

## Shamanic Healing: We Are Not Alone

An Interview of Michael Harner by Bonnie Horrigan

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Michael Harner, PhD, is an anthropologist and founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, an international nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving shamanic knowledge as it survives on the planet and to teaching the basic principles of that knowledge for practical applications in the contemporary world.

Harner, who has practiced shamanic healing since 1961, received his doctorate at the University of California-Berkeley. He is a former professor and chairperson of the department of anthropology at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York, and has taught at Columbia, Yale, and UC Berkeley. He also served as co-chair of the anthropology section of the New York Academy of Sciences. His books include *The Jivaro*, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, and the classic *The Way of The Shaman*.

In the course of his academic study of shamanism, Harner lived and worked with indigenous peoples in the Upper Amazon, Mexico, Peru, the Canadian Arctic, Samiland, and western North America.

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### *What is Shamanism?*

Michael Harner:

The word "shaman" in the original Tungus language refers to a person who makes journeys to nonordinary reality in an altered state of consciousness. Adopting the term in the West was useful because people didn't know what it meant. Terms like "wizard," "witch," "sorcerer," and "witch doctor" have their own connotations, ambiguities, and preconceptions associated with them. Although the term is from Siberia, the practice of shamanism existed on all inhabited continents.

After years of extensive research, Mircea Eliade, in his book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, concluded that shamanism underlays all the other spiritual traditions on the planet, and that the most distinctive feature of shamanism—but by no means the only one—was the journey to other worlds in an altered state of consciousness.

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*What is a shaman?*

Shamans are often called "see-ers" (seers), or "people who know" in their tribal languages, because they are involved in a system of knowledge based on firsthand experience. Shamanism is not a belief system. It's based on personal experiments conducted to heal, to get information, or do other things. In fact, if shamans don't get results, they will no longer be used by people in their tribe. People ask me, "How do you know if somebody's a shaman?" I say, "It's simple. Do they journey to other worlds? And do they perform miracles?"

*Is shamanism a religion?*

The practice of shamanism is a method, not a religion. It coexists with established religions in many cultures. In Siberia, you'll find shamanism coexisting with Buddhism and Lamaism, and in Japan with Buddhism. It's true that shamans are often in animistic cultures. Animism means that people believe there are spirits. So in shamanic cultures, where shamans interact with spirits to get results such as healing, it's no surprise that people believe there are spirits. But the shamans don't believe in spirits. Shamans talk with them, interact with them. They no more "believe" there are spirits than they "believe" they have a house to live in, or have a family. This is a very important issue because shamanism is not a system of faith.

Shamanism is also not exclusionary. They don't say, "We have the only healing system." In a holistic approach to healing, the shaman uses the spiritual means at his or her disposal in cooperation with people in the community who have other techniques such as plant healing, massage, and bone setting. The shaman's purpose is to help the patient get well, not to prove that his or her system is the only one that works.

In many cultures, shamans are often given gifts for their work, but they will return all the gifts if the patient dies, which I think is a commendable innovation that might help us with the costs of health services today.

*My understanding is that there are two aspects to shamanic healing: a medicinal one and a spiritual one.*

Shamans talk with plants and animals, with all of nature. This is not just a metaphor. They do it in an altered state of consciousness. Our own students rapidly discover that by talking with plants, they can discover how to prepare those plants for remedies. Shamans have been doing this since ancient times. They typically know a great deal about plants, but it's not essential. For example, Eskimo shamans don't have access to a lot of plants, so they work with other things. But in the Amazon shamans know the various plants and the songs that go with the plants, which they commonly learn from the plants themselves.

One former student of mine in the United States developed a practice of discovering and using healing plants based on his learning directly from the plants. He found that the pharmacopoeia he developed was very close to the ancient, classic Chinese pharmacopoeia knowledge of how to prepare and use these plants for different ailments. Another former student in Germany worked with minerals and found how they could be used in healing. It turned out that her discoveries were very close to what has been known in India from ancient times.

Which brings us to a very important issue: everything that's ever been known, everything that can be known, is available to the shaman in the Dreamtime. That's why shamans can be prophets; that's why they can also go back and look at the past. With discipline, training, and the help of the spirits, this total source of knowledge is accessible.

