

## A Personal Look at Core Shamanism By Timothy R. Flynn

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I became a member of the tribe of “shamanic workshoppers” shortly after graduate school. We're spread around the globe, from the United States to Canada to Austria to Singapore. We drag our drums and rattles on planes, buses and through airport checkpoints policed by startled attendants. "It's a rattle, it's filled with stones from the stream behind my house. No you can't touch that, it's my power animal mask and it doesn't want to see the light of day yet."

We save up our vacations and paychecks year after year for the chance to sit in circle with others like us to travel deeper into our experience of shamanism. Some of us offer healing professionally or semi-professionally. Some of us are nourishing our spirituality with one of the most authentic ways to access the sacred we've ever been privileged to learn.

Young, old, doctors, lawyers, blue-collar workers, therapists and everything under the sun, we form bonds that can be made nowhere else. Practicing new techniques on each other, sharing meals, sharing rooms - our bonds are based on experiences we can't even begin to explain to most people. After struggling in silence we're able to finally make sense of events that have baffled us for years. We're lucky enough to benefit from the wealth of the Earth's shamanic knowledge, made available to us by direct transmission from some living indigenous healers and by the explorations of experienced modern practitioners. Though we spend most of our time far from each other, we are all united by the circles we have sat in together.



It's impossible to go any further without telling you about Michael Harner. White male anthropologists have not enjoyed a glowing report card from academics, activists, or indigenous people over the last three or four decades. "Cultural appropriation," "inherently racist," and "tools of the patriarchy," are just a few of the salvo's fired at the tradition of Western anthropology, sometimes with good reason. The very term shamanism is thought by some to be a reductionist contrivance of elitist academics crafted to strip cultures of their unique qualities.

Michael Harner is to many of his students the embodiment of the refutation of those critiques. He has managed to use his training as an anthropologist and a shaman for the betterment of indigenous as well as contemporary peoples. After decades of laboring against the tides of academia, Michael was recently honored by the American Anthropological Association for his work both as an anthropologist and advocate of shamanism. In his study of indigenous cultures and training with shamanic healers, he has recognized a unique and invaluable ability that is essentially human. "Core Shamanism," which he originated, researched, and developed, is the practical expression of that ability. A series of shamanic practices that are universal or near universal make up the teachings Michael and the international faculty at the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS) offer. Core Shamanism has made up the heart of the FSS offerings since the 1970's. Over the last fifteen years, I've been privileged to study these practices.

So much has flowed from Michael's original spark. While not all of my training has been through him or FSS faculty, nearly all of my training builds on his work in some way. Ancient traditions have been brought to life, new techniques have been developed, and the ancient and the modern have united in the lives of tens of thousands of people exposed to his work. Core Shamanism allows modern practitioners of shamanism to approach, and with almost no introduction, begin to work alongside indigenous shamans trained in practices that are thousands of years old. It functions not only as a profound remembering, but as a bridge allowing us to reach out to the Earth's ancient shamanic traditions.

For people like me, who have been pulled by experiences and intuitions that are shamanic, Core Shamanism gives us a place to begin. The clarity of the teachings, not dependent upon a specific cultural tradition, allows me to build a practice in my daily life. I have practical actions I can take each day to deepen and to achieve balance with my own experience of shamanism.

There are others called to shamanism who focus primarily on studying traditions still steeped in indigenous cultures. For some this calling is especially strong, truly the heart of their path. I applaud this work, it is invaluable. Not only does it often result in powerful healing, it brings new vitality and perspective to the development of shamanism in the West. In my own work I prize more the shamanism that is growing directly out of modern peoples lives. If shamanism is going to help address our problems it will have to be resonant with modern lives. If it is to come to its full potential for us it must be born from our own experiences, crippled though they might seem by our industrialized way of thinking and behaving. Indeed it is the shamanism that can transform from within that is most needed now. This shamanism will be at least partly home grown.

