

THE RE-ENCHANTMENT

A SHAMANIC PATH
TO A LIFE OF WONDER

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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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INTRODUCTION

I am a scientist, an evolutionary biologist, and a paleoanthropologist who has been involved in the search for evidence of the mystery of human evolution for about forty-five years. I do not consider myself a New Ager, a theologian, or a priest, nor am I a Buddhist, although I walked that path for many years and still value it. My territory as a researcher is prehistory—a vast, largely empty expanse of time that extends from the beginnings of written language perhaps five thousand years ago back toward the origins of humanity many millions of years beyond that. I have always been intensely curious about everything, and in line with my scientific investigations of the past, I became interested, even compelled, to explore the nature of my self, my humanity, and the nature of the great mystery of existence in the present.

My expeditionary field research in the fossil beds of eastern Africa's Great Rift Valley brought me into repeated contact with indigenous tribal peoples, who still have inspired visionaries known as shamans. This connection was pivotal for me because I sometimes found myself drawn spontaneously into unsought visions and lucid dreams, and my discussions with these traditional people helped to explain and give context for my dreams and visions. These visions tended to be periodic and were much like daydreams, but very, very real. They often happened when I was immersed in the natural world for extended periods, and in response, I, a native New Yorker, was inexorably drawn onto the ancient mystical path of the shaman. I would learn—as revealed in my other books—that this visionary ability appears to run in my family.

In my investigations of what I came to think of as “the Mystery,” I stumbled into the realization that there is a new spiritual complex coming into being in the Western world, a mystical mosaic drawn from many traditions and many cultures, one that has the potential to replace or at least refresh all of our current mainstream religions with new perceptions and new insights. There are many spiritual paths through which this awakening is happening, and one of the most powerful and luminous is that of the shaman. The worldview of the shaman and the direct revelations that may be accessed through the shaman’s expanded understanding of how we and reality are really put together are contributing to this new spiritual assemblage.

I am well aware of those ethnic purists who proclaim with fervor that the word *shaman* can only be applied to tribal mystics of the Tungusic-speaking peoples of Siberia. However, allow me to note that the word *shaman* was chosen by professional anthropologists and ethnographers in the twentieth century and given a precise definition to accurately describe tribal mystics who perform spiritual practices on behalf of their communities, usually on a part-time basis. Such practitioners are very widespread on planet Earth today, and despite different appellations used to describe these visionaries, there is a remarkable congruence in their practice and in their worldview. Accordingly, it can be observed that the shaman is a universal figure found in some form in every culture and that our Western use of the term *shaman* is valid.

In this book, we will consider the shaman as an archetype for a particular kind of human: a woman or a man who can serve their communities as a mediator between the outer world of things seen and the inner worlds of things hidden. And we will talk about what that means. We will consider the worldview of the shaman and will visit various visionary perspectives, such as those of the Druids, the Tibetans, the American Indians,

the Gnostics, the ancient Egyptians, and the Eastern Orthodox Christians. Yet our investigations will not be another academic compilation of the esoteric belief systems of this cultural group or that. Rather, we will investigate some of the visionary mystical perceptions that are being achieved by everyday folks like ourselves on an ongoing basis.

We will also consider how the shaman's perception of reality is being reworked by modern Western mystics into a new form in response to who we are today and who we are becoming. The shift in our cultural mythos—the pattern of basic values and attitudes of a people—that is going on right now happens only once or twice in a thousand years. This book will explore this phenomenon and look at the beliefs, values, and trends that are part of the new spiritual complex that is coming into being. As it does, our understanding will be enhanced by encounters with the legendary psychologist Carl Jung.

It is noteworthy that this spiritual reawakening is occurring among many who are in social and professional positions from which it is possible to influence the larger societies' ideals and trends. You, the reader, are most likely among the increasing numbers of spiritual seekers who are investigating the full potentials of our uniquely human consciousness and in the process learning to balance the functions of mind, body, and spirit. You represent a distinct and growing cultural subgroup that holds a set of beliefs and values different from those of the general public—beliefs that cross socioeconomic borders and values that reflect the influence of non-Western traditions currently being molded into the new spiritual complex. This book will discuss some of these beliefs and values, as well as the social context in which they are taking form.

As you will see, the initial stages of our individual spiritual unfolding inevitably involve the experience of enchantment

early in life. As we move into our lives as active participants, the enchantment may withdraw for a time, and then sometimes, mysteriously, it may reappear, often through a powerful connection with nature. This re-enchantment through nature, in my opinion, is predictable, even inevitable, because nature is where the juice is. I'm talking about the life force that breathes essence and wonder into our world and into our selves.

In these investigations of the ancient, yet curiously modern, tradition of shamanism, perhaps you will discover that you are one of those worthies who possesses the gift of spirit vision. Believe it or not, an extraordinarily large sector of our population does, although many do not know that they have it.

