Embracing Your Inner Witchdoctor
Shamanism 101
By
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In addition to being a philosopher, philanthropist, humanitarian, theologian, musician, and a Unitarian, the late, great Albert Schweitzer was a physician who won a Nobel Prize for his extraordinary efforts as a medical missionary in Africa. It was in Africa that he encountered many traditional witchdoctors. We might presume, as a man of science, trained in modern medicine, that Schweitzer would have scoffed at the superstitious antics of these primitive hoaxers. But Schweitzer had great reverence for all beings. So, rather than viewing them as primitive, or superstitious, or as charlatans, as most westerners did at the time, Schweitzer held the witchdoctors with great respect. “The witchdoctor,” he said, “succeeds for the same reason all the rest of us [doctors] succeed. Each patient carries [one’s] own doctor inside... They come to us not knowing this truth. We are at our best when we give the doctor who resides within each patient a chance to go to work.”

So Schweitzer considered the witchdoctors legitimate healers because, like all doctors, they can help awaken their patients’ power to heal themselves. For some of us this might sound like primitive mumbo jumbo, or a bit too New Agey, but science calls it the placebo effect; referring to the healing that occurs when one believes one is receiving treatment, even though the medicines or procedures used have no innate healing properties.

I recall a personal example of self-healing, for instance, when I was in the sixth grade. My school was planning a carnival, and I was extremely excited about being assigned to work the balloon-shaving booth. Unfortunately, it was at a time when a Chicken Pox epidemic had stricken the school, my neighborhood, as well as my home. My two sisters and my brother were down with severe cases. We knew the incubation period of the contagion, that my turn was coming, and that I was scheduled to begin my outbreak just a couple days before the carnival, which meant I would most likely miss what I anticipated would be the best day of my life.

So I did everything I could to keep from getting sick, which, as you might imagine, was absolutely nothing. Still, I told myself repeatedly I wouldn’t get sick. I prayed I wouldn’t get sick. I was determined not to get sick. Friday night before the carnival finally arrived and I had no signs of the Chicken Pox. But on Saturday morning, the day of the event, I looked in the mirror and saw less than 10 small bumps on my stomach. But I felt perfectly fine and had no fever, so I kept my secret and rushed off to the school carnival.

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I don’t know how many other kids got the Chicken Pox that day because of my naïve enthusiasm. Nevertheless, by the next morning the few pox I had all but disappeared. I never felt sick, got a fever, and became immune to the disease for the rest of my life. Some might say I was just among the statistically fortunate, but I have since believed there was something inside me, something about my attitude, that shielded me from the worse effects of this illness. Of course, I realize this is never a sure thing, that there are lots of people with positive attitudes who get sick, and that I have gotten sick many times since. Nevertheless I still believe this to be one case in which my inner witchdoctor did his job.

I’m using the term witchdoctor, which we tend to negatively associate with voodoo, hocus pocus, mumbo jumbo, and so on, but the word, “witch,” comes from the word wicker, referring to pliable twigs used for basket weaving. Witch originally meant “weaver,” but eventually became a derogatory term to describe the simple ways of country folk, and, later still, to demonize the uncivilized ways of country folk. So witchdoctor is similar to saying, “country doctor.”

We call them the “simple ways of country folk,” as if they are unfounded, unrefined, and naïve, but they are actually rooted in thousands of years of observation, as well as trial and error. The ancestors saw how nature works, how if squirrels begin gathering nuts early, or muskrat houses are bigger than usual, or if the wooly worm has a heavy coat, then a bad winter is ahead. They found it more fruitful to plant under the constellations of Scorpio, Pisces, Taurus, or Cancer than at other times, and more beneficial to cut timber under the “old moon” so it dries quicker and doesn’t rot.

And, until only recently in history, they didn’t have nearby cities to visit when they needed a hospital, or clinics to go visit a licensed physician. They had a country doctor, a witchdoctor, who had been schooled in the old knowledge and traditions of the ancestors to help heal them when they were sick. Your arthritis bothering you? Drink powdered rhubarb dissolved in white whiskey. For a touch of asthma, try inhaling the fumes of steamed ginseng powder, or suck salty water up your nose. Use pine resin on a bleeding wound and red clay to make a cast for a broken arm. Put raw potato peals on a burn; take a mixture of honey and vinegar to treat a cold; or a teaspoon of peanut butter to stop the hiccups.

They may not have understood why some of these treatments worked and didn’t care. Maybe it was just the placebo effect. Or maybe, if science looks into some of them, they’ll find genuine medicinal values in some of these cures and treatments. In fact, as anthropologist Jeremy Narby points out, “Pharmaceutical companies have a history of going to the Amazon to sample indigenous plant remedies and then returning to their laboratories to synthesize and patent the active ingredients without leaving anything for those who made the original discovery.” He also says, “74 percent of modern pharmacopeia’s plant-based remedies were first discovered

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by ‘traditional’ societies.”3 In short, most our medicine today comes from witchdoctors.

