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The Shamanism Magazine

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Sacred Hoop is an independent magazine about Shamanism and Animistic Spirituality. It is based in West Wales, and has been published four times a year since 1993.

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We hope you enjoy reading this issue. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)
CELEBRATE THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

SACRED HOOP

CELEBRATE THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

SPECIAL ISSUE 2017

SHAMANISM • HEALING • MYTHS • WISDOM WAYS • NEW COMMUNITY

SPECIAL GUIDE TO SHAMANISM

27 SELECTED ARTICLES ABOUT SHAMANIC PRACTICE - TOGETHER IN A VERY SPECIAL ISSUE

• Jonathan Horwitz
• Sandra Ingerman
• Bhola Nath Banstola
• Faith Nolton
• Michael Harner
• Susan Mokelke
• Nicholas Breeze Wood
• Eliot Cowán
• Maria Czaplicka
• Bonnie Horrigan
• Mary Mueller Shutan
• Crow Swimsaway
• Zara Waldeback
• Amalia Rubin
• David Kowalewski
• Sun Bear
• Karen kelly
• Jim Price
Areas of original ancient shamanism

- Amazonia
- Mayan and Central American Cultures
- Wixáritari (Huichol) shamanic traditions using psycho-active plants
- NW. Coastal Cultures mostly animistic, but with some shamanistic elements
- Native North American Cultures
  - Indigenous cultures mostly animistic, but with some rare shamanistic elements
  - Now also home to a mixed European culture, which has little original animistic, but will include rare examples brought from the original countries of some immigrants
- Native South American Cultures
  - Indigenous cultures mostly animistic, but with some rare shamanistic elements
  - Now also home to a mixed European culture, which has little original animistic, but will include rare examples brought from the original countries of some immigrants
- Inuit and Eskimo Cultures
- Oceania mostly animistic, but with some shamanistic elements, depending on the tribal group
- Morocco’s Gnawa Traditions shamanistic - trance possession by desert spirits (djinn) to effect healing

Areas of original ancient animism

- Iceland
- Native North American Cultures
  - Indigenous cultures mostly animistic, but with some rare shamanistic elements
- Native South American Cultures
  - Indigenous cultures mostly animistic, but with some rare shamanistic elements

Areas of recreated or modern animism or shamanism

- lands occupied by people less than 1200 years ago

SIMPLIFIED MAP OF SHAMANISTIC AND ANIMISTIC CULTURES

Areas of the map are roughly colour coded, but the reality is far less simple that it appears, and the map is only a general approximation of shamanistic and animistic cultures. Also mainstream religions - such as Christianity, Islam Buddhism and Hinduism - also have followers in each region - and often these mainstream religions are alongside of, or overtop of, the more ancient shamanistic and animistic traditions; which can still be found, often as folk traditions, within many cultures and tribal groups.
Eastern Europe
Some surviving animistic elements remaining in some locations

Central Asia
Some surviving shamanistic and animistic elements remaining in some locations

Tibet and Nepal

Buryatia

Tuva

Mongolia

Inner Mongolia and Northern China

Korea

Manchuria

China
mostly animistic, but with some shamanistic elements

Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam
mostly animistic, but with some shamanistic elements depending on the tribal group

India
mostly animistic

Indonesia and Malaysia
mostly animistic, but with some shamanistic elements, depending on the tribal group

Australia and New Zealand
Original Indigenous animistic, culture but with some rare shamanistic elements
New Zealand was unoccupied by humans prior to around 1,000 years ago
Now also home to a mixed European culture, which has little original animism, but will include rare examples brought from the original countries of some immigrants

African Cultures
Indigenous Cultures mostly animistic, but with some rare shamanistic elements
Now also home to a mixed European culture, which has little original animistic, but will include rare examples brought from the original countries of some immigrants

Bushman
mostly animistic but with some rare shamanistic elements especially trance dance

Hungary
some remaining shamanistic elements

Middle East
Indigenous cultures mostly animistic

Sami People

Siberian Cultures

Inuit and Eskimo Cultures

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I 'officially' started my shamanic path when I was 27, back in 1985. I say ‘officially’, because in all truth the spirits had been calling me for a long time before that, but I had little ability to understand them, in the pre-workshop, pre-new age, pre-internet days of the early 1970s.

But during those early days, I was still being taught by the spirits, taught to do ceremonies facing the four directions and the above and below. No human was there to teach me, I didn't read it anywhere, I just knew somehow, and stumbled along the best I could.

In my 20s I tried to put all this spiritual nonsense behind me - as it was a surely a folly of my youth. I trained as a clinical psychotherapist, and as a social worker; but then, through a series of events, I ended up being the warden of a Quaker Meeting House, and in my first night in the warden’s cottage, someone pushed a flyer for a workshop - led by Leo Rutherford about Medicine Wheel teachings - through my door. The workshop was the next weekend, which happened to be my 27th birthday, so Faith, my partner, gave it me as a birthday gift, and I went, and I came home again, and I said to her; “My life has just changed.” And it had.

Since then, Faith and I have followed the spirits on an amazing adventure - one I could never have dreamed was possible when I was a teenager in the 1970’s, in all those times when I was trying to find my way, and stumbling so very badly.

When I first began to work with Leo and other human teachers, there were perhaps three or four teachers in the whole of Britain - and only a few handfuls in the USA. Now shamanism seems to be everywhere, and yet I see so much misinformation about it, and also see so many people asking questions about it as a path.

Faith and I have been editing and publishing Sacred Hoop Magazine since 1993, and during that time we’ve have lots of wonderful articles, about different aspects of shamanism and animism, written by some really knowledgable people.

So, it seemed to me it might be a very good idea to take a selection of these, and put them together as a special issue, of Sacred Hoop, which, I very much hope, you will enjoy. I hope it informs you, and other people, about some of the basic aspects of shamanism. May it help many people find out what shamanism is - and what it is not.

I hope it helps people grow in their own practice, helps people to listen to the spirits, both as a benefit to themselves, and more importantly as to benefit to their community.

This special issue of Sacred Hoop is a give away, please feel free to share it widely, wherever you think it would be well received.

However, we are not a rich magazine, we work on a shoestring budget and have no mighty magazine backers to help us. So I would ask you - if you feel so moved - to please take out a subscription to Sacred Hoop, if you don’t already have one.

Or perhaps consider making a donation to Sacred Hoop, PayPal is the easiest, simply send a donation to our email address - donation@sacredhoop.org - it would help us greatly.

Thank you.

Blessings to all Beings
Nicholas Breeze Wood

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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)
Defining shamanism is not easy, and you may not agree with the definition I will try to give here. Shamanism is not tidy and there will be anomalies in what I write - but I hope to give at least a rough rule of thumb, despite the exceptions.

The word ‘shaman’ is a Western corruption of the word samaan or s’amanthe, from the Siberian Evenk people (previously known as the Tungus people), which was brought into the Russian language by early explorers of Siberia.

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The word ‘shaman’ is a Western corruption of the word samaan or s’amanthe, from the Siberian Evenk people (previously known as the Tungus people), which was brought into the Russian language by early explorers of Siberia. The word gradually became established as a general term for a Siberian tribal healer in Russia, and then migrated to the rest of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries via anthropologists.

The word shamanka - meaning a woman shaman - was never used by Siberian people - the ending ka is a Russian way of giving a word a diminutive female form.

Some say the word is of Sanskrit origin, coming from the word s’ramana - which means a Buddhist monk - but the Evenk language is not related to Sanskrit, and the Evenks were not exposed to Tibetan Buddhist monks in great numbers - with whom, some people say the word was carried from India into Siberia. So the Sanskrit origin of the word is extremely dubious. Furthermore Russian explorers first recorded the word in the 16th century and any Tibetan Buddhist contact would have been roughly around the same time.

The word shaman only comes from the one tribal group, found in Siberia and Manchuria, and different tribal peoples in different regions use different names for the role.

In Siberia - close to the Evenk people, the Yakut people call male shamans khamma or ayun, whereas the Mongols and Buryats call them buge or bo, the Koreans mudang or baksu, the Tartars and Altaians kam and gam, the shamans of Kyrgyzstan baksy, and the Samoyed people tadibey.

But a woman shaman in Siberia has a different name, and this name is very much the same, over a very wide geographical area. Among the Mongols, Buryats, Yakuts, Altaians, and Evenks, and
Kyrgyz the word for a woman shaman is udagan (or variations such as utagan, ubakan, utygan or utugun). This word probably originates from the Mongolian word Etagen which is the name of the ancient hearth-goddess.

Because udagan is so universal, language experts know it to be a very old word, older than all the words for a male shaman, which shows that female shamans have been around a lot longer than male ones have.

**SHAMANISM AND ANIMISM**

A shaman has an animistic world view. An animist understands that all parts of Creation are alive in some way, and have spirits. Nothing is dead in the animist's universe - you and I have souls, and so do all the animals and plants, and likewise the rocks and rivers, mountains and clouds, stars, sun and moon, even an illness, or a concept, or a ceremony, or a ritual object has a soul - everything has a soul, and we live within a vast network of interconnectedness. All animistic and shamanic cultures understand this.

All shamanic cultures are animistic - but not all animistic cultures are shamanic.

Shamanic cultures are something special, something rare, something that only occurs in a few places on earth - although there are animistic cultures all over the globe.

An animistic culture is a culture which has a basic world view of animism. Examples of animistic cultures include the Q'ero of Peru and Bolivia, the tribes of North America, the Mayan people of Central America, the Maori of New Zealand, the Aborigines of Australia, tribal groups of Africa, the ancient Celts and Vikings, some groups in India, and many other peoples around the world.

None of the above are shamanic cultures, although some aspects of ancient animistic Viking culture were shamanic - the practice of seidr specifically. Seidr is an ancient practice where seers - generally women - go into trance and have the spirits speak or sing through them. The practice died out centuries ago, but the modern shamanic movement has done a splendid job of re-creating it, and I know many powerful seidr practitioners who dive deep and swim fast and strong.

A shamanic culture is an animistic culture where shamanism is practised - either within families - where the shaman heals just those immediately close to them - or where 'professional' shamans can be found, who work for the wider community.

A shaman is someone who goes into trance, and in that trance, they are either taken over by ancestor spirits - who were shamans before them - or they get taken over by local gods and spirits, such as the spirit of a mountain or a lake, or their soul leaves their body, and travels out to the other spirit worlds which are all around us - unseen - there to meet with spirits, so as to gain knowledge and power. Often all of these things happen within the same shamanic tradition.

Some people within animistic cultures have experiences of trance too, for instance when on a vision quest - in the Native American traditions - the quester may fall into a trance and see visions, but that does not make them a shaman, because the trance happens without their volition - and they can not call upon it when they wish to enter it.

Animistic cultures can have a great knowledge of magic, can perform powerful healings and can have great wisdoms, but their priests and healers don’t enter into controlled voluntary trance, and do
not go to the spirit worlds - instead they tend to call the spirits into this world - which although can be extremely powerful, is subtly different from shamanism, where shamans go to the spirits.

The cultures where shamanism is found mostly are tribal groups across Siberia, Finland and the far North of Europe, Mongolia, Tuva, Central Asia, China, SE Asia, Tibet and Nepal. Some anthropologists consider some of the tribes from the Amazon Rainforest to be shamanistic too, whereas others don’t. Personally, because their medicine people go into trance - albeit with the aid of psychoactive plants - I think they could be called shamanistic too. There are also traces of shamanic practice to be found in Hungary and other places. The map - like shamanism - is not perfectly tidy.

As a rule of thumb, if you are working with a culture outside of those geographic areas you are working with an animistic culture rather than a shamanic one. But the edge between what is
shamanic and what is animistic is a very blurred one. For example a Siberian shaman performs many practices which have much in common with a Native American medicine person. This can be explained by saying that shamans also perform animistic practice - not everything they do for people is shamanic - shamanism is the extra something they do for people which a medicine person doesn’t.

All animistic cultures the world over have similarities - that is because the world is the way the world is, and spirits are the way that spirits are. You can look upon this as the ‘bones of the sacred.’

All the bones of the world’s animistic spiritual systems are the same, but each culture puts different flesh on the bones. This is why a Zulu medicine person and a Lakota medicine person will look - on the surface - different, but when you understand the bones, you will see they are doing the same basic job.

WHO CAN BE A SHAMAN?
The Evenk people, from whom the word shaman came, have a saying: ‘A shaman sits on a different branch of the Tree of Souls to a normal person.’

This relates to a story they have that the souls of babies sit like birds on branches of the World Tree, waiting to be born. Normal babies sit on branches in the tree, but shamans sit on their own unique branch - shamans are different to other people.

Can you choose to be a shaman? No you can’t. You are either born a shaman, or you are not. If the spirits want you, there is nothing you can do, and if the spirits don’t want you there is likewise nothing you can do. No spirits equals no shamans.

Being a shaman is not a cool life, most tribal people think it’s a bit of a curse and often try their hardest to get away from the role. However the spirits always have their way, and the shaman-to-be often gets ill, or may die, if they don’t accept their calling. Native shamans often think people in the West are crazy if they want to become shamans, and actually seek it out.

The most important teachers of a shaman are the spirits. Without the spirits a shaman is nothing, and the spirits teach the shaman, who becomes their apprentice. Human teachers are important too however, as a human teacher is a bit like a marriage arranger, they introduce the shaman to the spirits and also teach the shaman ways to interact with the spirits.

Some shamanic traditions give their new shamans initiations, others don’t, it depends on the culture. Some cultures say you can not be a shaman in their culture unless you have the DNA of that culture - however far back in time the DNA came from. Others say you can be a shaman in that culture without the DNA.

Mostly people get the call to be a shaman because they are ‘off with the spirits’ from a young age, and this will often lead to either physical or mental illness in their teenage years - often called ‘shaman sickness.’ They may also have all of these and be hit by lightening as well, or get possessed by spirits and go into involuntary trance.

In traditional shamanic cultures a shaman will be called to diagnose the nature of the illness, and if it is
The most important teachers of a shaman are the spirits. Without the spirits a shaman is nothing, and the spirits teach the shaman, who becomes their apprentice.

determined that the sick person is to be a shaman, and the sickness is shaman-sickness, the shaman treating them will tell the sick person they have to learn to be a shaman, or face the consequences. However in the west, which is not a shamanic culture, things are, of course, generally not so clear.

In the early 1980s a new, Western style of shamanism came along - generally known as ‘Core Shamanism.’ This came about mostly through the work of Michael Harner.

Core shamanism took the basic model of going into trance and journeying out to the Spirit Worlds, but stripped it of all cultural aspects, making it more easily digestible to Westeners.

The basic tenet of Core Shamanism is that anyone can learn to journey and employ ‘shamanic techniques’ in their life, in order to help themselves or others. This is no doubt true, and many people derive much benefit from learning Core Shamanic techniques. However the same rule of being chosen by the spirits still applies.

I always think of the spirit world as being a bit like the ocean. All people can explore the shallows of shamanism; sit on the beach with their toes in the water, or paddle in the breaking waves - in other words almost everyone can learn to do a basic shamanic journey and do some things close to the shore.

Some people will wade out into the ocean up to their chests, or learn to swim a little - they go deeper in.

But only those chosen by the spirits will really learn to swim and dive, and hold their breath underwater, and go to the depths of the spirit world.

Saying this is not elitist - it is simply true. When doing shamanism at this deep level, it can be very physically and psychologically dangerous - some shamans die in ceremony. Not all people are cut out to dive deep, and only those with the spirits blessings and help will learn to go vastly out of their depths, to return safely - if they are lucky.

But everyone can live a rich animistic life and can learn some simple shamanic first aid - and I think the world would be a lot better if more people did.
SOME DO’S AND DON’T’S

There are lots of people out there who are really doing good shamanic practice - and their are lots of people who are not doing good shamanic practice at all - the New Age can be a place so full of fluff one can drown very easily, getting choked on all the fairy dust.

I often come across people who think yoga, or reiki, or some other form of therapy is the same as shamanism. It is not - at best it is animistic - but it is not shamanism.

I also come across many people who think shamanism is going and sitting out in nature, perhaps with their back against a tree, connecting and becoming ‘one with everything.’ Again that is not shamanism.

Meditating in nature is something to be encouraged - tuning in and feeling your connection with all your relatives is something of great benefit - but it’s not shamanism. Shamanism is hard disciplined work, meeting the spirits and having actual dialogues with them, negotiating - or at times subduing or even fighting them - for the sake of your community.

Often in the New Age community people think shamans are wonderful people - close to Spirit - who love everyone and do good deeds all day long. That too is a myth.

Traditional shamans will often fight each other, and sometimes try to kill each other and steal power with the aid of their spirits.

Traditional shamans will also often curse as much as cure, and make it difficult for other shamans to practise. I was recently talking with a Mongolian shaman friend about this, and they were rather envious of some of my own ‘shamanic adventures,’ because I had journeyed to places they had only heard about from their elders; they themselves were unable to journey to those places, as the fear of attack from other shamans was too much a possibility for them.

Thankfully these types of attacks are very rare in the Western shamanic and Core Shamanic communities, as within those communities, there are few people who have more than mere ‘hot air,’ as they often lack the knowledge and power to do much damage.

Also be warned, trying such ‘dark work’ is not advised, you will likely open yourself to spirit forces far greater than you, and put yourselves and your loved ones in danger. You might also lose your connection to any healing spirits you have working with you.

Many years ago, one of my own teachers was tempted to try to use a spirit for a little bit of low level ‘dark work.’ They had a good relation with their spirit helper - who was really important to them and their practice - but when my teacher tried to get this spirit to do the ‘dark work’ that spirit left them, and never came back. That was over 30 years ago now, and I know my teacher still regrets that, even to this day.

Being a shaman is not a cool life, most tribal people think it’s a curse and often try their hardest to get away from the role. However the spirits always have their way, and the shaman-to-be often gets ill, or may die, if they don’t accept their calling. Native shamans often think people in the West are crazy if they want to become shamans and actually seek it out.

Buryat shaman, wearing an iron crown set with iron antlers and holding his drum and a hobro - a horse spirit staff
Photo taken C1910
I had a sobering warning from my own spirits too, although I was not attempting ‘dark work’ at the time. My spirit helper looked at me and then casually reminded me they could turn off my shamanic ability ‘just like that.’ There was the sound of a click of the fingers, and I was back out of trance in an instant, and back in normal reality - they had thrown me out. It was a lesson, there was no problem going back the next time, but I have no doubts that - should they want to - the spirits would simply turn me off like a tap.

There are many, many books out there which purport to be about shamanism. Some of them are very good, others are not. Many of them are not about shamanism at all, because the word shamanism is a sexy word and book publishers use it to add fairy dust to their titles.

If you want to learn about shamans, I would advise reading about actual tribal shamanism, in good, grounded books about the cultures. Some New Age books are good, but most really are best avoided.

Likewise some books - which are really fiction - are often sited as important books about shamanism. Here I’m especially thinking of the writings of Carlos Castaneda, but there are many other authors too. Castaneda was an excellent novelist who wrote some fine story books. He drew from many ancient traditions and his books are a cornucopia of useful metaphors about Spirit and the sacred - only please do not think they are literally true, and especially please don’t think his books describe shamanism.

Shamanism often gets associated with the taking of mind altering plants. In recent years tourism to the Amazon has proliferated and people take such substances as Ayahuasca, San Pedro, Peyote and various types of mind-altering mushrooms.

People often seem to think this is essential when it comes to shamanism, but let me assure you it is not. Most shamanic cultures across the world do not take any mind altering substances at all - instead they rely on the spirits taking them over, aided by a mixture of ceremony, song and drumming.

If you are drawn to working with what are often called ‘teacher plants’ that’s fine, but work with them in such a way that you respect their spirits. Every traditional culture who uses plants like this has ceremonies and songs which are part of the practice. You don’t just grab a plant and ingest it in order to have a cosmic adventure; learn the traditional ways, find traditional teachers and do it properly - for your sake and for the respect and honour of the plant spirits, and the spirit of the lineage.

Shamanism is not a path of personal growth or personal healing. Sure both are going to happen to you along the way, but that’s a by-product.
However, Core Shamanism can be excellent for those things - and there is nothing wrong with using aspects of Core Shamanism to heal yourself, in fact, again, the world would be a much better place if people worked on ‘their stuff’ and got some healing, and the much more therapy-like model of Core Shamanism can be excellent for this.

But primarily a shaman’s job is to help their community - however you define that term.

Your community can be your family. As I said before, in a lot of traditional Siberian cultures, a shaman worked only for their family - or it could be for your friends and people you know in your real world life, or it could be your internet family, or even nationally or globally. We mostly no longer live in rural, agriculturally based small villages, our concept of community has changed dramatically in the last few hundred years. You will have to work out what the word means to you now.

Because we are not a shamanic culture - or even an animistic culture - we, in the West need to find ways to build an animistic worldview ourselves.

Because of this, we have tended to look towards other cultures who have held their animistic worldview - such as the Native Americans or Africans - despite the West’s often determined efforts to ‘educate the savages out of their primitive ideas.’

So, you are likely to tread on the toes of tribal peoples who have been marginalised, and seen genocide and cultural annihilation happen to their ancestors. They might welcome you and wish to share sacred teachings with you, or they might not. That will be on a tribe by tribe, person by person basis.

So tread carefully and respectfully. Learn with humility and pay attention to what is being taught to you. Treat it precisely as you carry it - like a fragile baby - into your own life and culture, as the chances are, the people you are being taught by, held on to those traditions through times of absolute horror and desperation - so act well.

You might feel drawn to follow an animistic path from your own ancestors - perhaps you have Celtic or European blood, perhaps you have African blood or Central Asian blood - and the pull of the blood on you is strong.

That’s a wonderful blood line to explore, but be aware, if you come from a European culture the traditions are broken, and paths such as Wicca or the Druids, are modern inventions, and bear little in common with their ancient ancestors.

Our ancestors were not following their spiritual path for recreation, or self improvement, they held to their spirituality because it was there to save their lives, to help heal their sick, and to help bring crops and animals to their table.

It is very easy to ‘get off’ on fantasy in the West, because we are divorced from the natural world, and we don’t need our ancient ways to help us survive. In the olden days, if things didn’t work, people would die, now it is not like that, and the essential pragmatic point of spirituality is no longer there. We seek it to find balance in our urban world, and because we do that, it is far too easy to get seduced by the romance of it and entranced by the ‘fantasy. Don’t become so spiritual that you are no earthly good.

The writings in this special edition of Sacred Hoop come from a variety of authors. They will, I hope, give you some insights and food for thought about how to walk a grounded path animistic or shamanic path.

I hope they will dispel some myths about shamanism and clarify the path a little. You may indeed be called to walk a true shamanic path - but if you are, it’s no big deal, you are not special, you are just chosen by the spirits to bare a heavier load on your back than many of your fellows - remember only an idiot actively wants to be a shaman.

But walking an animistic life-path, seeing the beauty in all of your relations, seeing it in every being you meet, from a raven to a rainbow, a starfish to a star, will make your life richer, and make you feel more connected - because we truly are all related.

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Shamanism is a world-wide phenomenon. I am absolutely convinced that the ability to 'shamanise' is an ability that people are born with, but it's taken away, or piled upon, from a very young age. Some people manage somehow to hang on to the ability from the time they are a child, and these people generally do become very powerful spiritual healers of one kind or another. The word shamanism has become over-used and really very over-worked. A lot of the time when people say 'shamanistic', they actually mean animistic - a perception of the world as it truly is, with all things alive and in connection. 'Animism' is the awareness of our connection to the world that is the foundation of the practice of shamanism. These two things are inseparable.

Children are often closer to this animistic awareness and understand more naturally. I remember giving a talk on shamanism one time in Denmark. I talked for a while and then asked if there were any questions. A child raised his hand and so I called on him - he was about 11 years old. He asked: "What does this [shamanism] have to do with magic?"

A lot of grown-up people in the audience heard him and they laughed and I could see him getting very embarrassed.

I said: "Wait a minute, that is a very good question, but before I try to answer you I want to know, what do you mean by magic?"

He said: "You know - just everyday magic." I replied: "Shamanism has everything to do with everyday magic."

I consider a shaman as someone whose primary job is the job of the healer. It is very helpful to remember that a shaman is only a shaman when he or she is 'shamanising' and the rest of
The word shamanism has become over-used and really very over-worked. A lot of the time when people say shamanistic, they mean animistic - the connection to the world that is the foundation of shamanism.

The Mazatec shaman, Maria Sabina, describes non-ordinary reality as "a world beyond ours, a world that is faraway, nearby, and invisible. And there it is where God lives, where the dead live, the spirits and the saints, a world where everything has already happened and everything is known."

This world is at least as rich and varied as the visible world, but we usually explain away, or cover up the involuntary glimpses or links with it as 'psychotic episodes', miracles, inexplicable events, or imagination and fantasy.

The difference between a shaman and someone who fears his sanity is that the shaman knows how to get to non-ordinary reality when he wants to, he knows how to move there, how to communicate with the spirits, how to get the power, and how to bring it back and use it successfully in ordinary reality. In order to shamanize, the shaman must know non-ordinary reality for the reality it is.

FINDING A WAY
I first got interested in shamanism about 1972 at University when I was just finishing my masters degree. I got into an argument with my professor about an article about a Washo shaman, Henry Rupert. You could see - and feel - by reading this academic article, that the author, anthropologist Don Handelman, really respected this old shaman, Henry Rupert. You could see - and feel - by reading this academic article, that the author, anthropologist Don Handelman, really respected this old shaman, admired him and stood in awe of him. That you could actually detect feelings in an article like this was such a surprise for me.

All throughout my University career I had been trying to be a so-called objective social scientist and all of a sudden here was somebody who was chipping away, breaking apart this shell that I had. I was totally fascinated and I ended up doing some research about shamanism. I came away from this research with the certainty that shamanism works. But I sure couldn't figure out how.

A couple of years went by and various personal changes led me to start experimenting with some of the spiritual phenomena I had read about showing how traditional people came into contact with the spirits. I often have results, but because I had no teacher, I didn't really know what to do with those results.

I realised, however, that I had to make my life more simple, and if I could succeed in making it more simple, then I would have a chance to start on a shamanic path. So for
several years I worked on simplifying my life.  

Quite often I would notice that talking to a tree or stone would make me feel better. I wouldn’t have been able to say at that point that, of course, I was connecting with the spirit of stone. In essence, that is what animism is all about. It is the foundation of shamanism - realising that what we in our culture call inanimate objects, are in fact animate. They do have a spirit. They do have a soul. This is what traditional people all over the world are aware of.

It went on like that until I reconnected with Michael Harner, whom I had known previously in America. For many years he has studied the essential, or core elements of shamanism, and the application of shamanic techniques. Things fell into place very quickly for me as we continued to work together, and all those previous years of stumbling around took on a meaning. We worked together for nine years.

FEELING CONNECTED  
People who feel connected - who feel a part of the group, or the world, or society, or the family, whatever it happens to be - are, I believe, healthy people. They are ‘power-filled’.

We all have differing amounts of power. If you are sitting on the train or bus, looking around, you can see this. Very rarely, sadly, do you see somebody sitting there glowing with power - really power-filled. Most of the people sitting there are just getting by. Then every once in a while you see somebody who is a wreck.

A lot of people today have a difficult time asking for help, feeling that it is their duty to ‘make it on their own’. This leads to one of the biggest problems we have in our culture - that people feel separated from each other and the natural world. They have a great illusion of being separate. Of course, they are connected. But in so many cases they just don’t feel the connection.

Often it is easier for people to connect with an animal, to have a pet for example - and they connect very well with their pet. It may be that they can connect with a spirit helper or ‘power animal’.

Everybody has a power animal, but not everybody is conscious of it. Becoming conscious of it is very helpful. Again, it automatically chips away at this wall of aloneness that so many people have.

When I am teaching a basic workshop, one of the first things I try to get people to do is to relax and lose their self-importance. I generally do that by getting them to dance and try to feel who they are dancing with - their spirit dance partner.

Very often people do get the feeling that they are ‘being danced,’ and this is wonderful and often very moving. They often identify the dance partner as being a member of the animal world, and sense the presence of a spirit helper of some kind. Generally this is a very empowering experience.

Once they get this feeling of connection to the spirit world through a power animal, then doors start opening in a lot of different ways.

Of course, on a spiritual path of connection your life can get changed in a way that you hadn’t envisaged and one must remember that if one seeks something, one risks finding it!

A lot of people think they want to seek something, whereas in fact they just want to sit back in an easy chair and feel good about themselves. OK, you deserve a break at the end of the day, and it’s fine to sit back and take it easy, think back over what has happened. But if that is all you want to do with your life, I don’t recommend shamanism. On that path you become aware of the Universe and the world and your neighbourhood and your family in an entirely different way. This is a way of responsibility.

Responsibility is something we all want when we’re adolescents, but then, when we start getting it, we start to think "Oh no, what is this!" Spiritual responsibility is much greater than material responsibility. When you get told to do something spiritually, you know you have to do it. Furthermore, you know that by doing it, you are going to walk through a door - and once through, you are never going to be able to go back to how things were before.

But then I believe that sitting back and closing your eyes to the
way the world is developing is much more dangerous than going through the door. In fact, it is dangerous not to go through the door.

SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY

The course on spiritual ecology that I teach at present developed from a journey I made to the Spirit World to ask my teacher how I could help the Earth. I was told to teach spiritual ecology, and when I explained I didn’t know anything about it, he replied ‘I’m going to teach you’. Then over the next two months he taught me this course.

The whole idea about the course is to engender a feeling for the Earth, a personal feeling. Not just sorrow because of how we have mistreated the Earth, not just hypothetical, or intellectual, but one you actually experience physically.

All of us have - in some people its deeper down, in some its not so deep - an animistic understanding of life. Most people, for example, have had a teddy bear - Panda was my best friend until I was nine. He knew all my secrets and we shared a lot of things together.

Around that age things start getting hard for most kids. Their parents start remarks like “Don’t you think you’re a little bit old to have your panda at the dinner table?” Or even more directly “Leave Panda upstairs”. So this awareness gets buried.

But most adults, unless they have been very heavily indoctrinated, still feel naturally that real life animals have souls. Ones that have been less indoctrinated feel the trees and flowers are alive, but then when you get so far as the kitchen toaster, then even they may draw the line!

The idea of spiritual ecology is that everything; for instance a the tree-has a soul, and one can actually interact with the spirit of that tree. It is surprisingly easy for most people.

On the course I send people out to find a tree to share an issue in their life with, to sit with the tree for awhile and maybe have their hands on the tree - to actually feel the power of the tree. Very often people take a very deep issue in their life to the tree and open up

The spirits are concerned about the way the world is today because they have been having a very free hand about things until the last few hundred years. Things have been really getting out of hand.

Of course, if we decide to wipe ourselves out, the world will regenerate, but it will regenerate in a new way and the spirits would just as soon see us not go through this transition. I think they are very happy about people. I think what they are unhappy about is that people have lost touch with them
I send people to find a tree to share an issue with, to sit with the tree for awhile - to feel the power of the tree. Very often people take a deep issue to the tree and open up their hearts to it. By the time they walk away from the tree, it's not such a big issue any more. Not only do they contact the tree spirit, but they feel better afterwards.

In our society, we’re kind of stuck. Unless you stay in your little back yard and your house or shack, you’re going to be one of the mass consumers of the world. But you can reduce that level of consumption if you have a heightened sense of awareness about the situation.

Shamanism is not escapism, and it doesn’t - shouldn’t - matter where you are. Of course it’s nicer to be in some beautiful place in the countryside, but everything in the world is connected and if we’re going to make our world a better place to live, then you might as well start in your own back yard.

**USING POWER**

When most people begin to work with me they come because they are either curious or they feel a lack of power in their life.

When I say power this is a very unfortunate word in English. I’m talking about basic life energy - Chi, like the old Germanic word *kraft*, (English : ‘craft’), which is about a constructive, building, lifting, energising power, as opposed to *mach!t* (English : ‘might’), which is more manipulative.

In Western culture handicraft is something relegated to ‘hobby’, whereas in traditional culture things are made by hand as a very normal part of everyday life. Traditional people did not separate a handicraft, they did not separate family life, they did not separate spiritual life into different boxes. All of these things were connected.

In the old days, people would make things, fetishes and amulets and they would put extra power into them. There would be the power of the objects themselves, and objects that were unusual in some way would be considered to have a special power. Then they would adorn these things with, for example, kestrel feathers and porcupine quills and give them colours.

As they did this they would sing extra power into it. So that object would have a healing power. And people who were working with *mach!t*, they might put something else in there that would be less desirable. But this latter practice has its own dangers.

One must always be aware of it and one must never do it in inappropriate power put into them, if they did not accomplish the mission they were sent out to do, they would come back to the person who made them and there was no way that person could escape them at all.

Generally they would go crazy or else they would confess what they had done, and the punishment was death. They couldn’t help but confess because that was part of the process.

By contrast, there is healing power in getting a present that was specially made by somebody, and a good feeling that somebody would actually use all those hours, for instance, to knit a pair of socks. This is something that we’ve lost very much in our society.

**PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT**

Somebody may come to you wanting help and they’re having a very hard time in life. To take a very over-simplified example it might be that their husband has a drinking problem and drinks up all the money and has a tendency to get violent - a terrible story. What are you going to do about it?

You might think this woman would be much better off if she wasn’t with that guy, and that may or may not be true. But if you decide that you’re going to get that guy out of her life, this is what I call using *mach!t*. Instead you can use *kraft!t* and try and bring power to that woman so that she is able to take care of the situation. This is using energy with a positive intention.

But the line between the two intents is very, very fine and it’s very easy to cross over.

One must always be aware of it all the time. The healer’s own ego has to go up on the shelf whilst working shamanically with someone, and also that person being healed has to remember not to give away their power by regarding the healer as a ‘guru’ or ‘saviour’.

If I am working shamanically on somebody because they feel ill, or they’ve been diagnosed with such and such a sickness, I will make a journey to the spirit world. That is, I will change my state of consciousness and allow one of my souls, or a part of my soul, however you look at it, to leave my body and go to the world of the spirits - which is no further away than the limits of my body.
There I will search for power for this person, perhaps in the form of a power animal. Then I bring that power animal back to that poor sick person and I give him that power, that basic Chi, or kraft.

In some cases, just the return of the power is strong enough to knock the illness out of the body. If they are power-filled there’s no place for that illness to come in. If they are not power-filled then there is going to be a vacuum; however great or small, and that vacuum will want to get filled somehow or other. So it’s important to fill it again with good power.

Once anyone gets reconnected with the power, they feel better, and the better they feel, the better, then they feel - a positive spiral. You will have set-backs every now and then, and sometimes you will have big set-backs. But you have the ability to restore your own power, for example by making a simple journey to see your power animal and have a good dance in non-ordinary reality, or for that matter to have a dance in ordinary reality!

ACTION FOR THE EARTH
When people start to get power-filled, they can do something more. They can maybe go out and make a little shrine in the back yard – that is a very basic spiritual act and it’s also a very practical act. Let me give an example.

There is beautiful common land in Copenhagen a ten minute bicycle ride from the Town Hall Square; foxes run round out there, and even deer.

There is talk about covering it with cement buildings. So we made a series of spirit journeys about what to do. One of the things we were told to do was to make stone circles out there, and another thing was to go and to find power places and go out and be with our power places. We all made journeys to go and find out how to use the circles.

I used to go out there every day before breakfast, when I lived there, and greeted the world, the sun, all the trees and grasses and I do this work within my stone circle. I gave thanks and talked to the people there, and ask them for help through that day, and ask them to help me to help them through that day.

Other people go out and dance at the new moon and full moon, others have different ways of using them. This is what I call the spiritual aspect. At the same time we helped to form a citizen’s committee for the protection of this area. That is the practical aspect. Both aspects are needed.

TEACHERS, NOT DEMONS
A lot of people are worried about meeting with unpleasant beings, or ‘evil spirits’ in non-ordinary reality. In my experience of shamanic practice, I have certainly been scared by spirits on more that one occasion but this is not to say that they are evil spirits.

It is very easy, just because something makes you uncomfortable, to classify it as bad, or evil. But my own experience is that the spirits come to teach me. Maybe it’s going to be a hard lesson and if its something that’s really stuck in me, then it probably is going to a really hard lesson. But if you have got a decayed tooth and the dentist comes at you with the drill, neither the dentist nor the drill is evil, although they might feel that way at that moment!

So it is with the spirits. On the whole I would say it all depends on your intention. If you want to manipulate something through macht, then you’re pretty much going to get into trouble.

The spirits are very concerned about the way the world is today because they have been having a very free hand about things until the last three, four hundred years. Then things have been really getting out of hand.

Of course, if we decide to wipe ourselves out, the world will regenerate but it will regenerate in a new way and the spirits would just as soon see us not go through this transition. I think they are very happy about people. I think what they are unhappy about is that people have lost touch with them.

Jonathan Horwitz has practiced shamanism since 1972, co-founding the Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies. His focus is the shamanic aspects of healing, ecology and community. He has a master’s degree in anthropology and was European Editor of Journal of Contemporary Shamanism.

www.shamanism.dk
Nick: Shamanism is proliferating in the West - do you have any thoughts about that?

Sandra: Indeed, we are seeing an incredible resurgence of people called to practice shamanism, but there is some difference of opinion among experienced teachers about bridging shamanism into the Western World.

In many ways the discussion is somewhat meaningless, because of the numbers of people already practising today. It’s already happening, there’s no way to turn back at this point. How do you say to tens of thousands of people, this isn’t supposed to be happening, and try to stop the process?

I get a little confused by some of the controversy - it’s almost like listening to American Democrat and Republican parties fight in Congress and the Senate, while there are millions of starving children being sold into slavery, women being abused, wars, and the destruction of our environment and planet.

There is a need for people to wake up and live a more conscious way of life. While people debate about Westerners practising shamanism, it seems like the helping spirits are finding a wealth of people to work with and through, who have no idea there is a controversy. These people are like ‘innocents’ - in the best sense of the word. They don’t read any shamanic magazines or newsletters. I continue to hear accounts from them of some of the most extraordinary and profound journeys that I’ve heard in over thirty years of teaching.

The spirits are sharing incredible, life-changing information with them, and helping them bring through healing methods. For instance there are people practising shamanism who are teachers in schools who encourage their students to connect with the trees and get messages from them, and connect with the animal world, and learn how to live with honour and respect for all of life.

There are people who bridge shamanic work into the world of business, working with the guidance of their helping spirits. In business meetings they are raising consciousness about the need to stop projects that might destroy an entire species or damage the environment.

People in the medical and psychological professions are getting information from their helping spirits, so their patients might, for example, go through chemotherapy and not get such a negative impact from the
treatment. They are receiving guidance to inspire their clients how to improve their state of health and well-being.

A range of people are learning about the shamanic ways of viewing death, and are able to sit with clients and loved ones as they are dying and share ways of being a loving, calm, and peaceful presence. For example they might share: “Yes, if you see your ancestors standing there in the room, they are here to help you,” instead of running out to get doctors to administer medications to stop the hallucinations.

So people are performing shamanic work in beautiful and inspiring ways, and they’re not aware of any controversy going on. So I have to wonder, if some of us are being left behind...

