal cultures they attacked needed to be broken, not just wounded in order for them to have dominion over them.

To break a tribal culture, its keepers need to be removed. Elders are the culture keepers, the historians, and the teachers of children. The bond between the elders and this children needed to be ruined, as the new 'society of disconnection' did not want wisdom to be transferred to the youth, because when that occurs there is always rebellion.

Soon being an elder served no function in this disconnected society - as in this society - people are resources which deliver a function - and elders no longer provided a function. The frailty of an elder made them unable to serve physically, and their wisdom of ages was no longer valued.

This disconnection sickness spread from one group to another, devouring indigenous people and nature.

Fast forward to our current age. We now have an older population, trying to reclaim their former place within culture, but even they can't quite figure out what that means. They are struggling to define what an elder is, and what elders do, and the youth, which is looking for elders, can't see what they are looking for in the older population.

What is the purpose of the elder? I've looked at this question for many years. It is my conclusion that the elder's role is to ensure the

development of connection in culture - to safeguard the continuation of life.

There are a number of attributes which people consistently display when a threshold of connection to self, others, and nature is obtained.

These are the qualities which manifest when people are in alignment with creation in healthy relationship. They include peace, love, compassion, empathy, vitality, true helpfulness, healing, and happiness.

Elders are the facilitators; developing these attributes in their communities, and this is accomplished through the honouring and marking of a person's different life stages, and daily mentoring. The role of an elder is to ensure the activation of these attributes in the youth. This obligation transcends fickle human law, which changes over time and from one group of people to another.

SEVEN SACRED ATTRIBUTES

When people are fully connected they have very healthy conduct. This conduct is called the 'Seven Sacred Attributes' (and they are also known as the 'Attributes of Connection') - which are the laws of nature in human form.

The teaching of the Seven Sacred Attributes is a Lakota teaching taught to Gilbert Walking Bull by Horn Chipps and Moves Camp. They are a measurement of connection in an individual, and are an indicator of the regeneration of healthy culture. The more people display these attributes, the stronger the community becomes.

The attributes gives us a method to gauge grief, connection and healing.

The seven attributes are given below with their Lakota names and an English translation.

The Attributes or Virtues (*Wo-ope*). One: *Wo-wah'wala* – a state of peacefulness or inner quietness (humility). Two: *Wo-canto'gna'ke* – a feeling of deep love. Three: *Wo-wa'unsila* – a feeling of deep caring, love and compassion for all creation. Four: *Wo-wa'wo'kiye* – the act of being helpful. Five: *Wo-bli'heca* – being fully alive in activity and working with a sacred purpose. Six: *Wo-wi'yu'skin* – a sense of happiness and delight, being pleased, delighted and joyful. Seven: *Wo-za'ni* – being healthy in all four parts of a human being; the heart, the mind, the body, and the spirit.

When these seven qualities rise within the youth, they ensure the continuation of human life upon the earth. In ancient times elders knew that when young people have these qualities, they will live as caretakers to themselves, nature and each other. They will be truly helpful to all of creation, in such a powerful way that modern people can only recall this way of life in legends, myths, and dreams.

The elders have been charged with this responsibility from the beginning of human existence. They hold this responsibility, not for themselves, but for all the children of creation. They are the '*Grand-Parents*' of every new born person, animal, and plant. They are at the service of the spirits of the unborn generation; they are keepers of the spirit of life. It is time for them to come back into service, to be active Grandmothers and Grandfathers once again. The children need you - we are running out of time.

Salvatore Gencarelle went through an intensive mentoring period with a Native American healer that required both dedication and sacrifice for 17 years. Through this mentoring he became a ceremonial guide, creator, singer, and mentor, and earned the responsibility to pass these teachings on.

Salvatore is also an artist, photographer, freelance writer, musician, and a former paramedic. As a healer he works with both Native American traditions and those of the modern world.

Salvatore teaches courses both in the UK and beyond, and will be teaching a two-part 'Life Stage Honouring Training' starting in April 2015 in the UK.

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See a review of Salvatore Gencarelle's book 'A Man Among The Helpers' in this issue of Sacred Hoop

CONVERSATIONS WITH A CAVE

Jessica Rzeszewski

I was hiking my way to the cave, located on the edge of a frothy, turbulent ocean, which pounded incessantly on rocks off the coast of the Hawaiian island of Oahu. The cave had mentored me for years. On this day, I scrambled over volcanic rocks, moving ever upwards to get to the cave that was situated just out of sight of the tide pools and blow hole on the east side of the island. The climb would put me thirty feet above the turbulent waves. As I clambered across the rocks and then descended the last volcanic outcrop on the cliff side, that prevented swimmers in the tide pools from seeing the cave, I sighed with anticipation.

For years this cave had communicated with me about life, awareness, dreaming, and freedom. It was no wonder that I approached with pen, paper, and an open heart.

I sat down on the hard-packed dirt and glanced around. Several years ago pigeons had discovered the cave just as I had, although unlike me they had made the cave a permanent home. Nests, hidden due to the darkness in the cave, were opportunistically built in crevices and niches above my head. At times I could hear the baby pigeons, squabs as they are known, crying aloud as their parents scavenged the volcanic cliffs outside for food to satisfy their young's ceaseless appetites. In and out the pigeons flew, dropping guano in their wake and tiny, fluffy feathers that floated silently to the dirt floor. The cave was littered with pigeon droppings and feathers but little else.

The sunlight warmed the dirt slope outside the cave but was unable to penetrate to the deep interior, thus there was minimal evidence of plant or animal life inside apart from the birds. But oh did that cave have a life of its own, and we often spoke with one another.

On this trip I brought worry and frustration with me. Just like a squab waiting for its parent to provide food for its maturation, I came to the cave waiting to be fed. The cave always made provision for my needs. On this day, circumstances at my job were causing me anxiety, and I wanted the cave to help me transcend those worries.

I also knew it was difficult to hear what the cave would say if my mind was chattering about those same worries, so I needed first to quiet my mind. Years of coming to the cave had taught me that I couldn't take in what it had to say if I was talking incessantly to myself.

A quiet mind was an open mind. It never took long for the cave to speak, as though my mere desire to seek out its company was enough for its telepathic communication to begin.

"Be where you are."

The cave's cryptic message in no way put me at ease. Far from it, I was annoyed. Hearing a koan¹ for the first time always annoyed me. Why the cave couldn't just speak in plain English was beyond me. I wrote the statement down and paused, waiting for the cave to say more, but nothing more was said. This was unusual because the cave usually spoke so rapidly I could hardly write it down.

The phrase that came to my mind, and which I began to turn over and over was this: 'Be where you are.' On the surface, the koan was simple enough, but I'd found in the past that koans were often deceptively simple. If I stopped at a surface explanation, I would miss the heart of the matter.

Like kneading dough in order to activate the leaven in the flour, a koan takes manipulation - not a negative act, but an act of force upon the words - in order to displace them. To grasp a koan, the participant must act upon the phrase to turn it over, under, and around, to push and prod and poke so that the koan releases its essence.

There is more to a koan, however, than working it out in the mind. A koan is grasped when the whole person, including the body, soul, and spirit, embraces its message until there is no separation, no duality, between the koan and the one working it. In a manner of speaking, when the koan becomes one with the person engaging it, then its work is complete.

In order to put this act of assimilation into motion, I set aside each word. By meditating on each word, I was better able to grasp the koan.

'Be...'

Simple, right? At first glance, it's easy to 'Be.' But when I sat with 'Be' for a while, I realised that 'Be' is singular and doesn't allow for any other way of being to confound or crowd it, or else it's not 'Be.'

Stop what you're doing at this moment - yes, even as you read this sentence - and 'Be.'

State what you see. State how you feel. Are you aware of a tendency to define, to explain, and to think about what you're experiencing? Are you able to 'Be' without your mind giving commentary to it?

Being has no value, no judgment, no beliefs, and no thoughts - to 'Be' just IS. 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin...' Matthew 6:28 Nature simply IS, and in that Biblical passage, a flower doesn't fall into the trap of worrying, evaluating, judging, and determining due to the circumstances it finds itself in.

To 'Be' is to be in the moment without thought, to be present for whatever is occurring regardless of past or future.

We're not raised to 'Be;' we're raised to 'Do,' and the two ways of existing are diametrically opposed to each other. It takes awareness, discipline, and courage to 'Be' rather than to 'Do.' Doing is not a bad thing, although it crowds out Being by its very nature.

I asked myself: Can I simply 'Be' without falling into 'Do?' And what I discovered was that my job was crowding me with 'Doing,' and the pressure to conform was intense. I was on the verge of losing my 'Being' because the imbalance between the two was so vast.

'Where...'

