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Shamanic Cosmology: A Psychological Examination of the Shaman's Worldview

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We do not see things as they are but as we are.

—*Jewish Proverb*

Only a few years ago, it was feared that shamanism might be lost due to the continuing encroachment of industrial civilization on tribal peoples and lands. However, shamanism has suddenly been rescued as a topic of considerable popular interest in the West. Shamanic books, workshops and rituals are proliferating at a remarkable rate and have spawned a veritable cottage industry.

So shamanism, or at least its contemporary Western version, is now doing surprisingly well. This does not mean that shamanism is well defined or understood. Indeed, there is enormous confusion as to exactly what shamans are and how, if at all, they can be distinguished from other tribal practitioners such as medicine men, witch doctors, sorcerers, and magicians.

Likewise, there is also confusion about the psychological status of shamans. Two extreme views are now prevalent. Among mainstream anthropologists perhaps the most common assessment of shamans is that they are psychologically disturbed individuals who have managed to adapt their psychopathology to social needs. Thus the shaman has often been called an hysteric or a schizophrenic, as well as a "veritable idiot" (Wissler 1931), "mentally deranged" and an "outright psychotic" (Devereaux 1961, 285).

On the other hand, an equally extreme but opposite view is now appearing in the popular literature. Shamanic states of consciousness are being identified with those of Buddhism, Yoga or Christian mysticism. Consider, for example, the claims that "shamans, yogis and Buddhists alike are accessing the same state of consciousness" (Doore 1988, 223) and that the shaman "experiences existential unity—the *samadhi* of the hindus or what Western spiritualists and mystics call enlightenment, illumination, *unio mystica*" (Kalweit 1988, 236).

There is also confusion over the nature and interpretation of shamanic techniques. For example, one of the central shamanic techniques, the shamanic journey or soul flight, has been interpreted as everything from a trance state to a neurotic dream, near-death experience, or yogic samadhi.

Clearly then, the recent popularity of shamanism has not ended confusion about the tradition. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to reduce some of this confusion by describing the shaman's cosmology and some of the major techniques of shamanism. What will become apparent is that these are distinctive and that the shaman's experiences are quite different from those of either the psychologically disturbed or of the practitioners from mystical traditions such as Buddhism or Yoga. Indeed, it is clearly time to recognize shamanism as a unique tradition that can no longer be reduced to psychopathology or equated with other religious disciplines.

Definition

There are several key features that distinguish this tradition. The first is that shamans can voluntarily enter altered states of consciousness and that these states are distinguishable from those of both psychopathology and of other religious traditions (Walsh 1989a, 1990). The second is that in these states shamans experience themselves leaving their bodies and journeying to other realms in a manner analogous to contemporary reports of some out-of-body experiences or lucid dreams (Monroe 1971; Irwin 1985; LaBerge 1985). They use these journeys in order to acquire knowledge or power and to help people in their community. Shamans also experience themselves interacting with and controlling "spirits." While many of their fellow tribespeople might claim to see or even be possessed by spirits, only shamans claim to be able to command, commune, and intercede with them for the benefit of the tribe. The use of the term "spirits" here is not meant to imply necessarily that there exist separate entities that control or communicate with people. Rather the term is simply being used to describe the shamans' interpretation of their experience.

In summary, shamanism can be defined as a family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves, or their spirit(s), traveling to other realms at will and interacting with other entities in order to serve their community. The term "family of traditions" acknowledges that there is some variability among shamanic practitioners (Siikala 1985). However, the definition clearly distinguishes this tradition from other traditions and practices, as well as from various psychopathologies with which it has been confused. For example, medicine men may heal and priests may conduct ceremonies, but they rarely enter altered states (Winkleman 1989). Mediums usually enter altered states but do not journey; some Taoists, Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists may journey, but this is not a major focus of their practice. Those who suffer mental illness may enter altered states and meet "spirits," but they do so involuntarily as helpless victims rather than as voluntary creators of their experiences.

Are Shamans True Mystics?

Whether shamans can be considered true mystics depends on both the definition and data one uses. If the criterion for a mystic is simply one who obtains direct, intuitive, transcendental knowledge, then the answer is clearly, yes. During their journeys through the cosmos shamans acquire intuitive transcendental information of value both to themselves and to their tribespeople.

However, a more narrow definition of mysticism confines it to experiences of union with the divine, the so-called *unio mystica*. Do shamans ever experience this mystical union? I have found no examples of it in the literature and nor apparently have others. One authority categorically states that "we never find the mystical union with the divinity so typical for the ecstatic experience in the 'higher' forms of religious mysticism" (Hultkrantz 1978, 42). He, therefore, argues that shamanism can be considered a form of mysticism only "if mysticism is not restricted to mean just the *unio mystica*" (Hultkrantz 1973, 28).

There are three lines of evidence that suggest that this conclusion might be incorrect. These are the facts: shamanism is an oral tradition, powerful psychedelics may be used, and some Westerners report unitive experiences (Walsh 1990).

That shamanism is an oral tradition means that unitive experiences may have occurred, at least occasionally, but have been lost to subsequent generations and, of course, to anthropologists. Without written documents, there may be no way to adequately preserve a record of the highest, and rarest, flowerings of a tradition. There may also be no historical guidelines or framework with which these few practitioners who do access these experiences can effectively interpret and transmit their experiences to others.

Although not an essential part of shamanism, the use of psychedelics is common in some areas (Harner 1973). Peyote and ayahuasca, for example, are powerful substances capable of inducing experiences that at least some authorities regard as genuine mystical ones (Smith 1964).

Finally, Westerners being trained in shamanic practices may report unitive experiences; I personally have heard two such accounts. However, these seemed to be experiences of union with the universe rather than with a deity. These experiences point to the fact that there are actually different types of mystical union (Wilber 1980) and that the experience of union with the universe is an example of so-called "nature mysticism" rather than theistic mysticism (union with God).

