

Spontaneous Shamanic Initiation

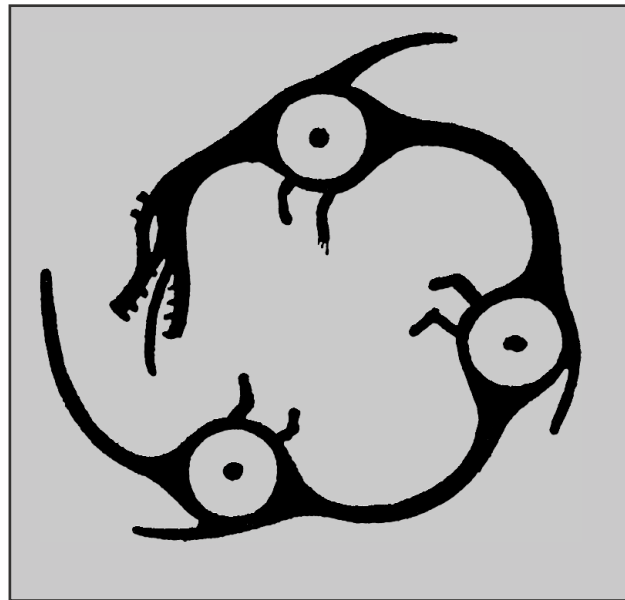
Valentine McKay-Riddell, PhD

There has been considerable controversy in recent years about the validity of spontaneous shamanic initiation. Advocates insist that this is the most authentic method by which a shaman is "made." Detractors, on the other hand, believe that only through a process of many years of rigorous training with a practicing shaman can an acolyte become an adept. Rather than argue the validity of one method over another, this paper discusses the experience of one shamanic practitioner—myself—and correlates my experience, as well as those of various clients and students, to theories of spontaneous initiation prevalent within both historic indigenous societies and the contemporary shamanic community.

During a period of three years (1983–1986), I was spontaneously initiated and worked shamanically to heal the catalyst of my initiation—ovarian cancer. This experience inspired and continues to inform my current work as a shaman, transpersonal psychologist, and founding director of a nonprofit organization devoted to the healing of individuals, communities, and the planet.

Introduction

What, precisely, is a shaman? While there are many versions of shamanic practice that run the gamut from the path of power to the path of heart, the following definition, offered by Rhianon, one of my shamanic studies students, is the one best suited to this article:



I define a shaman, first and foremost, as a healer. A shaman possesses specific talents or abilities that help others and themselves to communicate with the unseen spirit world and thus, attain healing and/or greater levels of harmony with the world(s) at large. This healing is energetic and requires the shaman to be a seer of sorts – to be able to see into a person and the spirit world – to get to the heart of the matter and act on behalf of the one being healed.

First Dream

The path was narrow, winding tightly around huge red boulders, and stretched far into the distance. I inched forward, clinging to the right side of the cliff that towered

above me. As I proceeded in this fashion, I was suddenly confronted by a stream of people coming hastily from the opposite direction. One of them stopped at the sight of me and said, "You shouldn't go any further—there's been a terrible earthquake!" "That's alright," I replied, surprised at my own calm. "I have cancer anyway."

As often happens with such dreams, I allowed my plans for the day ahead to erase it from my mind. And yet years later I can still recall it. It must have had some effect, however, for within a year, I had quit my job in UC Berkeley's IT Department. My older daughter, Krystal, had gone to college; my younger daughter, Leigh, who had never accepted my remarriage, had moved in with her father; and my husband Lewis and I had moved to Mendocino County to join the rest of the city's expatriates on California's North Coast.

My Path to Shamanic Initiation

Within a few short weeks of our exodus and reestablishment in a tiny two-room cabin on Cameron Road in Elk, all hell broke loose. One of my cats was killed on the road the day we moved in. Leigh telephoned to say that her father was moving the family to Georgia. The winter rains began early and, overcome by loneliness and grief, I soon developed constant, excruciating abdominal and back pains. Over the next several months, despite many visits to a local doctor, the pains—accompanied by

rapid loss of weight, hair, and energy—persisted. In the end, I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. I had no medical insurance and very little money; therefore Western medicine was out of the question. Besides, my father had died of esophageal cancer in 1980, and I was convinced that the medical protocol had hastened his death—a prospect which terrified me even more than the distinct possibility that I might die myself for lack of proper care. I decided to try to heal myself, reading everything I could find on the subject of alternative healing, and soon plunged into an alien world of macrobiotics, meditation, yoga, and acupuncture.