*What happens when a sick person asks a shaman for a healing?*

For example, a shaman might make a journey for diagnostic purposes, to get information about the person's problems from a spiritual point of view. It doesn't necessarily matter what the diagnosis is from an ordinary reality point of view. There's no simple one-to-one concordance between spiritual illness and ordinary reality illness. You can't say, "This equals that." So the shaman will often make a journey to find out what the spiritual causality is and, according to that causality, decide on the treatment.

From the shamanic point of view, people who are not powerful—spiritually "power-filled," that is—are prone to illness, accidents, and bad luck. This goes beyond our normal definition of illness. The shaman restores a person's linkage to his or her spiritual power. This spiritual power is something analogous to a spiritual immune defense system, but I wouldn't make a one-to-one equivalence. It's an analog. The power makes one resistant to illness. If somebody is repeatedly ill, then it's clear that they need a power connection. A healthy person who is not sick might go on a vision quest to get this power connection, but one of the shaman's jobs is to help people who are in no condition to do that for themselves.

Today in our culture many consider it avant-garde if a person talks about the mind-body connection, but the fact that the brain is connected to the rest of the body is not the most exciting news. It's been known for hundreds and thousands of years. What's really important about shamanism, in my opinion, is that the shaman knows that we are not alone. By that I mean, when one human being compassionately works to relieve the suffering of another, the helping spirits are interested and become involved. When somebody who is disinterested, who is not an immediate family member, out of generosity and compassion helps somebody else to relieve illness or pain and suffering—and it works even better when there are two or more shamans involved—this is when miracles occur. So the big news shamanism offers is not that the head is connected to the rest of the body, but that we are not alone.

*What is soul retrieval?*

Anyone who's had a trauma, from a shamanic point of view, may have had some loss of their soul. By soul we mean the spiritual essence essential throughout one's life as we describe life in our culture, which is from conception or birth to the time of death. The techniques for healing soul loss are soul-retrieval techniques, and one of the classic shamanic methods is to go searching for that lost portion of the soul and restore it.

Until about 8 years ago, most people in the Western world felt that soul retrieval was a superstitious practice that had no validity, but things have turned. I must say that a major reason is the work of my colleague, Sandra Ingerman, the author of *Soul Retrieval* and *Coming Home*. During her shamanic practice in Santa Fe, NM, years ago, women who had had significant childhood abuse would mention in the course of the sessions that they had removed themselves psychically from the situation at the time of abuse. Sandra immediately recognized, as a practicing shaman, that the person's soul to some degree had left the body (if it had left completely, the person would have been dead), and therefore the logical thing was to retrieve the lost portion of the soul and bring it back. So she then started doing soul retrieval for these people who had had significant childhood traumas, and the results were astounding. Today, this work is an important part of shamanic healing practice in the West.

Indeed, if you ask a group of people, "How many of you feel you've lost part of your soul?" it's typical that everybody raises their hand. At some deep level, there is a natural awareness of this problem. By the way, even a minor trauma can result in some degree of soul loss and can be treated.

Another major technique in shamanic healing work is extraction. Extraction involves removing a spiritual intrusion. Just as there can be infections in ordinary reality, so there can be spiritual intrusions. We don't mean that "evil" spirits have entered. It's more like termites in a wooden house. If you've got termites in your house, you wouldn't say those termites are evil, you'd say, "I'd just like to get them out of the house." In this same way the shaman works to remove things that interfere with the health of the body, such as spiritual intrusions, and extract them. This is not done through journeying. It's done through working here in the Middle World in an altered state of consciousness.

*How is an altered state of consciousness achieved in shamanism?*

In about 90% of the world, the altered states of consciousness used in shamanism are attained through consciousness-changing techniques involving a monotonous percussion sound, most typically done with a drum, but also with sticks, rattles, and other instruments. In perhaps 10% of the cultures, shamans use psychedelic drugs to change their state of consciousness.

I was introduced to shamanic work in 1961 among the Conibo Indians in eastern Peru, with the aid of native psychedelics. When I came back to the United States and no longer had my supply of ayahuasca, I experimented with drumming. Much to my surprise, it really worked. It should not have surprised me, because drums were reportedly used by shamans almost worldwide. Virtually everything you find in shamanism is done because it works. Over tens of thousands of years, shamans developed the most time-tested system of using the spirit, mind, and heart for healing, along with plant remedies, and so on. Again, the system is time-tested. So if healers in 90% of the shamanic cultures are using the same methods, we pay attention to them. And, of course, we find they work.

