In Search of the Shaman

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> Shamanism holds such fascination for the Western imagination that much continues to be written on the subject. This plethora of information from a multitude of disciplines has, however, given rise to a number of methodological problems. The gravest, in my opinion, involve not only the way perceptions of other life-styles are arrived at, but also the very definition and use of evidence. Fact and fiction about shamanism have become so intertwined that determining where one starts and the other stops is enormously difficult.
>
> Compounding these problems is another closely related one: there has been previous little historical accountability. Most writers uncritically create their own profiles of the shaman from the shifting sands of what was published before them. (Flaherty, G., 1992, p. 208)

There is a complex set of problems that make defining what--and who--a shaman is and is not. The overriding one that is apparent to me is that shamanism has become a rather stylish concept, at least to a certain sector of the Western culture in which I reside, and thus both the essential archetype and the reality of real, live shamans past and present tend to become romanticized, even while some delimitation of its traditional defining criteria reveals the meaningfulness of shamanism as both metaphor and a reality. Meanwhile, shamanism is not just an ancient tradition recently become fashionable, but a thriving occupation in many parts of the world, often bearing little resemblance to the stereotypes it has collected from its various researchers. However, archaic images that surface from the collective unconscious and will not be ignored must do so for a reason, and to that more introspective segment of Western culture that searches for a broadening (and

deepening) of understanding beyond the dogma of the Judeo-Christian tradition it was brought up with, the shamanic ideal may be a source of great inspiration if psychological projection can be avoided.

A recent issue of Shaman's Drum, "a Journal of Experiential Shamanism and Spiritual Healing," while edited by some of the foremost modern scholars on shamanism and containing numerous interesting and scholarly articles on shamanism, is also filled with advertisements for shamanic training, books and materials for shamanic rituals. (White, T., ed., 2000) It abounds with photographs and advertisements for various shamans and their reputations, and one wonders whether these people *are* authentic shamans, and by what criteria their authenticity is defined. It seems that this kind of media attention serves to bring an important topic to the collective consciousness of the culture, even as it may confuse the reality of the shamanic experience.

On this topic, I could draw on my own spiritual tradition of Sufism and recollect that what I call Sufism has been denied strenuously by the more traditional Islamic Sufis, while I would not deny the authenticity of my inner experience. My own spiritual teacher has commented that what his students have learned as Sufism may not even rightly be called Sufism, depending on the criteria accepted by its various orders and their teachers. However, in the sense that the tradition is handed from teacher to student throughout each generation, the reality is the dynamic entity any reality must be if it is indeed reality, and perhaps this is true of the spiritual tradition of shamanism.

Perhaps I could rely on Krippner's very succinct and practical definition of the shaman:

> Shamans are men and women who claim to be able to voluntarily alter their consciousness, engaging in unusual experiences that supposedly enable them to help and heal members of their tribe. In psychological terms, shamans purport to self-regulate their attention so as to obtain information that enables them to ameliorate the condition of members of their social group. (in Nicholson, 1987, p. 125)

This definition is broad, and leaves me free to consider various aspects of the topic, and hopefully to draw some useful conclusion, while bearing in mind that invariably the teaching is only as authentic as the teacher. (Khan, 1997-98) But who is an authority on shamanism? Like many religious beliefs, this may be a matter of faith--that is to say, faith based on experience--and not scholarship.

One prevalent conception of the shaman is that she or he was the original psychologist, although as Levi-Strauss (1962, pp. 198-199) points out, the essential difference between the shaman and the psychotherapist is that one talks and the other listens, which means that the shaman falls more into the category of prophet than psychotherapist. This is typical of the tendency to sketch connections between the shaman's role and that of a wide variety of teachers and healers, but the result of a shamanic healing may or may not be at all the end result of the works of any of these. However, I could agree, again with caution, that the shaman of a community assumes a unique role not played by anyone else in the "village," of being the one who "sees that which transpires beyond that which occurs," (Khan, 1987) and because of that vision, becomes both a healer *and* a prophet for individuals and the community that falls within her or his sphere of influence.

If one accepts the concept that imagination invariably plays a role in the

development of illness (Achterberg in Nicholson, 1987, pp. 103-124), then it is the shaman who in one way or another breaks through the veil of illusion that perpetuates either psychic or physical illness and in so doing brings the patient back to harmony and health, if not to self-actualization. The dilemma here, however, is that the shaman's methods may, by some, be considered to be suspect, and by others to be demonstrations of very clever psychological techniques. Indeed, some of the shaman's reported methods are no more extraordinary than prevalent psychotherapeutic techniques such as aversive conditioning, for instance, or even projective interpretation such as that employed in the Rorschach test, however reliable these more scientistic measurements have proven themselves to be statistically. Psychology and shamanism both are dependent on their practitioner's skills, and sometimes neither is above employing "smoke and mirrors" to gain their ends. I would like to think that the function of the authentic shaman has very little to do with such techniques, but I'm not sure the shaman himself would have such a bias if the cause necessitated it. Ellenberger, for instance, relates the account of an anthropologist who requested a shamanic healing, and was treated to what he called an "unparalleled skill in ventriloquism," although the ritual failed to cure him, and in any event his account was anecdotal. (Ellenberger, 1970, pp. 4-5) These stories give some idea of the psychological skills of historical shamans, but the question remains as to whether they offer anything of the reality of their skills currently.