In light of this evidence, it seems that shamanism may deserve to be considered a mystical tradition. Though unitive experiences may not be the aim of shamanic journeys, which focus on soul travel, it is possible that they sometimes occur. At the very least, it seems that shamans were the earliest forerunners of more recent mystics. For perhaps tens of thousands of years, they possessed a technology of transcendence capable of inducing significant altered states of consciousness and used them for acquiring power and information for themselves and for their tribes (Walsh 1989b, 1990).

Shamanic Technology

Shamans employ a wide range of techniques for diagnosis, divination, ritual, healing, and empowerment. Perhaps the two most dramatic and psychologically interesting techniques are the shamanic journey and mediumship. Despite their obvious psychological interest, as yet they rarely have been examined by Western mental health researchers. Most reports have been by anthropologists; psychological reports of these techniques are few, outdated, and usually pathologizing. Both techniques have often been regarded as evidence of significant psychopathology, most often schizophrenia, hysteria, or dissociative disorders.

Yet both the shamanic journey and mediumship are complex, culturally valued techniques that are sought after, voluntarily induced, cultivated through a variety of techniques, and supported and paid for by the community. To assume that they are only symptoms of psychological disorder may be to view them through an ethnocentric pathologizing framework and to "confuse culture and clinic" (Opler 1961). Contrary to many previous assumptions, it is now clear that shamanic experiences do not slip easily into Western diagnostic categories and that there are significant arguments against dismissing and diagnosing them as merely culturally accepted forms of psychological disturbance (Noll 1983; Walsh 1990).

This is not to say that all shamans are models of mental health. Clearly there are some psychologically disturbed individuals among their ranks. Nor is it to deny that there are numerous tricksters and charlatans among them (Rogers 1982; Warner 1980). However, it *is* to say that shamans and shamanism can no longer simply be diagnosed (away) as only psychologically disturbed or as charlatanism. Rather shamanism must be regarded as a unique tradition containing its own distinctive world view and technology of transcendence. Operating from this perspective, psychological research may unveil a wealth of previously overlooked information.

Shamanic Cosmology

In order to understand the psychology of shamanic technology, it is necessary to know the shamanic cosmology. After all, psychology is a subset of cosmology, and psychological techniques only make sense from the perspective of their corresponding cosmology (Berger and Luckmann 1969).

If we interpret shamanic techniques and experiences from the ethnocentric viewpoint of our own cosmology, then these experiences will certainly seem nonsensical. However, if we examine shamanic technology and cosmology together, we will see that they form an integrated unit in which theory and practice, cosmology and technology, belief and technique are intimately linked in a meaningful and coherent whole. For as the psychiatrist Donald Sandner (1979, 14) pointed out, "the entire lifestyle of a culture is built upon its mythic view of reality."

Of course, the shamanic world view is not scientifically based, and there is much in it that we, from our scientifically and mechanistically based world view, would regard as superstitious. Indeed, one of the tasks awaiting researchers investigating shamanism is to differentiate effective psychological, social, physiological, and medical practices from ineffective ones. This is an ongoing task with Western therapies also; ineffective techniques and superstitions are not unique to tribal healing.

In summary, it is clear that far from being merely the garbled productions of the psychologically disturbed, shamanic cosmology and technology can be recognized as dovetailing aspects of a meaningful, coherent, integrated, functional, encompassing world view or mythos on which are based the shaman's and the tribe's way of life. Let us now examine this cosmology and technology in turn.

THE SHAMAN'S UNIVERSE: MANY WORLDS

In order to understand shamans' experiences, we need to understand their universe. What was the nature of this cosmos and the worlds that shamans believed they could penetrate and explore? Fortunately, a general outline of the physical geography will serve our purposes; we need not go into the many details and cultural variations that Eliade (1964) has described so meticulously.

The shaman's universe is three tiered, comprised of an upper, middle, and lower world, and the upper and lower worlds may themselves be multilayered. What makes shamans "cosmic travelers" is their experience of being able to traverse these multiple worlds and levels. As Eliade points out:

> The pre-eminently shamanic technique is the passage from one cosmic region to another —from earth to the sky or from earth to the underworld. The shaman knows the mystery of the break-through in plane. This communication among the cosmic zones is made possible by the very structure of the universe. (Eliade 1964, 259)

"The very structure of the universe" to which Eliade refers is its interconnectedness. The three worlds and many levels are believed to be linked by a central axis, the *axis mundi* or world axis described in diverse myths.

> The essential schema is always to be seen, even after the numerous influences to which it has been subjected; there are three great

> cosmic regions, which can be successively traversed because they are linked together by a central axis. This axis, of course, passes through an "opening," a "hole"; it is through this hole that the gods descend to earth and the dead to the subterranean regions; it is through the same hole that the soul of the shaman in ecstasy can fly up or down in the course of his celestial or infernal journeys. (Eliade 1964, 259)

The central axis takes three main forms, all of them common to diverse cultures and myths, both shamanic and nonshamanic. The first is the "cosmic mountain" at the center of the earth. The second is the "world pillar," which may hold up the sky. The third is the highly symbolic "world tree," symbol of life, fertility, and sacred regeneration that the shaman climbs to other worlds. But whatever form it takes, the world axis is the cosmological symbol of the connection between worlds, a connection that the shaman, alone among humans, is able to traverse.

But the shaman's worlds and levels are more than interconnected. They are holocoenotic; that is, every part affects every other part. Shamans believe that these interactions can be perceived and affected by one who knows how to do so and that the shaman, like a spider at the center of a cosmic web, can feel and influence distant realms. The shaman was thus a forerunner of later Chinese sages who claimed that "Heaven, Earth and the ten thousand things form one body."

All parts of this interconnected universe are usually regarded as alive and conscious to some degree. In contemporary philosophical language, these would be the doctrines of hylozoism and animism. Hylozoism is the belief that all objects are imbued with life. Animism is the belief of tribal people that every object is invested with a mind or soul. When this same belief is held by Western intellectuals, it is renamed "panpsychism." Needless to say, this doctrine of panpsychism is most unfashionable in these materialistic times. However, historically, it has had some very notable Western supporters including first-rank philosophers such as Leibniz, Schopenhauer, and Whitehead.

