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Core Shamanic and Christian Altered-State Practices for Healing and Guidance

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Core Shamanism draws on common or universal methods of shamanic practice and cosmology for western healing and divination applications, as researched and taught by the late Dr. Michael Harner in his cross-cultural anthropological work and initiations into shamanism. Christianity also has ancient spiritual practices that can be applied to healing and discernment needs. Both traditions can work directly with the spirit dimension of reality through altered states of consciousness induced without reliance on psychoactive agents. We will explore a selection of these practices and cautions around their use. An example of drumming for a brief shamanic journey will be offered.

I want to thank all of you—those of you meeting in person and those of you who are connecting through the video platform—in exploring with me shamanic practices as well as some Christian spiritual approaches to healing and divination. In our time together I'll note various best practices and elements of ethical concern as practitioners work with clients. My primary focus today will be on discussing core shamanism since, by its cross-cultural practices, it is the most broadly available form of work with spirit realities that is not necessarily tied to religious beliefs and structures.

Shamanism's Historical Context

When we consider altered-state practices I wish to start with shamanism. Anthropological evidence suggests that shamanic practices date back perhaps 30,000-70,000 years or more. Shamanism, as methods of directly accessing the spirit dimension of reality, pre-dates any of our venerable religions but is likely to have influenced their origins and some of their practices. It is likely a forerunner to the rise of priestly orders in organized forms of religion. Forms of shamanism have been carried to our present time through various Indigenous cultures, and their practitioners are known by different titles. The commonly used name, shaman, is derived from the Siberian Tungus word “saman” meaning “one who sees” [in the dark] or ‘one who knows.’”

A shaman enters non-ordinary reality at will and intentionally develops relationships with autonomous spirit allies for the purposes of bringing greater health and knowledge to this world.

Core shamanism is based on the cross-cultural research and initiatory experiences of the anthropologist, the late Michael Harner. Core shamanism teaches a cosmology and particular methods of working with helping spirits that are universal or commonly practiced across indigenous or shamanic cultures; or a particular practice is adapted from a culture where the Foundation has a formal relationship and the shamanic leaders

have given consent to the Foundation to teach it as part of its training. I will be referring to core shamanism when I discuss shamanic methods and orientation. This is my shamanic “lineage” as it were, from which I have received training and initiations largely through the teachers of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies that was established by Harner.

The Worlds of the Shaman

All shamanic practitioners recognize two realities: there is ordinary reality in which we have a social consensus agreement about what is occurring. We are meeting together and share a common understanding about what is going on. The shaman also knows that there is what Carlos Castaneda called “non-ordinary reality.” It is a reality where everything is alive and has a spirit and where these spirits might interact with us. It is a highly personalized, subjective reality but where other shamans might share some understandings. Many, but not all shamanic cultures recognize three worlds in the shamanic cosmology, each having multiple levels to them.

(Middle World): Where we are now is called the Middle World with its two realities—ordinary and non-ordinary. In the middle world the spirits found in non-ordinary reality have their own agendas and needs. Some can be worked with beneficially by shamans, others are to be avoided and can

be harmful. This middle world is a world of mixed motives, both beautiful and dangerous. It is in the middle world where suffering occurs and where healing is needed.

(Upper World and Lower World): There are two other worlds in non-ordinary reality known by shamans: and in core shamanism they are referred to as the Upper and Lower World. Both these worlds are benevolent and include powerful compassionate spirits that shamans seek out to build relationships and alliances with for their wisdom, guidance, and capacity to bring healing.

The lower world is largely populated by spirits of nature such as plants, elemental spirits, and animals; and the shaman journeys to this world to find alliances with powerful, compassionate animal spirits and learn from other nature spirits. The upper world is largely populated by divinities, gods and heroes known in myths and legends, and angelic beings. Saints of various religions, and wise teachers can be found in the upper world. But the lower world also holds wise, compassionate human and divine spirits that can serve as powerful teachers and guides. Ancestral spirits may be found in either the upper or lower world. This lower world of nature spirits is in stark contrast to the location of the popular Christian

notion of hell or purgatory—which is more akin to some regions in the middle world.

Shamanic Journeys

As already noted, the shamanic practitioner is experienced in entering non-ordinary reality and working in the spiritual dimension. Harner's initial experiences of shifting consciousness was with powerful psychotropic medicines used by Indigenous shamans for his initiations. He initially thought that was normative. However, in further research he learned that the vast majority of shamanic cultures do not rely on psychotropic medicines, but rather use what he called "somatic drivers" to induce a "shamanic state of consciousness." Use of drums, rattles, click sticks, or other percussive instruments at a monotonous, repetitive 4-6 beats per second helps the shaman shift consciousness to the non-ordinary realm. Some traditional shamans speak of "riding their drum" into the spirit worlds.

This is an important finding since those who use plant medicines for journeying are subject to the plant spirit's control, but those who use a sonic driver are free to consciously follow their intentions and interact with the spirits of non-ordinary reality with greater autonomy.