The following spring we moved to a larger cabin on Greenwood Ridge. We put in a vegetable garden, and I sent off for a correspondence course in herbology and began to experiment with herbs on myself. Our 70-year-old neighbor became a good friend and taught me gardening “from the ground up”—a discipline every bit as life-affirming as love.

However, as often happens in such cases, a visit that summer from Leigh which coincided with a visit from my mother brought my dance with cancer to a crisis point. I had resented my alcoholic mother since early childhood for abandoning my sister and myself to the tender mercies of our great aunts and a Scots nanny. Angered by her inability to control her drinking, I sent her back to Washington DC, where she was diagnosed with cancer herself and admitted to a hospital in Buffalo, New York. There, she had a cardiac arrest shortly after Christmas but was put on life support, a situation that she would never have agreed to and one which the family could not afford.

Finally, after nearly a month of letters, late night bedside reports, and endless long-distance conferences with the doctors, I managed to convince everyone that not only would our mother have objected violently to a vegetative life, there was no money to pay for it. Within a couple of days, papers to cancel extraordinary life support arrived by Express Mail. I signed them, and we were all more or less free to pursue our separate paths.

Mine seemed to have reached a plateau. I was no worse, but no better ei-

ther. Still terribly thin and subject to occasional bouts of pain, I turned to art-making for relief. A local chiropractor had diagnosed scoliosis and this upset me tremendously. I'd made a small sculpture of my twisted spine which very accurately represented my inner state as well as my physical condition.

Meanwhile, Leigh announced that she had been seriously considering suicide, and my sister called to say that

comes back to you.

I thought about my gloomy spine sculpture and promptly began a second one, a mobile woven of rice paper and rainbow-colored strips of mylar, hung between two pieces of driftwood that balanced beautifully. Six weeks later the chiropractor announced that my spine was actually beginning to straighten out. It occurred to me that I might be able to apply this same process to the healing of cancer. I made two sculptures of my abdomen with instant plaster cast bandages—one painful-looking purplish thing with moss and prickly horse-chestnuts for ovaries to acknowledge the severity of the situation, and one bright pink one with silver mylar ovaries—a message to my inner self that I was ready to heal.

Meanwhile I continued the study of Huna in the writings of Max Freedom Long. I had read Carlos Casteneda in the mid-70s, and later I would discover Serge Kahili King, Michael Harner, José and Lena Stevens, Sandra Ingerman, and others. At this point, however, I was pretty much on my own. Still, as I learned and practiced various skills such as shamanic journey and communicating with nature in all its many forms, the pain seemed to lessen and some of my energy slowly began to return. I met Murray Goldman, a kahuna or doctor-priest in San Francisco, who prescribed visualization and journeying exercises and instructed me to say the Ho'oponopono, the Hawaiian prayer for forgiveness, every day.

After several months of this new practice, I ran into my friend in town again and gave him a progress report. I was much better, but still not completely well. He suggested that I might benefit from a psychodrama session with his partner. During the ensuing three-hour psychodrama session I was directed to play the roles of my mother and myself, moving back and forth between two empty chairs to do so. While playing Mother, however, I noticed that the words I spoke were not mine, and the feelings I had were unfamiliar to me. I could only conclude that she was somehow communicating through me. The following morning, I mulled over the night's events, and I suddenly realized that the problems I'd had with my mother were not her problems, but



***One of Huna's
most important
teachings is
that what you
send out into
the universe
comes back
to you.***

she'd had a modified radical mastectomy. I didn't know, then, about the connection between deep grief and physical illness. All I knew was that the life I had tried so hard to control was in total chaos, and that the people I loved most in the world were either sick or crazy or dead.

