

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

The making of a shaman: Calling, training and culmination

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4n0767rw>

Journal

Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 34(3)

Author

Walsh, RN

Publication Date

1994

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

THE MAKING OF A SHAMAN: CALLING, TRAINING, AND CULMINATION



ROGER WALSH is a professor of psychiatry, philosophy, and anthropology at the University of California at Irvine. His publications include *The Spirit of Shamanism*, *Meditation: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, and *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision*.

Summary

Shamanism and especially the psychological health of shamans remain topics of considerable confusion. This article, therefore, examines the shamanic training process from a specifically psychological perspective. Much in this ancient tradition that formerly appeared arcane, nonsensical, or pathological is found to be understandable in psychological terms. The initial shamanic crisis is seen to be a culture-specific form of developmental crisis rather than being evidence of severe psychopathology. Commonalities are noted between certain shamanic training experiences and those of other religious traditions and various psychotherapies. Psychologically effective shamanic techniques are distinguished from merely superstitious practices and several shamanic techniques are seen to foreshadow ones now found in contemporary psychotherapies.

Shamanism may be humankind's earliest and longest-lasting healing, psychotherapeutic, and religious tradition. Archaeological evidence suggests a history extending over tens of thousands of years, and textbooks of both psychiatry and comparative religion regu-

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author would like to thank the many people who provided assistance with the preparation of this article, Bonnie L'Allier for her excellent administrative and secretarial assistance, and Jeremy Tarcher for permission to use portions of my book *The Spirit of Shamanism* as a basis for parts of an updated and academic discussion of shamanic training.

larly begin with discussions of it. Within recent years, shamanism has suddenly become a topic of increased professional and popular interest. This new interest does not mean that shamanism is well understood. Indeed there is enormous confusion about the topic and considerable debate about what shamans are and how to define them.

Indeed, shamans have been regarded as everything from severely psychologically disturbed to virtual saints. Probably the prevailing mainstream academic view is that shamans are psychologically disturbed or, at best, individuals who have recovered from a significant disturbance. Among other things, the shaman has been called "mentally deranged" and "an outright psychotic" (Devereux, 1961), a "veritable idiot" (Wissler, 1931), and a charlatan. Perhaps the most common formal diagnoses have been epilepsy, hysteria, and schizophrenia.

On the other hand, an equally extreme but opposite view has appeared in the popular literature. Here shamanic practitioners and the states of mind they induce are being identified with those of advanced practitioners of Buddhism, yoga, or Christian mysticism (Doore, 1988; Kalweit, 1988).

Unfortunately, these comparisons appear to be based on gross similarities. When careful comparisons are made, it becomes apparent that shamanic experiences differ significantly from those of traditional categories of mental illness or from those of practitioners of traditions such as Buddhism or yoga (Noll, 1983; Walsh, 1990).

One of the reasons for the considerable confusion over the psychological status of shamans is that most research has been conducted by anthropologists with little psychological or psychiatric training. There is a significant need for more examination of shamanism by mental health professionals. This article aims to contribute to this examination by exploring the shamanic selection and training processes and attempting to make sense of them in psychological terms.

In doing so, it aims to distinguish between psychologically effective and merely superstitious techniques. It also contrasts shamanic techniques and experiences with those of other traditions such as meditative and yogic traditions.

At the same time, it also points to similarities with other traditions. Joseph Campbell (1968), among others, has pointed to similarities in the life stages of a diverse variety of healers, heroes,

and religious practitioners. This common pattern he has referred to as “the hero’s journey” and the stages of shamans’ training (their selection, discipline, and culminating experiences) are analogous to those of Campbell’s archetypal hero (Campbell, 1968; Walsh, 1990; Wilber, 1983). In any event, this division into selection, discipline, and culminating experiences will provide a useful sequence and framework for considering shamanism. However, first we need to define it.

Definition

Although no one definition satisfies all researchers, there do seem to be several key features that distinguish shamanism. For the purposes of this article, I will define shamanism 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 to serve their community (Walsh, 1989, 1990).

This definition points to several key features of this tradition that differentiate it from other religious and healing traditions and from various psychopathologies with which it has been confused. The first of these features is the shaman’s voluntary induction of altered states of consciousness, specifically trance states, that are phenomenologically distinguishable from those of both psychopathology and of other religious practices (Noll, 1983; Walsh, 1990).

The second key feature is that in these states shamans experience themselves as souls or spirits that leave their bodies and journey to other worlds or realms. Hence the various names that have been given to this shamanic technique include soul flight, spirit journey, and cosmic traveling. This experience bears obvious similarities to contemporary reports of some out-of-body experiences that can occur either spontaneously, by deliberate induction, or in lucid dreams and near-death experiences (Irwin, 1985; LaBerge, 1985; Monroe, 1971; Moody, 1975, 1988; Ring, 1980, 1984, 1993). Shamans 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.” Whereas many of their fellow tribespeople may feel they are victims of 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 necessarily

imply 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.

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 and 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 of consciousness (Winkelman, 1989). Mediums usually enter altered states (Bourguignon, 1973), but often do not journey; some Taoists, Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists may journey, but this is not a major focus of their practice (Baldrian, 1987; Evans-Wentz, 1958; Siegel & Hirschman, 1984); those who suffer mental illness may enter altered states and meet "spirits," but they do so involuntarily as helpless victims rather than voluntary creators of their experience.

SELECTION: THE INITIAL CALL AND INITIATION CRISIS

The Initial Call

The hero's journey in general and the shamanic vocation in particular usually begin with some sort of omen that Campbell (1968) describes as the "call to adventure," a call that may take many forms. In shamanism this call occurs most often in adolescence or early adulthood.

