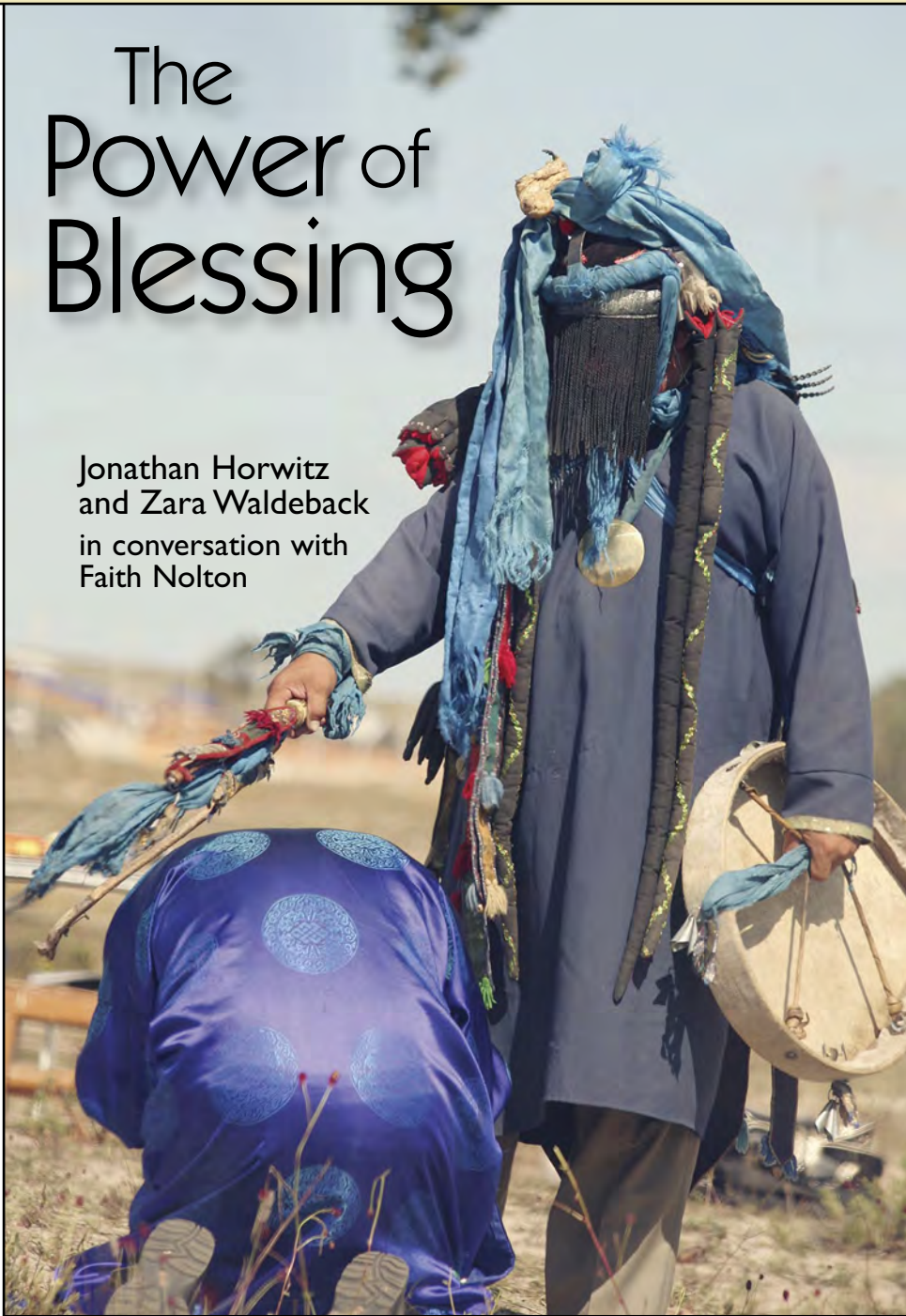


The Power of Blessing

Jonathan Horwitz and Zara Waldeback in conversation with Faith Nolton



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Above: Southern Siberian Buryat shaman blesses using a blessing wand (*bardag*)

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 source. They are different ways of giving power and connection.

However, although subtle, I do feel they have slightly different uses. In a very general sense, a power animal retrieval gives 'raw power' and fuel to live life. Healing can re-order spirit and matter so the whole comes into a good state of being.

Blessings simply give something - they are not asking anything, apart from that we receive and live its magic. The fact that blessings are given freely is part of their power. They are a pure gift.

Blessings can be used for situations where you may not need healing or power, but support. When we ask for a blessing we are not asking for advice. It doesn't usually give instructions for how to solve problems. For me there is a clear difference between asking for help to find the right house or asking for

a blessing for my new house.