Talking with a friend in Mendocino one day, I shared this sadness—and my feeling that this was what was keeping me from healing. Concerned, he loaned me a book on Huna, the Hawaiian science of healing and magic. One of Huna's most important teachings is that what you send out into the universe

mine! Mother had simply been herself—my disapproval of her mothering style was my own issue.

With this realization, a huge weight lifted, and I felt I could breathe more freely. Over the next few weeks I began to notice that while I still cared deeply about my sister and my daughters, I didn't feel so responsible for them. They would make their own decisions, and that would be okay. As for my mother, now that I understood the root cause of our alienation, I could begin to feel some compassion for her. If our relationship had been painful to me, I thought, how much more difficult might it have been for her?

Healing progressed rapidly after that. The combination of shamanic journeying, working with power animals (a practice that had occurred to me before I actually read about it), art-making, and forgiveness was medicine far more powerful than I could ever have imagined. Later I would realize this was a form of shamanic initiation, and since it seemed to arise of its own accord, I think of it as spontaneous. Then I began to think that perhaps I could share some of what I was learning as a health practitioner—not allopathic medicine, but naturopathy—and sent to Bastyr University in Seattle for a brochure. When it arrived I was shocked at the cost and realized I'd have to relinquish that idea. That night I went to bed feeling somewhat desperate. I was eager to learn, eager to teach and to help—but how?

Second Dream

I was on a high platform—towering hundreds of feet above the ground. The air was cold and thin and the sky a brilliant blue—much like the Sierras in the fall. There were others there—several gentle brown-skinned people wearing simple clothing in colors of red, black, and white. They didn't speak, but they smiled at me and I realized they expected me to walk to the edge of this platform. A message came clearly into my mind: "All you have to do is jump."

Terrified of heights, I approached the edge. I leaned over, just enough to gauge how far I was going to have to jump, and saw a staircase leading all the way down to the ground.

I awoke early, and as I moved through the various tasks of the day I pondered this dream. What could it

mean? Then, late that same evening as I was getting ready for bed, I realized that it was about art-making. My spontaneous initiation must have begun with the first dream. I was already an artist, had been since childhood, and my art reflected a kind of deep inner connection with both the physical body and spirit. I stopped doing this in the early 1980s in order to work at UC Berkeley, because we needed the money. It was returning to art that began the healing process (with the scoliosis sculpture first, and then the series of cancer sculp-



***The combination
of shamanic
journeying,
working with
power animals,
art-making, and
forgiveness was
medicine far more
powerful than I
could ever have
imagined.***

tures and paintings). I already knew everything I needed to know in order to be useful. I would be able to help people heal with a combination of shamanism and art!

Although this was a real breakthrough, I had to acknowledge that I no longer felt "normal." I didn't recognize the person I'd become, and even wondered, from time to time, whether some other spirit had entered my body—perhaps during sleep—and taken over. I was certainly no longer the woman I had been—the life of a healer had never oc-

curred to me. As a Catholic, I'd been a devout and rather odd child and a reasonably well-behaved teenager. I'd become a wife, mother, and artist, and had never conceived of being anything else. Suddenly the old roles were melting away and I found myself fumbling in this new one. I knew that was happening to me was similar to what Arnold Mindell describes:

Chronic illness, feelings of being torn asunder by opposing forces, and near-death experiences frequently have the goal of "cleansing" you from your own self and refilling you with nothingness or with pure nature....Either you become fluid, or nature erases you in its own way.

Despite my hesitancy and unfamiliarity with the "new me," however, I gradually began teaching the process I had learned, which I called "Healing Art." I soon came to love this work and couldn't imagine how I'd ever lived without it. Not only that, as I worked with other people, teaching what I'd learned, my body responded eagerly. Within a year all the symptoms were gone. Whatever I was supposed to do with my life had begun.

Methods of Shamanic Initiation: Historical Methods

Well-documented examples of shamanic initiation are almost too many to count; here I include only a few of them. Note that these are accounts of several initiatory practices: spontaneous initiation (in which the candidate is "called" to the role by an illness, accident, or the sudden emergence of unusual abilities and other paranormal phenomena); hereditary initiation (in which the shamanic powers and responsibilities are passed down both through a genealogical family as well as a spiritual genealogy); people's choice (in which the candidate is chosen by members of the community); and self-selection followed by rigorous training with a practicing shaman.

