

THE SHAMAN WITHIN

A Physicist's Guide to the Deeper Dimensions
of Your Life, the Universe, and Everything

Claude Poncelet, PhD



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

Contents

List of Journeys, Rituals, and Inquiries . . . xi

Preface . . . xiii

Introduction . . . xix

Why Shamanism Now?

The Consistency between Scientific and Shamanic Knowledge

What This Book Offers

PART I THE SHAMAN WITHIN

CHAPTER 1 What Is Shamanism? . . . 3

Shamanic Trance and Nonordinary Reality

Who Is a Shaman?

The Shamanic Journey and State of Consciousness

Journeying in the Upper, Middle, and Lower Worlds

The Shaman's Relationship with Spirits

Ways to Contact Spirits Other than the Classic Shamanic Journey

Shamanism Is Experiential

What Does the Shaman Do?

The Diversity of Shamanic Traditions and Core Shamanism

A Word about Ethics

CHAPTER 2 Shamanism as a Spiritual Path . . . 21

Spiritual Dimensions of Shamanic Practice

Connection with Western European Shamanic Traditions

| | |
|--|---|
| CHAPTER 3 | Impeccability and the Art of Living . . . 33 |
| | The Art of Living |
| | Impeccability |
| | Impeccability in Shamanic Practice, Shamanic Journeys, and the Relationship with Spirits |
| | The Mind's Role in Shamanic Journeying |
| CHAPTER 4 | The Art of Dying . . . 55 |
| | The Cycle of Birth, Life, Death, and Rebirth |
| | Preparing for Our Own Death through Shamanic Practices |
| | Resolving Unfinished Business |
| | Dying to "Who We Are Not" |
| | Psychopomp |
| | Helping People Who Are Dying and Their Survivors |
| | Loss and Grief |
| CHAPTER 5 | The Art of Healing . . . 69 |
| | Traditional Shamanic Healing Methods |
| | The Nature of Shamanic Healing |
| | An Experience as Patient |
| | The Roles of, and Relationship between, Healer and Patient |
| | An Essential Ingredient: Audience Participation |
| | Ethics and Potential Dangers in Shamanic Healing |
| CHAPTER 6 | The Art of Shapeshifting . . . 83 |
| | What Is Shapeshifting? |
| | The Purposes of Shapeshifting |
| | Shapeshifting into an Ally through Subtle Energy Work |
| | Shapeshifting into Other Entities |
| | Multiple Shapeshifting |
| | Shapeshifting as a Spiritual Path |
| PART II SHAMANISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY | |
| CHAPTER 7 | Shamanism in Family and Daily Life . . . 111 |
| | The Challenges of Modern Life |
| | Shamanism in Family Life |
| | Shamanism in Daily Life |

| | |
|------------|---|
| CHAPTER 8 | Shamanism in Professional Life . . . 127 |
| | Shamanic Practices for the Work Environment |
| | Principles, Ethics, and Guidelines for Shamanic Practice in Professional Life |
| | Shamanism in Other Kinds of Professional Work |
| CHAPTER 9 | Shamanism and Modern Scientific Discovery . . . 145 |
| | Science Is a Magnificent Creation of the Human Mind |
| | The Reciprocity and Synchronicity between Scientific and Shamanic Knowledge |
| CHAPTER 10 | Journeys to the Spirits of the Cosmos . . . 159 |
| | The Cosmos as Our Natural Environment |
| | A Brief History of Our Awareness of the Heavens |
| | Why Communicate with Spirits of the Cosmos? |
| | Working Shamanically with Spirits of the Cosmos |
| | The Life Cycle of a Star |
| | Journeys to the Spirits of the Cosmos |
| CHAPTER 11 | The Big Bang: Cosmic Background Radiation and the Creation Myth . . . 187 |
| | Creation Myths and the Universe Story |
| | The Big Bang and Its Aftermath |
| | Journeying to the Spirit of the Cosmic Background Radiation to Recover a Creation Myth |
| | Frequent Themes in Creation Myth Journeys |
| CHAPTER 12 | Shamanic World Work: Healing the Planet and Its Communities . . . 199 |
| | The Nature of World Work |
| | Ethics and Impeccability in World Work |
| | Examples of World Work |
| CHAPTER 13 | Healing Our Relationship with Nature: Creating a New Mythos for the Modern World . . . 213 |
| | Transforming the Modern World's Attitude Toward Nature: Science and Shamanism Come Together |
| | The Transformation Must Begin Within Us |
| | Collaborating with All of Nature: A Vision for a New World |

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Epilogue . . . | 237 |
| Notes . . . | 241 |
| Recommended Reading . . . | 249 |
| Additional Resources . . . | 253 |
| Acknowledgments . . . | 255 |
| Index . . . | 257 |
| About the Author . . . | 275 |



PART I

The Shaman Within

What Is Shamanism?



