



# Intrusions Parasites And Other Beasties

Spiritual Hygiene  
In Shamanic Healing

Caitlín Matthews

*Above:* 'The Ghost of a Flea' by William Blake. 1819-20 Egg tempera mixture with gold on a hardwood panel (21.4 × 16.2 cm)

*Opposite:* 'The Nightmare' by Henry Fuseli. 1781 Oil on canvas (101.6 × 127cm)

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

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

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

It wasn't until the days of compound microscopes, which enabled enough magnification, that

people could observe the micro-organisms that lived all around us. This was quite a shocking discovery for the Age of Reason, which had only recently put behind it, images of demons and devils. Such visions evoked paranoia.

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

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

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

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

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

## WHAT ARE INTRUSIONS?

Shamanically speaking, everything has power and spirit. Power and

spirit are not 'evil' in themselves, they are neutral, but when they are in the wrong place, we experience this as an 'evil.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both the demons and homunculi of medieval times, as well as the resurrected Gothic horrors of the Romantic era, inform our cultural imagination, veering uneasily between the thought of suppressed psychological entities, or forms of uncleanly fears and fancies. Some intrusions can have the appearance of insects, many-legged, or serpentine beings, which is one of the reasons that some shamanic teachers instruct beginners not to

bring back an insect, spider or serpent as a primary power animal when they first learn to journey, in case they mistake an intrusion for an animal ally.

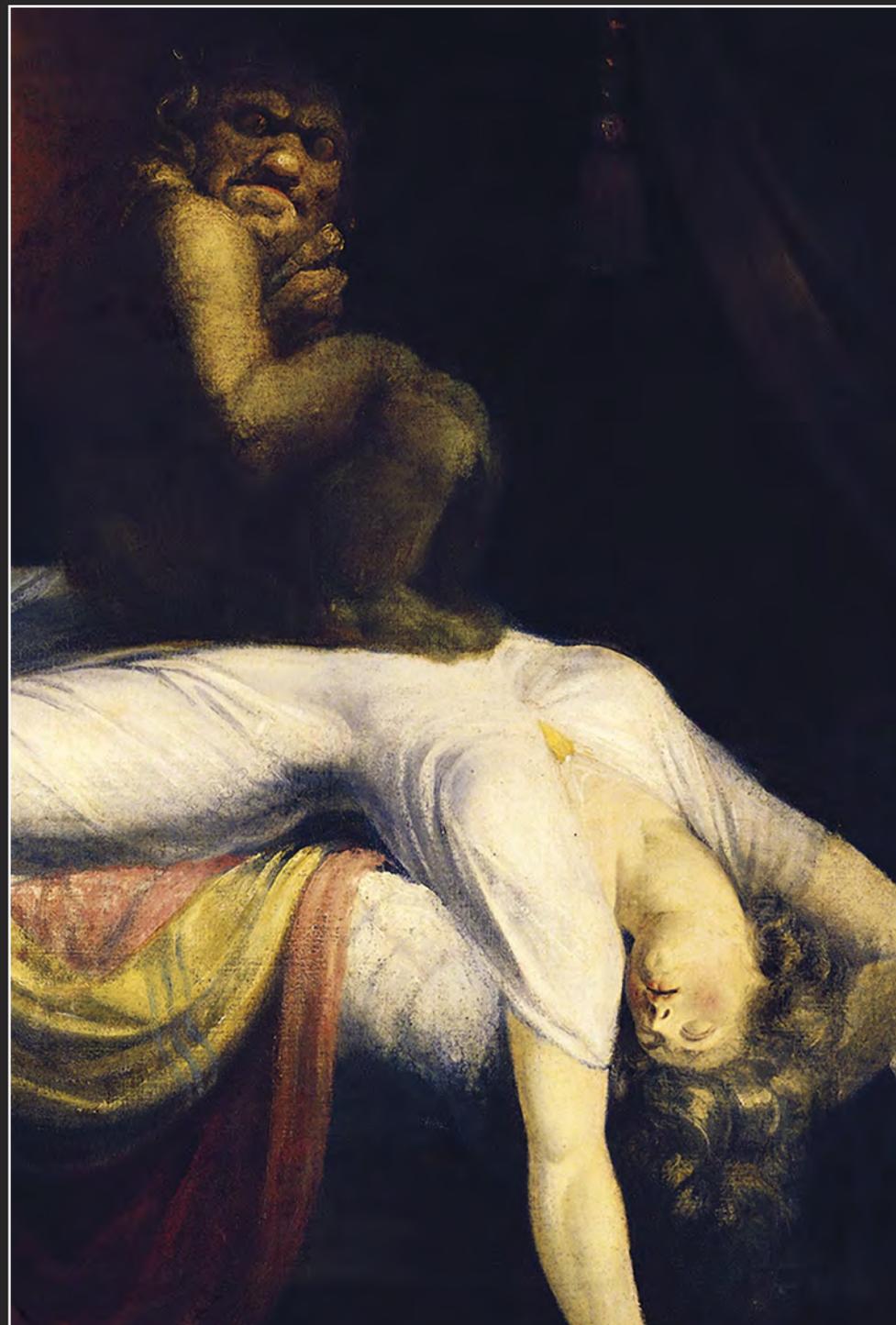
In actuality, some people will indeed have helpful allies and power animals that may be bees, butterflies, spiders or snakes, but these will feel very different in character from intrusive spirits, though not every beginner may be so discerning!