Spontaneous Initiation

According to Mircea Eliade, Central and Northeast Asian shamans have two methods of recruitment: hereditary transmission and spontaneous vocation. Shamans recruited by these methods are considered more powerful than the "self-

made" shamans or those chosen by the clan. Interestingly, however, in many indigenous cultures, such as that of the Araucanians of Chile, the candidate is one who is "... sickly or morbidly sensitive, with weak heart(s), disordered digestion(s), and subject to vertigo(they) claim that the divinity's summons...is irresistible and that a premature death would inevitably punish (their) resistance and infidelity." However, Eliade draws a clear distinction between the shaman and the mentally ill patient, who "proves to be a caricature of a mystic." He further notes that while various illnesses are "frequent in the vocation of medicine men and, that like an invalid, the shamanic candidate is shown the solitude, danger and hostility of the surrounding world...the...shaman...is above all a sick man who has...succeeded in curing himself." In this case, the healing of the candidate is considered equivalent to initiation. Eliade notes that "it is not to the fact that he is subject to epileptic attacks that the Eskimo or Indonesian shaman owes his power and prestige; it is to the fact that he can control his epilepsy."

In everyday life, a successful Wintu or Dyak shaman must, in spite of such manifestations, have excellent neurological health and above average intelligence; Australian medicine men "are expected to be, and usually are, perfectly healthy and normal."

Sandra Ingerman states that a shaman is one who has had a brush with death in some form or another, one who has gone "to the other side" and returned with the knowledge of how to survive that journey and the ability to share the information. Barbara Tedlock notes that whether a shaman is chosen directly by spirit or learns through her family's teachings, she cannot be initiated unless she has also been called during a dream, vision, or illness.

Regardless, the spontaneous call to shamanism is not easy to answer, nor the shamanic path a smooth one to follow. According to Roger Walsh, while the messages we are sent in dreams can (as in my case) be ignored, the shamanic initiation crisis cannot. "It explodes through the shaman-elect with life-shattering force, disintegrating the old equilibrium and identity and demanding birth of the new."

Hereditary initiation

Hereditary initiation, in which the ancestor's abilities are passed down to the son or grandson, daughter or granddaughter, may be somewhat easier to experience.

Unlike the shock of spontaneous initiation, this transmission is expected, both by the candidate and by the members of his or her family. On the other hand, Walsh writes:

When selection occurs at birth it may place an enormous responsibility on the future shaman, the family, and, indeed, on the whole community. The appropriate rituals and taboos must be followed in minute detail and can be painfully restrictive.

Walsh quotes Rasmussen's description of American and Iglulik Eskimo shamanic preparation as an event considered so serious that some parents burden themselves with onerous taboos while waiting for the birth of the shaman to be.

Such a life, hemmed in by countless taboos and circumscribed by self-chosen restrictions, is hard to imagine. Yet for tribal peoples these taboos are as essential to life as eating. To flout them means offending the spirits and thereby risking death and disaster.

Community's Choice

A community may choose an individual to serve as mediator to the spirit world because of some striking feature or experiences—an unusual physical appearance, an illness such as epilepsy,

unexpected recovery from severe illness, or a variety of other omens.

Black Elk, the great medicine man of the Oglala Sioux, describes his own process of shamanic initiation. At the age of nine, he became quite ill, and during this experience he was given many visions which, upon his recovery, he found himself unable to share with the people of his tribe:

They told me I had been sick twelve days, lying like dead all the while, and that Whirlwind Chaser, who was Standing Bear's uncle and a medicine man, had brought me back to life. I knew it was the Grandfathers in the Flaming Rainbow Teepee who had cured me; but I felt afraid to say so. ...Everybody was glad that I was living; but as I lay there thinking about the wonderful place where I had been and all that I had seen, I was very sad; for it seemed to me that everybody ought to know about it, but I was afraid to tell, because I knew that nobody would believe me, little as I was, for I was only nine years old.

Only as he grew older did he feel comfortable sharing the visions he had received during his initiation, and his visions eventually began to manifest. It was then that he was recognized by his people as the healer and leader that he was.

