

THE SHAMAN UNBOUND: A TEACHING MIRACLE

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In shamanic work we are often aware of miracles of healing. Many of us came into this work after having witnessed or been the recipient of such miracle cures: cancer disappears, tumors shrink, proper functioning of the lungs is restored.

There are also teaching miracles, where the spirits provide amazing evidence of their existence and power.¹ These teaching miracles open our minds and hearts and forever alter our understanding of what is possible, profoundly changing our perspectives and orientation toward reality. One such miracle is described below.

—the editor

Over the course of the more than 25 years that the Foundation has been offering the *Three Year Program of Advanced Initiations in Shamanism and Shamanic Healing*,² we have witnessed countless examples of amazing teachings provided by the spirits, some specific to individuals, some for the benefit of the entire group. These are rarely discussed outside of the training, partly because of the initiatory nature of the program and also because these miracles are ideally tailored by the spirits to the needs of the specific person or group that receives them.

The initiatory experience is, by definition, personal to each individual. No one can or need tell you what to know or believe, because you know profoundly and simply through your own direct experience. This is the way of shamans for millennia.

The profound initiatory practices of the Three Year Programs are about deepening our relationships with the spirits and gaining knowledge and power to help others and our world—and the startling phenomena that often occur can sometimes distract one from the teachings.

With the publication of *Cave and Cosmos*, Michael Harner wrote for the first time in detail about one of the initiatory practices of the Three Year Programs: the Bound (or Unbound) Shaman. He did so as an invitation to science and to skeptics to experientially test for themselves the reality of the existence of spirits.³

The Bound Shaman initiation is a core shamanic practice originated by Michael from his field research and experimentation—suggested by public demonstrations in the Arctic regions of Siberia, North America, Greenland, and the western plains and subarctic regions of indigenous North America. In these “public séances, tightly bound shamans [commonly tied in a blanket or skin, or isolated in a special tent or alcove, *ed.*] are spontaneously freed from their bindings with no apparent help.”⁴

Participants in the FSS Three Year Programs are offered the opportunity to experience this practice for themselves, after a demonstration by the teaching staff.⁵

THE MIRACLE OF THE ROPES

On a warm summer night in August 2014 in the Pacific Northwest, our three year group was gathered for the evening session. The group had been through nearly three weeks of training and was now prepared to have their first experience with the Bound Shaman practice. This evening we would have a demonstration of it, with one of the teaching staff as the person to undergo the binding—we’ll call our demonstration person “CJ.”

As the program instructor, I set the stage for the demonstration by explaining the background of the practice and what was required of the group. I noted that it was very attractive to the spirits for the group to work in unity and harmony, to

invite the spirits to be fully present tonight, and to ask for healing and knowledge for all of the participants. CJ, too, had been preparing throughout the day for the role as the Bound Shaman.

I asked for two volunteers from the group who were good at tying knots, and two women were chosen. I showed them how to bind the person tightly, using one of the staff, not CJ, to demonstrate.

Then the whole group and the teaching staff called in the spirits powerfully, holding the intention to be taught and to receive healing. I then continued to call in even more spirits in a special way for this practice, asking them to show us their existence, to give us their miracles of healing and teaching.

“...sometimes the spirits demonstrate their existence and power to two or more people at a time, and even to large groups of people. When this happens, these public demonstrations are often called miracles.

“For the shaman who is intimately interacting with helping spirits, miracles are almost routine events in healing work. In fact, spirit-produced miracles of healing are probably shamans’ most celebrated feature in indigenous societies. Separate from helping shamans carry out healing activities, spirits often attempt to communicate their reality through miracles and ‘micro-miracles.’ These ‘wake-up calls’ that the spirits send, often with the help of a shaman or shamanic practitioner, are perhaps best understood as attempts to educate people about their existence.”⁶

—Michael Harner, *Cave and Cosmos*

The participants formed a circle sitting on the floor. They had been told to hold hands throughout the practice and to pay attention with all of their senses to anything that happened when the lights went out. No further information was provided about what they might experience.

The two volunteers were instructed to tie CJ. CJ knelt in the center of the circle and was bound tightly at the ankles and the wrists, with the hands behind the back. At my signal, a large blanket was draped over CJ, and the rope was wound tightly around the blanket encasing CJ and tied.

The volunteers quickly rejoined the circle and held hands. Two of the teaching staff (including myself) and a volunteer from the group stood in the center by the candle with their drums. The lights were extinguished. In total darkness, the three of us in the center drummed loudly and rapidly for a few minutes.

It was completely dark in the room. I could see absolutely nothing with my ordinary eyes. I continued to call upon all spirits to teach us, heal us, bring knowledge. I felt that the room was dense with presences, but I remained focused on the drumming and calling.

After a few minutes of drumming it felt like time to stop and get some light. I lit the candle and could see that CJ was uncovered and sitting up. We increased the light. I did not notice whether I saw the rope at that time, only that CJ was unbound.

We sat in a close circle and I invited people to tell what they had experienced in the darkness. Many of them spoke about how the spirits manifested and the profound teachings received.

CJ was instructed not to discuss at this time what happened during the practice, since the participants would have the opportunity to have their own experience later in the program.

When finished with the sharing, one of the participants asked, "What usually happens to the rope?"

Not understanding her question, I said, well we just coil it up again for reusing next time. She persisted, "But where is it?"

