



Shamanism and Dreams

Near the end of David Chernick's film, *Fire on the Mountain: A Gathering of Shamans*, the Dalai Lama says that we in the modern industrial world suffer from the mistaken concept that we can control nature, whereas shamans know that we are all connected, with each other and with the earth, and that it is our responsibility to care for the earth.

In dreams we experience the shamanic world. Everything is alive, everything is connected. Animals talk to us. Our ancestors come across vast distances to meet with us. We journey into other realms. We fly. It is as if the magical quality the waking world once had has been preserved for us in our dreams. Dreamers who share their dreams with others usually come to feel that at some deep level we are all connected.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to experience shamanic dreamwork many times, in workshops and dream conferences around the country. I have tried my hand at making masks and other ritual objects, gone on inner journeys to meet ancestors and allies, and re-entered my dreams through trance states induced by drumming. Some of these experiences have been among the most powerful I have had doing dreamwork.

Although one person I met was a Mexican-born woman from a long line of shamans, most of the workshop leaders were people like me—white,

middle-class, college educated—and took care to explain that though they had studied shamanic techniques, often with real shamans, they did not consider themselves shamans. Personally, I distrust people not born into shamanic culture who study these techniques and then present themselves as shamans.

We can study shamanic principles and beliefs, practice shamanic rituals and techniques, have profoundly meaningful experiences—but we were not raised believing with every bone in our bodies that the world is alive, that plants and animals and stones can talk to us, that the dead still know us, that we journey to other worlds in our dreams and visions. Nor are we immersed in a culture where everyone shares those beliefs.

The techniques work, as I can attest from personal experience. So one possibility is to experience and work with them, and bring what we have learned into our own dreamwork practices. “Shamanic-influenced” dreamworkers needn't be actual shamans.

Another possibility would be to undergo training or apprenticeship with a shaman, with the goal of becoming a shaman oneself. A well-known example (perhaps just fantasy) is Carlos Castaneda. But is it possible for a modern “rational” person to become a shaman? Or would there always be some degree of divided consciousness, of role playing? Can one be true to

one's own culture while also being true to the shamanic training? In other words, find a new way of being a shaman that would allow authenticity within one's own culture?

Another way to approach this question is to ask, “Is there a profession in our culture that performs a function analogous to that of the shaman in traditional cultures?” Part of the problem in looking at the question this way is that the traditional function of the shaman has been divided among many professions in our modern societies, including doctor, health practitioner, therapist, and priest. Consequently, there is no one profession that corresponds to the role of the shaman.

“Shamans can be described as practitioners who work on behalf of a community that has given them a privileged status to serve its psychological and spiritual needs. . . . These practitioners claim to deliberately modify their attentional states in an attempt to access information not ordinarily available to other members of the community. Shamans use this information in their attempts to ameliorate the psychological and spiritual problems faced by the group members who gave them shamanic status.” (Krippner)

Given this definition, a case could be made that dreamworkers are the shamans of our modern culture. While the other professions I listed work in different ways to “ameliorate the psychological and spiritual problems” of their clients (and are generally afforded

more “privileged status” than dreamworkers!), only dreamworkers “access information not ordinarily available by deliberately altering attentional states.” The altered state they access is the dream, and the information they retrieve may include not only psychological insight, but also psi experiences, health information, and communications from the dead—all part of the shaman's traditional realm. (As are dreams. Krippner points out that in addition to using such technologies as drumming or hallucinogens to alter consciousness, shamans also draw upon naturally occurring altered states such as dreams.)

Another parallel between dreamworkers and shamans is the experience of being called to the work. Many ASD members have reported Big Dreams that marked a turning point in their commitment to dreamwork (see, for example, Kathleen Sullivan's account in this issue).

One important difference between shamans and dreamworkers is that the shaman is granted special authority in acquiring and interpreting the information retrieved from altered states. In our culture, we grant similar authority to doctors, priests, etc. Dreamworkers are unique in that (to

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