

THE LIFE AND WORK OF MICHAEL HARNER

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There are extraordinary individuals in life who are willing and able to venture into unknown territory and prepare the way for others. Michael Harner, born in 1929 in Washington, D.C., was such a person.

Trained as an anthropologist with a doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley, he experienced his initiation into shamanism in 1961 while studying with the Conibo people in Eastern Peru. By taking the step from scientific observer to shamanic practitioner, he crossed the Rubicon that separates science from what the scientific community considers to be superstition. Michael Harner found a way of walking on both sides of that river at the same time.

He understood that indigenous shamanic knowledge was rapidly vanishing and that shamanic cultures around the globe shared many common elements. Learning from different communities in the Upper Amazon and engaging in extensive research on shamanism worldwide, he distilled the underlying cross-cultural principles and practices into what he termed "Core Shamanism." Not a belief system, Core Shamanism is based on personal firsthand experience that "spirits are real." With Core Shamanism, Michael Harner provided a language and structure for experiences with spirits in non-ordinary reality, thus making it possible to replicate and study such experiences, and to teach an authentic shamanic methodology.

With the establishment of Core Shamanism, he fostered a revival of shamanic knowledge and healing practices in the West. With his book *The Way of the Shaman*, first published in 1980, he created a seminal and classic resource for contem-

porary shamanism. Though he was a writer of captivating style and clarity, he refrained from publishing further books for more than three decades in order to allow the shamanic teachings he had initiated to grow and develop through the oral tradition of our ancestors. This was a bold and visionary approach for present-day cultures dominated by the written word as contained in religious doctrines, historical records, or scientific world views. But it worked out well, resulting in the renaissance of shamanism we currently see in the West.

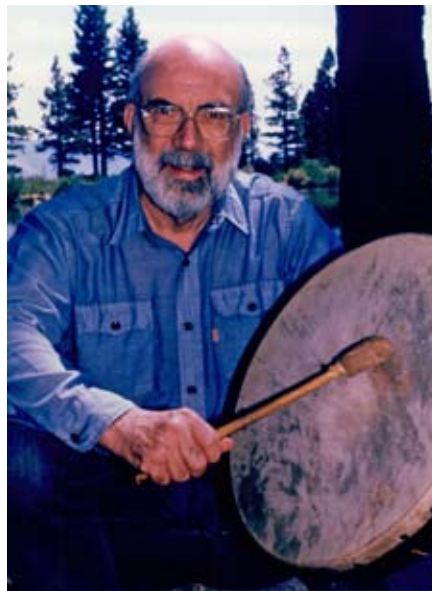


Photo by Loci Shines Yonder.

Together with his wife, psychologist Sandra Harner, he founded the Center for Shamanic Studies in 1979, (which in 1985 became the Foundation for Shamanic Studies,) as an organizational framework for this new, fundamentally oral tradition. Having been a professor for several decades at universities includ-

ing Columbia University, Yale University, and the Graduate Faculty of the New School in New York, in 1987 Michael Harner resigned his professorship in order to concentrate full-time on his work with the Foundation.

His work with indigenous shamans was not a one-way street, but a mutual exchange of knowledge based on respect and trust. He recognized that shamanic cultures had suffered centuries of religious and political persecution. Thus, through the Foundation, besides offering core shamanic training, he made the preservation and study of indigenous cultures an essential part of the Foundation's mission, establishing a shamanic archive of books and materials and supporting indigenous master shamans as Living Treasures of Shamanism.

Highly respected, Michael Harner was widely recognized as the foremost authority on shamanism in the West. He was consulted by academics around the world, and even indigenous shamans with whom he had collegial relationships. In Russia, assembled Siberian shamans of the Buriat people publicly declared him a great shaman upon witnessing his shamanic healings in 1998. They also said he proved that one could do both science and shamanism. He was a teacher who spoke with authority, but always left his students the freedom to travel their own paths. He unified scientific rigor and high ethics with spiritual profundity and a legendary sense of humor.

Over the last several years Michael Harner began to bring some cycles in his work to a close. In 2013 he published *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality*, an account of the reality of the spirit world drawn from

a lifetime of personal experience and research, as well as student reports from the Foundation's workshops. In the same year, after a long period of preparation and training, he handed over the presidency of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies to Susan Mokolke.

The message of Core Shamanism is out. This new shamanic tradition has spread significantly over the last decades, across continents, languages and civilizations. At the same time, many traditional shamanic cultures have been revived and are honored again. Michael Harner respectfully accepted his initiation so many decades ago, seized his life's work with power and perseverance, and fulfilled his mission.