These omens may include some striking feature or experience such as an unusual physical appearance, an illness such as epilepsy, or an unexpected recovery from severe illness. Alternately, the shaman-to-be may have unusual subjective experiences such as curious symptoms, feelings, and behaviors that may be so dramatic that they have been called the shamanic initiation crisis, which will be discussed shortly.

The call may also come during a dream or vision quest. A vision quest is a period spent in solitude and fasting devoted to receiving a guiding vision for one's life. Dreams about spirits may constitute a shamanic call in the Inuit Eskimo tribes, while in California tribes it may be dreams about deceased relatives (Krippner, 1987). The significance of these dreams may require confirmation by mature shamans who were probably the world's first professional

dream interpreters. This selection by dreams occurs in a number of religious traditions and the Old Testament, for example, proclaims "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream" (Numbers 12:6).

The call to shamanism may be received with considerable ambivalence, and those who receive it may be regarded as "doomed to inspiration" (Bogoras, 1909). Many of the elect attempt to decline the invitation at first. However the symptoms, dreams or spirits may be distressingly persistent and eventually win out. Indeed, many shamanic traditions, like many hero traditions, hold that refusal of the call can result in sickness, insanity, or death. One of the earliest shamanic researchers, Bogoras, claimed that the "rejection of the 'spirits' is much more dangerous even than the acceptance of their call. A young man thwarted in his call to inspiration will either sicken and shortly die, or else the 'spirits' will induce him to renounce his home and go far away, where he may follow his vocation without hindrance" (Bogoras, 1909, p. 419). Of course, there are some who do reject the call or accept it reluctantly and then practice their art very little.

In a few tribes, individuals may also select themselves. However, such people are often regarded as less potent masters than those whose selection is ordained by outside forces. One notable exception is the Jivaro tribe of South America. Here, would-be shamans select themselves, and established practitioners sell them their knowledge, a practice enthusiastically followed by today's Western shamans in their weekend workshops.

The Jivaro payment is neither cheap nor benign. It usually consists of such spiritual necessities as one or two shotguns together with gunpowder, a blowgun, and a machete (Harner, 1984).

Elsewhere, shamans may be chosen at birth to carry on a family tradition. 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 as, for example, in the case of an Eskimo shaman whose mother

was put on very strict diet, and had to observe difficult rules of taboo. If she had eaten part of a walrus, for instance, then that walrus was taboo to all others; the same with seal and caribou. She had to have special pots, from which no one else was allowed to eat. No woman was allowed to visit her, but men might do so. My clothes were made

after a particular fashion; the hair of the skins must never lie pointing upwards or down, but fall athwart the body. Thus I lived in the birth-hut, unconscious of all the care that was being taken with me. (Rasmussen, 1929, p. 116)

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. Thus the taboos may be kept for generations even though, as Rasmussen found, "Everyone knew precisely what had to be done in any given situation, but whenever I put in my query: Why?, they could give no answer" (Rasmussen, 1929, p. 54).

One point about the nature of superstitions is important. Although tribal peoples in general and shamans in particular may start from different assumptions and even employ different cognitive styles, this does not necessarily imply a lack of logic or rationality (Bock, 1988; Levi-Strauss, 1966). Superstitions may be *inaccurate* beliefs about casual relationships that result in unnecessary, ineffective behavior. However, these beliefs may be quite *logical* from the cultural perspective and worldview. Therefore, contrary to some claims, apparently superstitious (to our Western worldview) shamanic beliefs and practices do not necessarily imply either pathology or irrationality. If one believes in malevolent spirits, then shamanic rituals designed to appease them may make perfect sense. It may also seem perfectly logical to assume that an adolescent who seems bothered by the spirits may have special connections with them and may, therefore, make an effective shaman. When this bothering is severe, it erupts into the most dramatic and mysterious form of the shamanic calling: the shamanic initiation crisis.

The Initiation Crisis

While the call to adventure in dreams and omens can sometimes be ignored and suppressed, the shamanic initiation crisis certainly cannot. It explodes through the shaman-elect with life-shattering force, disintegrating the old equilibrium and identity and demanding birth of the new.

It usually announces itself shortly after adolescence with an onslaught of unusual psychological experiences. These are said to sometimes include talents such as heightened sensitivity and perception. More often the shaman-to-be starts to exhibit unusual, in fact, even bizarre, dangerous, and life-threatening behavior. The

result may be a period of weeks, months, or even years of unpredictable chaos that disrupts the lives of the shaman, the family, and the tribe.

The onset may be abrupt or gradual. Eliade (1964) notes that there are

“sicknesses,” attacks, dreams, and hallucinations that determine a shaman’s career in a very short time. [On the other hand,] sometimes there is not exactly an illness but rather a progressive change in behavior. The candidate becomes meditative, seeks solitude, sleeps a great deal, seems absent-minded, has prophetic dreams and sometimes seizures. All these symptoms are only the prelude to the new life that awaits the unwitting candidate. His behavior, we may add, suggests the first signs of a mystical vocation, which are the same in all religions and too well known to dwell upon. (p. 35)

In the West such behavior would traditionally be regarded as evidence of severe psychopathology and treated accordingly, perhaps even with enforced hospitalization and medication. However, in shamanic cultures this crisis is interpreted as proof that the victim is destined to be a shaman and is to be treated accordingly.

