

Shamanism, anarchy and the end of the world

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After twenty years of teaching shamanic practices to small groups in several circles in Washington and California, I found the results to be mixed. In the groups in which I participated, there were many moving visionary experiences, but the flabby jargon of the human potential movement left important messages missed amid incessant psychobabble.

Contemporary shamanism, which grew out of the human potential movement of the Big Sur-based Esalen Institute, rapidly became subsumed into the New Age culture as the latest fad/religion. In two or three decades, aided by workshop leaders, it has become lost into the pop culture. While the permutations were endless, pervasive alienation remained a constant. As always, money, sex, and power ruled.

That shamanism has been compromised is not to say that altered states and working in trance cannot offer us a personal healing direction. I know from experience that lives can be changed through shamanic work. A deep trance, engendered in a variety of ways and entered with intention, can be transforming.

The value of shamanism as taught in the contemporary culture may be that it provides some level of psychotherapy, some level of energetic balance, some palliative response to stress along with feelings of community and slightly less alienation. In some cases, shamanic practice may provide actual healing of disease or easing of struggles with death.

My own struggle with shamanism centered on skepticism and the understanding that we can fool ourselves into believing almost anything. My training was in agriculture and science. I was not one to accept much on faith. I continued to bounce between shamanic visions as projections of the psyche and as visitations from a separate spiritual world.

By the time I stopped teaching a few years ago, I had come to understand that the distinction probably didn't matter. My work and studies since have convinced me that contemporary religious and psychological shamanism represent part of a catastrophic human error which took place at the beginning of history, and that contrary to the notion that it has been around for tens of thousands of years, indigenous shamanism is more likely a transitional phase between the consciousness of hunter gatherers and the alienation of contemporary state religions.

Lives as numb wage slaves

Faith healing comes in many costumes, and shamanism is one of them. We can wear skins or robes. We can beat drums or play pipe organs, burn sage or incense, sing to the element of water, or submerge ourselves in the river. Both the "laying on" of hands or sleight of hand can be efficacious. We can sing to our bear or sing to Jesus, whirl like a dervish, whip ourselves until we bleed, play with rattlesnakes, dance in the sun for four days, or starve ourselves in caves. Take your pick. Each can make less painful our lives as numb wage slaves.

If we can ignore that tiny voice crying for real freedom and calling us back to the circle, our economic and religious subservience will help us pretend to be something more than the imprisoned domestic animals we are.

A large problem remains. Shamanism, or any of the other religious choices as currently practiced, will not turn us from the global abyss. To believe shamanism and religion can bring about some form of planetary healing is much like the notion that more technology will solve our environmental problems. Transference, sexual abuse, misinterpretation of serious pathologies, and lack of ethics, all typical of the human potential movement, combine to further alienate and separate.

Benign attempts at healing by unskilled and uninformed devotees, while perhaps not causing serious harm, can impede solid, long-term movement toward better health. To put it plainly, shamanism draws some seriously crazy folks, and many leaders are happy to look the other way as long as the fees are paid.

Contemporary shamanism teaches vertical, hierarchical religion

For those of us arrogant enough to assume we have mastered this reality enough to explore another, our shamanic practice should pull us toward radical anarchistic action. We've been hearing from, and paying huge workshop fees to shamanic leaders for decades about "connecting to spirit," but their message sidesteps industrial capitalism, the religions to which it is connected, and open, public, radical, changes flowing from our spiritual work. The reason for this omission is clear. Contemporary shamanism teaches vertical, hierarchical religion. The focus is on what Mircea Eliade, in *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, described as the "journey," rather than presence in this biological world.

Agriculture, religion and government have not brought us a better life. The price we have paid for these abstractions is far too high. The amusing charm of a small transistor radio hanging from a tree in an upper Amazon village belies the toxicity of the poisonous little gadget.

Writings of Morris Berman, Paul Shepard, Joel Kovel, Stanley Diamond, John Zerzan, David Watson, Derrick Jensen, Lewis Mumford, and others have led me to conclude that we should not be attaching religious symbolism and meaning to shamanic experience, but instead should seek a practice which takes us to the awareness that preceded the alienating, beginning of agriculture and religion.

We should attempt a return to what Berman calls paradox, free of time and language. Even brief experiences of integration might help us build decentralized communities centered on our insight.

Return to "primitive wisdom"

An intentional use of altered states can obliterate the duality that has led to the domination and destruction of our world, an experience of unity, what Sigmund Freud called the regressive "oceanic experience," what Jung called a progressive return to "primitive wisdom" and what Morris Berman, in *Wandering God*, termed the "paradox" of hunter-gatherer consciousness, "a diffuse or peripheral awareness," and in his earlier book *The Re-enchantment of the World*, called "participatory consciousness" in which "the sacred, such as it is, simply is the world."

Unfortunately, shamanic practice as taught imbeds us in pathological constructs. Linear, vertical thinking has brought us to disaster. If we leave religion behind, trance practice can lead us to an egalitarian culture of biological integration. We must reject the religious rituals and notions of upper and lower worlds. We must cease our efforts to ascend and return to living completely here, in ourselves, on this earth, as integrated beings.

The dominant power structures under which we exist are only too happy to have us live in the illusory and impotent condition of duality, and most humans will sit and do nothing during this time of inexorable unraveling. Only a few will work to recover our history as integrated, wild beings.

Our hunter-gatherer ancestors are still close. Wiser and healthier than we, they are calling us back from a technological and religious cliff. Small, egalitarian, tribal circles of paradox can return us to the awareness of our ancestors of 10,000 years ago, before they unwittingly brought us religion and planted the seeds of our destruction.

We can reject the linear, oppressive, hierarchical, and alienating forms of religions that have swept our world and begin to live in an archaic, anarchistic, sustained way that begins to heal our planetary home.

We must be done with leaders

We need not travel to other realms. We must learn to step through a barrier and arrive here. Trance brings us home. School is in the garden, the forest, the prairies, the rivers. The teaching we need will not come from priests, gurus, shamans, or scientists. Our circles must be egalitarian and built on a solid mistrust of all power.

We must be done with leaders and their overwhelming lusts for money, sex, and power, impulses so integral to our culture they routinely go unnoticed. We must find ways to explore our way home without the intervention of individuals and organizations that propose equality on the surface but simply duplicate the power and alienation they've learned in the academic and capitalistic culture.

A Taoist nun once said, "There is no practice." I think she was right, for those who have already merged with the living world around them. For the rest of us, if we sing, dance, eat our plant helpers, and there are spirits who care enough to help us return, they will. If we don't impose our notions of sacred, goodness, power, and importance on our visions, ourselves, and the other beings we encounter, we may be able finally to rest.

The rapture is not a naked ascent into heaven. It is a naked return through a diaphanous membrane to our wild, natural, biological home.

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