

POWER ANIMAL RETRIEVAL

Lora Jansson

Every now and then, a client or student will ask me what my favorite shamanic practice is. It's an odd question in its way because my "liking" a particular practice is immaterial. Of course, it's always the spirits who create the treatment protocol, and advise as to what practices I do to treat the client.

Having said that, I have to admit I have special fondness for power animal retrieval. The sheer sweetness and the time-tested efficacy of power animal retrieval means I always feel a small thrill when the spirits prescribe it. Clients seem to like it as well. Often, when I tell them I am going to do one, they grin like kids at a birthday party.

In a power animal retrieval I did for a client recently, after altering my consciousness, I walked into a huge meadow in the Lower World. The sky hummed blue. There was a light breeze, ruffling wildflowers never seen on Earth, and grasses of many textures and colors. I scanned the field, then looked beyond the meadow to the forest to my north, the mountains to the west, and the desert to the east.

Then I saw him running toward me. One blink later and he was right in front of me. His paws were huge. His tail flicked. His black spotted coat looked glossy, sleek. He strode stealthy, and I shuddered feeling his power. He paced back and forth, examining me. Then his face came close, and I stared into his huge, radiant blue eyes. He reared up, and Snow Leopard rested his heavy front paws on my shoulders. I could smell and feel his breath. As I brought my arms around him, he put his head on my shoulder, hugged me, and moved his body nearer in an embrace. As I gathered him into my hands, his shape morphed from that powerful body to a black and white and blue swirling star. As I brought

my hands together, I could feel the star shrinking in size, but growing in power and intensity. I flew back fast through the tunnel, and into ordinary reality. The power of the animal's spirit made my hands shake.

Once back in my shamanic studio still holding the Leopard star, I cupped my hands over the client's chest. I saw flashes of the face, the tail, the long lean body running through snow, and blew Leopard's spirit into her. The client made a small sound. Moving to the fontanel at the top of her head, I blew again, completing the



Panther. Painting by Don Hazeltine (www.donhazeltine.com).

retrieval. My hands were empty now and I could feel the power of Snow Leopard pulsing from her body. Rattling four times over the client, Snow Leopard was sealed in my client's body. The retrieval was complete, and I moved from a shamanic state of consciousness to an ordinary state of consciousness.

When I had finished my other shamanic work for my client, I told her who her power animal was.

She started, and said, "You won't believe this. Our uncle lives with us. He's old, and a little strange. Two days ago,

he marched into our living room with a picture of a snow leopard he had cut out of a magazine. He tacked it above the mantle, and told us to 'Pay attention to it.'"

"It's unbelievable," she said.

It's not unbelievable to me, and it's not even odd. I cannot be sure of the number, but I think that I have done at least 500 power animal retrievals over the past fifteen years. I wish I had taken notes from the beginning about all of the amazing synchronicities for clients that have taken place over time before and after this practice.

There was the thirteen-year old girl who, before she came to see me, felt compelled to draw a fawn, and then received Fawn; the woman who received Bear, and who said she had no relationship with Bear except for the fact that she made teddy bears for sick kids, and had just seen a medicine man who, rather than paying her for a massage, gave her a hand-carved bear; the woman who received Leopard and who opened a gift box from Nordstrom a week later to find a confused note from a friend accompanying the handbag made of faux leopard fur: "I've never seen you wear faux fur, but I felt compelled to get this for you." Later, my client found out that her friend bought the gift on the same afternoon as the retrieval.

So in my practice, there often seems to be an ordinary reality nod from a power animal right before or after the work. The power animals seem generous in offering clients' ordinary reality confirmations that, yes, the retrieval was real.

I wonder if this kind of thing happens in indigenous cultures or just in Western society. I do know that one of the things that my helping spirits have taught me to say to clients after the retrieval is that the

work is not abstract. That I really did leave my body, change states of consciousness, walk in the Lower World of nonordinary reality where a power animal appeared to me.

“The power animal spirit is really with you now,” I tell my clients. “This is not metaphor.”

When I first started doing power animal retrieval fifteen years ago, I said no such thing. I blew the animal’s spirit in, told them the name if the animal, and that was all I said. I taught them that power animals love to experience physicality, and how to dance their animal.

But what started happening sent me back to the spirits for clarification and help. It became routine in the beginning of my practice to hear from clients a few months after a retrieval. “I am not sure my power animal is still with me,” they would say.

When I would ask them if they were feeling poorly, they would universally say, “No. I just don’t feel the animal anymore.”

In some cases the animals had almost wandered away. In others, the animals were still with the client, but the bond was getting weak.

As shamanic practitioners, we know sometimes power animals are with us for a short time and sometimes for years. But I thought I was seeing a pattern of bonds growing weak or animals wandering away within what seemed to be very short periods of time.

I journeyed to the helping spirits to find out why this was happening. What the spirits told me was that people in our society had no way to understand or to relate to the animals who came back to them. That they felt the gift of the animal, but did not enter into a relationship with the animals’ spirits in any meaningful way.