Is there some way on integrating these apparently polar perspectives: the traditional Western pathologizing interpretation that has led so many researchers to regard shamans as walking psychopathologies and the tribal interpretation that sees novices as being called to a highly skilled, socially valued role as a source of help and healing? The answer is yes, because the initiation crisis may be a culturally specific developmental crisis which *starts* with a period of psychological distress but ideally *ends* with a new highly functioning leader and healer. The logic for this evaluation follows.

Despite many years of attempts to diagnose, label, and dismiss them, shamans simply do not fit neatly into traditional psychiatric diagnostic categories (Noll, 1983; Walsh, 1990). In fact, shamans often end up as some of the most highly functional members of the community and according to Eliade “show proof of a more than normal nervous constitution” (Eliade, 1964). They are said to commonly display remarkable energy and stamina, unusual levels of concentration, control of altered states of consciousness, high intelligence, leadership skills, and a grasp of complex data, myths, and rituals. So the symptoms and behavior of the shamanic initiation crises are unusual and even bizarre by both Western and tribal standards. Yet shamans not only recover but may function exceptionally well as leaders and healers of their people (Eliade, 1964;

Reichel-Dolmataoff, 1987; Rogers, 1982). In short, the shaman "is not only a sick man," said Eliade, "he is a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself" (Eliade, 1964, p. 27). From this perspective, "shamanism is not a disease but being healed from disease" (Ackerknecht, 1943, p. 46).

To set the shamanic initiation crisis in a larger context, it is important to note that shamans are certainly not the only people observed to be better off after a psychological disturbance than before it. In ancient Greece, Socrates declared that "our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness, provided the madness is given us by divine gift" (Lukoff, 1985, p. 155). The psychiatrist Menninger observed that "some patients have a mental illness and then they get well! I mean they get better than they ever were. . . . This is an extraordinary and little realized truth" (Lukoff, 1985, p. 157).

These crises have been given many names each of which illuminates a different aspect of the process. For example, disturbances with positive growth outcomes have been described as a positive disintegration, regenerative process, renewal, and creative illness (Dabrowski, 1964; Ellenberger, 1970; Flach, 1988; Pelleteir & Garfield, 1976; Perry, 1986).

Some crises are specifically associated with mystical or transpersonal experiences. These have been described as "mystical experiences with psychotic features," "divine illness," "spiritual emergencies," "spiritual emergences," and "transpersonal crises" (Grof & Grof, 1986, 1989, 1990; Laing, 1972; Lukoff, 1985; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

These transpersonal crises have recently received growing attention from mental health professionals (Assagioli, 1986; Bragdon, 1988; Perry, 1986; Lukoff, 1985; Grof & Grof, 1986, 1989, 1990; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986). They appear to arise either spontaneously as in shamans or as the result of contemplative practices. Various symptomatic patterns or syndromes of this crisis have been described, and one of these resembles classic shamanic experiences so closely that it has been specifically described as the shamanic type (Grof & Grof, 1986, 1989). The fact that similar crises can erupt among contemporary Westerners surrounded by cars and computers and among tribal shamans in tents and tepees suggests that some archetypal process may be involved. Transpersonal crises may, therefore, be newly recognized forms of perennial developmental crises of which one of the earliest may have been

the shamanic initiation crisis. This developmental perspective acknowledges both the pain and the potential development inherent in these crises and thereby offers an alternative, less pathologizing, more hopeful, and hopefully more accurate interpretation of the shamanic crisis than has the traditional purely pathologizing interpretation.

TRAINING AND DISCIPLINE

The greatest of all wonders is not the conqueror of the world
but the subduer of himself.

—Will Durant (1938, p. 360)

When the initial call has been answered, then the period of training and discipline begins. This is a period in which the mind is trained, the body toughened, cravings are reduced, fears faced, and strengths, such as endurance and concentration, are cultivated. This is usually a slow and lengthy process where success may be measured in months and years, and patience is not only a virtue but a necessity. The process was pithily summarized by the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu:

First gain control of the body
and all its organs. Then
control the mind. Attain
one-pointedness. Then
the harmony of heaven
will come down and dwell in you.
You will be radiant with Life.
You will rest in Tao.

—Merton, (1969, p. 121)

The shaman's instruction comes from both inner and outer worlds. In the outer world, it consists of apprenticeship to a master shaman. From the teacher, the apprentice learns both theory and practice: the myths and cosmology, rituals, and techniques of the shamanic culture. These provide the means by which the apprentice shaman's experiences are cultivated, interpreted, and made meaningful within the tribal and shamanic traditions.

In the inner world, the apprentice learns to cultivate and interpret dreams, fantasies, visions, and spirits. Ideally, both inner and outer worlds align to mold the novice into a mature shaman who

can mediate effectively between these worlds, between the sacred and profane, the spiritual and mundane.

The length of apprenticeship may vary from as little as a few days to as long as months or years. Much must be learned. On the theoretical side, the apprentice must become a mythologist and cosmologist. To become an effective “cosmic traveler” and journey to other “worlds,” the shaman must learn the terrain of this multilayered, interconnected universe in which he or she will quest for power and knowledge. The shaman must also become familiar with its spiritual inhabitants—their names, habitats, powers, likes and dislikes, how they can be called, and how they can be controlled. It is these spirits whom the shaman will battle or befriend, who will help or hinder the shaman’s work. It is they who represent and embody the power at work in the cosmos, and it is the shaman’s relationship with them that will determine her or his success. So the ontology and cosmology the would-be shaman learns is no dry mapping of inanimate worlds but a guide to a living, conscious universe (Walsh, 1991). In philosophical terms, this worldview corresponds to the doctrines of hylozoism and animism.