As metaphysicians, shamans tend to be realists. That is, where Westerners might regard the upper and lower worlds they traverse as mental constructions, shamans regard them as independently existing realms. Thus, for the shaman, "the mind is being used to gain access, to pass through a door into another reality which exists independently of that mind" (Harner 1987, 4). This is an example of the literal, objective, and realist interpretation of experience characteristic of the shamanic world view.

For the shamans' tribespeople, this multilayered cosmos is a belief, a myth, and an article of faith. For shamans, it is a direct experience. They alone traverse these layers and turn a cosmology into a personal roadmap. They alone, says Eliade, transform:

> a cosmotheological concept into a *concrete mystical experience*. This point is important. It explains the difference between, for example, the religious life of a North Asian people and the religious experience of its shamans; the latter is a *personal and ecstatic experience*. (Eliade 1964, 21)

Because the shamans alone experience the realms described in tribal myth and cosmology, the question arises as to whether their journeys and descriptions also shaped these myths and cosmology. To put the question more generally, and make it a very important one, to what extent do spiritual practitioners create their tradition's cosmology from their experience and to what extent is their experience created by, or at least molded by, their cosmology? To what extent do religious practice and experience create beliefs and to what extent do beliefs create religious experience? Which is chicken and which is egg, or are they mutually interdependent?

For shamanism, Eliade comes down on the side of experience being determined by cosmology. While he acknowledges that a number of epic stories may have been fostered by accounts of shamanic journeys, he denies the impact of these journeys on cosmology.

> The shamans did not create the cosmology, the mythology, and the theology of their respective tribes; they only interiorized it, "experienced" it, and used it as the itinerary for their ecstatic journeys. (Eliade 1964, 266)

On the other hand, Michael Harner notes that what defines shamanism is its techniques and that the experiences that these techniques elicit allow practitioners to reach their own conclusions and cosmology.

> Shamanism ultimately is only a method, not a religion with a fixed set of dogmas. Therefore people arrive at their own experience-derived conclusions about what is going on in the universe, and about what term, if any, is most useful to describe ultimate reality. (Harner 1987, 4–5)

This suggests that personal shamanic experiences can shape personal beliefs and possibly cultural ones. However, it is obvious that shamans must bring some prior beliefs and cosmology to their practice. Why would shamans learn to journey to the upper world if they did not already believe there was one? Moreover, there are wide cultural variations in myths, and shamans tend to have experiences consistent with the myths of their culture. This is similar to the way in which psychotherapy patients tend to have experiences and dreams consistent with the beliefs of their therapists. Thus in the short term, shamanic experience is definitely shaped by cultural cosmology. Perhaps in the long run, the reverse also occurs so that cultural cosmology and personal shamanic experience mold each other through a process of reciprocal determinism.

THE SHAMAN'S UNIVERSE: MANY SPIRITS

As we have seen, the shaman lives in and is connected to a living conscious universe, a universe filled with life, awareness, and "spirits." These spirits—everpresent, powerful and potentially malevolent—exert an enormous influence on tribal cultures. Whatever happens—good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate, success or failure—is likely to be attributed to the spirits.

Yet ordinary people are largely helpless victims of these spirits. These people have little control over the spirits save to blindly follow the traditions handed down from one generation to another: to pray, to sacrifice, or to ask the shaman to intercede on their behalf, for it is the shaman alone who can control spirits. Indeed, for many anthropologists, this control is one of the shaman's defining characteristics. But in order to control the spirits, the shaman must first learn to see them. Consequently, before we examine the nature of the shaman's spirits, it will be valuable for us to examine the ways in which the shaman learns how to perceive them.

Spirit Vision

Because the spirits are usually invisible to the untutored eye, a major part of shamanic training involves acquiring the power of "spirit vision" by which spirits can be recognized. This, says Eliade, explains "the extreme importance of 'spirit visions' in all varieties of shamanic initiations" (Eliade 1964, 85).

Given the importance of this spirit vision, it is not surprising that considerable effort may be invested in acquiring it. A variety of specific techniques may be used, some of which are extremely demanding. For example, the Jivaro Indian initiate of South America may spend days fasting and ingesting drugs until finally a spirit is seen (Eliade 1964). In another tribe, the instructor rubs herbs on the eyes of the apprentice.

> For three days and nights the two men sit opposite each other, singing and ringing their bells. Until the eyes of the boy are clear, neither of the two men obtains any sleep. At the end of the three days the two again go to the woods and obtain more herbs. . . . [I]f at the end of seven days the boy sees the wood-spirits, the ceremony is at an end. Otherwise the entire seven-day ceremony must be repeated. (Loeb 1929)

The spirits are usually sought under specific conditions such as altered states of consciousness and reduced lighting, conditions that enhance awareness of visual imagery. Trance and drug states can intensify images, and darkness enhances sensitivity to them.

What are we to make of the shaman's training and development of spirit vision? One psychological explanation might be that the shaman learns to organize and interpret *the flux of visual images seen during trances.* Even in an ordinary state, an almost continuous flux of images can be seen when the eyes are closed. In altered states, these images can become clearer, more meaningful, and more archetypal (Wilber 1980).

Shamans may be particularly likely to organize this flux into spirits and other images consistent with their expectations. A study of Zinacanteco natives of Mexico showed a number of perceptual differences between shamans and nonshamans (Shweder 1972). In this study, the experimenter showed a series of blurred, out-of-focus photographs and asked the natives what they saw. Shamans were much less likely than nonshamans to say "I don't know," even when the photographs were blurred to the point of being completely unrecognizable. Moreover, when the experimenter offered suggestions as to what the image might be, shamans were more likely than nonshamans to ignore the suggestions and to give their own personal interpretation.

These findings suggest that shamans may be "imposers of form" who easily create meaningful patterns from unclear data. That is, they tend to organize ambiguous experiences into coherent meaningful images. Moreover, for shamans, these images are particularly likely to reflect their own personal categories. Of course, it remains for future research to validate this study and to see whether its findings are true of shamans in other parts of the world. However, the study suggests that shamans may be particularly adept at finding what they expect to see. Consequently, they may be particularly adept, either by virtue of heredity, training, or both, at finding spirits amidst the many images that arise during altered states.