Spontaneous Initiation in Contemporary Settings

Among interesting examples of spontaneous initiation in the modern world are the near death experiences (NDEs). J. Timothy Green writes:

ShamanPortal.org

The global resource for all things shamanic

find, post, learn, participate & shop.

Listings of workshops, trips, apprenticeship, training, healers, books, drums, supplies, shamanic circles, retreats, teachers, volunteers and much more.

Participate in our Talking Stick Forum, read fascinating Articles by renowned shamans or read Blogs and shamanic News from around the world.

The field of near-death studies shares a number of interesting, often compelling, similarities with the ancient spiritual tradition known as shamanism. Not least among these similarities is the fact that a near-death experience (NDE) is a time-honored form of shamanic initiation. A deep NDE can propel a person who had no prior knowledge or interest in shamanism into spontaneous, often classic, shamanic experiences, while living an apparently normal life in the midst of modern Western society.

My personal experience, initiation through illness and subsequent recovery sans medical intervention described in the beginning of this article, falls under the category of spontaneous initiation. According to recent popular literature as well as scholarly research, I am not alone in having experienced this phenomenon. Paul Levy, a healer in private practice, writes at length of his initiatory process.

In 1981, I spontaneously went into such an ecstatic state that I was hospitalized by what I call the "anti-bliss patrol." The authorities had become alerted because I was simply unable to restrain my enthusiasm at the "good news" that was beginning to reveal itself to me about the nature of reality.... during that next year I was thrown in mental hospitals a number of times and (mis)diagnosed as having manic-depressive (bi-polar) illness.... Little did the doctors realize that... I had actually gotten "drafted" into a deeper psycho-spiritual process of an entirely different order – a spiritual awakening or shamanic initiation – that was blowing my mind as it was simultaneously revealing it.

While many self-healed individuals have gone on to share the fruits of their journeys with others for altruistic purposes, a great number of people do not assume the mantle of shamanism. In some instances the lack of family and community support provides the deterrent. Levy, who does innovative work in dreaming but did not become a practicing shaman, writes, "Tragically, with the support and blessing of the psychiatric community, both of my parents passed away convinced their son was crazy."

Levy's self-assessment is similar to my own post-initiatory state of mind. While I didn't exactly consider myself crazy, it was clear that my world had been turned upside down, and it took a

long time to find firm footing in this new environment. However, despite my initial hesitation and a notable lack of support from various family members, friends, and the professional healing community (one medical doctor, to whom I suggested that what I'd learned might be helpful to his AIDS patients, accused me first of witchcraft and then of practicing psychology without a license), it seemed to be the only viable



Shamanism is a path filled with initiations, and it is through the process of initiation that shamans grow, allowing them to move into their visionary abilities and healing gifts.

path. My own Native American heritage influenced me to define this path as shamanic. The clear sense that I had been "saved" in order to serve through sharing with others the learning experiences I had had impelled me to follow the path of a healer. This path had many branches.

As soon as I realized I was actually healed, I wanted to understand more about it. Murray Goldman, the kahuna I met in San Francisco, gave me a great deal of information about what had actually happened to me and why I was practicing as I was. For example, without any training at all, I had discovered that I could see inside my body and the

bodies of other people, discern what was not working, and intuitively sense how to "fix" it. As I did this, I would visualize surrounding the dis-eased part of the body with white light and then with whatever other color seemed appropriate. I made art pieces illustrating the undesirable condition in order to validate the message from what Huna calls the "Little Self" and followed this with art pieces depicting the desired healing, as a message to the Little Self that the patient was ready to heal.

After learning that this sort of work was loosely categorized as vibrational healing, I apprenticed myself to a well-known healer in Mt. Shasta and studied with her for two years, learning and practicing various healing techniques, including Reiki. Finally since Western society insists on such credentials, I returned to school to earn masters and doctoral degrees in clinical and transpersonal psychology. However, my work as a psychologist is still very much rooted in shamanic practice.

Spontaneous Initiation Two Case Studies

Over the years I have had the privilege of working with students in many capacities. As a shamanic practitioner and a Reiki master and teacher I have facilitated many Reiki empowerments, practiced Reiki with clients, and have taught students Reiki and a combination of Native American shamanism which I feel came to me through my Apache bloodline. Recent interviews with two of these students revealed diametrically opposed viewpoints.