When you and I started discovering shamanism in the eighties, there wasn’t any information around. We were the first generation doing it here in the West, so we had to feel our way forward. I think many of us got a bit politically correct - we were wary of becoming ‘wannabes,’ and didn’t want to take on cultural baggage. But at the same time we wanted to do it authentically, and that was a difficult path to tread.

I understand that. When we first started out there was no internet, no emails, or any way to communicate with each other, and so we were forced to practise direct revelation and learn directly through our helping spirits, we had to find our own ways to incorporate our work with others.

And that’s one of the shadow sides that I do see with the resurgence of shamanism today. There is a whole culture that has not been brought up in the practice of direct revelation, and doesn’t know how to enter into a process of self-reflection about how to work with the personal guidance they receive from their helping spirits. When they get information in their journeys, or time spent in nature, they turn to others to interpret their experiences. In doing so they give their power away by letting other people interpret symbols and metaphors shared by their helping spirits.

Shamanism requires taking responsibility for self-reflection, going out into nature, sitting for weeks, or even months, if needs be. During my first journey, where I met with my guardian spirit in 1980, I received a powerful one sentence answer. I am still reflecting on all the multiple levels of this answer all these years later!

I really yearn, as many practitioners do, for the days before we could network with each other, the times we were forced into our own ‘vision quest’ process around the work, as you were.

When I started studying shamanism and practising in San Francisco in 1980, there were only a few books written on shamanism. But even then there was such a wealth of workshops going on, and so many teachers. There were a lot of discussions and judgments about who should be doing what, and comparing the work people were doing.

But we just had to find our own way, had to rely on our own helping spirits and methods that worked, so we could help clients with the challenges that people were - and are still - facing.

Yes, back then no-one had heard of shamanism, but now it has become an incredible buzz word. Now everything is shamanic! For me that’s a difficulty - the word and concept are getting diluted because people apply it to everything.

I live in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and when I went to the store one day I saw a ‘shaman shampoo’. I almost had a heart attack!

What’s happening is, the practice is being diluted because many do not understand what the word ‘shamanism’ means anymore. At the same time I find that the endless discussions - trying to define what is and isn’t while people debate about practising shamanism, it seems like the spirits are finding a wealth of people to work with, who have no idea there is a controversy. These people are like ‘innocents’ - in the best sense of the word... So I have to wonder, if some of us are being left behind...
I went to the store one day and saw a ‘shaman shampoo’. I almost had a heart attack! What’s happening is, the practice is being diluted because many do not understand what the word ‘shamanism’ means anymore.

Shamanism - can get so extreme. It isn’t really helping to educate people, because there’s such an emotional energy of controversy around it all, which makes it really hard to hear what people are trying to share.

I think one of the issues now, is that so many different shamanic ways are being taught, that people start to think that one way is better than another. So instead of sinking into just one practice, and becoming it, really focusing on it, people seem to be saying: “If I could just study with one more teacher, or take one more workshop, then I’m going to learn a more powerful healing method.”

People are surfing - take a little bit from Peru, and take a little bit from Siberia, a little bit from a Westerner... They are not focusing on one practice, one tradition, one way of working!

Shamanism has an incredible depth and potential - that’s why it’s survived tens of thousands of years. But it’s the power of the practice and working in the invisible realms that has the ability to create change and healing.

If we don’t really delve into the depth of the practice, make it our own, really focus on it and become the work, then we will no longer see powerful results. Without the results we know are possible, the practice of shamanism will start to fade away. We have to dive deep into the work and experience the true magic behind the methods.

I agree - and yet to be devil’s advocate - I’m so aware of what happened in the later stages of Rome, when there were all the mystery schools thriving there. Then a heady moment of gnosia arose, where all the bits and pieces from the different ‘mysteries’ got fused together and out popped the Christian Church - a synthesis, with bits of the Isis cult and Mithraism and so on. So I wonder if we’re in some form of gnosia point at the moment, some kind of melting pot from which something new will emerge?

Well, yes you can definitely see that. I have students who contact me and ask, “How do I combine shamanism and reiki, massage, and so on?” We can see where the melting pot of combining different traditions is already occurring.

On one level I ask myself the question; ‘Does the work continue to evolve out of bridging shamanism into other systems?’ But then I wonder if because of that melting pot, are we losing and diffusing the power of the work? I can stay up all night and wrestle with these things.

So shamanism becomes a kind of baby food, all mushed up with all the texture removed!

Right, exactly. But I’m seeing some really amazing things happening, so I observe and stay open.

I receive letters from veterans of both the Iraq and Vietnam wars who were introduced to shamanic journeying through a book, or CD, or workshop, and many of them seem to meet up with helping spirits who are able to help them learn how to forgive themselves, heal, and move forward in their lives.

I observe people healing from illnesses - which doctors would diagnose as terminal - with the aid of their helping spirits. People are learning how to live a life filled with hope, and learn through their helping spirits how to improve their health on both emotional and physical levels. There are many paradoxes that we’re dancing right now.

The helping spirits are touching people in deep ways, by-passing all of the conversation. Due to this the issue becomes a ‘both-and’ where the gifts and challenges are both being revealed.

So, how do we encourage people to go deeper?

Well, what I tell people to do, is focus on just one practice at a time. Just do it and make it a part of your daily life.

I’m still teaching workshops on to perform shamanic healing ceremonies such as soul retrieval, but more of my passion right now is trying to help instill some of the the higher core values that come out of life in shamanic cultures. Teachings such as how to live a life filled with gratitude, how to love and respect yourself and others, how to share your strengths within your community to add to its strength and health. It is time to stop expecting a hero or heroine to appear to fix all the challenges we’re facing in our world. It’s each person’s responsibility to work with spiritual practices so we join together to create positive change in our communities, for all of life, and the Earth.

I’m more interested and devoted to teaching people daily practices, not just to perform in the morning, but ones we can integrate into daily life. So that when you’re stuck in traffic, or you’re standing in line at the bank, or the grocery store, you’re not moving into a place of frustration and anger, but you can drop into being a presence of love, peace, and light. When we do this we uplift people with a smile and a kind word, and focus our positive words, thoughts, and daydreams, as well as what we are grateful for, to lead to our desired outcome.

So, instead of looking for more complex ceremonies to get involved in, I really try to inspire people to integrate simple practices in their daily life. Performing complex ceremonies can end up being a distraction and might only speak to our mind. When we focus on simple practices that connect us to our heart and soul, we end up creating healing. We must do our work on a daily basis and throughout the day. Then you start to notice how your life changes, and how you start to uplift the people around you.

I use the word ‘simple’ a lot and often people misinterpret that and think it means that Sandra is only teaching beginners. But I find that it’s the simple practices that personally kept me alive and have helped me to live a meaningful life.
I have suffered suicidal depression for most of my adult life, and it’s really a miracle that I’m here! I’m 62 years old, and it’s the simple daily practices that I do which have kept me here. I have learned how to be grateful - no matter what I’m feeling - even if I’m making it up - even if I’m forcing it - just giving thanks for my life. I have learned how to work with my words and my thoughts, being aware of the energies I send into the collective. Through the practice of shamanism I have learned how to use my words, thoughts, and daydreams to bless myself and others. I have learned how to ride the waves of both the joyful and turbulent times.

In a way those are the foundations of shamanism, living with compassion and kindness and love for the world, and also being connected to life and the spirit of life. Having an animistic world view is very wholesome, getting connected with all our relatives in all the different kingdoms. But as I see it that is slightly different from doing more interventionist shamanic work. I always think shamanism is ‘applied animism,’ if that makes sense?

Yeah. So you mean bringing through some of the power of the helping spirits to do healing work and intervene?

Yes. I see lots of ‘shamanic’ workshops advertised, just like you do; and what’s being taught is really healthy, important, empowering work - but it’s more a form of animism. I think there’s such a hunger in our culture for meaningful practical spirituality.

I definitely understand what you’re saying. I love performing healing ceremonies, such as bringing people together to bring back the soul of land or removing trauma from a place.

But that is where my caution comes in. In the culture we live in it’s really easy for people to seek intervention from the helping spirits in a very powerful fashion. But also there is a tendency to try to manipulate our environment - albeit for all the ‘right reasons.’ I try to get people to explore the difference between intervention and manipulation.

For example, shamanic weather-changing work can get very tricky. How do we help people evolve into a place of spiritual maturity to avoid performing weather work from a place of ego and personal desires? How do we encourage them to be aware of a bigger picture?

I guess for me, I think I try to help people develop the maturity and consciousness needed before they ask the helping spirits to intervene. It’s necessary for us to grow and evolve, and that’s part of the initiation that we all go through.

One of the things that I encourage is to become embodied. This is number one. I think part of what creates dissociation and a state of un-groundedness is that we have all experienced so much trauma in our lives. Also we are flooded by so many images of trauma through the media, so that people are often drawn to spiritual practice to escape being in a body - the body is not a comfortable place, and it doesn’t feel safe.

I know one of the things I teach that can be controversial in the shamanic community is my belief that shamanic journeys are not an ‘out of body experience.’ Yes, shamans go into an ecstatic state of consciousness, but when they go into the invisible realms they engage their senses fully and see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the invisible spiritual world that they are in. They use all their senses while communicating with their helping spirits.

In our culture some people tend to view their shamanic journeys like they are watching TV or a movie. Some lie in bed, seeing some lovely visionary experience, but don’t actualise the information and guidance received. Of course there are many people who do drum, sing, and dance when they journey. And I encourage people to deepen their experience by being more active as they journey.

I encourage people to wake up their sensory experiences of this world, and of the invisible worlds. They need to touch the earth, to smell fragrances and listen to the sounds of nature in both worlds. I think the more we can get embodied, the less our spiritual work...
becomes ‘fluffy.’ When we’re really living in our bodies, and experiencing what is actually happening around us it creates the fuel to want to do something about it.

If we go around half in and half out of our bodies that’s soul loss. We are experiencing soul loss on a pretty mass level, and many are disassociated too. When we’re disassociated it’s very easy to ignore what is going on around us, and say, “Oh that story on the TV news, or on Facebook was disturbing,” and yet we don’t do anything about it. The stories we read and the events we witness do touch us on a heart level. But until we get truly embodied we might not become active in participating in becoming a positive change-maker.

If you really get in your body, you become more grounded, and you wake up to your responsibility to become an active participant in creating necessary and positive changes in the world.

I agree with that completely. I started off learning shamanism journeying in the typical Western way, headphones and a CD, Then about ten years ago I gave all that up and now I drum for myself sitting up. For me that makes it much more physical. It’s no longer a passive experience, and the journey experience is more vital and richer because I am more deeply in both realities.

I do the same thing, and I actually have been teaching that.

One of the reasons I keep writing books is that I keep exploring how we can deepen our shamanic experience and practice. And one of the topics that I’ve been writing about is how to stop being passive in our journeys! Shamans drum, rattle, dance and sing while they journey. But not everybody feels called to this. For some people the passive approach still really works for them.

In my workshops, one of the first exercises I do is get people to stand up with a drum or rattle, go outside, connect with nature, and sing and dance their journeys.

When I see clients, I drum for myself, and I just put the drum down when I have to do some hands-on work with them. It’s just too easy for my ordinary thoughts to come in if I’m listening to a CD, I start thinking about my emails, or all the tasks I have to do while I journey for myself.

Likewise. And if I’m looking around in the spirit world, my physical body turns and looks around in this world. It’s like there’s an intermesh between both realities and it’s vivid and extraordinarily real then, much better than anything I ever experienced on my back with headphones on.

Ok, I’ve got another question about the thorny issue of whether people in the West can be shamans or not? The whole thing about a shamanic practitioner and the ‘S’ word.

Well, you know, that’s a question that I sit with a lot.

We see tens of thousands of people getting in touch with shamanic practices, and my belief has always been it is our birthright as human beings to engage in the practice of direct revelation and receive our own guidance from helping spirits.

And so I still feel really good about teaching people how to access their own spiritual information through shamanic journeying, and through connecting to the spirits in a powerful fashion, but there’s a tendency to manipulate.

For example, shamanic weather-changing work. How do we help people evolve into spiritual maturity to avoid performing weather work from a place of ego and personal desires?
near death experience is a classic
wounded healers. Of course having a
healer. Shamans are often called
transforming them into a wounded
losses that you can never heal from -
these people suffer the kinds of
illness - they are the ones who I see
child dying - or they have healed from
suffered a terrible loss - such as a
observed that it is people who
thousands of students, and I've
personal game plan, so to speak.
want to do about it. it is not in our
professional game plan, so to speak.
"Of course you should call
yourself a shaman, it's only like
'shaman' explains
You are,' then 'shaman' explains
your identity.
I was trained very much like you,
for me the 'S' word is a big 'no
But then again, I got a bit of
gentle finger wagging from a
Siberian shaman once who said
"Of course you should call
yourself a shaman, it's only like
saying you know how to do first
aid if you come across a traffic
accident?" What an amazing
alternative way of looking at it!
I know, that's beautiful. I love that. I
grew up in the sixties, and I've always
been a rebel. My mother died at the
age of ninety-eight, and my husband
will tell the story that she would say
every day; "You could never tell
Sandy what to do - ever! She will
always do what she wants to do!"
I had three near death
experiences which opened me up to
a state of oneness and unconditional
love. As a teenager, growing up in
the sixties, I ingested psychedelic
drugs and had a wealth of numinous
experiences. I then moved to the
Haight-Ashbury district of San
Francisco, to join others in birthing a
more loving and conscious way of
bringing life into being.
Then I was introduced to
shamanic journeying in 1980, and I
was taught that the helping spirits
will teach you what you personally
need to learn to improve your life and
to help others. Well, that really fit my
personality. I realised that, I never
have to work with a human teacher, I
just needed to engage deeply in my
own practice of direct revelation and
work with my own helping spirits.'
And that's what I've done, and
through that experience and learning
I've been able to help others.
I think the shadow side of
working with human teachers, is
they can often take certain
principles and turn them into rules.
And then they plant the seeds of
fear into students by the desire to
want to control their them. We can
choose a broader construct, and
ask 'Where does this teaching
actually come from?' and 'What is
the purpose of this?' Or we can just
say 'Well, you're my teacher, and
I'm going to take all of this in, and
believe everything that you say.'
As we deepen our own
shamanic practices, we move into a
place of self reflection and need to
work with our own helping spirits,
rather than say 'I learned this from
somebody else, and I have to follow
everything I was taught without any
process of self reflection.
I have students who worked with an indigenous shaman who taught them that one should not share their journeys with others. Now, of course, sharing without discretion can be a form of giving your power away, not sitting with the experience, not letting it really sink in.

Yet often, there is a healing that occurs in our Western culture that comes from sharing our experiences and having others reflect back to you ‘How beautiful and profound your experience was’. For we live in a culture where we were taught that if you go into invisible worlds ‘You’re crazy,’ or ‘You need professional help and get on medication!’ We were taught to only acknowledge what we experience in the tangible realm.

So as I see it, often a teaching that comes from a specific culture has a broader underlying principle, which doesn’t always translate into our modern day culture in the West.

But there are profound guiding principles that we can learn from indigenous cultures and their shamans - whilst we are living in the here and now in our Western culture, which is so different.

It is so important to me that we do the questing, the visioning, the journeying, getting direct revelation. I continue believing there is a way for us to broaden our perspectives and evolve our work to be effective practitioners during the times we live in.

The paradox is, shamanism has changed over thousands of years to meet the needs of the people; and we’re in a different time now. So when we are wondering ‘Should I call myself a shaman?’ we have to know what ‘being a shaman’ actually means.

**Part of the shaman’s role has always been holding**

**Often people turn to others to interpret their experiences. In doing so they give their power away by letting other people interpret the things shared by their spirits.**

Shamanism requires taking responsibility for self-reflection, going out into nature, sitting for weeks, or even months, if needs be ceremonial space. I was in conversation with Martin Prechtel one time, and he said that he saw his role as ‘giving people the authentic taste of ceremony, so that when they came across it, they would know if it was real or not.’

I think if you learn from a traditional culture, or learn a traditional technique or a traditional world view, then you get that taste of what’s authentic. We need to know the bones of the ceremony, so we add our own flesh to them in a way that’s suitable for our own culture.

Absolutely, and I think that when people are able to participate in a ceremony which has been carried down through an ancestral line in a particular way for thousands of years, then the way that the people and the shaman at the ceremony all conduct themselves makes it - in Martin Prechtel’s words - ‘authentic.’ The power is the presence that comes through a ceremony like that.

The power that then shines through every cell of one’s being, is something that inspires us. But often we aren’t inspired because there’s not the depth. People who learn ceremonies or rituals, through churches, or different religious traditions, are given ‘step one,’ ‘step two,’ ‘step three,’... and rules.

So people end up reading from books or memorising steps to a ceremony taught by other teachers but there isn’t a cellular depth that’s being touched, the bones you spoke of are not really coming through.

When you’re in an authentic ceremony, that has been carried down through time, it’s not about reading notes, it’s about really experiencing what energies are being carried through, what healing energies and dreams can be bridged from the invisible into the visible realms. It shows the true power of shamanism as we spin threads into being from the invisible into the world of form, to weave into being a new beautiful fabric of reality.

Yes, and of course that taps into another aspect. An ancient ceremony or tradition has an incredibly vibrant spirit of itself, and you’re tapping into that spirit, which helps create an ancestral energy to what you are doing.
I agree. One of the things that I try to share with people in the West is that, due to modern psychotherapy, people often focus on what they didn’t get from their ancestors, because maybe they grew up in a dysfunctional family, and they are dealing with the impact of that.

On one level, we all have to deal with what we didn’t get growing up, and validate the feelings that come from feeling wounded as a child. Then we must work our feelings through and heal our past.

But at the same time, what’s happened, because of only delving into the wounds from growing up, is we have lost our connection to our ancestral line, in the way that people experience their connection with the ancestors in indigenous traditions. That’s a real loss.

For in the West, we’re generally cut off from that wealth of tradition, from that line of ancestral gifts and strengths.

I remember one time - this was many, many years ago - I was presenting at a conference. I was talking about my ‘Medicine for the Earth’ work, and I was teaching about the power of words, and how words can be used to bless, or how words can be used to destroy. I was sharing how we have to really work to align our words and thoughts that lead to our desired outcome.

At the end of my lecture, a Navajo [Dine] Elder came up to me - dressed in her full native dress - and she said to me; “Do you know what our term ‘May you walk in Beauty’ means?”

And I said ‘No.’ I often hear that term being used in songs and conversation. She said “It’s a Navajo term, and it means to make sure that you bless everybody with your words so that you always bring beauty.”

And then she said to me; “Do you know why we don’t trust people in America?”

I was confused by that question, because for me, there are obvious reasons, but I knew she was digging deeper than just the surface.

She said; ”Because you do not speak about your family when you introduce yourself.”

I asked her what she meant, and she replied, “When you come to the Navajo nation and we ask you ‘Who are you? What’s your name?’ we expect you to talk about your ancestors, and people don’t do that in your culture.”

I thought about that, and we sat down together and talked for a very long time - had a really deep discussion. I told her that my family came over from Russia to escape persecution and death. I shared that when they came to America their focus was on integrating into the U.S. They taught their children how to integrate into America and did not share where they came from and who their ancestors were. I know where my Mother’s family comes from, but I actually don’t know where my Father’s family comes from at all. Nobody in my family knows where my paternal Grandparents came from in Europe. Her questioning made me think hard about my own ancestral connection.

The whole topic of ancestry and connecting with ancestry really takes us to another level of reflection on how deep can we go with our own shamanic practices. We really need to bring through the wisdom and teachings and strength and bones of our ancestors.

For traditional people this connection remains and is carried down in physical community events. I live in Santa Fe, and I can go and see different traditional dances that go on in local Native American communities throughout New Mexico. They rehearse and they practise their dances, from the little kids - maybe only five years old - right up to the elders. They practise, practise, practise. But it’s not about practising the steps, it’s about tapping into the ancestors, and honouring the ancestors through the power of the dance. And it’s really evident that this is not a show for the public - not a performance. These are people who are actually bringing through an ancestral tradition, one that is still being done in a genuine and authentic way. The people present are touched by it. When people are touched, they feel their deep ancestral connections and it changes their consciousness.

Of course in the West, when we think about getting in touch with our ancestors, the automatic response is to go onto a genealogy website. We get very ‘head’ with it. But my shamanic approach would be to make offerings to the ancestors. I might offer honey and milk mixed together. I’d go and make prayers of gratitude to my ancestors for the fact that they carried me, and I’m here now! I don’t necessarily need to know who they actually were.

Exactly, yes. I do that every day in my own life. I adore my parents. And I just have such an honour and respect for my ancestors, and so expressing gratitude for my ancestors is part of the daily practice that I do every single day. Again, I’m looping back into some of those simple practices that we can do, which bring through some of the core values of shamanism. We need to be able to honour our own ancestors, and I also honour the helping ancestors of the land I live on every day, because I’m living on their land, I’m living here! And I give thanks.

For me, I also honour the ancestors of the shamanic traditions that I work with.

Oh absolutely. A couple of times, with groups of experienced students, we have done ceremonies to heal the lines of shamanism, especially where there have been divisive energies coming through.

We go back and really get in touch with the ancestral spirits, to bring through the power that we need to create change ‘right now,’ instead of getting lost in the divisive energies that our mind likes to get us involved in.

Well, thank you for a most interesting and thought-provoking talk. Is there anything else you want to add?

I am really excited to see so many people being drawn to shamanic practices today. I have just written ‘Walking in Light: The Everyday Empowerment of Shamanic Life,’ and in the book I encourage people to bring some of the positive and consciousness raising core values, that come from shamanic cultures, into our modern culture.

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Sacred Hoop wishes to thank Sofy Rosie for her help with this article.
Tengerism, or Tengriism, is an ancient Central Asian animistic religion and spirituality, which has been at the root of shamanism for thousands of years. The first recorded use of the word was in 4th BCE China.

It was the religion of Genghis Khan - the great Mongolian leader - and also of generations of his descendants, and was once to be found practiced from Bulgaria in the West to Siberia in the Far East.

Tengerism also has connections with other ancient beliefs of Central Asia, mingling with, and influencing both Zoroastrianism and ancient Central Asian Christianity. This form of Christianity is called ‘Nestorian Christianity,’ after Nestorius, a Patriarch of Constantinople - and it was controversial with Orthodox Christians, as it held the view that Jesus was a mortal man - not divine - who had a deep and close connection to the holy spirit, allowing him to become both a healer and a messenger of God - a sort of supreme shaman figure.

After a schism with the Orthodox Church in Constantinople in the 5th CE, Nestorianism spread to Western China and Central Asia along the Silk Road, becoming a popular spirituality - alongside shamanism and Buddhism - with the Uighur people of China’s Xinjiang provence (East Turkestan), which lies North East of Tibet.

Nestorianism faded out after the rise of Islam and the conversion of the Uighur people in the 10th, but Tengerism, Buddhism and Nestorianism still influence the folklore of Central Asia - even in those areas which are now predominantly Islamic; for instance with the baqshï (shamans) in Kyrgyzstan.

Tengerism has generally been tolerant of other faiths and spiritualities. In 1254, William of Rubruck, a medieval Flemish Franciscan monk who travelled to Mongolia, met with Möngke Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, and at that time the Great Khan of the Mongol empire. Möngke Khan told William: “We believe that there is only one God, by whom we live and by whom we die, and for whom we have an upright heart. But as God gives us the different fingers of the hand, so he gives to men diverse ways to approach Him.”

Do you work with the Four Directions, have a concept of the Three Worlds, understand that all things are alive and with spirit, and that all beings on the Sacred Hoop of Creation are part of one big family and related? Well if you do, you are probably a Tengerist - even if you don’t realise it.

Nicholas Breeze Wood explores this ancient shamanic spirituality and offers it as a catch-all term we could apply to the multitude of different shamanic paths currently growing in the West.
Currently Tengerism is having a revival in Central Asia, coming into focus once more. This refocusing is perhaps a redefining of these cultures after the collapse of Soviet domination; a looking to what is meaningful from their past, in order to bring meaning and identity to their present - but it is not a recreation of something lost, because it never actually went away - even during the times of Soviet persecution.

The countries and provinces where it can currently be found are all the countries we generally think of as the homes of Central Asian and Southern Siberian shamanism; including Tuva, Mongolia, Buryatia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Yakutia. Many shamans from these places identify themselves as Tengerists, including the late Buryat-American shaman and writer Sarangerel Odigon.

Regarding Tengerism, Sarangerel wrote the following in an online conversation in 2005: ‘You do not have to be a shaman in order to practice [Tengerism].’ Shamans are spiritual specialists who are called upon for certain situations of spiritual crisis, or for certain rites of passage and for healing. Most of the time [non shaman] people interact with the spirits directly through personal ceremonies done every day and in all kinds of contexts. In the western world shamanism has taken on such a confused meaning largely thanks to the New Age…'

A shaman is chosen by the spirits, and is not a ‘normal’ person, and yet the ‘normal’ people of a culture where shamanism is practiced still live by a shamanically understood cosmology - that is Tengerism. It’s a bit like saying you don’t have to be a vicar to be a Christian or a lama to be a Buddhist.

I see many people in the West, who are not shamans - but who have a shamanic understanding of life - struggling to give a term to their spirituality, so I offer Tengerism as a possible solution to this, I certainly would willingly say that I am a Tengerist myself, as it pretty well sums up where I am coming from.

So, what is Tengerism in real terms, how does a Tengerist see the world, and how does one practice Tengerism? The way to live - according to Tengerism - is to live in harmony with all things in the surrounding world, respecting all living beings and all aspects of nature.

Tengerists understand that existence is sustained by the ‘Sacred Marriage’ of the Eternal Blue Sky and the Earth Mother. The ‘Eternal Blue Sky’ is the Sky Father - or the Sky Powers - which is the same as the ‘Great Mystery’ (Waken Tanka: Lakota) of the Native peoples of North America.

Generally Tenger or Tengri refers to the Great Sky Father, the Great Mystery, and the word ‘Tenger’ actually means ‘Sky,’ Because of this association with the Sky Powers the sky is honoured in many ways. The commonest form of honouring is the use of sky-blue silk khadags. These blue scarves are tied to sacred places in nature and on to ritual objects such as drums etc. Other ways the sky is honoured is by sending clouds of incense smoke into it, as a gift to the Sky Father and all the local earth spirits and ancestors, or by throwing - or flicking with a a special spoon - milk or vodka upwards into the air.

The Sky Father Tenger is seen as the chief amongst all the spirits, with many other lesser Tenger spirits - often said to be His sons and also called Tengers or sometimes Khans - forming a pantheon and acting as His helpers, each responsible for different aspects of creation.

Mother Earth is seen as a living goddess with a spirit - not just a dead rock in space, ripe for exploitation. This Sacred Marriage between the Earth and Sky powers provides for all the needs of all living beings.

By living an upright and respectful life, caring for the environment and all the children of the Sacred Marriage (whether that being is a human, an animal, a plant or any other child of the Sacred Marriage) a person keeps his life in balance and develops his own personal power, which is often called ‘windhorse.’

Windhorse (lung ta in Tibetan and hımori in Mongolian) is the spiritual power of a shaman, and is a symbol important to both shamanism and Buddhism. Images of windhorses appear on Buddhist prayer flags, and the Tibetan name for a prayer flag actually is lung ta - a windhorse.
All of nature is alive and spirits are everywhere. Some of these spirits are friendly and helpful, while others are hostile. These are all the normal spirits of shamanic cosmology, spirits of mountains and lakes and trees, spirits of disease, spirits of the sun and the moon and the stars, spirits of animals and birds and plants, spirits of ancestors etc.; all of the spirits of the three worlds encountered when a shaman journeys in trance.

Because everything is alive and with a spirit, all of nature needs to be respected. This is especially true of the body of Mother Earth herself, which ideally should not be dug into. Water is especially sacred, as are mountains, and they should never be damaged or polluted. Of course these are ideals, Mongolia and other areas of Central Asia are heavily mined and water sources are polluted - no one is saying being a Tengerist is going to solve all the problems of the environment, as people are people the world over.

Tengerism is a way of life, much more than a religion in the normal sense of the word, and as you are reading this article you probably already have an awareness of the sacred nature of Creation, so you are probably already practicing Tengerism.

You may already have sacred ways you live by, perhaps you have learned some Medicine Wheel teachings or you might be a Tibetan Buddhist, or have been taught a sacred cosmology from another tradition. But that does not matter, as in Tengerism there are no fixed rules you need to obey, so long as you recognise the sacred nature of Creation, the Sky Powers above and the Earth Mother below and the fact that there are many other spirits all around you, and you try to live a life where you respect these sacred powers.

However, there are a few basic practices which most Tengerists do. These are done to bring harmony to themselves, their homes and the world around them (both seen and unseen).

These include keeping a house altar, a sacred place in the home. In Mongolia these are traditionally found on the North side of a ger (yurt), opposite the door, but as modern buildings are not often arranged to the Four directions you will have to be creative.
Put your altar on top of a cabinet or table, or maybe on a shelf on the wall, somewhere away from doors, where it is out of the way and won’t be disturbed. Put an attractive cloth down to build your altar on, and put on it items that represent sacred things to you.

It is good to burn candles and incense on it, and also to place a bowl of water. Traditional Mongolian altars also often have a small bowl of vodka. The water and vodka are offerings to the spirits and should be replaced often.

If you do shamanic work your ritual objects should be kept on, or next to, this altar.

Many Tengerists will also keep ongons on their altars.

An ongon is a spirit house, somewhere where a spirit is invited to come and live, and they take many forms - some ongons look like human figures and others are natural objects, or even painted designs on a square of cloth.

In Mongolia the most common ongons are a man and a woman called the zol zayach. These represent the family unit, and when a blessing in some form comes to the family, a small amount of decoration - perhaps a ribbon - is added to the ongons. They are kept close to the bowl of water and vodka, and sometimes bowls of milk or black tea will be added, perhaps together with a small plate of sweet food, such as small cakes; all placed in front of the ongons for a time, before it is given to nature for the little creatures to eat.

Other ongons - representing spirits of nature or animals, or a shaman’s helper spirits, or specific ancestors - may be made and placed on an altar too. All of these will be fed now and then.

The making of offerings is important in Tengerism. Besides small bowls on altars, when you open a bottle of wine or other drink give the first drink to the spirits. This is often done by dipping the right ring-finger into the glass and flicking the liquid. When I do this, I normally make six flicking offerings, one above to the Sky Powers, one below to Mother Earth and one to each of the Four Directions around me. This also symbolises that I am in the

Opposite Page: tying offerings of cloth strips to trees and other aspects of nature is a way of honouring and making offerings to the spirits of Nature right across Siberia and Central Asia

Left: a collection of ongon dolls on an altar shelf
sacred centre of Creation - the place of the sacred World Tree which links the Three Worlds.

Other offerings include tying a blue khadag scarf around your altar, or around an ongon on it, or tying one onto some outside part of your home. Sometimes I put one on my front door, and there are several tied to trees and rocks in my garden.

Smudging and burning incense are other forms of offerings, and the is also traditionally said to carry prayers to the spirits.

In Tibet this practice of smoke offering is called bsang, and it is easy to buy beautiful smelling bsang incense powders from Tibetan Buddhist ritual suppliers online at very little cost. Pinches of these powders can then be dropped onto burning charcoal blocks to make clouds of fragrant smoke rise, either inside your house or outside.

Being a Tengerist is not going to make your life better, it’s not going to make you a shaman, and it is probably what you already are - but sometimes it is nice to call a spade a spade instead of struggling to find another word for it, and the next
time someone asks you your religion you can confound them by saying Tengerist, and enjoy that look of puzzlement they have on their face when they ask you: “What on earth is that?” And let’s face it, being a Jedi is just so passé!

Nicholas Breeze Wood is the editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine. He has made a life-long study of sacred objects and runs an online gallery specialising in the ritual objects of Tibet and Central Asia.

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RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING
www.tengerism.org
www.buryatmongol.org

Sarangerel Odigon wrote two excellent books about Mongolian Tengerism and shamanism: ‘Riding Windhorses’ and ‘Chosen by the Spirits’ [this book is especially recommended].

There are also many videos about Tengerism on Youtube, but most of them are in Mongolian or Russian.

Blue khadag offering scarfs are not easy to get outside of Southern Siberia but any light-weight blue silk or cotton scarf or narrow length of material would be suitable to use. Mongolian khadags are obtainable from www.3Worlds.co.uk.

Tibetan bsang incense powders come in many varieties, each one dedicated to a specific being in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon (Green Tara, Medicine Buddha, Mahakala, Dorje Phurba etc.), so you might want to Google to find out a bit about the beings offered, to choose one that suits the intent of your offering - but any would be suitable as a generic smoke offering, as would smudging sage, cedar leaves or other herbs.

Remember charcoal blocks burn with great heat, so always put them in a suitable container.

Bsang powders can be easily bought from many places online, including:
www.garudashop.com (UK)
www.tibetanspirit.com (USA)
In the spring of 1995, a BBC film team approached our shamanic drumming group in order to gain permission to film us as we worked in circle. In discussion with their representative, I was told they planned to be respectful, but that they might need to use filming lights. I told them that shamanic journey was not that interesting to film, and they said they just needed a sample of that, but that they were told initially that we danced and chanted as well (both true). I decided to decline the opportunity on the grounds that what we were doing was sacred to us and not for public consumption.

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

In our everyday lives we have likely seen examples of people giving away their power — abusive relationships would be one example.

Another example is when someone shares information for attention or status — private information that a group might enjoy consuming. The integrity of relationships is compromised when personal knowledge or potentially confidential information is traded, outside those relationships, for momentary gain.

In the same way that we gain the trust of a good friend, client, or a team of peers by demonstrating our worth, so we also gain the confidence of our spirit helpers by earning their trust.

Our power and spirits are not meant to enhance our status or inflate the ego. If we used our friends that way, they would not likely stay close to us for long. We would lose the connection or link with that person. All of our friendships, material and non-material, deserve the proper regard.

In my very first workshop with Michael Harner back in 1985, he told a personal story about weather magic. He began by informing the group that the shamanic path involves gathering personal power, and there would be some things told to us by our personal spirit helpers that was given to us alone. He said that the shaman’s path involved collecting knowledge from the spirit realms, and that some of that knowledge might be personal medicine — your unique gifts for the world. He did not want us giving our power away.

Harner gave the example of weather medicine, stating that he had once held weather medicine that gave him an element of influence. But, he stated, he had bragged about it, and consequently, the medicine left him.

I resonated with this, feeling that there was a time in my life when I too had weather medicine. It’s not so much that I bragged, more that I didn’t know how to develop a relationship with it. To be clear, I wasn’t respectful. I’d come to expect compliance from them simply by praying. I wasn’t yet in my 20s, maybe I did brag in a small voice. In any case, it occurred to me one day that something had changed. So, prior to shamanic training, I learned intuitively that gifts from the spirit world were to be treated with deep respect. That often meant holding the gift in silence, at least while we were growing together.

SHARING IN A CIRCLE

In workshops we were encouraged to share, so that we could all learn from the experience. How does that square with holding silence?

Harner went on to discuss the value of sharing in specific circumstances. In a circle of sharing, everything that is shared becomes confidential — limited to the circle. Another circumstance for sharing that he discussed: sharing as a way to educate the circle or to broaden the retrieved information through resonance within the circle. When we are learning together the medicine grows.

Sometimes a piece of shamanic work is complete in a relatively short period of time. But often — especially as we age — we are introduced to a teaching that is deeply rooted and takes time to encounter and integrate.

When something is in process I generally feel that this is a thing I do not share. I have been told by spirit helpers, and feel it in my body, that we don’t share information or knowledge that is in process because it is still malleable in its interactions with reality and possesses a certain delicacy.

In other words, telling the wrong people or sharing indiscriminately may cause a leak in the process. Birthing something new into the world, or integrating something old, may require private gestation or appropriately linked supports.

What I found is that: when a story or event has run its course and time has passed, it often no longer seems necessary to hold silence. There are many personal experiences I have shared, and there are many that I have not. Through the years I’ve come to rely on my spirit helpers to guide me — when to share and when to hold silence. This becomes an automatic or reflexive response when your spirit helpers are held in continual reverence.

Jim Price is a spiritual traveller, being a shamanic practitioner since 1985. His main training came from the helping spirits, although he gained valuable experience from Michael Harner and Sandra Ingerman (among others). He has also worked with several indigenous teachers and engage in practices of mindfulness and mysticism.

For money, he was a counselor, behaviour analyst, and was director of a human service organisation.

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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, jhanwa, baidhangi, dhanmantari, jyotoshi, jaiishi, dhangre, dhyangre, janapa, khetwa, chalwa, ban jhankri, bonpa, lhapa, pau, khepy, bijuwa, baidhya, ojha, kuko dhami, phukwa, zhuk-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 a 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,
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 then they are likely to lose their position.

Below: A Nepali shaman plays his dhyangro during a healing ceremony. He wears a head dress of hawk feathers, and has a chain hung with bells over his chest. In front of him is an altar on which sits a pot containing a carved wooden phurba ritual dagger.

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 do not 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

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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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*Left:* Nepali shaman performs a healing ceremony. He has mixed herbs in a pot and is empowering the mixture while drumming.
In everyday life the shaman is not distinguishable from other people except by an occasionally haughty manner; but when he is engaged in communicating with spirits, he has to make use of a special dress and special instruments.

Authors of the eighteenth century, paid great attention to the shaman's accessories - though they have probably only been attracted by their picturesque side - yet their descriptions are very valuable.

The writer Shashkoff enumerates the following items as being indispensable to the shaman's dress all over Siberia: the coat, the mask, the cap, and the copper or iron plate on the breast.

Each tribe has, moreover, some particular object which plays the chief part in the shamanistic ceremony; among the Gilyak and the Olchi it is the shaman's girdle which is of the greatest significance; among the Buryat, the horse-staves.

The coat possesses an impersonal power of itself. By assuming this coat the shaman receives supernatural power, which allows him to go to the upper and under-worlds to meet spirits and deal with them. It is called the 'shaman's horse' among the Yakut. The coat as a whole is a protector of the shaman, and each symbolic object on the coat is also his protector.

Earlier writers thought that the shamanic costumes used throughout Siberia had a threefold significance: 1: the shaman wishes to make a profound impression on the eyes of the people by the eccentricity of his costume. 2: the ringing of the bells and the noise of the drum impress their sense of hearing. 3: symbolic meaning is attached to these accessories and adornments, a meaning known only to believers, especially to the shamans.

But this interpretation does not bring out the whole importance of the relationship of these objects to the spiritual world. They are of great importance, for the spirits will not hear the voice of the shaman unless the right dress and implements are used, and the drum beaten; they are sacred because of their contact with a supernatural and often dangerous power.

Being sacred, these accessories must not be used by anyone but a shaman. It is only a good shaman, a real one, who can possess the full shaman's dress.

THE SHAMAN BLACKSMITH
Among the Siberians it is usually the shaman himself who makes all accessories, and that only when the spirits give their permission.