Myths

Much of this cosmic terrain and the guidelines for relating to it are contained in the culture’s myth. Indeed, throughout most of human history myths have provided the major cultural guidelines for the conduct of life. It is only in our own time that major cultures have lacked a common, coherent myth—a grand, unifying picture, story, and explanation of the cosmos. Indeed as Carl Jung (1961), Edward Edinger (1984), and Joseph Campbell (1986) among others have pointed out, this lack of a common myth may be a major factor in the fragmentation and alienation that haunts so much of the contemporary world and much may depend on our ability to create a new myth appropriate to our time and needs.

Joseph Campbell (1986) suggests that myths serve four major functions: developmental, social, cosmological, and religious. Their developmental function is to provide guidelines for individuals as they mature through life’s stages. Their social function is to support the social structure and provide a shared understanding of life and relationship. Their cosmological and religious roles are to provide an image and understanding of the cosmos and of humankind’s role and responsibility in it.

Myths serve the shaman in all four ways. This is not surprising because many myths may have originated in shamanic journeys and reflect the terrain discovered there (Eliade, 1964). They guide the shaman's development, provide a place in society and cosmos, and indicate how he or she is to relate to them. In addition, myths provide the belief system that the shaman and his or her patients will share. This may be crucial since contemporary research suggests that a shared belief system, what Jerome Frank calls a healing myth, may be a vital part of an effective therapeutic relationship (Frank, 1985).

In addition to learning myths, the would-be shaman must learn diagnostic and healing practices, master the arts of entering altered states, and of journeying and acquiring helping spirits.

Inner Teachers

These helping spirits constitute the shaman's inner teachers. They may appear in dreams, daydreams, images, journeys, or visions. Consequently, much of the training concerns learning how to cultivate the circumstances and states of consciousness that will coax them to reveal themselves and their messages (Eliade, 1964; Walsh, 1990).

Similar encounters with inner guides occur in other religious traditions and in a variety of psychotherapies. Religious examples include the Hindu's "ishtadeva," the Quaker's "still small voice within," the Naskapi Indian's "great man," and the Tibetan Buddhist's deity figure. In Western psychotherapies, such inner guides may be encountered as animal imagery (Gallegos, 1987), the higher self of psychosynthesis (Ferruci, 1982), the inner self helper of multiple personality patients (Richards, 1990), the sage figure of Jungian active imagination, or the spirit guides that can appear spontaneously in psychedelic therapy and which, according to Grof (1988, p. 121), can be "most valuable and rewarding phenomena."

Asceticism

Perhaps the most dramatic practices are those of asceticism and isolation. Traditionally, ascetic practices are said to strengthen and purify. They may strengthen warrior qualities such as will, courage, and endurance, remove both physical and mental impurities,

and foster clarity and concentration of mind (Blacker, 1986). The sum total of these benefits is power. This is power of body, mind, and spirit. It is power to control one's faculties and responses, power to overcome temptations and obstacles, power to serve and benefit others, and for shamans, power over spirits.

Like any discipline asceticism has its traps. Feelings of righteousness are possible as is puritanical denial of the beauty and joy of life (Vaughan, 1986). Another trap is extremism because asceticism can be carried to dubious and dangerous extremes, even to the point of self-torture, mutilation, and death. But assuming that ascetic practices can also confer benefits, the logical question is how do they do this?

Several possible mechanisms exist. Those who succeed in meeting challenges have been found to enhance their sense of self-esteem and effectiveness (Bandura, 1986). Thus the ascetic who masters extreme challenges might well be expected to develop an exceptional sense of personal power.

Holding fast to their goals despite the pull of conflicting desires and fears means that ascetics give little reinforcement to these motives. Unreinforced motives tend to diminish and even extinguish, and this weakening of conflicting drives, which is a goal of many religious practices, is traditionally called *purification*. In contemporary psychological terms, this might be regarded as movement up Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Walsh & Shapiro, 1983). Some traditions (yoga, Vedanta and Buddhism) claim that in the higher reaches of spiritual mastery, competing desires can become so stilled that the mind rests in peace free of all conflict. This claim has recently received support from studies of advanced Buddhist meditators whose unique and remarkable Rorschach test patterns showed "no evidence of sexual or aggressive drive conflicts" (Brown & Engler, 1986, p. 214). While there is little evidence that shamans strive for this remarkable effect, they may certainly confront and overcome diverse fears and desires, thus attaining unusual degrees of concentration and power.

Assuaging guilt may also play a role in the effectiveness of asceticism. If practitioners believe they are sinful and must pay for their sins, then asceticism may seem a logical way to do so.

Ascetic practices occur in varying degrees in different parts of the world. Almost absent in some places, they reach extreme forms in parts of India and Japan. For centuries Japanese ascetics have

undertaken practices of almost incomprehensible life-threatening proportions, and some practices persist even today. The three major types include dietary restriction, cold, and solitude (Blacker, 1986).

In its mildest form, dietary restriction involves simply avoiding things such as meat, salt, or cooked foods that are believed to inhibit the acquisition of power. In its most extreme form, it involves rigid fasting, sometimes almost to the point of death. Such a practice was obviously not for the faint of heart.

A second major austerity is exposure to cold. Common in both Arctic areas and Japan, this technique is considered very effective in developing power. Once again, the severity of the practices can reach almost incomprehensible extremes.

“To stand under a waterfall, preferably between the hours of two and three in the morning and preferably during the period of the great cold in midwinter, is believed to be an infallible method of gaining power” (Blacker, 1986, p. 91). Indeed, one female ascetic reported that such a practice “no longer felt in the least cold to her. It rather promoted an unrivalled concentration of mind . . . which formed the very basis of her ascetic power” (Blacker, 1986, p. 92).

