

SHAMANISM AND PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION¹

Susan Mokolke, J.D.

For tens of thousands of years, shamans have been working on behalf of their people to bring the wisdom of the spirits to bear on issues facing the survival, health, and advancement of the tribe. The shaman's primary tasks were to bring the power of the compassionate helping spirits to help heal the sick; and to "see," using shamanic divination methods to address day-to-day problems facing the tribe, such as where to find food sources and spiritual protection from outside forces that might do harm.

Contemporary shamans still perform these tasks, though humanity's numbers and identifications with new tribes have expanded exponentially. Today we have multiple identities, which may include country and political parties, gender orientation, race and ethnicity, family, causes, careers, religion and belief systems, and organizational affiliations, such as universities and sports teams.

In spite of thousands of years of civilization, with undeniable advancements, we still retain those deep-seated instinctual tribal affiliations, necessary at the time to our survival. Thus, we congregate and identify with those who share our beliefs and similarities and avoid or exclude—and vigorously guard our territory against—those who do not. Being with our tribe makes us feel safe; and the more power and wealth our tribe has, the safer we feel. Add to this the loss of the intimate and inspiring oneness we once knew with the natural world and all of its lifeforms and earth forms—where everything was experienced as ensouled and as kin. And here we are today,

living in societies where everything is an object to be used rather than a subject to be in relationship with, where "my" immediate desires outweigh the needs of our living Earth and the future beings who will share our world.

There are 7.9 billion of us on the planet. Laws, agreements, regulations, protests, unified action, and so forth are essential as moral imperatives, but also to buy us time. I am profoundly grateful to all those who are working to preserve the wild places—the lands, animals, trees, waters, air—to those tirelessly applying hearts, minds, and hands toward easing the suffering of people and all earthkind. These acts of heroism and caring, protection and restoration, are essential. They provide us with that most precious of commodities—time, time in which we might awaken within ourselves that compassionate heart and conscious knowing that *we are not a part of, but one with, all that is.*

In the early days of humanity, there was an innocence to this knowing about unity. In our species' centuries of development, a scientific awareness has awakened in us as well. Much has been written about this separation between spirit (religion) and science during the Renaissance. Perhaps this was essential to human evolution; more learned scholars than I have offered this view. What seems evident today, however, is that we must *consciously* acknowledge a great truth with all of our being, with heart, mind, body, and soul—that we and the Earth are one. What happens to our Earth happens to us all. We each have a sacred charge, something to contribute, to the next stage in Earth's

transformation and to our ultimate future.

An acquaintance of mine who has made a study of Chinese history, remarked on how each dynasty started with good intentions to help the people and to make a better life for all. With the passage of years, corruption arose and the ideals of the past were forsaken in a quest to maintain wealth and power. When the situation worsened sufficiently under the reigning dynasty, it was overthrown and replaced by virtuous new leadership, and the cycle began again.

We have seen this same dynamic repeated in the history of Western civilizations and across a broad spectrum of human activities. If individuals engaged in this kind of dysfunctional repetitive pattern, we might ask: "And how is that working for you?" Problems are growing faster than we can fix them. We can no longer afford to confine our efforts to trying to fix what is broken—if we want a better world, we need better people. We need transformed, evolved humans, many of us, and fast.

THE SHAMANIC WORLDVIEW

Shamanism can help us find our way forward. 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.²

The shamanic worldview that everything that is, is alive and has spirit, is based in personal knowledge through experience. Shamanic practitioners know we are connected—one with all the lifeforms and earth forms of our world, our kin—because we have personally experienced it in journeys and other perspective-changing shamanic practices. We also know that there are wise beings, the compassionate helping spirits, who help us, teach us, and guide us.³ We are not alone in this.

SPIRITUAL PROBLEM SOLVING

In these arduous and chaotic times, it is important to recognize the immense contribution shamanic divination can make toward effective long-term solutions for persistent individual and community dysfunction. Shamanic divination, which most simply stated is asking the fully compassionate spirits for answers to questions, can reveal knowledge often hidden from access by ordinary reality means. One can think of divination as “spiritual problem solving.” In addressing difficult situations in ordinary reality, just as in shamanic healing, before applying shamanic methods the shaman first asks the spirits what the problem is and for the recommended course of treatment.

Powerful shamans are masters of two realities.⁴ We are both ordinary and nonordinary reality beings—thus the challenges we face involve these aspects as well. It is important that we investigate and research topics of concern to us by all conventional means possible. But ordinary reality actions alone cannot resolve the crises facing us, because these actions are, by definition, incomplete.