Shamanism, as noted in the introduction, is a very ancient spiritual tradition practiced all over the planet, and it is still practiced today by indigenous people on all continents, exhibiting remarkable similarities across space, time, and cultures. Shamanic practices probably began in ancient hunter-gatherer communities;¹ cave paintings in France and Spain dating back about twenty thousand years have been linked to an early shamanic tradition.²

Fundamental to shamanism are the principle of wholeness or unity and the realization that everything in the universe is connected. Also fundamental is the understanding that reality has a spiritual dimension. For the shaman, everything that has form or substance has a spirit, including trees, rocks, people, mountains, places, plants, animals, and the natural elements. The term *spirit*, as used in the shamanic tradition, denotes the manifestation of this spiritual dimension, or *essence*, of a given entity. In our modern world, the word *spirit* can evoke prejudices and unease. Nonetheless, because it is a traditional terminology in shamanic practice and is used by indigenous communities, I will use it throughout the book. I urge you not to get stuck on any images or connotations the word may evoke, but to consider it part of the tradition.

A great appeal of shamanism is its universality of principles and functions around the planet and through time. While different cultures have introduced a variety of rituals, practices, initiations, costumes, and power

objects, the internal essence of the shamanic journey, the work with spirits, and basic healing principles are strikingly similar worldwide. Practicing indigenous shamans are found today in North and South America, Siberia, Australia, Asia, Africa, and the Arctic.

Evidence of powerful ancient shamanic traditions is also found in Western Europe—for example, in the Celtic and Saxon cultures—as well as in more ancient Western European civilizations.³ These traditions, however, were largely eradicated by the Roman invasion and subsequent Christianization, although nascent efforts are underway to recover them.⁴ Over the past thirty years or so, a resurgence of shamanism has occurred in modern societies, particularly the United States and Western Europe.

SHAMANIC TRANCE AND NONORDINARY REALITY

The shaman works in the spiritual dimension of reality, sometimes called *nonordinary reality*. What distinguishes the shaman from other spiritual practitioners is the use of a nonordinary or *altered state of consciousness* that allows him or her to journey to this spiritual dimension. In his classic book *Shamanism*, Mircea Eliade defines this distinguishing state as an ecstatic trance, and he defines shamanism as a “technique of ecstasy.”⁵ Michael Harner, author of *The Way of the Shaman* and founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, has coined the term *shamanic state of consciousness* to denote this ecstatic trance.⁶

The shamanic trance is a focused shift in consciousness that allows the soul of the shaman to journey in the spirit world, journey to and among spirits, and communicate and interact with spirits. In this nonordinary state of consciousness, the shaman obtains from the spirits information, knowledge, assistance, power, and other resources to help him- or herself, other human beings, the community, and the planet, as well as to further his or her own spiritual development. The experienced shaman moves back and forth between realities in a disciplined and impeccable way that contributes to the harmony and wellbeing of the world we live in. In a way, the essential work of the shaman is to *bring forth, maintain, and restore balance and congruity between the spiritual and the ordinary, everyday dimensions of reality*.

WHO IS A SHAMAN?

The word *shaman* comes to us from the word *saman* of the Tungus tribe in Siberia. It was chosen by early Russian anthropologists to denote individuals who carried out specific spiritual practices and fulfilled certain functions in their communities.⁷ Shamanic practices need to be differentiated from those of priests, ceremonial leaders, medicine men, and other spiritual practitioners; today the term *shamanism* is often loosely used or misused to denote various practices, from nature rituals to magic. The shaman is distinguished from the medium, channel, and possession dancer, who typically receive spirits rather than intentionally going to meet them, although the shaman may do both.

In nearly all cultures, both men and women are shamans, and there is little differentiation between the shamanic functions they perform. It is much more a matter of individual orientation. The shaman usually has another, additional profession and conducts a normal life in ordinary reality.

Shamanism is not a religion, and the shaman is not a priest or a guru, although a priest or priestess could also be a shaman if he or she so desired. Shamanism is an experiential and individual endeavor whereby the shaman communicates directly with spirits and journeys in the spiritual realms. Hence, shamanism is fully compatible with other spiritual traditions and religions, and an individual's shamanic practice can enrich his or her participation in other spiritual systems. As Eliade shows throughout his book, historically shamanism has coexisted with other forms of religion and spirituality. Yet sadly, it is exactly the avowed individual, direct relationship with spirit that has been the basis for the brutal persecution of shamans by official state religions and state governments throughout history. Among many examples are the Christian church's persecution of shamanic traditions as its influence spread throughout Western Europe and into regions colonized around the world, the Protestant church's persecution of Sami shamans in northern Scandinavia, and the Soviet Communists' persecution of Siberian shamans.