Still, the shamanic ideal is an inspiring one for those who would be helpers and healers of any kind. As such, it must be understood on two levels, in my opinion. Initially, the shamanic archetype itself is a topic for inner attunement, for it seems to me that the shaman is a universal figure intrinsic to the human psyche, if

we care to turn our attention to this powerful force that manifests itself in the human psyche. Potentially, the shamanic force causes such chaos as to turn the personality into something it had only dimly conceived as a possibility prior to its surrender. Often our attention is turned to the inner archetype by meeting it in an outer guise. The first time I thought of the shaman as an archetype, I was looking into the writings of C.G. Jung for guidance, having met him in the form of a teacher who frightened and stimulated me both, who angered me even as I pitied him, but who ultimately *forced* me to make a change in my behavior that changed a very painful and troublesome family situation. It seemed to me that this teacher, in his manipulations and antics was, in his personality and motivation, the embodiment of the archetypal Trickster, as described by Jung:

> Ability to change his shape seems also to be one of his (the Trickster's) characteristics, as there are not a few reports of his appearance in animal form. Since he has on occasion described himself as a soul in hell, the motif of subjective suffering would seem not to be lacking either. His universality is co-extensive, so to speak, with that of shamanism, to which, as we know, the whole phenomenology of spiritualism belongs. There is something of the trickster in the character of the shaman and medicine-man, for he, too, often plays malicious jokes on people, only to fall victim in his turn to the vengeance of those whom he has injured. For this reason, his profession sometimes puts him in peril of his life. Besides that, the shamanistic techniques in themselves often cause the medicine-man a good deal of discomfort, if not actual pain. At all events the "making of a medicine-man" involves, in many parts of the world, so much agony of body and soul that

> permanent psychic injuries may result. His "approximation to the saviour" is an obvious consequence of this, in confirmation of the mythological truth that the wounded healer is the agent of healing, and that the sufferer takes away suffering. (Jung, 1973)

These words may be based on projection, but projections are often based on both need and intuition, and while I am again in danger of overgeneralizing the shaman's identity, these words reveal several important elements of the shaman's reality: that in addition to being a powerful healer and sometimes questionable personality who is capable of employing suspect methods, she is also, by destiny, the wounded healer (and even the seed of "the whole phenomenology of spiritualism") who of necessity undergoes a psychic wounding in order to play her role fully, whether she is an "approximation of the saviour" or merely a trickster. Through this understanding, it seems to me that the shaman is first perceived as an inner figure (which might correspond to the source of the "original shamans" mentioned by Eliade [in Nicholson, 1987, p. 126]) surfacing among the mythic archetypes that hold their various mirrors up to us and and reveal our paths, and sometimes make themselves known through outer figures who may be really quite ordinary, at least in terms of their more apparent qualities and functions. While this personal incident I describe really would be taking the definition of who can be called a shaman too far, the fact remains that this person drew my attention to the archetype and, aware or unaware, taught me something I needed to know, at a terrible psychic expense to both of us. In this is another example of how the shaman plays a role in the community that is not played by anyone else (Heinze, 2000, personal communication with the writer) and perhaps could not be; certainly, in the situation

described, a change was made that would not have been made otherwise, and such changes appear to be common to the shamanic role.

It seems to many that the shaman is in essence the soul of the social worker, the psychologist, the doctor, the priest or minister, all those that we now call "caregivers." But this assumption seems too simple, and by grasping what seems possible, we either run the risk of ignoring what is most important about the shaman or, alternatively, find that we need to redefine the roles and foci of those above-named "mainstream" caregivers, as depth psychology is already doing to some extent. Still, it strikes me that the shaman is the seed of all these in its raw and therefore most potent form. The shaman holds up a mirror in which we see ourselves, sometimes in cataclysmic ways, and binds the wounds of our knowledge, often through his own wounding. The shaman takes us where we thought we could not go, and we remember that we have always been there. The shaman is a "primitive" figure historically and archetypally, in that the mirror he holds up to his patient is the pattern of human existence at its most basic. In the ideal sense of the shamanic healing, nothing artificial is allowed to come between the patient and the truth, and sometimes the result shatters as it heals.

If we allow the shaman into the privacy of our psyches (and are prepared to meet her emerging), then we may be invited to partake of the opportunity to become an authentic helping agent in far more profound ways than academic learning and therapeutic techniques might otherwise take our patients. Yet, this impressive ideal is shadowed by the probability that the shaman is quite capable, in this cause, of assuming the role of the trickster, not at all above using questionable methods to produce the desired end to his works--and that often, these techniques

work very well indeed. It is in this understanding that I believe we must take the shaman very seriously, while at the same time recognizing that, like all healers and teachers, we limit her if we idealize her and, moreover, there is a dark side to any ideal. Yet, surely the "original shaman" is at work today as hard as he ever was throughout the ages, within and without the human being's endeavor to stay alive and sometimes to individuate. To fully know him, we must "shatter our ideals upon the rock of truth" (Khan, 1997), allowing his full personality into our understanding. It is my impression that this can be said of both the "inner shaman" as an archetype and the outer healer in the form of a person who plays the shamanic role.

Thus, it appears that the shaman can be discussed as an archetype in this very broad and unrestricted manner, or in terms of the historical and anthropological knowledge we have about a very specific role that has been studied in many cultures and times. It seems to me that both of these paths are useful in order to get in touch with the inner and outer shaman, and again: I suspect that while delimiting the shaman's image may lead to a more authentic experience, it can also lead to a misguided perception wherein the entire point of the shamanic experience is lost. Having stated my caution about this, and my determination not to fall into the trap of projection, I suspect I will do exactly that as I proceed to discuss those topics that fascinate me as a beginning student of shamanism, for the personality of the trickster in the shaman seems to be an important part of the lesson of the shaman has to teach; in fact, perhaps it is the vehicle to make the teaching accessible.

Defining Shamanism

Shamans have been compared with mystics, prophets, priests, medicine men and women, yogis, alchemists, mediums, psychologists and other healing and

transformative roles played by their practitioners. Shamanism has been compared, appropriately and inappropriately, to traditions such as Buddhism, Yoga, Psychoanalysis, Alchemy and the use of psychotropic drugs to induce what has been called the "Shamanic State of Consciousness" by Harner and others (in Nicholson, 1987, pp. 3-16). These comparisons all enjoy some success, depending on the motivation behind them, and it is the motivation for such comparisons that I suspect to be potentially problematic, and sometimes self-indulgent. Thus, I would like to discuss the commonly accepted defining criteria specific to shamans, and also to categorize those ideas that seem common to our understanding of shamans.