I want to mention that there are many other ways people can move into altered states of consciousness without use of psychoactive agents. Vision quests, practices of deep silence, imaginal meditation and prayer practices, vigils, singing bowls, chimes, extreme ascetical practices, ecstatic dance, chants, lucid dream practices, active imagination, spiritual pilgrimages, and intuitive journaling techniques are some of those ways of shifting to an altered state of consciousness. Christian mysticism provides countless examples of visionary encounters with saints and Christ occurring, and other religions have their own accounts of non-ordinary breakthrough encounters.

Shamanic Work in the Worlds of Non-Ordinary Reality

The shaman often brings helping spirits from the upper or lower world to provide powerful, compassionate assistance in the middle world. For it is in this middle world reality that we find suffering, brokenness, and the need for guidance in the decisions facing us in this reality.

Shamanic practitioners provide divinatory help to individuals and communities seeking guidance around a question by consulting directly with their helping spirits, asking the spirit to show them something related to the situation or give them advice in response to their query.

Practitioners also provide many forms of healing for clients using their helping spirits. Often the shaman partially merges, a form of voluntary possession, with a powerful animal spirit when doing the work of extracting harmful spirits that are lodged in the client's spirit body. Other modes of healing include soul retrieval where parts of the person's essence are brought back to the client after they have experienced soul loss from severe trauma or other conditions. A shaman might go to the lower world and bring back a power animal that wants to work with the client for their well-being and guidance, a practice called spirit retrieval. A deceased human can sometimes linger or get stuck in the middle world for various reasons and needs assistance from a shaman and their helping spirits to help them move on to the upper or lower world where they can flourish--this is a practice called "psychopomp" from the Greek meaning "conductor of souls".

Sometimes higher-level spirits, including deceased humans stuck in the middle world, are attracted to a vulnerable client and "compassionate depossession" is called for. I want to note that formal religions have their practices of exorcism and deliverance, but these methods tend to be solely concerned with the afflicted client and the afflicting spirit is treated contemptibly as an evil thing that must be forcibly removed. These religious

forms of spiritual deliverance are highly confrontational and draw on a model of spiritual warfare. In the shamanic practice of compassionate depossession both the afflicted client *and* the afflicting spirit or spirits are offered the opportunity for healing.

I have experienced the healing transformation of malevolent spirits into beings of great beauty and realignment with their Creator. Always they are given the opportunity to change and grow without causing suffering and are treated with compassion.

Competent Professional Spiritual Assistance

We do not have board certifications for shamanic practitioners or for spiritual directors. So how do we know that a person is competent to practice in these fields? Frankly, anyone can claim to be a spiritual guide or shaman. So, discerning a person's capability is an important professional ethics consideration. What should we look for as signs of a practitioner's competency?

Both these fields engage in the work of, and with, the Spirit or spirits and the spiritual dimension of life and have their ancient roots in formation and service to traditional communities. In shamanism the principal teachers are the helping spirits themselves, and in spiritual direction (also called spiritual companionship) the principal "director" is the Spirit. In traditional

shamanic cultures there were and are ways that their shamans will recognize and guide potential practitioners through apprenticeships and initiation processes. Spiritual direction in the Christian tradition had its roots in the fourth century Desert Abbas and Ammas of Palestine and Egypt and was carried on through the centuries largely through monastic settings. However, beginning in the late 1970s training programs for spiritual directors emerged and flourished, beginning with Catholic or ecumenical programs like Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. Later programs developed an interfaith approach reflecting the religious pluralism of our time. Likewise, in the early 1980s Michael Harner began training students in core shamanism, drawing on his cross-cultural studies and adapting particular methods to be sensible to Western oriented students. Others followed in his path. And there are people who receive training in culturally-located forms of shamanism.

So those who are considering the services of a shamanic practitioner, or a spiritual director, are wise to ask about the manner in which the practitioner was trained. Does the training program, or larger organization to which the practitioner is affiliated, have clear ethics guidelines and indicators of competency and accountability? Is the training respectful of other cultures and avoid mis-appropriating practices from those cultures?

Beware of the claim to be a “certified” spiritual director or shamanic practitioner. To my knowledge no training program will “certify” someone’s ability as a shaman or spiritual director. They will certify that someone has satisfactorily completed a course of instruction. Few practitioners of core shamanism will call themselves a shaman but rather defers to the people to which she or he practices to decide whether the work bears the good results expected of a shaman.

Consent

One of the key ethical concerns in shamanic practice is the importance of receiving explicit consent by the client for the shaman’s use of helping spirits. As a practitioner I am ethically bound to not send spirits to anyone unless the recipient gives their willing consent. In the case of children, I need to get the consent of the parent or other guardian, and I will also seek the consent of the child or at least the child’s higher spirit. If the person I intend to send helping spirits to is unconscious or deceased, I will ask consent from that person’s spirit. This ethical guideline is intended to safeguard against the practice of sorcery.