Among the Yakut, even the blacksmith who undertakes the ornamentation of the costume, must have inherited the right. If the blacksmith who makes a shamanistic ornament has not a sufficient number of ancestors, if he is not surrounded on all sides by the noise of hammering and the glow of fire, then birds with crooked claws and beaks will tear his heart in pieces. For this reason the blacksmith's vocation comes next in importance to the shaman's.

In modern times it is practically impossible among the Yakut for the shaman's coat to be made, since there is now no class of hereditary blacksmiths.

In his description of the Tungus shaman's garment, the writer Gmelin relates how the shaman whom he saw 'had no cap because the old one was burnt and the spirits would not grant him a new one.'
The hereditary blacksmiths have tools with souls (ichchylakh), which can give out sounds of their own accord. The blacksmiths are those who approach most nearly to the shaman in their office, and are, in a way, related to them; ‘the blacksmith and the shaman are of one nest’, says a proverb of the Kolyma district, ‘the smith is the elder brother of the shaman’ is another saying.

Blacksmiths can sometimes cure, give advice, and foretell the future, but their knowledge is simply a matter of cleverness and does not possess magical value. The profession of blacksmith is mostly hereditary. In the ninth generation the blacksmith first acquires certain supernatural qualities, and the longer his line of descent, the greater his qualities.

The spirits are generally afraid of the iron, and of the noise made by the smith’s bellows. In the district of Kolyma, the shaman would not shamanise until the Russian writer Sieroszewski had removed his case of metal instruments, and even then the shaman attributed his bad luck to them.

YAKUT SHAMAN COATS
The shaman’s coat, consists chiefly of a coat of cowhide, so short in front that it does not reach the knees, but touches the ground at the back. The coat is plain in front, and fastens on the breast with leather straps, and under the chin with a buckle in the form of a colt’s tongue (kulun tyl kurduk).

On the front of the coat are sewn figures of animals, birds, fishes; various disks; images of the sun, moon, and stars; and also some iron representations of the human skeleton and bowels.

A good shaman’s dress requires about 35 to 40 pounds (15 to 18kg) of iron.

The edges and the surface of this coat are ornamented at the back with different objects, each having its own name, place, and meaning.

Sieroszewski gives us an account of some of the coat ornamentation, which he heard from an old Yakut. The Sun (kungeta), a round, smooth, shining disk, the size of a small saucer, hanging between the shoulders, on a short strap of leather which passes through the hole in the middle of the disk. The Hole in the Ice Sun (oibon-kunga), a disk of the same shape and size as the first, but with a larger hole in the middle. It hangs above or below the first plate on a long leather strap. Rolls of tin (kondi kyhan) about the size of a thumb, but longer, banging at the back on the metal rings or loops. Copper bells without tongues (hobo), suspended below the collar; like a crow’s egg in size and shape, and having on the upper part a drawing of a fish’s head. They are tied to the leather straps or to the metal loops.

POWER OF THE AMAGYAT
In his list, Sieroszewski describes the amagyat, a copper plate as long as the first finger and half as wide as the palm of the hand. It is covered either with a drawing of a man, with feet, hands, head, nose, mouth, eyes, and ears, or with an engraving in relief, having a man’s figure in the middle. It represents both the shaman’s ancestor and his protector.

Only a blacksmith who has nine generations behind him can, without danger to himself from the spirits, make an amagyat.

The absence of an amagyat in a shaman’s equipment differentiates the less important shamans from those who possess one. The power of those in possession of the amagyat varies according to the strength of the spirit living within the amagyat.

Describing a shaman in action, Sieroszewski says that the shaman implored the assistance of his amagyat and of other protecting spirits; and it is only when the amagyat descends upon the shaman that he begins his frenzied dances.

The amagyat is the sign of the shaman’s vocation, which is always...
The coat as a whole is a protector of the shaman, and each symbolic object on the coat is also his protector. Given by the old shaman to the new. The Yakut shaman is taught by an older shaman, who initiates him by suspending round his neck the amagyat. This symbol is taken away from the shaman who no longer wishes to shamanise.

An old blind Yakut, however, told Sieroszewski how he gave up his shaman’s vocation, thinking it a sin, and although a powerful shaman removed the amagyat from him, nevertheless the spirits made him blind.

In the Mongolian language amagaldzi signifies the figure of the protective spirit of the house, family, and goods, made of tin. This word is derived from the word amagan - grandmother.

The human body cannot endure the continuous presence of a power equal to the great gods; hence the amagyat resides not within, but close beside the shaman (in the home made for it by the blacksmith), and comes to the shaman’s assistance whenever he needs him. The great shamans at death take their amagyat spirit with them, and thus change into heavenly beings, most of whom are ex-shamans; if the amagyat does not depart in this way, then sooner or later it will show itself on the earth. After the shaman’s death the spirit of a remaining amagyat seeks to re-embody itself in some one belonging to the same clan.

COATS OF THE ALTAI SHAMANS

Amongst the natives of Altai, the shaman’s coat is made of goat or reindeer hide. All the outer side is covered with pendants of varying length in serpent form, and have pieces of many-coloured stuff stitched on to it. The pendants, which terminate in serpents’ heads, hang freely. Bundles of reindeer leather straps are also attached here and there. The term manyak, is applied by the natives of Altai to the small pendants as well as to the coat as a whole.

There can further be found on the coat various symbolic figures and jingling pendants, such as iron triangles, a small bow and arrow to frighten hostile spirits. On the back and sometimes on the front of the coat there are sewed two copper disks. One kam (shaman) had four empty tobacco-bags hanging on his coat with imaginary tobacco inside, which he offers to the spirits whilst he is wandering in their country. The collar is trimmed with owl feathers. One kam had seven little dolls on his collar, which, the C19th...
century explorer Grigory Potanin was told, were heavenly maidens. A few bells are sewed on here and there; the more prosperous shamans have as many as nine. The ringing of the bells is the voice of the seven maidens whose symbols are sewed to the collar calling to the spirits to descend to them.

The cap of the Altaian shaman is formed of a square piece of the hide of a reindeer calf. On one side there are two buttons and on the other two loops. On the top, bunches of feathers are sewn, and from the lower edge hangs a fringe made of string and shell-fish. This is placed on the head with the two sides buttoned to the back, thus forming a cylindrical cap on the shaman’s head. If the hide is hard, the top of the cap with its feathers sticks up like a coronet.

Among some shamans of the Teleut tribe, the cap is made of brown owl skin; the feathers remain as ornaments, and sometimes also the bird’s head. It is not all shamans who can wear the manyak and the owlskin cap. The spirits generally announce to the chosen man when he may wear them.

The Buryat shaman’s costume was first described by the 18th German explorer Peter Pallas. ‘It belonged to a female shaman, who was accompanied by her husband and two other Buryat, each of them holding a magical drum. She herself held in her hand two sticks, ornamented at the top end with a carving of a horse’s head surrounded by small bells. From the back of the shoulders reaching to the ground hung about thirty snakes, made of white and black skin, in such a way that the snakes seem to be composed of white and black rings. One of the snakes was divided into three at the end, and was accounted indispensable to each Buryat female shaman. The cap was covered with an iron casque having horns with three branches, projecting on both sides like those of a deer.’

In their exhaustive 1893 work ‘Materials for the Study of Shamanism in Siberia’ N.N. Agapitoff and N.M. Khangaloff describe the old shaman costume among the Buryat – a costume of a kind which, however, is very rarely to be met with at present. According to them, the coat, the cap, and the horse-staves are the chief appertences of a shaman.

The coat is of material, its shape does not differ from that of the ordinary coat. The front of the coat is covered with metal figures of horses, fishes, birds. The back is covered with twisted iron representing snakes, together with a whole row of little bells and tambourine bells.

On the chest above the thin plates used to hang little shining copper disks, and on the sleeves, were also hung thin iron plates, in imitation of the bones of the shoulder and forearm.

The cap, which is peaked, is made of lynx skin, with a bunch of ribbons on the top.

On the shaman’s boots there were formerly sewed iron plates, but these are no longer in use.

The Olkhon Buryat shamans have one other property, called a shire. It is a box three and a half feet long and one foot deep, standing on four legs, each two feet high. On the box are hung ribbons, bells, strips of skin, and on one of the long sides different figures are carved or painted in red. Usually on the right side is represented the sun, and on the left, the moon. The sun is depicted as a wheel, and in the middle of the moon
there is a human figure holding a tree in one hand.
In the middle of the long side there are three images of secondary gods, one woman and two men, in whose honour wine is sprinkled several times a year. There are also war implements - bow and quiver and sword, and under each human figure there is a horse. The shire is used to hold horse-staves, drums, and other ritual implements.

The shaman acquires the right of carrying the shire after their fifth consecration. With every new consecration up to the ninth, the height and other dimensions of the shire increase.

Nil, the C19 archbishop of Yaroslavl, mentions two things more: abagaldey, a monstrous mask of skin, wood, and metal, painted, and ornamented with a great beard; and toli, a metal looking-glass with representations of twelve animals on it; this is hung round the neck and worn on the breast; sometimes it is sewed on the shaman’s coat.

Occasionally the Buryat shaman has also a whip with bells, but generally all these implements tend to disappear in modern times.

NOTES:
1: There are nine levels of Buryat shaman consecration, shamans pass through a ceremony every seven years to reach the next level, at each level they are allowed to own and wear specific objects. For a full account of such a ceremony read the book ‘Shanar: dedication ritual of a Buryat shaman’. Parabola Books.

This article was extracted and adapted from the book ‘Shamanism in Siberia’ M.A. Czaplicka, first published in 1914.

Maria Antonina Czaplicka (1886-1921) was a Polish born cultural anthropologist who is best known for her work on Siberian shamanism. She was based in London, and travelled to Siberia, doing extensive fieldwork there in an era where women were not generally engaged in either scientific research or exploration.

Living to only 35 years of age, she was also a skilled early photographer and took many images on her travels in Siberia. Some of these can be found here: http://bit.ly/cPYORU

More information about her life can be found at:  http://bit.ly/9S9J7I
Things have changed a lot since the old days. By the old days I don’t mean twenty-three years ago, when I first started teaching courses in shamanism. No, I mean the old, old days - long before the Vikings, long before the Druids, long before the megalith builders, back to that time when our ancestors sat around campfires fashioning wooden tools with stone tools, listening to the silence, feeling the presence of the spirits. And even though things have changed, still there is a connection to that time.

I find it wonderful that we, as shamanic practitioners, are the ones who are consciously carrying that connection to our most remote ancestors, and yet this is something that we forget, question, and often fail to realise to its full depth.

We make comparisons. “Why can’t we be like the shamans of old?” I have heard people ask. The answer is, mainly, because we don’t live in the past. We are here, for better or worse, at the beginning of the 21st Century.

Once, a participant asked if we weren’t just ‘playing Indian.’ It’s a fair enough question, because to the untutored eye, that’s how it may appear.

There we are, twenty-some people, sitting in a circle, a circle which was originally made around a fire, then moved to a skin tent, and which we, in our time, have rediscovered is the best way to sit, especially in a square room, if we are going to talk together. And talking together, we find out that this rediscovery of our inheritance, our true nature, is what some people not only want, but also need.

And some people ask “But how can I bring my shamanic practice into my 21st Century life?” Again, this is a fair question, and many people ask it. But first - what is it we want to bring back into our lives?

Many of us are urban or suburban dwellers. We are surrounded by modern conveniences, which we eagerly consume, pre-packaged foods, synthetic materials, and air pollution. If we are lucky, we have a job which we enjoy on some levels, and live with people who are supportive of us, and for whom we try to be supportive.

And we have our shamanic practice. But what is that shamanic practice? The answer to this question is as different as the people reading these words. My experience from teaching shamanism tells me that the majority of people who practice shamanism today do not do so because they want to bring back the past.

For me, and for many others, the reason for practicing shamanism is to maintain our contact with the Spirit World, and to bring the power of that contact into our lives and to our world today. This power is our spiritual heritage.

We do, however, live in the computer age and not in the stone age. The power from the Spirit World is the same as it always was, but the world around us has changed.

About fifteen years ago a Sami friend of mine arranged a course for me in arctic Finland, primarily for Sami people. One of the things that struck me was the difference in the quality of the intention of the journey missions. While I was used to hearing such missions as “How can I heal my inner child?” from course participants in England, a Sami man asked his spirit helpers “Where on the river can I catch most fish?”

Even in our day and culture, people come to see shamanic practitioners for physical health problems; but, unless they know about shamanism beforehand, the shaman is often the last of the health practitioners to be visited, and often
only when all other practitioners have signed the case off as hopeless.

But in many cases, people who don’t know much about shamanism come to see shamanic practitioners about ‘life issues’ rather than ‘health issues’.

I feel there is a tendency in the western shamanic revival to (psycho-)therapeutise shamanism, and given the life-style of the 21st Century, this is natural enough. Probably more than at any time in the history of the world, people are daring to ask the questions of themselves and their lives that only philosophers asked before. We dig deeper. We want to know the answers. We want to do better, better at least than how we were doing before.

So not surprisingly, one of the big drawing cards of shamanism is soul retrieval. People who know nothing about shamanism hear the phrase ‘soul loss’ and it rings a bell. This is because so many of us suffer from soul loss. The result of this is that pressure is put on the shamanic practitioner to perform the soul retrieval ritual in such a way as it is palatable to our times’ taste, even in cases where it may not be appropriate. And this presents an interesting cluster of related conundrums.

I feel a major problem for people interested in practising shamanism in the western world, is that shamanism is viewed simply as techniques we can learn. However, it is the spirits who empower, not the use of techniques.

Workshops can inspire and give introductory experience. You can learn to journey to the spirits. You can learn the basics of power or soul retrieval. You can learn to diagnose, to find the spirits of illness, and how to remove them. And this is all very valuable.

Sometimes when I teach a basic technique someone says ‘Oh, but I’ve done this before.’ This is what I call the ‘Pepsi view’ of life - ‘been there - done that’. Fortunately, life is not like that. Each moment is new, each experience is new. It is just our closed minds which keep us from seeing and experiencing the ever-changing colours of the sunrise.

Detractors of shamanic healing often say that the patient has to believe in shamanism, that is, believe in the spirits, for it to work. This is patently not true.

One of the most graphic examples of this was when I was doing an afternoon healing workshop at a conference on shamanism held at a University in northern England, some years ago.

The person we were working on was very ill with colitis and had been for two years. She was a psychologist working in a psychiatric ward of a large hospital. She had no previous knowledge of shamanism whatsoever, except that one of her colleagues had told her it was like stone-age psychotherapy. She had come to the conference to learn about shamanism.

Fortunately, there were sixty rattling singers and an excellent drummer on hand.

While I was doing the diagnostic work, I was shown a huge sleeping snake some thirty feet long and a yard wide, right where her lower intestine should have been.

“What’s THAT?!” I shouted at my very relaxed looking healing teacher spirit, who was sitting right next to me. “Oh, yes, that’s her power animal. It’s making her sick because she refuses to recognise it.” my teacher replied to me.

My healing teacher then told me how to remove it, and to put it into a small piece of amber which I had been carrying in my pocket for the past two years, and then told me to give the amber - and the snake - to the woman.

Three months later I received a letter from the woman. At the moment of healing at the conference, all the symptoms of
the illness had totally disappeared.

Perhaps from her point of view, I did the healing. But from my point of view, it was my teacher, my power animal, and her’s who brought her the power which restored her health. Yes, I was the conduit – and the power flowed through me - but it was the work of the spirits.

For non-practitioners, the shaman’s relationship to the Spirit-World is problematic, to say the least. Those who do not experience the Spirit World, and its power, view shamanism with an intellectual interest or a beneficent tolerance; still others with irritation, or even fundamentalist rage.

This is something we have to live with. But what has interested me increasingly over the years, is the effect this has on some shamanic practitioners.

For many, the result has been to emulate psychotherapists, even to the extent of getting an education as a therapist in order to have a façade of respectability. The result of this is that the burden is put on the practitioner to use ‘techniques’, be they shamanic or psychotherapeutic.

But where are the spirits in this? The techniques are the beginning. But with each gift comes responsibilities, and for shamans the responsibilities are spiritual. If we do not accept the responsibilities, then the techniques - together with their short-term peak experiences - become empty rituals. The spirits want us to learn from our experiences, change, accept responsibility, and become as powerful as the power they offer us.

Shamanism is not psychotherapy. The person visiting a shamanic practitioner may well have worked with a psychotherapist before and, not unreasonably, may be expecting something similar to whatever that was.

In psychotherapy, the relationship is between the therapist and the client. In shamanism, the relationship is between the shamanic practitioner and the spirits and the client. This means that from the shaman’s point of view, the power she is working with comes from the Spirit World through her to the client.

The shaman’s relationship to the spirits is the very essence and foundation of shamanism. No spirits - no shaman. The shaman’s power comes from the spirits. This is one thing that has not changed for the last quarter of a million years.

This is also what differentiates a shaman from a so-called ‘normal’ person. A normal person may well know who their spirit helpers are, but a shaman knows how to communicate with their spirits and how to interact with them.

It is practice that takes us further. Practice, practice, practice. What I mean by practice is: manifesting in our lives what we learn from our spirit teachers and guides.

This is why I have started doing individual practice trainings at my simple retreat center in the woods of southern Sweden. I start with where people are in their practice, and listen to where they want to go. So many people don’t even know what they want; but if you listen you can generally hear it.

The interesting thing is that the spirits know well what we want, but they are more interested in giving us what we need. The tragicomic truth is that often we are presented with what we need and we reject it because our tightly clutched agenda keeps insisting on what we want.

I know a lot of people who argue with their spirit teachers. I’ve even heard myself doing it. There are two key words in successful spiritual practice, shamanism included. The two words are trust and surrender. We have to trust our spirit teachers if we are to surrender to their power and wisdom, otherwise we cannot receive what it is that they have to give us.

By this I am not saying that we should resign all responsibility for our lives to the spirits. We have responsibility for our lives. Our shamanic practice is a part of that responsibility. When we go to them, do we listen or not? Do we receive their power? Do we follow their teachings?

The experience you get from practicing, from doing the work, builds on itself and is ever expanding. Every time I do a healing I learn something new, as with the woman with colitis, because each case is different.

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I feel a major problem for people interested in practicing shamanism in the western world, is that shamanism is viewed simply as techniques we can learn. However, it is the spirits who empower, not the use of techniques.

True, I am often slow to learn, for instance, up until then, it had never occurred to me that one’s own power could make one sick.

But not only did I learn from my teacher that unaccepted personal power can make you ill, I also learned new techniques on how to take care of the situation. And this is how I continue to learn, by giving the spirits room to work, not only with the person coming for treatment, but also with myself.

Shamanism is a demanding practice for many reasons, but in one very special way it is not. When we work with the spirits they give us the power we need to do the work. The hardest part is learning to hold onto the power.

The reasons for this being difficult are many, but it is often because we do not feel ready. But, both with myself and the people I work with, what I find is that when I am journeying, the further I get away from the ordinary reality of my ego, where I formulated the mission, and go deeper into the world of the spirits, the further I get away from what I want and closer to what I need.

One day, when I was doing my morning ritual, suddenly several of my spirit helpers were standing before me in my room. I was stunned. One of them said: “Now you have given yourself to us.”

“Wait a minute!” I protested, rattle in hand. “I didn’t ask for this!” I felt faint, and began to fall. One of them caught me before I hit the ground. “Don’t worry,” he said, and continued, “We have also given ourselves to you.”
While talking with a friend recently, they asked me an apparently simple question: “How does someone become a shaman?”

“How?” My friend asked me.

Oops, I thought, and mumbled a lame answer about visions and such, and then resolved to find a more complete response.

After taking some time to research about different cultures and history I learnt that the ‘how’ varies greatly, but here I offer the main ways, in hopes that you will not be caught so flat-footed as I was if someone asks you the same question.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Ancestry - a biological inheritance - is one of the most common ways one becomes a shaman.

Shamans in many traditional cultures are the sons or daughters of previous shamans, and as recent studies have show, paranormal gifts do in fact seem to run in families. This may be because children brought up in households where there is a belief in psychic phenomena, or where shamanic practices occur, encourages such phenomena or practices to develop in them, which can heighten their own psychic powers.

One of the most powerful shamans I’ve ever met told me that her whole family is psychic and always has been. Having parents and grandparents with psychic abilities, then, is a good sign. In such cases, the ‘shamanic torch’ - so to speak - gets handed down from generation to generation.

Is there a shamanic gene? Well, perhaps, as recent genetic research has shown than spirituality - but not religion - does seem to have a significant genetic basis.

Children who experienced a lot of family instability and trauma, such as physical and psychological abuse, parental psychosis and alcohol and drug addiction, frequent relocations, and so forth, are reportedly more apt to develop psychic powers.

In particular, intra-familial tension and conflict is strongly related to a heightened sensitivity to subtle emotional states and energies. The theory is that such children learn well how to read ‘the signs in the air’ to defuse, escape, or otherwise cope with any potential danger to their wellbeing.

Recruitment by shamans or elders is another way the calling can be passed on. This recruiting is done by the community’s spiritual leaders and wisdom-keepers, who see something special in a child, who is then cultivated gradually until early adulthood.

The elders may see the child talking with spirits, spending quality time with plants and animals or healing people spontaneously when they have contact with them. The child may also show a special interest in spiritual ceremonies and tribal history, or exhibit psychic abilities.

SIGNS OF NATURE

Some communities see physical abnormalities, such as birthmarks or extra digits on the hand as signs of the shamanic calling. In China - hunchbacks, in Japan - blind female children, and in Ghana - twins may all be seen as spirit signs. Being born with a portion of birth membrane covering the head - generally known as a caul - is another such signal, as are unusual eye features. In Southeast Asia impotence or infertility are sometimes considered signs.
Encounters with lightning or ball lightning is often important. In Mongolia and many other places, seeing a lightning-struck tree fall in front of you, having a recurrent dream of lightning, and surviving a lightning strike are all seen as spirit calls, and drums from trees struck by lightning are the most powerful.

Among the Salish people of North Western America a spirit manifesting as lightning may come in a dream, and in South America Inca shamans are sometimes called by lightning and communicate with the spirits through it.

The god Thor in Norse mythology wields a hammer and is associated with lightning bolts and in Haitian Vodou, lightning-struck stumps are said to become homes for spirits to live in.

Experiences with ball lightning are especially intriguing. Some shamans see it acting with apparent intelligence in front of their eyes, or exploding right over their dwellings, yet physicists have no explanation for it, and their experiments to recreate the phenomena are rather pathetic.

There is at least one account of an Inuit shaman getting his power after being struck by a what he described as ‘a ball of fire,’ and there are accounts of Native American medicine men being blinded and deafened by ball lightning.

In short, great electro-magnetic power, manifesting between heavenly and earthly realms, has obvious shamanic symbolism.

SPIRIT FLIGHT AND DREAMS
The Near-Death Experience (NDE) is a way in which many shamans have been called. This perhaps prepares new shamans for their journeys to the spirit worlds on behalf of their communities, both to secure divinatory wisdom and as a psychopomp to accompany discarnate souls to the ‘Land of the Dead.’ Shamans who have experienced a NDE can then in effect say: “Been there, done that!”

Studies show that those who have experienced NDE have far less fear of death, report enhanced spirituality and a greater attraction to the helping professions. Some also report new or greater psychic abilities too, such as greater intuition, clairvoyance and clairaudience, telepathy, psychokinesis, precognition, out-of-body travel, and an ability to heal - all of which are vital for shamanising.

Having what can be termed ‘waking visions’ can also be a sign. Shamans may experience these visions, as either visual apparitions or as physical phenomena such as hearing voices or being touched by invisible wings or feathers. These experiences often happen in wilderness settings, or in caves or other places of power. Such experiences are generally viewed as spirit manifestations.

The Murut shamans of Indonesia are selected by a spirit while on a quest to a mountaintop or in graveyards, or most especially in a cave. Japanese Buddhist Shugendo aspirants, and the Menangkabau people of Sumatra, go to mountaintops in order to seek paranormal shamanic powers and visions of spirits; whereas in the Indian Ocean, Andaman Islanders go into the rainforest to get their spirit visitations.

Among the Buryat shamans of Southern Siberia, such visions may prove prophetic, and in most cultures they offer some kind of shamanic teaching, direct from the spirits. Such experiences are often ‘soul-rocking,’ resulting in the gifting of shamanic powers which result in major life changes.

Night time dreams can also confer power. Big dreams, an especially vivid and dramatic one - often recurring - may recruit new shamans. Fijian shamans become healers through such dramatic dreams. Zinacanteo shamans in Chiapas, Mexico report being visited by departed shamans, especially their own ancestral ones, and these visiting dream shamans show the dreamer how to shamanise.

Shamans in many traditional cultures are the sons or daughters of previous shamans.

In such cases, the ‘shamanic torch’ - so to speak - gets handed down from generation to generation.

Others, for example the Shasta and Yurok peoples of North America, are visited by deceased relatives, while still others dream of being selected prenatally to shamanise, and so feel destined to do so.

A recurrent dream of an animal, especially a bear, is common across many cultures.

Amongst the Murut people of Indonesia, shamans-to-be dream of a spirit residing in some object, and also dream of that object’s location, then upon awakening they go to the site they dreamt about and find the object.

Dreams of dismemberment can also be evident, as is the appearance in a dream of a powerful vortex like a volcano or whirlwind.

Experiencing a spontaneous shamanic journey while awake is also a powerful sign. This is where the shaman-to-be is taken on an unexpected psycho-spiritual odyssey - a spirit flight - which often includes classic shamanic scenes and themes such as crystal tunnels and caves and the experience of being dismembered and re-membered by powerful spirit figures - often with the addition of some ‘power object’ such as a crystal...
being included in the new body. Combining two shamanic indicators - dreaming and lightning - can be a powerful indicator too, as a big dream of lightning is an especially powerful call.

The North American Oglala medicine man John Fire Lame Deer said that the medicine men who are heyokas (sacred contraries and tricksters) get their spiritual power from lightning dreams. In these dreams the thunder beings talk to them, making them ‘thunder dreamers.’

THE SHAMAN SICKNESS
The so called ‘Shaman’s Sickness’, an inexplicable health crisis, usually as a teen or young adult is a widely reported initiatory sign. These are ailments that have no known origin or conventional cure, and which can last anywhere from a few months to many years. Not even shamans can heal the sick person - only the spirits can, since the spirits themselves have sent the sickness.

In modern societies these ailments are generally misdiagnosed as psychosomatic, and so are typically ignored or treated with symptom suppressing medication. However in traditional shamanic cultures they are recognised as a shamanic or spirit illness and responded to as such. Because of the occurrence of such maladies, a common conception of the shaman is that they are a 'Wounded Healer.'

A common theory, across different cultures, regarding the reason behind these spirit sicknesses, is that they are sent because the shaman-to-be has a resistance to their shamanic calling, and only when the neophyte has humbled themselves and surrendered to the spirits - and so let them do the healing required - does the sickness disappear.

The symptoms of Shaman’s Sickness include extreme fatigue and paralysis; loss of appetite; shaking and epileptic-like seizures; fainting spells; fertility dysfunction (barrenness, miscarriages and still births - perhaps suggesting that the woman is being called to devote herself to shamanism instead of childrearing).

Fever (experiencing excessive body heat, - especially in the hands - is reported by many shamans during their healing work); edema; excessive sleepiness; sleepwalking and singing in one’s sleep; sensations of pain which travels from one body part to another body part, especially to and from the shoulders; respiratory problems; temporary blindness or deafness; heart flutters; bloody sweats; or even such a thing as a run of unusual bad luck. Some sufferers also report seeing visions, especially of headless bodies on horses, reminiscent of Washington Irving’s ‘Legend of Sleepy Hollow,’ or as in Tibet and Mongolia, visions of dancing skeletons or ghost riders on horses. These ghost riders in the sky suggest the death of the old - non-shamanic - life to make room for the new one.

A big dream of lightning is an especially powerful call.

The Oglala medicine man John Fire Lame Deer said that the medicine men who are heyokas get their spiritual power from lightning dreams.

In these dreams the thunder beings talk to them, making them ‘thunder dreamers’

NEW WAYS FOR A NEW TIME?
Among modern Western neo-shamanic practitioners, a method of calling which has become almost commonplace is the Inexplicable Psycho-spiritual Emergency, and this has sparked a whole body of literature of its own, such as the book by Stan and Christina Grof ‘Spiritual Emergency.’

This often occurs in middle-age, during the menopausal years.
spirits can ill afford a long
world, those being called by the
skepticism about the immaterial
physical illness, and the general
weak social support for prolonged
shelves to land at their feet.
unaccountably flying off bookshop
will often report spiritual books
partner or job or residence, and those
often reported too - such as a new
'demonic attack.'
of being under some sort of
or bird encounters to a perception
These range from unusual animal
describe as 'weird' seem to occur.
behaving in mysterious (but often
and computers and printers
without batteries) bleeping away,
smoke detectors (sometimes even
blowing with mere touches, or
participant tell stories of light bulbs
where I haven't heard at least one
shamanic talk, workshop,
healing ability etc.

Like other shamanic-type
initiatory experiences, those
experiencing the 'emergency' may
sense a paranormal opening,
whereby they gain clairvoyance and
healing ability etc.

Surges of psychokinetic type
energy also are often reported. I
doubt I've been to a single
shamanic talk, workshop,
rumbling circle or similar event
where I haven't heard at least one
participant tell stories of light bulbs
blowing with mere touches, or
smoke detectors (sometimes even
without batteries) bleeping away,
and computers and printers
behaving in mysterious (but often
seemingly meaningful) ways.

Experiences people often
describe as 'weird' seem to occur.
These range from unusual animal
or bird encounters to a perception
of being under some sort of
'demonic attack.'

Unexpected major life changes are
often reported too - such as a new
partner or job or residence, and those
in the midst of such 'emergencies' will
often report spiritual books
unaccountably flying off bookshop
shelves to land at their feet.

In the modern world, given the
weak social support for prolonged
physical illness, and the general
skepticism about the immaterial
world, those being called by the
spirits can ill afford a long
inexplicable bout of Shaman’s
Sickness as they perhaps could in
other cultures. And they
themselves may be skeptical about
the spirit world, and have little
belief in psychic powers, or even in
the spirits themselves. And so, the
spirits then, perhaps disrupt their
lives psycho-spiritually, rather than
physically, saying in effect: “You’ve
been culturally deprived, and in
denial for too long - so watch this!”

TRUSTING IN DESTINY
In all of these ways the spirits call,
themes of death and rebirth of
some kind is evident, as the initiate
is called to make a major spiritual
or physical transition or both.
The death theme appears in
some kind of separation or isolation
from ordinary reality, such as vivid
dreaming, alone time in a cave or
on a mountain top, or wandering in
a wilderness (whether voluntary or
otherwise), unconsciousness from
fainting, dismemberment of the
etheral body, and visions of
dancing skeletons.
The rebirth theme is seen in
such phenomena as the re-
memberment of the ethereal body,
sudden healing from inexplicable
illness, and the return to the living
body after a NDE.

Common too is the sudden
growth of psychic abilities, which
while they are not sufficient to make
them a shaman, are necessary for
the work of a shaman.

Finally, a near-to-total loss of
control over their ordinary lives and
their logical, rational minds is
apparent, followed eventually by
acceptance of, and surrender to,
the psycho-spiritual mindset of
non-ordinary reality. This in turn
gives the new shaman a substantial
ability to communicate with and
understand the ways of the spirits.

All of which gives initiates a
sense of destiny, a sense that they
have been specially selected to
shamanise. The modern cult of the
technical - the belief that learning
the right techniques will make one
an expert - is of little use here.
Reading the ‘right book,’ going to
the ‘right workshop,’ or finding the
‘right guru,’ is unrealistic and futile
unless it is clear that it is the spirits
who are calling the shots.

The Zhuang shamans of
Southern China divide people into
those having a light-destiny
(shamans) and those having a
heavy one (non shamans). Sri
Lankan shamans see their calling
as a specific destiny received from
specific spirits, and undertake
pilgrimages to sacred sites to
recharge their powers, and Buryat
shamans willingly suffer in order to
return to their ‘true soul-self and
purpose for living.’

This destiny notion has continued
up to the present, even in the West,
renowned shamanic practitioner
Sandra Ingerman puts it in her book
‘How to Thrive in Changing Times:’
‘my destiny is to bridge the invisible
realm with the visible.’

Shamanising, then, is a destiny
not a career - you don’t choose it,
it chooses you. Of course, the
spirits can ‘un-call’ us, and call
others to take our place, at any
time, a very good reason to stay
connected - spiritually.

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Below: Lakota
medicine man
with a square
drum. The photo
looks a little
staged, as he
appears to be
using a buffalo
horn rattle
as its beater.

Photo: late C19th

YOUR FREE GUIDE TO SHAMANISM
www.sacredhoop.org
When we think of a shaman, we probably also think of a drum, because shaman and drum go together like bread and butter.

No-one knows the historic origin of drums, but they certainly have been in use by people for tens of thousands of years. Indeed if you tap a dry, animal skin which has been stretched on a frame as part of its preparation, it sounds like a drum, and these probably were the first drums ever made.

The word shaman comes from Siberia, and it is in this vast geographical region where shamanism proper is to be found. Some anthropologists do not consider it to be found anywhere else on earth and do not label Native American or any other form of spiritual practice as shamanism.

The shamans of Central Asia and Siberia are unique in their use of the drum for the classic ‘shamanic journey’.

A frame drum is made by stretching skin over a frame of wood, which is generally made from a long plank of thin wood bent into a rough circle - the two ends of the plank being joined together in some way (often traditionally by rawhide lacing) to keep the circle closed and firmly fixed.

The shamanic drums of Siberia and Asia are made like this and, on first glance, look similar to many Native American frame drums. On closer examination however, major differences will be obvious.

All shamans’ drums from Siberia and Central Asia are single-skinned, having a skin on one side of the frame only, the back of the drum being left open so the wooden frame can be seen. I am not including Southern Asian shamans’ drums in this article, as the two-sided drums used by Nepalese and some Tibetan shamans are not really in the same tradition of shamanic drum making.

**FIXING ON THE DRUMSKIN**

The most noticeable difference between Native American and Siberian drums is the way the skin is attached to the frame.

Native American drums very often have holes in the edge of the drumskin, through which rawhide lacing is stretched, criss-crossing the back of the drum to bind the skin on very tightly. This criss-crossing is also often bound together to form a cross at the back of the drum; the cross forms a convenient way to hold the drum while it is being played.

With Siberian drums however, there are no rawhide laces holding the skin in place on the frame. Instead, the skin is actually stitched to the frame by means of sinew or cord.

First, a series of holes is made through the frame, and then the edge of the skin is folded over the frame and tucked inside the drum. The cord is then passed through the skin from the outside of the drum, through the frame, and...
through the skin that is folded back inside the frame. It then passes along the skin inside the frame to the next hole, and out again to the outside of the drum once more (see illustration).

Tension is put into the skin at this stage by pulling it taut before each stitch is made.

This is a very time-consuming way of making a drum, and it takes perhaps four or five times longer to make one using this process than it would using a Native American rawhide lacing style of construction.

THE DRUM HANDLE
Because there is no rawhide lacing stretching across the back of a Siberian drum, there is no place to hold it, and this is the other big difference between Native American and Siberian drums - the handle.

Handles of Siberian shamanic drums fall into two main types, ‘static’ and ‘moving’. They can also be divided up into those made of wood or bone, and those made of iron or other metal.

In a ‘static’- handled drum the handle is rigidly fixed to the frame and does not move. A ‘moving’ handle is tied loosely to the frame and moves about as the drum is played. Drums with ‘moving’ handles are generally played with the face of the drum pointing towards the ground - the drum actually being suspended on the handle.

Static, wooden-handled drums have a vertical bar of wood running across the frame from top to bottom. More rarely they have an additional cross bar going from side to side, and where this bar does appear, it is normally much thinner and there only to tie cloth streamers, bells or other ritual objects to the drum.

Drums with moving wooden or bone handles have a strip of wood or bone suspended in the centre of the frame by four iron chains, ropes, or cords.

Metal handles can again be ‘static’ or ‘moving’ types, and range from quite simple to very complex in their construction. The simplest is a ‘moving’ metal handle where a bar or cross or circle of metal (generally iron), is attached to the frame by chains.

Static metal drum handles may vary from simple rigid bars fixed across the frame, to whole inner frameworks of metal, attached to the outer wooden frame.

Many cultural groups name the handle of a drum after an animal. In Mongolia it is called a bar or el-bar (tiger), in the Altai Mountains they are called mar (snow leopard), and Buryat shamans call them baran-geresum (bear). On some drums from Southern Siberia (including Mongolia, Tuva, the Altai mountains and Buryatia) the handle sometimes takes the form of a stylised bow and arrow. The vertical handle represents the arrow, and a thinner curved strip of wood attached at the top of the vertical handle, represents the curve of the bow itself.

The symbolism is that the drum is like a bow, which shoots the shaman on his journey, and he holds on to the arrow (the drum handle) as he flies. Another meaning is that the drum acts as a bow and arrow ready to shoot hostile spirits the shaman meets while on his journey. Some Southern Siberian drums have a wire of iron stretching horizontally across the inside of the drum, which they call a kyrish (bow string). This is often hung with short lengths of twisted iron rod, which are the shaman’s arrows, ready to be used when needed.

Actual bows are also used in some Southern Siberian shamanic rituals, the shaman journeying on the sound of a bow string being twanged. They are also used as a method of dreaming where the shaman will gaze past a vibrating bow string at a fire to enable him to ‘see’ the spirits of things. The connection between bows and arrows and drums is therefore quite complex.

Another tradition from this part of the world is that the vertical bar the shaman holds represents a spirit, and these types of drum handles often have legs at the bottom of the handle and a face made from carved wood or metal at the top. The spirit is often the shaman’s main helper spirit, or the spirit of an ancestor who helps the shaman, or sometimes the spirit of the drum itself called ‘the master of the drum.’

DRUM DECORATION
Siberian shamans’ drums are often very ornate, their symbolism being a mix of cultural tradition and the shaman’s personal vision.

They may be left unpainted, or painted with designs symbolising the cosmology of the shaman’s
universe, or images of their spirit helpers. Sometimes they are simply painted an overall colour - both inside and outside.

Often they are hung with metal bells or iron cones which act as bells, with small replica weapons such as iron bows and arrows, small ongon fetishes containing spirit helpers, strips of cloth, or in Southern Siberia, where Tibetan Buddhism is also practised, tied with Buddhist offering scarves - generally sky blue ones. They may have feathers or animal pelts tied to them too, and as the lacing style produces an inner ledge to the skin at the back of the drum. Glass beads are sometimes stitched to this ledge as decoration, but then again drums may be left completely undecorated.

**MAKING AND EMPOWERING**

With such a vast geographic area as Siberia, there is no one tradition for the making and empowering of drums, as it varies from tribe to tribe.

Some shamans make their own drums, some employ semi-professional drum makers and some shamans’ drums are made by the whole community the shaman serves.

Generally the frame is made of birch, or larch, or spruce, and the skin is deer (often reindeer) or horse. Many shamanic groups do not have a word for drum as such, but refer to them by the name of the animal used to skin it - adding the word ‘sacred’ before it, so a shaman may think of his drum as a ‘sacred deer’ or ‘sacred horse’.