There is a certain quality to the shamanic experience that stands out in my understanding, including (but not limited to) the following elements: (a) the shaman journeys to the spirit worlds, but his work is very much concerned with the earth and the here-and-now; in fact, in the shamanic stories and accounts that I have read, the shaman and his patients seem concerned *only* with the present; other spiritual traditions focus on questions of immortality and the hereafter, but the shaman works to fulfill needs of the moment; (b) the shaman is a healer and only coincidentally a teacher, despite the many comparisons of her with saintly, prophetic and even messianic figures; (c) the shaman's role is a largely relational one in that the shaman is a healer and often heals through the force of his personality and his interaction with his patient and the spirits that guide him, yet he tends to be a singularly lonely personality, sometimes a revered member of the community held in great esteem, and sometimes almost an outcast: here, the "wounded healer" archetype comes in; (d) the shamanic state of consciousness is a fully aware state; the shaman actively participates in her experience of other levels of consciousness and retains the

memory of them in the awakened state; (e) the preoccupation of the shaman's role with the earth plane seems to be underlined by the shaman's interaction with animals as her guides and allies in her work. She does not consort with gods necessarily, but with any helping agent or personality that comes to hand, a much more dangerous role to play than that of devotee and intercessor between the soul and the godhead. This underscores the groundedness of the shaman's work; (f) as already discussed, there is a wide variety of experience and authenticity in those called shamans past and present, but the role of the shaman is a very specific one, different from other practitioners and teachers. Harner, mentioned above, includes most of these elements in his own definition, derived from that of Eliade:

> ...the main defining characteristic of a shaman is that he or she is someone who enters an altered state of consciousness (which I have called the shamanic state of consciousness, or SSC), usually induced by monotonous drumming or other percussion sound, in order to make journeys for a variety of purposes in what are technically called the Lower and Upper Worlds, These other worlds accessible to the shaman in the SSC are regarded as an alternate reality, and the shaman's purpose in journeying to it in the SSC is to interact consciously with certain guardian powers or spirits there, which are usually perceived as power animals. The shaman solicits the friendship and aid of such power animals in order to help other people in various ways, and he or she may also have spiritual teachers in this hidden reality who give advice, instruction and other forms of assistance. (Harner in Nicholson, 1987, p. 3)

This definition both reinforces the stereotypes and gives some idea of the

specificity of the shaman's work. My purpose is to attempt to arrive at some reasonable conclusion as to what a shaman is, and what a shaman does, and why the role of the shaman is unique and archaic one.

Who Becomes a Shaman?

> The shaman, like any personality, is not of his own making; rather, he is an individual seized upon by autonomous psychic forces in the most spontaneous way. It is this spontaneity that is understood by his fellows as the surest sign of an authentic "election" to the role of healer. The shaman initiate is at first a passive object of the sacred, singled out from the rest. (TePaske in Sandner and Wong, 1997, p. 21)

One might ask if there is a particular sort of personality that lends itself to the shamanic role. Considered through the archetype, Jung's words (already cited) point to a certain necessary woundedness: a "soul in hell," a "trickster," an ancient ideal that seems to become new again through initiation in the fully incarnated role of the shaman. As to the first, it is as though in order to achieve his perception of the deeper levels of his patients, the shaman undergoes a crucifixion of the ego-self, the "dark night of the soul" in order to become the solitary healer who is never alone:

> Against the backdrop of what we call "normal" comes an uneasy growth. In early youth a budding shaman differs from his or her peers in certain general ways. Although the shaman's designated role differs across cultures, there is a group of family resemblances that seems ubiquitous. In the tribes I have examined, one aspect receives consensus, that shamans are the unusually gifted or perceptive members of their communities. (Sharon,

> 1978, 16). Not everyone can be a shaman, and not everyone would want to be because some of the things common to shamans' experiences are at least initially unpleasant. For one thing, odd or deformed children--like those born with teeth or with six fingers (Dioszegi 1960, 64)--often become shamans. Those who by nature are set apart from their peers may receive the shamanic calling; tormented by nightmares and possibly by others' cruelty, the shaman stands alone. (Schmidt in Nicholson, 1987, p. 63)

Conversely, the shaman would need to have a very powerful personality--and even ego--in order to perform exorcisms and counter-magic. At the same time, she would have to have great receptivity in order for soul travel to take place, as the successful entering of a conscious meditative state *or* a state of possession requires a certain alert passivity combined with great concentration. If these qualities are necessary, it is easy to see how the shaman becomes a very powerful personality, a kind of law unto himself. This is why I think it is useful to consider the shaman as both a person and an archetype useful for self-understanding to the extent that one is open to it:

> Cultivating *the shaman within* is to develop an observing ego which, like the ancient shaman, is able to use altered states, rituals, and dreams to embrace more primordial forms of experiencing, peek behind the mythology that is operating, assess its limitations, and push on in new, considered, inspiring directions. (Feinstein in Nicholson, 1987, pp. 269-270)

In this sense, the shamanic ability is available to anyone. As to those who "actually" practice shamanism as a vocation, Heinze indicates that, in her work with shamans and mediums in Southeast Asia, she found a wide variety of personalities

and lifestyles among these practitioners (1962, pp. 30-38), but does point out that nearly all present-day shamans she studied felt "called" to their role, and usually inherited it. In this sense, the shamanic inheritance is similar to the passing "down" of spiritual teachings through generations that is common to many mystical traditions, but one gathers that this "law" does not always hold true in the temporal sense:

