

Shamanism – Part 3

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Shamanism In Contemporary Medicine

The influence of shamanism in New Age medicine is significant. As leading American shaman Michael Harner says, “The burgeoning field of holistic medicine shows a tremendous amount of experimentation involving the reinvention of many techniques long practiced in shamanism, such as visualization, altered states of consciousness, aspects of psychoanalysis, hypnotherapy, meditation.”¹

Shamanistic medicine per se may involve either a traditional approach, which is entirely occult and opposed to the scientific principles of modern health care, or it may involve a blending of the techniques of ancient shamanism with modern science and medicine. In the former, Rolling Thunder observes it is *always* true that “the healing comes from the spirit world.”² Concerning the latter, Harner, who has personally trained many orthodox physicians to accept shamanistic methods into their practice, comments:

In fact, in some hospitals ... visits by native healers are being increasingly encouraged as the Western medical staff becomes more aware of the benefits produced and there is no conflict between shamanic practice and modern medical treatment. Every North or South American Indian shaman I have ever asked about this matter has agreed there is no competition whatsoever. Jivaro shamans [into which Harner was initiated] are perfectly willing to have their patients go to see a missionary doctor, for example.... One day, and I hope it will be soon, a modern version of the shaman will work side-by-side with orthodox Western physicians. In fact, this is already starting to take place.³

One example of the incorporation of shamanistic techniques into modern medical health care can be found in O. Carl Simonton, Stephanie Matthews-Simonton, and James Creighton’s *Getting Well Again: A Step by Step Self Help Guide to Overcoming Cancer for Patients and Their Families*.⁴ This book not only incorporates several shamanistic techniques, it also encourages patients to contact their own “inner guide” or “power animal”.

Another illustration is the book by psychologist Dr. Alberto Villoldo and noted

parapsychologist Dr. Stanley Krippner, *Healing States: A Journey into the World of Spiritual Healing and Shamanism*.⁵ They propose the adoption of a shamanistic worldview, the acceptance of shamanistic practice, and the integration of shamanism and modern medicine.⁶ They point out that worldwide only 15 percent to 20 percent of all people are treated allopathically, and that for over a decade the World Health Organization has given its blessing to shamanistic and other pagan systems of medicine.⁷ Indeed, in the United States, the AMA has followed the trend.

In 1980 the American Medical Association revised its code of ethics and gave physicians permission to consult with, take referrals from, and make referrals to practitioners without orthodox medical training. This move opened the way for physicians to initiate some degree of cooperation with shamans, herbalists, spiritists, homeopaths, and other non-allopathic practitioners.⁸

Not surprisingly, then, shamanistic techniques are now increasingly used at modern medical health centers. Jeanne Achterberg is associate professor and director of research and rehabilitation science at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Dallas. Her text *Imagery in Healing: Shamanism and Modern Medicine* reveals how easy it is for modern medical practitioners to incorporate shamanistic techniques like altered states of consciousness and visualization into their health-care delivery. But however else she conceptualizes it, she concedes that the essence of shamanism is spiritism:

The focus of the shamanic journeying is on obtaining power or knowledge....

... The shaman is identified as one who has guardian spirits (also sometimes called power animals, helping spirits, tutelaries, totems, or fetishes), from whom power and knowledge is gained....

The shaman, then, is defined both by practices and intent: Shamanic practice involves the ability to move in and out of a special state of consciousness, a notion of a guardian spirit complex and has the purpose of helping others.⁹

Many Americans think shamanistic health practices are “superior” to conventional treatment because shamanism supposedly not only “cures” health problems but “properly” aligns them with the environment and universe. In other words, like ayurveda (Hindu medicine) and other pagan methods, shamanism at its heart is much more than merely a medical practice; it is a spiritual quest that seeks to answer fundamental questions about man’s place and purpose in the world. Because these are questions that gnaw deeply at the soul of modern man, shamanism is attractive.

