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THE SHAMAN'S INITIATION

In the course of studying shamanic initiation and working with my own psychophysical experiences and those of others since the sixties, I discovered strong similarities between shamanic initiation in tribal cultures and a certain kind of depth psychological experience I have personally known or facilitated and witnessed for others. I, myself, turned to shamanism, dedicated my time to the study and practice of it, to work with the Shadow content evoked in the course of my own LSD psychotherapy. These psychological and physical experiences were so vivid and difficult for me that I needed to see what was going on with my mind/body through a vantage point other than that of the repressive perspective held by contemporary Western psychology. This work with shamans and medicine people was personally motivated by the need to heal myself of the suffering that inevitably arises when one enters the darkness of the Underworld of the psyche. It also returned me to the body of nature, the body of the wilderness as healer, when I went in search of teachers and doctors in remote regions of this Earth.

I knew from my earlier anthropological work in the field and in the library that the journey of chaos that the shaman takes often leads to unusual states of psychological, physical, and spiritual strength. Those who have gone through this initiatory crisis are often more gifted, heartier, more full of humor, and wiser than most individuals in his or her culture. It is clear that the rigors of the initiatory journey, combined with the challenge of the shaman's work, usually require more than a little strength of mind and body. These experiences of suffering, which are usually felt as defeat, a failure of strength, I discovered are the basis of personal power.

Although the shaman has been called a wounded healer, in a deeper sense, it has been clear to me from the beginning that he or she is a healed healer, one who has gained personal knowledge of disease through the direct experience of suffering. I am only too aware that not all who make the journey reap the rewards of the sacrifices demanded of them. In spite of the

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dangers of the journey, my sense is that the peculiar strength of those who have been through these kinds of threshold experiences is ultimately grounded in the wilderness. Without the external wilderness, the internal wilderness cannot resolve itself back to its primordial state of innocence and vastness. I remember once I quipped, "Society is the sickness. Nature is the cure." Although this statement is a bit overblown, I feel deep in my bones and know from personal experiences that wilderness is one of the medicines that cures the psychosocial ills that afflict us. It seems ironic at best that we are destroying the medicine with the very force that ails us.

In the course of this journey of nearly thirty years, I inevitably discovered that my personal suffering was connected to the suffering of all beings, all species, and my life fumed toward helping to educate others in the context of the wilderness and tribal peoples. These worlds are now disappearing, and I am convinced that their loss has a profound effect on our individual and collective physical, social, and psychological wellbeing. We not only are less without these worlds but these worlds heal us as well. I believe that the shaman's initiatory journey is our individual healing journey. It is also a metaphor for the journey of history that we are now making and experiencing through the matrix of the environment. I am also deeply convinced that we need now more than ever to seek initiation, to go into the depths of our psyche in order to make familiar the strong forces that destroy us and others.

Shamanism is the most archaic form of healing practice of which we are aware. This proto-healer's signs are to be found on the walls of the great Paleolithic caves of France. Masked dancing figures and figures in a trance point to the persistence of this religion of early peoples. Its forms are found even today in those areas where the paleolithic continuity still exists, including Siberia, Mongolia, Japan, and in parts of Southeast Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Although shamanism is not a unified tradition, and is in a way an invention of contemporary anthropology, the components of he shamanic complex have some very important features in common, including the well-known initiatic crisis and the shaman as social and environmental healer.

The most usual pattern of shamanic initiation in older cultures involves the experience of a catastrophic encounter with psychological and physical suffering. Election can also occur through heredity, signs at birth, a proclivity or gift that is recognized in childhood, through a realization arising in the course of a ceremonial event, or in the experience of a quest for vision. Yet I believe that the most frequent and most genuine manner of initiation is that of crisis. The encounter with illness, suffering, and death not only opens the world of the gods to the shaman, it also provides an experiential ground for the work of social, personal, and environmental healing that the shaman will later be doing.

The initiatic crisis of the shaman in many ways resembles what is called schizophrenia. It also has features that are comparable to the journey of mythic heroes, to death-rebirth experiences in rites of passage, to the posthumous journey of the soul, to clinical death experiences and LSD experiences, and to what one can encounter in meditation practice.

The study of shamanism from the psychological perspective has helped me to understand the nature of various types of so-called mental disorders in Western culture. Beyond psychopathology, I have seen the great value of visionary experiences in human development and in society's relationship to nature. Shamanism is an important door to understanding social values as they are reflected in art and myth and how these values shape a people's way of being with the Earth.

It is so important for us to understand what happens in the journey of crisis because we are undergoing such a journey on a global and environmental level at this time. However, for initiation to work, it must be entered personally, not generally. It is an experience that does not function at a distance but under the skin of each individual who is passing through it. For the beneficial consequences of initiation to arise, I know that the road has to be directly experienced and known. Its language is learned through the body.