Solitude

The third major ascetic practice, periods of solitary withdrawal from society, is common to diverse religious traditions. Such periods mark the lives of many great saints and religious founders. Witness Jesus’ 40 days of fasting in the wilderness, Buddha’s solitary meditation, and Mohammed’s isolation in a cave. Such practices have been a part of the training of Eskimo shamans, the Christian Desert Fathers, Hindu yogis, and Tibetan monks who may be walled away in caves for up to 13 years.

The reason for seeking solitude is essentially to allow attention to be redirected inward away from the distractions of the world. Concentration is said to be cultivated, sensitivity to one’s inner world deepened, the mind quietened, and the clamor of competing desires stilled.

“Know thyself” is the motto of these practices. However, the demands and distractions of society usually hinder profound inner searching and self-knowledge. Consequently, periodic withdrawal

and solitude may be essential, as Wordsworth (1807) explained so poetically:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Shamans were the first to appreciate the far-reaching benefits of solitude for psychological and contemplative development. They were the first to learn from direct experience that, to use their own words, “the power of solitude is great and beyond understanding” (Rasmussen, 1929, p. 114).

The numerous trials faced by those willing to confront isolation and themselves in this way have been the subject of countless biographies. The Eskimo shaman Aua, whose parents’ rituals and taboos were outlined earlier, described his period of solitude as follows:

Then I sought solitude, and here I soon became very melancholy. I would sometimes fall to weeping, and feel unhappy without knowing why. Then, for no reason, all would suddenly be changed, and I felt a great, inexplicable joy, a joy so powerful that I could not restrain it, but had to break into song, a mighty song, with only room for the one word: joy, joy! And I had to use the full strength of my voice. And then in the midst of such a fit of mysterious and overwhelming delight I became a shaman, not knowing myself how it came about. But I was a shaman. I could see and hear in a totally different way. (Rasmussen, 1929, p. 118-119)

Note the extreme emotional lability and lack of control. These are common initial reactions to solitude and can be surprisingly powerful (Goldstein, 1983; Kornfield, 1979). After my own first retreat, I wrote of experiencing “sudden apparently unprecipitated wide mood swings to completely polar emotions. Shorn of all my props and distractions there was just no way to pretend that I had more than the faintest inkling of self-control over either thoughts or feelings” (Walsh, 1977, p. 161; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984).

Those who face themselves in solitude soon come to appreciate just how restless and out of control the untrained mind is. They soon come to understand claims such as Sigmund Freud’s that “man is not even master in his own house . . . in his own mind” (Freud, 1917, p. 252) and why “all scriptures without any exception proclaim that for attaining salvation mind should be subdued” (Ramana Maharshi, 1955).

Solitude and fasting are traditional ways of subduing the mind, and shamans may have been the first humans to use them to enhance access to the inner world and its images, visions, dreams, and spirits. For the successful candidate, these climax in certain culmination experiences that indicate that a degree of shamanic mastery has been attained. Two of the most frequent shamanic culmination experiences are those of being immersed in light and of death-rebirth.

THE CULMINATION OF THE QUEST: LIGHT, DEATH AND REBIRTH

Some experiences are unique to certain paths while others occur widely across different traditions. Two such widely occurring experiences are those of light and of death-rebirth. These are often regarded as major milestones, and in shamanism may be regarded as signs that the quest is complete.

Light

It is no accident that one of the terms most often used to describe the goal of the spiritual quest is *enlightenment*. The word has both literal and metaphorical meanings. Metaphorically it refers to a dramatic sense of insight and understanding; literally it refers to an experience of being filled, illuminated, or suffused with light. In the West the best known example is probably St. Paul, who was said to be blinded by the brilliance of his vision. Likewise, the church father St. Augustine “beheld with the mysterious eye of my soul the Light that never changes” (Underhill, 1974, p. 250). The famous mystic shoemaker Jacob Boehme, while wrestling with his “corrupted nature,” discovered that “a wonderful light arose within my soul. It was a light entirely foreign to my unruly nature, but in it I recognized the true nature of God and man” (Metzner, 1986, p. 83). Indeed, as Eliade noted, “Clearly, the ‘inner light’ that suddenly bursts forth after long efforts of concentration and meditation is well known in all religious traditions” (Eliade, 1964, p. 420).

Such experiences can also occur spontaneously. One survey suggests that as many as 5% of the American population may have

had them, and these people scored exceptionally well on the Affect Balance Scale of psychological health (Greeley, 1988).

Of course this is not to say that inner light experiences are all the same. They are not. Nor is it to say that all religious traditions evaluate them in the same way. They do not. Some traditions regard them as indications of progress; others, as seductive side-tracks to be noted and carefully passed by (Goldstein, 1983). Yet for still others, such as the Iglulik Eskimo shamans, they are regarded as essential and ecstatic.

For example, the Iglulik Eskimo Aua, whose career we have been following, finally experiences his quamenEq (shamanic enlightenment) alone in the wilderness. He had first trained in the company of his teachers, but his quest remained incomplete. He, therefore, set out into the Arctic wilds to seek in solitude what had eluded him in society. There he was seized by wild mood swings, experiencing unprecedented fits of melancholy and joy.