THE SHAMANIC JOURNEY AND STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

As I mentioned earlier, what distinguishes the shaman is a nonordinary state of consciousness or ecstatic trance. A primary and central aspect of

this state of consciousness is the shamanic journey in the spiritual realms. Shamanic practice requires discipline, concentration, and purpose. The shift into and maintenance of the nonordinary state of consciousness is essentially a matter of *attention*, *intention*, and *trust*: attention to being fully in the here and now, intention to bring about the shift in consciousness, and trust in the spirits and the help they provide as well as in one's own inner power.

Over the millennia, different cultures have evolved various methods that assist with moving into this state of consciousness. The large majority rely on percussion sound, with the most widespread being the monotonous sound of the drumbeat. An important gathering where shamanic work can be carried out is a *drumming circle*. A drumming circle creates a sacred space and time where a group of shamanic practitioners drum together, journey, and perform rituals and other shamanic practices for the purposes of spiritual growth, divination, healing, world work, or other personal or group work.

In some cultures, shamans use hallucinogenic plants and mushrooms to facilitate a shift in consciousness. In addition to the physiological impact of a regular percussion sound or a hallucinogenic substance, the connection with the spirit of the drum (or other percussion instrument) or the spirit of the sacred plant is important to the shamanic experience.

In shifting into an altered state of consciousness, the shaman undergoes a classic journey into nonordinary worlds outside of the physical dimensions of space and time and “sees” and experiences with the heart, the third eye, and all the senses of the energy body.

JOURNEYING IN THE UPPER, MIDDLE, AND LOWER WORLDS

Consistent with many mythological and spiritual traditions, the nonordinary realm the shaman journeys into is visualized as three worlds: an Upper World to which the shaman ascends, a Lower World to which the shaman descends, and a Middle World. The Middle World is essentially the nonordinary aspect of our daily reality. The shaman typically experiences multiple levels in the Upper and Lower worlds, and after many years of practice, he or she comes to learn the geography of the nonordinary realms and how to effectively and productively journey into

the vastness of these worlds. The shaman also learns how to quickly and impeccably move from ordinary reality into the nonordinary Middle World and back.

Though I will give you basic instructions for shamanic journeying, this book is not intended as a comprehensive introduction to the practice. For that, you can consult Michael Harner's *The Way of the Shaman* and Sandra Ingerman's *Shamanic Journeying: A Beginner's Guide*—both excellent books. Better still, I encourage you to take the so-called Basic Workshop offered by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, as well as by others around the world. Developed by Harner, this workshop provides an excellent initiation for Western-world individuals into the shamanic journey and working with spirits.

If you are new to shamanism, here are instructions for journeying into the Lower, Upper, and Middle worlds: Do the journey in a room that is quiet, not overly lit, and where you will not be disturbed. Turn off telephones, including your cell phone. Lie down or sit. It is important that you be comfortable and that your body not need attention during the journey. Use a bandana or other blindfold to cover your eyes.

A shamanic journey typically lasts ten to fifteen minutes, but can be shorter or longer depending on the shamanic practitioner's intention.

The regular beat of a drum will help you to journey. You can ask a family member or a friend to drum for you, or you can use a drumming recording. The drumming ends with four sets of seven beats, followed by thirty seconds or so of fast beats, and again four sets of seven beats. This change in rhythm indicates that it is time to end the journey and helps you to return harmoniously to ordinary reality.

An Exploratory Journey to the Lower World

Imagine yourself near a hole or entrance into the earth, a place that exists in ordinary reality and has heart and power for you. This could be a spring, an animal hole, a cave, a hollow tree, a crack in a rock, or the like. With the intention to go into the Lower World, allow yourself to enter the hole. Look for, feel, hear, smell, or taste a tunnel going down.

If you encounter obstacles or difficulties, repeating your intention will help you continue your descent.

When you come to an exit out of the tunnel, enter the Lower World. If this is your first journey, start moving about and explore.

When it is time to return, go back to the place where you exited the tunnel, move up the tunnel and out of the hole, and come back into ordinary reality. Be sure to write about your journey; when you reread it later, you may be amazed at what you discovered.

An Exploratory Journey to the Upper World

Imagine yourself near something that rises up, again a place that has heart and power for you and exists on this earth. It could be a tree, a mountain, the smoke of a fire, or a rainbow. With the intention of journeying into the Upper World, allow yourself to climb and look for, feel, hear, smell, or taste a membrane-like barrier. Cross it and enter the Upper World.

Move about and explore. You may want to move to an even higher level; if so, find a way up, climb, and cross another membrane into the second level. You may explore several levels if you like.

When it is time to return, go down the same way you came up, back into ordinary reality. Again, it is good to write about your journey and revisit it another time.