To get back to the extraction technique: the technique involves an altered state of consciousness and seeing into the client's body. Much shamanic work, including journeying and extraction, is done in darkness for a very simple reason. The shaman wishes to cut out the stimuli of ordinary reality—light, sound, and so on—and move into unseen reality. The shaman learns to look in the body with "x-ray vision" and see the illness and its location, and then to extract that illness.

*Is that like depossession?*

Depossession is related to extraction but it's not the same thing. From a shamanic point of view, it's very important to get out of the Middle World when journeying for spiritual purposes. In the old days, shamans journeyed in the Middle World to see how relatives were doing at a distant place or to locate the herds of migratory animals. But most of our work today is in the Upper and Lower Worlds where shamans have voyaged since ancient times. Shamans often prefer not to draw on the spirits of the Middle World because many of them are confused and lacking in power. Going to the Upper or Lower Worlds, one reaches spiritual beings of compassion, power, and wisdom.

Shamans who do another type of healing help the dead as well as the living. These shamans are called "psychopomps," or conductors of souls. Remember, from a shamanic point of view, when you're comatose, you're dead. So the shaman, in the case of comatose persons, would seek them out and see if they wanted to come back. Shamanism is not a system that intends to keep people in this ordinary reality whether they like it or not, because the shaman knows that this is not necessarily the best reality. You

make the journey for the person who is comatose to find out what they want. If they want to come back, then the job of the shaman is to bring them back. But if they want to go on—or, more commonly, if they're dying or already dead—then the job of the shaman is to get them to a place where they will be content and not have them stay here, adrift in the Middle World.

So now we come back to this business of depossession. Most cases of depossession of humans are by other humans who are dead, who are here in the Middle World and don't know they're dead. If people are disempowered, or have soul loss or power loss, they are like a vacuum into which these confused entities can come. This is involuntary possession.

Shamans will conduct the entity—with its permission once it realizes it's dead—to a place beyond the Middle World where it will be reunited with people who it loves. Once this is done, so that the clients are no longer possessed, shamans restore their full soul and lost power connections so they are again whole and not vulnerable to further possessions.

Depossession work has slightly different forms in different cultures, but the basic principles are the same. I hope that one day our culture will recognize the need to permit shamanic practitioners to work with the spiritual aspects of illness in cooperation with nonspiritual health professionals.

*In your opinion, why don't we do that now?*

Unfortunately, when science started, partially as a reaction to the church in Europe, it ordained that souls and spirits have no reality and therefore could not be considered in scientific theory. Now that's an a priori position; in other words, ironically, a statement of faith enunciated in the 18th century. In fact, science has never disproved the existence of spirits. I would submit that now, on the edge of the 21st century, it's time to stop having a science that's based on faith (the faith that there are no spirits) and make it real science, which means that it doesn't ordain a priori that certain types of causes cannot exist.

*In regard to extraction healing, in the shamanic view, where does the illness to be extracted come from?*

From a shamanic point of view, all people have a spiritual side, whether they recognize it or not. When people get angry, jealous, or have a hostile emotional attitude, they can vent not only verbal and physical abuse, but spiritual abuse without even knowing it. In other words, if somebody is ignorant of shamanic principles, they can do damage to other people on a spiritual level.

Among the Untsuri Shuar and Jívaro people of eastern Ecuador, with whom I lived for quite a while, they call these intrusions "magical darts." There were many feuds and wars, and sometimes healers would get angry and lose their discipline and use their powers to get even. But it is important to know that this is a big mistake, not just ethically, but in terms of self-preservation. No matter how justified a person feels emotionally at the time, those spiritual beings who are representative of the great, loving, hidden universe will disconnect. It's like we're rechargeable batteries. We still have some power, and we can do damage, but the power source is no longer charging us. I've seen this many times in the Amazon. The shamans, in their anger, do harm for awhile, but eventually everything they send out comes back in on them, and it often results not only in their own death or pain, but their immediate family gets affected disastrously by it.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't get angry at people. It just means that you should have discipline and know there are parameters. You can get angry with somebody and verbally let out steam and, at the same time, control your spiritual side. But for your own self-preservation, if you don't work to relieve pain and

suffering—and especially if you work in a contrary way—you're soon out of business, and probably dead.