Often there are special ceremonies to be enacted during the making of the drum, sometimes with prohibitions as to who can touch, or even see, the materials. But sometimes the expectation is that as many members of the shaman’s community will touch it, and even play on the completed drum, as part of connecting it to the people.

Generally metal and other ritual decorative items used in the construction will come from older drums, or other shamanic tools. These are considered to be ‘ancestral items’, having gained power during their life and previous use. When a new item is needed the assistance of a shaman-blacksmith will be called on, who will make the new object using appropriate ceremony and with great regard for the spirits. In Siberia blacksmiths are considered a type of shaman in their own right.

Part of the distinctive shape of many Siberian drums are the bumps which stick out from the side of the drum. These are often called ‘resonators’, and they are small sticks of wood or small animal bones, or other items. They are fixed to the frame by either nailing them on, or by binding them on with leather thong or lengths of glass beads.
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paddle is the closest Siberian
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Siberian shamans do not use
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on cultural tradition - and often
ranging from reindeer to goat to
animal whose skin was used,
and the tree the frame and
beater was made from. At its
simplest, an offering of vodka
or other liquid such as milk,
would be made to the spirits,
and the drum would probably
also be ‘fed’ with it.

A Siberian shaman’s drum is
not a musical instrument, it is a
complex model of the shamanic
universe, a tool kit of weapons, and
ropes to tie up hostile spirits. It
may also be employed in other
during the shaman’s spirit
travelling, on a shamanic
journey a shaman may well use his
drum as a boat and his drum
beater as a paddle, if he comes to
a body of water he has to cross in
the spirit worlds.

A drum will contain, in a very
physical sense, the shaman’s spirit
helpers, who will each have ongons or
spirit houses to live in within the
frame. It will probably also have a
place - a passenger seat so to speak
- for any lost soul parts that have
been retrieved on the shamanic
journey, the shaman putting them into
the drum for safe keeping until they
can be returned to their rightful owner.
The drum is, in essence, the
sacred place that lies at the very
heart of Siberian shamanism,
connecting the shaman to the other
worlds of the spirits.

EMPOWERMENT
Once a drum is made and
decorated it may, according to the
culture, be empowered. Some tribal
groups do not empower drums, as
they say that because the drum and
the drumstick are made from living
wood (these groups never use
dead wood), it is alive and
therefore needs no empowering.

Other groups will empower
them by specific ceremonies,
seeing this as essential for
the safety of the shaman, as
the shaman might get lost
during a journey if they do not
use an empowered drum, or
the drum may break during use,
trapping the shaman’s soul in the
spirit worlds. Often empowerments
are held by older, more
experienced shamans who are
assisting in the training of the
younger ones.

Some of these
empowerment ceremonies
take several days to
accomplish and are very
complex, involving specific
shamanic journeys to spirit
helpers, offerings to the
animal whose skin was used,
and the tree the frame and
beater was made from. At its
simplest, an offering of vodka
or other liquid such as milk,
would be made to the spirits,
and the drum would probably
also be ‘fed’ with it.

Siberian shamans employ a
special type of drumstick called a
‘drum paddle.’ These are flat, often
slightly curved, wooden shapes,
covered in fur on one side -
ranging from reindeer to goat to
bear or other animals, depending
on cultural tradition - and often
hung with bells, or metal rings on
the other. The drum is struck with
the fur-covered side of the paddle,
and the bells or rings act as a
rattle, jingling as the drum is hit.
Siberian shamans do not use
rattles, unlike Native American
medicine people, and the drum
paddle is the closest Siberian
shamanism gets to these
mainstays of Western neo-
shamanic practice.

The drumstick is a very
important tool in its own right. Many
shamans will use a drumstick a
long time before they get a drum,
employing it as a rattle, and healing
with it by using it as a sort of whip
or knife, to drive out, or cut away
illness from a patient. They also use
them as a method of divining, by
throwing them up in the air and
noting how they land.
People who contact me for mentoring have often done shamanic journey training. This is the process of entering an altered state in a controlled way, usually with a drumming rhythm played to assist the change of awareness, and with an intention or mission – a question for their spirit helpers in ‘Non Ordinary Reality’, where they live.

One of the first such ‘journeys’ that people often go on is to find a spirit animal helper (sometimes called a power animal), who guides and aids them in their experiences in the spirit worlds. In the journey, at the end of a pre-decided time, the journeyer is called back to ‘Ordinary Reality’ by an agreed signal; they then reflect on all that has happened as a response to their original question.

When people call me for mentoring, sometimes long after their original training, they often ask whether their previous experience with their spirits was real or imagined. I can only say that over the years, life with the spirits has been very, very real for me.

On one occasion I was putting up a large tipi in a very gusty wind – not a wise move. The poles were in place and I was inside the familiar cone shape, about to tie the canvas - and therefore the whole structure - to the ground. In effect, I was holding an umbrella of heavy canvas and small tree poles.

A gust of wind suddenly got under the canvas and lifted the whole thing, and it was about to collapse in on itself – and me.

At that moment my wolf spirit helper came to me and somehow guided me through the only available exit, the door opening that was hanging a few feet from the ground, some yards away.

I am not athletic, but amazingly in that split second we leaped together, and apparently were seen to shoot out horizontally just in time. A second later the tipi was a tangle of canvas and broken poles behind us.

Another time, a young woman told me about the strong relationship she had with her two tiger spirit helpers. Returning home late one night, her thoughts far from shamanic matters, she was the only passenger in an underground train carriage.
At a station several youths barged on just before the train moved off. They were clearly off their heads or drunk or drugs, and began jeering, and advancing on her. She had no doubts about their intentions.

As she braced for attack, her tigers appeared to her, standing in the central walkway between her and the youths, growling and snarling and ready to defend her. The youths instantly stopped in their tracks, back off and remained cowed at the other end of the carriage until the next station, where they beat a hasty retreat. Then her power animals stood down.

Of course our life with the spirit helpers is not often that dramatic, thank goodness, and one cannot rely on leading a charmed life – but it can happen that way. Life with the spirits relates to real life situations, not just personal development or therapeutic concerns.

This connection with our spirit helpers, and the wider awareness it brings, develops over time, and through our time shared together.

As a mentor, I often get contacted when people have not managed to journey in their home space, or have lapsed in their practice for a period of time, sometimes several years. They may really miss their power animal, and the world of the spirits – it is still nagging inside.

The spirits may have been giving them a nudge in some way in their everyday life, maybe an odd page falls out of a workshop journal, or someone sends them a card with their animal on and they feel the heart connection again. Whatever the reason, they have not got going with journeys, and feel out of touch and isolated.

For their world changed when they met their spirits; they took a step into a larger view of the reality and got a new skin, whether it feels comfy now or not. Experiences can't be un-experienced. But back at home, where they cook supper for the kids, or make sure the car is serviced, go to work each day, and deal with their personal relationships, all that workshop stuff can look very, very unreal.

Often people feel they are the only ones having difficulties, that they have let themselves down in some way, and it has been hard to ask for help. So I would like to share with you some of the typical questions that arise.

And before I do, let me also say that all practitioners find mentoring or reflection from others, invaluable at times, regardless of their length of experience. I have people I can meet or phone when I get stuck with my practice or my life. And I value this greatly.

These are some of the very typical questions I have been asked by people:

"Wasn't that journey just my imagination... how can I be certain it was real...?"

Of course there are no absolute proofs. Imagination, however, is not a sign of mental insufficiency, or something we should have grown out of; it is a vital tool which we understand more as we use it, like a muscle.

As we gain experience with the shamanic journey, we learn to distinguish between fantasy, our own busy mind-stuff, ‘self-scaring’, and connection with the real world of the spirits. This discernment grows with experience – and if doubts set in before that experience is gained, it can be a big stumbling block.

"I have no power animal yet, after lots of attempts to find one – haven't I got one?"

In my experience - and traditionally - we all have at least one. When there is a difficulty connecting with the power animal it is often we who are not seeing them. This is often through feeling we don't deserve one, fear that spirits might be real (or not real), belief that we are 'always left out' (Lonely Playground Syndrome), trying too hard, not finding what we expect, or the very common 'Helper Retrieval Dysfunction' – if you failed once, it's for sure gonna happen again.

When people call me for mentoring, sometimes long after their original training, they often ask whether their previous experience with their spirits was real or imagined. I can only say that over the years life with the spirits has been very, very real for me.

You can always ask a practitioner to retrieve your power animal for you, then it is up to you how you get to know each other.

This is a process there is often not time for on a workshop, but it is really important. If you feel you are going to meet a familiar friend on the journey, it becomes a much less daunting prospect.

"My power animal doesn't seem to be around, but a new one keeps appearing on journeys – do they change?"

Ask it if it is a new helper for you. Ask, ask, ask – a golden rule on journeys. Sometimes power animals seem to take a back seat for a while – but I find this is more about what our soul and development needs are at the time. They will get closer again when the time is right.

Recently I had been missing one of my original helpers, whom I had known over twenty years, but who was not accompanying me much any more - just a quick hello at the start of the journey. Then on a recent workshop I took part in the drumming - which I don’t usually do - and there he was, right in close, relishing the drumming and dancing around. So it seems like I found out a bit more about him, and will try doing some drumming to invite him to be with me.

"My power animal got cross and attacked me in a journey. Is she trying to tell me to back off?"

You went to ask the spirits a question – your ‘mission’. Everything that happens on a journey is part of the spirits' response to that. Always.

I have been cuffed round the ear by my helpers, even knocked on
One client was moved to tears as he realised that the spirit animal he thought he had abandoned some years before had been patiently following him.

Once he took off his ‘guilt blinkers’ he sensed the presence of his power animal so strongly.

My back, been roared at ... all part of responses to my question. It is not personal. And helpers won’t give you this kind of response until you are experienced enough to get the message – even if it takes you a while! They are there to help, but not make it easy. Otherwise we would never learn, push our boundaries, get out of our comfort zones.

This response can also be a way of testing our intent, our commitment, our trust. We are being trained by the spirits. This is not human territory but it is in my experience deeply loving.

“I have tried to journey with several practitioners, but when I imagine going into my entrance tunnel there is just blackness, no vivid scenery like I hear other folk describe. What am I doing wrong?”

Nothing, except maybe doubting yourself, and comparing your experience to that of others. Ask your power animal to help you. Work with all that you experience – with the nothing; the quality of it, the sound of it, the smell. Reach out, walk forward – don’t assume you are suspended in a void. Don’t assume anything!

It is so important to be pro-active in journeying, not float about without direction. So keep repeating your mission to the ‘nothing’ and pause for any new response. Explain that you cannot see. Use your imagination to try out different ‘tools’. One woman I worked with was stuck like this, and eventually remembered she could use imagination to picture herself a flashlight. She switched it on and yes, there was the entrance tunnel around her; and when she looked up she saw a circle of sky, the hole at the start of her entrance tunnel she had just stepped through, with her power animal peering down at her.

Many traditional shamans have little replicas of such tools tied to their costumes, their drums, painted on their rattles – each person’s tool kit is different, according to his or her needs. It might be a ladder, grappling hook, light sabre, scissors, axe, summoning trumpet, fear dispersing wand ... There are no rules or right aesthetics – just what works for you.

Also, not everyone ‘sees’ in technicolour pictures. Some people navigate by sounds, smells, patterns ... It is a conversation with the spirits that we are learning to interpret.

“I have had a power animal for a couple of years, but now another animal is joining us on journeys – can I have more than one, and what will my original one think?”

Yes, there is no limit to numbers, but usually there are one or two main helpers; the others may visit in different situations, contributing their particular energetic powers. For example, I have one who tows me in the spirit world to where I need to go; there is another crowd who turn up to encourage and cheer me on when I need it.

Ask the new animal if it is a power helper for you, and if so, thank it and acknowledge the relationship. Your original helper will probably not see why you are concerned about its feelings – emotional hierarchy is a human pre-occupation. But by all means check it out with them. Again – ask, ask, ask.

“I used to be close with my power animal but have lost touch through not journeying for quite a while. I feel like journeying again now, but wonder if they are still there for me and if so, will they be angry?”

We may really feel we have blown our relationship through neglect. We just have to take the plunge and go and ask.

Recently during a mentoring session one client was moved to tears as he realised that the spirit animal he felt he had abandoned some years before, had been patiently following him. Once he took off his ‘guilt blinkers’ there in my practice room, in a safe space, he sensed the presence of his power animal so strongly.

He realised it was still by his side and the reunion was heart-to-heart and a privilege to witness. I have known this happen over and over. And when that man reflected on the events of his life during the ‘separation’ period, he could see the influence and presence of his helper all along.

We do not know what timing schedule we are part of, on our soul journey. Sometimes an apparent absence from a spiritual process like journeying – it could as easily be meditating or ceremonial work – is simply a detour of learning and growing that we have to do as part of our own soul growing process.

If your helper seems withdrawn, or not enthusiastic - ask why, and ask if there is anything you need to do or know in order to re-connect again. There may be a teaching you are being offered, so note your own feelings as this is going on – it is all part of the spirits’ response to the mission.

“I have been told by a teacher that I trust that journeying is not for me. How else can I connect with the spirits?”

Shamanic work through journeying is not for everyone. Not all shamans work with journeying – there are many ways. Indeed, you may already have a practice that is working fine for you. Or it may not be the right time for you for other reasons that you do not know about. And you can always ask other people to journey to ask questions on your behalf.

The spirits have not shut you out. This is not a rejection – you simply need to find how to connect with the spirits in ways that suit you. Spirits are an integral part of the many dimensions of life, part of the soul landscape. You can no more be separated from them than the wind can avoid contact with the land.

Prayer is a powerful – though often neglected – way to connect with your spirits too, as is ritual, dancing and dreaming.
“Every time I try to journey something in this reality stops me, whether it’s the phone ringing or the washing machine leaking … is it a sign I shouldn’t be journeying?”

Ah yes – that old problem of omens and signs! The difference between superstition and discretion can be a fine line. Superstition operates on irrational fears, whereas discretion operates on logic and reflection. And of course fear happily uses interruptions and distractions as a way of avoidance. Also we might wait for perfect conditions – those don’t often happen, and are not necessary. One day you might need to do a journey to ask for help in much less ideal circumstances.

To check out the fear option, consider what you might be avoiding. Are you making your missions a bit too challenging? Or are your questions to the spirits ones you don’t really want to hear the answer to?

Take small steps: get familiar with the practicalities of journeying at home, organising the space you are using, settling yourself beforehand. Practice setting up your journey space in different ways, different rooms, sitting, lying down… experiment! It is important that you are comfortable with the process and there are no rules.

On that original workshop all the preparation of space and energies was done beforehand by the workshop leader, and now you must find out what suits you in your particular circumstances.

RECAPTURING THE MAGIC

People often seek mentoring because they feel isolated, with no shamanic connections now they are back home. They feel they have lost contact with a beautiful and fulfilling place and the spirits that live there. They need to regain confidence.

The first message has to be that that beautiful place is still there for them, when they are ready.

To get the feel of working in your home, why not settle down in the place you are thinking of using for journeying, maybe light a candle, and take some quiet time to reconnect with the circle by reading through your original journal entries and notes. Send good wishes out to the circle you learned with, and to your trainer. Send love to your spirit helper(s) and recall how meeting them had felt.

You might play a short track on a shamanic drumming CD, and go to the place you originally pictured to start your journey. This starting place, or gateway to the spirit worlds may need changing and experimenting with.

No need to make a journey this time, the intent is simply to go visit, reconnect with the place, review it, take a look around and then come back.

You may ask your power animal to meet you there and hang out for a while. The helpers work with us as real people, not spiritual performers. They, too, are concerned to have strong, clear communication.

Whatever our human world situation is, whether we belong to a drumming group, or have friends who journey, the helpers are always there in their world as a support system and community.

On an everyday level, there are online shamanic forums, associations or web communities. But don’t expect perfection from other practitioners or circles – or teachers - just because they have a spiritual tag; people will be people, fallible in all the same old ways.

If you are seeking to re-start or deepen your practice, you might choose to repeat the basic training to give yourself a boost, or consider finding a phone or email buddy with whom you can swap notes and check out progress.

You will need to have a contract for confidentiality, and promise each other to say if the contact is too frequent, or if the timing needs organising better. It can help confidence to have a shamanic friend to phone before and after a journey in real time and share your journey with.

Supervision from a practitioner can be very helpful too, to advise on the wording of your journey missions and share the results with, or you might book to have a couple of one-to-one sessions with a trained shamanic counsellor. In shamanic counselling the spirits are the counsellors, you do the journey, while the practitioner holds the space, supports and witnesses.

You can always get in touch with your original trainer to see if they can recommend possible contacts for any of this.

For those of you who have felt stuck, I hope this has opened some doors that seemed shut. And I wish you a close and supportive relationship with your spirits that unfolds in beauty and truth.

Faith Nolton (formerly Jan Morgan Wood) is a shamanic artist, mentor and trainer and also works with the Medicine Wheel teachings. She founded Sacred Hoop Magazine, being editor until recently. She is author of the illustrated workbook ‘Easy to Use Shamanism’. She offers workshops, talks and individual mentoring sessions on shamanism, soul awareness and creativity.

Faith’s visionary artwork is in collections worldwide and can be seen at www.soulgardens.co.uk
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The spirits are the power in shamanism. To emphasise this I often say: ‘no spirits - no shaman.’ When you talk to a shaman from any traditional culture, whatever the word for ‘spirit’ is in their language it will be a word they use often.

However, I know it’s not really normal to talk about spirits in mainstream Western culture, and sometimes it can also seem like that in the shamanic sub-culture of the West today too. I think a lot of people just don’t want to go there. They seem to want to clean shamanism up and turn it into a sort of psychotherapy. And in a way, shamanism is a sort of psychotherapy, but it is also so much more.

Shamanism has been conservatively thought to have been around for at least the last 100,000 years, although I personally think a more accurate estimate would be nearer a quarter of a million, or even more. And all that time shamans have worked together with the spirits - and that’s the bottom line.

I remember one day, a day very early on in my shamanic career, I was doing my morning practice, calling to my spirit helpers and asking them to ‘please come and help me through the day’.

It was just a normal day, but then I had what was for me a very powerful experience. All of a sudden my three main spirit helpers were there, sitting on the floor in front of me. It was one of the most physical experiences of the presence of the spirits I had ever had. I was not expecting it. I was just starting my ‘normal’ day. They looked at me for a moment and then one of them said: “Now you have given yourself to us.”

I wasn’t ready to give myself to anyone - no way - or so I thought. I was just a beginner. I was so shocked that I literally started to faint, but my teacher spirit caught me and said: “Don’t worry. We have given ourselves to you, too.”

That was the real beginning of it all for me. And I believe that is what happens, and what has got to happen; when we go deeply into shamanism, we take it beyond an individual psychotherapeutic stage and into a spiritual practice stage; we give ourselves to the spirits.

THE SPIRITS AND POWER
The spirits give the shaman power, and power is something I always talk about when I do an introductory workshop.

Most of us, in the course of our lives, have experienced the misuse of power in one way or another. This makes ‘power’ a tricky word in English, and people often get very uncomfortable when they hear it. However, in Danish, Swedish and the other Germanic languages, there are two words for power - magt and kraft - and they are different.

Magt means ‘might’ or ‘power over’ and kraft means ‘energy’ or ‘supporting power’. For example, a power station, where electricity is generated, is called a kraftværk, a place where power is made, while the armed forces of Nazi Germany were referred to as the Wehrmacht.

When I teach I ask people to think about these two types of power, and then I ask them to imagine a big circle, the Universe, and to draw a dotted line right down the middle of it. On one side I invite them to put the word ‘macht,’ and on the other side put the word kraft’. That centre line is really easy to see when you look at it, there in your mind, and I encourage people to start off their shamanic career firmly standing in the side of the circle labeled ‘kraft’.

But, you know, life is tricky and people who decide to walk the shaman’s path are tested. For example, someone comes to you for a healing. They have a life threatening illness and they want you to help them.

To help them you want to muster all the power you can get. So you call all your spirits and you ask them for help. You tell them about this poor person. You pull out all the stops in order for the spirits to bring enough power to do the healing. You start to...
I stumbled along for about ten years, When I started working with POWER FROM EXPERIENCE get what my spirits know that I need. don't get what I want at all. Instead, I got the 'if appropriate' rider - I often from that 'I want' place - even if it's So I know if I formulate something trust them more than I trust myself. And I do. I absolutely imperative to trust your face enough times to know, it's 'I want ..... if it's appropriate.' In my view of the person and you want that person to be healed. We worked together for eight years. I learned a lot during that time, but it was mainly techniques. At the same time, my spirits were trying to teach me other things. They had some success, but I was still trying to learn how to do 'this,' and how to do 'that.' The spirits didn't make any real headway with me at all until I started to realise that what I really had to do was to learn how to be a human being. We learn things from experience and I have come to see more and more that experience is the greatest teacher there is, because experience changes our perception. When our perception is changed, we learn to accept the teachings that we get, even if they are not the teachings we want - and this in turn deepens our perception. If life deals us a teaching we don't want before our perception changes, we may well see it as 'bad' or 'wrong.' By accepting the teachings which we get from experience, we get our perception changed, and this changes our understanding of how the world is put together and how we fit in. I think the most important prerequisite about practising shamanism is consciously being who we really are, and that's not always easy, especially if we lack life experience.

Most of us get really confused in our adolescence. I know I did. My confusion was deepened by being drafted into the army when I was twenty-two and being sent to Viet Nam. I was lucky enough to come home with my body intact, but, looking back, I know I was suffering major soul loss, and that took a while - more than twenty years - to deal with and heal.

It was through that soul loss, and its subsequent healing, that I came to the realisation that a person can have all the techniques in the world, but if they don't have some idea of who they are they are incomplete.

POWER AND PERCEPTION
When people come to me and tell me about some traumatic experience they had in the past, I try to get them to revisit the scene with their spirit teacher, and to see it through their spirit teacher's eyes. They need to be familiar with shamanism of course, and if they can journey, this is one of the most powerful healing ways I know. When they see events of their lives through their spirit helpers’ eyes, they will see them in a very different way to how they saw and experienced them before. In other words, their perception changes. Something that might not seem extreme to a grown-up can be very terrifying to a child, but very often if the person can see that experience again through their spirits’ eyes they can then let go of the story they have been carrying all their lives, and they can see that there is a prize in there for them: a gift of power.
When I went to Viet Nam as a soldier, I often asked myself ‘why me?’ Like Job in the Bible, I could see no sense or meaning in it. In fact, I felt it was quite unfair, and dealt with it in the usual way of trying to block it with substitutes.

Years later I felt a call to return to Viet Nam, and had the incredible privilege of going on a pilgrimage with a Buddhist monk and fourteen Vietnamese pilgrims. I was there for a month, and my trip ended by being asked by a young person if I would be her foster father. An honour I accepted with joy and humility.

That month was one of the happiest and most fulfilling months of my life, and at the end of it I realised why I had been sent to Viet Nam as a young soldier: I had been there so I could go back the second time, to be with the monk, to travel with the other pilgrims, to be forgiven and healed, to meet my foster daughter and to have many other life - and perception - changing experiences.

SURRENDERING TO POWER
Finding out who you are is all about surrendering. Surrender is an interesting word, and, like ‘power,’ one which many people find is uncomfortable.

When my spirits told me that I had ‘given myself’ to them, what they were really saying was that I had surrendered myself to them. I think that was why it was such a big shock to me. I had been brought up in the Western world, and I wasn’t at all interested in surrendering anything to anybody.

When people think of the word ‘surrender’ they often think of a white flag being waved, or being taken prisoner-of-war, or losing one of our imagined inalienable rights - something like that. Surrender means losing.

Well, if you surrender to magt, to ‘might,’ that could well be true, you may well have lost (although if you change your perception, you may get a surprise).

But if you surrender to kraft, to ‘energy,’ you become filled with power; and this is what I feel the would-be shaman has to do: surrender to energy, surrender to the power that the spirits offer.

It is not always easy to accept power, perhaps because we know that if we accept power we will have to change our lives. I find this so interesting, and I’ve seen it many times. Somebody comes to an introductory workshop and they have truly beautiful and powerful experiences. Then, at the end of the workshop they are the first ones out of the door because they just don’t want to look at it at all: they are afraid of the power, afraid of receiving it, afraid of using it, afraid of being changed. The reality is that change of some kind will come anyhow, but by surrendering to power we are actively participating in our change.

Because the spirits pick out people to represent them in the physical world, if the person who gets picked out doesn’t realise it and does not surrender to them, then she or he might end up in a mental hospital or worse - and that is a lose-lose situation.

But then, of course, there are the people who do figure it out and say: “I want to do this! I want more meaning and involvement in my life”. They step into the challenge of surrendering to power, and they take the power further out into the world.

POWER IN THE COMMUNITY
It is important to remember that shamanism is also about community. It’s not just about my healing. Originally, shamanic healing for the individual was also healing for the community, and it still is - but most people have either forgotten about that or never realised it to begin with, thinking, understandably, about their own healing primarily. But when there is any kind of illness in the community, then the whole community is affected.

I think there is one prerequisite to living a shamanic way of life and that is having a strong connection to love. Love for the others in the community, which grows out of our love for ourselves.

There is a wonderful poem called ‘Love and Fear’ by the Australian poet and artist Michael Luenig from his collection called ‘A Common Prayer,’

There are only two feelings.
Love and fear.
There are only two languages.
Love and fear.
There are only two activities.
Love and fear.
There are only two motives,
two procedures, two frameworks,
two results.
Love and fear.
Love and fear.

When practicing shamanic healing it is necessary to re-awaken trust in the people who come for help - trust in themselves and trust in life. Trust is what I like to call a ‘symptom of Love,’ an aspect of love. The world needs our love now. We have a job to do here. Now.

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DUALISM

Dualism is a major component of most of the world’s spiritual traditions. It defines aspects of creation in terms of the relationship between one ‘state of being’ set against ‘another state of being’ in order to define the whole. For example there is a difference between male and female, you and me, spirit and matter; heaven and hell, up and down, hot and cold, light and dark, good and evil, etc.

Dualism is like a dynamo, it provides the power which drives creation, and many cultures see this dynamo in sexual terms - this ‘dance of opposites’ is the root of tantra. Perhaps the most familiar male-female dualist tradition in the West is the Taoist yin and yang, expressed in the symbol of the two aspects in perpetual flow.

In some Native American medicine wheel teachings the two opposites - sometimes called Wahkawhuan and Sskawhuan - are placed in the centre of the wheel as the primordial male and female energies of creation. These two are said always to be in the act of recreation, re-creating the Universe. The same sexual symbolism is seen in the sacred ceremonial pipe: the bowl of the pipe is female and when the pipe and stem are joined for the ceremony to begin, the male stem enters the female bowl in the sacred marriage of opposites.

In a stone-built medicine wheel, constructed in a ceremony on the land, these two opposites are often represented by the two forks of an upright Y shaped stick placed in the centre.

In Buddhism the famous mantra, Om Mani Padmi Hum, expresses this concept. The mantra actually means ‘the jewel is in the lotus’ which alludes to the cosmic penis is in the cosmic vagina, recreating the union of opposites. Dualism in Buddhism is often described in terms of emptiness (female) and form (male). All things come into form from emptiness and dissolve back into emptiness from form - creation is always in a dance, nothing is ever fixed, the only constant is change.

This place of the dance of opposites is normally depicted literally in the centre of any symbolic map. In a Tibetan mandala map it sits at the centre representing the element of ‘space (emptiness)’, from which all things are manifested, as emptiness is the female aspect from which all (male) form is born. In Mongolian shamanism it is called the gol or golomt - the centre of all things. It is represented by the fire in the ger (yurt) which is always placed in the centre.

MOVING BEYOND DUALISM

Dualistic traditions however say that dualism is an illusion caused by our failure to perceive reality in its true form, which is beyond our everyday understanding, because we are ourselves trapped in a dualistic perception of self and everything else.

In Buddhism this can be thought of as being unenlightened - an enlightened being (a Buddha) sees through the illusion of dualism and therefore knows there is no separation from any state and any other state. Therefore there is no good or evil, no life or death, no male or female, no hate or love, no me or you, no spirit or matter. Dualism is therefore both the powerhouse that creates reality and the trap that keeps us locked within it.

This realisation of the myth of dualism is at the heart of all the great mystical traditions. In Buddhism this non-dual path is called dzogchen, which uses the power and understanding of tantra, but knows tantra is only a construct and not the ultimate reality.

In the yin yang symbol this non-dualist higher reality is shown as a small white dot in the black section and a small black dot in the white section. In the medicine wheel traditions it is shown as the two forks of the Y stick coming from one supporting stem.

It would seem that our task as sentient beings is to wake up and see reality for what it is, both dualist and non-dualist at the same moment - which paradoxically, of course, is a form of dualism. Or in the words of the C14th Tibetan Buddhist Nyingma Master, Longchenpa Rabjampa: “Since things neither exist nor do not exist, are neither real nor unreal, are utterly beyond adopting and rejecting - one might as well burst out laughing!”

Below: statue of the Tibetan Buddhist being Vajrasattva shown in sexual union (Yab Yum - literally ‘father-mother’) with his consort.

The couple symbolises the sacred marriage of opposites.

Tibetan art is rich in dualist symbolism, for example Vajrasattva holds a bell in his left hand - symbolising emptiness, wisdom and the female aspects of creation; and a dorje or vajra (diamond thunderbolt) in his right hand - symbolising compassion, form and the male aspects of creation.
The use of altars is one of the commonest traditions, across most of the sacred wisdoms of the world. An altar is a space set slightly outside of this reality, which acts both as a focus for sacred thought and activity, and also as a portal to the spirit worlds, and the beings who live in them. It is a place to keep our sacred objects, a place to make ritual offerings, and above all it is a place to connect with the sacred and the spirits.

Many sacred paths have, over time, developed a great amount of tradition regarding the ‘building’ of altars. These traditions may include the specific objects which need to be placed on the altar, as well as the colours and symbols used to decorate the furniture and room. They might even tightly control and carefully prescribe the positioning of all the objects on these altars too, as well as what offerings might be placed on the altar and when.

Some altars are large, belonging to whole groups of practitioners, whereas others are tiny and very domestic. And yet within the myriad of different forms altars can take, there are a few things that link most of them together, and which can give pointers you can use in order for you to make your own individual altar at home.

BUILDING YOUR ALTAR

Perhaps the first thing you need to ask yourself when making an altar is “Why?” “What is it for?” Does it have any specific intent, is it just something you feel you want - or need - to do on a deep level? Or do you feel you should have one because it’s the proper thing to do and a lot of your friends have one.

Some altars are specifically made for healing, perhaps with a photo of the sick person or an ongon of them placed on it, along with representations of healing spirits or aspects of the person’s healing. Other altars are for protection or containment of a situation, and will have specific objects relating to that situation on them instead. While others may be devotional, having images or statues or ongons of sacred beings the maker has a deep connection to. Altars may also be for the ancestors, and these will have images and objects on that relate to ancestral spirits.

Another question to ask is how long does this altar need to be assembled for? Is it an altar set up for a specific period of time, for specific work, and dismantled when the work is completed, or is it a long term permanent altar, set up for an indefinite period of time.

It is important to be clear about your intention for the altar before you build one.

The position of an altar is important to consider: it needs to be somewhere safe, somewhere where people or pets are not going to knock into it and damage it. A separate shrine room may be the ideal for some people, but in domestic life this is not always possible; although if you do have a room set aside for your shamanic practice this is an obvious place for it. However, saying that, one of the reasons for an altar can be to remind us of the sacred, and so if it’s stuck away - out of sight and
out of mind - behind a closed door, we won’t see it and be reminded of the sacred aspect of our lives.

Some cultures make specific pieces of furniture for altars, perhaps with niches for statues, while others will put them on a shelf on the wall or on top of a cupboard or chest.

On top of a cupboard makes a lot of sense, as the drawers or cupboard storage under the altar can be used to store sacred objects and other things related to the tending of the altar.

OBJECTS ON YOUR ALTAR
One of the most basic aspects altars from many traditions across the world is the use of an altar cloth and there is a great deal to be said for using them. Cloths are not always used, as sometimes the special furniture used for an altar is painted, and that can act as a cloth, but an altar cloth can often make a very good base of the altar.

Cloths mark the altar out from the rest of the world, and defines its edges - what is on the cloth is on the altar, and what is not, is not. Many ritual objects also have prohibitions placed upon them, which say they should not be placed directly upon the ground, so a cloth helps to ‘suspend’ these objects from ordinary reality and makes a sacred zone for them to be placed on.

You can choose any kind of cloth, from specifically made silk brocades used both in Tibetan Buddhism and by many Mongolian and Tuvan shamans, to the more ‘rustic’ woven cloths of the shamans of the Andes.

Find a cloth that is right for you, that appeals to your sense of beauty, and perhaps which reflects elements of your own spirituality. Above all an altar should be splendid and beautiful to honour the spirits, so choose something that reflects that.

Having laid a cloth, you have now defined the altar and can begin to place sacred objects upon it. There is no limit to the simplicity of an altar - or to it’s complexity either. Four stones placed in a circle, representing the Four Directions, may be all that is required for some altars, and if that is the case, then it is complete and perfectly appropriate. But, you may want more....
Objects on an altar should mean something, you should know what every object on an altar is there for, and so you need to be aware - both intellectually and energetically - when you make, assemble and place objects.

You might well work with spirits that take the form of animals, and so finding small representations in wood, stone or metal of these - or perhaps small painted images of them - may form an important part of your altar. As might small photographs of your main teachers, or other inspiring people or ancestors.

Ancestors can be represented by making ongons for them. These can be as simple or as complex as you wish them to be. A stick with painted dots representing two eyes and a mouth is perfectly acceptable, but it’s nice to add to things and make them even more beautiful, so if you are using sticks for instance, why not bind them with coloured thread to decorate them as you feel appropriate.

Ongons are enlivened with the spirits who live within in many different ways. In Tibetan Buddhism, statues (which are really only finely made ongons) may have elaborate ceremonies performed for them by high ranking lamas, whereas a shaman may sing the spirit into its new physical home.

Often cultures will raise up the main spirit figure of an altar, to show their importance. It is possible to use blocks of wood to do this - perhaps painted an attractive colour - although another simple idea is to find and buy a small oriental wooden display stand. Such wooden stands can be found on Ebay fairly easily from sellers generally in China. Some are round and some are oblong, and they are designed to have small vases or other objects placed upon them for display, but they make excellent stands for small statues or ongons.

What you place on your altar is entirely up to you.

OFFERINGS ON YOUR ALTAR
One of the most universal and simple offerings placed on many altars is a candle of some sort. This is a symbol of prayer and also a symbol of the light of spirit. It is easy to buy small tea lights or nightlights. These burn for a few hours which is normally sufficient for the time you are doing sacred practice, and you can easily light a new one if one goes out. These can be put into special containers, which are often colourful and attractive, and this keeps the rest of the altar safe and reduces fire risk.

An alternative to this is to use Tibetan Buddhist butter lamps, which many Southern Siberian shamans also use. Butter lamps can simply have a tea light dropped into them, or if you wish you can fill them with butter or regular candle wax and a wick.

New butter lamps are easy to buy from online Tibetan ritual object shops or Ebay, but you might pay more for an old one, as old objects that have been used tend to be considered as having been blessed through use, and so can become more expensive.

A recent phenomenon, found in the Far East, is the use of strings of small LED bulbs on altars, like those put on Christmas trees. These are a candle substitute, giving a gift of light without fire.

Flowers are also popular on many altars, either fresh ones in a vase or ‘eternal’ silk ones. Incense is offered too, as the beauty of sweet fragrances is important in many cultures and considered attractive to spirits.

An altar is a connection point with the sacred, it is a space set slightly outside of this reality, which acts both as a focus for sacred thought and activity, and also as a portal to the spirit worlds, and the beings that live in them.

It is a place to keep sacred objects, a place to make offerings, and above all a place to connect.
Other offerings include food and drink. In Tibetan Buddhism it is traditional to put seven bowls of water on an altar. These represent drinking water, washing water, flowers, incense, light, perfume and food. Each of these bowls are filled with pure water, so their contents are symbolic.

Seven bowl sets are often made of silver and decorated with gold, but cheaper ones are also made of copper or brass. They are available easily online.

Shamans in Tuva and Mongolia use these Buddhist bowls for their own offerings of milk or vodka and it is traditional to have a bowl of Vodka - as well as water - on an altar in those countries.

If you are drawn to more Native American practices you might like to have a bowl of ceremonial blue corn flour on your altar and some of this is ‘fed’ to the statues and fetishes on a regular basis by sprinkling it on them. It’s a good idea to have the flour bowl just underneath the ongon to catch the excess so that it does not get all over the altar cloth.

Other offerings can be semi precious stones or crystals to symbolise you are giving wealth to the spirits, and a conch shell is often put on Buddhist altars to represent beautiful music. If an altar is for wrathful practice it should have wrathful offerings placed on it, such as small swords and images with flames and skulls.

Food is another offering, and sweets wrapped in bright foil, sweet cakes and fruit are favourite offerings of many traditions.

Offerings that may perish should be replaced often. It is traditional to make fresh water offerings on a Buddhist altar every day and to remove them before it gets dark. Offering bowls that are empty should be inverted to show the spirits they are empty.

Food that has been placed on an altar can either be left outside for the small creatures to eat, or eaten yourself, as it is considered to be blessed by having spent time on the altar. Water that has been placed on an altar is also blessed and never should be tipped away thoughtlessly; instead giving it to plants, as a mindful offering, is an excellent way of dispersing it.

However you make an altar and work with it, it needs to be tended and kept fresh. Sometimes objects need to be removed and other objects added. You have to keep your senses alert in the process, and not let the altar go ‘stagnant’. From time to time it is also a good idea to strip and rebuild an altar, not only does that give you a chance to clean the objects upon it, but it also keeps your connection to it alive and dynamic.

Altars are a wonderful way to connect with - and pay respect to - your spirits and the spirit world. They provide a way to start and finish a practice - lighting a candle or making an offering can be like clicking the switch or turning the key in the door. The beauty of an altar speaks directly to the heart and the senses, side stepping the head, which is the last place we need to come from when we engage in sacred practice.
The creating of a Sacred Space is fundamental to any ceremony or ritual practice, but exactly how does one go about creating one?

Well, the short answer is there is no single way, and every sacred tradition, and every practitioner will have their own methods, but there are a few fundamentals that most people and traditions will all share. So, here are a few ideas, and a few of the things I personally do.

The nature of sacred space is such that it is at the very heart of all things – it is the sacred centre point of creation from which all directions radiate. In essence - to paraphrase a medieval Christian phrase used to define God – sacred space is a place whose centre is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere. In other words, when we create sacred space it is the centre of everywhere - and where we stand is the centre of Creation, and everywhere else is the circumference of the sacred circle of Creation, the Sacred Hoop.