In both the Upper and Lower World journeys, using an actual feature on Earth as the place to start and end the journey helps ground the connection between ordinary and nonordinary reality and spark the shift in consciousness.

Journeying in the Middle World

Before you begin, select a place that you enjoy—a forest, a lake, a meadow, or a city square. For your first journey into the Middle World, it is best to select a destination that you are familiar with and that is relatively close to you.

Now close your eyes, and with the intention to journey and the power of your imagination, allow yourself to enter the nonordinary-reality aspect of the ordinary place you're in right now.

Then, with your intention, move from your physical location to the destination you have selected. In the Middle World you can travel faster than you could in ordinary physical reality and yet recognize features of this ordinary world. When you reach your destination, just sit or look around for a while, recognizing features of the ordinary world. When it is time to return, come back and, along the way, notice the ordinary-world features of the route back to your current place. When you are back, open your eyes and write your impressions of your journey.

With experience, you can learn to drum for yourself as you undertake a journey. The experienced shamanic practitioner can also learn to journey without the help of a drumbeat.

The shamanic journey is a deep, beautiful, and profound spiritual experience. No matter how often a shamanic practitioner has journeyed, each journey is fresh, novel, and mysterious. It is often accompanied by strong emotions—tears, joy, sadness—often all together. This is shamanic ecstasy.

The first shamanic journey I formally undertook was back in 1984 at a workshop in Berkeley, California, taught by Michael Harner. Especially for those new to shamanism, my experience may offer a helpful orientation.

I am in a tunnel, going down. It is dark. The sides of the tunnel are smooth and feel like black mud. I get stuck, look up, and see

some blue sky through the hole I came down. I look for a way down, and suddenly I sneak through a gaping crack, go down very fast, and emerge from the tunnel into a vague, misty place.

I start walking and come to a pond. There I meet a swan. At first she stretches her neck and hisses fiercely. Then I walk slowly toward her, and she invites me to ride on her back. Now we are floating on the water—fast. I can see water splashing at the sides and on the bottom of the pond. I see brown algae and small fish.

We come to a small river that empties out of the pond, and the swan drops me off in front of a very tall tree, a redwood. The tree seems old and wise, and it speaks to me, but I do not understand. I walk around the tree and see a beautiful, very tall twin tree, its thick double trunks rising high like two arms of a chandelier. As I watch in wonder, a crack like thunder tears through the air, the tree breaks in the middle, and the two trunks fall, one to each side. In the center is a very large stone ball with small, blunt spikes on its surface. Suddenly a large white bear comes running down a small hill before me, and with his big front paw hits the stone and breaks it open into two hemispheric pieces. The bear runs away into the surrounding forest.

I approach the stone and see that both hemispheres have flat surfaces, like the pages of a book. There are writing and images interspersed on the surfaces. The writing is in a script that I do not understand and is slightly etched into the stone. Among the images I recognize are the shapes of people and houses. There are other shapes I cannot recognize. I stare at the unknown script, wondering what it means. I walk back from the split twin tree toward the tall redwood tree. It speaks to me again, and this time I understand.

The tree tells me that the stone contains the history, past and future, of mankind, linked to all else. At some point in my life I will be able to understand the script. The tree says that the stone also contains a message to teach me what free will really means

and how it relates to the other forces that move the world. It is a challenge, and it requires a vision that is not restricted to the ordinary world, I am told.

Then the swan calls to me and says it is time to go back. I float on her back over the pond, return to the tunnel, and swiftly ascend to the surface.

This first journey, my introduction to shamanism, brought me powerfully home. It was as if I was tapping into memories, feelings, and knowledge that had been deeply buried within me for a very long time. I felt connected to the world in a fresh and dynamic way. My body was alive, my mind was alive and free, and I was awakening to my soul, to my inner spirit. I had returned to my spirit home, not accidentally or spontaneously, but with intention and while remaining connected to the ordinary world. I knew from then on that I would inhabit both worlds.

THE SHAMAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SPIRITS

The shaman has traditionally been viewed as the intermediary between ordinary and nonordinary reality, between the everyday world and the spiritual realms, the world of spirits. The shaman is a master at shifting from one reality to the other.

While in the altered state of consciousness of the shamanic journey, the shaman meets, interacts with, and communicates with spirits in their infinite variety: spirits of nature, of the various other forms and substances of ordinary reality, of the souls of ancestors and other departed individuals, of beings that have not yet incarnated on this planet, and many others. It is this direct connection with the spiritual dimension of our universe that makes the shamanic practice sacred work.

The shaman establishes strong, lasting relationships with a number of individual spirits who assume a major role in the shaman's development and practice. These spirits counsel, guide, protect, and instruct the shaman and help with his or her practices for healing, divination, or other purposes. In anthropological and general literature, the language denoting these spirits is diverse and not always consistent. Among the terms