

# Shamanism

## Fault Lines or Core Beliefs?

“Shamanism,” say various scholars, “refers to specific spiritual practices of primitive, tribal peoples—you can’t remove it from these cultural contexts, so it’s largely lost.” “Hold on,” cry various groups of interested, first world seekers, “there’s too much wisdom there we need to learn and practice if we’re going to save the planet—we can’t let it die.” “Oh no you don’t,” say hard-line factions among surviving native peoples, “shamanism’s certainly not dead, and it’s just as certainly our cultural possession. We need it to strengthen our own, and you privileged children of white oppression have no right to practice or spread its message.”

There, in a fractured nutshell, are the fault lines that have afflicted the original spirituality of the Earth. It’s tempting to dive once again into the fray—to try to sort it out. If I steal a nickel from you, for instance, you don’t have it anymore. But if I “steal” a form of spirituality, by believing and practicing it—don’t you still have it? And haven’t I thereby made it stronger? So where’s the theft? But I’ve recently disengaged from over two decades of effort in that direction. Looking back now, trying to see through



the rubble of white discrimination, active red reverse discrimination, and ivory tower abstraction, I ask myself: “what’s getting lost here?”

Though there are, in the history books as well as in reality, many different shades of shamanism, **central to most is the intuition that everything is alive, conscious in some manner, and able to interact with us in ways not so obvious to the five senses.** Modern people (our parents) tended to scoff at this as “superstition.” Post-modern people (that’s us) are not so sure anymore. But “**superstition**” should perhaps be reserved for not-physically-obvious beliefs or practices **that are largely fear-based.** And though we can certainly point to aboriginal cultures in which fear was a prominent part of the shaman’s toolkit, that’s not what interests us these days.

Take the condescending treatment (in so many older books) of the “poor primitive savage,” who has to “kneel down and appease the spirit of the deer after killing it to feed his family.” Was this superstition? Well here’s what Native American and mixed blood elders taught me. Gratitude is the core healthy emotion and giving thanks for food is the “first” prayer. Life is supported on this Mother Earth by millions of little deaths each day. Honoring these little deaths as sacred gifts, praying and working for the health of the species that give those gifts, giving thanks not to some “Lord,” but directly to the systems that feed us—this is what keeps the “big deaths” at bay

By the “big deaths,” my teachers meant what we call the horsemen of the apocalypse—things like famine, plague, and war. In other words, the “stupid” savage kneeling over the deer was quite possibly making a prayer for ecological and social balance in the living world. This is a spiritualized ecology. Honestly, to subjugate and destroy species, buy their body parts

in corporate supermarkets all heedless of the real cost and source—isn’t that a lot more primitive and truly savage than an aborigine saying thank you to the ecosystem for a single kill his family will use every last part of? Who is being “stupid” here?

Native American languages commonly used terms meaning “medicine” to describe what we call “power.” As in “he’s got big medicine.” But why this word? What I was taught is that this usage reflects an underlying belief that “power” which cannot heal, which cannot bring things into harmony—is not worthy to be called “power.” Big medicine is power that heals. Anybody can break things. Here again, we come to the choice point. Is this perspective primitive? Or does it resonate to a far deeper wisdom than we seem to be able to articulate and live by in the dominant culture?

Finally, let’s look at the notion that different levels of conscious awareness are the building blocks of the entire universe, and that we can interact with these in ways not obvious to the five senses. This idea is as old as the Vedas, emerges in the mystical traditions of almost all religions, and is hinted at increasingly in the formulations of cutting edge science. What I used to teach was very simple. Suspend disbelief (if you harbor it), start “conversations” with respect and gratitude, listen quietly in the language of feelings (intuition)—and see if at times plant people, animal people, and even stone people don’t convey important information to you. Experiment—it’s the scientific method.

So looking back now, what I see is this. Racial, economic, and intellectual fault lines notwithstanding, there is a grand convergence to be found here. And since the dominant culture’s attempt to replace Nature with technology seems far from successful, shamanism’s living wisdom about how to stay in harmony with planetary systems could be valuable. ▲