For me, this is very beautifully encapsulated in my favourite Lakota sacred pipe song, a song called ‘The Sacred Nation Must Live’:

Lay yuah
chey wa ceyelo
Canupa kei
Lay yuah
chey wa ceyelo
Oyate ke Zanipikta
Oye wayelo

With this sacred pipe I go to the centre of the world to pray. I pray for the whole of Creation, that all creatures shall live in good health, and that the whole of creation be blessed

When I do any ceremony, and especially when I am doing a pipe ceremony, I am stepping into the very centre of all of Creation, with the sacred Four Directions all around me, along with the Above and the Below, placing me in the centre of the sacred Six Directions.

This centre point of Creation is often depicted symbolically - especially if you are working with a group of people, no matter how small - by placing a small altar, on the ground or on a low table, in the centre of your work space, and the group then sits in a sacred circle around that altar. The altar is the sacred centre point of Creation.

However, of course, if you are working by yourself, you can’t sit in a circle by yourself, but you can still create an altar, and either you personally, or the altar will be the centre of Creation.

ESTABLISHING THE CENTRE

It is perfectly possible to just place a single object as the centre point of Creation, a rock, a candle, a mug of coffee - whatever seems appropriate to you at the time, but if I am putting a centre down for a ceremony, I like to actually build a sort of medicine wheel, which represents the Powers of the Four Directions.

For this, I always put a cloth down first - an altar should always be suspended from ordinary reality, and a cloth is ideal for doing this. What is on the cloth is on the altar, and what is not on the cloth is not
on the altar - it's bad form and 'sloppy medicine' to have things half on and half off an altar; be spiritually tidy.

Different spiritual systems will have different attributes for each point of the compass. I have, for over 30 years, used the medicine wheel system taught by the métis (part Native American) teacher Hyemeyohsts Storm. His wheels have, pretty much, become the standard ones for many people in the West. These are shown in the medicine wheel diagram shown on this page.

I have specific objects, which I have used when constructing many hundreds of altars over the last few decades. These are a cedar cone for the South, a specific rock for the West, a magpie's wing for the North and a statue of Padmasambhava\(^1\) for the East. I also always put five lit candles, one in the very centre and one each for each of the directions.

I have made altars like this for so long, their making has become part of me, and so, for me, an altar like this denotes the setting up of this form of sacred space - creates the sacred centre of Creation.

Altars in this form are not traditional per se, but they have now, most certainly, become traditional for me.

**CALLING IN THE POWERS**

When I am working with the sacred pipe the way the tobacco is placed into the pipe's bowl - along with the prayers to the Sacred Powers made during the filling of the pipe - means that I always formally invite the Powers in to help with the ceremony. But in general 'calling in' the spirit powers is an important aspect of creating a sacred space - in its own right, and it can - without any physical supports such as an altar - be the simplest and most quickly performed method.

But before I write about that, let me say a little about intent. Intent is very important when you perform a ceremony or create sacred space. In reality it is the essence of what you do - whether you do it with words, objects or visualisations.

If you place a central altar down, with objects representing the Four Directions, you will be building intent when you first place the cloth, and then expanding it each time you place one of the objects down. You can do this silently, but it can be a good thing to do it verbally too - calling in each Power as you place the object.

However, this invitation to the Powers - the calling in - can, as I said above, be the only practice needed.

To call in the powers you need to be clear what you are calling in, and it is good to be eloquent in your language too. It comes with practice - but the most important thing is clarity of speech and thought, so you really are actually inviting in the Powers you wish to invite in.

Generally when I call the Powers I say something simple like 'Grandfather [Sky powers], Grandmother [Grandmother Earth], Sacred Ones, Grandfathers [the Four Direction Powers].

Below: calling to the Powers using an eagle wing fan.
The powers are not going to respond any better if you give them yards of verbose invitation, being lean of speech is good when you are doing ceremony, just as it is in life in general.

I might well face each of the directions in turn, always turning to the next one ‘sun-wise’ - clockwise - as moving the way the sun does in the sky symbolises that you are moving ‘with life’. Some traditions - such as the ancient, pre-Buddhist Bon tradition of Tibet - travel anti sunwise in ceremonies, but this is rare, and in the West there has been a long tradition that it is a negative thing to do, done for black magic, or if done accidently will result in misfortune.

Some people will call in the Powers of the Directions simply by naming them - north, south, east and west - and I generally do this because I know the deeper meaning underneath those simple names. Other people may call in the four elements - earth, air, fire and water - possibly facing the direction they are attributed too - or other spirit powers. Intent is all.

I generally hold something when I am calling in the Powers. This may well be a feather, or my eagle wing fan, but it could be a rattle or a drum beater - whatever is sacred to you.

Holding something sacred helps to give you a sense of power and authority; it is like a conductor before an orchestra. When doing ceremony, one needs a balance of deep humility and authority. Humility because you know before Creation, the Great Mystery, the spirits you are nothing; and authority, because you are solid in your own centre and grounded, and sure about what you are doing. You as the ‘dance chief’ - the ceremony leader - are a bridge between this world and the spirit world, and the last thing a ceremony needs is a wobbly bridge.

I will also often add another line to my calling in, inviting in the ‘Uncles and Aunts.’ These are my relatives in creation, the plants and animals and general spirit folk, such as land spirits, local protectors and the like.

I don’t tend to include ancestors with my intent in this group, if I want to invite them, I will call to them specifically, by inviting in the ‘Sacred Ancestors’.

However, it is important to remember not everything is friendly out there. If you were to put an open invitation out to a party in the physical world, and everyone was free to come, you would get some unsavoury guests. It is not any different in the spirit world, so it is good to put a filter on any wider invitation you make beyond the Sacred Four directions and the Above and Below. This would apply to the Uncles, Aunts and ancestors.

The way I have been taught to do it is to put a caveat on my invitation, only inviting those ‘who love me’ (or ‘love us’ if I am working with a group), as not everything out there will love you. Be selective when you invite in your house guests.

**KEEP YOURSELF SAFE**

This brings us to another, often thorny, subject - how protected should our working be, from ‘ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties?’

It is easy to become paranoid about the spirits, I have seen many people get so, and it gives them hours and weeks of entertainment, drama and neurosis. If you are too careful as to what they invite in you can end up being scared of your shadow.

But, on the other hand, I have seen people be so cavalier and
sorts of trouble. Sometimes get themselves into all to their space, and can, as a result, sometimes get themselves into all sorts of trouble.

I think, with any ceremony, one needs to have developed a degree of grounded awareness. If you get 'vibes' that 'something wicked this way comes,' you need to deal with it in no uncertain terms, but the first thing is developing an accurate awareness.

One night I was 'pouring for a sweat lodge' (running the lodge) with a friend, and both of us, unbeknown to the other, sensed the lodge was under attack. As a result both of us turned our backs on the central stone pit in the darkness, and faced the lodge's door to protect the lodge from any intruders.

It was the most frightening ceremony I have ever been in, and a lot more happened during it that just a vague sense of dread, but it should have been a 'safe' - albeit powerful - space, as we were both experienced and had done the ceremony properly.

In hindsight, it was the land the lodge was built upon, a most disturbed piece of land, and we should have factored that in the mix, but didn't.

Normally a ceremony will be safe and sound, but work with your 'spider senses' all the time and keep testing the feel, the vibe, of the state of play, and act accordingly.

The amount of protection needed will also depend on what the ceremony is for. If you are doing a healing for someone who has a serious health issue, such as a cancer or a bad infection - an illness that has a predatory spirit - you will need to be aware much more about protection than you will if you are doing a general blessing ceremony or a simple prayer circle.

There are many ways to protect a sacred space, and these include both physical and visualised defences.

In Tibetan Buddhism, a lot of the practices are done by visualising. Don't be put off, thinking this is some sort of second rate, new age way to defend a space, because it is not.

However, visualising is like a muscle, and you need to work out regularly in order to being up the sacred muscle tone. I have been visualising in a magical and sacred way for decades, but I was ‘totally pants’ at it when I started. So, the good news is - yes you can do it, but the bad news is, you might have to practise a lot and get spiritually fit, till you get the hang of it to do it strongly.

However, saying that, to borrow a phrase from Buddhism, it is important to develop a sense of 'vajra pride.' This means that you develop a really deep, inner certainty - a pride - that you are doing it right and it is working - even if you feel you are a raw beginner. This is about intent of course, so even if you can’t visualise for toffee, if you can honestly tell yourself, with all your intent, that you are doing it right - it will be right.

I often visualise I am standing or sitting within a circle of protection when I am working. This can be a circle of light, but I often use a circle of tigers - calling them in with a tiger mantra.

I also place a visualised medicine wheel shape - a cross within a circle - in each of the four directions around me and above and below me.

When doing ceremony, one needs a balance of deep humility and authority. Humility because you know before the Great Mystery, you are nothing; and authority, because you are solid in your own centre and grounded, and sure about what you are doing.

You are a bridge between this world and the spirit world, and the last thing a ceremony needs is a wobbly bridge fabric of the walls of the room, spending time visualising protection and protective symbols of your choice into the walls, so that you know those symbols are there – in the fabric - acting all the time you doing practice in there. You can also paint symbols on the wall or hang textiles. The floor of my shrine room is covered in Tibetan tiger rugs, which also act as protection, as in Tibetan traditions such rugs attract the dakini, the fairy-like spirit beings who come around practitioners to teach and protect them.

Red is generally considered a sacred protective colour, as it holds a phurba, the ritual demon dagger, found in Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism, and I very often place a visualised picket fence of them around me, at least 8 in a circle. I visualising thrusting them into the earth, and generally also say an accompanying Tibetan mantra as I place each one. Mantras are a bit like magic spells, in fact the word mantra actually means ‘that which protects [the mind]'.

If you are lucky enough to work in a regular room - a shrine room - you can do a lot more with the
represents life and blood. In Pembrokeshire, in West Wales, where I live it is traditional to paint doors and windows red to stop the fairies and other mischievous spirits getting into the house.

If you are working with physical things for protection, the easiest and most obvious is smudge, the smoke of burning herbs, such as desert or white sage, or cedar or juniper. Smudging is so commonly practiced nowadays I don’t think I need to say anymore about it, but if you are in doubt about it, Google it, you will find loads of information online.

Other physical things can include making a sacred circle of some kind. I often use eagle feathers - laid end to end, running in a sun wise manner - and sometimes paho - sacred blue corn flour, or on occasions salt or tobacco, although these work best outside as they are difficult to clean up from carpets or wooden floors. If very extreme measures are called for, I might use something called ‘banishing medicine’, which is an equal mix of salt, garlic and cayenne pepper.

I would also, at times, place physical phurbas in the directions - ideally iron ones, but bronze or brass ones would be fine - especially if I intended they were iron. Protection bundles - collections of sacred objects in a bag or wrapped in cloth - can also placed in each of the directions. These are individual things, and I think - if you feel drawn to making these - it is best you talk to your spirits about what you should put in them.

SPIRITS OF PROTECTION
I would - if needed - also call in the Protectors, spirit powers who act as protector beings - but as always, only those who love me, and who support the work I am doing. In Tibetan Buddhism there are specific wrathful Protectors, and they are there to keep the teachings and the practitioners safe.

Protectors act as ‘dog soldiers’ and this is another phrase I often use when I think of them. Dog soldier is a Native American term. Originally they were the bravest of warriors, those who would tie themselves to a spear, thrust the spear into the ground, and refuse to leave that place - fighting until they had either died or had won. Nowadays, the term is often used to denote the sacred ‘police’ at a ceremony, those who keep order and maintain the boundaries.

In Tibetan ceremonies big burly monks called dob-dob have the same role. When doing a ceremony - especially with a lot of energetic potential - it is good to have dog soldiers.

Another aspect of protection, especially in shamanism, is the ‘shaman’s armour.’ This is the ritual clothing which many shamans wear. Shaman’s armour is full of spirit helpers who assist the shaman and protect them, and in addition to that they are generally hung with empowered sacred objects, designed to protect the shaman in other ways - such as bronze mirrors, one of whose roles is to reflect away any harm.

The putting on of shaman’s armour creates sacred space in it’s own right, as when a shaman puts it on, they are - with their intent - stepping out of the mundane everyday world, and stepping into the sacred centre of all things.
Once they put it on, they immediately have their spirits close to them, and they start to go into trance. I know from my own experience of putting on my own ritual clothes how powerfully and quickly this trance can fall upon one.

Sometimes a shaman will not need their full armour - it depends on the nature of the work - but if it’s a piece of dangerous work, the shaman will generally be in full kit, boots and all.

Even if you do not have or use ‘shaman’s amour,’ you can have items of clothes you keep just for ceremony and also perhaps amulets or other ‘ritual jewellery’ which, when you wear them, denotes you are doing sacred work of some sort.

It is also good to dress respectfully for the spirits, so the wearing of fine clothes, ideally clothes kept especially for ceremony; this will help in the building of your intent, and also show you are approaching the spirits in a good way.

Creating a sacred space is just that - the telling to the universe that this place, at this time, is sacred because you are ‘opening the sky’ opening the gates to the spirit world.

The main thing is your intent - if you have clear intent, you will have created a good, strong sacred space. Intent is like legal language - it needs no sloppy thinking, no magical loopholes. You have to cross every ‘t’ and dot every ‘i’ and have all bases covered. You need to be on your toes, ready to steer the sacred ship away from unexpected high seas and into a safe harbour - you need your eyes peeled at all times and your feet firmly on the ground.

And when you have finished the ceremony, you need to collapse the space again - close the sky - and thank the spirit helpers you called in to assist you (so keep a mental checklist when you do your original calling in), scatter and dismantle the central altar if you have used one, put away any sacred objects employed, and generally close it down, so the spirits know play time is over for now.

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NOTES:
1: Padmasambhava is a Tibetan first-shaman figure and Tantric magician. In Buddhism he is considered to be the Tantric Buddha, the Buddha whom the historical Buddha (the man who formed Buddhism) spoke of when he said a more powerful Buddha would come after him. In historical terms, Padmasambhava was a 7th prince from the region between modern day Pakistan and Afghanistan who brought the Buddhist teachings to shamanic Tibet. He was said to have travelled all over Tibet and surrounding countries, magically binding all of the shamanic land spirits to his will and making them swear an oath to become Protector spirits of Buddhism. (See Sacred Hoop Issue 47 for an in depth article about him.)
In this article I hope to surface some of the issues involved in ethical shamanic healing, as well as to provide some basic guidelines.

As with most decisions involving questions of ethical behaviour, this commentary is not intended as rigid policy, but rather as a flexible standard to be considered thoughtfully and compassionately in each particular case. It is hoped that this might be a starting place for those beginning a shamanic practice, as well as an opportunity for experienced practitioners to deepen their own understanding.

Shamanic practitioners are part of an ancient lineage of spiritual healers. Since shamanic healing is a form of spiritual healing, the question of ethics is of particular importance. When Michael Harner began offering training in Core Shamanism in the seventies, shamanic healing was relatively unknown; but thanks to the success of his pioneering work, today many thousands of people worldwide practice shamanic healing, and there is currently considerable interest in guidelines for the principled use of this powerful method.

For those who practise shamanic healing with clients face-to-face the ethical responsibilities regarding appropriate physical contact are similar to those of any other therapist. Confidentiality, too, must be strictly observed. Any information received from the client or during the shamanic session must be kept private.

Because shamanic healing deals with the spiritual aspect of illness, the parameters of ethical practice often seem unduly broad, vague, and imprecise. What is permissible at the level of spiritual healing? What about ‘distance’ healings offered by individuals, groups, and drumming circles - where the person, place, or situation being healed may be miles or a continent away?

Those who have been involved in shamanic healing or divination for any length of time, either as practitioners or as recipients, know that it is powerful. Miracles of healing can and do occur. Difficult questions are answered in surprising and useful ways; problems that seem nearly impossible to resolve suddenly shift and elegant solutions appear. This power deserves our respect and serious consideration about where and how it is used.

THE NEED TO ASK PERMISSION

In shamanic healing, to use the power of the helping spirits (fully compassionate spirits from the Upper World or Lower World) consciously and compassionately so that the work we do will in fact be healing, there is one essential ethical requirement: permission. Permission means the express, informed
consent of the client for a specific individual or group to perform shamanic healing or divination - including the consent to disclose any information about the client.

Healing without permission is unethical and strays into the realm of sorcery.

It is unethical because each person has the right and the responsibility to decide what to do in matters of the soul. Each person has the right to choose a path without interference or undue influence. It doesn’t matter how clear it is that the person needs help or how sure you are that ‘the person would grant permission.’ Unless you have been asked, or you have asked and been granted permission, you must not do the work.

It is well worth taking the time to journey to your compassionate helping spirits to ask why this is so, to know deeply for yourself why the consent of the recipient is essential for shamanic work to be truly healing.

Those who are drawn to healing typically have a deep desire to help others. It can be very tempting when you see someone suffering, and know that this person could be helped, to quickly ask the helping spirits for a healing without the person ever knowing anything about it.

But none of us is wise enough to know what another’s soul wants or needs. I’ve heard practitioners say that if the helping spirits say it is all right to heal someone, then it is OK, even if you do not have the person’s permission. This is not ethical - first because you should not ask the helping spirits until you have permission; and, secondly the helping spirits may be all-knowing, but we as humans are all too fallible, subject to errors of interpretation as well as to hearing what we want to hear.

Informed consent means that in ordinary reality the person who will receive the work knows, at the very least, that you are offering spiritual healing and that you will be working with helping spirits.

If the healing is to be face-to-face, it is important to let the client know that there may be some physical contact and to ask if it is all right to touch the client if necessary during the healing session. Express permission means that you have been asked for healing or you have asked and the person has said, “Yes.” If the person is alive and conscious, this means a direct ordinary reality “yes.” It does not mean that you asked in a dream or in a journey or telepathically, or asked your power animal or teacher, or that you had your power animal ask the other’s power animal, and so on.

If a person is in a coma, permission should be obtained from the immediate family in order to do shamanic work. Even then, the person’s soul should be contacted in a journey to ask what work, if any, the spirit wishes to be done.

In the case of deceased persons, for psychopomp work (conducting souls out of the Middle World) or other shamanic healing involving souls, permission is still required. Souls are souls, living or dead. When journeying to help a deceased person, the soul should be asked if it wants help.

For shamanic healing work performed on behalf of children under about the age of twelve, you should have a parent’s, preferably both parents’, permission.

On a case-by-case basis, depending upon the maturity of the child, you may also need permission from the child. Where healing is done with the child present, shamanic healing should be explained in a manner appropriate to the child’s age and one or both parents should be present during the session. For most teenagers under 18, just as for adults, express permission of the teen as well as a parent is required for shamanic healing.

Within a healing session, clients will sometimes ask questions or make requests about another person. Remember, you may only work with the client; you do not have permission to work with the client’s spouse, relatives, or anyone else associated with the client. I.e., you may not ask for information about or offer healing to another person.

Most of the time, clients will come to you with a specific request for healing for an injury, illness, emotional problem, or for divination help for a particular difficulty in their lives.

For example, a client asks you to heal their broken heart. In this case, you have express permission to work on the broken heart and whatever you see that is related to that issue. You do not necessarily have permission to go beyond that.

However, it is not unusual to ask the helping spirits for healing for one thing, and have another seemingly unrelated issue surface. Some shamanic practitioners feel that if they have a client’s permission for healing for one thing, that permission extends to a general permission for healing.

Others confine themselves to healing only what was requested. Though the issue of permission is
somewhat flexible and each shamanic healer has to decide, in consultation with the spirits, what to do in an actual circumstance, it is best to err on the side of caution.

Fortunately, in most cases you can simply ask the client whether the additional issue should be addressed.

Since clients come to you for shamanic healing, shamanic healing is what they should receive. Until you become a master in more than one healing discipline, it has been my experience that trying to combine two or more modalities simply weakens the power of the healing. Shamanic healing has its own unique power - in the hands of an experienced practitioner it is usually sufficient to get the job done. As to ordinary reality interactions during a healing session, even though you really want to help, resist the impulse to offer advice, therapy, medical diagnoses, legal suggestions, relationship counselling, conflict resolution, etc.

If you feel these things might help the client, suggest additional help from a trained professional in these fields.

I am sometimes asked about working with animals. I apply the same guidelines I use with people to this work. Since an animal cannot speak, one must journey to the soul to ask for permission.

WORKING AT A DISTANCE
Shamanic healing works in a dimension beyond space and time, making it possible to offer this method effectively at a distance, without being in the presence of the client.

Lately there has been a proliferation of requests for distance shamanic healing, often communicated via email or in drumming circles. This has vastly increased the opportunity for people to receive shamanic healing and has led to some impressive miracles of healing. It has also made the question of permission even more critical - and harder to know for certain that it has been obtained.

There are several kinds of ‘non-local’ healing requests one can receive: for prayers, sending light, holding a specific intention - world peace, for example - and many others.

While these requests have their own ethical considerations, I am not addressing them in this article, which is limited to the ethical practice of shamanic healing and divination.

When a request for shamanic healing is made, whether by email, phone, or in a group or drumming circle, permission is still essential. The same rules that apply for work face-to-face with an individual client extend to distance healing. A person requesting healing must have given informed, express consent for the healing - and where a group is involved, must understand that information about the request will be released to the group for the healing.

It is particularly important when doing work in drumming circles or through group emails to do only the work that was requested. So, if a person asks for divination help, only divination work confined to the question that was asked should be done. If a specific healing is requested, follow the parameters set for the healing.

For example, if the request is for a ‘successful knee-replacement surgery, with minimal pain and fast recovery,’ there is no need for you to also ask for a ‘release of fear,’ a competent surgeon, and so on. Respect the distant client’s right to define what they need.

Lastly, especially when working via email, if you receive information that needs to be communicated to the client, communicate it privately - typically through the person who made the request - not as a reply to the group. Even using email, maintaining the client’s privacy is an important consideration, and is not guaranteed.

What about requests to help with natural or man-made


disasters? The issue of permission can be particularly confusing in these cases, especially if you are dealing with another country and culture, whose ways and people are unfamiliar. Permission is still essential in these cases, but permission from whom or what? If you want to help, it is necessary to make an initial shamanic journey to the place in the Middle World where the incident occurred. Ask the spirits of the place and any souls of animals or deceased people you contact if they want help - always ask before doing any work.

If you contact a living person, then you cannot do work without verbal permission; it is not sufficient to ask the soul. If you receive permission to help, then you can engage in shamanic healing within the scope of the permission you receive, with the assistance of your helping spirits.

Occasionally, I have seen requests to do shamanic work to influence a specific outcome in the larger world - elect a certain candidate to public office, “open the heart” of a person in power, even stop a war, etc. There is no permission for shamanic work in these cases, which are beyond the scope of ethical shamanic practice and, however well-intentioned, border on sorcery.

Even working with something like the weather has ethical considerations. If you work to end a drought or to bring rain, for example, this work can also affect surrounding areas in unintended ways. The Earth is a whole, a living organism - everything we do has consequences, everything we do affects everything else, for good or ill.

Healing is a profound and many-layered undertaking. Often the right thing to do is ambiguous and difficult to define - even more so because there is so much need, we care so much, and really want to help.

If there is any doubt about whether it is appropriate to offer shamanic healing, the simple answer is to ask the intended recipient, whether it be a person, animal, or place. If you do not receive clear permission, do not proceed unless and until you do. If you receive permission, then work closely with your helping spirits, stay within the parameters of the request, and do the work.

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Susan wishes to acknowledge and thank her teachers; Michael Harner, Sandra Harner, and Alicia Gates for their wisdom and guidance in the ethical practice of shamanic healing and divination.

This article is a revised edition of one which originally appeared in the FFS Shamanism Annual, published in December 2008.

Shamanic Ethical Scenarios

Here are a few scenarios of shamanic healing or divination ethical problems, some from my own practice and others related to me by clients or colleagues. Each scenario raises issues of permission, which may be considered from the standpoint of the ethical responsibilities of a shamanic practitioner.

• A client asks for a shamanic divination to determine when a seriously ill relative might die.
• An exercise class instructor decides to offer a healing meditation at the end of a class. Participants are instructed to pair up and to first send healing to each other, then to each other’s family members, then to the world. A shamanic healer is in the class. To what extent can the healer participate? What are some of the ethical issues?
• A client claims to have been sexually harassed and asks for shamanic help dealing with it. After the session, the practitioner telephones someone who knows the purported harasser to find out if it could be true, and what the client should be advised to do about it. (Consider: would it make any difference if the practitioner had the client’s permission to ask the person?)
• In a journey, a shamanic practitioner meets the soul of a dead relative. The deceased relative asks the practitioner to perform a shamanic healing for a living person.
• A shamanic practitioner, after consulting with the helping spirits, journeys to the scene of a natural disaster in another country and immediately begins to do psychopomp work. (Consider: what if another shamanic practitioner received permission at the site or from the helping spirits to do healing work?)
• A client requests help in resolving a conflict with a neighbour. Without intending it, during the session the shamanic healer receives personal information about the neighbour that could be important for the client to know. The practitioner tells the client the information.
• A legal conservator (appointed by a judge to manage the financial affairs and/or daily life of another due to physical or mental limitations, or old age) asks a shamanic healer to work on behalf of a patient under a conservatorship. What permission issues are involved? What if there are known living relatives of the patient?
• A client requests shamanic help in dealing with a dispute with a business colleague. The shamanic practitioner suggests filing a lawsuit against the colleague.
• A person asks for psychopomp work to be done for a close relative. The deceased person’s other relatives are strongly opposed to it.
• A client’s house has been robbed. A shamanic practitioner is asked for divination work to identify and/or locate the burglar.
• A shamanic practitioner, who is very sensitive, does healing work for others in dreams. Private information is often received this way. Would it make a difference if it was unintended? If the practitioner knows the people personally? If the practitioner’s helping spirits are involved?

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During the summer of 2010 Sacred Hoop met up with Eliot Cowan during a visit he made to Pembrokeshire in West Wales. We published the main part of our interview with him in Sacred Hoop Issue 70, but at the end of the interview Eliot continued to talk on a new topic - the use and abuse of teacher plants...

Eliot: I’d like to talk a little about what are called ‘teacher plant spirits’ now. I think there are some things that need to be said.

Nick: are you talking about psychoactive plants here?

Eliot: Yes, but I maintain that all plants are sacred, and they are all teacher plants if we open ourselves to their teachings.

But there are certain plants that have a very special function as teachers because they open those special sacred doorways to worlds of sacred knowledge and wisdom.

Now, one of the things to notice about these plants, is that none of them are brought forth everywhere. They were brought forth in a particular place to benefit a particular people, because each of the different peoples were brought forth out of the land that was given to them. And each group of people were also given the way to remember and come back to living a life from the heart rather than from the head.

So all the original peoples were given these ways and practices to help them get brought back to the heart. And they all have the same purpose, they all deliver the same goods, but they are necessarily different, because it’s like I said earlier, the Inuit and the Amazonian are different peoples, their souls are made of different stuff, and they live in different worlds. Therefore their needs are different, just like their physical diets has to be different - so their spiritual diet has to be different too. So some of the peoples were given very, very special sacred plant teachers to help them with this, and they are really quite specific.

Nick: Specific geographically so to speak?

Eliot: Yes - let’s call it a ‘homeland’ - because just like the plants and animals have a homeland, we are not separate from that.

These are very, very special teacher plant spirits, that were brought forth to help people who needed and could benefit from that particular kind of help.

In the old days it was very simple - let’s say if you were a member of the group that had gone through countless cycles of living and dying in the upper Amazon, then you and ayahuasca were made for each other, and if you are from someplace else well ayahuasca wasn’t for you.

But if ayahuasca was not for you, then there was something else that was, each land provided for the people there, gave them everything that they needed.

But these modern days, it’s quite a lot more complex, the ancestral stuff we are made up of today tends to be quite mixed, and this has something to do with genealogy, but that’s not the whole story anymore.

Nick: This is the cultural view?

Eliot: Well, yes it’s cultural, but it also has a spiritual aspect to it. In the old days, the land and the ancestral soul of the people meant the same thing - and human beings are ancestral beings, minds bodies and souls are from the stuff of parents and grandparents and so forth.

It is true spiritually; and all the different peoples - since the beginning of time - had a great deal of appreciation for the perfection of this arrangement, where the peoples, the land and the various beings of the land, the plants, animals, rocks, waters and so on and so forth, were designed in such a perfect way that everything got everything that it needed.

So, people took a great deal of care to make sure that it continued that way.

For example all peoples had, until very recently, funeral rites - one of the main purposes of which was to see that the soul of the departed got escorted to the ancestral home where it belonged, so when it was time for a new life, a new human being got born into the same land,
With the same people, the same tradition, the same plants, the same animals, etc.

But for sometime now, those practices have become partial or lost entirely, and therefore are not effective anymore, and souls have a tendency to wander after death, and they end up in all sorts of unusual places.

So, even if you know the place of your birth and your genealogy, they are no longer reliable guides to what your soul is made of. So you get people who are born in a certain place with a certain ancestry finding a deep and compelling attraction to a spiritual tradition that is totally foreign to their geographical origin, and yet it provides for them. And that can’t happen unless there is a resonance there between the soul of the person and the soul of the other homeland they feel drawn and connected to.

In order to engage a plant like ayahuasca - and have it be beneficial to you - the first thing you have to do is recognise that there are real dangers involved. These plants are sacred doorways, and they open into a vastness that an individual on their own can’t navigate. The possibility of getting lost is almost a certainty, so in order for it to be not only ethical, but also safe and beneficial to work with these sacred plant teachers, there has to be a set of circumstances present.

The first circumstance is that a person has to have a soul connection to that plant, and as I said before, in the old days that was easy if you came from where the plant grew - that was it - you naturally had it.

But these days, it’s not so simple. So now there are people who live someplace who through circumstances engage and benefit from sacred plants, even if they are not of the ‘right’ culture.

But there has to be that match, you have to be soulmates with the plant, otherwise it’s not clear. It may give you a glimpse of something, but there is also the possibility of misfortune in the form of illness, accidents, financial problems; all kinds of things can manifest in different ways.

Without a soul match connection to the plant, working with sacred teacher plants is like playing Russian roulette.

And then there are a couple of other things that need to be in place.

When those teacher plants were put into the world to benefit people, as part of the presence of the plant, something else was also brought into the world - let’s call it the ‘path’ or the sacred tradition.

This ‘path’ is what the plant requires in order for people to engage with it respectfully and fruitfully. It’s as much a part of the plant as the roots and leaves, it can’t really be separated out without risking some unpleasant consequences.

So one of the requirements of the path is that there is a properly initiated human guide - that’s always part of the deal. Yes the plant itself is the primary teacher, but you need a human teacher who has walked the path themselves, who knows from a human perspective what the pitfalls are, and so on.

Having an engagement with the plant is not enough to actually be a guide of others, being a guide is another level of huge responsibility and is always taken very seriously within traditional societies.

And you want to be very sure that the guide has a good integrity and your interests at heart, and it’s not about sexual or economic opportunity, etc.

I’d like to share with you about the Huichol tradition - which is my tradition - what it takes to become a guide to peyote for other people.

The first thing is that the person has identified for themselves - and this has been verified by a responsible shaman - that they have a calling to this particular medicine.

Then they have a minimum of five years of very difficult, gruelling, painful, grinding apprenticeship under a tricky, hardball playing shaman.

Now at the end of that time they have an opportunity to undertake an initiation ritual. If they make it through the initiation - which is not guaranteed - they are now a shaman - but they are still not a guide.

Now they have to work as a shaman for a minimum of another five years, and demonstrate that they are an effective healer, that they help people, and also demonstrate that they have the devotion to the welfare of their community.

At the end of that second five year period they can present themselves for a second initiation, which is much more dangerous than the first initiation.

Now, if they make it through that initiation - well they’re still not a guide.

Now the third stage, the peyote itself and the ancestors and the gods put them through a process and declare they’re OK. Now they have what it takes to be a guide.

It’s different in different cultures, but what is not unusual is the level of seriousness that people take these things with.

Nick: So, it is not just a weekend workshop then? [laughs]

Eliot: No, it’s big time, a lifelong commitment.

Nick: it’s like any spiritual commitment I guess, the more you do it the more you can’t get out of it!

Eliot: Well actually, the way it seems to turn out, at least for Westerners, is they realise they have signed a contract sometime after they actually signed it, but in native society everybody’s hip to this, and so that is why you don’t find people in indigenous cultures who have ambitions to become shamans, they’re trying to get out of it if possible, because they know what a huge pain in the arse it is.

Opposite page:
Eliot makes an offering to the sacred fire before we start the interview
Inset: a peyote cactus - sacred teacher plant to the Huichol people of Mexico
Below: Huichol Mara’k’ame (shaman)

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one of the requirements of the path is that there is a properly initiated human guide... you need a human teacher who has walked the path themselves, who knows from a human perspective what the pitfalls are
The office of shaman varies slightly in different tribes, in some cases it is hereditary, but in every case a supernatural gift is a necessary qualification for becoming a shaman.

Although hysteria (called by some writers ‘Arctic hysteria’) lies at the bottom of the shaman’s vocation, the shaman differs from an ordinary patient suffering from this illness because, they possess the power to master themselves in the periods between the fits which occur during the ceremonies.

A good shaman ought to possess many unusual qualities, but the chief is the power, acquired by tact and knowledge, to influence the people round him.

THE SHAMAN’S VOCATION

Whether their calling be hereditary or not, a shaman must be a capable - nay, an inspired person. Of course, this is practically the same thing as saying that they are nervous and excitable, often to the verge of insanity. So long as they practise their vocation, however, the shaman never passes this verge.

It often happens that before entering the calling shamans have had serious nervous affections. Thus a Chukchee female shaman, called Telpina, according to her own statement, had been violently insane for three years, during which time her household had taken precautions that she should do no harm to the people or to herself.

I was told that people about to become shamans have fits of wild paroxysms alternating with a condition of complete exhaustion. They will lie motionless for two or three days without partaking of food or drink. Finally they retire to the wilderness, where they spend their time enduring hunger and cold in order to prepare themselves for their calling.

To be called to become a shaman is generally equivalent to being afflicted with hysteria; then the accepting of the call means recovery. There are cases of young persons who, having suffered for years from lingering illness (usually of a nervous character), at last feel a call to take up shamanistic practice and by this means overcome the disease.

To the believer the acceptance of the call means accepting several
spirits, or at least one, as protectors or servants, by which means the shaman enters into communication with the whole spirit world.

The shamanistic call sometimes manifests itself through some animal, plant, or other natural object, which the person comes upon at the 'right time', i.e. when very young, often in the critical period between childhood and maturity (or else when a person more advanced in age is afflicted with mental or physical troubles). Sometimes it is an inner voice, which bids the person enter into intercourse with the spirits. If the person is dilatory in obeying, the calling spirit soon appears in some outward visible shape, and communicates the call in a more explicit way.

A shaman called Ainanwat, after an illness saw several spirits, but did not pay much attention to them; then one spirit came, whom Ainanwat liked and invited to stay. But the spirit said he would stay only on the condition that Ainanwat should become a shaman. Ainanwat refused, and the spirit vanished.

Here is an account by a Yakut-Tungus shaman, Tiuspiut ('fallen-from-the-sky'), of how he became a shaman:

‘When I was twenty years old, I became very ill and began to see with my eyes, to hear with my ears, that which others did not see or hear; nine years I struggled with myself, and I did not tell anyone what was happening to me, as I was afraid that people would not believe me and would make fun of me. At last I became so seriously ill that I was on the verge of death; but when I started to shamanise I grew better; and even now when I do not shamanise for a long time I am liable to be ill.’

The Russian writer Sieroszewski tells us that Tiuspiut was sixty years of age; he hid his shamanistic gift nine years, and had been shamanising thirty-one years when Sieroszewski met him. In spite of his age he could shamanise and dance the whole night.

During the shamanistic ceremonies his eyes had a strange expression of madness, and a pertinacious stare, which provoked to anger and excitement those on whom his look rested.

A similar statement is made about the Chukchee shamans by the anthropologist Waldemar Bogoras: ‘The eyes of a shaman have a look different from that of other people, and they explain it by the assertion that the eyes of the shaman are very bright nikeraqen (bright), which, by the way, gives them the ability to see spirits, even in the dark.

It is certainly a fact that the expression of a shaman is peculiar - a combination of cunning and shyness; and it is often possible to pick him out from among many others.’

When I was twenty years old, I became very ill and began to see with my eyes, to hear with my ears, that which others did not see or hear; nine years I struggled with myself, and I did not tell anyone what was happening to me, as I was afraid that people would not believe me and would make fun of me.

The Chukchee are well aware of the extreme nervousness of their shamans, and express it by the word ninirkilqin, (he is bashful). By this word they mean to convey the idea that the shaman is highly sensitive, even to the slightest change of the psychic atmosphere surrounding him during his exercises.

The Chukchee shaman is diffident in acting before strangers, especially shortly after his initiation. A shaman of great power will refuse to show his skill when among strangers, and will yield only after much solicitation; even then, as a rule, he will not show all of his power.

Once when I induced a shaman to practise at my house his spirits for a long time refused to come. When at last they did come, they were heard walking round the house outside and knocking on its walls, as if still undecided whether to enter. When they entered, they kept near to the corners, carefully avoiding too close proximity to those present.
The vocation of the shaman is attended with considerable danger, the slightest lack of harmony between the acts of the shamans and the mysterious call of their spirits brings their life to an end.

However, very old people are not supposed to hear the shamanistic call. In a Koryak tale, when Quikinnaqu (who had already a grown-up daughter) unexpectedly makes for himself a drum and becomes a shaman, his neighbours say sceptically: ‘Has the old Quikinnaqu really become a shaman? From his youth up he had no spirits within his call.’

But young people when they get into trouble also call for the help of spirits; when the latter come to them, such youths also frequently become shamans.

A man, Yetilin by name, who belonged by birth to an Arctic maritime village, but afterwards married into a reindeer-breeding family on the Dry Anui River, and joined its camp, told me that in his early childhood his family perished from a contagious disease (probably influenza), and he was left alone with his small sister. Then he called to the spirits. They came and brought food and said to him: “Yetilin, take to beating the drum! We will assist you in that also.”

The Chukchee tales contain accounts of poor and despised orphans, who were protected by spirits, and turned into shamans.

The vocation of the shaman is attended with considerable danger, the slightest lack of harmony between the acts of the shamans and the mysterious call of their spirits brings their life to an end.

This is expressed by the Chukchee, when they say that spirits are very bad-tempered, and punish with immediate death the slightest disobedience of the shaman, and that this is particularly so when the shaman is slow to carry out those orders which are intended to single him out from other people.

There exist traditions about shamans who were carried away still living from the earth to the sky, about others killed by spirits, or struck down at their first meeting with the powers whom they dared to call upon.

The shaman who decides to carry on this struggle has not only material gain in view, but also the alleviation of the griefs of his fellow men; the shaman who has the vocation, the faith, and the conviction, who undertakes his duty with ecstasy and negligence of personal danger, inspired by the high ideal of sacrifice, such a shaman always exerts an enormous influence upon his audience.

After having once or twice seen such a real shaman, I understood the distinction that the natives draw between the ‘Great’, ‘Middling’, and ‘Mocking’ or ‘deceitful’ shamans.