The spirits said that they related to their power animal like a kid receiving a Christmas present. Exciting in the moment, but as time went by, less so. And that, most importantly, they had no skills to build a relationship with their new helping spirit.

To me, this made great sense. A power animal signifies the beginning of both the return of power and a relationship. In a culture that lives so abstractly, what real skill set do clients have to relate to a spirit animal? How can they enter into a relationship with their power animals if they do not journey and do not wish to learn how to journey?

The spirits told me that the clients who were not building relationships with their animals had fine intentions, but needed to be taught how to form a relationship with their new power animal. So the spirits gave me instructions to give people after they received a new power animal. I have been

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR POWER ANIMAL

Here are some things you can do to tend your relationship with your power animal. For illustration, Bear is used as the power animal who was retrieved.

1. Hold the identification of your power animal as a sacred matter, not to be revealed to others.
2. Get a picture of Bear. It can be a computer printout from an image on the internet. It doesn’t have to be expensive or be a great work of art. Pin the picture near your bed, someplace you will see it when you get up in the morning. When you get up, look at the picture and say silently or aloud, “Good morning, Bear. Thank you for walking with me today.”
3. When you are out in nature, ask Bear to walk with you. Again, you can say this silently or aloud. “Please come and enjoy nature with me, Bear.” Note: Do not speak aloud to your animal when someone might overhear.
4. Go online and find out about the biology, habits and diet of the animal. DO NOT look at any shamanic encyclopedic reference like *Animal Speak* or any kind of “animal cards.” It is your responsibility to learn about Bear’s habitat, food, and habits as well as what differentiates it from other animals. This, in turn, can help you begin to appreciate why Bear came back to help you with his kind of power.
5. If the nonordinary animal is on the endangered list, consider giving something to help support the animal in ordinary reality—even \$1. This is reciprocity, a way to give back to the spirit of that species.
6. Every few months, have a meal that is prepared and consumed solely for the animal’s pleasure. In the case of Bear, that might be salmon, berries, and hot water with honey. Not all animals eat foods that are so delicious for us to consume. For example, in the case of the retrieval of Anteater, the recipient searched online until she found a novelty large chocolate ant. Not a chocolate covered ant, but a 6-inch long ant-shaped chocolate treat. She nibbled on it regularly, offering it to Anteater as she did so.
7. Call to Bear when you feel pain, doubt, or if you are in danger. Ask for his help. Speak with the animal if you need counsel, and note if there is a literal response or if something happens in ordinary reality as a response to the request.
8. When retiring in the evening, look at Bear and tell him you are thankful he walked with you today, and that you hope he feels free to either go wherever he wishes or to stay with you through the night.
9. Dance your animal frequently. This is probably the most important thing to do. Do it as soon as you get home after the retrieval unless there was time for you to dance the animal at the practitioner’s space after it was retrieved.

using this list of instructions for more than a decade, and now, rather than hearing that people cannot feel their power animals, I hear that they are in regular communication with the animals' spirits. While I observe that these relationships may not go as deep as relationships between client and animal when the client knows how to journey, an affection and respect for the relationship *and the need to tend it* does grow. (See the box, previous page, for what I was told to share with clients after a power animal retrieval.)

Clients are offered a printout of the instructions and told that power animals can be with a person for varying lengths of time, sometimes for life and sometimes to help for the duration of a specific project. Often if a power animal leaves, a new one will come in to take its place. I do not anthropomorphize the animals, and do not interpret why the power animal came back to them—unless the spirits tell me to offer their counsel for a specific reason.

My clients seem grateful for the tutelage. In our culture, we know little of reciprocity. We ask for blessings, for grace, for power, but do not understand that power moves in a circle. A tree spirit taught me about this during a journey. The tree takes in our exhalations of carbon dioxide and we breathe in the trees' oxygen exhalations. It's a symbiotic relationship that we may know about in the abstract in ordinary reality, but when seen in nonordinary reality, it is an unforgettable experience.

It teaches that the web of life is both empirical and practical (lyrical, even). This is an interdependence void of sentimentality, yet full of love of the highest order. It has been one of the many things the spirits have shown me so that I might understand that we live in mystery—in relationship—*all* the time. And when we choose, we can go to the spirits to better understand the mystery.

My life and work changed completely and deepened as a result of the teachings I received in the Foundation's Three-Year Program. And the spirits continue to ramp up their teachings. Still, if my helping spirits told me I could choose only one practice to use, I would pick power animal retrieval. I have seen it cure illness, alleviate



Bear. Painting by Don Hazeltine (www.donhazeltine.com).

depression, and bring order and peace out of chaos.

Ultimately, it is a way for people to begin to understand what it is to *live* shamanically—as opposed to practicing shamanism. When people decide to commit to the intention to know and appreciate their power animals, they begin to understand their relationship to other beings in our reality. This can be a very powerful first step toward understanding that species superiority is a kind of bigotry we can no longer afford to practice if our world is to survive and, just maybe, flourish. ☞

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