And then in the midst of such a fit of mysterious and overwhelming delight I became a shaman, not knowing myself how it came about. But I was a shaman. I could see and hear in a totally different way. I had gained my quamenEq, my enlightenment, the shaman-light of brain and body, and this in such a manner that it was not only I who could see through the darkness of life, but the same light also shone out from me, imperceptible to human beings, but visible to all the spirits of earth and sky and sea, and these now came to me and became my helping spirits. (Rasmussen, 1929, p. 119)

Thus Aua finally experienced the inner light and vision that signified the end of his quest. This is the so-called spirit vision (Eliade, 1964) that would enable him to “see” the cause and cure of his people’s ills. For these people believed, quite literally, that “without vision the people perish,” and shamans were the ones who took upon themselves the task of providing this vision.

Death and Rebirth

“It is only in the face of death that man’s self is born,” claimed St. Augustine (Yalom, 1980, p. 30). The extraordinary transformative power of a confrontation with death has been noted by both ancient religions and modern psychologies. “A confrontation with one’s personal death . . . has the power to provide a massive shift in the way one lives in the world. . . . Death acts as a catalyst that

can move one from one stage of being to a higher one (Yalom, 1980, p. 30).

In many cultures and religions, members must be willing to confront not only physical death but also ego death. This is the death of an old identity no longer appropriate to one's current stage of development. The old self sense must die, and out of its ashes must arise a new identity appropriate to one's developmental goal.

This experience of death and rebirth is a motif that echoes through the world's religions, cultures, and myths (Metzner, 1986). In diverse aboriginal cultures, the so-called rites of passage are death-rebirth rituals acted out at times of important life transitions. For example, in puberty rites the childhood identities "die," and boys and girls are reborn and recognized as adults. The Christian who undergoes a deep conversion may have a sense of dying to the old bodily self and being "born again" in the spirit or in Christ. "Unless ye be born again . . ." is a common warning in religious traditions.

Shamans have heeded these warnings, and death-rebirth experiences are widely regarded as essential for shamanic mastery. These experiences may occur either spontaneously or as a result of willed imagination and may be interpreted metaphorically or literally. Shamans may interpret their death-rebirth experiences quite literally as actual physical events in which their bodies are first dismembered by the spirits and then constructed anew. Thus shamans may believe that they are cut up by demons or by their ancestral spirits:

Their bones are cleaned, the flesh scraped off, the body fluids thrown away, and their eyes torn from their sockets. . . . His bones are then covered with new flesh and in some cases he is also given new blood. (Eliade, 1964, pp. 36-37)

The belief is that the practitioner has now been given a new stronger body fit for the rigors of shamanic work.

This dismemberment experience is similar to that of the Tibetan tantric practice of *gChod*. Here practitioners cultivate detachment and compassion by visualizing their bodies being dismembered and offered to wrathful deities and hungry demons to eat (Evans-Wentz, 1958). However, a major difference is that for the tantric these experiences are recognized as voluntary visualizations, for the shaman they are experienced as involuntary trials.

Similar experiences of dismemberment and reconstruction, death and rebirth, have also been observed among contemporary Westerners undergoing intensive psychotherapy or meditation practice. They occur most dramatically in either holotropic or LSD assisted therapy sessions. The term holotropic means moving toward's wholeness or aiming for totality. Holotropic therapy is a technique devised by Stanislov and Christina Grof which combines hyperventilation, music, and bodywork. This combination may be one of the most powerful nondrug means of inducing altered states of consciousness (Grof, 1988; Tarnas, 1989).

Studies of holotropic and LSD sessions have provided the most dramatic, detailed, and precise accounts we have of these fascinating and mysterious death-rebirth experiences (Grof, 1980, 1988). It will, therefore, be valuable to examine these accounts in some detail to fill out and understand the information available to us from shamanic traditions.

The LSD or holotropically intensified death-rebirth is an experience of remarkable intensity that shakes those who experience it to their psychological and spiritual core (Tarnas, 1989). Grof (1980) describes it as follows:

Physical and emotional agony culminates in a feeling of utter and total annihilation on all imaginable levels. It involves an abysmal sense of physical destruction, emotional catastrophe, intellectual defeat, ultimate moral failure, and absolute damnation of transcendental proportions. This experience is usually described as "ego death"; it seems to entail instantaneous and merciless destruction of all the previous reference points in the life of the individual.

After the subject has experienced the limits of total annihilation and "hit the cosmic bottom," he or she is struck by visions of blinding white or golden light. The claustrophobic and compressed world . . . suddenly opens up and expands into infinity. The general atmosphere is one of liberation, salvation, redemption, love, and forgiveness. The subject feels unburdened, cleansed and purged, and talks about having disposed of an incredible amount of personal "garbage," guilt, aggression, and anxiety. This is typically associated with brotherly feelings for all fellowmen and appreciation of warm human relationships, friendship and love. (p. 85)

The process of death and rebirth has been repeated numberless times throughout human history, but its interpretations have varied dramatically. A contemporary LSD subject might view it as the disintegration and reconstitution of the self-image or self-concept. Contemplatives might view it as a spiritual death and resurrection. Shamans, however, have traditionally taken it to be

a literal destruction and reconstitution of their physical bodies. For them, the images of bodily dismemberment are interpreted quite literally.

What are we to make of this recurrent experience of agonizing death, dismemberment, and destruction followed by a healing process of relief, reconstitution, and rebirth? Clearly, this is a powerful, perennial experience that has been sought by many and has burst unsought on others. It appears to represent some deep, perhaps archetypal process of the human psyche—a process with considerable healing potential. The following hypothesis is an attempt to understand this process in psychological terms.