Location, location, location is the real estate agent's mantra. Top on the list for a homebuyer is the location of their potential new home. The location of a dwelling will in large part determine the buyer's appeal. But it's also more than that - location must match the buyer's interest. If a buyer values a log cabin nestled amidst a mountain glen, then he or she isn't interested in a cottage on the beach.

Ask yourself where you are at this moment. Identify your physical surroundings and environment. For example, perhaps you're at Starbucks drinking a latte with your laptop seated on the table in front of you. Or, maybe you're seated on your couch with your iPad on your knees, reading this article.

Okay, so you think you know where you are. 'Where' is easy to determine if we specify concrete and physical surroundings.

Now let's move 'Where' into the abstract. Where are you in your head? Are you already at the party with friends you've scheduled for the evening? Are you in the conversation with your partner that took place last night? Are you in a mood that colours your day regardless of whatever else happens - a mood of sadness or agitation or even happiness?

When I can be present in the location I find myself at this moment, and not anywhere else, I go a long way towards being singularly focused and available for the koan's next word.....

'You...'

Here is where it would be easy to get into a long non-dual explanation for exactly who 'You' are. But I want to be honest with you: those explanations leave me dazed and confused. Let's see if I can simplify 'You' without sounding like a philosopher.

The lily in the Bible verse above has no 'You;' it only experiences 'Be.' It has sentience; it is present in the moment; it practices non-duality within its universe; it is aware with no value judgment placed on that awareness. What a gift to be in that state of being!

The personal pronouns 'You' and 'Me' are our attempt to be where the lily already is, and to define, evaluate, assess, and think ourselves into being. The concepts 'You' and 'Me' are mankind's heritage and we're good at playing the part. 'You' and 'Me' defines who we are as humans, but there is another distinction, much like the distinction between the physical and mental locales.

The belief in a separate self can take charge of who I am and run the show, or it can be part and parcel of the totality that I am and 'Be' balanced between body, soul, and spirit.

I don't want a concept of myself to run my life, as it is wont to do. I want 'Me' to be in harmony with all aspects of my being, to play all parts, to acquiesce when called for, to step aside when necessary.

What is running your life? Do you know how 'You' can step down from an ego-driven position and allow the totality of who you are to step into action? That's what the word 'You' calls for in this koan.

'Are...'

The word 'Are' links it all together into one: 'Be Where You Are.' Be present in the moment. Know how to be in conjunction with knowing how to do. Locate where you are and be there without judgment - 'Be' in one place at one time.

Let all of you - consciousness, spirit, soul, sentience, sapience, and awareness - operate your life, not merely a 'You.' Link all of these together, and your being will experience peace, presence, and the ability and wisdom to know exactly what to do, what to say, and how to proceed.

Nothing else is needed to live life to the fullest. The trick is in embracing the koan fully so that it becomes you.

So what happened to the job I was worried about that day in the cave? Well, in brief, within a year's time, I lost that job. I was no longer able to be there. The location was not one conducive to my health and wellbeing - tough because it was a position that had paid well.

I lost it just as soon as I accepted that it was no longer a good place for me to 'Be.'

I lost it as soon as I accepted that my 'You' was acting way beyond its boundaries.

That job allowed me to gain balance between my being and my doing, even though it meant I was no longer able to continue working there. That job freed me in a way it could not have had I not lost it.

Koans work upon us as they are designed to when we allow them into our lives. They become who we are when we embrace them with every ounce of our being. They take us to new vistas that without them we might never reach.

Gifts, they are.

Jessica Rzeszewski views the world through two distinct lenses that end up melding into a single worldview.

She is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and works with the military, providing counseling services in the USA and abroad. Jessica is also a shamanic practitioner; she practices, writes, and blogs about the unseen world of spirit. This distinct way of looking at the world has occupied her for the past twenty years. She is the author of 'Carry the Rock, An Apprentice Journey' published by Moon Books.

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NOTES:

1: Koan, a paradox to be meditated upon, used to train Japanese Zen Buddhist monks to abandon ultimate dependence on reason, and force them into gaining sudden intuitive enlightenment.

AYAHUASCA

Some reflections on tourism, teachers and pitfalls

Michele Costa Lukis

I wanted to write about plant ceremonies and my experiences of running Peruvian retreats, which include working with plant infusions. I want to share my knowledge in the hope that any reader tempted into the Amazon jungle to partake in a ceremony understands the risks involved.

I first started to work with Ayahuasca eleven years ago, as chronic back pain and a leg injury drove me to seek any cure on earth. I found myself in the Peruvian jungle drinking a slightly yellowy grey brew, whose taste I could barely tolerate.

I was the first in a small group to have my head in a bucket, purging, before laying back and allowing the plant to work its healing, which in due course she did. Mother Ayahuasca, the mother of all plants, the 'teacher,' changed, and is still changing, my life.

The brew was mixed by the same ayahuasco I work with today, a fifth generation master brewer, who understands that the brew Westerners tolerate is different to what he would make for his tribe.

He is a true ayahuascerero, having studied the plant and brewing techniques for years, and is also a shaman. Not all shamans have studied the art of brewing, nor are all shamans ayahuascereros. This is important, and when participating in a ceremony you must ask the person brewing if they are an ayahuascerero, and whether they have gone through the long and arduous training (there are, it is said, 214 ways to brew ayahuasca).

Since it has become very popular for Westerners to partake in the ceremony, many people along the Amazon are brewing for the tourists. Those brewing may be shamans, however, they may not be ayahuascereros, and they may not know how to brew for non-natives.

The would-be participant also needs to understand that certain Western medicines (e.g anti-depressants) will not mix with ayahuasca, and sadly people with certain medical and mental conditions cannot tolerate these plant medicines either.

If the participant, and-or the shaman-ayahuascerero does realise this however, then the participant may take part in the ceremony with only their foreheads anointed; as drinking the brew might cause problems to their health.

The dose for a participant depends on the shaman or the ayahuasero; not everyone will be given the full wooden cup dose and not everyone will have visions. No ceremony is ever the same for all the participants; the experience is one of a highly individualised nature.

Sometimes the plant works on a purely physical level and the visions - as described in books - are not experienced. My personal experience is that the plant medicine is working on the level the participant needs.

After ingesting the bitter brew, the participant will be immobilised for up to six hours, therefore it is imperative that the ceremony is held by safe, trustworthy people, as, for example, the participant will need assistance in managing to relieve themselves. In the groups that I and my colleagues hold, there are people to help us and we have guards around our area protecting the sacred ceremony.

I recommend not going into the jungle experience alone, without a trustworthy guide, or translator; and know who you are working with. I love the Amazon, I love the river, the jungle and its people. I return again and again to partake in ceremonies.

Years ago I was on a very small impoverished Fijian island, a guest of the King and his Queen who were hosting a kava-kava ceremony. As the coconut shell containing the brew was being passed around the small circle of participants, I leaned towards my daughter and whispered, "Don't drink it." She put it to her lips, without taking a drop, and passed to me.

Although I can't remember much about the ceremony, I remember having nightmares, or dispersing hallucinations for the rest of the night; I also suffered from severe headaches for three days afterwards.

I still have the large shell that the King and queen gave me as a parting gift, and came away with another gift too, the insight that the brew an indigenous culture could tolerate, my body could not - I am an American from European descent, and there is nothing in my make-up that could allow me to experience kava-kava in the same way that my hosts were accustomed to.

If you hear the call to work with a teacher plant, please do so, but do it safely. Last year my daughter sat in a circle with me, and she put the wooden ayahuasca cup to her lips and drank the Mother plant safely.

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GROUNDING THE QUEST FOR GOD

Unifying Plant and Non-Plant led Approaches to Shamanism

Jez Hughes

The use of plants for healing is something that unifies shamanism across many different cultures and times, and I would venture that this is much more so than the drum or other percussion instruments. This is because shamans, being primarily healers, have always used plants to bring healing to both the body and the spirit.

When I look at the modern Western shamanic world however, I observe something of a split between two main strands of practice - one heavily reliant on the use of teacher plants, (plants almost exclusively from cultures foreign to the West), and the other, following Michael Harner's lead, shunning plants in favour of the drum.

I often witness debate - at times heated - between these two camps as to whose approach is the most 'authentic'.

Further back than Michael Harner, the historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade began this argument by claiming in his seminal work, 'Shamanism- Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy,' that cultures who used 'teacher plants' were somehow following a debased version of a previously more pure form of ecstatic communion with the Otherworld, a version that didn't need them.

The author Terrance McKenna suggested that Eliade's view may have had more to do with subjective prejudice, than with any rational analysis of the evidence. He then went on to claim the exact opposite - that it was cultures that had lost connection with their 'teacher plant' roots that were practising a weaker, watered down strain of shamanism.