> What is important to note is the parallel between the singularization of objects, beings and sacred signs, and the singularization by "election," by "choice," of those who experience the sacred with greater intensity than the rest of the community--those who, as it were, incarnate the sacred, because they live it abundantly, or rather "are lived" by the religious "form" that has chosen them (gods, spirits, ancestors, etc.). (Eliade in Sandner and Wong, 1997, p. 21)

Thus, it might be possible to say that a shaman must possess a certain quality of personality in order to be a shaman, but that the archetype, the "religious form" mentioned by Eliade, has the final say. The "wounded healer" archetype may range from the shaman's appearing as a fragile, schizophrenic figure to a wise, balanced "old soul" who is a leader and teacher, as well as a healer. Another interesting commentary on the shamanici personality was a case study of a Native American woman, "Dawnlight," who struggled with family, tribal and personality dysfunction (at least in the judgment of the researcher) as well as alcoholism at intervals through growing into the shamanic role. (Boyer, Boyer and de Vos, 1982) Tested through the projective Rorschach system, her personality revealed itself to be "... a very rich, affectively open record in which we find both more positive and

more negative material than is the general expectancy" (p. 313), which might confirm the idea that the shamanic role demands great wounding and great power simultaneously with the receptivity to altered states of consciousness that seems to characterize the authentic shaman. Similarly, Krippner (in Nicholson, 1987, p. 130) reported on interviews with Apache shamans, both recognized and unrecognized by their communities, to whom also were administered the Rorschach test, which researcher found

> ...some evidence for hysteria but none for schizophrenia. He observed some preoccupation with body reactions, sex, and excitability among shamans, but these can be important aspects of shamanism (Eliade, 1964). When an ambiguous, unclear inkblot was described, shamans and non-shamans gave similar descriptions with a few exceptions. Shamans demonstrated a keener awareness of peculiarities, more humor, and more philosophical responses.

Given the lack of reliability of such projective tests, these conclusions may or may not be valid, but do bear some resemblance to the qualities attributed to shamanic and other mythic archetypes.

Other qualities of personality common to shamans appear in many esoteric traditions: the child Krishna, in scripture, manifested the trickster personality, who played numerous jokes on others in order to convey his teachings: as a child, stealing the butter, symbolizing the taking of wisdom; as an adult, teaching the Gopis about the omnipresence of the divine Being through translating himself into myriad forms. Khidr, the "Green Man" in the Sufi tradition appears and reappears purposefully in the interest of leading the follower to the "water of life," but only at his own behest, and only when the seeker has given up in despair. The great

patriarch Abraham becomes the symbol of strength and wisdom in the shamanic personality (and while a shaman is not often considered as a saint or prophet, it could be proposed that the shamanic archetype is very much a part of the formation of the great spiritual teachers of the world's religions). Legends and fairy tales from all cultures evoke these archetypes, many of which seem to lend themselves to the role of the shaman as psychologist and healer.

Two other characteristics are often attributed to the shamanic personality, and these are androgyny and madness, as when the shaman is reputed to dress in women's clothes or to exhibit schizophrenic symptoms. Either of these ideas would necessitate exhaustive discussions in themselves, but I am disinclined to attribute that much important to either, no doubt because of my own bias. Briefly, however, Heinze (1962) does not seem to give much credence to the former, stating that in her studies of many shamans in Southeastern Asia, none of them were effeminate (p. 33). That Apache culture from which the shaman Dawnlight, cited earlier, emerged, was very opposed to homosexuality, connecting it with witchcraft. Intuitively, it seems that these ideas are more appropriately metaphors, symbolic of the inner wholeness necessary for the role, as Eliade (in Sandner and Wong, 1997, p. 8)

> ... reminds us that male Siberian shamans will often ritually assume the dress and behavior of a woman. They may even take a husband. In Japan and China, female shamans may sometimes marry their spirit husband (or animus). These rituals are performed to uncover a hidden wholeness. They symbolically represent the inner marriage not only of male and female but also of matter and spirit (Eliade, 1964, 258)

As to the comparison of the shamanic experience with schizophrenia, the difference seems to be that the shaman consciously enters the symbolic world of images and archetypes that the actual schizophrenic is given no choice but to dwell in, and may or may not be ready for, depending on one's idea of what constitutes readiness:

> A person who has hallucinations and visions, and is torn and taken into the depths uncontrollably, may be classified loosely as schizophrenic. While a shaman is a person characterized by ecstasy--which the *Oxford Dictionary* defines as a "person out of his senses or place"--he has the ability to control himself. A shaman understands that real and unreal are not differences in kind but of degree, and therefore he can relate to his hallucinations without feeling his mind split. . . . (in Nicholson, 1987, p. 68)

I am inclined to agree with this, at least insofar as it applies to the mature shaman, but I would think that such a degree of control and realization are not automatic during the initiatory period when the shaman is shaken loose from "ordinary reality," as Castanedas termed it. (Harner in Nicholson, 1987, p. 4) In fact, I would suspect that the beginning shaman is meant to navigate these difficult waters as part of the initiatic test.

Finally, and to return to my initial theme, I note that the shamanic personality is compared with that of various mystics, yogis and alchemists. Yet I see a difference between all these, and while such comparisons may be useful to the achievement of understanding, they may present a roadblock to a full realization of the shaman's role. If there is indeed a common thread and a common goal running through all these--and I believe there is--they are still very different paths, followed

for different purposes, and each lends itself to different human and divine needs.

