

Windows for the Spirits

Connecting, Blessing and Healing with Shamanic Pictures

Faith Nolton



I always knew I'd be an artist. I attended Liverpool College of Art in England, in the 60's, but later found that I did not fit into the gallery-led art scene, and instead found myself exploring energy work through healing and the Medicine Wheel, discovering new ways to look at perception, inspiration and intention.

Over the last five decades I've been guided along a serendipitous and seemingly random route, gathering esoteric perspectives and skills along the way.

I now find myself a 'picture maker for the ancestors,' a maker of 'energy windows' for the spirits and 'soul gardens' for healing. These are not labels which I have decided upon for myself, but descriptions which have been given to me by my spirits.

I practice what I call 'shamanic image retrieval,' and make paintings for healing, blessing and renewal for myself, others and for the earth. This work is dedicated always to all my relations, and to the seven generations past, and the seven yet to come. I did not set out to do this work, but my life has been slowly and gently shaped by what has worked and synchronicity.

The images I paint are 'midwifed' into being under the direction of my helper spirits - I can be literally told which colour to put where, a bit like 'painting-by-numbers.' I often question politely if they are sure that particular colour goes there? Really? And despite these polite arguments, I have learned that it undoubtedly does. Painting in this way is a process of complete trust, and if I deviate from that the picture goes astray. It is art in service, not the individual-led path of a professional artist. For this reason I did not sign my work for many years, until spirits told me not to be so precious - I had provided the hands, eyes, paints and time!

BLENDING ART AND VISION

My art work never fitted in with mainstream galleries and art associations, or even with the college system where I trained. At college I made pictures through an intuitive



channelling process, in altered states: in effect channelling the images. But because I did not know how to manage this altered state, I spent most of the time feeling 'spaced out,' exhausted and dazed, with the tutors trying in vain to get me to do 'proper art'.

And then one day I had an epiphany during one of the coercive tutorials intended to inspire me. I had been making a mother and child sculpture, and my tutor was shouting at me to 'get real,' which in his case meant producing art of protest and anger. I found myself responding with unusual clarity and forcefulness, telling him: "My work is about beauty - it is a beautiful world and it needs balance!" I stopped myself in my tracks, and my heart listened to what I had just said, although I had no idea at that time what it meant. I kept those words in my heart.

Since then my understanding of healing and sacred art have been gently blended and merged by my spirits, to whom I give deepest thanks. I know many of you are also making beautiful images guided by the spirits, so I am sure you will find echoes of your own experiences.

TYPES OF VISION

Traditional peoples weave the sacred symbols of their culture naturally into their everyday, and from looking at tribal art-making I learned how sacred art is energy, contained within ritual, steered by intent; it is a weaving of balance and beauty that is essential for soul health and right relationship for the community.

Sacred imagery 'arrives' in distinct ways. It may come from a set spiritual belief system, ranging from tribal cosmology and myth to liturgically established religions. Its strength and practice lies in this formal structuring and its repetition through time. Spontaneous visionary experiences also bring pictures, and these experiences may have various forms ranging from an individual's natural 'sight' - that may or may not be recognised and developed - to the triggers caused by trauma or illness. Or imagery may come via conscious and intentional processes, such as the shamanic journey, deep meditation or ceremony. My own painting and artwork comes from such shamanic practice.

In the days before Photoshop and the wonderful digital photographic effects we have now, part of my work as a magazine editor, illustrator and designer was to find ways to convey healing energy, visions, dreams and the various esoteric experiences described in the articles. Without realising it I was learning to tune in to receive pictures from elsewhere. I began to get used to going within myself, waiting, and letting the images emerge. I got familiar with the shift of consciousness and sense of being directed.

A PAINTING FOR SUN BEAR

At this time I met Sun Bear, a Chippewa medicine man, and learned much about sacred ecology and ceremony from him; his love

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for the earth and for the emerging 'Rainbow Tribe' that bridged cultures, was powerful and touched many people around the world.

When Sun Bear was diagnosed with terminal cancer, people performed ceremonies to send him healing, and I intuitively offered the best I could, in the form of a painting to honour him and bring him the energy he needed. This was the first time I had ever done a painting with a focus of healing intent towards someone else.