For effective, elegant, and enduring solutions, we need to work in nonordinary reality as well, bringing the power of the helping spirits to bear. Thus, the *Shamanism for Inspired Local & Global Change*⁵ workshop was developed. This course teaches participants a fully experiential method for combining *both* ordinary reality factual research and

knowledge with the nonordinary reality wisdom and guidance of the spirits, to come up with specific ordinary reality actions. Working in ordinary reality with spiritual insight also simplifies the ethical considerations involved.⁶

SHAMANISM FOR PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

The shamanic methods taught in the Global Change workshop are equally beneficial when applied to individual problems, leading to personal growth and freedom—and ultimately to a

transformed human. It has been demonstrated that in working altruistically to resolve real-world problems, individuals undergo many positive changes. These changes include lessened fear and anxiety, increased life satisfaction, happiness, and—especially needed—hope.⁷ When one has a personal relationship with the compassionate helping spirits, they support most powerfully our altruistic efforts, with enhanced individual benefits and highly effective and creative actions when addressing community challenges.



Susan Nohelke

The Compassionate Spirits As Role Models

One of the challenging aspects of human transformation is that it is not necessarily clear what the enlightened human would be like. There are, of course, many loving, kind, and giving people, whose qualities we can emulate. Yet, humans are by definition of dual nature, a collection of opposing characteristics. This is, perhaps, a necessary part of our existence in this reality—it is in the struggle to live up to the promise of our transcendent qualities that we grow spiritually.

Through my shamanic practice, I have come to realize an inspiring and hopeful truth: The fully compassionate helping spirits of the Upper and Lower Worlds are the perfect role models for human transformation. As I have interacted over the years with my own helping spirits in providing shamanic healing for others, receiving knowledge, and in teaching core shamanic methods, I have been changed in profound ways. When you journey, swimming with the spirits again and again in a vast ocean of compassion, in time it seeps into your being and your heart opens. You are humbled in the face of the spirits' great love. You become sensitive to the suffering of other beings, not in a way that causes you to turn away, but instead inspires you to move toward, knowing that with assistance from the spirits, you can help.

For me, my experience with the spirits has been one of coming to an awareness of “compassionate neutrality.” The helping spirits are often tender with me when I am suffering and in need, but they themselves do not take on my emotional pain. Emotion is not the same as compassion. Among emotion researchers, compassion is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering *and feel motivated to relieve that suffering*.⁸ It is only when I am filled with compassion, not caught in my own feelings, that I can be a powerful partner to the spirits.

Another aspect of compassionate neutrality is that the spirits do not have private agendas to promote; they seek the higher ground, the common good. They wish only to alleviate pain and suffering for all beings. They do not judge or compel. This has engendered in me a deep trust in their wisdom and teachings, and a freedom to examine my own judgments, agendas, and ignorance forthrightly. It has made me aware of the disservice done to my clients when I attempt to impose on them my own views of what is “right.” In contentious situations, it has caused me to work hard to rise above my self-centered impulses and personal wants, focusing on finding solutions that restore balance and harmony for all.

Shamanism “is a way to multiply your opportunities of solving problems, of asking for healing for the planet, getting in touch with all the beings of the planet. This goes beyond compassion.... That’s a wonderful path but in shamanism it’s not just being compassionate for other beings, other animals, plants, the planet—it’s becoming one with it. So you feel compassion for it and yourself at the same time. We are working in concert with the agenda of the compassionate ones. It’s much bigger than just us.”¹⁰

—Michael Harner

The helping spirits are also exemplars of how to treat those who misuse power. They do not punish or indulge in anger, jealousy, pettiness or other emotions, as a human might. But they will not permit their power to be used to do harm, and may withdraw their power from you if you attempt to use it adversely. This can have serious consequences, including the loss of their protection in ordinary reality.

It is very risky, too, for a shamanic practitioner to defend by attacking, or to engage spiritual power when angry.

Thoughts and feelings have power. Like spiritual arrows they can do great harm when they find a target. And, just as love offered may be shared by the giver, anger too can be reflected back to the sender. This may be what lies behind the adage: “You become what you resist.”

This concept of not “resisting” those who do harm is greatly misunderstood in our culture. It is often perceived as a weakness, as a lack of resolve. But to refuse to hate or attack those who cause suffering is a very advanced and powerful spiritual practice, which does not preclude taking strong preventative actions in ordinary reality. To the contrary, journeying to your helping spirits to discover what might be done in ordinary reality to block or alleviate the suffering and to restore balance and harmony—and carrying out the proposed actions—are practices essential to our transformation. By their example, the spirits show us a better way to deal with those who would do harm. They maintain their compassionate stance and refuse to empower those engaging in harmful activity. And so, unfed, the potential for harm withers away.