Being Called

Again, the necessity is to separate stereotypes from human beings:

> The little one, the little spirit used to come to me. He had flown into my mouth and then I used to recite shaman songs. When I had no more strength left to suffer, finally I agreed to become a shaman. And when I became a shaman, I changed entirely (Dioiszegi in Nicholson, 1982, pp. 63-64)

These words, quoted from a Karagasy shaman in Siberia, describe being called in a very natural and unassuming way. A more problematic description, in my opinion, is offered by Sandner and Wong, based on Eliade's research:

> The shaman is initially a sick individual, personally experiencing epileptoid seizures, nervousness, extraordinary dreams, trance states, and displaying a number of aberrant behaviors. He is a person innately disposed to extreme introversion, whose unique inner experiences effect a radical separation between him and his fellows. . . . So distinguished as a special personality, he is tortured and dismembered by various demons and spirits, yet receives the aid of his familiar and helping spirits. He may be disemboweled, flayed, cooked, and have his skeleton separated bone by bone, yet he undergoes a regeneration and an ecstatic flight by which he comes into his own as a "technician" of the sacred. The shaman's passage through these ordeals and the knowledge he attains in this entrance into the realm of the sacred develop his ability as a healer. (Tepaske in Sandner and Wong, 1997, p. 20)

I see no justification for positing such criteria where the shaman's personality

is concerned. I suspect that these ideas are based on a convenient imagery that serves the researcher's romanticization of the shamanic role. Elements of such ideas appear repeatedly in the literature about shamans, but if we accept them unquestioningly, we are in danger of leaving out a great deal of richness in the shamanic spirit.

It is interesting to note the ways in which shamans have been portrayed by the various media. Having emigrated to Alaska in recent years, I recall the television show that gave me a fairly unrealistic, yet oddly reminiscent picture of Alaska life, "Northern Exposure." In this rather unusual series that was a combination of comedy and Jungian philosophy, there were actually two shamans portrayed, one who had been a shaman for many years, and one who was "called" to become a shaman-in-training. The veteran shaman was played by Native American actor Graham Greene, who portrayed his character as a mild-mannered but clear-sighted "old soul" who was very confident in his insight into his patients, and unabashed by the innocence of his perceptions. The shaman-in-training was played by another Native American man (the series was set in Alaska, but filmed in Washington state, so had very few, if any, actual Alaskan Natives), a young man of about sixteen years of age, who had no parents and lived alone in a rented room, although the entire village was quite fond of him. His appearance was pale and rather frail, and his personality was a humble one, although given to infrequent inflations. In the episode pivotal to his becoming a shaman, he began to see a 200-year-old "wise man" who offered guidance to him in his search for his mother, who had become pregnant out of wedlock with him and had given him to his village as an infant before she disappeared. One day, he ate a slightly spoiled piece of fish and

in the resulting illness experienced intense visions. Subsequently, he was informed by the older shaman that it seemed that he might have been "called," and that there was a test to determine whether this was true. He took him away from the village and buried his hand in the earth and told him to stay there for three days, after which he would be able to read the "sign" confirming whether he was a shaman. The young man stayed where he was for the prescribed time, fending off predatory animals, and evidently he was confirmed in his calling. In subsequent episodes, he was depicted learning his vocation, which seemed to be mostly a psychological one, as he developed his insight and intuition.

There is a series of Alaskan mystery novels written by a Caucasian woman, Dana Stabenow, who grew up in a native fishing culture. The mysteries are mysteries like any other, but her depictions of the peculiarities of modern Alaskan life are quite accurate. In one of her novels, a shaman appears, a man named Moses, who learned Tai Chi while in the service, and who drinks heavily because he hears voices in his head, and only alcohol will shut them down. The idea of shamanism being connected with schizophrenia is hinted at here, but in this shaman's case, he seems to feel that he has been chosen to hear these voices, although he is not particularly happy about it. His frustration with this does not keep him, however, from practicing his abilities, which seem, again, largely concerned with intuiting the hidden feelings and motives of those around him. His personality is portrayed as being forthright, demanding and highly sexual, in his openly passionate relationship with the local female bartender. (Stabenow, D., 1999, pp. 1-221) His manner is inscrutable.

My daughter and most of her friends adored the Disney animated film *The*

Lion King, a "coming-of-age" myth guided by a primate (mandrel) shaman, Rafiki. Rafiki was the lightning-quick intercessor between the jungle animals and their ancestral animal gods, a combination of "wise old man" and "trickster," forcing the other characters to see the truth before they had a chance to think about it. He was loving, yet detached.

Interesting portrayals, all, among many others. Whether or not they are accurate, each indicates the intuitive involvement of the modern mind with the shamanic archetype and each says something about the "calling" to the role of shaman.

Shamans are called through dreams and visions, through creative illness and through, sometimes, visitations from other spirits, often of the opposite sex, who become a "wife" or "husband" in order to teach the shaman. It is a common theme that refusing the calling may result in death. (Heinze, p. 31; Rapinsky-Naxon, 1993, p. 75) I would not presume to interpret the first, because I believe that reality is subjective, although in their effect, these latter experiences seem to correspond to the unification of anima and animus that are vital to the shaman's full understanding. Even more puzzling, at least to me, is the latter recurring theme that the refusal to accept one's calling may result in death or madness, often threatened by the calling spirit. I am not aware that the suspension of free will and of the imperative to serve are quite this absolute in other mystical traditions, and this is one aspect of the shamanic experience that differentiates it, in my understanding, even if the perception of warning is psychological. In this instance, one could conclude that the shaman's role is much more of a mediumistic one, in that the shaman is in contact with many spirits, as compared to the spiritual teachers that shamans are often

compared to, who generally are focused on the teachers from whom they have inherited their work, and on the godhead itself. Because of this, the shaman's role would seem to be a much more mediumistic and perilous one, in that it is relational with many beings, and with many levels of being. Perhaps it is for this reason that the shaman believes she may die if she does not accept her calling.

In Heinze's commonsense report on shamans in her "real-life" research, she reports the shamanistic calling in a less dramatic manner, which nevertheless takes in these elements:

> The age of the 122 mediums and shamans I studied ranged from sixteen years of age to seventy and over. The majority, however, were between twenty-five and fifty years old. They had become mediums or shamans either after puberty or in their mid-thirties when they were restructuring their life. Over seventy-five per cent of all practitioners in my sample had accepted their vocation during the past seven years, when they were over the age of thirty.