The painting which immediately came to me, was based on the

Opposite:
'Restoring The Gentle Heart' a scene from a healing journey

Below:
'Sun Bear Tree'



Opposite: journal records of shamanic journeys and inside Faith's studio

words of Lakota holy man Nicholas Black Elk describing his shamanic initiatory vision of the tree at the centre of the world: 'wide as daylight and as starlight', which sheltered all the creatures of the world.

An unexpectedly powerful tide of clear inspiration and energy carried me forward and I found the World Tree image appearing swiftly and with great focus under my brush. The process was beyond thought, and the painting was completed quickly. All the while I was praying and asking for good energy to go to Sun Bear. As I worked, letting the image grow intuitively, a bear appeared at the base of the tree, hugging it, drawing sustenance, vital and alive in spirit.

That painting has stayed with me for many years, although lots of people have wanted to buy it. It is in the heart of my home and has been seen and felt by so many people; they all get embraced in that great bear hug and enfolded by that sheltering tree. Sometimes the quality of Sun Bear's spirit is strong in the room and I know he is continuing his healing work through it. I discovered by observation how a painting can bathe people with its energy and bless and nourish the soul so simply and directly. And I know that many people have prints of this painting in healing and

meditation spaces, where they report similar healing experiences.

ICONS FOR THE EARTH

This is how the paintings, and the spirits who guide them, have taught me about my part in making sacred art. As I realised the power of Sun Bear's 'World Tree', I became aware of the message: 'by painting trees with intent you will be helping the energy of forests that are being decimated. Each tree you draw or paint, however simple, will plant a tree in the Dreaming.' And so I painted many trees.

I found out more about the 'Dreaming' of the Australian Aborigines. For them, all creation is being created by the ancestors - and our own actions - continually, simultaneously. Sacred ritual and ceremony honour and reinforce this process of creation. More recently I discovered parallels in the beautiful 'co-creation' work of Sandra Ingerman and others in 'Medicine for the Earth.'

Painting is my way to visualise a vital, whole and balanced world right now, and my spirits encourage me to paint more and more and send out the images - each one a creation 'seed' that will travel on through time and space.

One day, as part of a book I was writing and illustrating, I asked

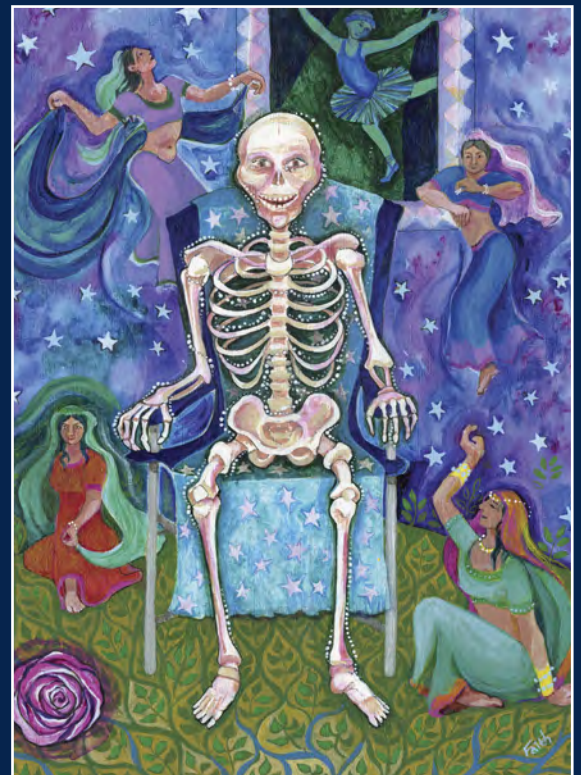
spirit for an image of a sacred well. I started to make the painting, not sure what it would look like. It came quite gently and clearly, and was of an overhanging tree, a stone-lined pool, and a large lake with mountains beyond. I was not sure I liked it as an illustration, but I accepted it from spirit. This ambivalence often happens, and when it does, I have learned to pay extra attention.