Because shamans experience such intense imagery during their journeys, it has been suggested that they may be so-called "fantasy-prone" personalities (Noll 1985). These are people who are usually excellent hypnotic subjects and who "fantasize a large part of the time, who typically 'see,' 'hear,' 'smell,' 'touch,' and fully experience what they fantasize" (Wilson and Barber 1982, 340).

Perhaps then, some shamans are "fantasy-prone" personalities who are able to organize and learn from their intense images in ways that are both personally and socially beneficial. They may be particularly adept at creating and recognizing images of spirits. Of course, this is not to say that this can account for all experiences of spirits or that spirits are necessarily only visual images. We will discuss this tricky question of the nature of spirits shortly. But whatever the nature of spirits, shamans clearly exemplify the words of the great sixteenth-century physician Paracelsus, who claimed that "Everyone may educate and regulate his imagination so as to come thereby into contact with spirits, and be taught by them" (Noll 1987, 47).

The novice's task of learning to see the spirits involves two stages. The first is simply to catch an initial glimpse of them. The second is to deepen and stabilize this glimpse into a permanent visionary capacity in which the spirits can be summoned and seen at will. As Eliade says of the initial training, "All this long and tiring ceremony has as its object transforming the apprentice magician's initial and momentary and ecstatic experience . . . into a permanent condition—that in which it is possible to see the spirits" (Eliade 1964, 87–88).

This shamanic task is but a specific example of a challenge that faces mystics of all traditions. All of them, after their initial perception of transcendental realms, must further develop and stabilize this ability (Deikman 1982; Shapiro and Walsh 1984). They must first learn how to access this perception at will. But beyond this, they must also learn, as Huston Smith (1976) so eloquently stated, to "transform flashes of illumination into abiding light." In less poetic but more psychological terms, we might say that their task is to transform a transitory altered *state* of consciousness into an enduring altered *trait* of consciousness.

For beyond the capacity to enter transcendent states at will lies a condition in which transcendental awareness permeates the ordinary waking state. This is the deification of Christianity, the *sahaj samadhi* of yoga, the eyes-open samadhi of Zen or what Abraham Maslow called the plateau experience (Underhill 1974; Goleman 1988). This phenomenon is interesting, both in showing the evolution and higher reaches of spiritual training and in pointing to a similar skill in shamanism. There is no evidence that shamans practice these samadhis. However, there are suggestions that mature shamans may eventually develop abilities, such as spirit vision, in their ordinary state, which initially they could perform only in altered states (Arrien 1989).

Types of Spirits

The types of spirits that the shaman may see and summon are many. They may be animal or human, lesser or greater, within or beyond the shaman's power to control. For as Eliade points out, the shaman is

> a man who has immediate concrete experiences with gods and spirits; he sees them face to face, he talks to them, prays to them, implores them—but he does not "control" more than a limited number of them. (Eliade 1964, 88)

Those he controls are his helping spirits. Many of these helping spirits are seen as animals, sometimes called power animals, and according to Eliade "they can appear in the form of bears, wolves, stags, hares, all kinds of birds" (Eliade 1964, 89) and numerous other forms as well.

Remarkably similar encounters can occur during psychotherapy. A number of therapists use guided visualization techniques to evoke images of "power animals" or "spirit guides" and then encourage the client to interact with and learn from these guides. As visualization therapies become popular, such experiences are becoming more common, and a number of therapists have found them helpful (Gallegos 1987).

Encounters with "spirit guides" also occur spontaneously in psychedelic therapy and according to Stan Grof, can be "most valuable and rewarding phenomena" (Grof 1988, 121). Indeed, it is remarkable just how often ancient shamanic experiences are echoed in contemporary psychedelic ones. This suggests that shamans have long accessed and mined deep archetypal realms of the psyche that remain hidden to most people.

Functions of Spirits

Whatever their form, the spirits may assist the shaman in any of four ways. They may assist with journeys, provide strengths and abilities, teach, or possess the shaman.

The spirits may travel with shamans on ecstatic journeys, accompanying or even carrying them to the sky. They may defend them from threats and battle on their behalf. The spirits' strength may become the shamans', if they voluntarily merge with the spirits and thereby partake of their powers and capacities. The shaman may see him- or herself turned into an eagle and soar into the sky or become a tiger and feel infused with its power. After returning from the journey, the shaman may perform his "power animal dance," moving and sounding like the animal, as a way of experiencing and maintaining its presence.

The following example of finding a power animal was reported by a participant in a shamanic workshop. It demonstrates both the experiential power of these encounters and the fact that they are accessible to contemporary Westerners.

> This was a journey to the lower world to meet and request assistance from power animals. I began my journey by entering a cave in Hawaii and went down a tunnel until I reached the lower world, which first appeared as a small green globe. On landing, I found myself in a lush green jungle filled with animals.
>
> I was immediately drawn to a lion. I appealed to him to be with me during the workshop and to let me share his power, his strength, suppleness, keen sensitivity, and agility.
>
> I then asked him what I needed to know or do. Immediately the lion leaped at and into me and merged with me so that my shamanic body was human/lion, and I felt its power. This sense of power was very helpful since it seemed to counteract a sense of contraction connected with feelings of fear and guilt that I had been experiencing.
>
> At the end of the journey, I returned up the tunnel into the cave and then back into the workshop room. Yet there was a clear sense that the lion returned with me. I was left feeling healed, empowered, and strengthened.

What are we to make of these reports of merging with power animals? Psychologically the process makes good sense and has been widely used in both East and West, in ancient religions and in modern psychology. A number of psychological mechanisms might be involved. These include permission giving (being given permission to feel powerful, effective, etc.), "acting as if" (one had a particular desired quality), role playing, belief, and identification. But whatever the mechanism, it is clear that visualizing oneself merging with a powerful, benevolent figure can be surprisingly empowering, and therapists report good success with this technique (Ferruci 1982; Achterberg 1985).