When we first enter into this work we can easily get caught up in devaluing our own experiences in favor of indigenous cultures. "If it's not as powerful as Black Elk's visions it must not be worth..." we tell ourselves. We mistakenly believe that because our religious traditions teach us we are separate from the natural world, we are therefore incapable of accessing its spiritual aspect in any meaningful way. In truth, the threads of shamanism exist within all of us because we are human and alive - that is all that is required for the initial price of admission. The common aspects of our days - breathing, eating, raising our children, working, and finally dying - are all potent gateways to an authentic shamanic experience. Because Core Shamanism focuses on what is essentially human in shamanism, it allows me the opportunity to embrace my own life experience, flawed and inhospitable to the natural world though it may seem to be. Almost immediately after receiving the most basic training students are often able to move forward in their lives with all the wisdom they can handle.

Several generations from now, when shamanism has had the time to fully develop roots in our culture, our ancestors may look back with great appreciation for our generation's shamanic re-discovery. The practitioners who struggled with their own health issues while working intensively with the spirits, the single mothers who saved for years to be able to afford to learn shamanic techniques, the artists who finally accepted the shamanic dimension of their work and let it carry them where it would, the health care professionals who faced the disdain of their mainstream peers with courage and openness - these may all turn out to be the heroes of shamanic practitioners yet to come. In our most private struggles we are opening doorways for empowered future generations of shamans.

My first formal class was the FSS Basic Workshop, The Way of the Shaman, with Michael Harner. Though I had already learned to journey, there was something unique about training with someone with his breadth of experience. We journey with our hearts, not our heads. Someone who has spent so much time exploring nonordinary reality just feels different. The lessons come through more clearly. The icing on the cake is that Michael has a hysterical sense of humor, made especially delightful by his enjoyment

of being the butt of the spirits' jokes. I find it comforting when a facilitator can dissolve so completely into laughter when the joke is on him.

At the time of my first workshop I didn't even know what to ask him. It would be many years later when, as a student of the FSS Three-Year Program in Advanced Initiations in Shamanism and Shamanic Healing, my head caught up to my heart enabling me to more fully engage him as a teacher. The Basic Workshop served as an introduction to Michael and the integrity with which the FSS communicates that core shamanic spark. They understand how essential this work is. They understand the way in which it belongs to each one of us. They're willing to put in the effort to create the environment in which we can remember this precious gift. They are not seeking lifetime students for their organization. When we've learned all we can from them, they expect us to go out into the world and integrate what we've learned into our lives.

## **Harner Shamanic Counseling**

After my first class I knew I wanted to make a bigger commitment than just a weekend workshop - I wanted to go all in. The only extended workshop available in my area was one being taught by FSS co-founder, Sandra Harner. A clinical psychologist and world renowned textile artist, Sandra has research and management credentials too numerous to mention here. What is extraordinary about spending time in her company is the combination of her keen, well-educated intellect and her overwhelmingly gentle heart. It was such a privilege to study Harner Shamanic Counseling with her.

I know what you're thinking, "Shamanic counseling, is that like couples therapy for you and your power animal?" No, it's not. In shamanism, the "counselors" are the spirits. Shamanic counseling is really the art of teaching a person how to journey, while at the same time, getting out of the way. A shaman is not a guru. One does not access the transcendent aspects of the universe *through* a shaman. The client learns to connect with the spirits directly, without the need of assistance from anyone else.

We met at Westerbeke, a family ranch in the rolling Sonoma Hills, which has evolved into a retreat center over many years. Nestled amongst acres of gracefully twisted and entangled oaks, its handmade adobe brick buildings are rustic and welcoming. Though it was summer, I often visited the river stone fireplace big enough to walk into. Westerbeke is a place rooted in home and hearth.

Training in shamanic counseling involves journeying and witnessing others journey for many hours. Of course, the instruction is much more detailed, but you learn to teach others to journey in a way that is impartial and supportive of the work of the spirits. For five days you transcribe others' journeys and your journeys are transcribed. Instruction and review is given at each break. This workshop is the best blend of clinical technique and shamanic vision I've ever experienced.

