

## Shamanism: An Old Skill for a New Age

by Sharon Van Raalte

It is a word we hear a lot these days – but just what is shamanism? The word “shaman” derives from Siberia and Central Asia, from the Tungusc “saman”. The term has been applied widely to refer to those experiences best described in Mircea Eliade’s classic work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Eliade calls shamanism a “technique of ecstasy”, not to be confused with other forms of magic, sorcery or even experiences of religious ecstasy.

Michael Harner, Founder and Director of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, calls shamanism a method and a practice, as opposed to a religion based on fixed dogmas. It is a way for individuals to experience and interact with a universe where everything is alive, interconnected and moving according to some hidden purpose.

Shamanism has its roots in ancient, land-based cultures, dating at least as far back as 40,000 years. The shaman was known as “magician, medicine man, psychopomp, mystic and poet” (Eliade, 1974). What set him apart from other healers or priests was his ability to move at will into trance states. During a trance, the shaman’s soul left his body and travelled to other realms, where helping spirits guided him in his work. The shaman provided healing on many levels; physical, psychological and spiritual. The work of the shaman was based on the holistic model, which took into consideration, not only the whole person, but that person’s interaction with his world, both inner and outer. The soul was considered the place of life breath, where essence resided, and any physical illness was inextricably linked with sickness of the soul. Illness of the mind had to do with soul loss, intrusion, possession.

Through time, tribal hunter-gatherer groups coalesced into agricultural communities. Then, people moved into towns which became cities, and eventually social structures became hierarchical. These vast social changes brought about profound changes in the world view of those who were no longer land-based, and altered their relationship to nature, to spirit and to the healing arts. The shaman, as healer/priest of the earth-based traditions, was perceived as a threat to the leaders of organized religion. A

nascent medical profession chose to restrict healing knowledge to an elitist group who were schooled in classical practices. Earth wisdom was disavowed. This paradigm has continued more or less unbroken up to the present and has given us the models of organized religion, allopathic medicine and contemporary psychiatry/psychology.

The ancient holistic model of the shaman has become splintered into specialties. Modern religion defines a relationship with God that is often filtered through dogma and sectarianism. Modern medicine focuses on the body as a grand machine, and the territory of the modern psychiatrist is the mind. Even though I have the notion that the psychiatrist, in some respects, is replacing the spiritual confessor, as organized religion seems less able to fill the needs of many people, I would guess that for many psychiatrists, spirit is less an issue than mind.

In the first years of the 21st century an emerging paradigm shift is coming into focus, spiraling us back to considerations of the soul and the spirit. The need in our culture for a more direct spiritual context and the desire for a sense of wholeness and connectedness is evident in the current shift towards mystical and earth-based holistic practices. Through eastern meditation, bodywork, Gaia consciousness, and the revival of indigenous wisdoms (e.g native North American, Celtic), for example, we are really attempting to find a footing on something of substance. We are looking for original wisdom. In this age of demystification, we are searching for the mystery.

Perhaps a brief look at the history of shamanism will shed light on the reasons for the current revival of this and other spiritual or animistic approaches to healing.

Accounts of shamanic practices reveal a long and continuous line of shamanic tradition that, rather than being lost, has been overshadowed in the West by a three hundred year preoccupation with rational and mechanistic thinking. During this time, earth-based wisdoms were discredited in favour of the prevailing scientific and technological paradigm. Native American shamanic counsellor, Leslie Gray, refers to the “devolution...from shamanism to mesmerism to hypnotism to psychoanalysis” during the “handful” of years (Yoga Journal, 93, 1990,p.53).

Holger Kalweit, combining the study of psychology and ethnology, has investigated shamanism from both of these perspectives:

The “perverse” upside-down physics of the shamanic universe – in which time is stretchable, space is solid, matter is transparent, and conventional manifestations of energy are replaced by invisible subtle forces – cannot be grasped by our customary mode of perception. Nevertheless, all our tribal societies as well as our ancestors – and cultures of both the Old World and our present world – did at one time subscribe to the idea of such a universe. Our modern Western culture forms the only exception to this general rule. Its determined scientific exploration and experimentation has confined itself to what is observable within three-dimensional space. In other words, it has concentrated itself exclusively on a reality accessible to a system of logic based on purely sensory perceptions (Kalweit, 1984, translation 1988, pp. xi-xii).

This mind-set has exacted a heavy toll on the integrity of the earth and its inhabitants. Some contemporary philosophers and historians, such as Thomas Berry, believe that we have carried this period to its “logical” conclusion and that our planetary survival depends on our rediscovering or re-membering the context that once informed the larger segment of our history as human beings on this earth. In his book with Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story*, Berry refers to the “feeling for subjective communion with the various components of the Earth community” as demonstrated in the drawings and paintings of animals done in Paleolithic times. Unlike the “taking without giving in return” that characterizes our present attitude towards the earth, in those early times

...everything existed within the single embrace of this immense world where the primordial mysteries of existence were shared in common. In the early civilizations the cosmological order was consistently experienced in terms of human society, and human social order was conceived in terms of the cosmological order. These were different aspects of a single universal order of things. (Berry and Swimme, 1992, pp. 244-245).

