

Shamanism and the Spirits of Weather  
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“Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.”  
— Charles D. Warner Dudley editorial in the *Hartford Courant*, August 24, 1897

*Inuit Song*

The arch of the sky  
And mightiness of storms  
Encompasses me,  
And I am carried away  
Trembling with joy.<sup>1</sup>

**More Pieces to the Puzzle**

It is Saturday afternoon at the Pathwork Center, deep in the heart of the mysterious Catskill Mountains of New York. Twenty-three people lie quietly on the floor with bandannas over their eyes. The resonance of drums fills the room with harmonious and compelling vibrations. I am drumming with David in the center of the room by a simple altar cloth and lighted candle. We are drumming for people who vary in their ability and level of experience, but all have done this before — the celebrated shamanic journey to the nonordinary realms: worlds of compassion, wisdom, and grace. Today they are attempting something new: a search for a spirit of weather, and if they find one, each has a question to ask on behalf of our circle. The excitement is palpable.

Our drumming continues and I am somewhat surprised to feel the familiar desire to journey also, even as I drum. I gaze around the room and everything seems peaceful. I look at David, his eyes wide open and watchful. I indicate I wish to journey and then close my eyes as I drum and drum and drum...

I journey to the Upperworld with several of my power animals, asking to meet the Spirit of Weather. I do not know why, but I feel ecstatic. We fly through a layer of storm clouds, up and up, searching until we finally are face to face with a "cloud being." He is imposingly large, with lightning shimmering in his eyes, and when he speaks, snowballs tumble from his mouth. I feel glad to have my power animals nearby. I introduce myself and respectfully ask the cloud being for a teaching for our community. I am genuinely surprised, even dismayed, as he "lets me have it." He is unmistakably annoyed! He tells me that our culture has essentially forgotten him; that in times past, people all over the world spoke to, prayed to, and worked with him. Now he is ignored. Now, our science and "knowledge" attempt to depersonalize and de-spirit him. So he creates aberrant, rough weather to get us to take notice, to puzzle over, and to know that we do not know. As I feel this spirit's mood, I am speechless. I offer only a "thank you" for his teaching and promise to share this with the circle and community.

This journey left me much to wonder about. Though I have held a passion for weather all my life, and thought I recognized the aliveness, the spirit in all things, I saw that I still carried our culture's world view of weather as purely physical forces—awesome forces—that we were getting better at describing and predicting. Although some still notice connections between moods and weather conditions, and we personalize hurricanes and typhoons with our own names, this is the limited extent of our understanding beyond the physics of weather. Without realizing it, I had been participating in the collective cultural arrogance that leaves little room to see, hear, or feel spirits of weather. The extravagant concepts of

rainmaking or weather-working were considered taboo by me, elusive in a realm betwixt and between myth and that which is too complicated and too dangerous.

Why explore or even attempt to relate to the spirits of weather? Is this merely a tangent of more important spiritual endeavors and truths? Each of us is profoundly affected by the weather, though we may only be minimally conscious of this. How many of us are aware of how our moods, behavior, and physiology change in response to the weather? Behind many of our most powerful experiences with Nature are forces of weather. A weather event has the capacity to draw us out of the relative isolation of our daily routines. It brings us together, all sharing the experience. And interestingly enough, weather is the one subject that we usually feel safe and willing to comment on with strangers!

Consider how we, collectively as well as individually, may affect the weather. Not only by the vast amounts of pollution and resource depletion that sustain our huge population and modern life styles, but even by our psyches and emotions, and sense of connectedness or disconnectedness from the natural world. There are indigenous and non-western people who recognize this connection and live in the truth of our relatedness to all. They embody what our ancestors must have for a very long time: an alive relationship with the spiritual forces of weather. This relationship is expressed in the principle of reciprocity: as above, so below; as within, so without; which is real and operative in our world and lives, independent of our conscious understanding.

To embark on a path of exploration and conscious relationship with the spirits of weather is to walk on a path of spiritual learning and experience that helps us relate to our sense of connection with all of Nature. In so doing, we can heal the rending wound of disconnection with Nature from which most of us in the modern world suffer. Along this path we encounter profound opportunities to experience and foster harmony in ourselves, and hence, in the Universe. It is a way to go somewhere following the lead of the spirits, and to enhance our own well-being, that of others, and of our Mother Earth along the way.