A student I'll call Morgana, a 26-year-old woman living in Texas, does not believe she was spontaneously initiated. However, her practices include Native American drumming, journeying, and work with animal spirits; various Huna rituals; Vudun use of body parts (i.e. hair) to communicate and heal long distance; and Druidic runes for protection. When asked how she became interested in shamanism, she replied that she had been "interested in it in some way or another my entire life, thus when I had a chance to learn I jumped on it."

Morgana explains:

With my childhood illnesses and other chronic (considered terminal) illness...in my

late teens, I began to be curious as to what I could have done better or differently in this life or another to prevent what seemed like an overbearing karmic weight to bear.

It was at this time that she was participating in a shamanic training program that I was offering at ITP. During that time she realized she had the skills of a shaman. I would call this her initiatory experience, even though she did not perceive it that way at the time.

When asked whether she applied shamanic principles in her daily life, Morgana replied:

Yes.... I have started to infuse the Spirit world I am becoming familiar with via the medium of shamanic study in every aspect of my life. I feel I now have a dual perspective to life that includes many things unseen when looking at the lessons and/or obstacles before me.

And yet this young woman refuses to call herself a shaman, believing that a true shaman never uses that term. This is similar to some indigenous practitioners of shamanism, who prefer to call themselves "medicine people" or "healers" in order to define themselves by what they do, not so much by a title of what they are.

Morgana continues:

To further clarify why I would not call myself a shaman YET, [it] is because I am only proficient using these practices to help myself and those closest to me. I have not yet had the experience of anyone approaching me for help in a shamanic way except for people close to me....Until this happens I ... won't know if I can act as a working shaman/healer for just anyone.

Rhiannon is a 29- year-old woman living in Michigan who describes herself as having had a long-term association with shamanism and states that she uses both Native American and Hawaiian practices. She notes that she has felt close to nature since early childhood.

Upon learning what shamanism stood for I realized I already inherently held those beliefs. I did not have a name to put onto this belief system until a couple years ago.

When asked whether she considered

herself to have been initiated she replied:

"Definitely. Since childhood....I remember putting together a little ritual outside once behind some bushes. It was the first time I ever went there to sing and hide out. I decorated this little fort area with sticks and stones. I dedicated it to God. I sang songs and felt an overwhelming connection to God. I inherently knew that God would be with me always and that no matter what happened, I would be okay. It felt like a quickening of my faith.

I would say that her use of shamanic principles in her daily life, which includes giving back offerings for what she has received and "maintaining a sense of gratitude for all the blessings in my life" stems from her childhood communication with plants and animals.


This was one way in which the shamanic path manifested early and spontaneously in her life. She believes that this ability and the emergence of an ability to "feel into an environment" enabled her to avoid dangerous situations in her home, and that these are further evidence of her early shamanic initiation. She believes that she is a shaman (rather than a nature mystic) because of the way in which she makes use of these communications – for purposes of healing and divining.

Rhiannon describes this as follows.

I have developed my ability to pay attention and "see" into things to get ideas about what is going to happen. This intuitive development guides me in my healing work. I implement journeying into many healing sessions, both for myself and others, to obtain insight and guidance. Many times during these journeying sessions, I will help my client interpret any plants and animals that show up. I have also created rituals to help manifest certain things or events I wish to happen in my life. These rituals include a communication and exchange with a spirit – sometimes in the form of a plant or animal and sometimes in the form of a god/goddess. I have done this since childhood. As a child I would create rituals as I felt led to do so...now I still follow my intuition but I have also received formal training.

She adds that she incorporates soul

Ancestral Voice is a center of healing and learning devoted to the preservation, application and respectful dissemination of shamanic and indigenous lifeways.




Drawing upon Native wisdom and practices, seekers learn and discover ways to live intentionally, with Awareness, Passion, and Freedom.