So who is right? Probably neither and both, because I feel such debate is actually irrelevant, as it just boils down to theory, and shamanism is a practical path, not a theoretical one.

I want to explore the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches, drum and plant, and, more importantly, see how they can perhaps be brought closer together. How can we build a bridge between these apparent disparate worlds?

THE TRAP IN SEEKING GOD

The West is becoming awash with previously exotic teacher plants, even to the point that ayahuasca has been used as a party drug by some young people. More and more people are travelling to the Amazon to partake in 'indigenous' ceremonies with the plants, and recent tragic deaths of young men following ceremonies, has brought this into focus.

I feel it is important then, that, as 'shamanic practitioners' (or whatever term you wish to use) we gain an awareness of why the plants maybe calling to so many people now, and how the plants can be integrated into shamanic practice in an effective, but safe way.

Beginning with teacher plants, I think the first point to note are the different ways indigenous people, who have cultivated their

relationship with them for thousands of years, and modern explorers approach the plants.

Firstly, if we look at how we in the West have changed the term used for such plants from 'hallucinogen' to 'entheogen' (which means 'generating the divine within'), we can see the emphasis which the Western relationship with the plants has taken - i.e. that the plants teach us to find God within.

For indigenous people however, there is not the same need to seek or find God, because the Creator is seen everywhere in the nature surrounding them, and that connection is inherent in their culture. They have not been banished from the 'garden of Eden,' or cut off from the source in their mythology. Thus, for indigenous people, plants are used much more practically; essentially to provide healing and curing, for the reversal of ill luck or the answer to problems.

Medicine people would also use the plants to cleanse and restore their power. As the Amazonian Cocama curandero, Don Juan Curico explained to me recently - 'a shaman is like a battery, after working with the plants their power is full, but gradually through helping and healing others, their power will be drained. That's when they should return to the plants for themselves to recharge their battery.'

This distinction, between the indigenous and Western approaches to the plants is very important, as it highlights some potential pitfalls when we work with them. The indigenous approach, by its nature, is extremely grounded and down to earth - the plants are practical aids. The Western approach however can be the opposite, as it is one of transcendence.

I have observed a problem for many Westerners that this creates, seemingly getting caught in the trap of 'chasing the medicine.' They become so enthralled in the experience of connection which the plants offer - to themselves, others and spirit - they develop a desire to re-experience this again and again.

I think this happens because one of the core social-stories in the Western psyche is that we, as a culture, are somehow separate from the divine, and therefore need to find our way back to oneness again. This creates a desire to chase that feeling of connection, and for many it seems that it is only possible to experience 'connection' while in ceremony with the plants.

This can lead to two results: firstly a lot of ungrounded people, who want to stay in a 'bubble of oneness' and not face up to conflict and the other challenges of life; and secondly a non-integration of the healing aspects of the plant and its spirit.

INTERGRATING THE HEALING

The plants, as with any with spiritual practice, work fundamentally with intention. Thus, if my intention is to heal an aspect of my life - say to open my heart more - the spirit of the plant encountered in a ceremony can give me incredible insight into what is blocking this. It can also begin the energetic work of taking apart the defences that have built up as a response to past trauma.

However, the healing doesn't stop there; in fact it is only just beginning. The real work occurs when I start to integrate this new way of being into my life.

I always say with any shamanic healing that the energy work is the most straight forward and easy part; what is difficult and can take a long time is the need for our emotional and physical bodies to catch up with what has occurred on the invisible, spiritual level.

This process of integration can lead to what people have traditionally called a 'healing crisis,' what I like to call the 'back-flush.' This is when we're hit with all the crap that has been blocking us - all the pain from our past - as it is suddenly brought up from the depths of our being in order to be released.

A part of this process can mean that the pattern we are trying to heal is repeated. We seem to re-experience the trauma of what it felt like to be vulnerable, or hurt; so much so that it can feel threatening to our very survival. And this, of course, is the very thing that caused us to close down our heart in the first place.

This phase seems to be an essential part of any healing, and it gives us an opportunity to respond consciously in a different way. If we choose to keep our hearts open in the face of all that pain and vulnerability, we can then fully take responsibility for our healing and claim it for ourselves.

If, however, in the midst of this healing crisis we go off to work with the plants again - perhaps undertaking even more powerful ceremonies - we are just putting off the inevitable. We are going to have to face up to all this in our everyday lives sometimes in order to integrate it. Too much ceremony without integration can also lead to the very real possibility of complete psychic breakdown as the system becomes over loaded with too many healing crises. I have seen this and experienced it myself. Too much healing at once can be a dangerous thing.

LEARNING TO TRUST

The reason that this normal healing process is compounded when working with the spirits of the teacher plants is that their power is immense. In my experience, the healing that can be received in one ceremony could be the equivalent of years and years of other healing work. It is like they offer us quantum leaps in our growth, this is their gift, but it is also why we need to be careful and respect them.

This is where I feel that other shamanic work, work which focusses on connecting us to Spirit, and more importantly to nature, is so important. This is the gift of the non-teacher plant focused path. On this path we have to learn to 'earn our visions,' as the Lakota holyman John Lame Deer put it when he decided to move away from the Native American Church, and what he thought was their over reliance on the use of the peyote cactus in their ceremonies.

I will share a personal experience as an example of this. A few years back, I was involved in an ayahuasca ceremony with a medicine man from the Shuar people of the Amazon.

I'd travelled quite a long way to get to this ceremony, and was ill at the time, which had caused me to think quite a lot as to whether to take part or not. I was not finding it easy to decide whether my illness was resistance to the ceremony or a genuine message not to continue, but in the end I decided to carry on with the ceremony.

However, feeling the way I did, and not having worked with this medicine man before, meant that after taking the medicine, I felt a huge desire not to be there, and as a result, I lost my trust completely.

Unfortunately, this was when the 'plant medicine' started to take hold of me, but in a powerful and bewildering way, which I hadn't ever experienced before.

It was like I was suddenly in the middle of the worst storm of my life, I was completely disorientated, I couldn't think, or even sit straight,

my head was spinning madly, and I heard an overwhelming noise like a helicopter above my head just about to land.

At this point strange spirits, beings - who were the most unusual looking alien-like things I'd ever seen - manifested all around me. I could see them with my eyes wide open and physically feel them.

One of them kept reaching into me, as if he was trying to drag me out of my body. I was absolutely terrified and focussed all my energy on battering him back, convinced that if I gave into him that would be it, I'd end up dead, or mad, or worse.

Luckily, with what I had left of my conscious, rational mind, I suddenly realised that I had to pray for help. As I did so, the main spirit helper I work with - one I've spent years developing a deeply trusting relationship with, and who has helped me in hundreds of healings, was there in an instant.

He put his hand in the middle of my back and held me up, which meant I could just surrender into his arms. He then said simply: "Go with him," indicating the spirit that was reaching into me.

Because I trusted my spirit helper, I did so, and physically left my body with this other spirit. The experience I then had was one of the most profound and deeply healing of my life, far beyond the realms of time and space, and impossible to put into words.

I still work with the spirit that was introduced to me that night, especially in exceptionally difficult healings when someone is facing what seems to be an irrevocable conflict in their lives - the state I had been in at the time of the ceremony.

This is the beauty which an introduction to the spirit of the plants brings, it is the beginning of a relationship which can continue to grow and flourish over a long period of time, and the potential of the teachings you may receive is infinite. The important thing however is that you do not necessarily have to consume the plant on a regular basis for this relationship to continue - the spirit of the plants are always there for you once you have connected.

THE ESSENTIAL GROUNDWORK

But, without all of the shamanic training outside of the use of plants; the hard earned trust in my spirit helpers that I had worked at for years on a daily basis, I would not have been able to have received this experience.

This seems, to me, to be the essential groundwork - without it my resistance would have been too great. And even if I had been able to surrender to what had happened to me during that ceremony, it would have been of little practical use in my life, other than as an extraordinary out of this world experience to file away somewhere in the back of my mind.

However, due to the trusting relationship I have built up with my spirit helper, I was able not only to receive my own healing, but more importantly, I was able to let this new plant spirit helper assist me in the healing work I do now: something I feel which has taken it to another level.

We have to ground the healing and wisdom through hours of sweat and toil, through disappointment and disillusionment, and through sometimes feeling completely disconnected from the spirits when we need them the most. And we have to learn in these moments to muster all our faith and trust to reconnect and let the invisible ones lead and move through us.

We do this by drumming and dancing for so long our arms and legs want to fall off, and just when we think of giving up, something happens. We do this also by sitting out in nature for hours on end, fasting and freezing, thinking 'why am I here, nothing is ever going to happen?' This helps us to retain our discipline and faith that spirit will eventually reveal itself in a profound way. This is the leg work, and for me, it is essential. It also means that when we do open up to plant spirit teachers, the work we do with them can go so much deeper.