The experience of death and rebirth, dismemberment and reconstitution, appears to be a psychological transformative process most likely to occur at times of overwhelming emotional arousal and stress. This arousal activates psychological tensions and conflicts to unsustainable levels. The result is a crisis in which old patterning forces are no longer able to maintain the former psychological balance. The old psychodynamic forces, conflicts, habits, conditioning, organization, beliefs, and identity are overwhelmed and the psyche's organization temporarily collapses. The key result of this collapse, says Grof, is that "what is destroyed in this process is the old, limiting concept of oneself and the corresponding restricting view of existence and of the universe" (Grof, 1980, p. 170).

This destabilizing process is projected, pictured, and experienced in the form of images. These are so-called autosymbolic images—images which symbolize one's own psychological state. Thus this initial phase of unbearable psychological tension and breakdown may be experienced symbolically by both shamans and patients as visions of physical torture, bodily dismemberment, death, and decay or as scenes of war and destruction (Grof, 1980, 1988).

Reorganization and reconstruction occur out of this newly destructured chaos. This reorganization can occur in a mind now partly freed of old limiting and distorting habits. Reorganization may be guided by the drive toward wholeness (holotropism) that some psychologists, contemplatives, and philosophers have described as an inherent part of the psyche (Wilber, 1980). The result may be a reconstructed psyche, identity, and consciousness which are less conflicted, less symptomatic, less bound to the past and more healthy, integrated, and whole. The old identity has died and a new one has been born. This reconstruction, reintegration, and

wholeness is also reflected in the accompanying imagery. Thus the shaman may see the spirits reconstructing the body, the therapy patient may witness images of birth, or the contemplative may experience himself as being "reborn in the spirit."

Such a process involving major destruction of old conditioned patterns and self-images and reconstitution at a more effective, integrated level might account for the dramatic benefits that can sometimes follow death-rebirth experiences. These benefits may include resolution of the disabling initiation illness in shamans, relief of chronic psychopathology in patients, and reduced egoism and attachments in spiritual practitioners. Just how dramatic these benefits can be is evident from both ancient and contemporary accounts. Grof concludes that:

Powerful experiential sequences of dying and being born can result in dramatic alleviation of a variety of emotional, psychosomatic, and interpersonal problems that have previously resisted all psychotherapeutic work." (Grof, 1988, p. 234)

Some 2,000 years ago, the potential of this process was described in a metaphor that has echoed across centuries: "A grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it brings a rich harvest" (John. 12:23-24). The experience of death-rebirth can evidently bring a rich harvest and, as with a number of other psychological processes, it seems that shamans were the first to recognize and harvest it.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, much in shamanism that formerly seemed arcane and nonsensical can now be understood in psychological terms. Shamanism appears to represent a distinct medical, psychotherapeutic, and religious tradition that employs, along with considerable superstition, a variety of psychologically effective strategies. Contrary to decades of opinion, shamans do not necessarily suffer from significant psychopathology. Rather they can now be recognized as individuals who have faced and usually triumphed over psychological challenges and developmental crises, some of which are now being recognized and researched in the West. While there may well be some charlatans and psychologically disturbed individuals among them, others appear to function at exceptionally high levels.

Some of the techniques they have discovered and instituted appear to be forerunners of later contemplative and psychotherapeutic techniques. For millennia shamans have stood as symbols of hope and healing for their people, and much may remain to be learned from sympathetic psychological research of this, our most ancient religious, healing and psychotherapeutic tradition.