Although exposed to danger from supernatural powers, the shaman is supposed to be safer from human anger than any other person. One Chukchee tale says: ‘the murderer’ came to her neighbour, a woman who was busy trying to make a fire, and stabbed her from behind. But the woman continued to work on the fire, because she was a shaman-girl, a woman able to stab herself in a shamanistic performance.

Therefore ‘the murderer’ could not kill her, but only severed the tendons of her arms and legs.

A man who can pierce himself through with a knife, so that its end shows at his back, or cut his head off, put it on a stick, and dance round the yurt, is surely strengthened sufficiently against an enemy’s attacks.

Yet the shaman called Scratching-Woman, when he refused to drink the alcohol offered to him by Bogoras, and which he had previously demanded, explained as follows: “I will be frank with you. Drink really makes my temper too bad for anything. Usually my wife watches over me, and puts all knives out of my reach. But when we are apart, I am afraid.”

On the whole, the shamans are very much attached to their vocation, in spite of the persecutions which they have to suffer from the Government. Tiupsiut was many times punished by the Russian officials and his shamanistic dress and drum were...
burned; but he returned to his duties after each of these incidents. "We have to do it, we cannot leave off shamanising," he said to Sieroszewski, "and there is no harm in our doing it."

Another shaman, who was old and blind, affirmed that he had been a shaman some time before, but after he became convinced that it was a sin he stopped shamanising, and 'although another very powerful shaman took from him the sign, amagyat, still the spirits made him blind'.

In the village Baigantai Sieroszewski met with another instance of a shaman who, however many times he vowed to abstain from shamanism, still returned to it when the occasion arose. He was a rich man, who did not care for gain, and he was so wonderful that his eyes used to jump out on his forehead during shamanistic performances.

Tiuspiut was poor and cared for money, but he was proudly regardful of his reputation, and when some of his neighbours called in another shaman, one who lived farther away than Tiuspiut, he became quite offended.

Among the Tungus and Yakut the shaman is recompensed only when his arts are successful; and now, since Russian money has come into use, he receives from one to twenty-five roubles for a performance, and always gets plenty to eat besides.

The shamanistic call among the Tungus of Trans-Baikalia shows itself in the following manner: A dead shaman appears in a dream and summons the dreamer to become his successor. One who is to become a shaman appears shy, distrait, and is in a highly nervous condition. Similar instances are to be found in the records of all Siberian tribes.

As to the shamanistic office being hereditary, this is the case wherever a descendant of a shaman shows a disposition for the calling.

Among the Ostyak, the father himself chooses his successor, not necessarily according to age, but according to capacity; and to the chosen one he gives his own knowledge. If he has no children, he may pass on the office to a friend, or to an adopted child.

The Ostyak shaman occasionally sells his familiar spirit to another shaman. After receiving payment, he divides his hair into tresses, and fixes the time when the spirit is to pass to his new master. The spirit, having changed owners, makes his new possessor suffer; if the new shaman does not feel these effects, it is a sign that he is not becoming proficient in his office.

Among both the Yakut and the Buryat, although the office is not necessarily hereditary, it is usually so in part; for it will generally happen that the shamanistic spirit passes from one to another of the same family.

The Altaians believe that no one becomes a shaman of his own free will; rather it comes to him like a hereditary disease. They say that sometimes when a young man feels premonitory symptoms of the call, he avoids shamans and shamanistic ceremonies, and by an effort of will occasionally cures himself. The period when the shamanistic call comes to the descendant of a shamanistic family is known as tes bazinyat, (the ancestor spirit leaps upon, and strangles him).

THE SHAMAN’S PREPARATION

The Chukchee. The Chukchee call the preparatory period of a shaman by a term signifying 'he gathers shamanistic power'. For the weaker shamans and for female shamans the preparatory period is less painful, and the inspiration comes mainly through dreams. But for a strong man this stage is very painful and long; in some cases it lasts for one, two, or more years.

Some young people are afraid to take a drum and call on the spirits, or to pick up stones or other objects which might prove to be amulets, for fear lest the spirit should call them to be shamans.

Some youths prefer death to obedience to the call of spirits. Parents possessing only one child fear his entering this calling on account of the danger attached to it; but when the family is large, they like to have one of its members a shaman.

During the time of preparation the shaman has to pass through both a mental and a physical training. He is, as a rule, segregated, and goes either to the forests and hills under the pretext of hunting or watching the herds, often without taking along any arms or the lasso of the herdsman; or else he remains in the inner room the whole time.

The young novice, loses all interest in the ordinary affairs of life. He ceases to work, eats but little, and without relishing his food, ceases to talk to people, and does not even answer their questions. The greater part of his time he spends in sleep. This is why 'a wanderer must be closely watched, otherwise he might lie down on the open tundra and sleep for three or four days, incurring the danger in winter of being buried in drifting snow.'
When coming to himself after such a long sleep, he imagines that he has been out for only a few hours, and generally is not conscious of having slept in the wilderness at all.

With the Koryak, the mental part of the training consists in coming into contact with the right spirits, i.e. with the spirits who are to be the shaman’s protectors in his shamanistic practice. The Russian ethnologist Vladimir Jochelson writes ‘Every Koryak shaman, has his own guardian spirits, who help him in his struggle in his rivalry with other shamans, and also in attacks upon his enemies’.

The shaman spirits usually appear in the form of animals or birds. The most common guardian spirits are the wolf, the bear, the raven, the sea-gull, and the eagle.

One of the two shamans whom Jochelson met among the Koryak related to him how the spirits of the wolf, raven, bear, sea-gull, and plover appeared to him on the tundra - now in the form of men, now in that of animals - and commanded him to become a shaman, or to die. Thus we see that, while they are in solitude, the spirits appear to them in visible form, endow them with power, and instruct them.

But Bogoras describes the mental training of a new shaman differently. ‘The process of gathering inspiration is so painful to young shamans, because of their mental struggle against the call, that they are sometimes said to sweat blood on the forehead and the temples.

Afterwards every preparation of a shaman for a performance is considered a sort of repetition of the initiative process: hence it is said that the Chukchee shamans during that time are easily susceptible to haemorrhage, and even to bloody sweat.

Bogoras himself saw two cases of nose-bleeding and one of bloody sweat among the shamans; but in the last instance he suspected the shaman of smearing his temples with the blood from his nose.

As to the physical training of a novice, he must learn singing, dancing, various tricks, and how to beat the drum. The beating of the drum, notwithstanding its seeming simplicity, requires some skill, and the novice must spend considerable time before he can, acquire the desired degree of perfection. This has reference especially to the performer’s power of endurance. The same may be said of the singing.

The manifestations continue for several weeks, during which time the shaman exercises the most violent activity with scarcely a pause. After the performance he must not show any signs of fatigue, because he is supposed to be sustained by the spirits, and, moreover, the greater part of the exercise is asserted to be the work of the spirits themselves, either after entering the shaman’s body or while outside his body.

The amount of endurance required for all this, and the ability to pass quickly from the highest excitement to a state of normal quietude, can, of course, be acquired only by long practice. Indeed, all the shamans I conversed with said that they had to spend a year, or even two years, before sufficient strength of hand and freedom of voice were given to them by the spirits.

Some asserted that, during all this preparatory time, they kept closely to the inner room, taking up the drum several times a day, and beating it as long as their strength would allow.

Have the novices any teachers? One would suppose that they must have, if only to learn the difficult magical tricks, but it is hard to get any detailed information on this.
point, because the natives ascribe all the cleverness of the shaman to the spirits.

Sometimes the old men teach the young shamans. The man who gives a part of his power to another man loses correspondingly, and can hardly recover the loss afterwards. To transfer his power, the older shaman must blow on the eyes or into the mouth of the recipient, or he may stab himself with a knife, with the blade of which, still reeking with his life force, he will immediately pierce the body of the recipient.

According to Sieroszewski, three kinds of spirits are associated with a Yakut shaman, namely, anagyat, yekyua, and kaliany. The anagyat is the indispensable attribute of every shaman, but anagyat is also the name of the iron breast-circle [shaman’s mirror], the sign of the shaman’s dignity.

Even the weakest shamans possess anagyat and yekyua spirits - the latter is said to be ekyua iui abassyyuah, simah abassyyuah, usuuttan ongorudh (the sent from above, animal power, bewitching spirit and devilish devourer).

The yekyua animal spirit of a shaman is carefully hidden from the people. One shaman described it thus: “My yekyua will not be found by anyone; it lies hidden far away, there, in the rocky mountains of Edjian.” Once a year, when the snow melts and the earth is black, the yekyua are said to arise from their hiding-places and begin to wander. They hold orgies of fights and noises, and the shamans with whom they are associated feel very ill. Especially harmful are the yekyua of female shamans.

The weakest and most cowardly are the dog yekyua; the most powerful are those of enormous bulls, stallions, elks, and black boars.

Those shamans who have as their animal incarnation a wolf, bear, or dog, are the most unfortunate; these animals are insatiable; they are never satisfied, however much the shaman may provide for them.

The dog especially gives no peace to his two-footed fellow; he gnaws with his teeth the shaman’s heart, tears into pieces his body. Then the shaman feels sick and suffers pain. The crow is also a bad yekyua; the eagle and hairy bull are called abassy keiktah (devilish fighters and warriors), and this title is the most flattering one for a shaman.

When a new shaman appears, the other shamans recognise him at once by the presence of a new yekyua, whom they have not seen before. Only shamans can see yekyua; to ordinary people they are invisible.

PRIEST, HEALER, PROPHET

In nearly all the more advanced tribes we shall see that certain shamans specialise in one sort of duty or another, while among the more primitive peoples each performs many different kinds of duties - a state of things made possible by the less complex nature of those duties.

The high conception of a shaman’s duties among certain tribes may be seen from the C19th Russian writer Dorji Banzorrof’s, ideal picture of a Buryat shaman, that he is ‘a priest, a medicine-man, and a prophet.’

As a priest, he knows the will of the gods, and so declares to man what sacrifices and ceremonies shall be held; he is an expert in ceremonial prayers. Besides the communal ceremonies at which he officiates, he conducts also various private ceremonies.

As medicine-man, the shaman performs certain ceremonies to expel the evil spirit from the patient. As a prophet, he foretells the future, either by means of the shoulder-blade of a sheep, or by the flight of arrows.

This ideal type of shaman was probably rare even in Banzorrof’s time, for he himself says that the shaman was not present at all communal sacrifices. It is the same with some family sacrifices: the ongons (spirit fetishes) are fed by the master of the house; and certain other sacrifices, as, for instance, those offered at childbirth, are made without the assistance of the shaman.

The fact that a communal or family ceremony is sometimes presided over by the head of the commune or family, or that a private individual occasionally performs divination, does not alter the fact that the original type of Buryat shaman had the performance of all these rites in his hands.

Family shamanism is connected with the domestic hearth, whose welfare is under its care. The family shaman has charge of the celebration of family festivals, rites, and sacrificial ceremonies, and also of the use of the family charms and amulets, and of their incantations.

Professional shamans are those who are not definitely attached to a certain group of people. The more powerful they are, the wider is the circle in which they can practise their art.

It seems, however, necessary to add another category of communal shamans, forming a transitional class between family and professional shamans. These shamans have to deal with a group of families taking part in important ceremonials.

From the above we see that the essential characteristic of a shaman is a liability to nervous ecstacy and trances. Women are more prone to emotional excitement than men, but the only conclusion - if any - that we could draw from this would be that women are by nature more disposed to shamanising than men.
The Path of Power is a Sacred Path. If you are coming along this path, you are looking to find your balance. When you come into the world, you come out of your mother’s womb. So we’re all equal on one level of it. We all got onto the planet. That’s our passport. You shouldn’t ever need any more passport than that to go around the world. But we have all these funny boundaries because people think they own land.

But when you come onto the planet, it’s a process of growth. When you don’t know anything, you’re afraid of everything. You have a lot of fears. You come through life and you’re always afraid of this or that. You’re afraid somebody or something is going to get you or take advantage of you or whatever. You battle with that, with your fears. Then if you really start reaching out and somebody is willing to share knowledge, and you start taking it in, then you start moving into your Path of Power.

There are a lot of things that come into this path for you. I want to share some things with you, because it’s very important that you understand these things.

There’s a lot of reasons why we humans go along the way we do most of the time in the world.

Many people are emotional cripples. They only move at 50 percent of what they should be doing. They are locked into these fear patterns. And there’s a lot of other people that would just as soon keep them there. They like to keep you on a little string of fear because that means control.

That’s basically what this whole system operates on, is control.

There are a lot of ways of people taking power over your life and keeping you from becoming a whole human being.

Many times you give them this power, because you don’t have the courage to be yourself and be your own person. It’s much easier to give in to somebody else and let them do it for you.

There’s a lot of people in this society and this world that have been doing things for you for a long time. A lot of them will tell you, like the politicians, Mr. Bush and all the rest, they’ll tell you they’ve been doing these things for your own good.

My mother used to be telling me about all the things she would have done with her life. She would say, “I would have done this, but my dad wouldn’t let me,” or “I would have done this, but my husband wouldn’t let me.” All these people would have done something, but somebody wouldn’t let them. They go through life this way.

And we have these little excuses as to why we don’t do something about it. One of my brothers gave me a very good one on this. I asked him why he hadn’t done something. He said, “Sun Bear, I could give you an excuse, but,” he says, “excuses are like assholes – everybody’s got ‘em!”

If you want to move in a sacred way, the first thing is that you have to have enough courage to do some self-surgery on yourself. You have to do something very brave sometimes.

I’ve had to be brave sometimes. I’ve looked at things. There were some things that wouldn’t work in dealing with the world as a whole. What I had to do was self-surgery. I had to remove all the old tapes and old conditionings that people
Wisdom is very important. Wisdom is learning to use knowledge in a sacred manner. You can have knowledge and words, but wisdom is the use of knowledge. When you're moving on this path, then you get into your power. Power is something you need to learn how to balance. The more powerful you get, the more you need to stay in balance. If you're in balance and know how to work wisely with power, there isn't anything in the world that won't come to you.
Bonnie Horrigan: how would you describe shamanism?
Michael Harner: The word ‘shaman’ in the original Tungus language refers to a person who makes journeys to nonordinary reality in an altered state of consciousness. Adopting the term in the West was useful because people didn’t know what it meant. Terms like ‘wizard,’ ‘witch,’ ‘sorcerer,’ and ‘witch doctor’ have their own connotations, ambiguities, and preconceptions associated with them. Although the term is from Siberia, the practice of shamanism existed on all inhabited continents. After years of extensive research, Mircea Eliade, in his book, ‘Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy’, concluded that shamanism underlays all the other spiritual traditions on the planet, and that the most distinctive feature of shamanism - but by no means the only one - was the journey to other worlds in an altered state of consciousness.

Shamans are often called ‘seeers’ (seers), or ‘people who know’ in their tribal languages, because they are involved in a system of knowledge based on first hand experience. Shamanism is not a belief system. It’s based on personal experiments conducted to heal, to get information, or do other things. In fact, if shamans don’t get results, they will no longer be used by people in their tribe. People ask me, ‘How do you know if somebody’s a shaman?’ I say, ‘It’s simple. Do they journey to other worlds? And do they perform miracles?’

Is shamanism a religion?
The practice of shamanism is a method, not a religion. It coexists with established religions in many cultures. In Siberia, you’ll find shamanism coexisting with Buddhism and *Lamaism* (Tibetan Buddhism), and in Japan with Buddhism. It’s true that shamans are often in animistic cultures. Animism means that people believe there are spirits. So in shamanic cultures, where shamans interact with spirits to get results such as healing, it’s no surprise that people believe there are spirits. But the shamans don’t believe in spirits. Shamans talk with them,
interact with them. They no more ‘believe’ there are spirits than they ‘believe’ they have a house to live in, or have a family. This is a very important issue because shamanism is not a system of faith.

Shamanism is also not exclusionary. They don’t say, ‘We have the only healing system.’ In a holistic approach to healing, the shaman uses the spiritual means at his or her disposal in cooperation with people in the community who have other techniques such as plant healing, massage, and bone setting.

The shaman’s purpose is to help the patient get well, not to prove that his or her system is the only one that works.

In many cultures, shamans are often given gifts for their work, but they will return all the gifts if the patient dies, which I think is a commendable innovation that might help us with the costs of health services today.

Shamans talk with plants and animals, with all of nature. This is not just a metaphor. They do it in an altered state of consciousness. Our own students rapidly discover that by talking with plants, they can discover how to prepare those plants for remedies. Shamans have been doing this since ancient times. They typically know a great deal about plants, but it’s not essential. For example, Eskimo shamans don’t have access to a lot of plants, so they work with other things. But in the Amazon shamans know the various plants and the songs that go with the plants, which they commonly learn from the plants themselves.

One former student of mine developed a practice of discovering and using healing plants based on his learning directly from the plants. He found that the pharmacopoeia he developed was very close to the ancient, classic Chinese pharmacopoeia knowledge of how to prepare and use these plants for different ailments.

Another former student in Germany worked with minerals and found how they could be used in healing. It turned out that her discoveries were very close to what has been known in India from ancient times.

Which brings us to a very important issue: everything that’s ever been known, everything that can be known, is available to the shaman in the ‘dreamtime’. That’s why shamans can be prophets, that’s why they can also go back and look at the past.

With discipline, training, and the help of the spirits, this total source of knowledge is accessible.

**What happens when a sick person asks for a healing?**

A shaman might, for example, make a journey for diagnostic purposes, to get information about the person’s problems from a spiritual point of view.

It doesn’t necessarily matter what the diagnosis is from an ordinary reality point of view. There’s no simple one-to-one concordance between spiritual illness and ordinary reality illness. You can’t say, ‘This equals that.’ So the shaman will often make a journey to find out what the spiritual causality is and, according to that causality, decide on the treatment.

From the shamanic point of view, people who are not powerful — spiritually ‘power-filled,’ that is — are prone to illness, accidents, and bad luck. This goes beyond our normal definition of illness.

The shaman restores a person’s linkage to his or her spiritual power. This spiritual power is something analogous to a spiritual immune defense system, but I wouldn’t make a one-to-one equivalence. It’s an analog. The power makes one resistant to illness. If somebody is repeatedly ill, then it’s clear that they need a power connection. A healthy person who is not sick might go on a vision quest to get this power connection, but one of the shaman’s jobs is to help people who are in no condition to do that for themselves.

Today in our culture many consider it avant-garde if a person talks about the mind-body connection, but the fact that the brain is connected to the rest of the body is not the most exciting news. It’s been known for hundreds and thousands of years.

What’s really important about shamanism, in my opinion, is that the shaman knows that we are not alone. By that I mean, when one human being compassionately works to relieve the suffering of another, the helping spirits are interested and become involved.

When somebody who is disinterested, who is not an
immediate family member, out of generosity and compassion helps somebody else to relieve illness or pain and suffering - and it works even better when there are two or more shamans involved - this is when miracles occur.

So the big news shamanism offers is not that the head is connected to the rest of the body, but that we are not alone.

**How would you describe the process of soul retrieval?**

Anyone who’s had a trauma, from a shamanic point of view, may have had some loss of their soul. By soul we mean the spiritual essence essential throughout one’s life, as we describe life in our culture, which is from conception or birth to the time of death. The techniques for healing soul loss are soul-retrieval techniques, and one of the classic shamanic methods is to go searching for that lost portion of the soul and restore it.

Until recently, most people in the Western world felt that soul retrieval was a superstitious practice that had no validity, but things have turned. I must say that a major reason is the work of my colleague, Sandra Ingerman, the author of Soul Retrieval and Coming Home. During her shamanic practice in Santa Fe, NM, years ago, women who had had significant childhood abuse would mention in the course of the sessions that they had removed themselves psychically from the situation at the time of abuse.

Sandra immediately recognised, as a practicing shaman, that the person’s soul to some degree had left the body (if it had left completely, the person would have been dead), and therefore the logical thing was to retrieve the lost portion of the soul and bring it back.

So she then started doing soul retrieval for these people who had had significant childhood traumas, and the results were astounding. Today, this work is an important part of shamanic healing practice in the West. Indeed, if you ask a group of people, “How many of you feel you’ve lost part of your soul?” it’s typical that everybody raises their hand. At some deep level, there is a natural awareness of this problem. By the way, even a minor trauma can result in some degree of soul loss and can be treated.

Another major technique in shamanic healing work is

Shamans don’t believe in spirits, shamans talk with them, interact with them. They no more ‘believe’ there are spirits than they ‘believe’ they have a house to live in, or have a family.
extraction. Extraction involves removing a spiritual intrusion.

Just as there can be infections in ordinary reality, so there can be spiritual intrusions. We don’t mean that ‘evil’ spirits have entered. It’s more like termites in a wooden house. If you’ve got termites in your house, you wouldn’t say “Those termites are evil”, you’d say, “I’d just like to get them out of the house”.

In this same way the shaman works to remove things that interfere with the health of the body, such as spiritual intrusions, and removes or ‘extracts’ them. This is not done through journeying. It’s done through working here in the ‘Middle World’ in an altered state of consciousness.

How is an altered state of consciousness achieved?

In about 90% of the world, the altered states of consciousness used in shamanism are attained through consciousness-changing techniques involving a monotonous percussion sound, most typically done with a drum, but also with sticks, rattles, and other instruments. In perhaps 10% of the cultures, shamans use psychedelic drugs to change their state of consciousness.

I was introduced to shamanic work in 1961 among the Conibo Indians in eastern Peru, with the aid of native psychedelics. When I came back to the United States and no longer had my supply of ayahuasca, I experimented with drumming. Much to my surprise, it really worked. It should not have surprised me, because drums were reportedly used by shamans almost worldwide.

Virtually everything you find in shamanism is done because it works. Over tens of thousands of years, shamans developed the most time-tested system of using the spirit, mind, and heart for healing, along with plant remedies, and so on.

Again, the system is time-tested. So if healers in 90% of the shamanic cultures are using the same methods, we pay attention to them. And, of course, we find they work. To get back to the extraction technique: the technique involves an altered state of consciousness and seeing into the client’s body.

Much shamanic work, including journeying and extraction, is done in darkness for a very simple reason. The shaman wishes to cut out the stimuli of ordinary reality - light, sound, and so on - and move into unseen reality. The shaman learns to look in the body with ‘x-ray vision’ and see the illness and its location, and then to extract that illness.

Is that like depossession?

Depossession is related to extraction but it’s not the same thing. From a shamanic point of view, it’s very important to get out of the Middle World when journeying for spiritual purposes.

In the old days, shamans journeyed in the Middle World to see how relatives were doing at a distant place, or to locate the herds of migratory animals. But most of our work today is in the Upper and Lower Worlds where shamans have voyaged since ancient times. Shamans often prefer not to draw on the spirits of the Middle World because many of them are confused and lacking in power.

Going to the Upper or Lower Worlds, one reaches spiritual beings of compassion, power, and wisdom.

Shamans who do another type of healing help the dead as well as the living. These shamans are called ‘psychopomps,’ or conductors of souls.

Remember, from a shamanic point of view, when you’re comatose, you’re dead. So in the case of a comatose person, the shaman would seek the soul out and see if it wanted to come back.

Shamanism is not a system that intends to keep people in this reality whether they like it or not, because the shaman knows that this is not necessarily the best reality.

You make the journey for the person who is comatose to find out what they want. If they want to come back, then the job of the shaman is to bring them back. But if they want to go on - or, more commonly, if they’re dying or already dead - then the job of the shaman is to get them to a place where they will be content and not have them stay here, adrift in the Middle World.

So now we come back to this business of depossession.

Most cases of possession in humans are by other humans who are dead, who are here in the Middle World and don’t know they’re dead. If people are disempowered, or have soul loss or power loss, they are like a vacuum into which these confused entities can come.

This is involuntary possession. Shamans will conduct the entity - with its permission, once it realises it’s from a shamanic point of view, when you’re comatose, you’re dead.

So, in the case of comatose persons, the shaman, would seek the soul out and see if they wanted to come back.
dead - to a place beyond everyday reality, where it will be reunited with people whom it loves. Once this is done, shamans restore the patient’s full soul and lost power connections so that they are once again whole, and not vulnerable to further possessions. Depossession work has slightly different forms in different cultures, but the basic principles are the same. I hope that one day our culture will recognise the need to permit shamanic practitioners to work with the spiritual aspects of illness in cooperation with non-spiritual health professionals.

Why don’t we do that now? Unfortunately, when science started, partially as a reaction to the Church in Europe, it ordained that souls and spirits have no reality, and therefore could not be considered in scientific theory. Now that’s an a priori position; in other words, ironically, a statement of faith enunciated in the 18th century. In fact, science has never disproved the existence of spirits. I would submit that now, in the 21st century, it’s time to stop having a science that’s based on faith (the faith that there are no spirits) and make it real science, which means that it doesn’t ordain a priori that certain types of causes cannot exist.

In regard to extraction healing, in the shamanic view, where does the illness to be extracted come from? From a shamanic point of view, all people have a spiritual side, whether they recognise it or not. When people get angry, jealous, or have a hostile emotional attitude, they can vent not only verbal and physical abuse, but also spiritual abuse without even knowing it. In other words, if somebody is ignorant of shamanic principles, they can do damage to other people on a spiritual level.

Among the Untsuri Shuar and Jivaro people of eastern Ecuador, with whom I lived for quite a while, they call these intrusions ‘magical darts.’ There were many feuds and wars, and sometimes healers would get angry and lose their discipline and use their powers to get even. But it is important to know that this is a big mistake, not just ethically, but in terms of self-preservation. No matter how justified a person feels emotionally at the time, those spiritual beings who are representative of the great, loving, hidden Universe, will disconnect. It’s like we’re rechargeable batteries. We still have some power, and we can do damage, but the power source is no longer charging us.

I’ve seen this many times in the Amazon. The shamans, in their anger, do harm for a while, but eventually everything they send out comes back in on them, and it often results not only in their own death or pain, but their immediate family gets affected disastrously by it. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t get angry at people. It just means that you should have discipline and know there are parameters. You can get angry with somebody and verbally let off steam and, at the same time, control your spiritual side. But for your own self-preservation, if you don’t work to relieve pain and suffering - and especially if you work in a contrary way - you’re soon out of business, and probably dead.

As I understand it, shamans restore wholeness and power to a human being, and then that

In about 90% of the world, the altered states of consciousness used in shamanism are attained through consciousness-changing techniques involving a monotonous percussion sound, most typically done with a drum

Top: Shaman’s frame drum hung with many items made of iron which rattle when it is played. Late C19th Net people, Siberia
Left: Shaman in ritual costume with his drum. Sakha people, Siberia
wholeness and power heals whatever is wrong with that person. So in this framework a power-filled person has the ability to heal himself.

To an outsider, it would look like they’re healing themselves. But the concept of self-healing excludes the spirits. From the shamanic point of view, nobody’s lived into adult life without spiritual help, whether they know it or not.

The self-healing concept is a secular concept, and that’s fine as far as it goes. It teaches people to take some responsibility for their illness. But it also teaches them to take responsibility for their death.

With that approach, everybody’s a failure at the moment of death, because they are responsible for the whole thing. From a shamanic point of view we are not that important. We are not necessarily the biggest thing in the Universe. The shaman has a more humble point of view, that what looks like self-healing is in fact, when we are getting help. And the shaman has the role, of course, of accelerating that possibility.

Self-healing is a very secular view of reality, but it’s a step in consciousness. It’s like recognising the brain is connected to the body.

Can you talk about the difference between ordinary reality and non-ordinary reality, especially regarding the implications for medicine?

The terms ‘ordinary reality’ and ‘non-ordinary reality’ come from Carlos Casteneda. Ordinary reality is the reality that we all perceive together. It’s the reality in which we can all agree that there is a clock on the wall.

Non-ordinary reality is the reality that is associated with the shamanic state of consciousness; that is, when the consciousness has been altered and you’re able to see what you normally don’t see in an ordinary state of consciousness.

Ordinary reality is something that virtually everybody agrees on. Non-ordinary reality is very person-specific. The information obtained in nonordinary reality is tailor-made to the individual - other people may not perceive it at all, as opposed to the information obtained in ordinary reality, in which everybody gets the same thing.

Non-ordinary reality is also an empirical reality; that is, the person interacts with it, sees it, touches it, hears it, feels it. And the shaman sees with the heart in that reality. In non-ordinary reality, for something to be the same for different persons, it has to be the same in the heart.

Here (in ordinary reality) for something to be the same, it doesn’t matter what your emotion is; you’ll see it, for example, as a door in the room. If I showed you a picture of my mother, now deceased, you and I would not have the same emotional relationship with that picture.

But if I said the word ‘mother,’ and everyone saw their own mother, the emotional feeling in the heart would be closer - not identical, but closer. So to see things exactly the same in the heart, is a little different for each person, because each person has a different personality and a different life history.

The term ‘non-ordinary reality’ is useful because it permits one to be reminded that access to these worlds is related to the degree to which you have entered the shamanic state of consciousness. It clarifies our thinking. For years, many people were confused by what shamans said. ‘I made a journey and was away for three years, and such and such happened.’

Now that person in non-ordinary reality had the experience of living somewhere else for three years, but might have been gone only a half hour in ordinary reality.

What about divination?

Work in shamanism also involves divination. A person can journey for themselves, or have somebody who’s a shamanic practitioner journey for them, to get an answer to a question.

What’s really interesting is when somebody who’s a complete stranger - about whom the shaman knows nothing - asks for an answer to a question, and the shaman then journeys or uses other techniques and gets the exact information that’s valid for that person’s life.

This can happen because these things are known by the spirits. The shaman doesn’t need to know anything except the methods, and to have his or her own spirit helpers.

How can doctors and nurses use this knowledge?

Sometimes I informally call our foundation the ‘University of Shamanism.’ I bring that up because our primary purpose is to return shamanism to the planet by training people.

Many of these people are doctors and other health professionals. It is they who must discover how to integrate what they are taught into their practices.

We don’t have a ready template for that. Within the next few years, we hope to have a large-scale
conference of health practitioners who have studied with us, to exchange information about how they have used these methods in their practice.

**The Foundation is conducting research about drumming and health. Can you talk about that?**

Our research, thanks to the Samuel Lunenfeld Foundation in Canada, is investigating certain matters regarding shamanic journeying and drumming and health.

My wife, Dr Sandra Harner, is the director of the Shamanism and Health Project. Her research involves two major aspects, one of which is the effect of shamanic journeying and drumming on our immune response and emotions.

In connection with this work, she has gotten some hints that people with certain profiles of psychological descriptors respond much more effectively in terms of the immune response than others. This is a subject, obviously, of considerable interest.

She has also found that there is a tremendous increase in the sense of well-being, as well as decreased mood disturbance and stress, in people working with shamanic drumming and journeying. But to say more would be premature.

It’s ironic that a system of healing that - other than using plants - is the oldest known system of healing in the world, should have no research going on in it at all, other than what we are able to do with our meager resources.

I look forward to the day when the possibility of spiritual causality is not ruled out of research, so that science, in fact, can be completely scientific.

We also have what the medical profession would call ‘anecdotal accounts’. People often come to the shamans when everybody else has failed. We have cases in which, once people start getting shamanic treatments and laboratory tests are continued, the tests turn out negative, whereas they previously were positive.

The assumption from the medical profession is usually that the previous diagnoses were incorrect, because there’s been a reversal. That’s fine with us. After all, it’s virtually impossible, on a case-by-case basis, to prove causality. People wonder, “How do you know this works?” Well, you just practice it for your life and it develops a track record for you.

My primary interest right now is in miracles. I’ve devoted some years now to finding out what principles are involved to have miracles happen. I think we’re making significant progress.

Almost everything that anybody’s ever read about in the shamanic or the miracle literature, is something that we have some knowledge of how to do now. And this includes miracles of healing.

I might say something about spirits, because it’s a strange word to people. What is a spirit? In 1961, when I was with the Conibo Indians in eastern Peru in the Amazon, I was training using ayahuasca with a shaman, and we were working with the various nature spirits every night. I worked with the anaconda spirit, the black panther spirit, the fresh-water dolphin spirit, various tree spirits, and so on.

They would come, we would see them. Then one night I got introduced to the outboard-motor spirit. And then the radio spirit and the airplane spirit. I came to realise that anything that you see in complete darkness or with your eyes closed is technically a spirit. That makes it sound like it’s just an image in the air, but shamans find out which spirits have power and which don’t. They discover what spirits can help in what ways. It’s very important to recognise that whatever you contact in non-ordinary reality is technically a spirit. It’s a spiritual reality.

**Once a shaman contacts the spirits, what happens?**

There’s a crossover of the power from nonordinary reality to ordinary reality. The two realities are conceptually discrete, but the shaman is able to move the power of one over to the other. When this is done successfully, that’s how healings occur and how we have what is called miracles.

**Your interest in miracles was obviously spurred by your**
experiencing or witnessing miracles. Would you be willing to tell us a miracle story?

This is a very simple one that can be seen to this day, empirically, in ordinary reality. One of our students, Carol Herkimer, was in what we call a 'spirit boat,' along with other members of a basic class.

The spirit boat is a technique used in Aboriginal Australia, on the Northwest coast of North America, and in the upper Amazon. A group of shamans journey together to the Lower or Upper World to go outside of time. They may be going for healing or knowledge. When a whole group of people, trained properly and in contact with spirits, journey together to help one person, it’s very powerful.

We were using a dance studio in lower Manhattan on Canal Street called 'The Kiva.'

Like any other dance studio, it had highly polished floors, so we always had to be careful not to scuff them. Carol was recovering from a terrible traffic accident and she couldn’t sit on the cushions on the floor with the other people. She had to sit in a chair with bent tubular metal legs.

So we went off on the journey, and when we came back (to ordinary reality), people shared what they had encountered. When Carol went on the journey, she went through a sea of fire in non-ordinary reality.

When she came back, the floor was smoking under her chair, and the bent aluminum tubular leg on one side had burned a channel into the floor, but she hadn’t gotten burned. The people who owned the studio were quite upset, and to this day the burned channel is still there.

This example alone doesn’t prove anything, but it’s these kinds of coincidences that build up in your own practice. In no single case can you be sure what actually happened, but if you find a high correlation between treatments by people who are well known as healing shamans and recoveries - when other things have failed - then you begin to pay attention.

When you start shamanic journeying, if you’re the kind of person the spirits feel compassion for and want to help, you’re going to get lots of teachings you never asked for and never expected. Because once you go through those doors - whatever those doors are - the spirits will teach you according to your preparation, and your life will change. Even one journey may start changing your life.

Michael Harner PhD, is an anthropologist and founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, an international non-profit organisation dedicated to preserving shamanic knowledge and to teaching the basic principles of that knowledge for practical applications in the contemporary world.

He has practiced shamanic healing since 1961, living and working with many indigenous tribal peoples, and is a former professor and chair of the department of anthropology at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York. He has also taught at Columbia, Yale, and UC Berkeley, and also served as co-chair of the anthropology section of the New York Academy of Sciences. He has written several books including the classic ‘The Way of The Shaman.’

Bonnie Horrigan is the author of two books: ‘Red Moon Passage’ and ‘Voices of Integrative Medicine.’ In 1995, she co-founded Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine, a medical journal examining cross-cultural healing practices and the relationship of the human spirit to health, and is currently editorial director for EXPLORE: The Journal of Science and Healing.

Bonnie co-founded and serves as the Executive Director for the Society for Shamanic Practitioners, a non-profit organisation dedicated to re-emergence of spiritual healing in our culture.


Right: ‘digital painting’ of Dr Harner lying down inside the spirit boat next to the sick person

Right above: after the journey is completed he blows retrieved power into their crown
any anthropologists have come to the conclusion that within the shamanism of Siberia, women were the first shamans.

The C18th Russian explorer Stepan Krasheninnikoff writes that the shamanistic gift among the people of Kamchatka is almost exclusive to women. “Woman is by nature a shaman,” declared a Chukchi shaman to the anthropologist and writer Waldemar Bogoras, “She does not need to be specially prepared for the calling, and so her period of training and preparation is much shorter and less trying.”

ALL IN A NAME
An important pointer to the original shamans being women comes from the names the different Siberian peoples have for a shaman.

Shaman is a Western corruption of samaan or s’amanthe, a word from the Siberian Evenki (previously known as the Tungus people), which gradually got brought into the Russian language by early explorers of Siberia. The word gradually got established as a general term for a Siberian tribal spiritual healer in Russia, and then migrated to the rest of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries via anthropologists. The word shamanka, meaning a woman shaman, was never used by Siberian people - the ending ka is a Russian way of giving a word a female form.

Across the vastness of Siberia, different peoples had different names for both male and female shamans. The Yakut call male shamans khamma or ayun, the Mongols and Buryats buge or bo, the Evenki samman and khamman, the Tartars and Altaians use kam and gam, the shamans of Kyrgyzstan use baksy, and the Samoyed use tadibey.

But a woman shaman has a different name, and this name is basically the same over a wide geographical area. Among the Mongols, Buryats, Yakuts, Altaians, Turgout, and Kyrgyz the word for a woman shaman is udagan (or variations such as utagan, ubakan, utygan or utugun). This word probably originates from the Mongolian word Etugen which is the name of the ancient hearth-goddess.

Because udagan is so universal, language experts understand it to be a very old word, older than the words for male shaman, which seems to show that female shamans have been around a lot longer than male ones have.

There is other evidence that supports the idea of women being the first shamans. When we look at the roles of traditional Siberian
shamans, both male and female, we can see how their modes of dress, habits, and privileges compare with those of their non-shaman same-sex peers. For instance, if a male shaman is allowed to dress, or do activities that normally men are prohibited from doing, but which women are expected to do.

CROSSING THE GENDER DIVIDE
As the first shamans may well have been women, it is interesting to see how many Siberian male shamans - to some degree or another - are ‘transformed’ to become women. Women shamans do ‘transform’ to become men, but this is generally less common.

This transformation occurs all over Siberia, but it is much more dramatic in the Northern parts.

In the south of Siberia, transgenderism is mostly centred around the costume and ritual apparel of the shaman. Writing about Yakut shamans in his book ‘The Evolution of the Black Faith,’ Russian anthropologist V. F. Troshchanski points out that traditionally ‘male Yakut shamans have two iron circles representing breasts on their coat, that they part their hair in the middle - as traditionally woman would do, that they braid their hair like a woman does and let it fall loose during their ceremonies.’

He also notes that ‘neither a woman nor a shaman lies on the right side of the yurt’ and adds that ‘it is only on very important occasions that the shaman wears his own garment; on lesser occasions he wears a girl’s jacket made of foal’s hide.’ Despite these somewhat superficial aspects of trans-genderism, male shamans generally stay within their cultural same gender roles.

WORKING WITH THE SPIRITS
This appropriation of certain female roles has sometimes been

‘Woman is by nature a shaman,’ declared a Chukchi shaman ‘She does not need to be specially prepared for the calling, and so her period of training and preparation is much shorter and less trying’
interpreted by anthropologists as a sort of cunning plan by male shamans who are eager to take power from women and muscle in on their social territories. But from a shamanic point of view it is much more to do with the balancing of energy within the shaman. Vladimir Kondakov, a Yakut shaman, described how shamans have to balance their male and female energy in order to work powerfully.