THE NEED FOR GROUNDING

So why ingest plants at all? Well, apart from the previously mentioned quantum leaps in our growth they can offer, and the assistance they can give in our work with others, there are other possible reasons.

One of these is this: I've noticed for myself and by observing others that when doing shamanic journeying with a drum, we can take a lot of our 'stuff' into the spirit world. This can be stories, prejudices, expectations and illusions etc. This 'stuff' has the potential to invoke fantasy, which can then be projected onto the spirits encountered and the spirit world in general.

Teacher plants seem to have the ability to cut through this fantasy very quickly, and lead us into the heart of what is real. As healers I think we need that, to have our potential illusions cut through every so often, to bring us back into authenticity with ourselves. As Juan Curico also said to me once "We can lie to ourselves, we can lie to others, but we can't lie to the plants."

Many traditional spiritual paths also involve some kind of physical practise, aimed at purifying and aligning the body so as to enhance the connection to Spirit. Eastern traditions have Yoga, or Tai Chi, and in other cultures there are sweat lodges or ritual dances. This essential component seems often missing or overlooked in modern, Western practice with its focus on the shamanic 'journey.' But these grounding and purifying practices are the bedrock of further exploration, and encourage the practitioner to learn the art of physical surrender.

This physicality can also be obtained with teacher plants, and traditionally a part of their use is to cleanse the body and teach the initiate to surrender. A traditional name for ayahuasca is 'la purga,' (the purge) because of the violent vomiting it can stimulate; this emphasises its primary role as a cleansing agent.

Once, during in a ceremony, I became curious as to how plants could assist humans, how they could know so much about us and our lives, and bring us the exact healing we needed? So I asked the plant spirit I was working with, and it said simply "because we dreamt you into being."

After the ceremony I thought about this, and realised, beyond any spiritual implication, the simple fact is plant life provided the exact conditions on the earth which enabled animals, including humans to live. In a way, they gave birth to us. And, just as any parent, they retain an active interest in their offspring, they care about our survival and want us to prosper and flourish.

This is why I feel the plants are calling out to a lot of people right now, to help us to heal and bring us back into line with Creation, back to the source; because they - being older than we are - are closer to it. And of course this applies to all plants, not just to the teacher plants.

The teacher plants, however, are like mediators. They can help us to consciously heal the 'broken link' between our own bodies and the rest of nature. By forgiving and loving us in the unconditional way that only a parent can, we, as children of the earth, can then learn to

grow and live in harmony with the rest of creation.

If we respect the power of these teachings, and use them in partnership with other shamanic techniques, they have the possibility to ground us, in our everyday lives and worlds.

Finally, I feel it is important that the potential healing power is contained by the wisdom of the indigenous medicine people holding a ceremony. They have thousands of years of ancestral wisdom, in partnership with the spirit of the plants, to draw upon. This is why I usually will only take part in ceremonies with teacher plants led by an indigenous medicine person.

But it is important to remember, just because they are indigenous, doesn't necessarily mean they are any good, and doing your own research about your teachers, and also trusting your spirit helpers to lead you to the right teacher for you, is very important.

Someday, perhaps if we partake in enough of these ceremonies, we may then be able to connect with the teacher plants of our own lands and listen to and dream with them enough to form our own indigenous ceremonies. This is a dream of mine. However this happens and wherever this road leads, I think that the potential for healing is immense, when we - as modern shamans (or whatever we call ourselves) - listen to, and entwine both plant led, and non-plant led paths of ecstasy.

Jez Hughes is the founder of Second Sight Healing. He has worked full time as a shamanic healer for ten years and runs shamanic training and initiations from the heart of the woods in Sussex. His journey with the plants began 12 years ago with the spirit of Peyote in the Mexican desert and he has since worked with many different plant and non-plant traditions. His book, 'The Heart of Life' is due out next year.
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www.secondsighthealing.co.uk

SPIRIT OF THE BLACKSMITH

*The master of my furnace is radiant sky
The master of my bellows is black, like coal.
A brisk hammer and anvil are a help of my right hand
Heavy tongs of silver are a help of my left hand*

An introduction to Damjin Dorlig, the Southern Siberian and Central Asian shaman blacksmith spirit

Nicholas Breeze Wood

The blacksmith spirit appears in all the cultures which have worked with iron - a fundamental figure in mythology, right across the world, and from far distant times.

My spirits introduced me to Damjin Dorlig, a Southern Siberian blacksmith spirit, by a roundabout set of 'coincidences'.

It all started a few years ago, during a day spent with a shamanic peer group, where I made a shamanic journey to ask my spirits if they had anything they wanted to show or tell me at that time.

During the journey a spirit, who I thought was a Tibetan Buddhist protector being I recognised as Dorje Legpa, appeared; I found myself being given unexpectedly a traditional Tibetan empowerment ceremony into what I thought was his practice.

That evening, eager to find out a bit more about Dorje Legpa I asked a Buddhist friend about him. He told me that the famous Tibetan Buddhist master, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, was giving a 'transmission' (a traditional form of empowerment) for Dorje Legpa the next day, and I could take part in it if I wished to.

But I still had no idea as to why Dorje Legpa had apparently come into my life.

The first chance I had, I journeyed again to my spirit helpers, to ask them for more information about Dorje Legpa, and they gave me a short phrase which they told me to 'Google.'

When I did so, I swiftly came to a reference about a Buryat and Mongolian shamanic blacksmith spirit called Damjin Dorlig. Damjin Dorlig (spellings vary across Siberia and Central Asia) is not only responsible for everything related to metalwork, he is also the spirit keeper of all machines and electricity too.

The Buddhists of Tibet and Central Asia adopted many existing shamanic spirits, Damjin Dorlig included. He is known by Tibetan Buddhists as Damchen Garwa Nagpo and sometimes Dorje Legpa¹.

I come from a long line of family blacksmith ancestors, but I had never been drawn to smithing, and felt no connection to Damjin Dorlig. But I accepted that the spirits knew best and awaited developments...

THUNDERBOLT COINCIDENCES

Again I asked my spirits for more information, and they said that a miniature set of iron blacksmithing tools, which all Buryat shamans have, and which I had been given many years ago, were the special tools of Damjin Dorlig. Later, I discovered a film on YouTube² in which a Buryat shaman talks about these tools and how they belong to Damjin Dorlig, explaining the use of each one.

These miniature tools are generally fixed to a special wand-like whip shamans carry called a *bardag*, which is used for healing and blessing. They often contain such items as miniature anvils, bellows and hammers, as well as weapons and other tools the shaman may need, such as a sword, a bow and arrow, an axe, magical keys to any lock, and even sometimes a boat, a ladder, and many other implements.

Part of a song from one Buryat shaman states *"If cliffs and rocks appear, the ladder puts me through, If lakes or rivers appear, the rowboat takes me to the other side."*

My spirits also told me I should obtain a small iron thunderbolt to wear around my neck.

I understood my spirits had meant a small iron Tibetan dorje, (which represents a thunderbolt). I looked everywhere but I had no luck finding one. So eventually I asked a Mongolian friend if he could find me one in Mongolia. He asked me why, so I told him of my encounter with Damjin Dorlig. His reply was "There is something you don't know about me! For many years I was a smith, and I worked with the spirit Damjin Dorlig every day!"

He arranged for a small iron dorje to be made for me by a blacksmith in Ulaanbaatar who makes ritual objects for shamans. That dorje - which is not one suitable to be worn - is now on my altar in front of the statue of Damjin Dorlig.

The trail didn't end there. A little after this, I went on a Buddhist retreat, totally unconnected to Dorje Legpa. Sitting down to lunch, the man seated opposite asked me, completely out of the blue, if I knew anything about Dorje Legpa? He told me that he came from Finland, and a lot of his friends there thought that Dorje Legpa was a manifestation of Thor, the Norse god. Several months later I bought an iron Thor's hammer amulet, feeling drawn to it. When I put it around my neck, I recalled my conversation over lunch and remembered the fact that Thor's 'hammer' was a thunderbolt. I fell about laughing at the realisation - my iron thunderbolt had arrived after all! And what better symbol for a blacksmith spirit than a hammer?

The spirits then told me I should learn blacksmithing, because Damjin Dorlig was going to be a major spirit helper for me. I found a blacksmith teacher, who had a keen interest in Iron Age and tribal smithing and artifacts, living just a few miles away.

THE SACRED BLACKSMITH

In Hindu mythology, Tvastar, or Vishvakarma as he is sometimes known, is the blacksmith of the gods, whereas Vulcan (Hephaestus) holds that role in Greek and Roman mythology, using as he does a volcano as his forge.