Perhaps the most dramatic example among religious traditions is the so-called "Deity yoga" of Tibetan Buddhism. Here the yogi visualizes him- or herself first creating and then merging with a god-like figure who embodies virtue upon virtue: unconditional love, boundless compassion, profound wisdom, and more. After merging, then, just like the shaman and his or her power animal dance, the yogi attempts to move, speak, and act as the deity. In other words, after merging with their allies, both shaman and yogi then attempt to embody, experience, and express their allies' qualities. The difference is that, for the shaman, the power animal ally is regarded as real whereas, for the yogi, the deity is ultimately regarded as a mental creation and projection. The potential power of these visualizations is suggested by the fact that the Tibetans regard Deity yoga as one of the most powerful and advanced of their vast array of practices. Indeed, in what may well be the world's most dramatic claim for effectiveness, they claim that with Deity yoga a practitioner can become a Buddha in a single lifetime rather than in the "three countless eons" that it would otherwise take (Hopkins 1984).

Thus, the practice of merging with a power figure is widely recognized as a technique of great potency. Here, then, is another example of twentieth-century psychologists rediscovering techniques that shamans may have used for more than twenty centuries.

The spirits may also instruct and teach. In fact, "during the period of initial contact the spirits function above all as teachers" (Siikala 1978, 228). They may provide information for either the shamans or their clients on any number of crucial issues. The spirits are most likely to instruct during altered states such as dreams, trances, or journeys, or during the curious process of mediumship.

Mediumship or Channeling

Mediumship, or channeling as it is now known, is common among shamans who may well have been the world's first mediums. A survey of twenty-one cultures in which shamans engage in soul flight showed that, in over half of these culture, shamans also display possession (Peters and Price-Williams 1980).

The process of mediumship/channeling involves a supposedly spiritual entity speaking through the medium. The medium's stage of consciousness may vary from full awareness and complete memory of the process to complete unawareness and amnesia. The medium's voice, expression, accent, posture, and behavior may all change dramatically and suggest that the original person and personality have been replaced by one quite different. The effect can be very dramatic. Mediumship is a world-wide phenomenon, and its impact has been remarkable. It has played a major role in world religions and on several occasions has changed the course of history. In a survey of 188 cultures, it was found in over half of them (Bourguignon, 1973). There are many famous examples of which the best known in the West is probably the Greek Oracle at Delphi. For over 1,000 years, the Delphi temple priestesses regularly became possessed, supposedly by the god Apollo, and dispensed advice to princes and paupers alike.

The king Croesus, whose enormous wealth inspired the saying "rich as Croesus," was one of the oracle's more famous customers. Greedy for yet more wealth, he wanted to know wehether to attack his neighbors. The oracle's sage advice was, "After crossing the Halys (a river) Croesus will destroy a great empire" (Hastings 1991). Much inspired, Croesus crossed the river and, in fact, did destroy a great empire: his own.

The oracle was also approached for military strategy to defend against the marauding Etruscans. The oracle's advice was to "use as few ships as possible." Displaying admirable faith in the oracle, the people sent out a mere five ships against the entire Etruscan fleet. Not wishing to be embarrassed by seeming to need a larger force, the Etruscans also sent out only five ships. These were promptly sunk. The Etruscans then sent out another five. These were also sunk. The scenario was then repeated yet a third and fourth time. Finally the Etruscans retired from the scene (Hastings 1991).

It was also the oracle who dubbed Socrates the wisest man in Athens, much to Socrates' surprise. Of course, not all the oracle's advice was so dramatic or effective. Yet the oracle had a track record respectable enough to stay in business for over a thousand years and had a major impact on Greek history.

Mediumship has been important in many religions. There are references to it in both the Old and New Testament, and it played a significant role in Jewish mysticism (Hoffman 1981). Some extremely influential religious texts that many brilliant minds over many centuries have regarded as profound were apparently produced in this way. Examples include parts of the Koran and several key Tibetan Buddhist scriptures (Hastings 1991).

Mediumship has once again become popular in the West where it is now known as channeling. Of the many books on the subject, the most thorough are probably *Channeling* (Klimo 1987) and *Tongues of Men and Angels* (Hastings 1991). Contemporary channeling shows both differences and similarities compared with earlier times. Today's channeled productions include literary, musical, metaphysical, spiritual, and psychological works. The emphasis on psychology is new as are a number of the supposed sources. In ancient times, gods, goddesses, and angels were busy being channeled and in the nineteenth century, American Indians, Orientals, and deceased spirits were much in vogue. Today, however, spiritual masters, more evolved beings on other planes, and extraterrestrials are all the rage.

The range of quality of channeled materials is enormous. They include the abysmal and trite, the ego-serving and self-aggrandizing, as well as the clearly erroneous and ridiculous. Some of the more amusing examples include "Leah, a sixth density entity from the planet Venus six hundred years in the future" (Schultz 1989, 56) and Mademoiselle Helene Smith. Among other experiences, Mademoiselle Smith journeyed to Mars with her spirit guide Leopold "whence she returned with colorful descriptions of the Martian countryside and samples of the inhabitants' writing and language" (Nemiah 1985, 950). This is considerably more than either Soviet or American space probes have been able to do. Productions such as these led Ken Wilber, one of today's best known writers on psychology and religion, to comment, "Higher intelligences have got to be smarter than the drivel most of these channels bring through" (Wilber 1988, 14).

Yet channeled works also include, though much more rarely, favorably reviewed literary works, extraordinarily complex and coherent (though not necessarily verifiable or correct) metaphysics, and helpful—even profound—spiritual works.

The most famous literary productions were those of either (depending on your belief system) Pearl Curran, a little-educated St. Louis housewife, or of Patience Worth, the spirit of a seventeenth-century Englishwoman. Pearl/Patience could perform a variety of remarkable feats. She could dictate a poem on a specified topic faster than a scribe could write it in shorthand. She could even alternate lines from two different poems as she did so; the first line from poem one, the second from poem two, the third line from poem one, and so on. The author Edgar Lee Masters witnessed one such writing session and shook his head in disbelief saying, "It simply can't be done" (Hastings 1991). Altogether Pearl/Patience channeled over twenty volumes of poetry, novels, and advice that were widely published and favorably reviewed.