The theme of accepting the shamanic calling as part of a "mid-life crisis" is an interesting one that recurs elsewhere. (Sandner and Wong, 1997, pp. 125-182) Further,

> All the Malay shamans had inherited their vocation, while the mediums and shamans of the other ethnic groups in question (Thai, Chinese, and Indian) had either begun to practice after an initial illness or having been "selected" by a spiritual entity. (Heinze, 1962, pp. 30-31)

All of the above show elements of the accepted ideas about the shaman's calling, whether fact- or imagination-based on the part of shaman or researcher. Some

become shamans because they have, simply, inherited the role. Others seem to actively choose the role, as an outgrowth of their personal search for meaning. One would guess that this is particularly true in this culture, as more and more people search for an authentic experience of the numinous that is *worth* earning through pain and hardship. Classically, however, the shamanic role is the outcome of a "creative illness," a "spiritual emergency" from which the new shaman emerges:

> ...those who become shamans have a serious illness early in life. The illness is experienced in the form of a calling; an individual's life order is disturbed to the point that in order to be cured, he himself will have to become a healer. (Groesbeck in Sandner and Wong, 1997, p. 31)

It is easy to see how many afflictions that cause people to somehow be "different" from the accepted and safe norms of a society can in themselves evolve into the creative illness that forces the shaman to take up her calling. The difference, whatever it may be, often forces the prospective shaman to live a lonely and solitary life, facilitating the detachment necessary to both the precipitation of the initiatory experience and the later work of the shaman. The difference between involvement with the true "wounded healer" archetype and the "shadow" version of it seem important here, also: just as many become psychologists or social workers in order to get their own needs met while remaining in the "safe" position of relating without taking personal risk, the shamanic image no doubt encourages many to meet unconscious needs for power and esteem through taking up the role. This is the dark side to the shamanic identification.

I had an interesting and synchronistic experience during my months of researching the topic of shamanism: I met someone who told me he had been

initiated as a shaman. He is a homosexual Caucasian man who was employed as a clinical supervisor by the human service agency where I directed a program for the dually-diagnosed, a strong personality who mesmerized his co-workers with his therapeutic brilliance and self-deprecating humor, and was not above using any means for accomplishing what he thought best, even if it meant lying to or about his clients. He was known for "opening up" patients to their repressed trauma and then going home to get a good night's sleep. He also admitted to having Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and to having survived an extremely traumatic childhood and several subsequent suicide attempts. He was a fascinating personality for me, and we struck up an email correspondence, during which I referred, in one post, to seeing the shamanic archetype in him. He replied,

> thank you for those words.....they really mean a great deal to me. you speak my truth with your perception. it has been a life long challenge for me, not that you would be surprised. one that i continue to gain lessons from.
> i dont know that i told you, but i will tell again. in December of 1996, after nine months of preparation, i was initiated into a circle of gay men shaman. [Name withheld by author], a cherokee shaman, and a dear friend of mine named [name withheld] provided the preparation and ceremony over a week long time period. This sealed a life of visions and weird experiences into a way of living for me.
> i dont share this with many people. if i do it is quit superficial, i leave out most details because few are ready to hear.....my sense is that you know already.....thats cool.....(Personal communication with author, 2000)

This quote is given exactly as written, despite this man's advanced academic degree.

Soon into our working relationship, I realized he was viewed with suspicion and hostility by his co-workers. He was seen to be dishonest and power-seeking, and he was demeaning and tyrannical in his treatment of his colleagues. Eventually, it was decided that he was doing the agency and its clients a great deal of harm, and was asked to leave. I cannot gauge the authenticity of his shamanic experience, but I found it to be very instructive of the pitfalls inherent in any spiritual "power" role, what Jung would call a "shadow identification" with an archetype. Like any helping role, the shamanic responsibility is a precarious one, for both shaman and patient(s). It is not clear to me whether this shadow identification is synonymous with the "malevolent practitioners" described by Winkelman in his "Cross-cultural analysis of magico-religious practitioners" (1984, p. 5). These, he says, are identified as sorcerers or witches, and

> are generally thought to have low social or economic status and are both male and female in most societies. These practitioners are thought to cause harm to people and little else. They generally are thought to have power over spirits, particularly animal spirits, but also have access to impersonal sources of power such as in ritual. Animal transformation beliefs and beliefs about unnatural acts such as killing kin and eating corpses are frequently ascribed to these practitioners. Malevolent practitioners frequently acquire their role through social labeling rather than, or in addition to active seeking on the part of the individual. They are frequently killed for their actual or suspected malevolent magical activities.

Where is the line drawn between Jung's "soul in hell," the wounded healer, the unwitting shadow identification and the actual practicing, conscious sorcerer? I

would think that these transitions and identifications could occur with practicing shamans, and with those with an archetypal identification. And if it would be a stretch to call someone a malevolent practitioner, surely that archetype pulls at the unwitting and unclear seeker.

In those committed to the healing ideal, it seems that currently, the calling to shamanism can be precipitated by personal needs or by what appears to be an outside force that chooses the shaman for destiny's work. Clearly, there are authentic callings and those that result from false inflations, even though they, too, may be attended by "calling" spirits. In whatever way the call comes, the initiation is painful, and while initiation is always a cataclysmic experience--in virtually all mystical traditions--this seems to be particularly important to the shamanic tradition, although the culmination is the same:

> In the midst of such a fit of mysterious and overwhelming delight I became a shaman, not knowing myself how it came about....I could see and hear in a totally different way. I had gained my *quamanEq*, my enlightenment, the shaman-light of brain and body, and this in such a manner that it was not only I who could see through the darkness of life, but the same bright light also shone out from me, imperceptible to human beings but visible to all the spirits of earth and sky and sea, and these now came to me and became my helping spirits. (in Ripinsky-Naxon, 1993, p. 74)

Perhaps one lesson the shaman has to teach is that of acceptance of one's share of the collective fate of humankind.

