

CORE SHAMANISM AND POWER

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When I first began studying shamanism with Michael Harner in the mid-nineties, the issue of power was not really on my radar.

I took the *Basic Workshop: The Way of the Shaman*,[®] subtitled “Shamanic Journeying, Power, and Healing,” because I had had a profound mystical transformative experience. In trying to understand that experience, I discovered it was shamanic in nature. Fortunately for me, I was living in the San Francisco Bay area and the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS) was headquartered in Mill Valley, California. I signed up for the soonest available beginning workshop.

In that workshop, Michael told the story of a dangerous river crossing he had made with a band of Shuar (Jívaro) in the Upper Amazon in February of 1957. Later in *Cave and Cosmos*, he wrote that this experience “opened a door to important spiritual knowledge....” Through it, he “gradually learned from the Shuar that they were protected by spirit power against all forms of death except epidemic disease...and that such power can leave one.”¹

Michael went on in the workshop to talk about illness and healing from a shamanic perspective, again relating health to spiritual power. While curious about the shamanic healing methods he described, such as psychopomp work, extraction, and soul retrieval, at that time I had no frame of reference for understanding spiritual power.

Now, nearly twenty years later, I have come to see that the spiritual power Michael referred to is *the* essential component necessary for the vitality and health of individuals—as well as for the ultimate healing of human societies, the

species who share this planet with us, and of the Earth itself.

This writing is not meant to be the last word, but as a stimulus for further thought. Core shamanism is an independent democratic spirituality. My process of learning about and understanding shamanic power is unique to me, as yours will be to you. But it is of crucial importance that we *do* come to such an understanding. Our future depends upon significant numbers of people able to compassionately and powerfully work with the helping spirits to transform our world.

SPIRITUAL POWER

After the Basic Workshop, I continued my shamanic studies with the FSS. The initial phase of my training seemed on the surface to be about gaining knowledge of methods. There was that, but what was really happening was that I was forming relationships with my helping spirits—beautiful, amazing, loving relationships. I was awakened to a possibility of compassion such as I had not imagined existed in my ordinary reality life.

As I learned shamanic practices, I was drawn to offer this healing to others, partly from my own desire to help, but also because of the great kindness and love the spirits were showing me. I completed the FSS *Two Week Shamanic Healing Intensive* and the *Three Year Program of Advanced Initiations in Shamanism and Shamanic Healing*. I continued to develop my shamanic healing practice. During this period, I became very aware of the issue of power and of my own complex relationship with it.

Power is a difficult concept for most of us. The entire history of our species

is fraught with the abuse of power. I have never met anyone who has not experienced some form of mistreatment from those who have had authority or influence over them. Misuse of power can express itself between individuals in hurtful and damaging physical or psychological acts. In organizations it can be reflected in petty bureaucratic strictures, harsh criticisms, punitive actions, or neglect. On a global scale, the world has witnessed wars, violence, religious hatred, violence, terrorism, environmental devastation, and tyranny.

In my own early shamanic phase, though I was having some good results with my healing practice, there was a growing awareness that something was missing, that there was *more* awaiting me if I could but grasp it. A new shamanic client came to me who had experienced severe abuse as a child. In the process of working with her over several months, the issue of power arose for her. She had experienced such great suffering through its misuse that she had chosen to reject it, withdrawing from participating in life and spending much of her day alone and sleeping.

In working with the spirits on her behalf, I began to examine my own relationship with power. What is power? How was I using my power? If I accepted my own power, might I too misuse it? What is spiritual power? How does one gain spiritual power?

As time went on and in consultation with my spirits, I came to realize that while I trusted the compassionate spirits, I doubted my own ability and readiness to use their power appropriately. In interacting shamanically with this one client over the course of some years, I

witnessed her total transformation: her refusal to let her early wounds define her and her coming to an acceptance of her own power—resulting in the freedom to truly live her life. She and the spirits taught me so much about power.

In the practice of shamanism, we often say that the goal is not personal enlightenment. While personal transformation is not the goal, it is almost inevitably the outcome for those who take shamanic healing seriously. It is impossible to merge with the spirits of the Upper and Lower Worlds regularly and not be transformed by this interaction.

Once I realized that it was *myself* I mistrusted, something in me let go and a sense of humility awakened. I began to examine deeply the desires of my own heart and my own very human foibles. I asked the spirits for help, to be a better vessel for their healing power. They began teaching me at a whole new level about dealing with, and letting go of, my human shortcomings. This was not about trying to achieve some state of perfection, but about coming to terms with the aspects of self that might interfere with the full and appropriate use of spiritual power. The spirits taught me, too, that the refusal to accept power and to do your best to help those seeking aid was a different kind of ego. In their kind but firm (and slightly humorous way), they told me: “You are needed. Get over yourself.”

Power per se is not the problem—the workout for each of us is in how power is used and one’s intention when using it. Practicing shamanic healing has become my crucible for transformation. It is in offering the spirits’ curative power to others that the path to my own flowering has unfolded. Through this discipline I have come to know that the deep desire of my heart is truly to help our world heal and become the garden it was intended to be. Being human, I am not in that state all of the time, but I have come to trust in my intentions. If I get off track, the helping spirits are there to guide me back.