In ancient Irish mythology, the sacred smith is Goibhniu, and in Wales he is Gofannon. Both of these names mean blacksmith in their respective languages.

In Anglo-Saxon Northern Europe, Wayland the Smith, who is known in Old Norse as Völundr, is the heroic blacksmith, who has many legends associated with him.

Traditionally in Siberia and Central Asia, the blacksmith is a very important person, closely related to the shaman; one Siberian saying is - 'the shaman and the blacksmith are from the same nest' - which sums it up well.

The blacksmith makes many of the shamans' tools and pieces of equipment. He is the armourer of the shaman, and the iron objects fixed onto shamans' coats or carried by them, are their armour and weapons. In Buryat tradition, such a smith and maker of shaman's objects is called *Dorligtoi xun* - 'a person with Dorlig.'

According to Buryat legend, blacksmiths were taught by spirits from heaven called tengers, who were sent down to the earth to train human beings in the blacksmith's art. They descended, carrying a hammer, tongs, and bellows 'the size of a meadow' to the peaks of mountains. The first people to be trained by the tengers handed down their skills to their descendants. Thus the role of smith became a hereditary one, generations of blacksmith families making the shamans' 'armour', tools and weapons, being honoured for their work and their skill.

Iron was considered magical in its own right, but the smiths worked with other, non-ferrous, metals too. These smiths, like shamans, are divided into two groups: 'white' and 'black.' Black smiths generally forge articles from iron, the 'black metal', and their work includes domestic items, such as axes, knives and parts for horses' harnesses, as well as shoeing horses. They also make the shamans' items related to Damjin Dorlig such as metal parts for the shaman's costumes, and iron parts for drums.

White smiths are those who tend to work with non-ferrous and precious metals, and their shamanic work would include making brass and bronze ritual mirrors, and the casting of amulets and bells.

DAMJIN DORLIG IN TIBET

When Buddhism came to Tibet in the 8th CE there was already an ancient shamanic culture and a rich family of shamanic spirits there.

Legend has it that the Tantric Buddha Padmasambhava, who brought the teachings to Tibet and surrounding regions, travelled all over the land subduing these ancient spirits and making them take a vow to be protectors of Buddhism from that moment onwards. These protectors are known as *Dharmapala* (Oath-bound protectors of the Dharma, the Buddhist teachings).

This was true of the blacksmith spirit too, who became known as Damchen Garwa Nagpo who acts as a protector of Buddhism. He is also regarded as a mountain spirit with a mountain in North East Tibet sacred to him. His spirit comes into the bodies of shaman-like Buddhist oracles, through whom he gives advice and guidance. Some famous historical oracles who embodied him were reputed to be able to melt iron in their bare hands, just by holding it while in trance, when Damjin Dorlig had come into them.

As a protector there are many examples of Damjin Dorlig being used in protection rituals. Here is an extract of one such Buddhist ritual:

Invoke Damjin.

*Visualise yourself as
the powerful victor.*

Wear a black costume.

Tie your hair on top

of your head.
Wave a magical baton
in the four directions.
Imagine the mighty divine protectors loudly calling
out to the enemy.
Seek the testimony.
Attest to your innocence.
Let Damjin precisely know
the obstructers that are to
be targeted with maledictions.
Entrust Damjin with the
slaughter of the enemy.
Prepare burning goat fat
and incense.
Sprinkle offerings in
the four directions.
Ask Damjin - 'the rider of the tiger' - and his retinue to
come to this place.
Play the drum and bell, hold aloft a victory banner, blow the conch trumpet, and melodically
chant "You must slay and
devour this evil-doing enemy."
Then, like this, Damjin
is called to action.

FORGING WITH DAMJIN

I have no wish nor aptitude to become a blacksmith, but working with the element of fire and iron was a powerful experience. It does not need huge amounts of strength or skill to make *something*, and it is very rewarding to shape hot iron.

When I set out to learn blacksmithing, my spirits instructed me to make a set of iron spirit traps, for use in a specific healing ceremony that I use sometimes. I was not able to do all the work on the traps myself, it was too technical, so Aaron, my local blacksmith teacher, was more than happy to help me with the bits that were out of my ability zone.

I continue to work with Damjin Dorlig, making regular offerings of incense and vodka to him, and journeying to meet him and receive teachings and instructions. My spirits told me to get an *ongon* (spirit house, fetish or statue) of him for my altar. This was fairly easy to find, and I was able to get a Buddhist statue of him sitting on his red goat with horns of twisted iron.

MAKING AN IRON DRUM

About a year prior to writing this article, I had a 'big' dream in which a shaman from Northern China clearly told me to make an iron- framed drum. These drums are used in some shamanic traditions in Inner Mongolia and North East China. I often have very deep and vivid shamanic dreams, receiving teachings, performing healings and working with Mongolian shamans, so this was not too out of the ordinary for me, and I have learnt to take note of these dreams.

As I had been so clearly instructed to make the drum, I asked my spirits about it the next day, and they agreed wholeheartedly that I should make it and added that I should also have a set of iron antlers (*orgay*) made for me at the same time. These iron, or sometimes copper, antlers are a traditional part of the ritual equipment of many Siberian shamans, from the Buryats in Russia to shamans in Central Siberia, and eastwards to Northern China and Manchuria.

It took me almost another year to manage to arrange for time at the forge, and when I did, these two items were made mostly by Aaron, my teacher; I acted as his assistant at the forge. They were made with ceremony and offerings to Damjin Dorlig, both in preparation at my house and at the forge before we started work each day.

I am currently being taught about how to use these two new sacred objects by my spirit helpers.

I have written this account of the series of 'synchronicities' that connected me to this blacksmith spirit, and because I hear fewer stories from people who work with other, more archetypal spirits. My spirits tell me that Damjin Dorlig has come into my life because of my deep love for ritual objects. I do know it has been quite a powerful encounter for me, and one that is still evidently unfolding; and where it will take me next I cannot really hazard a guess...

NOTES:

1: In Buddhism, Damchen Garwa Nagpo and Dorje Legpa are sometimes seen as the same being, but sometimes Damchen Garwa Nagpo is seen as a spirit helper of Dorje Legpa, one of his entourage.

2: Youtube Film:

www.bit.ly/Buryat-Bardag

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MUSIC AND BOOK REVIEWS

MEHRAAB

Loga Ramin Torkian
CD and Download: 42 mins
Six Degrees Records
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

Brooding and very atmospheric Iranian electronica, fusing traditional Persian folk music and subtle psy-trance-grooves. The nine songs on the album are a mix of electronic and acoustic instruments, and at times are lyrical and soaring, and at other times reflective and introvert. They are always rich and exotic

Loga is a member of the band Niyaz, and is also the husband of Azam Ali, whose album 'Lamentation of Swans' we reviewed last issue: it has a similar flavour. Haunting music.

www.lrtorkian.com
Available from Amazon and iTunes etc.
On Spotify (www.spotify.com)
YouTube: www.bit.ly/Loga-YouTube
Four and Half Feathers

ALTAI

Dangaa Khosbayar
CD or Digital download: 58 mins.
Blue Flame Records
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

I am afraid I have not been able to find out any information about this Mongolian throat singer on this album which was released a few years ago now.

The album is a fusion of traditional Central Asian over-tone singing, mixed with electronica and a selection of acoustic instruments - from piano, to sitar, to didgeridoo - and in styles that range from ambient Western chill-out, to Indian and Arabic inspired tracks... It's a bit of a mongrel, but it has its charm (like most mutts).

It's released on a German album label, and appears very geared to European consumers of ambient world music fusion, those who like to feel they are listening to exotic music without having to leave their comfort zones.

I'm not sure it works in all places, but it's creative and you can tell they had fun recording it, and the man can really sing.

Available from Amazon and iTunes etc.
On Spotify (www.spotify.com)
YouTube: www.bit.ly/Dangaa-YouTube
Three and a Half Feathers

REVIVAL

Bellowhead
CD or Digital download: 77 mins.
Island Records
Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

Bellowhead - the thinking folkies wall of sound... With its eleven person lineup, and reputation for arranging traditional British folk music and sea shanties in a wide variety of highly creative ways, Bellowhead are very much a music force to conjure with. Long before Mumford and Sons became the darlings of the acoustic pseudo-folk scene, Bellowhead were carving their place into the affections of listeners, with a wide range of music tastes.