- Indigenous Lifeways: Program-Path of the Human Being, Valley of the Mystic
- Native Healing and Ceremonies
- Rites of Passage ■ Counseling
- Herbal Medicine ■ Bodywork
- Instruction in: Tai Chi Chuan; Native Drum & Rattle; Bolyeria

Phillip Scott, Founder/Director, of Cherokee Ancestry, has walked the Native Path for over 25 years, learning from Medicine-Holy People, tribal Spiritual Leaders and shamans from various traditions.

{415} 897-7991
 Phillip@ancestralvoice.org
 www.ancestralvoice.org

Awaken to your true self.



Sacred Center

SCHOOL FOR THE HEALING ARTS
 JOURNEYING TO PENU · ANDEAN WATER
 ESSENCES · ENERGY CONSULTING

Ucannora Anundolma

WWW.SACRED-CENTER.NET
 845-987-7846

retrieval into her work as a Reiki practitioner and follows the Lakota tradition of shamanism under the direction of a personal teacher who also follows a path of Love. Finally, when asked if she considered herself to be a shaman, she responded:

Yes, because I feel very connected with the principles of shamanism. When I read about shamanic practices and ways of being, I feel like that describes me. I am doing those things. I am within that state of being. I very much believe those things. At the same time, I just do what I do...it seems natural...so if shamanism is what we are calling it...then great.

These students' responses surprised me. I expected Morgana, who has recently completed a shamanic studies course and apprenticeship to a shamanic practitioner in her area, to feel more grounded in shamanic practice, and Rhiannon, with whom I am currently working, to be less so. The difference might be due to the fact that Morgana has found new practices and new ways to incorporate them into what she has already learned; she states that she does not know what to call herself or her beliefs because, apart from the fact that they are all rooted in Earth-based spirituality, they vary widely. Rhiannon, however, is quite immersed in her shamanic practice and is currently planning her vision quest. To me, the question of spontaneous initiation in Rhiannon's case is clear. Regardless of her early Catholic upbringing, her con-

nection to Spirit was immediate, personal, and nature-based, and has continued to be imbued with these characteristics throughout her life. She has not merely accepted, but embraced, her shamanic abilities.



***It seems safe to say,
at this point, that
spontaneous
shamanic initiation
is a far more
frequently
experienced event
than is commonly
recognized.***

On the other hand, I happened to be present during what certainly appeared to be Morgana's spontaneous initiation while she was undergoing her first Reiki treatment, in which she reported being able to see the spirits of departed relatives and experiencing a tremendous

surge of energy throughout her body. This was followed by several days of disorientation and a new ability to communicate with spirits, animals, and other beings in what she later described as a place that is "not of this earth, yet seems to run... parallel to it." I can only conclude that perhaps she is not yet ready to claim this aspect of herself. In defense of each of these students' shamanic abilities, however, I point to Wesselman's assertion that the ability to achieve expanded states of awareness beyond this physical world, to enter inner worlds and communicate with their inhabitants, and to use these abilities to help themselves and others are qualities that define true shamans and set them apart from all other religious practitioners.

Conclusion

It seems safe to say, at this point, that spontaneous shamanic initiation is a far more frequently experienced event than is commonly recognized. Even practitioners of mainstream psychology and medicine are being forced to take notice of this psycho-spiritual phenomenon. Certainly many examples of spiritual emergency present symptoms that fall under this category. Stanislaus and Christina Grof note that:

The concept of spiritual emergency, which differentiates transformational crises from psychiatric disorders, is supported independently from many different fields. Particularly important are the data related to the shamanic traditions found in the historical and anthropological literature.

Indigenous accounts of spontaneous shamanic initiation that go back many years if not centuries recount the same onset, prognosis, and conclusion as in the Grofs' descriptions of spiritual emergency. The Grofs define a variety of such experiences, among them spiritual emergence and renewal, many clinically diagnosed psychoses, kundalini experiences, psychic opening, UFO encounters, and shamanic initiation.

It is also important to be aware that shamanic initiation is not necessarily a one-time event, but rather an ongoing procedure: As Sandra Ingerman and Hank Wesselman write:

Shamanism is a path filled with initia-



Purple Medicine Woman

***Shaman, Healer,
Counselor,
Consultant***

***Debra M. Varner, MA
415-694-9015
San Francisco, CA
debra@purple
medicinewoman.org***

www.purplemedicinewoman.org

tions, and it is through the process of initiation that shamans grow, allowing them to move into their visionary abilities and healing gifts....Shamanic initiations often occur without our having to ask for them. The spirits will create new life experiences to help you move into a new level of awareness.