A Salish word from the Pacific Northwest, *skalalitude*, describes what life is like when true kinship with nature exists: "when people and nature are in perfect harmony, then magic and beauty are everywhere."<sup>2</sup>

Other indigenous cultures around the world also know that everything has spirit: rocks, animals, plants, trees, places, rivers, storms, mountains, and oceans. Many of these cultures recognize and work with spirits of weather. Wise ones—Elders—of widely separated cultures understand the need for humans to honor and relate to the spirit world for the overall maintenance of harmony and balance and for the good of one's people, including the good of individuals. They see it as a special duty for humans to work in this way and they attend to this responsibility through the enactment of community rituals such as the Iroquois mid-winter world renewal rites. They also realize this through attitude: in expressions of love, honoring, and gratitude for life and for all the relations, seen and unseen, who share life on this beautiful Earth. In the 1800s, Alexander Carmichael wrote of the Scottish Highlanders:

[T]he old people had runes which they sang to the spirits dwelling in the sea and in the mountains, in the wind and in the whirlwind, in the lightning and in the thunder, in the sun and in the moon and in the stars of heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Elders of the Athapascan Koyukon peoples of the northern forests of contemporary Alaska have noticed signs of disorder, both obvious and subtle, even in their local wilderness environments. Animals are behaving abnormally, such as ravens coming into the villages and — begging for food, "like orphans with no self respect." The Koyukon attribute this apparent imbalance to the loss of medicine people—to the loss of those willing and able to work with the spirits of the animals and the elemental forces of nature.<sup>4</sup>

Today many fear that we are in a time of aberrant and worsening weather conditions: mega storms, killer heat waves, and El Niño and La Niña floods and droughts. It is well worth pondering how today's weather events may be exacerbated by a modern lifestyle that provides little room for personification of natural forces, much less recognition of the reality of spirits! The premise here is that a reciprocally beneficial relationship with the spirits of weather at a cultural level is not yet beyond our ken and reach. We still have the ability (and hopefully) the time to reestablish an aware relationship with these spirits, as well as with all the spirits with whom we share this world.

### *Journey Suggestions for Working with Weather*

For those who are interested in exploring their relationship with the spirits of weather, here are some journey suggestions:

- What would an alive, harmonious relationship with the spirits of weather be like?
- How can I prepare myself to harmoniously and effectively work with the spirits of weather?
- What are the ethics of working to influence the weather?

What about the practice of "weather-working?" Significant numbers of references and anecdotal evidence attest to the fact that humans of the past engaged in this art of relating, and that it is still practiced today. In many cultures, weather-working ability seems to be part and parcel of the shaman's job description and is considered necessary for the survival and well-being of the community. Successful weather-working also demonstrates the shaman's strong relationship with the spirits and the forces of nature. Implicit in these demonstrations is not an opportunity for self-aggrandizement, but ideally, an opportunity to support the community in the certain knowledge that the spirits are really at work and that miracles can indeed be expected! As with any shamanic healing work, shamans must defer to spiritual forces, knowing that acts of relating and attempts to engage or influence may or may not have any identifiable effect. All they can do is uphold their part in the relationship, respecting the mystery, and let the spirits do the rest.

For the Koyukon peoples, the old time shamans were not seen so much as owners of power for themselves, but instead as ones who knew how to influence the spiritual forces of nature for good or no good, according to their purpose. The traditional Koyukuk people see that everything in nature, including the weather, is spiritually invested. It is clearly understood that nature holds the power and must be "petitioned and pacified, not forcibly conquered."<sup>5</sup> And while it is necessary for everyone to behave in a morally correct, properly reciprocal relationship with each other and all beings of nature, it is the responsibility of their shamans to work with these beings and spirits to maintain proper order and harmony in the world. In times past, if ravens came into villages seeking handouts, the shaman would tell them to go back to their homes in the wild and live as they are supposed to. As mentioned earlier, the elders now notice unmistakable signs of natural disorder, all the more problematic because of the present day lack of practicing shamans. Today weather is still "sometimes manipulated by people who have learned its few points of vulnerability."<sup>6</sup>