The book had been published for some years when a woman phoned me from Ireland. She thanked me for this particular painting and for honouring a special sacred tree she knew. I told her she was mistaken, this was an 'imaginary' image and in any case I had never been to Ireland. No, she insisted, every detail of the landscape and well was true, it existed. There were cloutie prayer cloths tied to the tree in my painting, just as they had been hung as healing requests in the tree itself.

We were both confused, and I asked her more about the tree. She told me tearfully that it had been cut down, despite local protests, and she had just been overjoyed to find it again in my book. I asked when the tree was felled and it was at the time the painting had been made. So not only do the spirit trees weave into

Right: 'Garden Spirit' a record of an encounter with a powerful spirit in Ordinary Reality

Far right: 'Bless My Bones' a blessing vision from the spirits following a request for a personal physical healing



reality, it seems that the real trees can come into the painting 'windows' to continue their work.

As I became more experienced in shamanism I found I had more conscious tools to connect with the spirits, and we could dialogue directly about the paintings to be done. When I learned the three stages of shamanic journeying - entry, journey and return - I was able to be more aware myself in my painting sessions; I could start, do the work, and re-enter Ordinary Reality using my shamanic skills.

Over the last decade particularly, working under the guidance of my teacher Jonathan Horwitz, I have pursued my art 'apprenticeship' with the spirits, getting more and more sacred art work to do from them.

On my journeys the spirits often take me aside and say 'you should paint this part', and this happened more and more, until some while back I pleaded with them that I was getting like an overstuffed suitcase full of the waiting images. They simply told me to 're-send' the images into Ordinary Reality through my intent. I did not have to personally create each one. What a relief!

Some paintings are very clearly healing images. On one journey I was taken into a 'soul restoring garden'. Here I could see the glowing consciousnesses of people walking among delicate crystalline plants, soaking up their healing energies. Not only did I walk in that powerful healing place myself, but I was told very definitely to paint it. This proved very difficult. The scene had been so ethereal and full of light, and at the best of times a painting in Ordinary Reality cannot match the radiance of the spirit worlds.

Back in the studio I looked despairingly at my efforts, which were falling far short, and trying to ignore my art-trained mind that kept trying to help. The spirits repeatedly brought my awareness back into my heart centre, and asked me "Is that what you really saw?"

This is the phrase I now have to repeat to myself when a painting is struggling to emerge. It is one thing to have a Spielberg-style journeying experience, and quite another to birth it into the material world. But the key is always to keep returning to the original experience.

PASSING ON MESSAGES

I have also found messages come to people through the images. One day I was painting a tree, when suddenly I found myself painting a blackbird staring out from the branches with a hypnotic gaze. Slightly discomfited - as the image was a strong one - I finished the painting and in due course it was put up on my online gallery. Some while later a woman phoned me to say how moved she was by the work; her daughter had been killed in an accident some while before and had been appearing to comfort her as a blackbird in all kinds of ways. She recognised the blackbird immediately and now has the painting in her keeping.

I used to be unsure which images were suitable for public display, as many of the subjects came from personal journeys, and I did not see how they could be relevant to other people. I also did not wish to disrespect the shared experiences with my spirits. Then one painting gave me the answer. It was from a journey for emotional healing for my own heart. On the journey I had to take out my bruised and battered heart and place it in a net bag, and hook the bag onto the branch of a nearby tree, which would be doing the healing while the journey continued. I could then return to collect the healed heart.

I was told to paint this and the spirits also told me to share the painting via my website gallery. Contrary to my expectations, I

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found that it immediately spoke to people directly and powerfully, and I still have many requests for prints.

However, I always check with the spirits whether to display a painting publicly. Sometimes ones I feel are public the spirits say are not for other people to see - and vice versa. If a painting has been on the 'private' list for a while, it is sometimes moved to the 'public'. I guess this is when it has finished its work with me personally.

SYMBOLS OF ESSENCE

While learning how to represent energies I inevitably found the power of symbols. Each culture has their own energy shorthand in symbols that resonate with the energy they represent. A symbol represents the essence of an energy, from the simple love sign of a heart carved in a tree, to the complex patterns of the Buddhist Kalachakra Mandala evoking world peace and the cycles of time.

