

I presented this paper at the International Conference on Shamanism, Healing, and Transformation, 2011 sponsored by the Society for the Study of Shamanism. (<http://shamanismconference.org>).

The Intersection of the Ordinary and the Sacred in Shamanic Work

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Abstract

Dedication to the path of shamanic work requires an understanding of the relationship of the intersection of the ordinary and the sacred. As I embrace the shamanic aspect of my life more fully I notice increasingly that the tasks of daily life, and the skills I have learned through my life-long work as an educator, assist me to perceive accurately while working in trance. It is the intersection of the seemingly ordinary, everyday elements of daily life such as conversations, or, the preparation of food, or the very physicality of my five senses that allow me to focus my attention on the sounds, images, and language that I apprehend during trance, or, sacred time. It is the recognition of this intersection between the ordinary and the sacred that scaffolds my attention to the healing process for the person or animal with whom I am working.

Typically, shamans, by definition, engage in their work during ecstatic trance, or as it is sometimes called, “the journey,” or, that which links time as we know it with primordial time, or, a sacred time, a time in which the separation between this world and the animal world does not exist (Eliade, 1964). Subsequent to the conclusion of the journey, shamans return to their physical bodies and to the culture to which they belong. As I become more accepting of the shamanic aspect of my life I have come to take

special delight in what might be characterized as “everyday,” or, “ordinary,” and to the physical self through which I can enjoy the pleasures that my five senses provide. I have begun to notice that what seems to be “ordinary” possesses the potential to support my shamanic work because it assists me to remember to pay careful attention to what I perceive in an altered state. I have begun to reflect more deeply on the wonders I am afforded through the functioning of my senses.

The first time someone called me a shaman was during a therapy session when I was accruing hours of analysis in preparation to apply to the Jungian Institute for training as an analyst. During one session in particular I perceived light emanating in an unusual way at the intersection of the walls and ceiling of the room. When I asked the analyst, a psychiatrist, what he was doing he replied that he was not doing anything, that I was doing something, and, to my amazement, called me a “shaman.” Some years later, Tuvan shaman, Ai-Churek Oyun, now deceased, told me that in order to fully value what I could do as a shaman that I needed to “set aside my western mind” and come to her center in Kyzl in the Republic of Tuva, Siberia, to “do my work.” I went to Kyzl and began to accept the shamanic skills I had developed to a greater degree than ever before in large part due to the growing sense of efficacy I gained when people told me that something of value occurred for them as a result of the work I had done with them, and because others there addressed me as “shaman.”

Scholar, Stanley Krippner (2002) notes that “there are many types of shamans” and that “the training mentor may be an experienced shaman or a spirit entity.” In my case, my training mentors have been, and still are, spirit entities. My connections with the land of the dead, or to primordial places within the earth to which I journey are rooted in the ancient; however, the ways in which I understand my experiences and perceptions

during the journey are linked to my “self” as a human being living on the earth in the twenty-first century, and, also, to a deepening understanding of the ways in which the name, “shaman” has become incorporated with my perception of my identity in the same way as “teacher,” or, “clinical professor” has become incorporated into the life and work of the person I am.

When Ai-Churek told me to “set aside my western mind” I believe she meant that I should learn to acculturate myself to the shamanic realm and to regard what I have learned in it, and what I perceive during the journey, with the same degree of regard that I have learned to attribute to university degrees and teaching certificates and to the skills that constitute the work that is done authorized by those degrees and certificates. As time has passed I have come to think and to feel that the attention I pay to the experiencing of everyday life and work can support the attention I must pay to what transpires in the journey as well as the intention that guides the use of skills related to shamanic practice. For example, noticing the intricacy of the structure of the seed pods on the butterfly weed plant in my back yard (*Asclepias Red Butterfly*) reminds me to pay attention to the type and complexity of energy that I perceive when I am in trance, and to pay attention to it for specific purposes related to the needs of the being with whom I am working. In addition, the name of the plant, *Asclepias*, reminds me of the Greek god of healing, for which the *Asclepius* plant is named; it reminds me, too, of the Jungian analyst, now deceased, who first called me a shaman. His prompt to “pay attention” is key to my work during trance.