Intrusions can have the appearance of a host or swarm of colonisers, like the gatherings of dirt or residue that you find in a long-forgotten outbuilding where

cobwebs and other detritus pile up.

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An intrusion can also have humanoid forms: ancestral presences who are lost or astray, or who still hold undue influence over



Below and right:  
Inuit spirits  
drawn by Knud  
Rasmussen

the host, or residues of abusive people still alive, whose lives have tangled with our own. Intrusions are rarely depicted, for good reason.

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

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

Opportunism is the name of the intrusions' game. If we leave an opening, something may come in. Sometimes it is invited in, because the host believes that some benefit



may accrue. Or an intrusion may take residency out of coercion - as in the case of abuse, or due to a violation.

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

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

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

They may also feel 'overseen,' stalked, or 'uncomfortable' in an undefined way, overshadowed or in the presence of something alien. Some people have even described this discomfort with a metaphor of indigestion, 'it's like I've eaten something bad, it just sits there, it doesn't move, but it feels toxic.'

The nature of dirt of any kind is that it builds up and accumulates. The same kind of thing happens when we do not observe psychic

hygiene in our own beings. When there is a gap or space in our power or soul, intrusion can build up there and become a more serious matter.

### THE FORMATION OF ENTITIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### DIAGNOSING INTRUSION

This was obviously an extreme case of intrusion, both in the soul and in the home of this lady. We

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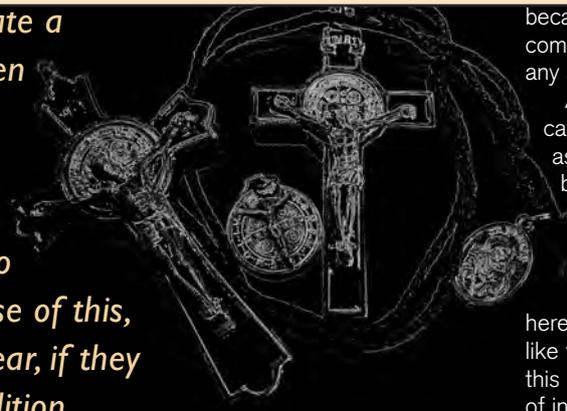


can see how it was given opportunity by her loneliness and her habit of hoarding. Interestingly, when I first spoke to her over the phone and asked what symptoms she was experiencing, she said she had the sense of being spied upon. Rationalising this uneasy feeling, she said that a radio mast had been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

This is where it's necessary to be cautious, of course, because when a client speaks like this, you need to check for mental stability. But because the concept of intrusion is not commonly



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

The sense that something is living or lodging inside you or in your soul is scary. This is why we must be so careful not to demonise an intrusion or use language that is

understood in our society, the metaphors describing it can often sound very paranoid – people will often giggle uneasily when making comparisons of this kind, knowing that these statements sound bizarre to their own ears.