As a scientist, I always kept journals while I was in the field, and the following chapters are like field reports from a life that has been lived like an adventure. In these chapters, I offer some of my discoveries and insights about the “New Mysteries” that seem to be coming into being in response to our need for them. These narratives are much like the song lines that for tens of thousands of years have guided the Australian Aboriginal peoples across their vast lands under huge skies—songs that were sung as they trekked, songs that revealed the way to this water-hole or that sacred place or campsite, songs that also guided them across the dusty borderlands of the Dreamtime. It is my hope that the revelations within these narratives may enhance your own path of discovery out there on the trail, where you may encounter initiatory experiences that can lead you to that which you are destined to become.

My invitation to you is quite simple: Would you like to engage in an absolutely extraordinary experience—an expedition of spiritual unfolding through which you can begin to move toward who and what your destiny holds out to you? Because that is what re-enchantment is all about.



THE ENCHANTMENT AND RE-ENCHANTMENT

I have now been walking on the magical mystery road of life for seventy-five years. The magic and the mystery began in my childhood in the early 1940s, but I had no understanding of what was going on then, nor any clear idea of that for which I had signed up. Yet I remember the first time I experienced being enchanted. Perhaps you do too.

In my case, I was about three or four years old, and my family and I lived in an apartment on New York's Upper East Side. One day, my mother took me to Central Park. I remember staring up at the trees from my stroller, taking them all in, and suddenly I had a deep insight. I saw them as living beings like myself, yet different. And then there were the pigeons on the sidewalks, bobbing and cooing, mobbing and hassling each other for the breadcrumbs my mother spread out for them. They were also living beings like myself, yet different.

And then there was the squirrel. It was just your average, everyday gray squirrel. It was perched on the gray trunk of a large beech tree, its curled fluffy tail twitching with alert intensity above its back, its liquid jet-black eye staring straight into

my soul. My mother gave me a peanut. In my innocence I held it out. The squirrel, conditioned by countless generations of curious children, approached tentatively, jumped onto the edge of the stroller, and looked deep into my eyes for a long moment. And then it snatched the peanut in one swift gesture from my trembling little fingers, retreating like a flash onto the tree trunk where it shredded the shell and ate the peanut with great gusto. Then it returned for another.

In those moments, I was enchanted. It was as though a spell had been cast over me. I had been entranced by none other than Mother Nature herself through a rather hyper furry ambassador. This initial experience remains with me to this day, and there was more.

There was the zoo. My mother took me there often. The sights and sounds and smells remain with me still—the hippopotamus in its small depressing concrete pool of murky greenish water stained with hippo poo, the crocodile lazing on its cement embankment in deep meditation, the birds shrieking with joyous abandon in their aviaries, the sea lions cavorting in their outdoor pond accompanied always by the odor of fish.

And then one day, one very strange enchanted day, I saw a beast of incomparable beauty in a cage. It was a leopard. It was such an extraordinarily exquisite being that I still remember the wonder and intensity I felt in response to our meeting. I say “our meeting” for that was exactly what it was. As I watched this gorgeous creature pacing in tight, ever-narrowing circles behind the bars, I was spellbound, entranced by its beauty, yes, but also by its power and by my own intuitive perception that within its graceful spotted body, a great will lay imprisoned.

I didn’t know what this meant, of course, but the world as I knew it drifted in those moments, and where it drifted to I do not know, but the leopard and I found ourselves together in a

place of utter calm, a shadowy blue place of deep magic where there were no bars. As I watched, the veil over its green gaze silently lifted, and the leopard looked deeply into my soul.

And something happened.

Looking back across the years, I reach for that moment, and it eludes me. Yet it was on that cold, foggy winter day at the zoo that something definitely happened—something that in retrospect I now know had to do with my enchantment. From that time forward, that leopard became my imaginary spirit friend. It was with me whenever I turned my attention in its direction. Sometimes it appeared in my mind's eye as entirely catlike, and at others it would morph to become a curious composite of human-animal that stood upright on two legs that I thought of as “the leopard man.” More than forty years later I would create a painting of it that graces the cover of one of my books.

Interestingly, in my so-called inner fantasy life, the leopard man would not enter my apartment building. He liked to stick to the bushes in the park. What I didn't know then was that leopards are ambush hunters and they prefer to engage in covert operations. But when I went to the park with my mother or my au pair, the leopard man was always there waiting for me. Perhaps our clandestine relationship and our imaginal adventures contributed to the reactivation of an ancient aspect of my soul that I had no idea existed at that time. And there was more.

