# SHAMANIC TRAINING IN DIGITAL SPACE

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In late January 2020, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies held its annual Gathering of the Council, bringing together a dedicated group of advanced shamanic practitioners and FSS supporters. As we have done for several years, the four-hour meeting was held by live video conference and consisted of presentations from our shamanic community as well as experiential opportunities. As part of the program, Roland Urban, Director of FSSE, was invited to speak about the subject of the June conference, Shamanism and Digitalization,[1] and update us on what had been discovered so far.

This turned out to be a fortuitous event for the FSS and FSSE, as only a few weeks later the coronavirus pandemic resulted in a shutdown of our in-person workshops and training programs. On both sides of the Atlantic, we plunged into an intensive effort to create online offerings to support the shamanic community and to provide opportunities for shamanic training online. *(See page 9.)* Our previous experience in North America, sponsoring webinars with FSS faculty and interactive video presentations by the late Michael Harner, our founder and originator of Core Shamanism, provided invaluable lessons for this effort.

Shamanism is a spiritual practice, which celebrates the spirit or soul in everything – in nature, plants, animals, and the earth itself, as well humans. As Siberian shamans know: "Everything that is, is alive!"[2] For some, technology is experienced as artificial and antithetical to nature, or at the least uncongenial. And,
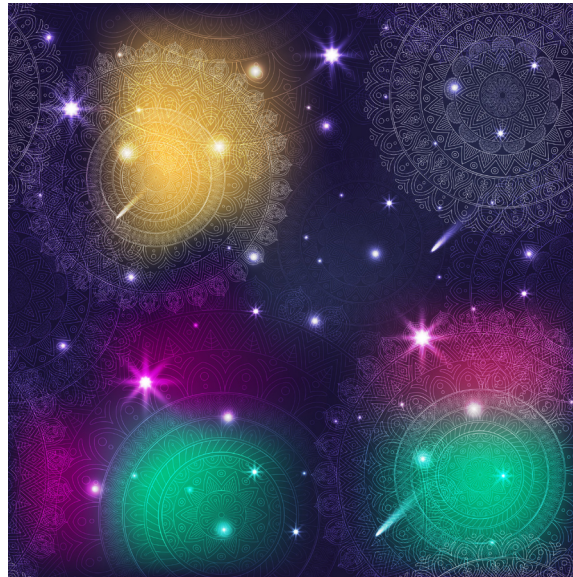
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undoubtedly, the uses made of technology have not been entirely benign and have sometimes been actively harmful to the natural world.

As with most complex things, this is not an either-or dichotomy, but a continuum. Online video conferencing facilitates connections with people all over the planet in the same digital space. Many forward-thinkers reflect that this makes possible nearly instantaneous

awareness and awakening, and mobilization for change, as demonstrated by the recent worldwide protests in support of racial justice and equality ignited by the killing of George Floyd in the USA, and other related tragedies. Peter Russell, author and speaker, has postulated that the complex web of digital information and connection is linking the minds of humanity together into a single "global brain," with astonishing potential for healing and transforming our Earth.[3]

THE SHAMANIC STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In Michael Harner's culminating work, Cave and Cosmos,[4] he speaks of the shaman's ability to travel outside of space and time to other realities and connect with powerful and compassionate spiritual beings for knowledge and assistance for our world. The shaman is often described as "one who sees" or "one who knows." For shamans, the sustained regular beat of the drum at 3 – 7 beats per second is the means of transport to other realities – the method to alter consciousness – to enter these alternate realms. We refer to this as the "shamanic state of consciousness."

In Core Shamanism we use the terms "ordinary" and "non-ordinary" reality to differentiate these realms, these states of being. Ordinary

reality is our physical day-to-day reality, where things can be measured and catalogued. It is a consensual reality, where there can be significant agreement about the size and weight of an object, for example. Non-ordinary reality is a spiritual, non-physical and non-consensual reality, where each individual comes to their own knowing from their personal experience. Shamanism is an independent spiritual practice without dogmas; it is a method for gaining knowledge, not a system of beliefs.

Shamanic practice, and particularly the shamanic journey, is uniquely suited to the digital space. Like the shamanic journeyer, the digital voyager enters into another reality with its own unique operating parameters and principles, which must be mastered for success. Shamanism is an experiential discipline; one comes to certainty and knowledge through personal experience. While one can read about others' shamanic journeys, it is only when one actually engages with the non-ordinary realms of the compassionate spirits that the power,

wisdom, and beauty that exists there is truly understood.