Among the many contemporary spiritual works, one of the most interesting is a three-volume set with the most unlikely name of *A Course in Miracles* (Anonymous, 1975). This is a Christian mystical text produced by an astounded and reluctant Jewish professor of psychology at Columbia Medical School. "Having no belief in God," she said, "I resented the material I was taking down and was strongly impelled to attack it and prove it wrong" (Skutch 1984, 134).

But no matter how negatively the reluctant scribe felt about it, others have felt positive just as strongly. The first book review stated that "the three books comprise one of the most remarkable systems of spiritual truth available today" (Skutch 1984, 127). Likewise, a Stanford University professor called it "perhaps the most important writing in the English language since the translation of the Bible" (Skutch 1984, i). Ken Wilber's comments about channeled "drivel" suggest that he is no big fan of channeling. Yet he also comments that "The *Course* is clearly inspired. Its insights are genuinely transcendental. . . . I know of no other channeled material that even comes close to it" (Wilber 1988, 34). Not everyone is a fan of the *Course* and it has been assailed by some Christian fundamentalists and theologians. Yet it has also sold over a half-million copies and is being translated into over a dozen languages. In content, it seems to embody the perennial philosophy (the common philosophical and spiritual core found at the heart of the world's great religions) expressed in Christian form. Add to this several famous Tibetan Buddhist texts and parts of the Koran, and it becomes clear that a small number of channeled spiritual works may be of considerable significance.

Skeptics would deny that channeled productions are ever significant or profound. For the true skeptic, all such productions "consist solely of strings of loosely associated gobbets of naive ideas" produced by people "of hysterical personality, displaying dissociative features" and in many cases "all the hallmarks of schizophrenia" (Reed 1989, 385, 390, 388). There is no argument whatsoever that most channeled productions are trite or nonsensical but that does not prove that all of them are. Unfortunately, skeptics tend to carefully ignore the difficult cases such as the classic channeled religious texts or the writings of Pearl Curran.

Clearly, then, mediumship is no simple matter. Meaningful and profound productions seem to occur even though they are far more rare than trivial and nonsensical ones, so that the phenomenon cannot be simply dismissed as pure nonsense or pathology.

Unfortunately, most people take extreme positions. On the one hand are the true believers, who doubt not a single word of their favorite spirit guide or god. On the other hand are the skeptics, for whom every word is false and channeling is dismissed—often after only superficial study—as self-deceit at best or psychosis at worst. Either approach serves as a pleasant psychological anesthetic that saves having to investigate and think about the issue in greater depth.

Yet mediumship is clearly a complex, curious phenomenon from which, at the very least, we stand to learn much about little-known capacities of mind. As yet, there seems no reason to assume that there is only one type of channeling. For all we know, it may yet turn out to be a complex process involving different mechanisms and sources in different cases.

Many theories, none of them entirely satisfactory, have been suggested to account for mediumship. These range from fraud to dissociation to possession by true spiritual entities. Needless to say, it is easier to suggest processes involved in producing trivial, nonsensical works than profound ones. Fraud may account for some cases but hardly all, and some channelers are most reluctant and confused by the whole process.

Dissociation is perhaps the most common explanation. In this process, aspects of the psyche are split off from conscious awareness and ego control. Such aspects may then function independently as subpersonalities or as more or less full-fledged, separate personalities, as in cases of multiple personality. Such personalities may project thoughts into egoic awareness; these thoughts are then perceived by the ego or conscious personality as coming from outside itself.

Multiple personalities provide a dramatic example of dissociation and divided consciousness. However, the implications of research on dissociation are much more subtle and extensive. They suggest that all of us live with some degree of dissociation. Ernest Hilgard's suggestively titled book, *Divided Consciousness*, opens with the statement that "the unity of consciousness is illusory. Man does more than one thing at a time—all the time—and the conscious representation of these actions is never complete" (Hilgard 1986, 1).

The implication is that anyone—ancient shamans, modern channelers, and all the rest of us—may be capable of receiving information from aspects of our own psyches that lie outside conscious awareness. This information may seem to come not from our mind but from another entity, a fact that can be easily demonstrated with hypnosis. Moreover, some of the communication may consist of information and memories that the conscious personality has long forgotten, a phenomenon known as "cryptomnesia." When this occurs, the effect can be particularly dramatic and provide apparently impressive evidence that the message must come from another entity, because the information it contains is apparently novel to the channel (Schultz 1989).

So it seems, then, that purely psychological mechanisms may be sufficient to account for many, if not all, superficial channeled productions. There seems little need to invoke spirits, or any other type of nonhuman entity for that matter. In addition, Occam's razor, the longstanding scientific principle of parsimony argues for keeping explanations as simple as possible.

Most psychological explanations of channeling stop here. Unfortunately, as yet, very little experimental research has been done on channeling. An interesting beginning was made by Sarah Thomason, a professor of linguistics at the University of Pittsburgh. She analyzed the voices of eleven different channelers and found a number of contradictions and peculiarities in speaking styles.

Several findings were highly suspicious. For example, two entities were said to sport British accents yet claimed to be thousands of years old. However, British accents as we know them have probably not existed for more than a thousand years at most. Likewise, another entity used inconsistent pronunciation that became more inconsistent and American the more excited he became. According to Thomason (1989, 393), this is a real giveaway and "just the opposite of what one would expect, if he were a non-native speaker of American English."

Yet other findings were puzzling. The well-known "entity" Lazaris, who does telephone interviews and has a waiting list over two years long, was a case in point. "Lazaris' accent sounds fake to me but there are no obvious inconsistencies in his sound pattern" said Thomason (1989, 393). The phenomenon of channeling is nothing if not puzzling and clearly in need of further careful research.

This still leaves us with the problem of accounting for the occasional profound channeled work. While it is easy to conceive of a subpersonality producing trivial nonsense, it is more difficult to imagine it creating major literary or spiritual works apparently far beyond the channel's level of knowledge and skill. However, it is possible to imagine such creations coming from the psyche if we can conceive, as many Eastern and some Western psychologies do, that there may be aspects of the psyche that are "superior" or "transcendent" to the ego or conscious personality. Indeed, some channels report that, over time, they eventually come to experience their spirits, not as separate entities but rather as aspects of their own mind and unacknowledged wisdom (Malkin 1989). Some channeling might therefore be an example of what Maslow called "the Jonah complex," the unwillingness to acknowledge one's own capacities.