With adolescence in the 1950s, my inner world was steam-rollered by puberty, by my growing fascination with what Zorba the Greek called “the female of the species,” and by material culture at large. In response, perhaps, the sense of magic withdrew, but interestingly the mystery remained. When I was out in nature, in the garden, at the pond in the woods, in the park, at the beach, in the mountains, or on the wooded university campus, the mystery was around me as a definite yet elusive

presence, and I always had a sense that something I could not see or even understand was just *there*. I also had a clear perception that it, whatever *it* was, was always aware of me too.

I knew nothing of mysticism or enchantment or visionary experience in those days, but not surprisingly, I have always loved being out in nature. And when I finally read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, I knew exactly what he was talking about.

Perhaps this is why my college studies in the 1960s at the University of Colorado at Boulder propelled me toward becoming a biological scientist. My inner visionary was on hold, and upon graduation I did a two-year stint as a science teacher with the U.S. Peace Corps in western Nigeria where I connected with indigenous spirituality for the first time among the Yoruba peoples. Although everyone I met was either Christian or Muslim, there was also a deep, underlying animist tribal religion that existed, one that was imported into the Americas with the slave trade, becoming known as Macumba, Candomblé, or Umbanda in Brazil, Vodou in Haiti, Obea in Jamaica, and Santería in Cuba. I would discover years later that while I lived among the Yorubas, I attracted the attention of some of the spirits they call *orisha*, yet I didn't fully understand what this meant at that time.

In my postgraduate studies and scientific professional life that followed in the 1970s, I traversed the entangled trails of evolutionary and environmental biology with relation to paleontology and anthropology. I was in search of insights into the living world of the biosphere on the one hand and, more specifically, the evolution of life preserved as fossils in the lithosphere on the other.

I fell in with an anthropology professor named F. Clark Howell at the University of California at Berkeley who was then director of the American half of the Omo Research Expedition in Ethiopia (the other half was French). In 1971, he graciously

invited me into the field, where my research projects involved the excavation and recovery of microvertebrate fossils—bats, insectivores (shrews), rodents, lagomorphs (rabbits), mole rats, galagos, mongooses, and other small mammals that tend to be very habitat specific. Through my analysis of these fossils, I attempted to reconstruct the paleoenvironments of important prehistoric early man sites at the time they were laid down millions of years ago. I also tried to understand the inner workings of the evolutionary process within lineages of fossil animals across time, seeing how they had changed and trying to discern why. This work led me into my scientific investigations of what I came to refer to as “the Mystery” and eventually earned me a doctoral degree in anthropology. I still do this work today.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE MYSTERY

In the early 1970s, I was living for months at a time in a tented safari camp out in the fossil beds of the Lower Omo Valley in southwestern Ethiopia, and I remember having spontaneous, unsought dreamlike experiences that were definitely odd. They often happened at night, but they also occurred during the day when I was fully awake. They were so extraordinarily real that they got my attention. It was as though I was watching films, but I was aware that I was watching them. Through these direct and immediate experiences, I was inevitably drawn into the Mystery.

There was one episode that contributed greatly to what I now perceive as my re-enchantment in my early thirties.

I was involved in excavating a paleontological (fossil-bearing) site that had been dated by geochronology (potassium-argon dating) at about three million years or a little older, a site that had revealed the fossilized remains of early hominids still in the process of becoming human. There were also fossils of various

other animals that were their contemporaries—ancestral giraffes, gazelles, buffalos, baboons, fish, turtles, hippos, crocodiles, and the assorted carnivores that preyed upon them.

I was working with a small team of African tribal men. Two of them were Wakamba tribesmen from Kenya named Muthoka and Kaumbulu; the other, a member of the local Dassanetch tribe, was named Lokiriakwanga, but everyone called him Atiko. I had been told that Atiko was a shaman. In fact, he was rumored to be a crocodile-whisperer in that he could communicate with the immense crocodilians that inhabited the Omo River at that time. It was said he could even swim across the river immune to the enormous reptilian predators that resided there. Having seen them myself, I understood this was no small thing.

I didn't speak a word of Atiko's language, nor did he of mine, but friendship has a language of its own, and with repeated and ongoing contact over several field seasons we became very close. I could speak a little Swahili by then, above which, or perhaps below which, we had a system of nonverbal communication that worked very well. He always knew exactly what to do without my telling him, and in reverse, I came to suspect that he had a profound influence on me, although I was largely unaware of this at that time.

One blazing hot day, around noon in mid-August, we were excavating fossil beds near the great silt-laden Omo River, which drains the Ethiopian highlands to the north and flows into Lake Turkana in Kenya to the south. The eroded desert landscape under the vast pale sky was surreal. The ground was shimmering with heat, and we were preparing to go back to camp for lunch. I had been aware for several days, usually at odd moments, of a curious feeling that would come over me—the sense that I was being watched by something. We were out in the remote, whispering lands of eastern Africa where there are lions and leopards,