You only have to hear the third track on the album, the old English song 'Fine Sally' (collected in the Appalachian mountains in America) performed as a funky R&B - a la Phil Collins, on traditional folk and brass instruments, to realise these people grab folk music, turn it inside-out and dance wildly on its hat, while they juggle it. Amazing stuff.

www.bellowhead.co.uk
Available from Amazon and iTunes etc.
On Spotify (www.spotify.com)
Youtube: www.Bellowhead-YouTube
Four Feathers

SABBATUM: A Medieval Tribute to Black Sabbath

Rondellus

Monsters Of Rock: MOFR 00442

CD and Download: 53 mins

Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

I couldn't resist reviewing this - after all who doesn't have a soft spot for those cheeky chappies, the popular beat combo called Black Sabbath?

Rondellus are a serious Estonian medieval music ensemble, accurately playing beautiful medieval music on copies of period instruments; they also like Black Sabbath's music, and so decided to release an album of Sabbath songs performed in authentic medieval style, all translated into Latin.

It sounds absolutely authentic as medieval music, fiddles, hurdy gurdy, medieval lutes, harps, frame drums and other instruments combined with soaring vocals, in a style that has its roots very firmly in C13th and C14th Northern France - and then you catch the melodies and you recognise the song.

It is unbelievably skillfully done, showing high creativity and dazzling originality; it works on both levels - medieval, and as a pastiche of rock - and is truly beautiful to listen to. The album starts with 'Verres Militares' (War Pigs) and contains twelve songs - although sadly does not have a version of Paranoid. I think my favourite is 'Funambulus Domesticus' (A National Acrobat) as it has such a haunting riff.

This album has to be one of the greatest musical jokes of all times, and a very fine and fitting tribute to those 'loveable lads' from Birmingham.

www.rondellus.ee

Available from Amazon and iTunes etc.

On Spotify (www.spotify.com)

YouTube: www.bit.ly/Sabbatum-YouTube

Five Feathers - Album of the Issue

GRIEFWALKER

Directed by Tim Wilson

National Film Board of Canada

DVD 69 mins

Reviewer: Janey Verney

This beautifully crafted film is a documentary about Stephen Jenkinson, Canadian teacher, farmer, and ceremonialist, with decades of experience of counselling the dying... Director and friend, Tim Wilson speaks with him of having returned from the edge of death himself, and of nearly losing someone close to him. This story is interwoven with Stephen Jenkinson's frank conversations with people in his hospital work, his daily life, and rituals on the beautifully photographed wild land where he lives, and elegiac music.

His own spiritual practice is not spelt out, but his reverence for the wild land is clear as he makes offerings, blessings and prayers on his way. He asks us how we pay back, and speaks of grief as awakening us to this... seeing the beauty of a flower, yes, and also that it will soon be gone.

Jenkinson speaks in stories, and asks questions as much as giving answers. The key message I get from this film is an urgent call to love, praise and be grateful for life in the enlivening grief of embracing and befriending death as its twin too.

A key to the film is the prayer on the last page of the booklet that comes with the DVD - a prayer to our ancestors, and that we may live 'as ancestors worth coming from.'

WISDOMKEEPERS - PAQO ANDINO

Directed by Jeffrey Wium

Streaming Video: 132 mins

Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

I found this film absolutely extraordinary. It is a fly on the wall documentary following three traditional Andean paqos (shamans) as they go around and about their community and up into the mountains, performing ceremonies for the benefit of their people and all beings everywhere.

The film is in their own language, but has subtitles, so you can understand their astonishingly beautiful and heartfelt prayers as they perform blessings on children and llamas alike, and make despacho offerings in the mountains and in the fields of their homelands.

Their ceremonial language is delightful, just watching them is a masterclass in prayer and sacred etiquette and I can't praise this film highly enough. It is so intimate, so encompassing and so rich, the love between them and their love to their community and the wide world pours out of the film.

As far as I am aware the film is sadly not available on DVD, you have to watch online, but the website has dates and locations of screenings. Very highly recommended.

www.paqoandino.com

THE HISTORY OF CENTRAL ASIA:

Vol. 2: The Age Of The Silk Roads

Christoph Baumer

I B Tauris Press

HB: 398 pages. £17.00 : \$37.57

ISBN 978 1 78076 832 8

Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

This is a delightful, large, profusely illustrated book, the second in a series (we reviewed the first book in Hoop some time ago), all about the history and culture of the Silk Road, from China to the Middle East. The first book was devoted to pre-history, and this one is devoted to the great age of the Silk Road, from around 100BCE to about 900CE.

The book is sumptuous. It has a large page size, and is thick and heavy in the hand, and as you flick through it you come across page after page of wonderful photos of art and objects, peoples and landscapes from all the cultures found along the road; from China in the East, to the desert living peoples of Central Asia, to the Mongolians in the North, the Tibetans and Indians to the south, and the Arabs and Turks in the West. So many rich and different cultures, so many wonderful ancient treasures, buildings and landscapes. A veritable feast for the eye.

The cultures of the ancient road were predominantly animistic and shamanic - with a bit of Buddhism and Christianity thrown in for good measure, and of course, later on Islam - and the ancient artwork of all these peoples drew upon that. Mythological animals and zoomorphic themes abound, so for those drawn to the arts the book will be a banquet. I advise you to treat yourselves and, if you are in the winter zones, light a good fire and do some armchair travel, and time travel, while you explore one of the most amazing cultural melting pots of human history.

Available from Amazon etc.

SPIRITUAL BYPASSING:

When Spirituality Disconnects Us From What Really Matters

Robert Augustus Masters

North Atlantic Books

PB: 224 pages. £10.73 : \$12.49

Also available for Kindle

ISBN 978 1 55643 905 6

Reviewer: Luitha K Tamaya

This is an odd book to find reviewed in a shamanism magazine, coming, as it does, from a fairly modern, Western psychological perspective. But when you look beneath the surface, the message it contains is both spiritually potent and deeply resonant for all spiritual traditions.

It is also, judging from my own experiences in some 'shamanic' circles, sorely needed. The author defines spiritual bypassing as 'the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds and developmental needs.' In practical terms, the book is about how easy it is to let our spirituality be the reason we're stuck in a holding pattern, avoiding dealing with the real roots of our own relationship, financial, health or other problems.

The book details various common ways in which spirituality can become an obstacle, from the refusal to experience and deal with 'negative' emotions, such as anger, to the indiscriminating conflict avoidance of blind compassion, to the disconnection of 'living in our heads' while taking but poor care of, nor listening to, our bodies.

This book isn't slamming spirituality in itself, but rather our blindness to the ways we use it for reinforcing our own problem-causing choices. While it's not overtly about shamanism, it is a good reality check for those of us who want our spiritual paths to be about more than fuzzy feelings and the security of a group identity.

And while I don't - and many of you reading this won't either - agree with the author's views on the importance of psychotherapy, I can certainly agree with his insistence that focusing solely on high minded spiritual ideals without doing the dirty, gritty work of examining our own behaviours and their consequences is, at best, distracting and, at worst, sociopathic.

Ultimately, this book points us towards some essential principles for spiritual maturity. Don't read this book if you have any remaining skeletons you're not quite ready to face.

Available from Amazon etc.

SADHUS AND SHAMANS

Swati Chopra

Lustre Press

HB: 144 pages. £26.50 : \$19.25

ISBN: 978 81 7436 864 5

Reviewer: Philip Ash

This is a rather strange, but interesting book. It brings together Indian Hindu holyman traditions, with Mongolian, Nepalese and Tibetan shamanism, and even some Sufi mysticism thrown in, producing an attractive, picture rich, book, which contains some extraordinary and dramatic photos and an interesting narrative.

The book gives a general, brief outline and background about each of the traditions it showcases - the main connecting element of all of them, of course being trance. The reader then has the ability to explore the book's - often outstanding - photos, for a more visceral and visual taste of what these ancient spiritual traditions have to offer.

The author is from New Delhi, and she has a great love of the spirituality of her subcontinent homeland, having written several other

books - many of which exploring spirituality and the contemporary role of women, and gender in general, within those spiritualities. It's no surprise therefore that the book's main theme is the shamanic and shaman-esq traditions found in India itself. But the book is not limited to this, including as it does, traditions from the wider trans-Himalayan regions to the North of India (which of course, over the centuries, have often had close contact with India).

Almost all of the photos were new to me and they show aspects of ceremony and spiritual practice in powerful ways. As a general book it's a good introduction to these traditions and shows the links between them, but I suspect many people will enjoy it just for the photos, and it is well worth buying just for those alone.

Available from Amazon etc.

A MAN AMONG THE HELPERS:

Salvatore Gencarelle and Russ Reina

VirtualBookWorm

PB: 220 pages. £10.10 : \$14.95

Also available for Kindle

ISBN 978 1 60264 939 2

Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

Salvatore wrote for us in this issue of Sacred Hoop, and this is a lovely book about his time and training in Oglala spirituality and medicine with the highly regarded Chipps family.