Exploring the psychophysical aspects of shamanism has been a very important process for me, both experientially and cognitively. I have seen how archaic and durable are the patterns that give shape to certain types of psychological structures in the unconscious. It is clear to me that many similar structures related to the experience of birth, death, and rebirth appear in cultures that are not related geographically or linguistically. These psychological structures are like the white bones that give our bodies shape. We can be short or tall, broad or thin, but we share a common signature, a common sign inside our body in terms of our skeletal structure. Although culture and history, geography and society seem to separate us, if we look deeply, we see that we share with each other birth, suffering, and death, and these events all have features in common--just as do the events of coupling or sleeping, eating and excreting. We may attribute different meanings to all these events; they may occur in varying contexts, but their basic structures, the bones beneath their social and cultural robes are a common color and share a similar shape.

In collecting and analyzing first-person narratives of shamans' initiatory experiences, I have delineated some broad stages of the archetypal journey: (1) an experience of separation or isolation from society and culture; (2) an encounter with extreme mental and physical suffering, including experiences of being eaten or dismembered by local wildlife, or being burned, cooked, or afflicted with disease; (3) an encounter with death; (4) an experience of nature-transmission with creature, ancestor, spirit, god, or element; (5) a return to life, sometimes by way of the celestial realm with the World Tree or bird flight being featured; and (6) a return to society as healer (Halifax 1982). Needless to say, the variations on this theme are numberless, but this simplified general shape can be seen as a map of a deeper territory in the unconscious that is textured by idiosyncratic psychological, cultural, environmental, and social content.

The Jungian psychiatrist, John Weir Perry, has outlined a similar structure in his description of the schizophrenic process as a "Renewal of the Self." Seen from the perspective of shamanism, this process can be described in the following way: (1) psychic, cosmic, and personal geography focus on a center; (2) death occurs in the process of dismemberment and

sacrifice--the person is tortured, chopped up, and his or her bones are rearranged (one can also be dead and talk with presences of the Spirit World); (3) there is a return to an earlier time, to paradise, or to the womb (the theme of regression can also be reflected in the individual manifesting the behavior of an infant); (4) there arises a cosmic conflict between forces of Good and Evil or other pairs of opposites; (5) there can be a feeling of being overwhelmed by the opposite (the threat of the opposite can also occur in terms of a positive identification with one's opposite); (6) the transformation of the individual results in a mystical apotheosis where the experiencer becomes identified with a cosmic, spiritual, elemental, or royal personage; (7) the person enters into a sacred marriage, a coming together of the pairs of opposites; (8) a new birth is part of rebirth fantasies and experiences; (9) a new age or the beginning of a new society is anticipated; (10) the balance of all elements results in the quadrated world, a four-fold structure of equilibrium and depth, perhaps represented by a medicine wheel or mandala as a sign of integration.

From the perspective of the experiences of shamans, initiation usually begins with a withdrawal from the social realm. I have seen that the withdrawal can take place as a result of a physical or psychological illness that can be symbolized as an abduction by a spirit or animal, by the experience of being lost in the wilderness, by an illness, or by ritual prescription. No matter the case, the social and psychological identity of the neophyte-shaman will be undergoing a dramatic change. This move away from the ordinary world of everyday events allows the initiate to move inward to a psychological and visionary territory or center that is rooted in the unconscious.

In the solitude, torments of every kind have been described that afflict the neophyte, who can feel attacked and devoured by wild beasts, torn apart or carried away to the Otherworld by spirits, reproached by the ancestors, threatened with death by the elements, or experience a depth of loneliness that verges on extinction. He or she can be pierced, flayed, dismembered, and boiled alive. The neophyte can also undergo an experience of starvation or enternment, or be afflicted by hideous diseases and other forms of torment. These experiences do not occur just on the level of fantasy or as if watching an interesting movie. Rather they have been described as happening on "the cellular level," in the bone marrow, in the gut.

I know only too well that the territory hidden from ordinary human beings is revealed to the man or woman in crisis. The paths to and from the realm of death are repeatedly traversed by people going through this experience. Owl, coyote, bear, serpent, seal, frog and lizard teach their ways. The spirits of the dead meet the shaman-neophyte in the "Between World." The wilderness and elements purify. The trials of the shaman make him or her vulnerable to the power of other beings. It is in this way that transmission takes place between human and creature, spirit, or element. In other words, the eyes of the shaman open when he or she has entered the soul's dark night.

For most shamanic cultures, the universe is believed to be composed of at least three levels: the Middle Realm is the world as we know it, the world of normal human events; The World

Below, the Underworld, can be associated with the dead and dangerous spirits; and the Over World, the Celestial Realm, is frequently characterized as the abode of the Sun, in some places the realm of transcendent consciousness.