In sorcery a shaman or other practitioner in non-ordinary reality may send a harmful spirit in the form of a curse or steal a part of a person’s soul or otherwise use force against another.

Core shamanic practitioners also try to safeguard against unintended consequences in situations that affect larger systems such as weather, or war, or the socio-political arena. I am more comfortable asking my helping spirits to guide me about concrete actions I might take in a given situation rather than engage in shamanic actions that may affect others without their having given consent.

Healing and Discernment Practices in Christian Prayer and Spiritual Direction

I want to spend just a little time mentioning altered states in Christian and spiritual direction contexts and then return to questions of ethics and best practices.

One Christian healing prayer ritual involves the ancient tradition of laying on of hands and anointing with oil. It is often used as a sacramental healing rite for those sick and in hospital or those who come to a healing station during a church worship service. Here the minister prays for Christ's presence and healing for the recipient while placing hands on the recipient's head or shoulders and makes a sign of the cross with blessed oil on the recipient's forehead. The person seeking healing of their body, mind, or spirit simply opens themselves for the Spirit's or Christ's healing actions. The altered state is generally light and receptive to the Spirit's healing.

Prayer for the healing of memories is a guided or self-guided visualized prayer asking Christ or the Holy Spirit to go to a painful or traumatic memory. The pray-er envisions the memory but with the divine healer's presence now there, acting to bring about some new meaning, understanding, healing.

Spiritual directors/companions (of various religious and spiritual traditions) often offer their clients guided imagery meditations. Two of my favorite imaginal meditations I teach are how to make inner journeys to visit the Wise One when they are trying to make a wise decision or discern a next step in their life, or the Healer when they have a concern related to their physical, mental, or spiritual well-being.

Cautions about deep imaginal meditations and shamanic journeys

We need to exercise caution when leading or teaching people meditations or journeying to assure their safety. These methods take people into deep places of spiritual and psychological engagement, and it is best to be in the presence of, or have access to, a spiritual director, psychotherapist, or experienced shamanic practitioner--especially if they are in a time of strong emotional or mental vulnerability. It is rare but a person can get stuck in the imaginal state of non-ordinary reality and may need help from a competent guide to return to ordinary reality.

Some things that increase safety are:

-They could choose an alternative such as “thinking about” an imaginary scene rather than entering it, which provides a little more emotional distance and safety.

-They can be told before a meditation or journey that if they feel uncomfortable in the imaginal state, they are free to stop the meditation and return to their ordinary state of mind.

-We can teach our clients the basics of making their own shamanic journeys so they can work with their own helping spirits, thereby reducing the chance of fostering a dependency on us.

-They can pray in whatever way is right for them, invoking divine guidance and care before they move into the meditation or journey.

-We can ask a person who is making a shamanic journey or imaginal meditation to narrate their experience to us as they are going through the journey, and we can join them in their journey if they feel the need for assistance.

-When we use drumming or rattling for a shamanic journey, we often employ the “call back” which is a change in the drum rhythm that signals that it is time to thank the assisting spirits and come back to the starting place and shift to ordinary consciousness. I introduce this process

whenever I am working with newcomers to journeying so they don't get confused when the call back is signaled.

-There are core shamanism drumming circles that people can join. (I lead an online drumming circle twice a month.) A drumming circle helps to provide a supportive community of shamanic practitioners with a range of experience.

Other best practices for practitioners:

-Engage in routine peer or one-on-one consultation and supervision where we can bring difficult or unusual situations for reflection and support.

-Receive for ourselves ongoing spiritual direction/companionship or mentoring.

-Be spiritually grounded in a tradition and community.

-Recognize and be informed about cultural differences, and religious and spiritual images and language, and adapt our methods to their world.

-Work in cooperation with western medical and therapeutic practitioners.

-If a healing practice usually involves touching the client, it is well to ask if that is okay or we can adapt our method to their need.

-In difficult situations such as deossession a multidisciplinary team may be indicated. Also, other shamanic practitioners can be invited to add their helping spirits and assist in holding the participants in care and safety.

An Experiential Shamanic Journey

If shamanic journeying is new to you, when I begin the drumming try to hold in your mind a special place in nature that you will begin to see as you shift consciousness to non-ordinary reality. It may be a beloved place you hold in your memory or a new place you would love to visit. This place is sacred, consecrated ground for you and is a safe place for meeting your helping spirits. It is also a starting place for journeying into the upper and lower worlds. Pay attention to what is in this place and invite to it a spirit that wants to be helpful to you right now. Notice if the spirit of an animal or person comes to meet you. If so, simply greet that spirit and ask about its reason for visiting you. Then feel free to engage the spirit in whatever way seems appropriate to you. When the call-back is signaled, thank both the visiting spirit and your special meeting place and gently return to our shared ordinary reality.

[Debrief and Q & A]

I am happy to follow up on any questions or situations with you personally.

So look for me or feel free to contact me via a call or email.

Thank you!