SHAMANIC TRAINING IN PERSON AND DIGITALLY

Humans are ordinary reality (physical) and non-ordinary reality (non-corporeal, spiritual) beings, which is one reason why the digital realm, which also has both these aspects, can be effectively used for shamanic training. In the past few months since the pandemic arrived, we have received feedback from many students about the pros and cons of learning the shamanic journey online. Most of the difficulties have to do with learning how to use the video conferencing program and technical issues. The actual experience in the online meetings practicing the methods was extremely positive. (See box below for some student comments about the online workshop *The Shamanic Journey: Pathway to Knowledge & Power*.[5])

What we are learning is that many of the issues relevant to in-person meetings apply to digital meetings. For example, for successful in-person meetings you need a facility,

a physical location where you can gather. The host must consider location, privacy, seating, lighting, whether an audio system is needed, and so forth. For an online meeting, you could think of your computer connected to the internet as your physical location; you connect to other meeting participants through the video meeting software interface at a specific meeting location in digital space. The instructor needs to prepare the online meeting space in advance by: ensuring a good internet connection; knowing how to use the video conferencing software as well as being aware of its limitations; checking audio and camera settings and placement; and ensuring a professional appearance to the background space.

Just as when teaching in person, being familiar with effective teaching methods is important. There are special considerations when communicating through digital media, which can greatly enhance participants' experience. Much information is available on this topic from various sources, which will not be addressed here. However,

"Magic! It really is amazing to do this work and get results from journeys that are helpful and powerful. We seemed to be able to work with different people in pairs or threes and got to feel the essence of the people in circle."

"I love that this course was able to reach more people. Where I am from, Newfoundland, it is not always an option to fly there and do any courses. I would love to see more of them available online."

"I found the workshop very inspirational. I took a two-day workshop several years back but circumstances made it difficult for me to continue or to practice what I had learned. This was a wonderful opportunity to revisit what I had learned and fill in a few blanks."

"Content is ideal for a beginner; with basic skills and practice, a new student learns just enough to practice after attending workshop. With Zoom, I felt as connected as if in-person; as if we were in the same room."

"Exhilarating in this day and age that something so liberating could be made so accessible. Afterwards, I was so inspired and encouraged I journeyed for a few more hours and was uplifted by the results. This workshop was a life changer; so much more than imagined was given to me."

for students of shamanism, one element essential to an effective online learning experience is worth a deeper look: fostering a feeling of personal connection between the group and the teacher and among the participants.

One of the first things that FSS faculty members do in a workshop is to form the circle, connecting the group participants with each other and setting this as safe and sacred space. This involves brief introductions by the participants and calling in the compassionate helping spirits to be present and support us as we learn together. In person, we also join hands around the circle, feel our connection physically and acknowledge our intention to work in unity and harmony throughout the workshop.

When working online, we are limited to two of the five physical senses, seeing and hearing, with taste, smell, and touch absent. Touch seems particularly important in forming connections, so we have been experimenting with ways to activate the sense of touch during our meetings. We have discovered, for example, a very effective way of virtually holding hands and experiencing ourselves as a "physical" circle, with participants reporting the physical sensation of touch.

In some ways, the digital world is the perfect medium for shamanism. Through the shamanic journey, the shaman is already familiar with the "soul flight," the ability to fly to other worlds, traveling outside of the body beyond space and time. I think of this as another human "sense," or ability, though a non-corporeal one. In the shamanic journey, the shaman enters into these realms through a "point of departure," the non-ordinary aspect of a physical location known to us

in ordinary reality;[6] in digital space, the doorway is a specific internet-computer-software locus.

There are many practical benefits of digital formats for teaching shamanism—being able to continue to teach in a global pandemic, for one. We do not know how things will change for our world in the coming months, but non-local travel is likely to continue to be affected, for public health reasons, but also as part of sound environmental policy. While virtual meetings are not a substitute for in-person gatherings, they can be an effective enhancement to them, making possible frequent sessions to reconnect and deepen in the practices.

The use of digital technologies offers the potential to reach a broad audience, including those who are unable to travel for the training and those who wish to make an initial exploration to see if shamanic practice is the appropriate path for them.

The Foundation for Shamanic Studies is "dedicated to the preservation, study, and teaching of shamanic knowledge for the welfare of the planet and its inhabitants." What we know, and what many tens of thousands of shamanic practitioners around the world have experienced, is that there are realms of wise and compassionate spirits awaiting us—spirits who wish only to alleviate pain and suffering in our world and help heal and transform

our Earth. The digital space offers us another practical tool for learning how to connect with them—to bring their knowledge and power here to our daily lives where it is profoundly needed. ✦

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NOTES

1. The Shamanism and Digitalization Conference, sponsored by FSSE, was held online June 26, 2020. *See pages 3-5 of this journal.* This article was excerpted from the book compiled after the conference: Urban, Roland, (ed.) (2020): *Shamanism and Digitalisation.* Wartberg ob der Aist: FSSE. For conference details, the book is highly recommended: https://issuu.com/fsse/docs/tagungsbuch_2020_en

2. Harner, Michael. *The Way of the Shaman.* 3rd ed, Preface xviii. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

3. Russell, Peter. T*he Global Brain: The Awakening Earth in a New Century.* 3rd ed. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2008.

4. Harner, Michael. *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality.* Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2013.

5. *The Shamanic Journey: Pathway to Knowledge & Power.* Online training also offered by FSS Europe, *The Shamanic Journey to Power and Knowledge.*

6. Harner, Michael. *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another Reality.* Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2013. See pp. 70-71.