During a ten year period Salvatore was instructed in sacred ways from people at the heart of Oglala spirituality. learning to set up the altar for *yuwipi* (an ancient spirit calling, healing ceremony), learning about the *chanupa* (sacred pipe), *hembeciya* (vision quest), the *inipi* (sweat lodge) and many other traditional ceremonies; all the time receiving the deep teachings behind the ceremonies and the real power of connection to the Mystery the ceremonies give.

The book is very autobiographical and beautifully written. Anyone who has received similar teachings from Native American teachers will recognise them, will feel right at home and will have memories arise, as the book captures some of the deep flavour as well as the surface activity of being around 'the medicine.' A very moving, heartfelt read.

Available from Amazon etc.

THE WIND IS MY MOTHER:

The Life and Teachings of a Native American Shaman

Bear Heart

Berkley Books

PB: 260 pages. £15.00 : \$10.95

ISBN: 978 0 425 16160 9

Reviewer: Nicholas Breeze Wood

I will overlook the fact that Native Americans don't have shamans, making the subtitle somewhat of an oxymoron... different times - the book was, after all, written back in 1996, in a less politically fastidious world. Despite its age, it is still very applicable, and also still available.

I never personally worked with Marcellus - Bear Heart - Williams [1918-2008], although friends did, and I have several recordings of him talking. He was a full blood Muskogee Creek medicine man, with a reputation for deep spirituality and great wisdom. This book is filled with stories and teachings, and comes over just as I heard him on the recordings. Sweet medicine!

Available from Amazon etc.

Available from Amazon etc.

PEOPLE ON THE PATH - EVENTS DIARY

DEC 2014

DEC 12: SHAM-TASTIC (KENT) Monthly open drum circle. Shamanic drumming With Phil and Lynne Cowley Jones
www.shamanickent.blogspot.co.uk

DEC 12-14 THE CALL OF KING ARTHUR (GLOUCESTERSHIRE) Join us as we convene once more the table of the Arthurian mysteries, creating a profound Hallowquest with the figures of the Arthuriad and the Grail Quest, as we celebrate with ritual our core myth. With John and Caitlin Matthews (01453) 759 034

DEC 14 3 RIVERS SHAMANIC GROUP (IPSWICH AREA) One theme, two or three journeys per session. Contact Julia
www.3riversshamanicgroup.co.uk (07875) 218 178

DEC 17-22 DANCING WITH THE HEART OF THE WORLD (WALDHAUS, SWITZERLAND) Through Movement Medicine and the

Awakening the Dreamer Symposium, we will look into where we are, individually and collectively, to create a better future together. With Susannah and Ya'Acov Darling Khan Contact (01803) 762 255 Roland@RWEvents.co.uk

DEC 20: JOURNEYS OF DISCOVERY (N. CORNWALL) Drumming, healing and journey circle, all welcome, novice and experienced who would like to explore the world of the shaman. Warm, friendly and open circle. Contact Derek (07788) 432 380 www.healingtree.org.uk

DEC 21 SHAMANIC CIRCLE (SOUTH LONDON) Exchange healing, safe and supportive, soul retrieval, sacred art, Norse and Seidr. Practitioners or beginners. Contact Kat (07985) 433 889 newmoon11@gmail.com

DEC 21 WINTER SOLSTICE (ISLE OF ORKNEY) Inclusive open ceremonies, no charge, all welcome. Please bring a poem, dance, music to share if you like. Speaking parts available if you would like them. Local pub after for social and to warm up. info@spiritualorkney.co.uk

DEC 21 SOLSTICE CELEBRATION (WRECSAM, CYMRU) Celebrating the solstice, celebrating the sun, the gifts of this year and what we wish to bring in this coming solar time. With Katie Creuyanni Contact creuyanni@yahoo.co.uk www.creuyanni.wordpress.com

DEC 21: CANDLELIT LABYRINTH WALK (GLOUCESTERSHIRE) Winter Solstice Walk the labyrinth in celebration of the past year and to welcome back the sun. Fire, feasting and ceremony. With Mandy Pullen and Jane Embleton. Contact (01594) 541 850 or (01823) 672 689 www.mandypullen.co.uk info@mandypullen.co.uk

DEC 27: SHAMANIC CIRCLE (SOUTH LONDON) Exchange healing, safe and supportive, soul retrieval, sacred art, Norse and Seidr. Practitioners or beginners. Contact Kat (07985) 433 889 newmoon11@gmail.com

JAN 2015

JAN 1: TWO YEAR SHAMANIC INITIATORY TRAINING (MAINE, USA) Registration opens for the eleventh Spirit Passages comprehensive training in the ancient ways of the shaman, including opportunities to experience life with more power, confidence and joy (Course starts in April). With Evelyn Rysdyk and Allie Knowlton. www.spiritpassages.com passages@maine.rr.com (+) (207) 846 6829

JAN 4: SHAMANIC SUNDAYS (GLOUCESTERSHIRE) Monthly journeying group on the first Sunday of each month in Forest of Dean. With Mandy Pullen. Contact (01594) 541850 www.mandypullen.co.uk info@mandypullen.co.uk

JAN 9: SHAM-TASTIC (KENT) Monthly open drum circle. Held on the 2nd Friday of the month. Shamanic drumming With: Phil and Lynne Cowley Jones www.shamanickent.blogspot.co.uk

JAN 9-11: THE SILENT PATH (CO. MEATH, IRELAND) Join us for a guided weekend of stillness - meditation - mindfulness - walking in nature - connecting back to you and your soul, rediscovering yourself. Preparing a new path for 2015. With Annette Peard www.dunderrypark.org

JAN 14: DRUMMING GROUP (SURREY) Free journeying group, for those with shamanic journeying skills. Group meets once a month. With Trish Coates www.dreamingshadow.com (07876) 291 133

JAN 23-25: THE SHAMAN'S BREATH (CO. MEATH, IRELAND). Holotropic Breathwork with Martin Duffy www.shamanismireland.com

JAN 24: GATEWAY TO THE SHAMANS QUEST (N. CORNWALL) Drumming, healing and journey circle, all welcome, novice and experienced who would like to explore the world of the shaman. Warm, friendly and open circle. Contact Derek (07788) 432 380 www.healingtree.org.uk

JAN 24-25: THE ROLE OF BLESSINGS (STAFFORDSHIRE) An exploration of the use and purpose of blessings from many traditions, plus how to ask for and receive blessings. With Roo Reegan www.holisticwellbeingmidlands.co.uk (01785) 713 721 roo@holisticwellbeingmidlands.co.uk

JAN 25: SHAMANIC CIRCLE (SOUTH LONDON) Exchange healing, safe and supportive, soul retrieval, sacred art, Norse and Seidr. Practitioners or beginners. Contact Kat (07985) 433 889 newmoon11@gmail.com

JAN 30 - FEB 1: BALANCING THE FLAME (GLOUCESTERSHIRE) Imbolc - Candlemas workshop connecting us to the energies of the seasons and land on 60 acres of sustainable farmland. We will work with new beginnings. With Mandy Pullen and Jane Embleton. Contact (01594) 541 850 or (01823) 672 689 www.mandypullen.co.uk info@mandypullen.co.uk

FEB 2015

FEB 7-8: INTRODUCTION TO SHAMANISM (STAFFORDSHIRE) Part 1-basics. Exploring the shamanic worlds, sacred space, journey techniques, meeting spirit allies and developing relationships with spirit. With Roo Reegan www.holisticwellbeingmidlands.co.uk roo@holisticwellbeingmidlands.co.uk (01785) 713 721

FEB 11: DRUMMING GROUP (SURREY) Free journeying group, for those who are already have shamanic journeying skills. With Trish Coates www.dreamingshadow.com (07876) 291 133

FEB 13: SHAM-TASTIC (KENT) Monthly open drum circle. Held on the 2nd Friday of the month. Shamanic drumming With: Phil and Lynne Cowley Jones www.shamanickent.blogspot.co.uk

FEB 20-22: THE SHAMAN'S JOURNEY (CO. MEATH, IRELAND) With Martin Duffy www.shamanismireland.com

FEB 21-22: BASIC SHAMANIC JOURNEYING SKILLS (SURREY) Workshop to learn the art of shamanic journeying. Find out what shamanism is all about and how it can enhance your life. With Trish Coates (07876) 291 133 www.dreamingshadow.com

FEB 22: SHAMANIC CIRCLE (SOUTH LONDON) Exchange healing, safe and supportive, soul retrieval, sacred art, Norse and Seidr.