Another appreciation of the ordinary and its link to the need for precision while doing shamanic work is the precision of observation needed in the preparation of food. For example, precise measurement is important in baking. Precise timing is necessary in

most sorts of cooking so that foods are not undercooked or overcooked, or, burned. Precision in the use of herbs and spices is important so that flavors are balanced and tastes are palatable. Similarly, strict attention to what is occurring during shamanic work is essential in order to create the best outcome possible in light of whatever request is at hand. On one occasion, I gave too little attention to the lapse of time that had occurred while applying a particular sort and concentration of energy that I was using in order to relieve pain. The person with whom I was working told me that he was beginning to feel too hot; he began to worry that an increase in heat meant increased pain and he became fearful. In that moment I learned that it was critical that I redirect my attention to the level of energy I was using, instantly, so that his pain and anxiety could diminish immediately. The message: “Pay attention.”

Just as an awareness of the information I receive from my senses is so much part of daily life, experiencing my work as an educator can seem “ordinary” because it is a daily part of my work life. However, it is my intention to bring to my work as an educator some of the important principles of Humanistic Psychology articulated so eloquently by Carl Rogers (1980): (a) active listening, or, listening to the content of a conversation as accurately as possible, in light of the other person’s views, (b) unconditional positive regard, or respect for the people I teach, (c) congruence, or, being genuine about the person I am, and (d) empathy, or, approaching another with the will to understand as accurately as I can, the personal meaning the person brings to his or her feelings and experiences. These tenets of Humanistic Psychology are present in my shamanic work as well especially when I am learning about the reasons why someone is seeking assistance. In practice, active listening, congruence, positive regard, and empathy contribute to the creation of mutual trust. The work undertaken during the shamanic trance state is most

beneficial to any being with whom I am connected when a climate of trust exists because the journey itself can hold greater potential for clarity throughout its duration when trust is present.

Yet another connection between my physical self and the work accomplished during the journey began to occur as I was preparing for the trip to Tuva. I met with a movement therapist in order to strengthen my body for the long trip. As I moved and breathed deeply into the movement I began to exhale sound. The deeper the exhalation, the more sonorous the sound became. It seemed to me that some sort of synchronicity was at work because sound “arrived” as I was getting ready to go to Tuva, a place where overtone singing is legendary and sometimes a part of shamanic practice. Since that time, sound, or, what I call wordless song, often in the form of harmonics, enters my work when the need calls for it. The sound is never the same and follows no formula but is related to the need at hand or to the request of the person with whom I am working. The emergence of sound as I first experienced it, feels to me similar to that of a healer’s first encounter with song described by Halifax, (1979, p. 33): “...his first encounter with the spirit was heralded by a loss of consciousness. His body was quivering ‘While I remained in this state, I began to sing. A chant was coming out of me without my being able to do anything to stop it. Many things appeared to me presently: huge birds and animals...these were visible only to me, not to others in my house. Such visions happen when a man is about to become a shaman; they occur of their own accord. The songs force themselves out complete without any attempt to compose them.’”

While in an altered state song emerges from me when needed. I have, at times, experienced the song demanding to be sung, ready to burst forth, insisting that it become the voice of the process of healing, perhaps, the means of the process of healing.

Goldman, (1992) one of the seminal specialists in the area of sound and its healing properties writes, “The fact that these sounds [harmonics] may be used to affect our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual bodies makes them even more extraordinary.”

I am deeply grateful to the functioning of my physical body for supporting the sounds that can make a difference for others. I am also deeply appreciative of the feedback I receive about my shamanic work because the content of the exchanges help me to sustain my confidence in the value of the work. Recently, a woman who had requested some assistance with discomfort in one of her legs told me that the ants with whom I conferred during the shamanic journey helped her greatly. When I told her about the ants after our session she created a mental image of these insects. Doing so helped her to relieve the tension she was experiencing related to her physical unease, and, also, helped her to feel more focused, or, grounded as she went about the tasks of her daily life. She envisioned ants walking as they do, in orderly ways, and remembers her personal image of ants frequently in order to help her “put one foot in front of the other,” and to increase her feelings of resilience in difficult situations.

Although the ways in which my experience of the “ordinary” as I have characterized it can support my shamanic work I do perceive differently in the journey than I do through my senses. During the journey events seem to occur instantaneously, and what I “see” with respect to energy that I may employ has a quality of brilliance to it that is something like the brightness of a welder’s flame. In attempting to characterize the way in which I experience what occurs during the shamanic journey and that which constitutes my knowledge of, or, familiarity with everyday life, I particularly enjoy Abram’s (1996) depiction of the relationship between the work of the magician and tribal sorcerers: both know “the malleable texture of perception.” Though my work does not

involve sorcery or magic my experience of the pliability of the consistency of perception during the journey, as well as what I bring to my perception of my experience of the ordinary in work life and personal life, provide a wonderful counterpoint for one another. I am profoundly appreciative of the melodies of both.

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