If a symbol is used continually for centuries, it gathers an intent of its own. Each time it is used - especially in ceremony - this deepens its resonance, and traditional peoples have great respect for this accumulative power. For example Australian Aboriginal 'singings' painted on bark, are the diagrammatic energy forms of their land, in constant creation. Some of these singings are so strong in their energy that the design is divided up amongst initiated artists so that the whole image can only be made on special occasions when all the owners of the design come together in ceremony.

Western art is a far cry from this level of awareness, intent and energy direction. Even our materials are obtained with little physical effort, we do not need to travel great distances to obtain raw pigments from their source; nor do we spend hours grinding semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli to make our paint, or spend days preparing a painting surface

like the wooden panel for an icon. All these time-consuming and often ritual processes deepen the intent of the making and therefore increase its power. And it is only in the last couple of hundred years, since the expansion of the chemical industries, that we have had such an amazing range of bright colours to use.

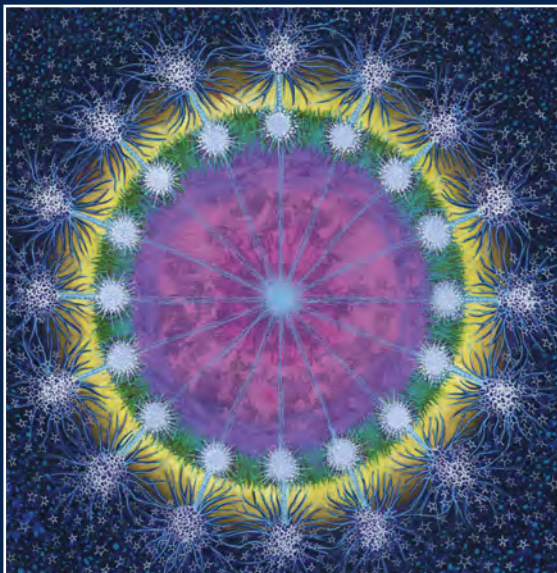
Today's ready supply of brushes, drawing materials, paper, canvases and boards make it all too easy to pick up and launch into a piece of work with unclear focus and no real connection to spirit.

One thing has been made very clear to me about respecting this process of symbolic imagery - indeed, the spirits long ago insisted I have it pinned up beside my studio light switch: 'Symbolism is not an excuse for bad painting.' 'Bad' is not about level of skills or execution here, it means sloppy or careless. My intent must always be to stay as true to 'what I saw' as possible. It is through the eyes of the heart that we must look, and anything we make from that place of truth is beautiful.

WINDOWS BETWEEN WORLDS

The spirits have told me that my work is both a window for people to see into and connect with the spirits' world, and also a window through which the spirits can look into our world. This is most powerful when the work is the original painting, but I receive wonderful stories of how this energy effect works even with a print.

Because of this active flowing of energy, many traditional spirit paintings, such as Tibetan thangkas and often Christian icons, are given coverings to allow them to 'sleep'. Some have doors, like Mexican house shrines, and others may be kept wrapped up to keep the energy contained and inactive until required. The late artist-shaman Pablo Ameringo, who made vibrant, visionary paintings from his ayahuasca visions to transmit healing, left instructions that some paintings should be kept covered until they are needed.



Top left: 'Angel Wheel' a mandala showing the sacred Four Directions of the Medicine Wheel

Centre: 'Grove of Stars' an image given by the spirits to symbolise the circle of power of the Star Nation

Left: 'Beaver Visitation' an initiatory experience in which a spirit helper unexpectedly devoured Faith and transported her to the spirit worlds



ACTIVATING IMAGES

Once completed, a sacred object or artwork is considered alive, and may often be blessed and awakened - a moment of initiation or birth. For the Tibetans, an awakening mantra is written on the back of a thangka painting, and Christian icons are activated when a small white dot is placed in the eye of the saint or virgin. Work can be baptised, blessed, presented to the sacred directions - each culture has its own ways.

For me, I go with my own feel for each work. And I have to consciously disconnect from the paintings before they pass into another's keeping. This I do through prayer and a simple cutting of ties ceremony, using smudge and crystals - whatever feels right at the time.

THE SACRED PROCESS

With all this sacred creative energy around, it is important to keep the 'making' space itself grounded and anchored. Ritual creates a container for these energies, which can be considerable.