In order to return to this level of human awareness in a new context, Berry invites us to find a “mystique of exaltation” through

“the renewal of the great cosmic liturgy”. Rather than seeking to reject the present and return to some past glory, we are being offered the challenge of participating in the creation of an elegant synthesis of the reasoning mind and the passionate heart – one that will take us forward in our evolution.

The historical path that has brought us to this point can be traced if we look at the evolution of shamanic traditions. Joseph Campbell provides insight into the nature of the shamanic way of being when he addresses the question of the contrasting mythologies of the hunting and planting tribes. In hunting societies, success depended on the prowess or power of the individual hunter, which was believed to be accorded to him through visionary encounters with beings in the spirit world.

He describes that, by taking even one step up the evolutionary ladder of society, to the planting tribes, the group was already faced with a complexity of structure that required putting individual initiative aside in favour of “a rigid relationship not only of the individual to his fellows, but also of village life to the calendric cycle” (Campbell, 1959–69, p. 230). Direct communication with the spiritual source was replaced with elaborate ceremonies and rituals, conducted by a professional priesthood, in which the whole community participated.

The contrast between the two world views may be seen more sharply by comparing the priest and the shaman. The priest is the socially initiated, ceremonially inducted member of a recognized religious organization, where he holds a certain rank and functions as a tenant of an office that was held by others before him, while the shaman is one who, as a consequence of a personal psychological crisis, has gained a certain power of his own. The spiritual visitants who came to him in vision had never been seen before by any other; they were his particular familiars and protectors (Campbell, 1959–69, p. 231).

As interdependent groups evolved into village, then city structures, it became ever more important to discredit and stifle the individual impulse that set shamans on journeys of personal discovery, in favour of group-enhancing rites. And now, in this age of “professional priesthods”, at the height of the most complex societal structure the world has ever known, we are seeing a

renewal of the shamanic calling, of mystical thinking and the return to a consideration of ancient wisdoms. We are experiencing a need for “spirit”.

All cultures have grown from a place of shamanic awareness, even if it barely remembered. We have all sprung from tribal and animistic roots. Those roots are calling to be remembered. We have just to look at the renewal of Native North American spirituality and practice, the memory of it still warm in the hearts of the elders and the ancestors. At pow-wows and in healing circles across the continent, the hand of friendship and teaching is also being offered to those of us whose memories are more distant.

Michael Harner is one of the most respected voices in the field of contemporary shamanism. An anthropologist with impeccable academic credentials, he was also trained in shamanism by both the Conibo and Jivaro Indians. His lifelong investigation into the ways of shamanism around the world led him to develop a synthesis of universal shamanic wisdom, called core shamanism, that can be learned and practiced with high levels of success by Westerners in a Western setting.

The sense of something missing has expanded from the spiritual to include the physical and emotional. In this vein, Harner sites a dissatisfaction with the inadequacies of purely technological treatments of illness, along with the impersonal and commercial aspects of much of modern medicine, as another reason people are seeking more.

He points to aspects of alternative medicine, which seem to be bringing back into use many of the techniques that have long been associated with shamanism, “such as visualization, altered states of consciousness...hypnotherapy, meditation...and the mental and emotional expression of personal will for health and healing” as an indication that “shamanism is being reinvented in the West precisely because it is needed” (Harner, 1980, p. 136).

One of the first and most important teachings in shamanic work is that our real masters are our guides and teachers in the spirit world. We can access these realms using techniques which come to us from various shamanic cultures. Learning these techniques is fascinating. We can learn, as well, from important teachers in this

reality who have tread the ground before us. But, in the end, how we get there is not as important as what we learn once we are there. The truth is, we all learn “one on one” by journeying to our own helping spirits for answers and teachings. In essence, this is the purpose of the vision quest and other forms of contemplative isolation that characterize most shamanic traditions.

In his book, *The Way of the Shaman*, Harner suggests some reasons for the return of shamanic practice. What he describes is a natural outcome of the growth and waning of cycles. During the Age of Faith, if ecclesiastical dogma affirmed a spirit world, that was enough to ensure belief in it. Ironically, the Age of Science, with its worship of the scientific method, created in its offspring, seekers who require first-hand evidence of “the nature and limits of reality”. For many, dogma is no longer sufficient.

Jeremy Taylor’s words on the subject are insightful.

The true shamanic tradition is open and adventurous. It is more conscious, complex, and multidimensional than ordinary “rational” dealing with life, not less. It is a practical world view that acknowledges the archetypal patterns of the collective unconscious as pragmatic realities. It embraces the vision and the dream as practical means of communion with real energies greater than the ego. The true shaman, in non-technical societies as well as in modern industrial settings, is always more open to new technologies and ways of doing things, new social relationships, and new ways of framing and conceptualizing experience than his or her more conventional neighbors. True shamanic exploration is the exact opposite of “superstition” because it always remains open and non-dogmatic, regularly searching beyond the known and the socially agreed and accepted, not acknowledging conventional wisdom as the limit of the possible (Taylor, 1992).

In this respect, shamanism is truly an old skill for a new age.

#### RECOMMENDED READING:

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