Jonathan: You could say that receiving a power animal or healing is a blessing! But if you get a power animal retrieval, boom! You've got this power animal with you and a new relationship develops - it is very concrete. If you receive a blessing, often it will continue to work subtly inside you, as a stimulus for your own spiritual development, if you are mindful of it. This is especially so with blessings given with words.

Zara: In the end, the differences are maybe not that important. It is almost impossible to find the line between healing and blessing.

Jonathan: This is typical for humans. We want to make boxes and definitions, but there is so much interaction and motion and fluidity that it is difficult to pin it down. What is important is to remember that they are all forms of power and it doesn't need to be defined. The power simply needs to be used.

Faith: What if people have strong feelings about giving blessings? Can anybody bless?

Jonathan: When I started thinking about blessing in relationship to shamanism quite a few people asked, "But don't you have to be allowed to bless? Don't you need permission?"

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 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



Above: Mayan shaman performs a blessing for the rainforest

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.

Faith: How powerful can a

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blessing be?

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



Right: American politician being blessed by a Native American elder

Below: A Native American medicine person gives a blessings with an eagle wing fan and a braid of sweetgrass

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.

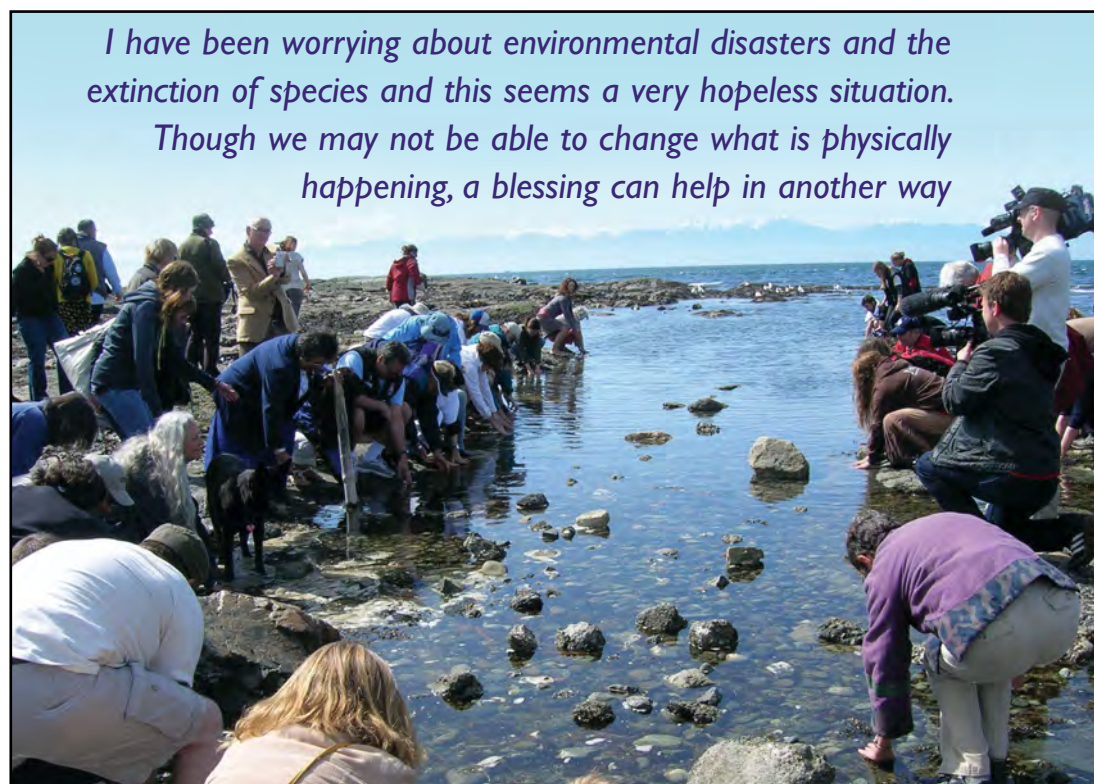
When I re-connect to the blessings I have been given, I experience power coming back into my life, and I bring myself back to power.

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.

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



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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.

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.

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,

Above: giving a blessing to the ocean

Below: a Mongolian shaman performing a blessing





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

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.

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



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.

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?

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.

Top: a Tibetan Bonpo lama gives a blessing by pouring water from a sacred vase (bhumpa)

Above: bhumpas are filled with spring water for a Tibetan Buddhist ceremony

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: With tools I try to contact the spirit of the tool and ask it for a blessing. Just as I can bless my rattle, my rattle can also bless me, and there is no reason why I shouldn't ask for that blessing if I feel that I need it.

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.

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 it is 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

Below: Buryat shaman flicking liquid onto other shamans as a blessing



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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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