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

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

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

It was clear from the context that this was not a 'demonic possession' but a cry for help. I immediately got medical assistance for

him and he was rushed to hospital where, after a battery of tests, a brain tumour was diagnosed. End



of 'demonic possession,' and feelings of intrusion which, in this case, was of physical causation!

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

Possessory intrusions that dominate a person's soul have historically been seen as 'demonic possession' in many cultures, including our own. Disease has spirit and when that spirit becomes more dominant than the person hosting it, then we have problems.

Unfortunately, the only models for intrusion in our culture tend to be found in horror movies;

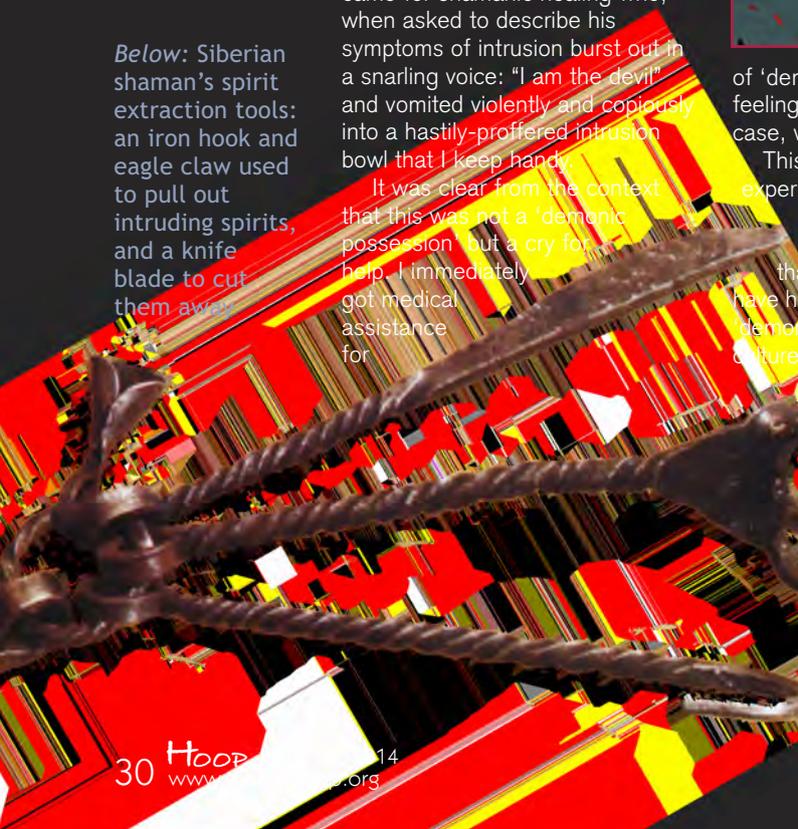
going to freak out the client. 'Intrusion' is a neutral word and in dialogue with a client, I draw an unjudgemental analogy between intrusion and dirt, which most people easily understand.

### REMOVAL OF INTRUSIONS

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

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

*Below: Siberian shaman's spirit extraction tools: an iron hook and eagle claw used to pull out intruding spirits, and a knife blade to cut them away*



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When something has come into your being, it is essential that you have a good sense that this intrusion has left it! We can see

how shamans in traditional cultures often deal with intrusion by passing it into a stone or other object as part of the extraction.

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

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

While we are engaged, connected strongly with the spirits who inspire us, we can live without fear of intrusion, because these things fill us up with the power to live. It is in the vacant moments, when doubt, fear or uncertainty enter into the emptiness that

intrusions can enter in, or when we are under compulsion or coercion.

To be as full with power and soul as we can be is the best preventative.

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

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

In this way, in the words of Gandhi: *'Your beliefs become your thoughts  
Your thoughts become your words  
Your words become your actions  
Your actions become your habits  
Your habits become your values  
Your values become your destiny.'*

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

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