Introducing shamanism into modern medicine is ironic because of its essentially antiscientific nature, such as its occultism and irrationalism. The following accounts are typical of the bizarre world of shamanistic “healing” procedures. (Readers may find some of the following quite offensive.) Shamans will do such

strange things as “placing spirits” in their mouth and sucking out the “poison” from the body, which is believed to symbolically represent the person’s illness. Or they may rub a patient’s body with guinea pigs or gerbils believing that a transfer of the illness takes place into the hapless creature. Here is an illustration from the personal experience of Michael Harner (who, remember, is a chairman at the New York Academy of Sciences):

If the patient has a harmful power intrusion [causing the illness], the shaman suddenly [occultly] sees one of the following: voracious or dangerous insects, fanged serpents, or other reptiles and fish with visible fangs or teeth. He immediately stops the [occult] journey [that he has been traveling in his mind or the spirit world] to deal with these intrusive powers.... [T]he sight of one of these creatures... involves a complete certainty by the shaman that it is eating away or destroying a portion of the patient’s body. At that moment, one may experience an incredible revulsion and an awareness that the insect or other creature is evil and the enemy of the shaman as well as of the patient.... The shaman must locate the harmful, intrusive powers within the patient. To this end he uses a divinatory technique. In the absence of taking [the drug] ayahuasca to [clairvoyantly] see into the patient, the shaman may use a technique that is something like employing a divining rod.... By passing his hand a few inches above the body slowly back and forth, an experienced shaman gets a definite sensation in his hand when it is over the place where the intrusive power lies. Another technique is to pass a feather over the patient to pick up any vibration.

When the shaman senses a particular location, he calls the two spirit helpers, either silently or in song, as he shakes his rattle steadily over the patient. When he clearly sees the helpers approaching in the darkness, with his eyes still closed he wills them into his mouth. There they will capture and absorb the power intrusion as he sucks it out of the patient. When he definitely sees the two in his mouth, he wills all his other spirit helpers to assist him in the sucking. Now he is ready to begin the work of abstraction. At the location in the patient’s body where he has sensed the harmful intrusion, the shaman sucks with all his might.... *The shaman has to be very careful in this process not to permit the voracious creature he saw from passing through his mouth and throat into his stomach....* The shaman repeatedly sucks and “dry-vomits” as many times as necessary. It is important not to swallow the sucked-out power, but to expel it after each sucking into the container on the floor or ground. This is done with powerful, sometimes involuntary, violent wretching [sic] that gives the shaman a real sense of cleansing, of being emptied of the emotionally disgusting power that he has extracted. As he removes the power intrusion from the patient, the shaman may feel engulfed in waves of extracted power that almost stun him and cause his body to tremble.... He keeps up such cycles of sucking until finally, in passing his hand back and

forth above the patient, he no longer feels any localized emanations of heat, energy, or vibration.... [T]hen he stops the sucking process.... Finally, when he is convinced that the patient is spiritually clean, he shakes his rattle around the patient's body in a circular fashion four times to provide a definition of the unity of the cleansed area, demarcating its boundaries for the spiritual world [e.g., so that no more evil spirits can enter].¹⁰

That such a spectacle can, to observers, be odd indeed is seen from the following recollection of a shaman-initiate present at a "healing" ceremony conducted by Peruvian shaman Don Edwardo Calderon:

The apparent suffering of my dear friend, whose guts were being sucked and puked out, was hard to reconcile with the serene sense of love and compassion seeming to envelop me. I had never participated in a ceremony where the medicine nauseated so many, yet there was an orderliness about it that defies description. At one point that night the only sounds I could hear were various members of the [shaman] circle clearing their throats, belching or vomiting—an oddly comforting euphony in the desert darkness.¹¹

One of the most famous North American Indian shamans who used the sucking method was the late Mormon leader Essie Parrish, who healed Indian and non-Indian patients. Because of a vision from her spirit guides that she should reveal her shaman methods to non-Indians in order to "benefit" them as well, she cooperated in making the Sucking Doctor film.¹² In the Kalahari !Kung Tribe, the shaman "pulls out the sickness with eerie, earth-shattering screams and howls that show the pain and difficulty of his healing." This involves the shaman in several hours of exquisite torment.¹³

This kind of irrational "healing" attempts to transfer the patient's illness in other ways as well. In the case of Don Calderon:

The act of diagnosis is not separated from the act of healing, as they are in Western allopathic medicine. They occur together at the same time.... For example, when the guinea pig used in diagnosing is rubbed over the areas of the body associated with the spiritual energy centers, it may manifest physical symptoms correlating to the problem of the person [denoting the manifestation or transference of illness].... [T]he guinea pig makes externally apparent what may be invisible to the person experiencing it.¹⁴

Finally, if oral spirits, fanged serpents, sucking out energies, vomiting diseases, and guinea pig transfers aren't strange enough, consider the process of "restoring" a power animal into a person who, for various reasons, has lost it and has become "sick" as a result. The shaman must descend into the "lower world" to capture the spirit and return with it clasped in his hands. As Harner states, he proceeds to "blow" the spirit back into the person's body through the chest and head. "Immediately place your cupped hands containing the guardian spirit on

your companion's breastbone, and blow with all your strength through your cupped hands to send it into the chest of your partner.... Forcefully blow again to send any residual power into the head."¹⁵ Now the shaman must assist the client to "dance his animal" in order to make the spirit feel welcome. This gives "it the reward of experiencing its movement in material form." The client is instructed to dance with his animal regularly so that it will remain content and stay within him.¹⁶

