



A Consciousness vs. Shamanic Path: a commentary

by J'aime ona Pangaia

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Having worked very closely in the past with two people who are well known teachers and advocates of shamanic counseling and healing, Sandra Ingerman, M.A. and Michael Harner, Ph.D., I am very familiar with the concept of 'soul retrieval'. Soul retrieval is a name given to a form of shamanic healing meant for those who have 'lost parts of their soul' as a consequence of any kind of trauma. Soul retrieval, is the remedial action that a shamanically trained (or recognized) person does by shifting via a trance state to 'non-ordinary reality'. Typically, in the approach taught by Harner through his Foundation for Shamanic Studies, after the client presents his /her problem, the 'shaman' lies down next to the client, and, with the aid of singing, dancing and / or drumming, enters a trance state. With the assistance of his/her spirit helpers, the shamanic healer discovers and returns that lost part back to the person by literally blowing it back into the body of the client in ordinary reality. Story telling about the shaman's experience within the journey is presented to help the client integrate the energy on an informational and perhaps mythic level. The aim is to heal the symptoms of soul loss and to reintegrate the soul.

At the same time that I was both studying and hosting Harner and Ingermans' work, I was studying with Hal and Sidra Stone, Ph.D.'s. I also practiced both approaches concurrently with clients for awhile. What I came to realize is that the very same symptoms of "soul loss" are symptoms of the suffering of psychological disownment. Some symptom examples are: depression, illness, anxiety, apathy, fear, hopelessness, being accident prone, self-loathing, feeling disconnected and powerlessness.

Harner and his associates are fairly outspoken about being anti-psychology and they attempt to make a case for a critical difference between 'soul' work and psychology. It's worth noting that the very word, psychology comes to us from the ancient Greeks; psyche - soul, logos - knowledge or awareness. And what is the difference in the work, really? Exploring and mapping the inner terrain's of our psyche is the unfolding legacy of psychology that can lead to our deepest layers of being. Eventually, I personally came to feel that shamanic healing techniques are approaches to working with psyche that rely on the transference of power to a specially designated person who works 'magically', that is, in invisible unknown ways. To an extent, hypnotism, suggestion and transference can go a long way towards alleviating symptoms of disowned selves within the psyche . . . for awhile.

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In practicing 'shamanic healing', I found that indeed, a lot of people did get better - as long as they were convinced of my power to heal, retrieve, extract, etc., them from their woes. AND, I had to do considerable education with them (the non-shamanic people) about what shamanism was. Since this approach is foreign to our modern mainstream culture, I had to demonstrate how I was specially capable of doing this work by virtue of personal power, reputation or suitable accoutrements and ritual behaviors.

I found in particular that, while practicing 'soul retrieval', sessions were most successful when, in addition to the perception of my power and abilities, I was able to identify and honor the "missing fragment" - or disowned self, in symbolic and direct language and with energetic resonance. Our deep unconscious responds well to resonant symbols and metaphors. Our disowned vulnerable selves leap with hunger and hope when somebody recognizes and redeems their existence.

The lure to 'be a shaman' was insidious, since, as a shaman, I got to be mysteriously powerful and special. I got to represent and carry the power element in the relationship. This is especially true as a person doing this in a non-shamanic culture. I have met a number of indigenous shamans who are very humble, aren't paid for their shamanic efforts at all and aren't accorded any elevated position in their community for being a shaman. However, in the new-age modern communities where neo-shamanism is practiced, this isn't the case. There is very definitely an exchange of often monetary value and social importance going on. "You use your faith in my

power (or connection to mysterious power) to heal you and I will get to be socially powerful and you get to be healed." This can be one of the shadow currencies of doing 'healing work'. What inner selves of mine were being lusciously fed by 'being a shaman'?

What was eventually unsatisfying to me, was that, in this context, the vast majority of these clients weren't generally on a consciousness path, they were on a fix-me path. I can also relate to that - there are parts of myself that have also wanted somebody else to be able to just come in and fix my psycho-spiritual-social-physical pain and ills. Parts of me wanted an all powerful person to sweep in like the ideal parent that none of us ever had, and make it all better. And part of me wanted to be that person for others.

More than any other practice, the Stones' work was what gave me a means for rediscovering both my disowned vulnerable selves and the disowned capacities for taking good care of them. Their training of an Aware Ego process gives us a spectacular and everyday means for soulful healing of all our selves.

Thankfully, for my part, I eventually became disenchanted with the role of neo-shaman. Yes, I continue to be interested in working transformatively with people. More to the point, as I continued to learn about inner selves from my work with the Stones, I became more interested in being a companion / facilitator / fellow traveler on a consciousness journey. In this, we each in our own ways are becoming more consciously empowered to rediscover, reclaim and embrace any and all parts of ourselves. Unlike in shamanism, or my former profession as a medical RN, this requires the client to take full ownership of his/her journey, successes, obstacles, and healing. It's not in the hands of power animals or shamans; it is very humbly in the hands of each one of us. If my former shamanic practice showed me the parts of myself that needed to be powerfully special, the voice dialogue work reintroduced me to the parts of myself that enjoy being ordinary.

AND, I do recognize a great mystery to life and nature, an infinite presence that I can feel yet never know. I've come to deeply enjoy the journey through the mysterious expressions of everyday life! What I personally discovered by exploring the teachings and practices introduced by Harner and his associates is that there is no magic formula, song or dance and no magic person or spirit who can heal me or do my journey for me. For this inadvertent lesson, I am deeply grateful. Since then, keeping my evolving spiritual practice private allows both my clients and myself our greatest ranges for self discovery.

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My own 'healing' journey has been a step by little step process of becoming more conscious of who I am, who I can be and more forgiving/accepting of myself for the ways in which I am not always consciously aware. Like, even right now! This is why I eventually moved away from practicing neo-shamanism and moved into a practice of teaching and facilitating Voice Dialogue. There is amazing healing to be found by exploring the tremendous and relatively untapped potentials of our ordinary consciousness.

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