*If I understand the concept, shamans restore wholeness and power to a human being, and then that wholeness and power heals whatever is wrong with that person. So in this framework a power-filled person has the ability to heal himself.*

To an outsider, it would look like they're healing themselves. But the concept of self-healing excludes the spirits. From the shamanic point of view, nobody's lived into adult life without spiritual help, whether they know it or not. The self-healing concept is a secular concept, and that's fine as far as it goes. It teaches people to take some responsibility for their illness. But it also teaches them to take responsibility for their death. With that approach, everybody's a failure at the moment of death, because they are responsible for the whole thing. From a shamanic point of view we are not that important. We are not necessarily the biggest thing in the universe. The shaman has a more humble point of view, that there is what looks like self-healing but, in fact, we are getting help. And the shaman has the role, of course, of accelerating that possibility.

*So the person is not healing himself?*

They might be in a specific case. I don't want to rule that out. Self-healing is a very secular view of reality, but it's a step in consciousness. It's like recognizing the brain is connected to the body.

*Can you talk about the difference between ordinary reality and nonordinary reality, especially regarding the implications for medicine?*

The terms "ordinary reality" and "nonordinary reality" come from Carlos Casteneda. Ordinary reality is the reality that we all perceive together. It's the reality in which we can all agree that there is a clock on the wall. Nonordinary reality is the reality that is associated with the shamanic state of consciousness; that is, when the consciousness has been altered and you're able to see what you normally don't see in an ordinary state of consciousness.

Ordinary reality is something that virtually everybody agrees on. Nonordinary reality is very person-specific. The information obtained in nonordinary reality is tailor-made to the individual—other people may not perceive it at all, as opposed to the information obtained in ordinary reality, in which everybody gets the same thing.

Nonordinary reality is also an empirical reality; that is, the person interacts with it, sees it, touches it, hears it, feels it. And the shaman sees with the heart in that reality. In nonordinary reality, for something to be the same for different persons, it has to be the same in the heart. Here (in ordinary reality) for something to be the same it doesn't matter what your emotion is; you'll see it, for example, as a door in the room. If I showed you a picture of my mother, now deceased, you and I would not have the same emotional relationship with that picture. But if I said the word "mother," and everyone saw their own mother, the emotional feeling in the heart would be closer—not identical, but closer. So to see things exactly the same in the heart, they have to be a little different for each person, because each person has a different personality and a different life history.

The term "nonordinary reality" is useful because it permits one to be reminded that access to these worlds is related to the degree to which you have entered the shamanic state of consciousness. It clarifies our thinking. For years, many people were confused by what shamans said. "I made a journey and was away

for 3 years, and such and such happened." Now that person in nonordinary reality had the experience of living somewhere else for 3 years, but might have been gone only a half-hour in ordinary reality.

*What about divination?*

Work in shamanism also involves divination. A person can journey for themselves or have somebody who's a shamanic practitioner journey for them to get an answer to a question. What's really interesting is when somebody who's a complete stranger—about whom the shaman knows nothing—asks for an answer to a question, and the shaman then journeys or uses other techniques and gets the exact information that's valid for that person's life. This can happen because these things are known by the spirits. The shaman doesn't need to know anything except the methods, and to have his or her own spirit helpers.

*How can doctors and nurses use this knowledge?*

Sometimes I informally call our foundation the "University of Shamanism." I bring that up because our primary purpose is to return shamanism to the planet by training people. Many of these people are doctors and other health professionals. It is they who must discover how to integrate what they are taught into their practices. We don't have a ready template for that. Within the next few years, we hope to have a large-scale conference of health practitioners who have studied with us, to exchange information about how they have used these methods in their practice.

*I know the Foundation is conducting research regarding drumming and health. Can you talk about that?*

Our research, thanks to a Canadian foundation, is investigating certain matters regarding shamanic journeying and drumming and health. My wife, Dr. Sandra Harner, is the director of the Shamanism and Health Project. Her research involves two major aspects, one of which is the effect of shamanic journeying and drumming on one measure of immune response and on emotions.

