

# WHEN WE FOCUS ON THE SIMPLE WAYS

Sandra Ingerman  
talks to  
Nicholas Breeze Wood  
about the need for simple,  
grounded, shamanic practice

**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 practicing 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

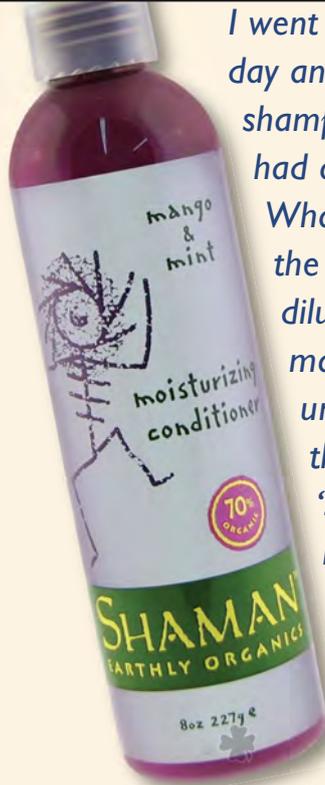
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workshops going on, and so many teachers. There were a lot of discussions and judgments about who should be doing what, and comparing the work people were doing.

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



*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*

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 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 gnosis 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 gnosis 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 how 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**

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**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**

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**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 with - and communicating with - nature, and watching for omens and signs that are shown to us to help guide our way.

But I'm sure you get the same emails and letters I do - 'I would like to be a shaman, how do I go about doing that?' I really believe that it is a destiny to be a shaman, and not a profession that you choose.

I do observe people in my workshops who are born with a gift. I can see it in their eyes. I've trained some practitioners whose work is extraordinary, it's beyond my wildest imagination, but it wasn't their choice, it was a gift and part of their destiny.

There are two aspects I see - those who 'become a shaman' through destiny, and those who 'engage in shamanic practices' to improve the quality of their own health and well being, and become a more conscious being on the planet. I separate out these two aspects.

I cannot teach anybody how to be a shaman, that is for the spirits to do. Once you open up to the world of spirit, the spirits take you into their tutelage. And it's not always a pleasant thing, because there are very challenging initiations that continue throughout life. The spirits are not just going to put you through

a hard period for a week, there are constant initiations to open you up to the world of spirit and teach you how to be a vessel for the helping spirits and to work from a place of compassion and love.

**Yes, for me it's always been the old thing that it's the spirits that decide who's going to be a shaman. Whatever we might want to do about it. It is not in our personal game plan, so to speak.**

Absolutely, I agree with that. I've had the opportunity to work with thousands of students, and I've observed that it is people who suffered a terrible loss - such as a child dying - or they have healed from a challenging physical or emotional illness - they are the ones who I see with a gift for the work. Many of these people suffer the kinds of losses that you can never heal from - transforming them into a wounded healer. Shamans are often called wounded healers. Of course having a near death experience is a classic initiation into becoming a shaman.

It's almost like the spirits chose them before they were aware of shamanism or spiritual practices, and they went through their loss or crisis, and it was their destiny to be opened up - because of that initiatory life experience - into the work. Just like you, I teach people that it's the spirits that choose you and if they do, it won't mean that life becomes easy for you, because you are going to experience a lot of challenges in order for the spirits to sculpt you into the shaman you are going to become.

What I see is that the really great shamanic practitioners are constantly going through initiations.

I was introduced to the practice of shamanic journeying by Michael Harner, and I also did a lot of work with Oceana FastWolf, who is an Apache medicine woman. Both of them really instilled in me you don't call yourself a shaman. Your community recognises you as a shaman, but to actually call yourself a shaman is an egoic statement. That idea became so embedded in me. I never trained with anyone who said, "You should stand up and call yourself a shaman." I saw calling yourself a shaman, and bragging about your

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power, as being the same thing.

But I can see that if you were initiated and trained in a culture where you were taught, 'this is who you are,' then 'shaman' explains your identity.

**I was trained very much like you, for me the 'S' word is a big 'no 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.

