

Spiritual Help for the Burning West
By Nan Moss
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The original article, Fire Season 2000: Spiritual Help for the Burning West, was written by Nan Moss and the late David Corbin. It was revised and expanded by Nan Moss in September 2020.

While originally written in 1999 during the drought in the Western United States, which experienced a series of calamitous wildfires, with drought and fires sweeping many areas of the world, this article is especially relevant today. Then, as now, many shamanic practitioners are moved to ask the compassionate helping spirits for assistance in restoring balance and relieving suffering. We offer this personal story from one of our longtime faculty members, as an example of compassionate ethical partnership with the spirits in helping to restore balance and harmony in one particular situation.

—Narrye Caldwell, Editor

This is both an account of events as well as a story. It is a story of humans reaching out to the world of spirits for help for the Earth and beings of the Earth. This is a story of human and spirit compassion, of intense need and help ultimately received. It is a story that raises the question, “What really happened here? Did we experience a miracle?” So, in our wonderment, it is a story of ‘miraculous ambiguity,’ of events that offer us great teachings.

Prelude

One summer while living in coastal Maine, there was a severe drought. Neighbors’ wells were drying up, the stream back in the woods had turned putrid to the extent that I couldn’t even imagine any animal drinking from it. As the drought continued, down by the shoreline of the cove, and next to a boulder with petroglyphs from early peoples, even the special spring of pure drinking water had finally dried up.

How were the local animals getting enough water to drink anywhere? At least morning dew showed up from time to time.

I grew more concerned on a daily basis. Once in a while a promising cloud would come by, and even drop a little spurt of rain, but hardly enough to keep our gardens from withering.

Fortunately, we hosted a weekly drum-journey circle in our region, and figured that we had a good chance of helping to move this unwelcome drought on its way... I sent out a notice to everyone that our intention for the Tuesday night meeting would be to finally engage in some long-overdue ‘drought-busting’!

At 7:00 pm, nine people showed up – some from two hours away and others closer by. All of us were more than ready for this. What a relief to finally join together and actually do something about this potential disaster... We were ready to whole-heartedly jump in – with total commitment to the task, whatever it took.

Feeling this way, we were impatient to get after the work, and so were momentarily tempted to forego what we always did in the beginning portion of our meetings – which was to honor, “power up,” and finally to journey to our helping Spirits requesting their support for the work of the evening, and to also ask for any advice they may have at the outset.

Well, what we thought of as a prelude, turned out to be a powerful and memorable teaching – a complete surprise. Every single one of us came back with the same message: “Do Nothing. This drought is needed.” In their own way to each of us, we were assured that the animals, trees, plants – living beings of this realm – knew how to get by in a time of hardship, and to trust that this particular drought is necessary for overall balancing. It also helps us, as humans, to become more aware of the sacredness of clear, clean water and to waste less, if any. This is an opportunity to grow in our appreciation for the blessings of water from Earth and rain from Sky. Finally, some of us were told that this would end soon.

So that was it. We did not have an agreement from our helping spirits, nor permission from the realm to attempt to interfere. I will always be grateful for this lesson – even when I can still feel that drought-busting urge!

August 2000

The spring and summer of 2000 were extremely challenging for the land and inhabitants of the northern Rocky Mountains. An open winter had provided little snow pack for summer water needs and the region experienced a drought, severe enough to drive the forest and rangeland fire danger ratings well into high and extreme levels, even early in the season. Lack of moisture from snow, along with sparse spring rains, served up ample warning for the potential of calamitous forest and range fires, but at that point, little could be done to avert the hardships and dangers of drought.

On Wednesday, August 16, 2000, the governor of Montana declared the entire state a disaster area, and issued yet another evacuation order for the residents of the Bitterroot Valley. At this point, more than one million acres of forest and range land in the western U.S. had burned. As many as twenty-five of the largest fires were in Montana at the time, and had consumed at least 457,000 acres – 265,000 acres in the Bitterroot Valley alone. Similarly, more than 550,000 acres of Idaho wild lands had gone up in smoke.

I anxiously tracked this situation, as Montana used to be my home and loved ones still lived there. On August 27 I received an urgent message from Margi in Washington relaying a call for spiritual help from a friend of hers who worked for the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services. Margi and her friend, who had also read our article, “Shamanism and the Spirits of Weather,” had hopes of turning things around by rounding up spiritual help.