And where did they get this original knowledge? Narby says, “The shamanism of which the indigenous people of the Amazon are the guardians represents knowledge accumulated over thousands of years of the most biologically diverse place on earth.”4 Today, especially in the Amazon where half of all plant species live, pharmaceutical companies continue to get rich exploiting the ancient knowledge that has been passed down for generations through indigenous country doctors. In other words, Big Pharma is taking “the simple ways of country folk” very seriously.

*Shaman* is the term anthropology officially uses to describe indigenous healers the world over. It should be noted at the outset that *shaman* isn’t a gender exclusive word, despite its sound and spelling. It’s second syllable, m-a-n, doesn’t stem from the English word “man.” It’s a phonetic spelling, rather, of the Tungus word, *samin*, which the people of Eastern Siberia used in reference to their healers. Although they are called by many names in different cultures, anthropologists have come to use *shaman* in reference to them all. But there are male and female shamans (not shamen) in most cultures, as well as homosexual and transgender shamans, who were and are especially honored by societies in North and South America.

Nowadays, anthropologists hold the same attitude towards shamans as did Schweitzer, one of respect and appreciation. But when European explorers first began encountering them around 500 years ago, they considered them devil worshipers. In 1535, for example, the Spanish navigator, Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo encountered a tribe, in what is currently called Haiti and the Dominican Republic, that he said, “do not know Almighty God and they worship the Devil.”5 He also witnessed a medicine man of which he said, “the Devil entered into him and spoke through him as through his minister.”6 Twenty-two years later a French Franciscan Priest, Andre Thevet said the Brazilian shamans he encountered living in Rio de Janeiro, “are people of evil custom who have given themselves over to serve the Devil to deceive their neighbors.”7 He called them “imposters,” and, “vagabonds,” who “communicate with evil spirits,” that he claimed gave them “intelligence about the most secret things of nature.”8 Thevet thought it sinful to seek the secrets of nature, “Which Our Lord has reserved for Himself.” He considered such knowledge “a lack of faith and good religion.”9

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3 Ibid., p. 33.
4 Ibid., p. 154.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., p. 13.
8 Ibid., p. 15.
9 Ibid.
Other explorers accused them of “evoking the devil,” and of “conjuring demons,” an attitude that lasted into the 18th century, during the Enlightenment era, when shamans were viewed in only slightly better terms. Instead of seeing them as the spawn of Satan, Rationalist thinkers widely considered them superstitious charlatans and frauds that should be punished for deceiving others with their absurd and ridiculous antics. In 1751, for instance, a German chemist and botanist, Johann Georg Gmelin, said of a shaman he questioned in Siberia, “In the end we were confirmed in our opinion that it was all humbug, and we wished in our hearts that we could take him and his companions to the Urgurian silver mine, so that they might spend the rest of their days in perpetual labor.”

Just four years later another botanist, Stepan Petrovich Krasheninnikov wrote that he considered the shamans so superstitious that “only in their human appearance do they differ from animals.”

Again, it wasn’t until the 19th century that anthropology emerged as a discipline, and with it a more objective view of shamanism. It was then their religions was first described as animism, and, rather than seeing them as demonic shysters, their practices were described in neutral language. Swedish anthropologist, Ake Hultkrantz, an renowned expert on the religions of American Indians, listed the following, “visionary insight, ecstatic disposition, ventriloquism, dexterity... gymnastic fitness,” and the use of one’s “supernatural power for the benefit of society.”

Despite such objectivity, however, it wasn't until well into the 20th century that anthropology itself had advanced enough to truly begin to respect the witchdoctor’s worth and legitimacy. This occurred as the anthropologists themselves became open to experiencing the powerful medicine of the shamans, sometimes by actually ingesting their hallucinogenic substances. The most famous among them is Carlos Casteneda, whose bestselling 1968 book, The Teaching of Don Juan, ignited popular interest in shamanism for the first time ever. In another bestseller, The Way of the Shaman, published in 1980, anthropologist Michael Harner, describes his own shamanic journey and has gone on to found The Foundation for Shamanic Studies, a non-profit educational organization dedicated to the preservation, study, and teaching of shamanic knowledge to the world.

So shamans have been legitimized by today’s anthropologists, who seek to understand them on their own terms, rather than through our western biases. The best example I can think of is Jean-Pierre Chaumeil’s treatment of magic darts, the use of which are widespread among shamans, especially those living in the Amazon. Shamans there tend to believe illness is caused by invisible darts shot by evil spirits and sorcerers. The shaman heals by removing them, often by sucking them out of the victim’s body. Shamans are immune to the evil darts because they make it a

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10 Ibid., p. 28.
11 Ibid., p. 29.
habit to ingest their own invisible darts, which gives them protection and power over them. To the novice, this sounds pretty naïve and superstitious when considered through our own cultural lens. But Chaumeil says, “This protection system seems to constitute a form of autoimmune defense acquired by the shaman, who would then appear to be a partially immunized, or vaccinated, body... whether one considers the darts as agents of illness, therapy or immunity, everything occurs as if one were dealing with a vast ‘ethnovirological’ complex... In other words the Amazonian societies do not seem to have waited for the arrival of western medicine to understand the functioning principles of a virological system.”

In brief, what we call viruses, they call darts, but the treatment, building up immunity, is similar in both our societies.