It is apparent to us that Middle World weather spirits are forces with a power that is neutral, rather than compassionate like that of our spirit helpers in the Upperworld and Lowerworld. As such, we need to relate to them in weather-work from a place of compassion and wisdom ourselves. To attempt to influence these forces when we have not yet learned the wisdom to work for the good of all, can have disastrous consequences. Just consider the attempts our culture has made at controlling the force of nuclear power! Though we have the knowledge to harness the incredible power contained in the atom, we do not have an equal amount of wisdom. We have used this power to destroy, both intentionally and accidentally. Similarly, our first "scientific attempts" (in the mid- to late-1800s) to control weather

involved naive and dangerous methods such as burning forests, shooting cannons into the sky, and sending bombs up to create rain! Even if any of these ploys worked, no thought was given to the long term effects of the techniques themselves, let alone the long range effects of changing the weather. In the words of James Swan:

Weather modification is a dangerous business: A single thunderstorm can dump 125 million gallons of water. There is enough electrical energy in the average thunderstorm to meet the power needs of the United States for twenty minutes, the equivalent of a 120-kiloton nuclear bomb.<sup>7</sup>

In Sanskrit, the term *siddhi* refers to unusual and extraordinary powers. Indian sages have long taught that the highest use of these powers is not in manipulative manifestations, but in working harmoniously, in unity with the highest universal life purpose. They caution that wisdom must precede power.<sup>8</sup> It is the shaman's responsibility to consult with the spirits, not only to master specific techniques, but to learn how to work with these forces to bring about what is best for the most people, animals, plants, land, and ideally, the whole world. The Warao of South America, for example, require a high degree of maturity in their prospective weather shamans.<sup>9</sup> It is important to realize, however, that what is desirable for a particular region and community may be anathema to others. Some tribes in South America diligently work to avert rain while tribes elsewhere work to insure adequate snowfall for summer crop irrigation. Others, such as certain Colorado ski resorts, have recently requested and obtained weather-working services for their snowfall needs (which also happen to be good for the needs of the local ecosystem.)

There are significant stylistic differences in weather—working practices—as might be expected when differing world views and approaches to life are considered. Despite these differences, all of these cultures acknowledge that the forces of weather are spiritually alive and sentient. Some peoples use intimidation and threat to achieve their desired result. The Guajiro of South America, for example, shoot arrows and fire-arms into clouds to pierce them and force the release of rain. Other tribes in South America shoot or brandish arrows at unwanted storms to frighten them away.<sup>10</sup> Deliberate attempts to evoke the pity of weather spirits are also employed. Among the North American Koyukon, it is advised that to pinch a female dog until she yelps can work to avert a storm. The Ayrnara and Quechua may beat their children or tie up large numbers of black sheep in a city plaza and starve them in hopes that suffering will bring rain—the tears of the spirits of weather.<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, a philosopher of ancient Greece, noted that heavy rains often fell on major battle sites once the fighting was over.<sup>12</sup>

Such practices may sound unappealing, and it is tempting to judge them as dysfunctional and hurtful. However, we are looking at this picture from our culturally biased eyes, not from the eyes and experience of people whose lives are immediately threatened by too much or too little rain and storms. For them it is not a matter of "Please don't rain on my picnic." It can also be said that these South American peoples are more warlike than others, hence their seemingly adversarial approaches to weather-working. However, remember that we, too, bombed clouds.

On the other hand, we found more frequent evidence of harmonious weather-working methods. In general, these methods employ such approaches as song and chant, dance, prayer (directive and non-directive), and offerings such as tobacco. Often, such methods are utilized in ritual, whether simple or elaborate. In our culture many of us as children chanted (and maybe danced as we sang) the ditty, "Rain, rain go away! Come again another day!" At this other end of the spectrum, we have the example of the Hopi people of the American Southwest who are well known for their successful "rainmaking." They accomplish this through not only their beautiful and elaborate ceremonies, but because these ceremonies come from a people largely dedicated to living spiritually reciprocal and harmonious lives. As such, they

are able to continue to live and "dry farm" corn in a notably arid region as they have done for generations.

