

Dreamwork Is Not Shamanism

This past Labor Day weekend, I participated in the 28th International Conference on Shamanism, Healing and Transformation. Among the many fascinating experiences I had, I got to meet and spend time with several shamans from other cultures—one from Zimbabwe, and two, a man and a woman, from South Africa, trained in *sangoma* shamanism. Since I had given a presentation on dreams, and also led a morning dream group, one thing we talked about was dreams. Many people, including me (*DreamTime*, Summer 2004), have drawn parallels between dreamwork and shamanic practices, so here I want to explore some *differences* between Western dreamwork and shamanism.

In recent months, I had had two disturbing dreams that lingered in my mind. In one, my mother and father (both deceased in waking life) had visited me and wanted me to come with them to a special event that was about to take place. I started walking with them, but then something came up that led to my turning back. When I awoke, I had the distinct feeling that I'd made a narrow escape, that I was not meant to accompany them wherever it was they were going. In the other dream, I saw a friend who had recently died. She, too, wanted me to go with her, and again something intervened that kept me from going.

In my dream group, we had discussed possible symbolic and

psychological meanings of these two dreams, and also considered the possibility that the dreams were actual visitations from departed loved ones—an interpretation I wanted to believe but which led to the question of why, in both dreams, it felt like I'd narrowly escaped something bad. Surely these particular people would mean me no harm. Was it the pull of the underworld? That made some sense with regard to my recently-deceased friend, but both my parents have been gone for quite some time, and I've had many other dreams about them, none like this.

I was curious how the shamans would view these dreams, and spoke first with the *sangoma*. They both asked very specific questions about how these departed loved ones presented themselves to me. Did my father look like himself? Did my mother? Did they act the same way as they had in waking life, or in other visitations? Did my friend seem like herself, or was she different? I had to admit that they had seemed a bit "off." My father, unlike in other dreams I've had of him, looked like a corpse and was clearly dead. My mother was very vague and hard to focus on. My friend looked as she had in waking life, but her body was able to bend backwards in an anatomically impossible way. Both shamans grilled me on these questions, and both concluded the same thing: these had not been visitations from the ancestors, but instead had been visits from malicious spir-

its masquerading as loved ones. According to their beliefs, malicious spirits will sometimes assume familiar forms in order to trick us—but if we're alert, we can spot them, because they are unable to do a really convincing imitation; they will always get something wrong and that will tip us off to their masquerade. Both shamans thought I'd handled myself well, by not going off with these spirits.

The other African shaman came to the same conclusion. I had spoken with him before about his work, and he'd explained that he does not heal, it is the spirits working through him who do the healing. But I'd never heard him speak of evil spirits. Were there such things? "Oh yes," he said. "And the more good work you do, the more they will try to interfere and obstruct." He, too, thought I'd done well in turning back. What would have happened if I hadn't? I wondered. He said I might have lost some life force and become exhausted, perhaps even ill.

We could go into greater detail about these dreams and the different ways of approaching them—but for now, I want to look at some of the underlying beliefs of these shamans, which are so different from Western psychology.

First, *the spirit world is real*. As Michael Harner recently pointed out, this is the fundamental principle of all shamanic practice. If you don't accept the reality of the spirit world, you are not practicing shamanism. One upshot of this is that dreams are viewed



as encounters with or messages sent by the spirits.

Second, *not all spirits are good*. This is illustrated by the interpretations given to my disturbing dreams. One upshot is that in the shamanic world view, it is simply not true that all dreams come in the service of health and wholeness—a basic principle underlying the approach of many Western dreamworkers. In the shamanic view, some dreams may be sent by malicious spirits, be actual encounters with evil spirits, or even be attacks upon the dreamer.

In addition, although the shaman often asks the dreamer many questions about the dream, ultimately *it is the shaman who explains the meaning of the dream*. This directly conflicts with a basic premise of most Western dreamwork, that the dreamer is the final arbiter of the meaning and significance of the dream. In shamanic cultures, this is not true.

Though Western dreamworkers may adapt shamanic practices to their own work, unless they believe and base their work on these (and other) core principles, they may be practicing "shamanism-inspired" or "shaman-like" dreamwork, but they are not practicing shamanism.