Now that we’ve spent a good deal of our time discussing the history of shamanism, and, I hope, opening our minds a little to the potential value and legitimacy of a people who have been maligned for centuries and remain exploited to this day, we can begin outlining what shamanism is. Although the practices obviously differ widely from culture to culture, the shaman, in general:

- Walks between worlds, between the physical and spiritual, or the visible and invisible realms;
- Experiences altered states of consciousness;
- Has a guardian spirit;
- Has the power to retrieve lost souls;
- And is a healer who uses one’s powers to help others.

Based on this list, I would suggest, though some may have developed it more than others, all of us have shamanic power within us. All of us have an inner-witchdoctor with the power to help heal ourselves and others. The ability to walk between worlds, for instance, doesn’t have to be as extraordinary and outlandish as it might sound. It may simply mean that the witchdoctor within is wise enough to understand there is more to reality than meets the eye. It may refer to a certain openness to mystery, to the unknown, to the unconscious. This is no different than the scientist who recognizes the invisible forces of electricity, magnetism, gravity, particle physics, microbiology, genetic influences, ultrasound, microwaves, and so much more we cannot sense, but now know exist. Or of the psychologist who seeks to understand hidden motivations. So the first quality of our inner shaman is this awareness that there is more to life than just what we see and know.

This then leads them to seek altered states of consciousness. Some shamans do so by ingesting mind-altering substances like peyote and ayahuasca, but the inner-shaman in all of us does so every time we question our own paradigms, every time we find a new way of looking at things. If this morning, for example, you have already begun to view shamanism in a new light, you’ve had a mind-altering

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13 Jeremy & Huxley, ibid., p. 275f.
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experience. You can do so just as easily by reading a book or watching a documentary about a subject you’re unfamiliar with. It’s also important that the shaman, once viewing things in a new light, shares such insight with others so the whole community can benefit and progress. It is the inner shaman’s vision of a different, better, truer world, that helps society advance. This is why I consider preaching to be at its best when it’s used to help alter paradigms, those patterns of thinking and being all of us get stuck in, by skewing our more familiar reality just enough to invoke a consciousness expanding experience. If you walk out of church looking at things just a little differently than when you arrived, then I have done my job. And anytime your open-minded inner-witchdoctor helps find a new way of looking at things, she has done her job too.

The notion of having a guardian spirit or being in touch with the spirit realm can also make us rational types, including myself, a bit uneasy. But for me the guardian spirit is another term for one’s own genius and authenticity. The words genius and demon, originally referred to one’s own authentic pattern. Just as the pattern for the giant oak tree is contained in the tiny acorn, one’s guardian spirit, one’s daimon, as the Greeks called it, or one’s genius, which shares the same root as words like genie, genetic, and genesis, inwardly directs us toward our own most authentic state. Yet, in a world were there are so many external pressures also shaping us and forcing us to be something else, it takes great power, great medicine, to live authentically.

Having accomplished this great task, however, the shaman is prepared and qualified to help others retrieve their lost souls. Indigenous shamans often to so through a variety of techniques, like drinking psychoactive brews that help them leave their bodies to travel underground to find lost souls, or by drumming and chanting and dancing, or by dramatizing a journey to the underworld in invisible canoes, as the Salish people of the Pacific Northwest do. But the inner-shaman simply needs to understand that the soul and the psyche are the same. Psyche, from Greek, means “soul.” Psychology is the study of the soul. Psychotherapy is soul work. In fact, the psychotherapist is just a fancy western term for witchdoctor, which, you should know by now, is not a put down. Psychotherapists help to guide and heal wounded souls most often by just listening and helping them discover new ways of looking at things.

We may not think souls can actually leave our bodies, but there are many lost souls, and most our psychological disorders are dissociative in nature, meaning our psyches, or souls, have been split away from our bodies, from how we live our lives, including through extreme dissociative conditions like multiple personality syndrome and PTSD. Psychotherapy means to help the soul heal, same as shamanism.

Finally, the shaman uses one’s powers for the good of all. Shamans are humanitarian and communitarian, and the inner-shaman is at work whenever we’re striving for the greater good. As Michael Harner says, “Shamanism goes far beyond a primarily self-concerned transcendence of ordinary reality. It is transcendence for a broader
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purpose, the helping of humankind.” Indigenous shamans may have ways that seem strange and foreign to us, but those ways stem from the desire for healing and wholeness shared by all peoples and all beings. We may not chant, drum, drink psychoactive teas, paddle imaginary canoes, or suck out invisible darts, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have an inner-witchdoctor who helps us find health and wholeness through the power of an open mind, embracing new ideas and letting go of old patterns, living authentic lives, and caring for others. As Dr. Tomás Soloway Pinkson, a Huichol shaman I know, says at the end of his autobiography, “Our time on this planet hangs by a fragile thread that can break in any given moment. Right now is the time to be living our authentic heart path life. Each of us is called to bring forth our deeper vision and birth it into the world. Sing your song. Dance your dance. Celebrate now! Heal the Sacred Circle. May it be so.”

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14 Harner, ibid., p. 179.