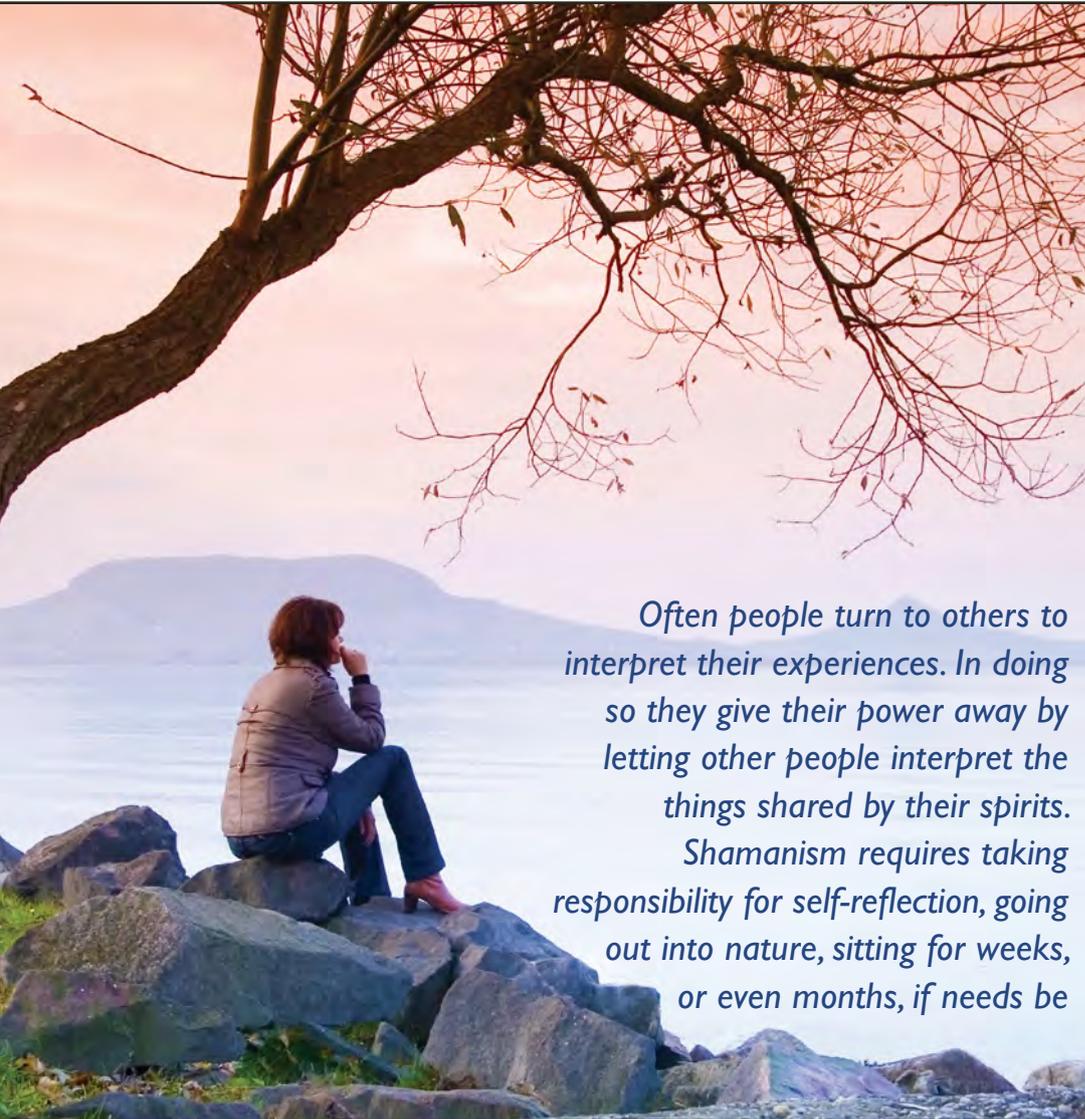
It is so important to me that we do the questing, the visioning, the journeying, getting direct revelation. I continue believing there is a way for us to broaden our perspectives and evolve our work to be effective practitioners during the times we live in.

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 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 -



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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 [Diné] 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 adored 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

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See the review of Sandra's new book: 'Walking In Light: The Everyday Empowerment of Shamanic Life,' in this issue of Sacred Hoop

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