Her friend told us that the crisis, already extreme, was about to get much worse for many people and other inhabitants of the burning and nearly burning region. Upon hearing this heartfelt plea for help, I felt deeply motivated to go to work and add my efforts to those of others.

Our drumming circle met the next day and we journeyed to our helping spirits to receive their perspective on the nature of this crisis, and if indicated, to ask for help and work to restore harmony. Our entire group experienced dynamic journeys with strong synchronicities. Initially we all went to our helping spirits in the Upper or Lower worlds, and all of us were taken to the Middle world region for which we were working. We all learned that the fires were needed to restore balance in many ways, and that the fires were calling out to the weather spirits for the badly needed moisture to return.

The conditions that started the fires had already occurred, and now we needed the conditions for them to end. It was time for us to add our voices to those others, the voices of the suffering ones: the plants, animals (two and four legged), the injured and displaced ones. It was time to honor

the fires and ask the spirits of weather to take pity and bring the moisture back to the land in ways the land could best receive it.

So, we worked, each in our own way, in partnership with our helping spirits. Repeatedly, we were asked to work for balance to be restored and to understand that the fires were part of that, too. Nearly all of us were told that the rains and snow would come soon and that though the moisture was coming, to be sure to continue to petition for the land, plants, animals, and suffering ones.

Meanwhile, Margi had contacted her circle of shamanic practitioners a few days earlier and so other people were already working. On August 29 the CBS evening news reported a remarkable shift in the jet flow for the La Nina pattern. It was hoped that the northern states would experience a cooling, moist trend.

I sent out a blanket email to people who I thought might be willing to help. I relayed information given to me about the great 1910 fires of Montana, Idaho, and Washington, and how the present fires were being compared to those in terms of devastation. Apparently, those fires were quelled by unseasonably cold weather and early snows in late August.

There was speculation about whether this was not at least partially due to the likelihood that there were more Native American elders alive then who understood how to work with the spirits and forces of Nature, who knew when “enough was enough” and thus worked to help bring an end to the burning.

Knowing that we rarely have the advantage of the overall perspective that our compassionate helping spirits do, I suggested we ask simply for whatever conditions of weather would be appropriate to bring balance and more harmony to the land now. Because we felt it would be unwise to ask for specific kinds of weather, we decided to leave that up to the greater perspective and wisdom of the spirits.

For example, what if we asked the spirit of Wind to stop and it did? Perhaps then it would be unavailable to bring in the needed weather fronts. What if we asked for as much rain as possible, without regard to the vulnerability of newly exposed, burned ground?

Some people shared their journeys with me. Their teachings were profound in their meanings for us all in our contemporary world. The journeys underscored the need for our combined efforts in making our spiritual work more effective – and to remember to work with all of Nature to restore well-being to the Earth.

In his journey David was shown that:

“The weather spirits cannot just create conditions necessary for particular weather easily. There are many factors involved, but in order to rain, certain conditions must be present. The spirits need us to create a bridge between the worlds, so that their power can come through and do work. The more people (and plants and animals...) who ask for help – and who give help – the easier it is for the spirits to create the conditions required.”

A circle of about twenty people in Wisconsin conducted a powerful ceremony over the span of at least two days for the Montana-Idaho-Wyoming region. Another drumming circle in Vermont met on August 24, asking for the “highest healing good to come to Montana regarding the weather” and petitioned for the fires to end.

In other journeys the animal spirits showed up with generosity and sobering messages. Salmon spirit helped Margi to experience and understand something of the taste of waters tainted with oil and what it feels like to be gasping for air in mud-choked creeks and rivers. Margi writes: “I am abashed before the generosity of spirits who have so much right to be angry, and still show such mercy to us.”

Kate of Colorado shared a journey where Mountain Lion, Badger, and Bear appeared, showing her how they have suffered from the heat of the fires and the loss of home, habitat, and young. Yet they suffer far more grievously from human greed and ignorance of our relatedness.

On a lighter note, Nancy from the Bitterroot Valley of Montana, one of the hardest hit places where many lost their homes, writes:

“I am glad you and your friends helped ask the spirits to stop the fire. Everybody here was doing the same thing. Jim and I made a vow to dance, naked, in the first promising rain – we did and the Gods laughed so hard they cried and the rain continued.” (See “Afterword 2020”)

The weather did shift – to many of us, miraculously so. With so many praying and working spiritually no one could point and say that this or that person or group carried the day. All we know is that many were moved in their hearts to take time and effort to reach out to compassionate spirits for the desperately needed help, healing, and restoration of balance.