A Crucible for Transformation

Humans are both ordinary and nonordinary reality beings. Practice in both realms is essential for transformation. First, learn how to effectively access the spirits.⁹ The spirits can show us elegant, creative, and concrete solutions for real world problems. But mastery can be achieved only if we actually apply these solutions in ordinary reality.

You can find meaning and inspiration working with the spirits in a cooperative process of discovery. Your intention can be personal, seeking insight and transformation. I have taken many journeys to understand and improve myself and to enhance my ability to positively impact our world. I have asked the spirits about releasing fear and moving through grief, how to be a more effective teacher, how to let go of judgments,

and for help increasing my effectiveness at work. With appropriate care for shamanic ethics, you may ask about anything that is important to you. The spirits will give you what you need, what is perfect for you—freely given to help you increase your compassionate power to be used not only for yourself, but to help others.

It is a kind of dance between the inner personal dimension and outer community action. As you grow in understanding and compassion, you work differently in the world. Personal issues surface—areas that need healing, but also unrealized gifts. Committing oneself to this path means that along the way, emotions will surface: fears, doubts, attachments to outcomes and “my way,” confusion, judgments, anger, and the “posing of enemies.” These challenges should not be seen as a punishment, but as a kind of teaching from the beneficent powers of the universe—as opportunities to move through ordinary reality limitations into a new state of being as a compassionate and evolved human.

Listen To Your Heart

Because effecting change is not an easy road to navigate, when you dedicate yourself to this way of compassion, I have found it important to choose an ordinary reality undertaking that is close to your heart, something that you truly care about that moves you deeply. It is love for this chosen subject, the deep desire to see it grow and flourish, that will see you through the seemingly impossible times—that, and your relationship with your compassionate spirits and their love for you. And in the practice of working to nurture that which you love, you will be transformed.

What practitioners of shamanism express to me is their absolute delight in working with the spirits, and the incredible joy and personal satisfaction felt when the compassionate spirits join with them to provide unexpected and helpful solutions to challenging

problems. When times are especially onerous and signs of hope are elusive, I have experienced that the helping spirits seem to draw closer to this reality, becoming more accessible, awaiting only our invitation to help.

Each of us has a significant contribution to make in this lifetime, something we care passionately about, something that speaks strongly to the heart. When we engage with the deep desires of our hearts, joy and inspiration flow in our lives. We transform ourselves, one soul at a time, and the whole world advances. 🌟

Susan Mokolke, J.D., is the president of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies and director of the FSS Faculty. She currently teaches the FSS two-day workshops and the Three Year Program of Advanced Initiations in Shamanism and Shamanic Healing. She can be reached through the Foundation at info@shamanism.org.

NOTES

1. For more detail on the concepts presented here, see “Core Shamanism and Power,” by Susan Mokolke. ©*Shamanism Annual*, December 2015, Issue 28. FSS website: <https://shamanism.org/news/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Mokolke-Core-Shamanism-and-PowerArt.pdf>; “Shamanism: The Heart of Transformation,” by Susan Mokolke. ©*Shamanism Annual*, December 2016, Issue 29. FSS website: <https://shamanism.org/news/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Mokolke-Shamanism-Dec2016-Heart-of-Transformation.pdf>; and “Shamanic Divination as Spiritual Problem Solving,” by Susan Mokolke. ©*Shamanism Annual*, December 2017, Issue 30. FSS website: <https://shamanism.org/news/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Mokolke-Divination-ProblemSolving-p29-31.pdf>

2. Harner, Michael, *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2013.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

4. Harner, Michael, *The Way of the Shaman*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980, revised 1990, p. 59.

5. *Shamanism for Inspired Local & Global Change* workshop. In person: https://shamanism.org/workshops/calendar.php?Wkshp_ID=38 Online: https://shamanism.org/workshops/calendar.php?Wkshp_ID=44

6. For more on shamanic ethics, see “Ethical Considerations in Shamanic Healing” by Susan Mokolke. ©*Shamanism Annual*, December 2008, Issue 21. FSS website: <https://shamanism.org/articles/ethics.html>

7. Post, Stephen G., “Altruism, Happiness, and Health: It’s Good to Be Good,” *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 2005, Vol. 12, No. 2, 66–77 <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Post-AltruismHappinessHealth.pdf>

8. “What Is Compassion?” in *Greater Good Magazine* (science based insights for a meaningful life): <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition>

9. For shamanic training, visit shamanism.org. In person workshops & training: <https://shamanism.org/workshops/index.php>; Online workshops: <https://shamanism.org/news/online-workshops/>

10. *The Way of the Shaman: The Work of Michael and Sandra Harner* (documentary, 2017). Michael Harner, closing statement. Watch online: <https://shamanism.org/way-of-the-shaman/documentary.php>

