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SHAMANIC HEALING

With its ancient connections to philosophy, religion, science and art, modern-day shamanism regards health as a balance of energies.

Shamanism is a worldwide tradition, long practised on all continents. It existed in the West until the Inquisition, when many practitioners were burnt as witches or heretics. A shaman believes our lives are intimately connected with plants, animals, and the spirit world: we are all connected in the web of life. It isn't surprising that at this time in our history, when we are more disconnected from nature than ever, there has been a huge wave of interest in the techniques long practised by shamans, including visualisation, hypnotherapy and meditation. In a sense, shamanism is being re-invented because it is needed.



To the average Western mind, the prospect of journeying through alternate realities might sound odd, even threatening. However, some forms of modern psychotherapy, such as transpersonal counselling, already use these ideas to access deeper states of healing. The traditional shamanic view is more pragmatic: those resources available to us in our waking state, such as reasoning and problem-solving, may simply not be enough to understand the cause of disease, or to achieve true healing, so other resources may be required.

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

“In the shamanic tradition, consciousness is believed to extend beyond the boundaries of each individual,” says Dr Ralph Locke, an initiated shaman and medicine person within Native American traditions who has worked with healers and shamans in many cultures.

As a professor in parapsychology at Duke University USA, Dr Locke researched states of consciousness and human potential. “While the body is the seat of our consciousness and identity in this world, it is simply one stream among many. It is the doorway to a broader view of our existence which encompasses many other streams, many other forms of life, and ways of being and doing,” he says.

The shaman cultivates different states of consciousness for exploring worlds that exist beyond his own ego, or anyone else’s. He journeys in order to enter the ‘landscape’ of another person, where he can examine their issues and illnesses in order to encourage healing.

The shamanic tradition relies very much on the idea of each individual creating their own ‘story’ as their life develops and, within this framework, their own personal myth and meaning. Particular symbols and images that resonate deeply for that person appear in their story that the shaman can see when he enters their landscape.

SHAMANISM VS CONVENTIONAL PSYCHIATRY

Prue Blackmore worked for over twenty years in conventional psychiatry. She strongly believes that shamanic healing can have profound and positive effects on psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety and certain personality conditions.

“Psychiatry has the ability to continually disempower a patient, making whatever symptoms are manifesting into a disease over which they have no control. From my perspective, a condition like depression is a gift, an opportunity for someone to change the way they’re living. I believe that what we conventionally call ‘symptoms’ are, in fact, opportunities for healing.

“The shamanic viewpoint is also all about empowerment. It aims for internal resolution, centeredness and balance. It is not always about ‘curing’. Using the example of depression again, shamanic healing allows the patient to complete the journey that they are having with the illness and bring it to resolution, as opposed to freezing it with medication and shutting the patient down. That which doesn’t kill you makes you strong!”.



RESTORING BALANCE

Prue Blackmore is a transpersonal counsellor and healer who has trained with Locke in the ways of the Shaman. She says, “When we are out of balance, our bodies – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual – begin to manifest symptoms of dis-ease. The shamanic view of healing is about restoring balance, allowing symptoms to subside and helping the individual access other resources available from other streams of consciousness.”

In the shamanic world, all humans have an animal totem which is their connection with the spirit of nature and their own particular medicine. When the shaman enters a client’s landscape or story, they meet their totem, and see their medicine. “However,” says Blackmore, “sometimes a totem may be trapped or wounded, even absent. As the client’s landscape unfolds, it tells me the story of what that person requires for healing. For example, if you were feeling isolated in your everyday waking state, your totem might appear cut off or lost in some way in your inner landscape. If I were entering your landscape in the form of my own totem, I would try to re-establish power or connection to your totem.”

During my session with Blackmore she saw my totem, the butterfly, stranded in a high rocky and threatening landscape. In the form of her totem, the tiger, she entered my landscape and assisted the butterfly on its journey towards safer surroundings. “The balance that is created in the client’s inner landscape then flows out into the physical world,” explains Blackmore. “Healing is facilitated on a core level – a soul level. It also enables the client to see where they are in their life’s journey. It give them perspective on the bigger picture.”

CASE STUDY: OVERCOMING GRIEF

Blackmore describes the experience of a recent client. “Jill* was sixty-eight years old. Both her husband and son had died and she was experiencing severe grief. She felt, essentially, that her life was over. She described herself as a robot and said that she no longer wanted to live, that she just wanted to be with her husband and her son.

“I did some introductory process work with Jill, then a shamanic healing journey where I met her totem, which was very wounded and damaged. I restored it to health during the journey. “A week later, at our next session, I saw a remarkable difference. Jill’s hair wasn’t pulled back in a tight bun, but falling softly around her face. She even had a spring in her step! She said to me, ‘I don’t know what has happened, but I feel alive again for the first time in seven years! What did you do?’ I told her that I didn’t do anything – I had just opened some doors that were already there.”

* Not her real name.

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