On February 3, 2018, only a few weeks before his 89th birthday, Michael Harner passed away close to his home in Mill Valley, California. His legacy of shamanic methods, with its emphasis on spiritual democracy, lives on, not only in the hearts of the many students and practitioners whose lives he touched, but also through the work of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. Through its mission to preserve, study and teach shamanic knowledge for the welfare of the Planet and its inhabitants, the Foundation continues to carry out Michael's vision—restoring the practice, wisdom, and power of shamanism to our world. ☸

With gratitude to Andreas J. Hirsch, faculty member, Foundation for Shamanic Studies Europe. Thanks also to Narrye Caldwell, FSS faculty member, for her editorial contributions to this article and comments.

MORE ABOUT MICHAEL

- Visit shamanism.org
- View the recorded live stream of Michael's memorial celebration: <https://shamanism.org/michael-harner-memorial.php>. See the FSS news blog to view and post comments: <https://shamanism.org/news/in-memori-am-michael-j-harner-1929-2018/>
- View the documentary *The Way of the Shaman: The Work of Michael and Sandra Harner* at: <https://shamanism.org/way-of-the-shaman/documentary.php>

SOME OF THE MANY LIVES MICHAEL TOUCHED

He helped us find our medicine. —Jack Kornfield

I know these things to be certain: Michael's vision, humility, compassion for humanity and dedication to his sacred mission of introducing core shamanic practices to the West, are forever imprinted upon my heart and live on through his students.

—Sandra Locklear

During the FSS 3-Year Program, I was walking with another student on the road to the classroom, when Michael drives up behind us, leans out the window, and asks, "Is this the road to enlightenment?" ... "Yup."

—David Kowalewski

Michael's work changed my life; the FSS trainings changed my life. His light will endure throughout time and place. I am eternally grateful for his curiosity, his passion, his teachings, and his being.

—Kristina Woodall

Often legacies are thought of as what's left of a lifetime of work. Michael Harner has left a legacy which has no end. It has seeded a magnificent remembering for many thousands of students past and future.

—Della Clark



Photo by Linda Sperry

Photo by Jak Wonderly

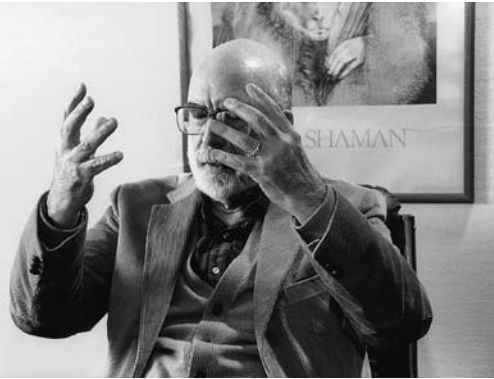


Photo by Curtis Martin

In the entire history of the study of shamanism, Michael Harner contributed more to a clear understanding of this human ability than any other previous scholar. He was the first professional anthropologist to make an effort to clearly delineate the core principles of shamanism.

Even more importantly, he left academic teaching and research to establish a foundation that was directly involved in teaching these core principles to all those so interested. In a culture where most people do not believe in the reality of shamanism, this was a bold and risky undertaking that became extremely successful in teaching ordinary people how to responsibly practice shamanism.

Consequently, he was the main 20th century scholar, along with his wife Sandra, to challenge our disbelief in shamanism, which was long overdue, and to demonstrate its reality. In my eyes, he was a true hero to have successfully undertaken such a difficult task.

If you've heard about shamanism it is because of Michael Harner. ... Like Michael I am an anthropologist and a student of shamanism, but Michael was the master who outlined the core of shamanism world wide and made its practice understandable and applicable to western consciousness. I was fortunate to be his student. Michael changed my life. Better put, made it. Showed me how to be a better person and integrate many differing elements that could be used in a compassionate manner. ... I loved Michael and miss him terribly.

—Larry Peters

“If there was ever a person to be welcomed by the ancestors, and those who live in the Upper and Lower Worlds, he is the one. Such a celebration!!! So much good, so much giving, such a good sense of humor, and of honor. His last book [Cave and Cosmos], no secrets, except those not his to disclose. Truly, a gift to all of us who ever knew him. He is like a man who daily plants a few trees. Through the years a great forest slowly grows from his hands. He has left behind him so much that is growing well and nourishing others.

—James Fadiman

—William Lyon

Michael Harner and I were friends for several decades, and I join numerous people who mourn the loss of this international treasure. More than anyone else, Michael not only made shamanism a respectable field of scientific inquiry, but revived shamanic traditions that were on the verge of extinction. His training program in Core Shamanism has helped numerous people and empowered others. He left a legacy that will endure and multiply.

—Stanley Krippner

Michael's humanistic bent was apparent in his respect and concern for all the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the world. In the early 1970s, when the protests at Wounded Knee exploded in Lakota country, he made the trip to be in solidarity with the Lakota people, and he denounced the actions of the government in the NY Times. He talked the talk and he also walked the walk.

—Jeffrey Ehrenreich



Photo by Sandra Harner