REFERENCES

- Ackerknecht, E. (1943). Psychopathology, primitive medicine, and primitive culture. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 14, 30-67.
- Assagioli, R. (1986). Self realization and psychological disturbances. *Re-Vision* 8(2), 21-32.
- Baldrian, F. (1987). Taoism: An overview. In M. Eliade (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of religion*, Vol. 14 (pp. 288-306). New York: Macmillan.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Blacker, C. (1986). *The catalpa bow: A study of shamanistic practices in Japan*. Boston: Allen & Unwin.
- Bock, P. (1988). *Rethinking psychological anthropology*. New York: Freeman.
- Bogoras, W. (1909). In F. Boas (Ed.), *The chukchee*. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill.
- Bourguignon, E. (Ed.). (1973). *Religion, altered states of consciousness, and social change*. Columbus: Ohio State University.
- Bragdon, E. (1988). *A sourcebook for helping people in spiritual emergency*. Los Altos, CA: Lightning Up Press.
- Brown, D., & Engler, J. (1986). The stages of mindfulness meditation: A validation study. Part II: Discussion. In K. Wilber, J. Engler, & D. Brown (Eds.), *Transformations of consciousness: Conventional and contemplative perspectives on development* (pp. 191-218). Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Campbell, J. (1968). *The hero with a thousand faces* (2nd ed.). New York: World.
- Campbell, J. (1986). *The inner reaches of outer space: Metaphor as myth and as religion*. New York: Alfred van der Marck.
- Dabrowski, K. (1964). *Positive disintegration*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Devereux, G. (1961). *Mohave ethnopsychiatry and suicide*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Doore, G. (Ed.). (1988). *Shaman's path*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Durant, W. (1938). *The story of philosophy. New revised edition*. New York: Garden City Publishers.
- Edinger, E. (1984). *The creation of consciousness: Jung's myth for modern man*. Toronto: Inner City.
- Eliade, M. (1964). *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Ellenberger, H. (1970). *The discovery of the unconscious*. New York: Basic Books.
- Evans-Wentz, W. (Trans.). (1958). *Tibetan yoga and secret doctrines*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Ferruci, P. (1982). *What we may be*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Flach, F. (1988). *Resilience*. New York: Ballantine.
- Frank, J. (1985). Therapeutic components shared by all psychotherapies. In M. Mahoney & A. Freeman (Eds.), *Cognition and psychotherapy* (pp. 49-79). New York: Plenum.
- Freud, S. (1917). *A general introduction to psychoanalysis*. Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishers.
- Gallegos, A. (1987). *The personal totem pole: Animal imagery, the chakras and psychotherapy*. Santa Fe, NM: Moon Bear Press.
- Goldstein, J. (1983). *The experience of insight*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Greeley, A. (1988). Mysticism goes mainstream. In E. Bragdon (Ed.), *A sourcebook for helping people in spiritual emergency* (pp. 228-236). Los Altos, CA: Lightning Up Press.
- Grof, C., & Grof, S. (1986). Spiritual emergency: The understanding and treatment of transpersonal crises. *ReVision*, 8(2), 7-20.
- Grof, C., & Grof, S. (1990). *The stormy search for self: Understanding spiritual emergence*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Grof, S. (1980). *LSD psychotherapy*. Pomona, CA: Hunter House.
- Grof, S. (1988). *The adventure of self-discovery*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Grof, S., & Grof, C. (Eds.). (1989). *Spiritual emergency: When personal transformation becomes a crisis*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Harner, M. (1984). *The Jivaro*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Irwin, H. (1985). *Flight of mind: A psychological study of the out-of-body experience*. New York: Scarecrow.
- Jung, C. (1961). *Memories, dreams, reflections* (R. Winston & C. Winston, Trans.). New York: Vintage.
- Kalweit, H. (1988). *Dreamtime and inner space*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Kornfield, J. (1979). Intensive insight meditation: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2, 41-58.
- Krippner, S. (1987). Dreams and shamanism. In S. Nicholson (Ed.), *Shamanism* (pp. 125-132). Wheaton, IL: Quest.
- LaBerge, S. (1985). *Lucid dreaming*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Laing, R. (1972). Metanoia: Some experiences at Kingsley Hall, London. In H. Ruitenbeck (Ed.), *Going crazy* (pp. 11-21). New York: Bantam.
- Levi-Strauss, L. (1966). *The savage mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lukoff, D. (1985). The diagnosis of mystical experiences with psychotic features. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 17, 155-182.
- Merton, T. (1969). *The way of Chuang Tzu*. New York: New Directions.
- Metzner, R. (1986). *Opening to inner light*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Monroe, R. (1971). *Journeys out of the body*. New York: Doubleday.
- Moody, R. (1975). *Life after life*. Atlanta, GA: Mockingbird.
- Moody, R. (1988). *The light beyond*. New York: Bantam.

- Noll, R. (1983). Shamanism and schizophrenia: A state specific approach to the "schizophrenia metaphor" of shamanic states. *American Ethnologist*, 10, 443-459.
- Pelleter, K., & Garfield, C. (1976). *Consciousness: East and West*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Perry, J. (1986). Spiritual emergence and renewal. *ReVision*, 8(2), 33-40.
- Ramana Maharshi. (1955). *Who am I?* (8th ed., T. Venkataran, Trans.). India.
- Rasmussen, K. (1929). *Intellectual culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*. Copenhagen: Glydendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag.
- Reichel-Dolmataoff, G. (1987). *Shamanism and art of the Eastern Tukanoan Indians*. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill.
- Richards, D. (1990). Dissociation and transformation. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 30(3), 54-83.
- Ring, K. (1980). *Life at death*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan.
- Ring, K. (1984). *Heading toward omega: In search of the meaning of the near death experience*. New York: William Morrow.
- Ring, K. (1993). Near-death experiences: Implications for human evolution and planetary transformation. In R. Walsh & F. Vaughan (Eds.), *Paths beyond ego: The transpersonal vision* (pp. 195-202). Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Rogers, S. (1982). *The shaman*. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- Shapiro, D., & Walsh, R. (Eds.). (1984). *Meditation: Classic and contemporary perspectives*. New York: Aldine.
- Siegel, R., & Hirschman, A. (1984). Hashish near-death experiences. *Anabiosis*, 4, 69-86.
- Siikala, A. (1985). Comments. *Current Anthropology*, 26, 455-456.
- Tarnas, R. (1989). The transfiguration of the Western mind. *Crosscurrents*, 39, 258-280.
- Underhill, E. (1974). *Mysticism*. New York: New American Library.
- Vaughan, F. (1986). *The inward arc: Healing and wholeness in psychotherapy and spirituality*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Walsh, R. (1977). Initial meditative experiences: Part I. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 9, 151-192.
- Walsh, R. (1989). What is a shaman? Definition, origin and distribution. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 21, 1-11.
- Walsh, R. (1990). *The spirit of shamanism*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Walsh, R. (1991). Shamanic cosmology. *ReVision*, 13, 86-100.
- Walsh, R., & Shapiro, D. H. (Eds.). (1983). *Beyond health and normality: Explorations of exceptional psychological wellbeing*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Walsh, R., & Vaughan, F. (Eds.). (1993). *Paths beyond ego: The transpersonal vision*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.
- Wilber, K. (1980). *The Atman Project*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.
- Wilber, K. (1983). *Eye to eye: The quest for the new paradigm*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Wilber, K., Engler, J., & Brown, D. (Eds.). (1986). *Transformations of consciousness: Conventional and contemplative perspectives on development*. Boston: Shambhala.

Winkelman, M. (1989). A cross-cultural study of shamanistic healers. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 21, 17-24.

Wissler, G. (1931). *The American Indian*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.

Reprint requests: Roger Walsh, Department of Psychiatry, University of California, Irvine, CA 92717.