However, if we are going to be completely honest, we need to admit that none of these suggestions actually disprove or rule out the possibility that spirits, whatever they may be, are the actual source of some channeled materials. Therefore, to be honest and complete, we should briefly examine the nature of "spirits," and it is to this tricky question that we now turn.

The Nature of Spirits

What then is a spirit? The Oxford dictionary defines it as "a supernatural, incorporeal, rational being or personality, usually regarded as imperceptible at ordinary times to the human senses, but capable of becoming visible at pleasure, and frequently conceived as troublesome, terrifying or hostile to mankind." This has probably been the most common view of spirits throughout human history. However, if we set aside historical notions such as these, as well as our own preconceptions, we need to ask questions such as: are "spirits" part of or separate from the medium or shaman, are they mental or nonmental, are they material or immaterial, and are they expressions of health or pathology or both? In short, what is the psychological and ontological status of spirits?

We may be able to shed light on these questions by examining shamans and their spirits along with related data from other traditions. To do this, we need first to look at what the experience of a "spirit" is exactly. Essentially, it is an experience of interaction with what is felt to be an intelligent, nonmaterial entity that is separate from the ego or self. In the shamans' case, it may provide information that shamans believe they cannot access alone.

Such experiences are widely recognized in both religion and psychology and may be either troublesome or beneficial. In a religious context, troublesome examples include the experience of being either tormented or possessed by unfriendly spiritual entities such as ghosts or demons. Dealing with troublesome spirits is one of the shaman's most frequent tasks. In a psychological context, these same "spirits" might be interpreted as hallucinations.

Interactions with spirits may also be beneficial. Here, the spirits may prove to be valuable sources of information, guidance, and wisdom. In a religious context, some of these sources might be regarded as transcendent beings such as the shaman's "helping spirits," the Hindu's "inner guru," the Quaker's "still small voice within," the Naskapi Indian's "great man," or for a Christian, the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, a conventional psychological perspective might regard all such inner sources as mundane aspects of the psyche such as subpersonalities.

A transpersonal psychological interpretation might fall somewhere in between these two views. Because transpersonal psychologists acknowledge the possibility of realms and capacities of mind transcendent to our usual egoic awareness, they might interpret these inner sources of wisdom in several ways. The first way would be as mundane subpersonalities, as the traditional psychologist might interpret them. However, a second possibility for transpersonal psychologists would be that these spiritual sources of wisdom represent transcendent aspects of the psyche "above and beyond" the ego. Several such transcendent aspects of the psyche have been described in both Eastern and Western psychologies. Western examples include the higher self; the transpersonal witness; the Jungian Self which is the center of the psyche; and the inner-self helper that is a helpful and apparently transcendent personality that occurs in multiple personalities.

It is clear that numerous religions and psychologies have recognized the possibility of accessing wisdom from inner sources that seem wiser than the ego or personality. Indeed, considerable effort has gone into refining ways of facilitating contact with these sources.

Religions have used a variety of rituals, prayer, supplication, sacrifice, and altered states of consciousness. The altered states may include possession, soul travel, or quieting and calming the mind so as to be able to hear the "still small voice within."

In psychology, the major techniques include hypnosis and guided imagery. It is apparently a relatively easy matter to create an experience akin to channeling through hypnosis. As Charles Tart puts it:

> From my studies with hypnosis I know I can set up an apparently independent existent entity whose characteristics are constructed to my specifications and the person hypnotized will experience it as if it's something outside of his own consciousness talking. So there is no doubt that some cases of channeling can be explained in a conventional kind of way. There is nothing psychic involved. (Klimo 1987, 223)

Several schools of psychology, such as Jungian and Gestalt, use guided imagery or fantasy to access inner wisdom. In a common technique—dialogue with the sage or inner teacher—the therapist asks the patient to imagine her- or himself in a safe, pleasant environment, meeting a person of great wisdom. The patient is then encouraged to allow a dialogue to emerge spontaneously and to ask of the person whatever questions would be most helpful. Such dialogues can produce surprisingly insightful information of which the patient was formerly unaware. Indeed, a growing number of authors, artists, and business people commonly resort to such techniques for inspiration (Vaughan 1979). These techniques have obvious similarities to the shaman's journeys to find a spirit teacher.

Inner teachers may also arise spontaneously and have powerful, life-changing effects. Some people who have changed the course of history have been directed by such inner teachers. The Greek philosopher Socrates, the political leader Gandhi, and the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, all reported that they learned from, and were directed by, inner guides who arose unbidden from the depths of the psyche (Heery 1989).

Carl Jung provided a number of dramatic examples. One such inner teacher, whom he called Philemon, provided Jung with a wealth of information about the psyche. Philemon first appeared during a fantasy of Jung's in which:

> Suddenly there appeared from the right a winged being sailing across the sky. I saw that it was an old man with the horns of a bull. He held a bunch of four keys, one of which he clutched as if he were about to open a lock. He had the wings of the kingfisher with its characteristics colors. . . . Philemon and other figures of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life. Philemon represented a force which was not myself. In my fantasies I held conversations with him, and he said things which I had not consciously thought. For I observed clearly that it was he who spoke, not I. . . . I understood that there is something in me which can say things that I do not know and do not intend, things which may even be directed against me.
>
> Psychologically, Philemon represented superior insight. He was a mysterious figure to me. At times he seemed to me quite real as if he were a living personality. I went walking up and down the garden with him, and to me he was what the Indians call a guru. (Jung 1961, 182–183)

Even a single experience of an inner guide can have life changing effects. A dramatic example is given by a woman called Lillian who suffered chronic pelvic inflammation and pain for which no medical cause could be found. Lillian began practicing visual imagery and obtained some benefits. She started by imaging