In difficult situations, I consider my heart, reaching for patience, understanding and kindness. But this is not some

ethereal state of sweetness and light. This is a daily earthly workout—often swimming upstream against my own less admirable impulses and resulting mistakes—striving to see the appropriate action clearly and accepting that sometimes tough decisions are necessary. All the while, refusing to give in to blame, anger, and judgment and attempting to emulate the compassionate neutrality of the helping spirits.

As I have consistently strived toward goodwill and come to trust in my own heart, I have been able to receive more of the spirits’ gifts of power. For example, a specific helping spirit that came to me in the early days of my training presented itself as a kindly and gentle spirit. That is how it remained for many years. At a recent Three Year Program session I taught, there was a situation that required a great deal of power to address.

I called upon my helping spirits and opened myself to receive on a scale I had never before experienced. This typically rather mild spirit was the first to come in. The spirit became huge, filling the entire

meeting room, dazzlingly radiant with power. The spirit told me: “I have shown you the gentle side of love. Now I will teach you about its fiery aspect.”

In abandoning myself to merge with this spirit, I experienced a new degree of spiritual power, and the situation completely shifted.

When one is free to embrace the power that the helping spirits provide, an immense resource for transformation and healing becomes available that is crucially needed now to sustain our troubled planet.



Figures 1 & 2. In the two figures above, a shamanic practitioner describes a manifestation of a spirit’s power: “This was after a healing session with a client. Apparently some of the power went into a large crystal ball on the floor. It dissipated over time. It was quite interesting because a few weeks later I saw a photograph of a shaman in Asia who purposely sends power into these kind of balls and they light up; in the photograph she had one in her lap and three around her, all lit up. I did not intentionally do this and in fact I didn’t notice it. The client did and took the photograph. Submitted by Janet Rodriguez of Liguna Niguel, California.

Michael Harner's genius in bringing us core shamanism, from the standpoint of preserving our future, is three-fold: Core shamanism is accessible to humanity regardless of culture; it can be learned and put into successful practice relatively quickly; practitioners of core shamanism work with fully compassionate spirits of the Upper and Lower Worlds, exclusively and explicitly for healing purposes.

I have heard it expressed by some that contemporary shamanism is not "real" shamanism, that one must be an indigenous shaman in order to have significant power. As my own experience and the powerful healing results of thousands of core shamanic practitioners over the last several decades have demonstrated, this is most emphatically not the case. We are not in competition with shamans from other cultures, whose ways we value and respect. We see ourselves as colleagues with them, working to ease pain and suffering and to bring about balance and wholeness.

One could imagine that when future generations look back on us, they may perceive core shamanism as the cultural shamanism of our time.

SPIRITS MANIFESTING

Amazing healings and miracles of teaching and transformation are one way of experiencing the spirits presence and power. In addition to a growing body of shamanic healing accounts, actual physical manifestations of the spirits seem to be on the rise. The FSS has examples of spirits appearing in photos or leaving physical evidence of their presence, particularly in the *Three Year Program of Advanced Initiations in Shamanism and Shamanic Healing*.² Many other instances have been reported by shamanic practitioners, though not publicized, or have appeared in this journal.³ A few thought-provoking photos of one shamanic practitioner's experience of manifesting spirits are displayed in this article. (See Figures 1-4).

I am fortunate to have the opportunity to discuss with colleagues what they are learning and experiencing as they deepen

in their shamanic knowledge and power. Recently, I have been receiving increasing reports from practitioners that their helping spirits are teaching them ways to bring their spirits' power to bear for healing on a larger scale; such as in war zones, the plight of refugees, the suffering of animals like elephants, and the degradation of our lands, air, and waters.⁴

I also have received such teachings. In my journeys and healing sessions, I have

noted with great hope the presence of tremendous numbers of helping spirits pressing against ordinary reality, waiting to be invited, waiting for someone to open the way for them.

Our precious Earth is on the brink, caught between opposing forces of chaos and enlightenment. From my perspective, we are standing on the edge of tremendous possibility. We can choose to fly or fall. Shamanism can help us to fly. ☸



Figure 3. About figures 3 and 4, the practitioner says: "I had done a long distance healing for my son, who was at a campground. In the evening, about an hour after I sent the healing, he shot these photos in the campfire using a cell phone. They were the healing spirits I had sent." Submitted by Janet Rodriguez of Liguna Niguel, California.

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NOTES

1. Harner 2013:11. There is a great deal more about shamanic power in *Cave and Cosmos*. See particularly Chapter 1, Spirit Power and the Cave.

2. Mokolke 2014. In last year's issue of the *Shamanism Annual*, I described a teaching miracle that occurred during the Three Year Program. Read the article online: <https://www.shamanism.org/articles/shaman-unbound.html>.

3. Rinchinov & Tsyrendorzhiya 2013. Photos of a series of spheres taken during a shamanic healing ritual performed by FSS Living Treasure Bo Bair Rinchinov. Bo Bair remarked that the spheres were probably lost souls attracted by the ritual. Michael Harner agreed that they were lost souls and other spirits drawn by the shamanic work.

4. In many cases, the methods being taught also address issues of permission. *I.e.*, how to offer healing on a larger scale while still maintaining ethical standards for the practice of shamanism. For more about shamanic ethics, see *Ethical Considerations in Shamanic Healing*: <https://www.shamanism.org/articles/ethics.html>

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Figure 4. Spirit in the campfire. See description, Figure 3. Submitted by Janet Rodriguez of Liguna Niguel, California.

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