Initiation

When I shamanize, the spirit of my dead brother, Ilya, enters and speaks

through my mouth. My shamanic ancestors compelled me to walk the course of the shaman's way. Prior to becoming a shaman and beginning to shamanize, I was laid out by sickness for an entire year, and became a shaman at fifteen years of age. The malady, which took hold of me and forced me toward this path, showed itself through my bodily swellings and fainting spells. This condition would vanish, generally, when I would start singing [shamanistically].

Thereafter, my ancestors started shamanizing with me. They set me up like a block of wood, and shot at me from their bows until I was no longer conscious. Then, they sliced me up, removed the bones to be counted, and partook of my raw flesh. They found that I had one bone too many; if there had been too few, I could not become a shaman. All this time, while the ancestors were busy with this rite, I had nothing to eat or drink for the entire summer. Toward the end, the shamanic spirits had some reindeer blood to drink, and let me have some of it, too. The shaman has less blood, and looks pale, after such occurrences.

Every Tungus shaman undergoes this experience. He can begin to practice, but not before, his shamanic ancestors sectioned his body, in this fashion, and took a count of his bones. (In Rapinsky-Naxon, 1993, pp. 79-80)

The motif of suffering is common to virtually all shamanic initiation. Edinger, commenting on Jung's "Answer to Job," lists four stages of that archetype, which seem very similar to the process of shamanic initiation:

1) There is an encounter between the ego and the greater power
2) A wound or suffering of the ego results from the encounter.

> 3) The ego perseveres in insisting upon scrutinizing the experience in search of its meaning. It will not give up in despair or cynicism but perseveres in the assumption that the experience is meaningful. . . .
>
> 4) As a result . . . a divine revelation takes place by which the ego is rewarded with insight into the nature of the transpersonal psyche (Edinger 1992, p. 29)***

There is a certain similarity to shamanic initiation in the stories of transformation in other mystical traditions: one recalls the ordeals of Christ, the Desert Fathers and the persecution of Hasidic *tzaddiks*; there is the story of the prophet Mohammed, whose crowning initiation was when, as he was sleeping in his cave, during a *kinvat* (retreat), angels descended from the heavens and tore open his chest and removed the last shreds of his ego. The Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree waiting for enlightenment day after day, with wild animals prowling about and insects stinging his flesh. Certain Sufi mystics are reputed to make spiritual retreats by hanging upside down for 40 days in an empty well while chanting the dhikr, for instance, or in an open grave. The shamanic initiation, however, seems to consist of either symbolic or real disfiguration or dismemberment, described in extremely visceral terms. Eliade and others say that this experience of death and resurrection is imperative to the consecration of a shaman. (Ripinsky/Naxon, 1993, p. 76) However, whether these experiences are literal or metaphorical seems unclear, or perhaps variable: "At times, such an ordeal may have only a symbolic form." (Ripinsky/Naxon, 1993, p. 82)

More recently, the metaphor of the shamanic initiation has been applied to experiences of illness, surgery and madness by modern day students of shamanism

as the necessary "creative illness," giving reason to painful, debilitating and seemingly meaningless personal crises. Cancer, stillbirth and other intensely painful experiences have been interpreted in this way, and viewed metaphorically, and even provide the presence of the requisite initiating spirits:

> If the Gods wound, and if the Gods become diseases, as Jung used to say, then it is necessary to understand sickness--even cancer--as a wounding and to go in search of the God at work in it. Gods are angered and strike when they are denied, defiled, or devalued. What is needed is to go into the symptoms, into the sickness, and to connect again with the God hidden there (Lockhart, 1977, p. 14 in Sandner and Wong, 1997, p. 148)

The physical ordeal of death and rebirth, according to Rapinsky-Naxon (1993, pp. 82-83) is one of three elements of the initiation, although he points out the necessity of dying in order to learn to travel to other planes of existence, and describes the kinds of privations and ordeals mentioned above, which vary in kinds and degrees in different cultures, but are similar in their overall metaphorical framework of crucifixion and resurrection. If the prospective shaman emerges from these ordeals, then his calling is considered to be authentic.

The second element is, in some cultures, the administration of hallucinogenic preparations in order to induce soul-travel to the Otherworld. The inducement of trance is supposed to produce the phases of rebirth from the shaman's ordeals, and includes elements of what might be likened to the alchemical *albedo* (purification and rising, here into the spiritual realms) and *coniunctio,* the marriage of spirit and matter, when the reborn shaman returns to carry out the purpose of the initiation.

The third element in the initiation of the shaman is what has been referred to

as the Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC) by Harner (Nicholson, 1987, p. 125), the ecstatic soul-journey where the shamans of some cultures meet their "power animals," sometimes of the opposite gender, who will become their helpers in their work. Sometimes the shaman transforms herself, on the inner journey, into an animal "spirit helper." The SSC is, according to Rapinsky-Naxon and others, the central component of the shaman's experience, but he points out that its purpose is to aid the shaman in his work as a healer. He also states (1983, p. 86) that in some tribes, such as the Chukchees of Northern Siberia, that this experience is reportedly absent from the shamanic experience, and that therefore they cannot properly be called shamans. This is, again, a subjective view in my opinion, if the archaic role of the shaman is primarily a healing one. I would guess, again subjectively, that in the sense that the archetype "chooses" its subject, while the essential uniqueness of the shamanic experience might remain, the details are not always the same, despite the importance conferred on mystical experience.

The final element of the shamanic initiation cited by Rapinsky-Naxon is when the neophyte receives instruction from his mentor-shaman in the knowledge of healing techniques and plants, and of the rituals, inner practices and myths of the shamanic role. The shaman perfects his capability to travel to other worlds to seek remedies for his patient and to act as psychopomp; he learns to heal through dreams and visions and he speaks to animal spirits who reside in other worlds. He uses whatever comes to hand in order to accomplish his task.