There are two experiences shamanic workshopppers have in common, sore butts and full bellies. Though some techniques require us to dance or lay down, we spend a LOT of time sitting. If you follow the path of the shaman bring extra pillows to sit on. You might also want to up that exercise regime. Shamanic work actually burns a lot of calories (no I do not have a study to support that), but residential workshops often include abundant food. Workshop leaders must have learned at some point the importance of LOTS of good food. By day three of an extended workshop you begin to feel like a cow. "Mooooooh" sounds rise up from the food line as you wait to stuff your face on what is often some of the best food you'll eat that year. It not unusual to be deeply altered, swaying back and forth from the last mind blowing experience, clutching tightly to your most recent practitioner. Good food can be a welcomed enticement to return to earth.

It was at this first workshop that I met two of my dearest friends and colleagues. I knew Ann would be a close friend when the first sentence out of her mouth was a compliment. "Are you a dancer? I could tell by the way you move." A single mom and retired school teacher, Ann had been involved in spiritual pursuits for many years. "I heard you lived in Oakland, I live in the area, what do you think about starting a drumming circle?"

Shamanic drumming circles are a way for students and practitioners to gather and support each other in their development. We meet regularly, usually open and close with a ritual, practice techniques and offer healing to each other and people recommended to us. The FSS encourages students to start their own circles and offers a listing of some on their website. This was another element of structure without constrictive rules that I needed. Validating yourself for your own shamanic experiences gets a little difficult to sustain day after day. We all need a tribe. For people just beginning a regular practice of Core Shamanism it is an invaluable means of support. Ann and I began a monthly drumming circle that through her guidance has grown and continues to this day.

I knew Lora was a gifted practitioner when she worked with me, transcribing a journey I took with Bat. I've loved bats since I was a child. I remember my first report in grade school was on their amazing ability to see the world in ways no other creatures can. One of my most powerful initiatory dreams was one in which I was being forced through a cave like a birth canal. When I reached the back of the cave, a bat hanging upside down died and turned to ash in the blink of an eye. The energy released from its disintegration blew me out of my dream and into waking consciousness. This was death as transformation, a great shamanic lesson conveyed to me viscerally. Never again could I look at death as an ending or a way to escape being. This was my first medicine to empower me to cross the terrain between the living and the dead.

Lora transcribed my journey while I spoke it aloud as part of our training. My journey took on a whole new level of physicality. Unexpectedly I merged with the energy of Bat as I followed it into the lower world. My ears became incredibly sensitive, not only amplifying sounds but absorbing the feelings of everyone in the room through my ears.

Discussing my journey with Lora, I was deeply touched by the reverence with which she held my experience. It was clear she wanted to push the chairs to the edge of the room and really spend the time necessary to honor what had transpired for me. To this day she witnesses each gift from the spirits with the same gratitude for all of her students and fellow practitioners.

Some of the friends we meet on this path become more than peers, as Ann and Lora became for me. The experiences we share create bonds so deep they transcend even the words we use to describe family - sister, brother, daughter, mother. These are the people we look to when we know it is our time to die. These are the people to whom we know we can entrust our souls.

Of course, these relationships are peppered liberally with the same humor that reduces Michael to a hysterical puddle every now and then. As sometimes happens, we were pressed in the final moments of the workshop to finish our scheduled work. The last journey was being taken by half of the class as the final seconds ticked away. Lora has an exceptional ability to journey deep and for long periods at a time. Where a half hour journey might tire some of us out, I have no doubt Lora could journey for many hours without tiring. So it was that as the rest of us joined hands in circle to end our five day retreat, we circled around Lora, lying on the floor blind folded, speaking her journey loudly to the room. "Oh, and now my Power Animal is telling me that the workshop is over," she announced, "and everyone is standing in circle ready to leave." I managed to stifle my giggles as she quickly returned to the room, looking up to see all of our smiling faces. That day she was truly held in circle.

Shortly after returning to the Bay Area, Ann and I held our first drumming circle in my loft in the warehouse district of Oakland. I don't remember what we did that day - I think there were only four of us then. I know I was changed by the beat that day, as I've been changed by all the other circles I've sat in over the years. Sitting in circle and drumming with other shamanic practitioners always feels so good. When you drum in circle to work with the spirits, you are sitting alongside the first human beings. You return to the heart and soul of our beloved Mother Earth and say: "I love you."