The Underworld has been variously described by shaman-voyagers as a dangerous and terrifying place. The Realm of the Dead in many Arctic traditions resembles the world of the living, except that all that exists there is upside down or inside out. Death is a reversal of life. According to Samoyed tradition, for example, the trees grow downward, the sun sets in the east and rises in the west, and the rivers flow in opposite directions from the directions in reality. The world, life's phases, and daily human activity are all inverted, like reflections on the surface of a pond.

There are many rich descriptions of the Underworld that are useful to us in exploring what Carl Jung has called the Shadow, the content of the psyche that is often unexpressed. In primal cultures, Shadow content can be quite integrated into the fabric of culture through mythology and ceremony. And, of course, the shaman is the master of the unexpressed, a master of the darkness, of night, of the Underworld, of death and suffering. In our culture, the Shadow tends to be denied or repressed, and when it erupts, the effect on the individual, social, and environmental realms can be disastrous.

What follows are several descriptions of the Underworld territory that give us a sense of the initiatic journey on which a shaman might find himself or herself. In one description, the Siberian Altaic shaman enters the gloomiest of forests and traverses the highest of mountains. Everywhere are the bones of shamans and their mounts who have died while voyaging in these wild lands. At last, the shaman comes upon a hole in the Earth and begins the journey in the Underworld Realm.

In the Land of the Dead, spirits of disease haunt him, and the souls of transgressors reveal their terrifying fate with violent gestures. The shaman then confronts the Lord of the Underworld, who howls and bellows like a crazed bull. Through trickery and gifts, the shaman appeases this awesome presence. Finally, the shaman makes the return from the Underworld on the wings of a wild gander--in considerably more style than when he embarked on the journey.

The liminal phase of a shaman's initiatory journey can be described in other ways as well. For example, in another Siberian account, the shaman is born of a she-eagle, who is an emissary of the Sun. The iron color of the eagle's feathers is associated with the origin of fire because it is the striking of iron on stone that brings forth fire. Metallurgical "magic" implies mastery over the element of fire that the Siberian shaman will attain at the end of the initiation process. This candidate is born in a larch tree and raised by a one-eyed, one-handed, onelegged spirit shamaness, who thens feeds the neophyte to hungry spirits. The act of sacrifice and self-sacrifice prepares the shaman for the life of one who is specially chosen. According to this Siberian tradition, powerful shamans suffer dismemberment three times, less powerful shamans only once. Huge numbers of hungry spirits gather and hack the neophyte to tiny pieces and

share it among themselves. The shaman is permitted to work only once for each malady that has not been provided for by a piece of his flesh. If a spirit eats leg flesh, for example, the shaman will be able to cure ailment of the legs. If the spirits eat his belly, the shaman will have the ability to heal afflictions of the guts. If the spirit consumes the shaman's ear, he will have the facility for working with sicknesses of hearing. In some cases, the amount and location of flesh eaten suffices to cover all ailments.

In 1967, the psychologist Julian Silverman did an important analysis of schizophrenia and shamanism. Before Silverman's study, many anthropologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists referred to shamans as "halfhealed madmen." This view was beginning to change in the late sixties and early seventies, but even now conventional psychologists tend to look askance at shamanism and the fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Silverman's paper on the subject of shamanism and schizophrenia made an important contribution to the deeper understanding of the integrative function of altered states of consciousness and, most particularly, of those related to shamanism.

In Silverman's conclusions regarding the shaman and the schizophrenic in relation to the psychosocial and environmental function of the initiatory journey of the shaman, he characterized schizophrenia as a disorder where the individual withdraws from society and the outer world and becomes preoccupied by internal processes with a resulting disintegration of the personality. The symptoms, broadly described, include autism and unreal ideation, disturbed perception and thinking, emotional lability and volatility, and bizarre behavior. The stages of the schizophrenic process include a magnification of unresolved conflicts, intense feelings of failure, and excessive self-concern. This is followed by a narrowing of attention, a withdrawal from the external world, and an increasing absorption in internal experiences, accompanied by an increasing difficulty in differentiating between reality and fantasy. There are usually auditory and tactile hallucinations and distortions of the body image; individuals often suffer from an experience of dismemberment or dying, hearing voices, ritualistic behavior, fusion of higher and lower referential processes, and the individual can cognitively reorganize, including the reintegration of the personality and the assimilation of unconscious content into the sphere of consciousness.

I have seen that the integration of these experiences by people who are diagnosed as schizophrenic can be marginal to great. Silverman (ibid.) noted that those who have made it through the experience can manifest great mental acuity in which sensitivity, awareness, and creativity are definitely increased. He noted that when a crisis occurs in the life of a person from certain tribal cultures, it is socially as well as psychologically appropriate that the vocation of shamanism is considered as modus operandi for the resolution of the problem.