What is most important here, however, is not to argue with "hard science" over the existence of this phenomenon. While science continues to debate the validity of spiritual emergency or shamanic initiation versus psychotic break, shamanic practitioners must turn to each other for validation of such life-altering experiences, in themselves and in those who come to them for help. Our task, as I see it, is to support each other and not to fall prey to the critical stance so prevalent in science and academia. Tedlock writes that the renaissance of shamanism is a worldwide spiritual movement whose practitioners insist on their right to practice both ancient and modern methods of healing and restoration of the planet, their communities, and themselves.

As shamans, ours is a largely uncharted and ever-changing world—one in which the spirits of curiosity, acceptance, and adventure must be our chief guides. We must continue even more courageously, in these confusing and often distressing modern times, to "go where no man has gone before," following intuition and knowing in the very core of our beings that we tread a well-worn path, and that even though it may wind through city streets, rather than virgin forest, it is truly the path with heart.

References

Casteneda, C. (1968). *The teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Eliade, M. (1972, 1974). *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*. Bollingen Foundation, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Green, J. T. (2001). The near-death experience as a shamanic initiation: A case study. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*. 19:4, 209-225. doi: 10.1023/A:1007859024038

Grof, S. & Grof, C. Eds. (1989) *Spiritual emergency: When personal transformation becomes a crisis*. New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam.

Harner, M. (1980). *The way of the shaman: A guide to power and healing*. New York: Bantam & Row.

Ingerman, S. (1991). *Soul retrieval: Mending the fragmented self*. New York: Harper Collins.

Ingerman, S. & Wesselman, H. (2010). *Awakening to the spirit world: The shamanic path of direct revelation*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

King, S. K. (1990). *Urban shaman: A handbook for personal and planetary transformation based on the Hawaiian way of the adventurer*. New York: Fireside/Simon & Schuster.

Levy, P. (2009). "We are all shamans-in-training." (Retrieved from www.awakeninthedream.com/artis/we%20are%20all%20shamans.htm 2/21/2010.)

Long, M. F. (1948, 1976). *The secret science behind miracles*. Marina del Rey, CA: DeVorss & Co.

Mindell, A. (1993). *The shaman's body: A new shamanism for transforming health, relationships, and the community*. New York: HarperCollins.

Niehardt, J. (1932, 1959, 1962, 1972, 2008). *Black Elk speaks*. New York: SUNY Press.

Stevens, J. & Stevens, L. (1988). *Secrets of shamanism: Tapping the spirit power within you*. New York: Avon/The Hearst Corporation.

Tedlock, B. (2005). *The woman in the shaman's body: Reclaiming the feminine in religion and medicine*. New York: Bantam Dell/Random House.

Walsh, R. (1990). *The spirit of shamanism*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.

Wesselman, H. (August 8, 2009). Encounters on the shaman's path. Retrieved from <http://www.themetaarts.com/archives/artuvw.html>

Wesselman, H. (September 9, 2009). The modern shaman. Retrieved from <http://www.sharedwisdom.com/article/modern-shaman>.

Valentine McKay-Riddell, PhD is the founder and Executive Director of Orenda Healing International, a 501c.3. nonprofit organization devoted to promoting individual and community health and wellbeing. She holds a PhD in Transpersonal Psychology and a Master's degree in Counseling Psychology from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) in Palo Alto, California, and a BFA in painting and sculpture from the San Francisco Art Institute.



Shamanism Canada.com
800-953-3343

**JOURNEY WITHIN
BASIC SHAMANISM RETREAT**
November 5 -7, 2010
www.shamanismcanada.com/retreats

**6TH CANADIAN 2-YEAR ADVANCED
SHAMANISM TRAINING**
Beginning November 2010
www.shamanismcanada.com/2-Year-Training-Application-4.pdf

Rediscover ourselves,
Empower each other,
Restore our connection
with the earth