In connection with this work, she has gotten some hints that people with certain profiles of psychological descriptors respond much more effectively in terms of the immune response than others. This is a subject, obviously, of considerable interest. She has also found that there is a tremendous increase in the sense of well being as well as decreased mood disturbance and stress in people working with shamanic drumming and journeying. But to say more would be premature.

It's ironic that a system of healing that—other than using plants—is the oldest known system of healing in the world, should have no research going on in it at all, other than what we are able to do with our meager resources. I look forward to the day when the possibility of spiritual causality is not ruled out of research, so that science, in fact, can be completely scientific.

We also have what the medical profession would call "anecdotal" accounts. People often come to the shamans when everybody else has failed. We have cases in which, once people start getting shamanic treatments and laboratory tests are continued, the tests turn out negative, whereas they previously were positive. The assumption from the medical profession is usually that the previous diagnoses were incorrect, because there's been a reversal. That's fine with us. After all, it's virtually impossible, on a case-by-case basis, to prove causality. People wonder, How do you know this works? Well, you just practice it for your life and it develops a track record for you.

*What are you working on now?*

My primary interest right now is in miracles. I've devoted some years now to finding out what principles are involved to have miracles happen. I think we're making significant progress. Almost everything that anybody's ever read about in the shamanic literature or the miracle literature is something that we have some knowledge of how to do now. And this includes miracles of healing.

Starting next year, we will be moving forward on this project with some of our most advanced students. I'm not in a position to comfortably start sharing this information publicly—it's too early—but it does involve a real awareness of the spirits.

I might say something about spirits, because it's a strange word to people. What is a spirit? In 1961, when I was with the Conibo Indians in eastern Peru in the Amazon, I was training using ayahuasca with a shaman, and we were working with the various nature spirits every night. I worked with the anaconda spirit, the black panther spirit, the fresh-water dolphin spirit, various tree spirits, and so on. They would come, we would see them, and so on. Then one night I got introduced to the outboard-motor spirit. And then the radio spirit and the airplane spirit. I came to realize that anything that you see in complete darkness or with your eyes closed is technically a spirit. That makes it sound like it's just an image in the air, but shamans find out which spirits have power and which don't. They discover what spirits can help in what ways. It's very important to recognize that whatever you contact in nonordinary reality is technically a spirit. It's a spiritual reality.

*Once a shaman contacts the spirits, what happens?*

There's a crossover of the power from nonordinary reality to ordinary reality. The two realities are conceptually discrete, but the shaman is able to move the power of one over to the other. When this is done successfully, that's how healings occur and how we have what is called miracles.

*Your interest in miracles was obviously spurred by your experiencing or witnessing miracles. Would you be willing to tell us a miracle story?*

This is a very simple one that can be seen to this day, empirically, in ordinary reality. One of our students, Carol Herkimer, was in what we call a "spirit boat," along with other members of a basic class. The spirit boat is a technique used in aboriginal Australia, on the northwest coast of North America, and in the upper Amazon. A group of shamans journey together to the Lower or Upper world to go outside of time. They may be going for healing or knowledge. When a whole group of people, trained properly and in contact with spirits, journey together to help one person, it's very powerful.

We were using a dance studio in lower Manhattan on Canal Street called "The Kiva." Like any other dance studio, it had highly polished floors, so we always had to be careful not to scuff them. Carol was recovering from a terrible traffic accident and she couldn't sit on the cushions on the floor with the other people. She had to sit in a chair with bent tubular metal legs. So we went off on the journey, and when we came back (to ordinary reality), people shared what they had encountered. When Carol went on the journey, she went through a sea of fire in nonordinary reality. When she came back, the floor was smoking under her chair, and the bent aluminum tubular leg on one side had burned a channel into the floor, but she hadn't gotten burned. The people who owned the studio were quite upset, and to this day the burned channel is still there.



This example alone doesn't prove anything, but it's these kinds of coincidences that build up in your own practice. In no single case can you be sure what actually happened, but if you find a high correlation between treatments by people who are well known as healing shamans and recoveries—when other things have failed—then you begin to pay attention.

When you start shamanic journeying, if you're the kind of person the spirits feel compassion for and want to help, you're going to get lots of teachings you never asked for and never expected. Because once you go through those doors—whatever those doors are—the spirits will teach you according to your preparation, and your life will change. Even one journey may start changing your life.