> a stream of cool water circulating through her pelvis, and knotted ropes being untied. What felt like a cement block in her lower back was imaged as dissolving. She said she felt better; the burning was still there, but covered a smaller area.
>
> Then one night when Lillian was practicing her imagery at home, a coyote named Wildwood flashed into her mind. He advised her to stay by his side, and watch what was about to happen, and told her that what she saw would be related to the fire in her body. She then sensed herself sitting by a campfire, in the midst of a hostile tribe of Indians who held her captive. She experienced the horror of being brutally gang-raped and murdered. "At the instant of my death . . . I woke up and was back in my body in the room, only my pain was completely gone, and hasn't returned since." (Achterberg 1985, 98)

What is one to make of such an experience and its dramatic outcome? Lillian attributed it to a past life. The shamanic interpretation would be that her spirit guide or power animal, the coyote Wildwood, had taken her on a journey in which she had undergone rape, death, and a healing rebirth. A psychological explanation would be that her own mind had, by a wisdom and means far beyond our present understanding, provided her an experience of profound psychosomatic healing power. Whatever the explanation, one can only feel awe for the healing power of the psyche, its images, and its inner guides.

So both religion and psychologies have sought and found ways of accessing sources of inner wisdom that seem in some cases wiser than the ego. Clearly, the wisdom that they provide can sometimes be vastly more profound than the egocentric trivia that characterizes so much channeling.

How are we to understand these inner sources of wisdom? What exactly is their nature, or in philosophical terms, what is their ontological status? Asking the sources themselves is not particularly helpful because the answers may range from "I am a part of you" to "I am Argon from the seventh plane" to "I am part of God." Clearly we're not going to get much help here although, unfortunately, many people seem to believe channeled claims. But those of us who are more skeptical are left having to make our own decisions about the nature of this process and about the sources of information.

From a psychological perspective, it seems that we may be able to account for spirits, inner guides, and channeling—both high and low—provided we are willing to entertain the possibility that there exist transpersonal aspects of the psyche above and beyond the ego. The principle of dissociation, which may play a major role in the production of relatively superficial channeled works, can then be extended to the production of profound ones as well. Channeling in these latter cases would therefore involve receiving information from the transpersonal domains of mind recognized by some psychologies and many religions (Wilber 1980; Wilber et al. 1986).

Certainly the principle of parsimony favors an explanation in terms of known mechanisms such as dissociation. However, if we are to be completely honest, we must acknowledge that even now we still have not disproved the possible existence of spirits (intelligent, nonmaterial entities independent of the channel's mind) or their role in some channeling. Indeed, it is not at all clear that it is possible to disprove them.

To put the matter in more precise philosophical language, we seem to have here a case of what is called "ontological indeterminacy." This means that the fundamental nature, or ontological status, of the source of information may be undecidable. It cannot be decided definitely because the available information or observations can be interpreted in many ways, and we have no absolute method by which to determine which interpretation(s) may be best.

Practically speaking, what this means is that people's interpretations of the phenomena will be largely determined by their personal beliefs, philosophy, and "world hypothesis." The world hypothesis consists of the fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world and reality that underlie the life and work of a community. Most people simply take the assumptions of their culture or subculture unquestioningly and interpret the world accordingly. That is, the consensual "world hypothesis" goes unquestioned.

What this means is that people's decisions about the nature of spirits and channeling will depend in large part on their prior assumptions about the nature of reality. Thus, for example, a person who believes in philosophical materialism assumes that everything that exists is either matter or entirely dependent on matter for its existence. Such a person will obviously view "spirits" very differently from the religious practitioner or theologian who believes in a transcendent realm of pure spirit. For the philosophical materialist, all sources of inner wisdom, information, advice, or visions, all perceived entities, all voices and images are simply mental constructions—the expressions of neuronal fireworks, and probably deranged fireworks at that. Therefore, shamans' experiences and spirits are likewise only creations of mind and all worlds; spirits and souls are merely mental projections. Therefore, shamans are obviously mistaken at best or psychotic at worst.

Things are very different for the believer in panpsychism. This is the view that everything in the universe, including plants and inanimate objects, has some kind of psychological being or awareness. For people holding such beliefs, there is no problem with the idea that at least some of the helpers, voices, and visions encountered during shamanic experiences are indeed spirits.

Of course, it must be admitted that we have no proof whatsoever that all sources of inner wisdom have the same nature. For all we know, some might be merely aspects of mind, and not terribly impressive aspects at that, while others might conceivably be some transcendent source or sources within or beyond us. At the present time, we may simply not be able to decide definitively between these various interpretations. Consequently, an agnostic view of spirits and channels in which we confess their indeterminacy and our ignorance may be the only intellectually honest position.

This may be honest, but it may also not be overly satisfying. Indeed, it may be annoying and irksome. Yet our annoyance may be a reflection of our unwillingness to tolerate ambiguity and our attachment to our own opinions and world hypothesis. Diverse philosophies and spiritual traditions repeatedly nudge us to *acknowledge that we just do not know*, indeed cannot know, the ultimate nature of many things. We are encouraged to recognize the "radical mystery" of existence (Free John 1985), and, in the language of Zen, to keep "don't know mind."

So the fact that we cannot decide once and for all about the existence of spirits, channels, and nonphysical entities is actually not so surprising. Rather it simply reflects our current ignorance and perhaps even the perpetual limitations on knowing. This may not be very satisfying, but it may be usefully humbling.

Implications and Conclusions

Given the present limitations on our knowledge, what can we conclude about the shamans' spirits and their counterparts in other countries and centuries? To begin with, it is clearly possible for many people to access inner sources of information and wisdom that may be experienced as entities separate from themselves. The information so obtained may often be trivial, nonsensical, and egotistical. Yet it may also occasionally be meaningful, profound, and life-changing. It appears that we may have underestimated the range and depth of information available within us, the number of ways in which it can be accessed, and the frequency and impact of channeling. For channeling, through its effects on individuals, cultures, and religions, has changed the course of history.

Although one can interpret the nature of this process in many ways, it is clear that it points to realms and capacities of the human mind that as yet are all too little understood. We may have underestimated both ourselves and the wisdom, imagination, and creative resources that lie latent within us. Shamans appear to have been the first pioneers to systematically explore and use these resources.

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