Shamanizing

> It is told that an old man's son had died. The old man was in misery. He did not bury his son but kept him on the *polog* [sleeping platform]. He

missed his son very much. The old man called on many shamans but they could not bring the dead son back to life. Finally the old man found one that shamanized while sleeping and asked him to revive his son. The shaman who shamanized in his sleep sought the deceased son but could find him nowhere. He awakened and said to the old man:

--I can't find your man anywhere! Give me some beads; I am going to look for him on a faraway star.

The old man gave him beads. Again the shaman lay next to the deceased and then told the old man:

--I will sleep for three days. See to it that I am not moved or awakened!

Shamanizing while asleep he left for the faraway star. He arrived there and saw two wolves sitting near the door. He gave beads to the wolves and asked them:

--Isn't our man here with you?

--Yes, he is here. He is nailed to the back wall of the *polog*.

The one shamanizing in his sleep entered the house and saw the man nailed to the wall. The master of the house asked the shaman:

--Hey! What are you doing here?

--Well, I am looking for our man. He is here with you.

--Yes, your man is here with us, but we will not give him back.

--Yes, you will! If you don't give him back I will lower all of you, with your houses, to the earth!

--I will not return him! You can't lower us to the earth!

They began to quarrel. The old man would not release the man. Then the man shamanizing in his sleep went outside. He gave beads to both wolves and told them:

--Drag this dwelling below!

The wolves were happy that they were given beads and they dragged the dwelling below. They arrived at the earth and the one shamanizing in his sleep said to the old man:

--Well now, go and look at the earth!

The old man went outside. And in truth it turned out that he was standing on earth. The old man was much taken aback and he said to the shaman:

--Lift us back to the faraway star and I will give you the man!

--You give first and then I will lift you.

The old man agreed and gave the body of the youth to the shaman. The shaman brought the youth home. In exactly three days and nights the shaman and the deceased awoke together. Then the one shamanizing in his sleep said to the youth:

--In the summer, when the sun is really hot, don't go beyond the village fence! Do you hear?

One day during the summer the sun was very hot. The youth did not listen to the shaman and he went beyond the fence. An eagle swooped down and killed the youth. This time he was dead forever because he did not listen to the shaman. (Narrated by a village elder in the village of Uelkal in Anadyr *rayon*, Vaalgyrgyn, in Dolitsky and Michael, 1997, p. 62)

This delightful little story seems to me to illustrate all that is most endearing and unique about the shaman: the shaman is a remarkably strong and straightforward individual who is, nevertheless, capable of entering the mystical state necessary to travel the universe looking for the dead boy. After living among the Aleuts, an Alaskan Native tribal group inhabiting the Aleutian Islands, for two years, I can "hear" this story being read in the way it was told, which only adds to its lack of pretension. The shaman makes no great claims: once found among all the other shamans who could not bring the boy's soul back, he goes straight to work, accomplishes his goal through ingenuity and the friendship of animal spirits combined with his ability to shamanize in his sleep, and has no desire to repeat the task again. In the native story-telling tradition, That's All!

Relenting to the intellectual impulse to categorize what would be better left unsaid, Ellenberger places his criteria for shamanic healing more generally in his discussion of primitive healing of various kinds, but they are useful for organizing the facets of the shaman's work in general:

1. Disease-object extraction; the shaman "pulls" or extracts that which is causing the illness from the patient.

2. Soul retrieval; as described above, the shaman goes on a soul-journey to find and return the lost soul, lost through unhappiness or depression or other harmful influences.

3. Exorcism: the shaman can drive out evil or offending spirits who are causing disharmony and mischief in the patient.

4. Confession and propitiation: the shaman acts as both priest and psychologist, learning what wrong the patient has done and advising how to set it

right;

5. Sorcery and Counter-magic: the shaman is willing and able to fight an evil shaman or sorcerer if necessary, and does so through soul-travel, the aid of his power allies, dreams, visions or counter-magic; whether the evil is "real" or symbolizes a projection of the patient, the result is the same.

As I already proposed, I find that the shaman's work is predominantly with healing, aided by many kinds of beings and levels of being, and focused on issues of the here-and-now, and not some far-off afterlife, although he does accompany the soul on its journey to the next stage. However,

> Apache shamans perform services almost exclusively for individuals. Their principal function is to seek to cure or avert illnesses, but such medicine men also try to alleviate other problems. Thus a shaman might use his power to help find something which has been lost, to keep someone from being arrested or convicted, to help a political candidate be elected and so forth. (Boyer, Boyer and De Vos, 1982, p. 301)

There seem to be as many different methods of shamanizing as there are cultures where shamans reside. Certain themes and rituals are common, but never completely identical, and in that the shaman is traditionally *for* her village, not meant to be a teacher or a writer or a guide, but a human being who, through understanding the human experience fully, is committed to serving other human beings.

What is a Shaman? What is a Shaman *Not*?

Here is my own very subjective view of the shaman: A shaman is not a yogi, a Zen master, a Dervish, a minister, a teacher, a psychologist, an alchemist, a

prophet, a priest, a medium, a witch or a sorcerer. The mystical states a shaman experiences are not the same states that these experiences, but they might be, because a shaman is the primitive blueprint for all of them, and not one of them would be fully authentic without that blueprint, that seed of archaic mystical commonsense the makes the divine fiat possible over and over again in communities and persons and universes. A shaman draws on his transmission of this raw, primitive understanding from all those who have their origin in him, and so is in command of all potentialities for healing and transformation.

Ultimately, a shaman is a person who serves other people in the purest sense of service, because she or he has no choice but to answer the call and to work with what is given. Who else can say this, other than a *real* shaman?

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