Many Siberian male shamans have female spirit helpers, and as it is customary in Siberian shamanism to have spirit helpers take over a shaman, a spirit’s female qualities (or possibly male spirit helper qualities in the case of women) will come forward, making the shaman appear to act in a transgender manner.

This work with opposite gender spirit helpers is seen as useful in the healing work shamans do, as it helps balance out the energies in the person being healed. Sometimes a shaman will tell his or her patient that they too must adopt the manner, clothes or life style of the opposite sex if they are to get well again.

The opposite gender spirits often demand that shamans dress in the clothes of the opposite sex. This may need to be only when they perform shamanic work, or all of the time, depending on the instruction of the spirit.

This more overt form of transgenderism occurs more in the north of Siberia up by the Arctic Ocean. One Northern Siberian Chukchi shaman recounts how when he was young, and before becoming a shaman, he was afflicted with a strange illness which caused him to sleep day after day, almost without interruption.

Eventually a spirit appeared to him in his sleep and ordered him to put on a woman’s dress, after which he got better and became a shaman.

This shaman had a wife and four children and was described as having ‘cheeks covered with a stubby black beard so there could be no misunderstanding about the sex to which he really belonged.’

**BECOMING A SOFT-MAN**

At times the shamanic use of balanced sexual power means that male shamans are said to actually turn physically into females (and vice versa), rather than just wearing opposite sex clothes or adopting hair styles. This gender change may be just for particular shamanic ceremonies or it may be permanent.

At the turn of the C20th, the Russian ethnographer Waldemar Bogoras studied the Chukchi people and wrote a book about them. He describes how many male shamans become yirka-laul (soft-men) or ne’ uchica (like a woman) and women shamans become qa’ chikicheca (like a man). He tells us that such transformations were always on a spirit’s orders and were greatly feared by the young shamans who wished to remain their biological gender.

Bogoras explained the various degrees and stages of transformation amongst the Chukchi shamans he met, beginning with male shamans echoing women only in the manner of braiding and arranging their hair.

The next stage is when a man ‘throws away the rifle and the lance, the lasso of the reindeer herdsman, and the harpoon of the seal-hunter, and takes to the needle and the skin-scraper.’

He explains that shamans learn the use of these quickly because the spirits help them all the time, ‘even to the point where the shaman’s mode of speech changes from male to female, and his body alters in its faculties and forces, thus does he lose masculine strength, fleetness of foot and endurance in wrestling, and acquires instead the helplessness of the woman... He has accompanying psychological changes, as he loses his brute courage and fighting spirit, and becomes shy of strangers, even fond of small talk and of nursing small children; with this the soft-man begins to feel like a woman.’

Bogoras goes on to report that; ‘A true soft-man enters into sexual competition with women for young men, and succeeds easily with the aid of his spirits. He chooses a lover and takes a husband, and a marriage is performed with the usual rites, and I must say that it forms a quite solid union which often lasts till the death of one of the parties.’

Soft men are said sometimes to acquire the sex organs of a woman, although others are said to have mistresses and to produce children with them. The greatest male shamans who become soft-men are said to even be able to give birth to children, and there are reports of giving birth being held in public to prove they are now truly women.

In addition to perhaps marrying in ordinary life, each soft-man has a special protector spirit who plays the part of a spirit-husband. Sometimes a male shaman who has not transformed to a soft-man has a spirit-wife too, in addition to his own physical wife.

Bogoras never met a woman transformed into a man, but he heard of several cases. One transformed female shaman was a widow, who had children of her own. Following the command of the spirits, she cut her hair, took on the dress of a man, adopted masculine pronunciation, and even learned in a very short time to handle the spear and to shoot with a rifle. Eventually she wanted to marry, and easily found a young girl who consented to become her wife.

But it seems that the spirits could sometimes be negotiated with, one Koryak shaman wore women’s clothes for two years on...
the orders of his spirits; but after that time, as he had not been able to completely transform into a soft-man, he implored his spirits to permit him to resume wearing regular men’s clothes. The spirits granted his request, but on the condition that he put on women’s clothes during ceremonies.

Despite being shamans, soft-men would sometimes suffer a loss of status, and be treated badly as the tribes treated the rest of the women.

**MEN, WOMEN AND SHAMANS**

This transgenderism in Siberian shamans has been noted for a very long time. The Roman historian Herodotus describes the enarees, the transgender male-to-female shamans of the ancient Scythians of the Central Asian steppes. He described how they would go so far as to mutilate their genitalia and afterwards take on female roles. They were said to be the most powerful shamans of their people. The Roman poet Ovid claimed that some Scythian female shamans knew how to extract what he called “female poison,” which was distilled from the urine of a mare in heat. This poison was used to dose men in order to turn them into women.

Today a pregnant mare’s urine is the main source of premarin, the most widely used estrogen drug for gender reassignment.

It seems that shamanic transgenderism is extremely ancient, and it can perhaps be said that in traditional Siberian culture there are three sexes - women, men and shamans, as the shaman does not truly belong to either gender.

A shaman may be transgender, androgynous, homosexual or heterosexual, or sexless, but whatever they are, they form a special category of people, having special social roles comprising of both male and female characteristics. The same may be said of their ritual clothes, which combine features peculiar to the dress of both sexes.

Whether the transgenderism displayed by some Siberian shamans is inherent in their personality and physiology is debated by anthropologists, especially as many shamans appear to be comfortable in their biological gender and sexuality before they receive their calling, and then are often most reluctant to make the change, especially if the change involves becoming a soft-man.

From this it would appear that it is the intervention of the spirits which causes such dramatic changes, although an inherent transgenderism in the shaman-to-be which ‘comes out’ during their initiation cannot be ruled out.

It is important not to think that Siberian shamans come from some sort of enlightened liberal society. If a non-shaman decided to change their gender they stood a great chance of social stigma and would probably be shunned. But when a shaman changes, it is seen as a sacred thing, a spirit power gifted to them to help them be more powerful as a servant of the people.

*Above: cap of a transgender ‘transformed’ shaman. Yukaghir people*

*Below: Chukchi shaman perform a prosperity ceremony*
Karen: Does shamanism have a goal or a vision?

Jonathan: Shamanism is a spiritual practice and a healing practice at the same time; it is a spiritual healing practice. The idea is that people who want to be healed or need to be healed come to someone who is practising shamanism for the healing, and the shaman together with his spirits try to heal that person.

While doing the healing, the shaman learns more about the spirits, and his relationship with them and also more about healing - including his own healing.

I would not say that shamanism, as I practice it, has the goal or vision of personal healing. But I would say that it has the goal or vision of contributing to the balance of the universe and that, of course, affects the shaman herself.

Most spiritual paths have an ethical framework - the ten commandments, the five precepts etc. Do you see there as being a shamanic ethical framework and if so, what?

It’s a very interesting question. There is no real dogma, yet at the same time there is an ethical framework. The ethical framework is the shaman’s relationship to her spirit helpers. This puts a lot of responsibility on the shaman. As I have recently been told by my teacher, the greater the gift, the greater the responsibility. If we forget our responsibility, we are quickly reminded. The basis on which shamanism stands is the animistic experience of the Universe. That is, all that exists is alive.

Through his experience, the shaman knows that all that is alive is connected. As one works more and more with shamanism, one comes to understand this on deeper and deeper levels. The deeper levels of understanding bring deeper levels of responsibility. So I would say that it’s not a frozen framework but rather a very fluid and dynamic framework.

Are there any common beliefs shared by people practising core shamanism? If not, what effect do you believe that this lack of commonality has on the practice of it as a spiritual path?
I do believe that there is a common experiential base to shamanism which is different from a dogma or a belief system. This is because shamanism is not a matter of belief, it is a matter of experience.

That in itself probably has a very deep effect on the practice of shamanism as a spiritual path. A lot of it depends on how seriously you take your life and how much you are willing to be educated and changed by the experiences of your life. Are you going to lock them out, or are you going to let them in?

I think this is very much the essence of this question and I think this is very much the essence of anything as a spiritual path. Some people have very thick armour and they want to wear their shamanism, or any other spiritual practice, as a shield, as a buffer, between themselves and the rest of the world; some people want to wear it as a medal or a royal order, some people want to wear it like a diamond ring. And some people want it just to be a part of their life.

I don’t think there is any one answer to this question. I think you would get a lot of different answers if you asked different people. In this day and age I would say that a lot of people are seeking an identity. I’m sure that there are a lots of people who would like to be identified as a shaman. This is not the point of shamanism, and I do not think this is the point of any spiritual path.

As one very wise teacher, Ram Dass, pointed out “The spiritual journey, as I conceive of it, is a progression from truth to ever deepening truth”. And that is one aspect of shamanism as a spiritual path that is shared with all other paths.

The way core shamanism is currently being taught in workshops focuses strongly on the ‘doing’ side of the practice. Are your changing perceptions of shamanism as a path changing the way that you teach?

I think you’d have to ask the people who have been coming on my courses that question. But I feel it probably has.

I think a lot of people go on courses to have peak experiences. For me this contributes to spirituality as a substitute for life, just as alcohol or drugs.

I think when you go to these New Age gatherings of the mind, body and spirit, the people who are performing there are mostly trying to offer spectacular spiritual experiences.

When I first started teaching workshops, I would often end it up by inviting people to try to journey for a few minutes. I have stopped doing that and there are a lot of reasons for that decision. One reason is that someone in an environment like that might not experience anything and they’d think “that’s it for shamanism”.

Another reason is just the opposite. Somebody might have the experience of a lifetime sitting there in a room with 300 other people in an uncomfortable chair. They might be transported to the world of the spirits and be wondering what has happened to them wondering if they were losing their mind, wondering if they were the reincarnation of Mahatma Gandhi, wondering any number of possibilities. But the lecture is over and who can they talk with?

Anybody can have a peak spiritual experience at any time, and weekend or week-long courses certainly are orientated around just that. When I’m teaching I am interested that people not only experience a contact with the spirit world but I’m also very interested that they find out what to do with those experiences.

This has become an essential part of my teaching. When I say "what to do with those experiences" I’m not only talking about what to do while they are having them, or what to do while they’re working with other people or for other people. I’m talking about what to do with the experiences for the rest of their lives.

All paths have a shadow, this can have many aspects. It can represent the place where most practitioners are tested by something within the path itself. What do you believe to be the shadow side of shamanism?

I wouldn’t say that shamanism really has a shadow side. It has a twin, which I would call sorcery. But I think it’s an interesting question that touches on a lot of things. I would not describe the place where most practitioners are tested by their path as a shadow side either. It’s a time of testing. Whether or not you come to the twin depends on how you do on the tests.

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One of the first tests is, what you do with the power that you get from practising shamanism. There are so many different answers to this question, so many possibilities. If you let the power go to your head you’re probably going to get in trouble for a while. But, if you’re a half decent person to begin with, you are probably going to get out of that trouble pretty quickly. If it goes to your head, then you think it’s something personal to do with you, you think you own the power.

If you do this, then you are probably going to lose that power pretty fast. And by losing that power it might put you into an unhappy place. In this aspect you could compare it to falling in love. Its great when it’s going on, it’s terrible when she says goodbye. That, I guess, is the first test.

But if you let the power go to your heart, that can be dangerous too. It might end up that you give it all away as quickly as you get it.

There is one theory that the more you give the more you get. But I think we have all experienced that this is not 100% true all of the time. For example, soul loss often happens when we give our power away voluntarily.
Another trap is the spiritual materialism trap. Where you go out and start to call yourself a shaman, maybe buy a badge that says "I am a shaman - who or what are you?"

There is also the trap of saying, "I have spirits therefore I can do anything I want". This is a very dangerous trap. This is the trap that generally leads people to what might be called sorcery. That is, when the spirit power you are loaned is used for the accumulation of power rather than for continuing the flow of power.

Look at a dam where the water is stopped for the purpose of making hydroelectric energy. In the first place you had a river and the river was flowing, having its effect on the entire environment; doing the things that rivers do, flowing. You build a dam and you stop the river. You occasionally open the ducts so that the water streams through under high pressure, so that it can turn the generators to make electricity.

In the meantime what happens to the river valley? It dries up. Perhaps it turns out that the dam was not constructed right, and then the dam bursts. Then what happens?

This of course is just an analogy and a very simple one at that, perhaps presented in an oversimplified way. But I think it’s a useful one to think about when you start to think about power, and trying to store it.

I often talk about power as energy and power as might. When you start thinking that you have power, that this power belongs to you, that your power is stronger than someone else’s power, then you start to approach what I think you called the shadow side of shamanism.

But for me this is not really the shadow side of shamanism, it is another practice altogether. It is the accumulation of personal power whereas shamanism is not. For me shamanism is a spiritual discipline which enables one to directly contact and use the spirit power of the universe. The point of the shaman’s work is to bring the power of the world of the spirits to the material world and to let that power flow through him. The more that the power of the spirits flows through the shaman, the more powerful he becomes. As long as this power is handled in a proper way.

A spiritual life can be thought of as being made up of three elements - path, practice and participation. Core shamanism to date has largely focused on shamanic practice. As far as I can see, participation is the energy with which you, as a human being, follow your vision, and is largely up to you as an individual. However a path must have certain central elements which are key to those who walk it. Could you talk briefly about what you see to be the key elements of the shamanic path?

I feel that the key element to remember is that the shaman is directly and consciously interacting with the spirit world. Directly interacting with this spirit world brings with it a lot of responsibility and the shaman is someone who is willing to and does take on this responsibility at a very deep level.

Of course you don’t just plunge into the depths right away, at least most people don’t. To do so generally has extreme psychic side effects. Most people go into shamanism slowly and carefully and this is also what I recommend.

Of course not all people have that possibility; some people are just thrown into it and this can be a very terrifying experience.

I would say that the direct and conscious relationship with the spirit world and the responsibility that entails are the key elements of the shamanic path.

Coming right along with that is trust, a very deep trust in the spirits. And trust of course is an expression of love. I don’t think that people who have difficulty in feeling - and expressing - love can walk the path of the shaman. However, you also have to have very deep understanding of what love is and that is something that a lot of us do not have. I find myself constantly receiving lessons about love and truth. If you are not true to yourself, you cannot be true to anyone else, and that includes the spirits. To practice shamanism you have to be true to the spirits.

How do you personally resolve conflicts when they arise between the demands of today’s society and your shamanic way of being. How do you stay centred when the distractions of our society invade and seduce?

Those are all very deep and very personal questions. I will do my very best to answer them in turn. First off, I try not to separate my shamanic way of being and today’s society. The way I interact with today’s society I hope is a reflection of my shamanic way of being. If it is not, it is generally quickly brought to my attention and I have to consider it. Sometimes it takes me longer to consider these things than other times.

Sometimes the answer is very clear that, in fact, the demands of today’s society and my shamanic way of being are not interacting in a harmonious way. Sometimes to get me and my stupid self to switch over to my shamanic-way-of-being is not easy.

How do I stay centred when the distractions of our society invade and seduce? I don’t expect to stay centred every time the ways of our society invade or attempt to or do seduce me. I am not in any manner guaranteed to stay centred. I am a human being. However, when I am away from my centre, I become aware of it and I try to get back to it as quickly as possible, with the help of my spirits.

To do that there are several things I try to remember to ask myself. One of them is to ask "how is my behaviour affecting my environment". Another way of doing it is to ask "Am I being true to myself by doing this?"

I feel that both of these questions are very centering. I experience them that way, and they often lead me to do things that I know I should be doing. My laziness, my slovenliness, my fleshiness, want me to act in another way; but if I act in that other half-hearted way, then I know that I’m not being true to myself.

How do I stay focused and true to my path? There is only one way to do this and that is to know what your path is. And of course the path takes on different faces every day and this means that the only way to stay true to your path is to stay aware of it. There are a lot of ways of doing that and shamanic practice is one of them. There are many small practices within the great shamanic practice.
Shamanic practice has been defined as being able to contact the spirits to seek their help and advice and to bring that advice and help back to the material world. There are a lot of other practices though, and those practices are all about the major practice. So I advise people to have a daily practice which they perform, do, work with every day. A practice that reminds them of their spirit connection.

In the Bible, in the book of Exodus, Moses, on the behalf of the children of Israel, makes a covenant with Yahweh. I advise everyone who is practising shamanism, who have felt that they have taken shamanism to their hearts, to make a covenant, a pact, a contract with their own spirit teachers and helpers. For me this is vital. That pact or covenant should be made together with the spirits. It should not be something you just decide one day. It should also be simple.

The reason I say this is that it should be something that you can always remember in those times when, as you put it, the distractions of our society invade and seduce. It should be easy to remember when you are trying stay focused and true to your path. However, I would not advise anyone to make such a contract unless they are absolutely certain that they really want to do their best to keep it.

Our society is so disconnected from the natural world. What special opportunities and challenges do you see shamanism as having as a spiritual path in such a society?

I see the opportunities and challenges as limitless. In a society like ours, which is disconnected, hierarchic and highly specialised, the effect of shamanism will be (hopefully) to make people more aware of the natural world and their connections to it, and make their lives less hierarchical and more decentralised in all aspects.

I feel that the practice of shamanism gives people the experience of how we are all connected, and how we are all interdependent. It also gives people the experience of how wonderful life is when we surrender to it.
Trance: in Western culture the word has a romance to it. Being entranced is a term of romance, the idea of a trance is peaceful, beautiful, desirable. We even have a music genre by the name. It is also one of the most important tools in Böö Mörgöl, popularly known as Mongolian shamanism, as it is the state of consciousness a shaman enters, in order for a spirit to enter the shaman’s body.

As the shaman falls into trance, his spirit leaves his body and another spirit takes over. These spirits, fondly called ‘Grandmother’ or ‘Grandfather’, make use of the shaman’s body to give the spirit a voice and ability to work with those who have come to speak with them.

To many, this state seems almost romantic: losing control and relinquishing it to the divine. Yet the realities are far more complex.

I would like to share with you some trances I have witnessed in Mongolia. For the sake of privacy, all names have been changed.

TULGA AND THE TRANCE

At first, there didn’t appear to be a problem. Grandmother spirit seemed more tired than usual, but it was to be expected after the number of people she had worked to heal that day.

I had seen Tulga shamanise several times before. Grandmother, one of the primary spirits that come into him, was known for her abilities as a traditional bonesetter and the therapeutic effect of her massages. The entire family had come to see Grandmother that day, and she had done intense healing massage on several members, myself included. By the end, she was visibly exhausted.

Shamanising was finished for the day, and it was time to send Grandmother back to Heaven, and bring Tulga’s spirit back down into his own body again.

Tulga’s wife handed Grandmother the new hingirig (sacred drum), which had just been presented and enlivened that day. The hingirig is the shaman’s steed which they ride on during their shamanic journey; and it is also the bow that shoots the shaman’s soul to the heavens.

Yet Grandmother was so tired that she could not sit fully upright. She asked the attendant to help her hold the drumstick and drum.
I had never seen this before. I was concerned that the attendant would not be able to achieve the same rhythm that Tulga could when he drummed his spirit in and out of Heaven, but we all trusted that the attendant had done this before.

The attendant wrapped her hand around the shaman’s drum hand, helped brace the drum properly against his head, and began to drum.

Initially the rhythm was weak and unsure, but after about a minute, the shaman animated and began to drum on his own. The attendant let go and allowed the shaman’s natural energy and charisma to take over in the ecstatic trance of the drumbeat.

The drumming peaked in a frenzy, then the final beats and the shaman went limp, dropping the drum. This was what we were used to.

The attendant rushed to remove the drum from Tulga’s weary hand, and swiftly pulled the ritual mask-headress off his head.

We waited for the shaman to stir, knowing it would take him a few moments to recover from his spiritual descent from trance.

“Tulga, Tulga” his wife gently prompted. There was no response.

Oogi, Tulga’s two year-old son, ran over, excited that his father had returned from the heavens. “Aawal” (Father), he shouted with childlike excitement. The cries became more questioning, then concerned, then panicked as Tulga remained slumped over.

We stood up, hovering over him with concern.

“Tulga” his wife prompted again, lightly slapping his face with her hand.

Something was wrong.

An older brother rushed the children out of the room. He slammed the door shut and blockaded it with his body. The two-year-old was unsure whether to be confused or hysterical, and his cries switched between the two.

A sister turned off the light and another brother grabbed the brother’s bardag (a large stick used for beating and purification) and heavily beat the shaman on the back three times.

I flinched. I’d been beaten with a bardag twice before. After the first time, I could not sleep on my back for four days, and as I watched I realised Tulga’s brother was not using a light hand.

There was no response.

This was a crisis, Grandmother had left, but the shaman’s spirit had not returned. We didn’t know why; if he was lost, or worse.

One of the greatest spiritual dangers of shamanism is soul loss. Everyone in Mongolia had heard of shamans dropping dead while shamanising if something happened to their soul while it’s out of the body.

The fear in the room was electrifying, but stronger than the fear, was the sense of urgency and purpose.

I moved to the side as the shaman’s wife pulled the headdress off of her shoulder - where she had slung it before - and jammed it back onto Tulga’s head, struggling with his limp neck.

She called to the brother to grab the drum. Two men braced the shaman upright, forcing the drum into one lifeless hand and the drumstick into the other.

It took several tries to brace him in a way that didn’t allow the drum to drop.

Forcing the drum against his head, one brother moved the drumstick-hand again and again against the drum, trying to bring Tulga back.

Nothing happened.

The attendants and family held the shaman like a limp doll, moving his body for him. After a few tense minutes, the shaman suddenly animated and began drumming on his own.

We all stepped back and anxiously waited. His drumming seemed to return to normal, speeding up, then slowing. Then the final strikes.

He slumped forward again and the drum fell. His wife grabbed the drum away and pulled off the headdress. She called his name. He weakly lifted a hand to his face, covering his eyes, moaning in recognition.

Tulga’s incident shook me to my core. I had known, since starting my work in Mongolia, of the inherent dangers of shamanism, but I, like many in the field, viewed trance with a kind of romance. I had heard many tales of shamans losing their souls or dying during trance, but I had
As the shaman falls into trance, their spirit leaves their body and another spirit takes over.

These spirits, fondly called ‘Grandmother’ or ‘Grandfather’ make use of the shaman’s body to give the spirit a voice and ability to work with those who have come to speak with them.
The morin huurs were moved away and the shaman came over and began slapping Ankhaa on the back with the tassels of his headdress.

Tsetseg, another shamaness, told me that this was one form of shaman sickness. He was possessed, but not within his control. His breathing and movements were animalistic. He kept gripping and tearing grass from the ground.

After a few moments of hitting him on the back, he seemed to come to. He stumbled his way out of the circle and towards the picnic area to spend some time alone after what was, presumably, a traumatic experience. A few friends came to join him.

Bayar asked if I was scared, I explained that I was concerned, but not scared. I had seen this sort of thing before as a teenager in Thailand. Bayar was relaxing and talking to me when suddenly, we heard a commotion. People were shouting for Bayar again. He jumped up and ran over.

Ankhaa was back in trance. It was taking three full-grown men to try and restrain him, his movements were so strong.

Bayar and Khishgee and another shaman, were both trying everything they could to get the spirit out of Ankhaa, but it wasn’t working.

Bayar rushed back to the circle to start shamanising, hoping that his spirit could directly intervene.

At this point, Ankhaa briefly snapped out of it. He demanded his shirt be removed, he was sweating and in pain. He was crying, screaming Bayar’s name in agonised cries. We assured him Bayar was shamanising and would help.

Ankhaa was struggling for control, and collapsed sobbing. He soon lost control again. The spirit was back, and there was a massive circle of dirt around him, about two feet wide on all sides, where Ankhaa, in trance had ripped the thick grass and flowers out of the ground. His grip as he tore the long wildgrass from the earth was so violent that, as we found out later, he broke his thumb in the process.

The men tackled him again, and when the spirit briefly left and Ankhaa collapsed for a minute, three men grabbed him and picked up his limp body, bringing him into the circle.

Bayar was shamanising and his Grandfather spirit was present.
Ankhaa was blindfolded and dragged in front of him. The spirit which had taken over Ankhaa would not calm down enough to be cooperative, and Grandfather and the attendant had to whip him several times. I cringed as scarlet lines appeared across his already beaten back.

Finally they were able to fix the blindfold and sit him on cushions. Grandfather tried to talk to Ankhaa’s possessing spirit - who up until now had only been making animalistic grunts and growls - and he began to talk in an angry, unearthly voice. Ankhaa’s parents, devout followers of Tibetan Buddhism’s most strict Gelugpa sect, have a hatred towards shamanism and refuse to propitiate the family spirits. For three years, Ankhaa has been afflicted by this spirit that will come, very violently, and demand attention.

Grandfather was able to talk to the spirit, and seemed to be scolding him. I couldn’t really tell. I was too transfixed by the situation to ask for translation.

After a long conversation, Ankhaa’s spirit was given a drum, made a few more demands before he left, and drummed himself out, leaving Ankhaa collapsed, on his back, in the circle, sobbing. After a few moments of trying to recover, and while Bayar and Khishgee comforted him, he ran out of the circle and into a quiet area of grass to cry on his own. I helped clean up some of the sacred items in the circle and Ankhaa’s friends came over and brought him his shirt and jacket.

Bayar coaxed him over to the picnic area to sit and talk. The poor man was sobbing uncontrollably, cursing his situation and misfortune. Khishgee joined Bayar, because he too was someone who had also experienced unplanned trance. We left them alone for a while, but when Ankhaa had calmed down, I went over and talked with him. He was red-eyed but seemed much better.

I asked if he was okay and massaged his hand, which was stiff from the spirit’s grip. We even got him to laugh a bit and we joked around a little.

He apologised to me for the spectacle, I laughed and asked what he was apologising for. I showed him a video of unintentional trance in Thailand I had on my phone, and said I had seen it before and wasn’t scared and it was OK. We started to get a few smiles out of him.

He then looked up and said in English “What the fuck?!?” And we all started laughing. “Yes, exactly,” I said, “What the fuck?!”

Amalia Rubin completed her Masters at the University of Washington researching the revival of indigenous traditions in Inner Asia, concentrating on Gesar traditions in Kham and Böö Mörgöl in Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia. She is currently residing in Ulaanbaatar as an English teacher and on the board of directors for a Mongolian non-profit organisation. Amalia is continuing her research on the revival of Böö Mörgöl in Ulaanbaatar and hopes to eventually turn her research into a book.

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One of my own shamanic teachers once said to me: “Any white person who has had trauma, thinks that they are a shaman these days,” and this sentiment certainly seems to be true: feel out of place, sensitive, have a horrible childhood? Then you must indeed be a shaman.

We really seem to want our experiences - especially our pain - to mean something, and top-ten lists, such as the one I mentioned, posted out to the Western new-age shamanic movement reinforce this - you are special because you have suffered, and being a shaman is the reason for your suffering. No wonder these kind of messages are so appealing to many people.

What is interesting about the Western ‘be your own shaman’ phenomenon, is that it often seems to be perpetuated by authors and shamanic teachers, but in my experience, it seems extraordinarily rare to see many of these authors and teachers do much actual shamanic work themselves.

This is important, because becoming a shaman or “spiritual worker” of any sort - while being at it’s core a calling - is also actual work. Being a “spiritual worker,” means that you are of service to your community - however you define that.

Being a shaman is not a self-help path, or a personal health path of becoming whole again; instead, it is a path of service, similar to becoming a plumber, or school teacher, or caretaker, or doctor, or priest.

And it is not a superficial thing either, to be of effective service means that you have put in years (or often decades) of direct experience, endured the difficulties of your spiritual path, and learned to traverse the spirit realms in ways that are of benefit to others in your community. It means being an intermediary between the spirits and the people.

And it’s a path that takes a long time to develop - it’s not something learned in a weekend, and certainly not something a person is automatically ready for because they fit criteria on a list they read on a website.

Being a shaman is something that relatively few people have the capabilities of doing. I say this not to perpetuate any idea of specialness - which as I said many disaffected people, drawn to spiritual work seem to desperately need - but simply to point out that a true shaman has traits that most people do not.

A shaman must be able to work with the spirits and beings of varying sorts. These spirits are not self-created energies, or psychological archetypes, or disassociated aspects of the self - they are spirits.

A shaman needs to have the ability to see, and directly experience other spirit beings beyond themselves – and they need to be able to communicate with these spirit beings, who are as complex as any human, and who are not singularly ‘dark’ or ‘light,’ or ‘compassionate’ or ‘uncompassionate’ - just as none...
Shamanism is not a path of ‘love and light’ - as it is often made out to be - nor is it safe; instead it is work that continually opens you in both joyful and distressing ways.

Above: Siberian shaman's drum and leather drum bag. Probably Tofalar people. Early C20th

of us are purely those things either.

Anyone without the ability to work with these spirit beings is not really doing shamanic work. Without this ability one is simply doing mental or psychological work, which can be helpful, but is something very different to shamanism in the real sense of the word.

The mental and the spiritual realms are two distinct things, and due to the misunderstandings of ‘pop psychology’ - which has often taken on aspects of shamanism as another form of self-help - there is, I believe, a basic and distinct misunderstanding of the nature of spiritual work as a whole.

In modern Western society, we seem to have a spiritual vacuum - a void within ourselves - and because of this people often rush out to attend shamanic workshops - often at spiritual vacation spots - looking for initiations and experiences in order to fill this void. Shamanism is being sold as a commodity, and many who sell it know only too well that they can tell their students that they are ‘special’ in some way, sometimes even making up initiations or giving certificates announcing that their graduates are now a shaman or have passed a shamanic course - whether or not the student has any actual ability, or have enough experience to effectively work for their community.

Such students may never get beyond the romantic illusions perpetrated by the modern Western shamanic movement. They may never generate a deeper level of understanding of the cultures they have been taught about, and initiations that they may have undergone. They may never realise that these initiations, and any resulting certificates, may not be worth the paper they are written on.

Another common factor currently, seems to be a lack of knowledge which people have about their own ancestral culture.

Workshops often advertise exotic spirituality, and many people rush to the popular spiritual culture of the day. This used to be Native American medicine wheel teachings, but in recent years this appears to have shifted on to Peruvian shamanism. This allows for the modern spiritual aspirant to romanticise a culture without understanding that culture’s actual history, mythology, or the present-day reality of that culture.

The spiritual aspirant can then feel as if they are standing and associated with the proverbial ‘other’ - a culture outside of their own - and announce that they are now part of something bigger, which they can view as mystical and romantic. They don’t have to deal with the messy every-day reality of that culture, and by removing themselves from their own Western culture they can neatly sidestep the responsibility of being in that one too.

I think this is one of the biggest reasons so few people avoid exploring their own ancestry - their own spiritual culture - digging down deep into their own backyard.

In online spiritual communities there are many discussions (and often arguments) about the very term ‘shaman’ too, about what the term means, and who can use it, and so forth.

These can occasionally be interesting discussions, but in reality most of them are steeped in illusions about the reality of shamanism - such as those ideas perpetuated by new-age authors and psychologists, who may have little real idea of what actual traditional shamanism entails.

While the term ‘shaman’ certainly did, of course, come from a specific culture, it has now taken on a life of its own.

I seem to see what appears to be a form of arrogance among ‘workshop shamans’ - those people who has appropriated the term for their own use - and anger and animosity amongst many of the world’s indigenous people, who have had so much taken from them already, only to have spiritual tourists romanticise their culture, and try to usurp their spirituality.

With the word ‘shaman’ now often just another term for a mix of self-help psychology and creative visualisation techniques in the West, I think it is quite possible that many of the participants of new-age shamanic workshops are, in reality, self-creating a whole host of spirit helpers, guides, power animals, and ‘energies’ of varying sorts.

These creations may indeed help them with their self-healing, but there is, I think, a danger that they also continue that sense of ‘feeling special,’ and, if they are not truly independent spirits, these self-created beings can end up saying things to their creator which their creator wants to hear. These self-created ‘spirits’ are typically one-dimensional, without much if any personality, and often seemed to be singularly focused on helping the practitioner, without any needs or wants of their own and without a helping involvement within the wider community.

While doing a degree of personal psychotherapeutic...
work is essential for anyone pursuing a spiritual path, there is a distinct difference between this 'self-help' type of work and true spiritual work. The biggest difference of course being the actually interaction with spirit beings outside of the self.

It seems to me that it is a rarity for people to actually traverse the spirit worlds and meet real spirits - as they are instead only meeting self-created parts of themselves which masquerade as spirits. If this is indeed the case, is it any wonder that many teachers and authors then look for an ever wider audience, so as to perpetuate the myth that anyone can be a shaman. This romanticises the idea that shamanic work is safe and all about 'love and light,' and is something which can be done on the occasional weekend here and there.

If it was otherwise, the popular movement - which often seeks to say 'how exciting it is to do shamanic work' - would, I think, certainly lessen; as becoming a competent 'spiritual worker' takes an incredible amount of time, effort, and fortitude, as well as a natural aptitude.

Shamanism is not a path of 'love and light' - as it is often made out to be - nor is it safe; instead it is work that continually opens you in both joyful and distressing ways.

Certainly wanting to heal oneself - to be as solid and grounded in one's life as much as possible - is a wonderful and important thing. But bringing real self-realisation to this work is also essential, as by developing that we begin to become more aware of those who seek to commercialise the shamanic path. We need to be able to determine who are the people who are only using psychological self-help methods, and who are the people who actually have a shamanic calling, and a natural aptitude towards serving their community; and ability to be one of those age-old intermediaries between the spirit realms and ordinary reality.

When we look beyond the surface - when we go beyond the current new-age model and its romanticised versions of what a shaman is - we might find that what we were told to be true, by our teachers and favourite authors, is simply incorrect.

We might realise that we can come into our own strength, our own ancestry, our own cultures, without having to romanticise, fetishise, or appropriate another's ways. Perhaps then we can begin to learn that the spirit world is all around us - and to reach it we do not need to participate in any form of spiritual tourism.

Perhaps then we will know enough to realise that many of the 'initiations,' and the words of teachers and gurus and authors - who tell us we are 'special' and can be shamans - are false or at best misrepresentative. Perhaps we will then be able to begin to really question things.

As the modern shamanic movement, and its merging with the psychology and self-help schools, seemingly not going out of fashion any time soon, we can, as individuals, move beyond being placated by those who seek to tell us how special we are, and come into our own direct experience of spirituality.

We can realise perhaps that modern psycho-spiritual methods may be helpful, but unless we have the ability - and feel the necessity to put in decades of work in order to be a good 'spirit workers' - we are not shamans.

We might all have a spiritual path, but not everyone is called to be of service to their community, to be an intermediary between the spirits and ordinary reality.

And that, at the end of the day is okay - not everyone is meant to be a plumber. Mary Mueller Shutan was fascinated by mythology, spirits, the occult, magic, and different religions and spiritual paths since she was a child. It wasn’t until she was in her early twenties that she stopped denying her own experiences and started looking for answers, initially studying acupuncture and Chinese medicine. She then developed and interest in shamanism and folk, chaos, and ceremonial magic, studying with curanderos and several other spiritual healers who taught her to see beyond the illusions and experiences she’d had. Mary is the author of ‘The Spiritual Awakening Guide’ (2016). www.maryshutan.com mary@lotusbodywork.com

NOTES:
1: The Post ‘Ten signs that you’re a shaman and don’t know it’: www.bit.ly/Ten-Signs

Below: Mongolian shaman wearing a fringed, vulture feathered face mask, They are in trance - taken over by their helper spirit - and the spirit is giving a blessing

Being a shaman is not a self-help path, or a personal health path of becoming whole again; instead, it is a path of service, similar to becoming a plumber, or school teacher, or caretaker, or doctor, or priest. It means that you are of service to your community.
The Power of Blessing

Jonathan Horwitz and Zara Waldeback
in conversation with Faith Nolton

Faith: Where does blessing fit in with shamanic practice for you? How did you start exploring it?

Jonathan: My first teaching in shamanic healing came when I asked how I could help people who asked for help. I was told: “Listen to what they say and give them something.”

A blessing, whether from your heart or from the spirits, is a powerful start. Blessing is a way of connecting people to the power of the universe.

My first conscious meeting with blessing happened twenty-some years ago with some Lakota Sioux visiting Denmark. When I said good-bye to Albert Whitehat, a traditional singer and teacher, he shook my hand, smiled at me and said, “Have a good safe journey home.”

Simple words, yet overwhelming. I was overcome with the beauty of being alive, feeling the sun on my face, and the five hour bus-ferry-train ride home became the most important thing I had ever done. I knew - and felt - that I had received a blessing.

There is a lot of teaching in this simple experience. The essence of blessing is the power it contains.

All of us have experienced powerful moments which have changed our lives. Sometimes they come because of something someone says - the power of words - as I experienced with Albert Whitehat.

Sometimes we become aware of these moments because of an experience - I remember bicycle riding with my brother when I was eleven by Darby Creek at sunrise in June, the mist rising from the meadow, and feeling for the first time in my life the blessing of brotherhood. I have never forgotten.

Power is all around us, and in shamanic practice, blessing is one way of conveying power.

For me there are at least two kinds of blessings: the spontaneous well-wishing which comes from our hearts, and the blessings which come from the spirits.

Zara: I think it can be very useful in shamanic work to feel the difference between these two types of blessing. A blessing from the human heart is ‘giving my blessing to’ - giving my support and love, maybe even permission. A human blessing says ‘Yes’ to an act instead of ‘No.’ It goes from one heart to another.

A spirit blessing is more a case of ‘to bless’ - to have an intention for spirit power to come into a person, object or event. The kind of blessing that comes from the spirits can also give love and support but is in essence an empowerment.

Faith: Why might you give a blessing rather than healing or a power animal retrieval?

Zara: In one way they are all forms of spirit power and come from the same
At first I thought this was a funny question. But people kept saying it. I realised then that we do live in a culture of subservience. But who do we need to ask permission from? What kind of test should you pass to give a blessing? In fact, blessings are a part of everyday life. Even the phrase ‘Bye-bye’ is a shortened form of the common blessing ‘God be with you.’

If you say someone can’t give a blessing, it is taking their power from them. It is denying someone a human right. Who are we to say who can and can’t bless? Shamans, our spiritual ancestors, have been bringing blessings from the spirits since the dawn of time. It is the blessings from the spirits which carry extraordinary power.

Zara: There is a difference between giving a human well wishing and bestowing ‘the grace of god.’ I think people recognise this second act of blessing as sacred and powerful, one that has traditionally been in the hands of shamans or priests. Because of living with organised religion, some of us have accepted the idea that to give a blessing, a person must be of a ‘higher order.’ But this is not true with shamanic blessing - here it is the spirits that do the blessing, the human person is only delivering them. That is important for both giver and receiver to remember.

As always with shamanism, anyone can communicate directly with the spirits, if you have intention and connection.

Jonathan: Blessing is not used as much in modern western shamanism as it is in many tribal traditions. In our culture we have moved away from consciously blessing. People who are close to an organised religion often feel more comfortable with the idea of it. But in my experience many people practicing modern shamanism feel like refugees from a religion. So it can be a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater - and blessing is one of the babies being thrown out.

Faith: Do you feel that blessing as a shamanic practice is useful at certain times?