Practitioners or beginners. Contact Kat (07985) 433 889 newmoon11@gmail.com

FEB 28: JOURNEYS OF DISCOVERY (N. CORNWALL) Drumming, healing and journey circle, all welcome, novice and experienced who would like to explore the world of the shaman. Warm, friendly and open circle. Contact Derek (07788) 432 380 www.healingtree.org.uk

MAR 2015

MAR 7: INTRODUCTION TO DREAMING THE MOON DANCE (LONDON) Workshop introducing a series of workshops metaphorically dancing with the phases of the moon using dreaming, inner reflection and much more. With Mandy Pullen and Jane Embleton. Contact (01594) 541 850 or (01823) 672 689 www.mandypullen.co.uk info@mandypullen.co.uk

MAR 13: SHAM-TASTIC (KENT) Monthly open drum circle. Held on the 2nd Friday of the month. Shamanic drumming With: Phil and Lynne Cowley Jones www.shamanickent.blogspot.co.uk

MAR 14: THE SHAMAN'S SONG (GLOUCESTERSHIRE) Connecting to the Web of Life The intention of this day is to explore our voice, our sound: that which heals, refreshes and resonates with our Soul. With Maxine Smillie www.maxinesmillie.com

MAR 15: THE HEART OF THE DRUM (GLOUCESTERSHIRE) - Finding your Sacred Beat workshop will offer you a starting point to waken with your drum or rattle and gain confidence to drum a shamanic journey. With Maxine Smillie www.maxinesmillie.com

MAR 15: SHAMANIC GONG BATH DAY (GLOUCESTERSHIRE) A chance to incorporate shamanic work within the gong bath process, to go deeper and connect with spirit using this ancient sounding device. Led by Anna Farthing and Mandy Pullen. Contact (01594) 541 850 www.mandypullen.co.uk info@mandypullen.co.uk

MAR 21 – 22: THE ARCHIAIC AND THE MODERN (STAFFORDSHIRE) A study of ancient and traditional shamanic traditions and exploring ways of bringing archaic practice into modern life. With Roo Reygan www.holisticwellbeingmidlands.co.uk (01785) 713 721 roo@holisticwellbeingmidlands.co.uk

MAR 22: SHAMANIC CIRCLE (SOUTH LONDON) Exchange healing, safe and supportive, soul retrieval, sacred art, Norse and Seidr. Practitioners or beginners. Contact Kat (07985) 433 889 newmoon11@gmail.com

MAR 27-29: SHAMANIC PRACTITIONERS COURSE (CO. MEATH, IRELAND) With Martin Duffy www.shamanismireland.com

MAR 28: JOURNEYS OF DISCOVERY (N. CORNWALL) Drumming, healing and journey circle, all welcome, novice and experienced who would like to explore the world of the shaman. Warm, friendly and open circle. Contact Derek (07788) 432 380 www.healingtree.org.uk

MAR 28-29: SHAMANIC EXTRACTION TRAINING (SURREY) Advanced course in the ancient shamanic healing practice of extraction over one weekend. See website for dates, details and prerequisites. With Trish Coates www.dreamingshadow.com (07876) 291133

Stars ^{on} the Path

with Rob Purday

December Solstice 2014 to March Equinox 2015

The quarter between December Solstice and March Equinox is marked by two major influences. Firstly, the lunar cycle is in perfect synchrony with the cusps at the beginning and end of each of the last three signs of the tropical zodiac, and, secondly, the ongoing square between Uranus and Pluto becomes exact for the 6th and 7th times as the quarter opens and closes. This marks this quarter as a time for becoming both more deeply aligned with the forces of nature and their cosmological rhythms, and, through this, bringing the mind of nature into deeper and stronger awareness within our everyday lives. In the words of Barbara Hand Clow, we are 'becoming more fully consciousness of the unconscious'!

For healers, especially those who work with the lunar cycles, this is an important time to attend to your own healing needs, as this quarter will require you to be in the best possible shape. Use the lunations to power up and feed the roots of your practice, to strengthen the networks vital to your work in the world, and open higher, that is to say, more evolved levels of connection with the unseen, the spirits and the elemental powers within the land, as well as with each other. Each lunation will be markedly strong, so, expect an uptick in calls for help, especially around full Moon and third quarter of the Moon's cycle, and take the period around the dark Moons as time out, a personal space to recharge within.

On the global scale, we see the reality game shifting from a covert to more overt use of power – the veils have lifted on many dark goings on in the world over the last quarter, and now, with Neptune direct, the delusional notion that authoritarian worldly power is being used for our benefits is exposed for the illusion that it is. This could escalate through this quarter, especially with Jupiter strongly activated at Imbolc. Here, Jupiter is retrograde, quincunx by Pluto and Chiron and conjunct the full Moon! The growing inner need to activate our personal role as global healers will be strong ~ expect the world to reflect this back to us, as if it isn't already. Revelations about how our ancestors lived and accompanying inspiration from them and our guides could inspire a totally new perspective on how we fulfill this, so, tune into their messages on a regular basis and keep the shrines well tended.

We can use the synchrony and underlying flow of change present in this quarter to highly creative ends. First, take time to refuel in nature, to ground and re-balance; then, working with this energy, dare to be innovative in ways that only you are

capable of and trust in the support of spirit as you do so. We are in the zone where personal freedom and collective fate are intimately interwoven, where every act of creativity undertaken in this way becomes revolutionary and can turn the thread of fate into the path of destiny. The time is now ~ seize the moment!

Practitioner Profile... Shenoah Taylor

LOCATION: LONDON, ENGLAND.
www.shenoahtaylor.com

Where did you first meet shamanism?

As a child I had spontaneous connections, rhythmically swinging on the garden swing and making up songs that took me to another place. Many years later on my first shamanic course I spent the entire week weeping as my heart opened and I felt the spirits close to me once again.

Which teachers and teachings have influenced you the most?

I have been blessed with so many wonderful teachers. Some have shown me how to connect more deeply with myself and nature, others how to work with the spirits on behalf of myself and others. All have mirrored how to become more myself by living and sharing their own gifts. Jonathan Horwitz, Annette Høst, Myron Eshowsky, Sandra Ingerman, Betsy Bergstrom, Annie Spencer, Thich Nhat Hanh, Joseph Real, Pippa Bondy. I hear inspiring teachings every day from my own spirits and the spirits of my clients, but the one that brings me home is; 'where there is love there is no fear.'

What makes your heart sing?

Singing, singing and then singing some more. Witnessing the transformations as people receive help, healing and most importantly hope.

What is the most bizarre situation that you have found yourself in on your shamanic path

My bizarre levels are pretty high, but getting lost within a copse of trees no more than a few feet across and not being able to get out for what felt like hours, but was no more than 10 minutes is certainly up there.

Where on earth do you feel most at home?

I can feel at home almost anywhere I am in nature. In London I have a special affinity with Wormwood Scrubs Park, Acton Park and Kew Gardens, all beautiful green spaces that continue to feed and support me. Farther afield a number of places in nature in Wales, British Columbia Canada, and Scandinavia all fill me with the sense of being at home.

What do you do for fun?

Meet friends, eat fabulous food, drink delicious wine, play games, sing - often in that order. Listening to 'Just a Minute' or 'I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue' on BBC Radio 4 never fails to make me laugh out loud too.

What is your favourite food?

Current favourites are Ethio-Eritrean, where the food is served on one big platter and everyone eats with their hands, it is a great communal experience. Also my local Creperie, which always has delicious food and coffee and a warm welcome for everyone.

What music do you like?

I am currently listening to Andy Kershaw's BBC Radio 3 archive of world music. His adventures and interactions with musicians, and the people in each country he visits, brings the music and culture alive. I listen to each one a number of times before I am ready to move on to the next one. Favourite music I keep on my portable devices, for when I am out and about, include Kirsty McKall, Lo Cor de la Plana, Sam Lee, John Tavener, Le Trio Bulgarka, Norah Jones, Abba, June Tabor, Paul Weller and Angelique Kidjo.

Best book and film?

So many inspirations that I return to again and again. Films - 'Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner,' 'The Story of the Weeping Camel' and 'Ten Canoes,' - all made with non professional actors, and the extras on these DVDs give the films an extra dimension. 'What Dreams May Come,' 'Whale Rider,' 'Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon' all touched me deeply in different ways. Books - 'How Can I Help' by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman transformed how I understood help. 'Sacred Hunt' by David F. Pelly, 'Reindeer People' by Piers Vitebsky for the depth of understanding and insights into the cultures they reflect. The 'Chronicle of the Stones' series by Barry Brailsford for the magic and simple truths, 'Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow' by Peter Høeg for the story and characters, anything at all by the truly wonderful Sir Terry Pratchett.

What message to your 12-year-old self would you give?

The same message that my spirits give to me now. 'All will be well little one, All is well little one.'

A wish for the future?

That we humans learn to live in harmony with ourselves and the earth and everything receives what it needs to thrive.