Although the attitude toward the individual who is suffering from a psychomental crisis differs radically between tribal cultures and us, we can see that the experience that afflicts the schizophrenic is very similar to the crisis through which the shaman passes. Schizophrenics and shamans both manifest a sense of isolation and estrangement from ordinary cultural and social

concerns. This situation of withdrawal from the ordinary world, Silverman noted, is accompanied by a fixation on ideas or objects imbued with supernatural significance. Both shamans and schizophrenics often become caught in a circle of ideas, omens, and objects. This obsessiveness gives rise to sleeplessness, where the boundary between the sleeping state and the waking state breaks down, plunging the individual into a twilight zone. In any case, if ritual is involved in the process of the initiation of the shaman, everything will be done to deepen the experience of dying and death.

Both schizophrenics and shaman-neophytes encounter death on the symbolic level, and frequently this encounter with death is preceded by an experience of dismemberment. Soul journeys and spirit voices also accompany this phase of the breakdown, as do ideas of a world catastrophe, conspiracy theories, and missions of great importance. Words, thoughts, and deeds can be seen to reside in external objects. Causal relationships can also be seen against a background of magic and animism. As I have said, Western society views such psychological experiences from a pathological perspective, whereas primal peoples often find them acceptable within the context of the shamanic world view.

Both schizophrenics in Western society and neophyte shamans can learn to use their altered perception to a good advantage in the process of cognitive reorganization. As Silverman points out, the Western schizophrenic has to work out the experience of mental suffering without the benefit of culturally sanctioned attitudes of an acceptance of alternative realities, whereas the shaman lives in a culture where such realities are a part of everyday life. The mythologist Joseph Campbell once commented in conversation with me and others that the schizophrenic is drowning in the same water in which the mystic is swimming with delight.

The experience of mental crisis has been described by a number of researchers in integrative and opportunistic terms, such as positive disintegration, creative disintegration, creative illness, spiritual emergency, and kundalini experience. The crisis of the schizophrenic and experience of shamanic initiation can be compared with anthropologist Anthony Wallace's (1966) "mazeway resynthesis," where the world is restructured by the individual in response to extreme crisis and anxiety. Gregory Bateson (1972) felt that an acute psychotic episode can be a means where an individual resolves a pathological situation and eventually returns to normal life with new and valuable insights. It is what anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) has called "transforming the obligatory into the desirable."

The psychiatrist Raymond Prince (1972) has written that the function of psychosis is to break down the ego and its maladaptive defenses and to integrate it as an adaptive ego through the experience of rebirth. Elsewhere, the mythologist Mircea Eliade (1964) has written that the shaman has succeeded in integrating into consciousness a considerable number of experiences that are reserved for dreams and madness. The shaman is the man that knows and remembers. He is not solely an ecstatic but also a contemplative.

I am sure that an incomplete or poorly integrated initiatory experience does not produce an

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effective shaman. Initiation in this situation can be viewed as the cure. Shamanic equilibrium or shamanic balance are terms that denote the strength and ability of the shaman to maintain equanimity in the midst of any conditions. In this way, the shaman can be healer and psychopomp, initiator, prophet, mythologist, and historian, guardian and guide, painter and sculptor, practitioner of enchantment, consummate botanist and pharmacist, sacred politician, mediator and counselor.

I believe that the interest in shamanism today represents not only a nostalgia for the past but also a need for us to understand the unrevealed nature of the human psyche as well as the lessons that the world of the wilderness has to teach us about who we really are internally and in terms of our extended self, our True Self. As nature in all parts of the world is being critically altered or destroyed and the peoples who live with the wild commons find their lives changing rapidly or ending altogether, our interest in shamanism represents an attempt to retrieve and include a part of our inner and outer lives that technology and civilization has consistently denied, eliminated, or destroyed since the advent of agriculture. In the contemporary world, where our rites of passage for young men mean going to war, in a world where social disorder and environmental disaster produce an angst that conduces to madness, the way of the shaman, the one who is a master of the threshold and ally of suffering, might well be of great value for all species of beings.

The shamanic world view brings us into the realization that we are deeply interconnected with the elements as well as with all beings, including plant and animal. The extinction of plants and creatures impoverishes Earth in ways that will profoundly affect the life of those that remain. The poisoning of Earth's waters, soil, and atmosphere, the loss of lakes and rivers, topsoil and forests, the extinguishing of many species, as well as the possible end of the paleolithic continuity of cultures and peoples with the concominant loss of old wisdom, is a tragedy that has direct consequences on the lives of those that remain. The respect and sense of relatedness that many primal cultures feel toward nature is one of the ways in which they express the knowledge that has awakened in visionary states. To understand the shaman's world at this time is to understand the Self.

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