Any space used for deeply focused sacred art, just like any healing and sanctuary spaces, needs to be kept clear and bounded. And as part of this awareness I am careful who, and when, I allow other people into my work space. I have also learned that the paintings themselves, when they are finished, may need space and quiet around them.

We also need to be aware of being tidy with our own energy. When people come to study with me I always check out first that they consciously enter and exit the inspirational space, and do not get stuck in it. For most creative activity and inspirational working is a form of trance, triggering a shift of consciousness - and it is not easy to get on with everyday life while still half in trance. There are often sighs of relief when people realise that it is commonplace to feel ungrounded by creativity, and how simple the remedies are.

For myself, the sacred process for managing the energy shifts involved vary from picture to picture. I stay receptive to whatever the spirits are telling me. Sometimes I may be asked to present the work to the four directions or sometimes to bless it

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with water or incense. I also smudge and bless my studio altar, paints, equipment and myself regularly.

As the intent grows and the work progresses, the experience becomes more and more akin to that of being in deep trance. I have one foot in Ordinary Reality and one in the spirit world. This is literally a balancing act, and if I go too far either way, the flow of the work falters. I 'overbalance'. Before now I have gone right into trance and 'come to' with my head resting peacefully on the work in progress; or I may drop the paint brush, or knock over a water pot. Then the balance naturally returns!

SHAMANIC TOOLS

I use all the familiar objects of shamanic practice - such as my rattle



Above: 'All is Shimmering' the spirits join in witnessing the true energy appearance of Creation

Below: 'Meconopsis Dreaming' meeting a plant spirit and being body-surfed by a field of calendulas



and drum - in my studio at some time or another. The spirits guide me in specific ways to work with them. For instance, on a complex journey some years ago a healing spirit gave me an image to paint for someone, and I feared that I would not remember it. My spirit helper simply shrugged and said 'Take a picture of it.' I asked how, and was told 'With your rattle.' Since then my rattle has done service as camera, and I rattle out the image afterwards, either onto my journal, on to the work in progress, or occasionally into the client - the image does not always have to be manifested.

The pictures that I am given can often be acts of personal healing for myself too. On more than one occasion I have been given paintings that retrieve parts of my own soul during the making process.

On one occasion I was making a journey for someone else when the

action of the journey was suddenly diverted and I found myself flying down to a place in London where I grew up, and the Second World War bomb site that was next to our house. In the few years since the blitz, the ground where next door's house had been had become a wonder of new growth, wild roses, dandelions, brambles, all covering the scar in the street. It was a neighbourhood playground.

So, when I had realised where the spirits had taken me, I saw myself aged about three, waiting with my 'imaginary' dog watching beside me.

I explained who I was to the soul part and gathered her up. A vivid memory came to me, as I did so, of the little skirt she was wearing, and what a struggle it had been for my small, determined fingers, to do up the buttons! I was told to paint this moment of retrieval, and then I continued on the original mission of

the journey. Now this I reckoned was a really private painting, but when I was making my latest book, 'Gardens of the Soul: Making Sacred and Shamanic Art' the spirits insisted it be included.

Another painting whereby I retrieved a vital part of my own creativity and soul power through the process of making the painting is also included in the book, along with a record of its different stages. The spirits have said that the witnessing of the finished work and the stages of its creation by readers of the book is part of the soul retrieval process for me.

So my learning journey with pictures and the spirits continues. But those of you who are experimenting and making journals and visual records of your shamanic experiences, please don't think I have a grand studio - it's the spare bedroom of a tiny cottage. Neither do I ever feel experienced or secure in a set of skills or way of working. Because each creative act is an act of risk, of newness, entering unfamiliar territory with all the old inner demons of doubt and self-criticism on my shoulder. The one thing that is constant is a willingness to take that journey into the unknown, just as it is with all shamanic working.