What practices such as these have to do with scientific medicine is not clear, to say the least! Neither is this explained by its shaman promoters or persons in the AMA who endorse a degree of cooperation with shamans. Unfortunately, however, many modern scientists and physicians who incorporate aspects of shamanism in their practices usually redefine its spiritistic realities in scientific or psychological terms, thereby masking the occult methods promoted. Dr. Achterberg naturalizes much of shamanism into supposedly universal laws that function in accordance with psychodynamics, such as visualization.¹⁷ The result is that many people are unaware that they are being treated with shamanic techniques.

Achterberg, who also codirects the Professional School of Biofeedback in Dallas, shows how the use of biofeedback can be related to shamanism: "Bio-feedback involves healing in the imaginary realms and fits well within the rubric of proverbial healing using the imagination. It contains aspects of shamanism: Rituals are conducted, the subject goes into an altered state of consciousness, takes an imaginary journey, and enters into a territory where healing information is available."¹⁸

Other more direct associations between shamanism and medicine can be seen in dream work, visualization, and meditation. For example, the therapeutic use of dream work illustrates one manner by which shamanistic methods are being incorporated into American culture. Dream work is a component of New Age medicine, much modern psychotherapy, and also important in shamanism, as standard texts and periodicals reveal. Numerous modern books on dream work, including some Christian books, are also ultimately based on shamanistic techniques and goals. The pagan Senoi dream methods are an example.¹⁹ These shamanistic connections are one reason so many modern texts on dream work utilize altered states of consciousness and lead to spirit contact. It is also significant that within the shamanistic tradition, visualization and the directed use of the imagination may lead to spirit contact and even possession. In other words, spontaneous spirit contact results from what appears to be an entirely neutral technique.²⁰

To summarize, hundreds if not thousands of health-care practitioners are experimenting with shamanistic techniques. Some are even using them on their patients without patients' knowledge. Shamanism is also being camouflaged by a "scientific" reclassification of its characteristics, with even the spirits being redefined into neutral psychological categories.²¹ That old adage "let the buyer beware" is quite relevant here.

Space does not permit detailing the full influence of shamanism in modern American life. For further information, popular books such as Dave Hunt's *America, The Sorcerer's New Apprentice: The Rise of New Age Shamanism* may be consulted.²² What concerns us more is the innocence with which thousands of people are being drawn into shamanism and the consequences this will bring them to personally.

In future articles we will examine the characteristics, nature, and dangers of this ancient but increasingly influential practice.

Notes

- ¹ Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 1986), p. 175.
- ² Jim Swan, "Rolling Thunder at Word," *Shaman's Drum*, Winter 1985, p. 43.
- ³ Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, pp. 130,176-177.
- ⁴ O Carl Simonton, Stephanie Matthews-Simonton, *Getting Well Again: A Step by Step Self Help Guide to Overcoming Cancer for Patients and Their Families* (Los Angeles, CA: J. P. Tarcher, 1978).
- ⁵ Alberto Villoldo and Stanley Krippner, *Healing States: A Journey into the World of Spiritual Healing and Shamanism* (New York: Fireside/Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1987).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- ⁹ Jeanne Achterberg, *Imagery in Healing: Shamanism and Modern Medicine* (Boston, MA: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1985), p. 13.
- ¹⁰ Virginia MacIvor, Sandra LaForest, *Vibrations: Healing Through Color, Homeopathy and Radionics* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1979), pp. 151-157.
- ¹¹ Debra Carroll, "Dancing on the Sword's Edge," *Shaman's Drum*, Fall 1985, p. 26.
- ¹² Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, p. 161.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- ¹⁴ Carroll, "Dancing on the Sword's Edge," p. 26.
- ¹⁵ Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, pp. 104, 108.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ¹⁷ cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 16,71-77,107,210-11.
- ¹⁸ Achterberg, *Imagery in Healing*, p. 100.
- ¹⁹ Strephon Kaplan-Williams, *Jungian-Senoi Dreamwork Manual* (Novato, CA: Journey Press, 1988).
- ²⁰ Achterberg, *Imagery in Healing*, p. 98.
- ²¹ (see I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1975), p. 192.
- ²² Dave Hunt, *America: The Sorcerer's New Apprentice* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1989).