Perhaps closer to home is the story of young Taylor Newton, age nine, of Connecticut, who in September, 1995, performed a weather-working of his own. Distressed over the severe summer—long drought and consequent suffering of gardens, trees, animals, and people of his home town—he one evening donned his moccasins, painted his face and chest, took his mother's drum, and proceeded alone to the back yard where he danced and drummed in an effort to bring much needed rain. According to Taylor, "Once I was done, the wind started blowing and trees were rustling. I thought 'wow, this is neat.' I never got spooked." He said he danced for rain because he "wanted to help the people of the town."<sup>13</sup> It rained several times during the remainder of the week.

There is yet another "style" of weather-working, one that is apparently unintentional on our part and is closer to what has been called "grace." It appears to be a kind of sympathetic response, a reaction from the spirits of weather to our human activities, and as with any deliberate weather-workings, the principle of ambiguity walks hand-in-hand with the miracle. We have already referred to the phenomenon of heavy rainfall after major battles in ancient times. Today we notice this happens in other, more harmonious settings. This dynamic is observed by many in relation to visits by the compassionate monk Thich Nhat Hanh. According to an Omega Institute staff member:

On at least a couple of occasions, we had been in a long dry spell at Omega, and the day Thich Nhat Hanh arrived for one of his silent meditation retreats, it would rain. It would then continue raining for much of the retreat. Among staff members, the scheduling of his retreats became a form of weather forecasting—we knew we could count on rain during that period. The rains also lent a calming, hushed spirit to the retreats. By the way, the photo Omega most often uses to promote Thich Nhat Hanh's retreat shows him leading a walking meditation holding an umbrella!<sup>14</sup>

Another example is the Indian Holy Mother, Amritanandamayi Devi, otherwise known as Ammachi. Those who accompany her on her US tours speak of noticeably predictable occurrences of rain concurrent with Ammachi's retreats and purifying ceremonies, including accounts of Ammachi working intentionally for rain. In 1996, the Santa Fe, New Mexico region suffered a severe drought. Upon arrival for her tour retreat offering, Ammachi was asked to bring relief. Shortly thereafter, much rain fell, so much so that the tour workers asked her to temporarily stop it for practical reasons. Ammachi refused, explaining she had made a sankalpa, a divine resolve, and would not take it back or postpone it for matters of convenience. In years past, on nights of the Devi Bhava ceremonies, when Ammachi showers grace upon all, these celebrations would regularly be accompanied by thunderstorms. Eventually, as the crowds outgrew the indoor shelters, the storms generally ceased.<sup>15</sup>

There are numerous other examples of this sympathetic weather response. Many who practice Core Shamanism and who have worked in intensive healing circles can attest to examples of this from their own experience. What, exactly, is going on? We are uncertain, except that something is, and this something is real and profound.

What is the appropriate purpose of working with the spirits of weather? The highest calling of the shaman is to help maintain and restore balance and harmony, and thus, to relieve suffering in the world. Shamanic weather-working, as with shamanic healing, is not just interested in "curing" a symptom, be it a headache or a drought, but rather in bringing the whole system back into balance: to "heal" the Earth. To understand and work harmoniously with the spiritual forces of weather is a powerful way we can do this. The spirits of weather want us to work with them. They want us to take an active and conscious role

in the healthy functioning of our planet. If the spirits see that we are interested in learning from them, that we are dedicated to working for the good of all, perhaps they will take notice and gently teach us ways in which we can assure the continuance of the Earth as a healthy, alive, and wonderful world.

## NOTES

1. Houston
2. James Swan. p. 148
3. Carmichael. p 281
4. Nelson. pp. 30-31
5. Nelson. p. 241
6. Nelson. p. 40
7. Swan, p. 250
8. Swan, p.251
9. Wilbert, p. 93
10. Wilbert. p. 184
11. Wilbert, p.194
12. Swan, p. 250
13. From *Shore Line Times*, Vol. 124. Issue 3, September 20. 1995.
14. Conversation with Kevin Quirk, former Omega staff member, March 1999.
15. Conversation with Bente Van Cleave, staff member for Ammachi's US tours.

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