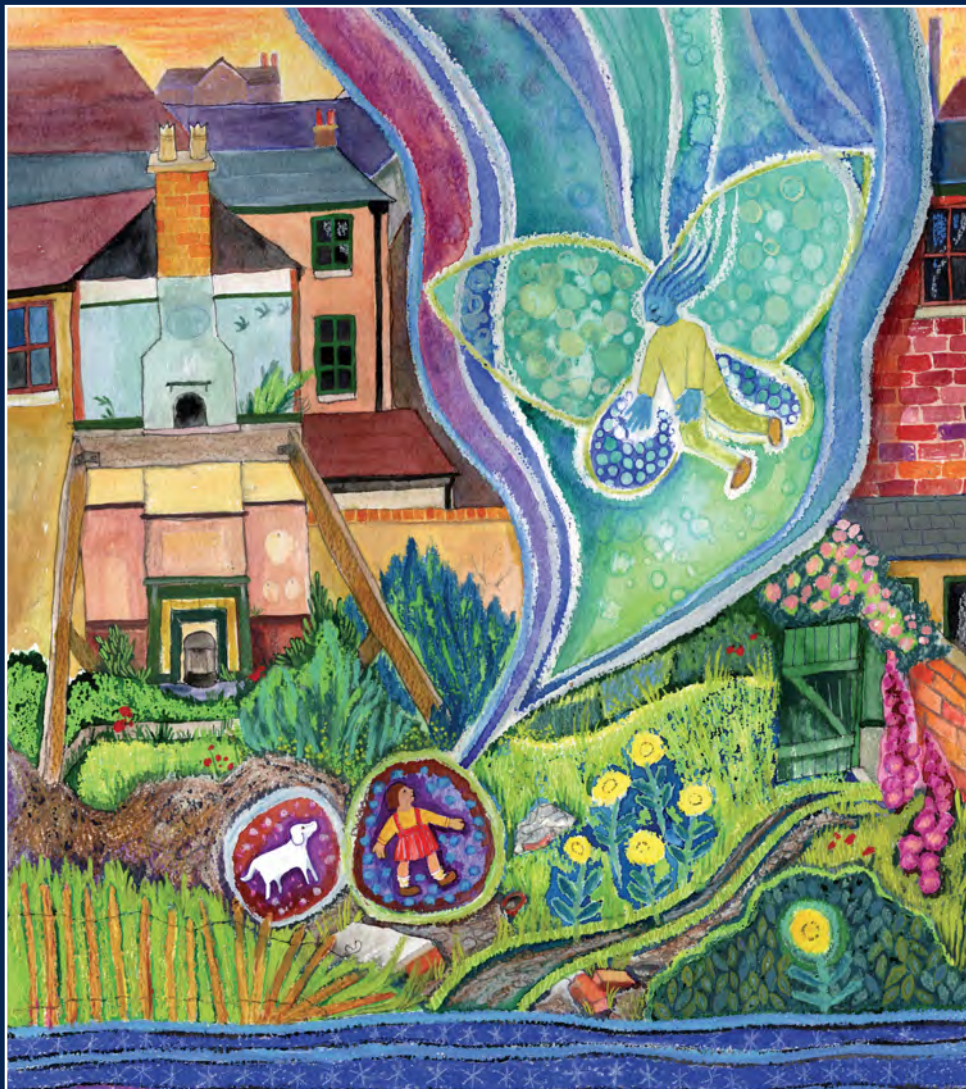
Thanks be for the spirits who hold my hand, are infinitely patient, and yes - they usually *do* know which colour goes where!

Faith Nolton DipAD, ATD graduated in Fine Art and Sculpture at Liverpool College of Art in 1968. She founded Sacred Hoop Magazine in 1993 and continues as its design consultant and as part of the support team. Faith has for many years offered shamanic workshops, ceremonies and circles, and now concentrates on creating shamanic paintings and poetry.

She exhibits and holds residencies occasionally by invitation, and holds a regular 'giveaway' of her original paintings. Faith lives in West Wales, where from her studio she offers small scale workshops and mentoring time for individuals.

Her first book 'Easy to Use Shamanism' (Vega Books 2002) explored the Medicine Wheel and shamanic awareness and is now being revised as an e-book. Her latest book, 'Gardens of the Soul: Making Sacred and Shamanic Art' (Divine Arts 2014 : see the review in this issue) explores making intentional art to bring healing, blessing and harmony

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Below:
'Gathering Soul'
showing Faith
retrieving a
lost soul part