Not to be forgotten were the hundreds of people who risked their lives to deal with the fires in concrete, ordinary-reality ways. We owe them much gratitude.

The rain and cool temperatures and snows did come. On August 31, Margi’s friend from the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services emailed:

“I am in tears, I am so grateful for your powerful, life-saving work. Words cannot communicate it, but maybe circumstances can begin to... When I requested help last week, the brightest minds in the business were predicting a 60% chance of a catastrophic event of unprecedented proportions where we could have lost up to four to five million acres in a matter of days. (We’ve lost under a million thus far the entire year.) Predictions from a variety of experts were that it was a distinct possibility that wind storms with no rain would create firestorms unlike anything we had ever seen and that more than one community would be overrun at the same time.

“I was busy planning for the possibility of triage on a community level basis. Today at ground zero in Ravalli County it’s not only raining, but it’s raining the kind of gentle, continuous rain that will actually put the fires out. We are not completely out of danger yet – the experts say it will take two significant rain events over the next couple of weeks to end this ferocious fire season, so please keep up your work. In yesterday morning’s briefing, our meteorologist took extra time to discuss the significant weather shift that he termed no less than miraculous that brought a weather system from the tropics – warm weather loaded with moisture. Thank you to you and all the spirits that are helping, healing, empowering and protecting us. We bless you.”

Over the next weeks many of us kept up our work with our helping spirits and the spirits of weather and fire. We gladly watched as the rains and first snows arrived and shortly after, firefighters left in droves. The moisture continued to bless the land – so much so that ski resorts enjoyed their earliest opening dates of the season.

The last email communication from Margi’s friend stated:

“The level of assistance we received boggles my mind. The two sets of steady, gentle, widespread rain were precisely what was needed. It’s humbling to be a small part of something so powerful.”

We really are all in this together. Along with inspired teachings and blessings comes the challenge of the sacred mystery – that which cannot be constrained by the limitations of our rational minds – thus nourishing and humbling our sense of self.

Afterword 2020

Nancy and Jim’s lively example of answering the call for help as local residents of the burning Bitterroot Valley in Montana, may sound as if they are trying to tell the helping spirits how to handle this. The point I wish to make is that as practitioners of Core Shamanism we work with our helping spirits, and do not serve up specific orders for an outcome that we deem best. We learn, through direct experience, that the compassionate helping spirits have a greater perspective and are not shackled by our more limited world view of life and ordinary reality. Therefore, we can open to other possibilities.

This is not to suggest that we cannot have our druthers – we sorrow for burning forests, wounded and dying animals, people losing their homes and lives. Of course, we have our preferences and may even argue and protest, but in the end we yield to the guidance of our compassionate helping spirits. This kind of trust takes time and direct experiences to establish. ❖

“We go to the hill, the forests, the high places to know, to re-member the all relational world of spirit – whose currency of meaning is often negotiated in weather; wind and storm in reciprocity as a gift translated only in the language of love, of gratitude, even of awe-struck transcendence. Jung called synchronicity ‘an acausal connecting principle,’ which is what sometimes happens, without cause or intent, on vision quest, in ceremony, in community, ‘when you get your love out,’ to the spirits of weather and nature, as Lester Obago, medicine man put it. The point is that it is an acausal connecting principle at work, which points towards an acknowledgement of connections all-relational, experiential knowing.

“At times, in that primal connection with the spirits of weather, it feels like compassion arising as a mirror. The weather begins to reflect our own internal transformation, mirrored and mirroring; bridging these worlds. The ancient recognition of ‘I am That’ (Tat Tvam Asi in Sanskrit) is at play. In my own experience, it is not about linear cause and effect, or control over that which could be viewed as sorcery, but rather as ‘circular intention.’ A circling intention as the hawk’s circling spiral among the high clouds, ‘getting their love out’ in ever widening circles in an ancient dance with weather.”

—Steve Seymour, FSS Three Year & Two Week graduate

On the Hill Along the Missouri River

Against the high vault of sky
The Thunderers come rumbling
When all is burnt and dry
There is no sweeter sound;
splitting the veil of sky
Wake up, it is time
to all the elements reply
We come dancing, we come dancing.

High horsemen strike fire
the healing stones will awaken
Chaos knows your heart's desire
They come blessing, they come blessing.

All the elements will live again
They will guarantee you nothing
All the elements will live again
They come blessing, they come blessing.

Immersed in the plenipotential of a
participatory universe, there are no spectators.

—Steve Seymour

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