We looked at CJ. CJ did not have it and had thought that one of the teaching staff



Figure 1. Normal unused rope.

had taken it. We confirmed with the group that neither teaching staff nor participants had the rope.

We turned up more light and I asked people to look around their places. No one could find it. Then somebody happened to look in the corner of the room by the back door. The door, made of heavy wood and

glass, was still securely covered and taped shut with thick black plastic sheeting, used to prevent light and anyone from entering the room. Large bolster pillows had been placed against the door to further secure it.

And there the rope was, in a pile in the corner by the door, nearly 40 feet from where CJ had been located while bound!



Figure 2. Rope used in the demonstration, showing kinks and frayed ends.

I picked up the rope, which was in a tangled lump, and put it near my chair, thinking that I would take it to my room and wrap it neatly. The group had been holding hands during the entire practice and they all agreed that they had not touched the rope after the lights came back on. Typically after this experience, we simply coil the ropes used neatly and reuse them another time. But I planned to take this rope back to show Michael Harner, since this was a very unusual occurrence—we had never had a rope move across the room by itself—and it would be good to keep it in the Shamanic Knowledge Conservatory.

After the session closed for the night, I put the rope carefully in my cloth carrying bag and went back to my room. In my room, I unwound it a bit, in preparation for coiling it in a tidy bundle for preservation, thinking I was just going to make sure any knots were undone. Then I took a good look at it. I observed that it had been totally altered from the normal rope I was used to seeing, which is smooth and flexible. (See Figure 1, previous page, normal unused rope.)

The demo rope had these odd elbow-like bends, and was kinked and twisted every few inches all along its length. I was able to unwind it a bit, but did not try to straighten it out. It looked like the “stuffing” of the rope had popped out in places. The ends of the rope were frayed in a special way, with the outer fibers standing up like hair does with static electricity, and one end was frayed longer than the other end. It was also very stiff, not flexible like the normal rope.

Figure 3 (top right). Normal unused rope, showing typical blunt ending and no evidence of kinks.

Figure 4 (middle right). Rope used in the demonstration.

Figure 5 (bottom right). Second rope found the morning after the demonstration. Never used and still neatly wound, but stiff and showing the same elbow-type kinks and frayed ends as the demo rope.

All photos were taken the morning after the evening demonstration (8:00-10:00 pm), immediately after the morning session ended at noon.



I had never seen anything like it. The rope wasn't singed, melted, or scorched, but was more like it had been zapped somehow. (See Figure 2, p. 4, demo rope.) I had no idea how one would do such a thing to this kind of rope. I wound the rope gently and loosely so it was in a manageable bundle and wrapped it carefully in a scarf for transport home.

The next morning, I took the rope to the class and passed it around. People were amazed to see it. The volunteers who had tied the rope confirmed, as did the teaching staff member who had overseen the binding of CJ by the two volunteers, that the rope was not at all like that when they did the binding—it would have in fact been unusable if they had tried to tie CJ with it.

There was one more interesting teaching from the spirits we discovered that morning. The rope had been selected for the demo by one of our teaching staff members out of a box of extra ropes we brought along and stored for this practice in case a participant forgets to bring a rope. These extra ropes were kept in a heavy plastic storage box in a very small kitchenette-closet room with a solid wooden door, just off the same room where the demonstration occurred.

When the teaching staff member went back to the storage box the next morning,

there on top of several other normal ropes, was another rope of the same kind as the one from the night before—and this unused rope too was popped and kinked like the demo rope, except that it was still wound neatly as the ropes typically are when they have not been used. The ends were frayed exactly as the rope in the demo. It looked so much like the one from last evening that the staff member asked why I had put the rope back in the box, since it was known I had planned to keep it.

So, now we had two mysteriously transformed ropes, one from the demo which was tangled and not able to be rewound in a tidy fashion; one not used in the demo but discovered the next day, altered in the same way but still coiled neatly, just like a rope that has never been used. (See Figures 3–5.)

I was personally delighted by this teaching miracle. It was not only the rather playful nature of the spirits' demonstration of their power, but that it had such a profound effect on the participants' understanding of the nature of reality. For many, it altered their concept of, and relationship to, what is "impossible" and showed them the willingness of the spirits to be present in their lives. It was an important teaching and a healing.

It was also evidence that the group had come together as one heart and had

sincerely opened themselves to receive the spirits' teachings—and an open and willing heart is the true gift of a miracle. ☸

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NOTES

1. Harner 2013:23-29.
2. Originated by Michael Harner and based upon his decades of research and experimentation, the *Three Year Program of Advanced Initiations in Shamanism and Shamanic Healing* is the most advanced training in shamanism and shamanic healing offered by the Foundation. It is widely considered as unparalleled in the world. It involves intensive extended training in progressively higher levels of very advanced shamanism, including initiations into rare and little-known practices and principles. Visit shamanism.org for more information.
3. Harner 2013:199-202
4. Ibid. 199.
5. Ibid. 202. *Caveats*: this experiment should be conducted only under the safe supervision of a Foundation for Shamanic Studies faculty member who has taught the practice. Various safeguards include: using a blanket sufficiently porous that bound persons can breathe; not tying the bindings around the neck; a maximum of three minutes for keeping persons fully covered and bound; the practice should not be undertaken by persons with cardiac or respiratory problems. In case of doubt, they should consult a physician first.
6. Ibid. 23.

REFERENCES

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



Figure 6. Close up of rope found the next morning, not used but showing the same odd elbow bends as the demo rope (see also Figure 5).