Zara: Blessings are often used at threshold moments. They seem connected to beginnings and endings, and to when a situation seems beyond help.

Being a pure form of power, almost a direct infusion of spirit, blessings are good for working with ‘new life.’ This may be a new baby or marriage, a journey, a new project. In my experience what the blessing does is blow life force into the person or object, imbuing it with spirit and enlivening it. It may already have a certain amount of its own essential power but the blessing fills it with spirit power so it can go well and grow well. Blessing the seeds of
If you say someone can’t give a blessing, it is taking their power from them. It is denying someone a human right. Who are we to say who can and can’t bless?

Right: American politician being blessed by a Native American elder

our life means they are given support and power from the spirits to help develop.

Jonathan: I use blessings in weddings. I ask the spirits for a blessing for the couple getting married, as a part of the ceremony. I always get the guests to take a very active part as well. I generally have a big basket of flower petals - rose petals if I can get them. I go around with the petals and ask each person to take a handful and sprinkle them on the bridal couple while giving them a blessing in words. I don’t stand there listening, but looking at the expressions on the faces, it is clear that sometimes these words are coming from some place far beyond the blesser. And so again, the line between human well-wishing and spirit words is not always clear.

Zara: Although blessings are often given in a ceremonial manner, shamanic blessing is not about ritual. It is about essence, spirit essence. Blessings speak directly to the spirit, in a language far beyond our everyday human ears. We don’t have to try to make sense of it. We just need to receive its power.

Zara: It can have a miraculous effect.

My spirits told me blessings can be used in situations which seem hopeless. When nothing more can be done, a blessing can change things in ways we can’t even imagine. I have been worrying about environmental disasters and the extinction of species and this seems a very hopeless situation. Though we may not be able to change what is physically happening, a blessing can help in another way.

So even if a species disappears, on a spirit level something of their ‘medicine’ can remain, helping to keep balance. This may seem like cold comfort, and I don’t mean that we shouldn’t do all we can to help the physical situation. But as my spirit teacher says “When all hope is gone, a blessing brings the life spark back”. It doesn’t make everything all right, but it can offer power, even if not on a human plane.

Faith: Can blessings empower us in everyday life? Can they also protect us?

Jonathan: Nowadays I hear people saying that love and fear are the two main forces or energies in the world and that the big battle is not between good and evil, but between love and fear. The fact is that many people have fear, and, in traditional societies where shamanism still exists, people go to the shaman asking for blessings for themselves, their camels, children, business, or whatever. In some cases, the motivation may be for support. In other cases it is often for protection. Due to my experiences in practicing shamanism, I have
decided not to work with the concept of protection. Here’s why. In working with the idea of protection, one sets up a polarity: ‘safe’ versus ‘not safe.’

Most people, when they ask for protection, are asking for an invisible wall to be built around them. Inside the wall is safe, outside the wall all the unsafe - the unknown - is raging. But in the end, the only thing we are protecting ourselves from is life itself.

So what can we do when we are afraid? For me, the answer is to try to prepare myself for the unknown by filling myself with power. Receiving the blessing, living it, and sharing it with others takes us beyond the need for security. We feel blessed, we feel empowered; we are standing not alone but in the circle of blessing.

**Zara:** I agree. When people think of blessings as a form of protection, it is almost as if we want to safeguard something by weaving a spell around it. Then we hope no bad things can befall it.

Instead I feel the blessing fills a person (or object, or event) with enough power so they can withstand the blows that might come to bear down as they move through life.

**Faith:** I have heard you talk about ‘living the blessing.’ Does it matter not only how it is given but also how it is received?

**Jonathan:** One could say that life itself is a blessing from the spirits, perhaps the greatest blessing. The more I work with blessing, the more it seems central to living in a conscious way. Think of the roundness of blessing. It is not only given. It is active and must be both received and lived.

Perhaps the most difficult part of any healing is for the patient to receive the power that has been brought. From a spiritual energetic point of view, it is the responsibility of the healed to live the healing. So it is for people who have been blessed.

It is very important for the blessed to live the blessing, incorporate it, manifest it, and in doing so spread the power of the blessing. We do not live in a vacuum. If others can see that you are blessed, they can also feel it. It’s like standing in a circle holding hands and just letting the power flow through you. It’s not power that you have, but it is with you. You can use it, the person next to you can use it, everyone in the circle can use it, and it does not diminish, even when shared by so many. In fact, it increases.

As long as you are aware of your blessings you will have a tendency to live them and to receive the power from them. Feeling blessed is a sure sign of receiving it.

**Zara:** I have a practice to help with this which the spirits taught me - ‘counting my blessings.’

I used to feel that ‘count your blessings’ was a patronising phrase, told to people so they would shut up, be happy and stop complaining. When the spirits showed me what they meant, it created a new dimension. When I count what I feel are blessings in my life, however small and everyday, I begin to feel re-empowered. I remember the good things already in my life and it makes me feel calm, happy, grateful. It has to come from the heart and feel true, then I really recognise something as a blessing and allow myself to feel it. It is not false cheer but an honest appreciation of the beauty of life.

When I re-connect to the blessings I have been given, I experience power coming back into my life, and I bring myself back to power.

**Jonathan:** That was true in my own life experience. For many years of my life I was so cut off that I felt totally unblessed, empty, abandoned, a victim.

Looking back now, however, I can see that throughout my life I have been blessed many times and in many ways.

I have been worrying about environmental disasters and the extinction of species and this seems a very hopeless situation. Though we may not be able to change what is physically happening, a blessing can help in another way.
Faith: How would you suggest that shamanic practitioners prepare themselves to give a blessing from the spirits?

Jonathan: A lot of the time when we consciously bless someone from our human heart, it comes from our wish to help that person. Bringing a blessing from the spirits is another situation. It involves putting your own desires to one side and opening up to the power of the universe. Then you give it voice, words or action.

Zara: When you give a blessing, you are in service, still and strong, with total trust.

When passing a blessing on, I try to be ‘clean’ - with no agendas - so the blessing flowing through me can be delivered clean.

Jonathan: Sometimes shamanic practitioners may feel uncomfortable giving blessings, because it puts them in an obviously powerful role.

This can be a big obstacle for a lot of people who get involved with shamanic work. You start off wanting to work with the spirits because you want to feel empowered, then all of a sudden you are put in a position where the spirits push you out of the closet door, into the spotlight, and you have to deal with a kind of power you are not familiar with. It can be really difficult to take on this voice for the spirits.

Zara: There needs to be a balance of power when working with the spirits, so you don’t get carried away with the power. But neither should you give your power away, not to other people nor to the spirits. You have to stand in your power and work in partnership with the spirits, taking responsibility for the decisions you make about what they tell you.

Faith: Words seem important. How do you see the relationship between blessings and words?

Jonathan: Words have power. Just as there are benedictions there are also maledictions. A lot of people are unconscious of what they say to each other. For some the expression “drop dead” is a normal part of their communication, without thinking about what it means. You can really hurt and disempower people by using words. The other side of that is that you can also empower with words. Words given by the spirits are especially empowering.

When I read in John O’Donohue’s book ‘Benedictus’ the blessing for a new born child, I really feel what a new born child needs as well as my responsibility in helping to supply that. And when I read the benediction for a drug addict, I come to have a deeper, heart-felt understanding of what it is like to be a drug addict.

Think of a glass bowl into which you want to pour water. The water is fresh and pure. Your job is to bring it to a friend to drink from, so they can be replenished. Knowing how clean the water is, before you pour it in, you make sure the bowl is also clean.

In this ‘pure’ state, it becomes a perfectly empty vessel (without agenda), with strong containing boundaries. By ‘pure’, I don’t mean anything to do with morals, but energy as related to ‘pure power’.

Water can be poured in and when you bring it to the person, the water they will drink will be as much as possible in its original state.

This for me is what it means to bring a blessing to someone in a ‘pure’ way - that I interfere as little as possible when helping to transport it. This is always important in spirit work, but with blessing it feels particularly vital. When you deliver a blessing, you deliver pure spirit essence.

Water has a traditional association to blessing, and blessed water exists in many different cultures and religions.

Water can be sprinkled, drunk or washed in, it can carry the power of the blessing into a person, place or object.

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Word blessings are often words which are inspiring. When I receive spirit blessings in words for other people, I come to have more insight of their situation. And they have a deeper understanding of where they can go, without actually having received any instructions. This is why I feel that word blessings are especially useful for human beings.

Zara: Yes, because we are human, we often need reminding of the help and power we receive. Words are a way to revisit the blessing.

A word-blessing from the spirits will generally be a short sentence which is easy to remember. By repeating it, you can reconnect to its power again and again.

The words themselves are not the blessing, but the carrier of it. They become the bridge on which the blessing reaches the person.

If you journey to the spirits and ask for a blessing, power is often put into the words whilst in the journey. As you come out of the journey the words are already filled with power and, as you speak them, they carry the spirit energy to the receiver.

Faith: Are there also blessings that do not use words?

Zara: Essentially blessings are transferred by energy not words. It is not the words you give, but the power that matters. Blessings are beyond words. For blessings without words, water is a good carrier.

Water has a traditional association with blessing, and blessed water (holy water) exists in many different cultures and religions.

Water can itself be blessed and is a good ‘pure’ carrier. By being sprinkled, drunk or washed in, it can carry the power of the blessing into a person, place or object. Water can be easily contained and shared and seems to keep the energy of the blessing in as pure a state as possible.

Jonathan: There is a connection for me between blessings and prayers. The Plains Indians use their pipe and the smoke from it to send prayers to the spirits. I feel that when I use my rattle I am using it in a similar way, as sending prayer.

When I call the spirits and rattle a circle together, I feel that power coming back and the rattles blessing people as I go around. I know from what people have told me that they feel blessed by the rattles. It is nothing to do with me, it is in the rattles.

Zara: When I give ‘shamanic’ gifts (rattle, medicine bag, notebook, etc.) I often ask for a blessing – and sometimes also for ‘normal’ gifts. It is not about weaving spells. When you ask for a gift to be blessed, you are not putting a particular intention or aspect of power into it. You are opening yourself to the spirits and asking for their blessing, and receiving whatever that may be. Often when I have blessed gifts I do not know what the blessing is, I am not told the words or understand the meaning, but I know it has been blessed, and I give it away with power.

Faith: Can the tools we use, such as drums or rattles, benefit from being blessed?

Zara: Blessing tools or gifts is a way of empowering them. Blessing a tool awakens it to the spirits.

It can also create a deeper connection between the tool and the person using it. When I asked for a blessing for my drum and our work, the words I received bound us together in a very direct and emotional way. It is something I think of every time I pick it up. As I repeat the blessing while I drum, it also reminds me of why I drum. The power of that blessing connects me not only to the drum but also to the spirits and the reason I do this work.

Jonathan: If you are giving a power object to someone, it is not like giving them a piece of chewing gum. Or maybe giving someone a piece of chewing gum should be like giving them a power object!

Sometimes we don’t pay enough attention to what we do in our ordinary everyday acts. Not just gift giving but everything. There have been times when I have given a power object away and I didn’t give it enough attention before it left me. I’ve felt badly about it afterwards, not just for the other person but also for the object itself. A blessing helps not only the giver and receiver but also
the object itself as it carries that blessing with it. If I am going to give someone a rattle, I feel I need to thank the rattle and let it go, and also ask it to bless and help the person it comes to.

**Zara:** Blessings can help release us from the object, so it is given with no strings attached.

For me blessing an object before you give it means I don’t hold on to it, or wish I didn’t have to give it away (which I sometimes feel!). The blessing seems to set the object free and ‘cleans’ it so it is ready for its new life with its new partner.

**Faith:** Does this release process work with humans too?

**Zara:** Yes. Traditionally, when you asked for a blessing from someone who had control over you - parent, employer, spouse - in a way you were asking to be set free. The blessing promises you can go without fear of control, without having obstacles put in your way. Similarly with blessings from the spirits, they help to clear away the old and make ready for the new. They set us free for the next part of our journey. One way to use this is to bless someone at the door of death.

Death is both an end and a beginning, a threshold. A blessing can help to set the soul free from the body and give it power for the next leg of its journey.

My spirits showed me how a blessing given before or at the moment of death can ease the passing and help the person die in peace rather than fear. Their soul is released and can travel on easily. If you die in fear, there is a chance of soul loss happening at the time of death or panic trapping the soul (or soul part) in the physical world.

A blessing given at death gives permission to go. In this way, to go with someone’s blessing means literally to ‘go in peace’ - at a deepest soul level.

**Faith:** What is it that engages you in the on-going exploration of blessing?

**Jonathan:** Perhaps the reason I am most interested in working with blessing is to help people see - and remind myself - that everything that happens to us is a blessing. With every situation we meet in life, we can react to it as disempowering or respond to it as empowering. If we react to it as disempowering, then it will take the power we need to respond to the unfolding of life. If we respond to it as empowering, as a blessing, then we will be ready for whatever comes. As the 13th-century Persian mystic Rumi says in his poem ‘The Guesthouse’:

**The dark thought, the shame, the malice**
Meet them at the door laughing
And invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.

Blessings are where we see them, and whenever we see the events of our life as blessings, it becomes empowering. This way of looking at life is easier said than done. It takes practice.

When I was drafted into the army in 1964, I felt I was the most unlucky of the unlucky. This attitude did not change in 1965 when I was sent to the war in Viet Nam, and for years after I wondered “Why me?”

Thirty-three years later I returned to Viet Nam for a month-long spiritual pilgrimage. At the end of my visit I realised that my first trip to Viet Nam as a soldier was one of the greatest gifts life had given me, filled with treasures and teachings I had never seen while I was there because I had not been able to consciously receive them.

I also understood why I had been sent to Viet Nam as a twenty-three year old soldier: it was so I could come back as a fifty-six year old man to be healed - and feel blessed.

**Zara:** For me, blessings are miracles. By working with blessing, I feel I have opened to another dimension of spirit power that is both very beautiful and very simple. It feels like a humble way to work that helps my trust to deepen. Anything is possible. Blessing has helped me to not be afraid of the power of miracles.

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I've been teaching shamanism together with my partner Bekki Shining Bearheart since 1982, and we've always been fascinated by the ‘power of place' both within traditional tribal shamanic work and within our own. This has led, inevitably, to an awareness of the many cosmologies by which shamanic peoples orient both themselves and their power places to the universe; and recently this has also led to additional research and the following observations on the topic.

We have always taught shamanism within the framework of the traditional ‘layer cake' cosmology of Upper, Middle and Lower worlds, with various manifestations of spirit and reality in each of these three worlds. This has been useful, effective and correlated well with our own and our students’ experiences during shamanic journeying. We also encourage students to experience the connecting place at the centre of each of these three worlds - the World Tree or World Mountain (the Axis Mundi).

However, amidst the traditions of original shamanic cultures, there is more out there than this ‘layer cake cosmology;' and contemporary shamanic practitioners might well be missing out if they do not expand their understanding to encompass these more comprehensive perceptions of the cosmos.

There are two consistent themes in the tribal shamanic experiences of time: namely that time is cyclical, not linear, and that there is a simultaneity. Simultaneity is the principal of ‘both-and' rather than the more common Western insistence on ‘either-or,' Within simultaneity, two things and-or two events may occupy the same space and-or the same time simultaneously. This simultaneity can also mean that anyone (and a whole culture) may hold contrasting, conflicting and overlapping ideas on any given subject, and be unconcerned about the apparent disjunctures this creates.

THE LAYER CAKE WORLD

The three-layered view of shamanic realities is certainly the one most commonly described in the ethnographies dealing with tribal shamanism anywhere, whether in Mongolia, Siberia, Central, South and North America and elsewhere.

Mihaly Hoppal in his 2007 book ‘Shamans and Traditions’ outlines the constant appearance of the elements of the Siberian cosmos in every aspect of the shamans’ costumes.

We tend to think of portrayals of, for instance, the World Tree, on a shaman’s drum or robe as being symbolical of the shamans’ beliefs. This is only partly true, because: ‘…the shaman’s body was viewed as a reduced replica of the Universe, the shaman’s dress and the making of it were regarded as a symbolic act of the creation or recreation of the Universe.’

Three things are important for us here: the three layered cosmos; the human body of the shaman being essentially the same as the cosmos; and the ability of the shaman (who is also the cosmos) to be able (and often in fact required) to create that same cosmos in an earthly, material form.

Mongolian and Turkish shamanic peoples, have very complex systems of spirits (including numerous gods and...
children of gods, and many other spirit beings) which are tightly tied with their perceptions of the three layered cosmos and the four cardinal directions of the compass.

The importance of any particular spirit is often determined by how high up in the layers of the three worlds they are to be found, as many cultures have many sub-layers within each of the three worlds, for instance the ‘seventh heaven’ is the seventh layer of the upper world and will be home to more important spirits than lower levels.

An alternative to the World Tree which sits at the centre of each of these ‘layer cake’ worlds is the River of the Universe or ‘World Stream’ which the Evenki people of Siberia perceive as connecting the three worlds.

Evenki shamans do most of their journeywork along this river of spirits, going to the headwaters to visit unborn souls, the middle course where the present day clan members live, and the lower course of the river where shamans do psychopomp work to help deceased souls reach their home in the land of the dead. The shaman’s drum is the boat, the shaman’s beater the oar and so on for the Evenki.

While these people still work within a tripartite view of the cosmos, it is not clear whether the parts are arranged in layers or, as the river idea seems to imply, are all on the same plane.

Of course, this may be a perfect example of a ‘both-and’ simultaneity, with there being a vertically layered cake, the layers of which are easily connected by a flowing river.

STEPPING BEYOND THE CAKE

Tribal shamans sometimes journey beyond the cake into what might be called its astronomical setting. That is, they go so far ‘up’ that they zoom beyond the Upper World. We have noticed that this occasionally happens by chance (mixed with a degree of enthusiasm) in some of our student early journeys, when one of them might find themself on the Earth’s Moon, the Sun or some other identifiable body in outer space instead of in the Upper World; their experiences are always credible.

Traditional shamans have known how to visit these destinations for a long time. An example is the story, told by the writer Clarissa Pinkola Estes, of an isolated tribal shaman in Mexico who was very bored with her tales of humankind’s first moon landing. The shaman explained how they went there all the time, and could recount many features of the experience just ‘discovered’ by our men in space suits.

Another well known instance of journeys to places beyond the layer cake is the ancient West African Dogon tradition that Sirius is in fact two stars, not the one it appears to be to our naked eyes. This was known by them centuries before Western scientists had a telescope strong enough to see both stars: the Dogon claim ancestry from Sirius and their shamans journey there even today.

An alternative approach to the shamanic realities comes from the Sami people of Northern Sweden, Norway, Finland and parts of North Western Russia.

In the Sami’s ‘walking journey,’ one walks continuously in ordinary reality until trance takes one ‘sideways’ through the veil into an alternative reality - the Sacred Land - where one may find and make strong connections with powerful landscapes, allies and so on. This entrance into the Sacred Land implies that the realities are side by side rather than piled one on top of another. I do not know if this experience correlates with current astrophysical theories of parallel universes but it sounds similar.

COMPLEXITY WITHIN THE CAKE

A recent expansion of my own perception of shamanic realities came from the Culina and the Wakeuenai peoples of South America.

In these cultures the shamans travel both up and down in a typical layered cosmos, however, within so called ‘ordinary reality’ they also make powerful Middle World connections with spirits too. These connections are very much like Lower World animal and plant spirit helper connections, but since they take place in Middle World, there is
also some resemblance to experiences with the spirits of place.

This is interesting, as it seems to be very rare for spirits of place to become active helpers to contemporary Western shamanic practitioners.

The spirits with whom the Culina and Wakeueni work, while known to be accessible at specific power spots within the physical landscape, become accompanying, helping, healing spirits for the shamans who are strong enough to go and find them. They exist in specific directions as seen from the shamans’ villages, and the directional correlates of their locations are an important part of their nature and the shamans’ cosmology.

This cosmology, which has both vertical and horizontal coordinates and other expressions for these peoples. Departed souls need to undergo a healing and empowering transformational journey which must take place horizontally in the Middle World, or a plane which overlaps it. Once transformed, the souls then move to paradise in an Upper World.

Now things get really complicated as there are several related axis involving seeming dichotomies between jaguars and peccaries, ‘wildness’ (jungle, water, animals, plants) and ‘social life’ and men and women. Jaguars, men and wilderness group together, as do peccaries, women and social life. All three of these oppositional pairings exist horizontally in the Middle World and, simultaneously vertically between Upper and Lower Worlds. At any given moment, any given individual is aware of his or her own presence along all these axis within a dynamically moving multidimensional cosmos. For instance the hunter, the man of the wild who invokes Jaguar energy, is active in the (peccary-influenced) social life of the people.

SPIRITS ALONG THE WAY

The English anthropologist and writer Piers Vitebsky, in his study of the contemporary Siberian Eveny reindeer people writes of their relationships with the spirits that fill their Middle World.

These spirits do not move about; they are attached to very specific landscape features and locations, yet they are very powerful connections for both the Eveny herders and their shamans alike. The annual circuit of migration would not be successful without the help of these spirits at stopping places along the route. These read to me as true spirits of place, but with a power and a place in the herder’s perception of their world far more intense than any place previously witnessed.

Any culture has been active in landscape for a good long time; perhaps this is how such land-based relationships with spirits have always been for shamanic peoples.

The significance for our reconsideration of shamanic cosmologies is that the Middle World for the Eveny is mapped with powerful places of spirits; it fairly glows with all the spirit beings which the herders look forward to being with, living with and working with on a regular and, they hope, predictable basis.

THE DOGON LAND COSMOS

As we look more closely at land-based cosmologies, the West African Dogon people come to mind again. Not only do the Dogon have a deep connection with the twin star Sirius, they are also intensely integrated with the landscape in which their communities exist.

In the flat lands, the plains around the river Sere which lies in front of their villages, live wild animals, wild and dangerous spirits, and souls awaiting rebirth.

In their villages, which are built at the foot of and part way up the sides of quite steep cliffs, are family, community, vitality, food and all the other things of culture which makes life worth living. In natural caves at the top of the cliffs are the dwelling places of the dead and the home of the ancestors, and even higher up above the cliffs are the stars, the home of the ancient ones and the spiritual homeland of the Dogon.

The differences and natural boundaries between these three geographical zones are visible and clearly known to all Dogon. This cosmology is partly horizontal, connecting the wild and the cultured, and partly vertical connecting culture, and the people, with the vital spiritual powers above them.

The connections are not metaphorical or solely metaphysical. People go from the villages out a little way to raise their crops of millet, then further to hunt and confront other wilderness in the bush. They climb strenuously up the steep cliffs above the villages, first to bury the dead at one level, then later to

Left: Dogon village in Mali, West Africa.

Inset: bronze Dogon figurine with the symbol for Sirius upon its head.

move the bones up to join the ancestors. This is only half the cycle however, for there is a marvellous return, back down and around to the bush, of souls ready to be reborn and return to the safety of the villages once again.

ARCHITECTURAL COSMOLOGY

Now let us compare all the variations of the layer cake cosmos I have described above with the cosmologies that are inherent within the physical structures in which the people actually live. Most tribal cultures had special ceremonies for the building and completion of a house, marking its significance as a cosmological container.

But we must stretch our Western mind-sets here, as this cosmological architecture is not mere symbolism; the buildings do not ‘represent’ a native perception of the cosmos - they ‘are’ the cosmos.

One does not say that this is the West side so I am reminded of the dark, the shaman’s journey. When one goes to the West side, one is there, in the dark. Each building is the cosmos. When one is in the building, be it ritual structure (sweat lodge, kiva) or dwelling (hogan, teepee), one is in and a part of the cosmos. This is not to imply a sharing of an identical cosmology throughout Native North America. There are at least as many experiences of the cosmos as there are styles of building. Yet, all of these cosmological expressions are familiar to those of us practicing shamanism today and all of them go beyond the layer cake.

THE TEACHINGS IN THE STARS

Today every traditional Mayan home has, at its centre, a three-stone hearth, and in the homes fires are built in the hearth each day.

This central hearth and a special recognition of the four cardinal corners are part of a process of centering which contemporary Maya do for themselves daily. They do it for ceremonies, they also do it whenever they begin to cultivate a milpa (cornfield). These three-stone hearths, and the centring practices can be found in Mayan temples around 3,000 years old, and are
also portrayed in the elaborate artwork on the temple walls.

The hearth also exists in the sky, it is the three stars, Alnitak, Saiph and Rigel in Orion.

The Maya say it was originally made as the first act of the beginning of the current universe: First Father (Hun-Hunahpu or One-Maize-Revealed) placed the three stones even before he raised the World Tree and gave circular motion to the sky.

Itzamna, the first shaman, took First Father across the night sky until the canoe they travelled in up-ended, dropping them at the place of the three stones of Creation. Itzamna brought First Father there so he could be reborn and create the new universe.

The classic Maya called the World Tree at the centre of their cosmos ‘Six-Sky’ or ‘Raised-up-Sky,’ for the creation event when the World Tree was first erected and lifted up the sky, and it is possible to stand, even today, at this sacred navel of the world in many Mayan communities, for instance at the Guatemalan town of Momostenango it is called waqibal, (Six-Place).

Mayan hieroglyphics and cultural experts David and Linda Freidel write in their 1993 book ‘Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path’: ‘I truly did stand at the place of the creation, not only in terms of space as the Momostekans understand it, but in terms of time. The axis of waqibal pierced straight back three thousand years to the kings on their stone images at [the archaeological site of] La Venta. Waqibal truly is and was hallowed ground and in my heart I centered the world.’ I find it impossible to summarise Maya cosmology, it clearly shares many elements with other shamanic cosmologies, especially it’s focus on the world’s navel - the centre of the world or the World Tree. Seemingly unusual in their cosmology is the intense connection between visible celestial events, shamanic practice and other practical matters (war, politics, crops and planting etc.) on earth. The Freidels add that: ‘The gods wrote all of these actions in the sky so that every human, commoner and king alike, could read them and affirm the truth of the myth.’ This myth continues to play itself out in the skies still visible to today’s Maya, as it has for at least 3,000 years.

**FIND YOUR OWN COSMOLOGY**

The approach Bekki and I have to teaching shamanism involves helping each student establish their own shamanic cosmos, their own cosmological point of view.

Part of this involves enabling them to get a feeling for where they are, and if you are experienced in shamanic journeying the suggested missions in the box on this page may help activate and open up this process for you. These shamanic journey ideas are good for any of you who wish to expand your map of the cosmos, and experience what you may have been missing.

The worlds of the shaman are complex, and although share much in common across the world, are individual to both cultures and shamans. All shamans and cultures have built up a body of knowledge over time by continued practice and as Western practitioners of these ancient arts it is up to us to do the same.

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**JOURNEY SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION**

- Go back and review your Upper and Lower World journeying experiences and do a little mapping of the geography of the worlds.
- Taking a trusted helper spirit with you, journey beyond where you usually go in each reality. You may find these places are different, larger and more complex than you now know.
- Have a go at a ‘zoom beyond’ journey. Take a journey to visit the Moon, for instance. Every one of our students who has done this - even accidentally - has had fun and gained knowledge.
- Is there a landscape feature in ordinary reality that has particular attraction for you? If so, do a Middle World journey there with the intention of connecting with powerful spirits that live there. Ask whomsoever you connect with if they will help you as your spirit helpers do.
- Do you travel much in your ordinary life, perhaps on business? If so, make a Middle World journey to some of the ‘power places’ along your way. You can do this from home if it is not possible to journey as you travel: stay in the Middle World with the intention to go to the spirit of that beautiful mountain you often drive past or whatever. Spirits you find there may help you in your travels.
- We may often invoke the energies of the four directions when we open a circle or when we begin a journey by ourselves, but try doing this with new awareness of the powers of each of the seven directions (north, south, east, west, above, below and the centre). Try making a journey to each of the directions to meet its spirit; pay special attention to the centre.
- We may improve our shamanic journeying by generating a stronger connection to the world’s navel, the World Tree or Sacred Tree. You may wish to make a shamanic journey to your spirits to ask for teachings about this cosmic connection point.
The renaissance of shamanism over the past 50 years has brought the craft into popular culture - which has been both a blessing and a curse.

People have learned about its enchantment and miracles, but the purity of the traditions have been diluted and commercialised (there’s even a Shaman hair shampoo nowadays) and confused with related phenomena. We need to disentangle the real deal from the false notions, so that shamanism can keep its original integrity and everyone can see more clearly what in fact it is.

So, without intending to be a definitional Nazi, I offer below what it is not:

Shamanism is routinely called a religion, even by those who should know better.

In fact, shamanism might be considered the Ur-religion - the starting place of later belief systems - since every big bureaucratic religion has features stemming from ancient shamanic roots. Shamanism predates religion by millennia, starting as a hunter-gatherer spirituality, whereas religion came much later with agriculture.

And when the enlightenment threw out the spiritual baby with the religious bathwater, shamanism was thrown out too and got mixed up with religion in the modern mind. Yet shamanism lacks all the key features of religion:

These key features include the following:

**FOUNDATIONAL LEADER:** Shamanism has no originator like Mohammed or Jesus, although within cultures some powerful practitioners have been especially revered.

**CLERICS:** Shamans are not a permanent specialist class, and they may stop shamanising inorder to take on other responsibilities. Also their power may come and go at any time.

**DOGMA:** Shamanism lacks a fixed set of tenets which one must believe in. It is not a faith, but an experience; not a belief system, but a knowledge system. It is does not have a history of bloody wars over doctrin, icons or the meaning of salvation. Spiritual truth, for shamans, is what is learned from the spirits. That said, shamans from different cultures do share some principles, based on common experiences; such as the ability to interact with spirits, the acknowledgement of a universal energy web, and the animated nature of nature.

For both spirituality and religion, reality is deeply mysterious, but whereas religion has answers that may never be questioned - spirituality has questions that may never be answered.

**SACRED TEXTS:** For most of its existence, shamanism has been an oral, not a written tradition. But within that oral tradition, shamans have memorised songs and sagas which have been passed down through the ages to each new generation. Certain texts related to shamanism in the modern era are respected - such as Carlos Castaneda’s Teachings of Don Juan - yet it is not the books that are sacred, just the spirit behind them.

**MORAL ABSOLUTES:** Shamans are guided by whatever the helpful spirits say is best for all concerned at any particular time. The craft does not generally judge, but instead seeks to enlighten and empower. To the shaman, the task is not to be ‘good,’ it is to be authentically oneself - and that is good enough.

Saying that, at the same time however, many practices and behaviours are taboo and sacred and cultural traditions deserve, and even demand respect, lest dire consequences follow - whether from human authorities or from spiritual ones.

**HERESIES AND SCHISMS:** Since shamanism has no dogma, sacred text, or moral absolutes, it lacks the pathologies deriving from these ‘false gods.’ That said, traditional communities have been known to punish shamans who misuse their power.

**RITUAL AND LITURGY:** Shamanism lacks rituals - by which I mean static rites, which are always the same for everyone in the community. However, it does have ceremonies, by which I mean fluid collective practices, often derived from the spirits. Shamans are free to conduct any ceremony they wish to, and no one will say: “We don’t do that.”

Tuva shamans, in fact, consciously change their ceremonies - such as saying...
words in a new way so people will listen afresh. While some animistic or shamanic cultures do have regularised ceremonial forms with protocols - such as the sacred pipe practice of the Native-Americans, or the peyote-gathering pilgrimage of the Huichols – even during these activities spontaneity can break out all over. The spirits have their own agendas, and they do love to dance.

PRAYER BOOKS AND TEXTS: Shamans don’t pray to the Source, they go right to It. At the same time, sacred mantras and physical postures are evident in many shamanic traditions, and these may even appear cross-culturally.

WORSHIP INFRASTRUCTURE: In animistic or shamanic cultures, ‘church’ is nature itself, especially areas of wilderness. Mountains, caves and waterfalls are often seen as being the most sacred sites, and generally not any building, such as an ashram, mosque, temple, convent, monastery, or basilica. Shamans, however, may well often practice within a building for practical reasons.

Shamanism is raw primitive spirituality, and does not seek to compete with religion. It just asks, “How can you call yourself spiritual if you don’t interact with spirits?”

All my shamanic teachers have told me: “Find your own truth from the spirits.” Some of them have even gone much less threaten - followers, they just make themselves available, usually seeking not to command, but to liberate.

But, shamanism does overlap with mysticism, as both shamans and mystics seek to journey from ordinary to non-ordinary reality and aim to feel at home there.

The differences are clear however; whereas mystics often come back from non-ordinary reality unable to describe their ineffable experiences, shamans have classically related their trips in full detail.

Shamans enter non-ordinary reality to gain power and instruction from the spirits, and come back to

Shamanism lacks a fixed set of tenets which one must believe in. It is not a faith, but an experience; not a belief system, but a knowledge system. It does not have a history of bloody wars over doctrin, icons or the meaning of salvation.

Spiritual truth, for shamans, is what is learned from the spirits.

BUREAUCRATIC HIERARCHY: For shamans, it is the helpful spirits who must be heeded, not necessarily humans. This is why religions have power structures, with officials and followers, while in shamanism the spirits can give anyone power.

Shamanism is direct revelation, although at the same time, it does have trainings and initiations. Shamans are spiritual professionals, even if they might specialise, for example in divination or plant spirit medicine. Fixed and official positions with titles and promotions or demotions are normally lacking in traditional shamanism.

further, advising: “Find other teachers.”

Shamanism is spiritual freedom, not social cultism, and shamans are guides, not gurus - generators not generals. It is the spirits, not the shamans, who call devotees; ‘when the student is ready’ - as they say – ‘the teacher will appear.’

To the uninformed, shamanism may seem to have the trappings of a cult, with its unorthodox lexicon, effigies of spirits, ritual objects, and the like, and of course some shamans do have loyal followers. Power, and especially non-ordinary power, attracts like a magnet, and this may look like guruship, but shamans don’t generally recruit -
Both shamans and mystics seek to journey from ordinary to non-ordinary reality and aim to feel at home there. The differences are clear however; shamans enter non-ordinary reality to gain power and instruction from the spirits, and come back to carry out specific services - such as healings - whereas mystics seek to know the nature of reality as an end in itself.

Right: Soviet anti shaman posters from the 1930’s

Typically shamans go to non-ordinary reality in order to interact with spirits, while normally mediums deal with spirits within ordinary reality.

Yet the distinction has never been altogether sharp, and today may have lost a lot of its meaning. Mediumship has been found in at least half of world cultures, and both shamans and mediums work directly with spirits - often merging voluntarily with them.

Both at times also do psychopomp work - helping the spirits of the dead to free themselves from attachments to this world.

Many shamans do some kind of mediumship work - allowing spirits to speak through them. One medium I know works side-by-side with shamans at times, and others have personal helping spirits just like shamans. So, is it time to get rid of the distinction? Maybe so.

Michael Harner put it succinctly: ‘Shamanism is not New Age, it’s Stone Age.’

In my experience, animism and shamanism have little in common with much of the current New Age puff and fluff. Most shamans I’ve met have little interest - if any at all - in astrology, numerology, pyramiology, reincarnation, and Higher Self (whatever that is) and so forth.

The New Age however does popularise a holistic approach to life, alternative medicine, a tolerance for spiritual seekers, and other norms which any shaman could feel comfortable with. It also introduced ‘energy thinking’ to the materialistic world - which is an animistic and shamanic way of seeing the world, and a huge step up from ‘dead-matter thinking’, and shamans today are grateful for that leap.

Early psychologists pathologised shamans, without any substantial evidence, and they seemingly did this in part to discredit ‘soul doctors.’

Yet actual field research has not only demolished the ‘crazy shaman theory,’ but has found that they are often way above average in terms of psycho-social health. It has been shown that shamans often exhibit less anxiety, more testing out of reality, more psychological and psycho-social integration, and often take more responsibility within their cultures.

Yet, of course, shamans are - at times - ‘in the world, but not of it’, because their spirits get them to do some seemingly crazy things.

Dogmatic skeptics dismiss shamanic healing as a placebo effect at best, and stage magic and trickery at worst.

True, some shamans may elicit placebo effects in those they treat through the use of ‘stage magic’ and trickery, but shamans are far more than simple placebo-manipulators, having performed miracles on plants, animals, infants, comatose patients, and even tumors in petri dishes.

Often healings will occur far away from the shaman, so in those cases stage magic and trickery can often be ruled out.

Shamans, it is true, have long used showmanship to cause a psychodynamic effect (somewhat similar to methods many psychotherapies employ).

At times, perhaps when a shaman gets arrogant, selfish, or abusive - and so start to lose their
spirit power - they may resort to ‘stage magic’ and trickery inorder to save their reputation, so, it is inevitable that there are some charlatan shamans out there, just as there are some ‘quack’ doctors; but singling out the former, while ignoring the latter is unfair.

Probably less than half of the animistic and shamanic cultures of the world ingest any type of psychotropic substance - such as ayahuasca - in order to enter a shamanic state of consciousness. Instead most shamans use drums, rattles, chants, dances and other techniques to enter the stage. Shamanising does not need drugs.

Shamans have been labeled ‘fantasy-prone’ in some anthropological research, implying that ‘it’s all in their heads,’ that they ‘make it all up.’

It is true that shamans use their imagination, but not to ‘look at a mirror,’ but rather to ‘peer through a window.’ By this I mean they do not use it to reflect their own images of ordinary reality—as if looking in a mirror at this world—but instead use it to see a revelation of non-ordinary reality—as if looking through a window onto another world. They do not actively create internal images like a cartoonist might, but passively receive them like a movie-goer does. They do not make images or visionary experiences up, instead they just surrender to them.

Shamanism is not imaginary, but it is imaginal.

It’s not about lame imagining, it’s about powerful envisioning. It’s letting the spirits, not the ego, guide the imagery.

Shamanic and psychic powers (psi) do overlap, which can cause much confusion in the popular mind. While one cannot be a shaman without certain psi - such as telepathy and clairvoyance - it does not a shaman make.

One of the most psychic people I know steadfastly refuses to call herself a shaman, and in fact does everything possible to hide her power. It is the spirits, not friends, or talk-show hosts, or pop psychologists - much less oneself - who recruit someone to shamanise. So psi is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for shamanism.

Scholars who saw cross-dressing shamans in ceremonies jumped to a so-called theoretical conclusion and labeled them transvestites. If they had bothered to ask the shaman, they may well have found that the costume was donned to honour the shaman’s spirit helper of the opposite sex.

Many of my teachers have told me that spirits like to be fully physicalised in ordinary reality, including being danced in sexually accurate costume. Such cross-dressing, then, is likely spiritual ceremony and not sexual preference.

From this survey, an important cautionary tale emerges. Shamanism is a distinct, in fact distinctive, spiritual technology that can stand alone in its own right, does not need explaining in terms of anything else, and is ill-served by being blindly forced into preexisting frameworks, stereotypes, prejudices, evidence-poor theories, or related practices. Instead, commentators and analysts would do well to stop, look, and listen to the shamans themselves. Or, better yet, they can try that time-tested method of the social sciences—participant observation.

So what, then, is shamanism? Jump in and find out.
Right: two drums belonging to a shaman called Amyr Salanka of the Altai people. Photo 1924