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# Belief Is Not Experience: Transformation as a Tool for Bridging the Ontological Divide in Anthropological Research and Reporting

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For more than a hundred years, anthropologists have recorded stories of beliefs in other-than-human sentience and consciousness, yet we have most frequently insisted on contextualizing these stories in terms of cultural, epistemological, or ontological relativism. In this paper, I ask why we have had such a hard time taking reports of unseen realms seriously and describe the transformative role of personal experience as a catalyst for change in anthropological research and reporting.

**Keywords:** *ontology, epistemology, transformation, anthropology, pedagogy, relevance*

In the early spring of 2006, after more than 20 years of studying shamanic practices among Peruvian shamanic healers, I had an experience that changed my view of both anthropology and my relation to it. Like Michael Harner (1982), I finally saw “behind the veil” of non-ordinary reality in a way that rocked my world. What happened, in a nutshell, was this: I was participating in an all-night shamanic ceremony, as I had hundreds of times before. Yet, on this occasion, I *saw*, as shamanic healers also claim to, the sentience of non-human Beings (Hallowell, 2002). As I (Glass-Coffin, 2010) have described it elsewhere, the open-eyed scene unfolding before me during that ceremony was:

completely ordinary except that every plant, from the tallest coconut palm to the smallest blade of grass acknowledged and honored my presence. Like a crowd of well-wishers at an acceptance speech, all turned towards me in unison when I appeared, bowing in a sign of respect. When I returned the nod, the gesture was repeated. When I looked away, their undulations of stem and flower, of bark and frond became less focused, marked by private conversations and shared whispers between those plants in closest proximity to one another. But when I returned my gaze again, the coordinated movements were repeated. Bowing and swaying like schools of fish or flocks of geese on a common flyway, the multitudes repeatedly bowed and I reciprocated. We were equals honoring one another. (p. 210)

That experience changed the way that I view anthropology, with its adherence to the assumption that all beliefs and behaviors can and should be explained within a cultural context, regardless of whether or not they are really-real. Anthropology was built upon this premise of cultural relativism, which is the willingness to take seemingly irrational experiences described by informants at face-value and without judgment while describing the functions, the symbols, and the meaning of what they report as logical within the context of their cultural beliefs, behaviors, and structures. *But, even though anthropologists have frequently been told, by the cultural experts who are the subject of study, of ghosts and spirits, star relatives, and animal allies, for more than a hundred years, the principle of cultural relativism has allowed a side-stepping of the more fundamental question of the transpersonal.* Instead, through focusing on the interpretation of beliefs, rather than on any evaluation of the validity of these against a common frame of reference, anthropologists contextualize such claims—domesticating and dismissing them, colonializing knowledge even as they claim to honor the truth of the Other.

In my training as a cultural anthropologist who specializes in studies of non-ordinary reality as described by shamanic practitioners in northern Peru, I had, until my own experience of peeking behind the veil, internalized this frame. Like most academics, I presented and wrote what I had heard from my shaman informants with the *or so they believe* and *as if* qualifiers that would

position me as one who studies the exotic rather than as one who has simply gone mad. For almost 20 years, precisely because the transpersonal unmasking had not affected me personally, my cognitive world and that of my academic colleagues remained congruent. Then I had my own introduction to the transpersonal, and I found myself reeling, questioning, and re-positioning myself within my discipline—all because I know what I saw. This difference between an ontological knowing and an epistemological frame for making sense of what others claim to know in culturally relative ways continues to un-make me.

### **What *if* Native Peoples Have It Right?**

For more than 100 years, Native/First-Nation wisdom keepers have been telling anthropologists that the cosmos is animated and responsive to human intention. Tribal peoples from geographic regions as widely separated as the Western Australian desert (Poirier, 2008), the forests of Southern India (Bird-David, 1999), the northern climes of East Central Canada (Ingold, 2004; Poirier, 2011), the great plains of North America (Ross, 1989), and lowland Amazonia (Descola, 1996; Viveiros de Castro, 1998) have insisted that being is not a *sui generis* state, but rather a matter of relationship. As Bird-David so succinctly captured it, the motto of these tribal peoples is not so much the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am,” as it is “I relate, therefore I am” and “I know as I relate” (p. S78). This is the basic premise behind human/non-human connectivity, as well as the conscious awareness that micro and macro processes are intertwined (Latour, 2010). It is, as one of my shaman friends has put it, a fundamental understanding of tribal wisdom traditions around the world that consciousness structures matter, and that human interaction with other-than-human intelligences impacts material conditions in fundamental ways. It is, as Philippe Descola asserted, the majority view for most groups in the world today. As Poirier (2008) summarized his contribution, “the way the modern West imagines nature . . . as an autonomous sphere devoid of spirit, subjectivity, and consciousness . . . is the least widely shared thing in the world” (p. 78).

From this brief accounting, it would be easy to conclude that only primitive or tribal peoples have asserted that intelligence, sentience, or consciousness is ubiquitous, but this notion is actually found in many other kinds of societies too. In the high Andes, peasant farmers and herders assert sacred reciprocity between human and non-human energies. The rule of *ayni* (as it is

called) is what keeps all the processes of life in harmony. Thus, human gifts to the Earth, or earth practices as de la Cadeña (2010) called them, are undertaken with the knowing that as mountain spirits are fed, so the mountain spirits will feed humans. Social relations are built upon mutual relations of care “among humans and also with other-than-human beings” (p. 354). There are no a priori separations of humans and nature, but only relatedness. The consequences of remembering or not remembering these earth offerings are made manifest in material ways as the cause for illness and the way to restore wholeness and health.

This understanding of cosmic interdependence was also common among Western cultures before the Enlightenment, when the natural world finally became disenchanting and objectified (Berman, 1981), its sentience silenced to accommodate the political and expansionist agendas of what Latour (2010) called the “Modernist Constitution” (p. 476). Before that time, classical and medieval philosophers from civilized society also affirmed that the destiny of the world was completely interconnected with, and resonant to, human action (Latour, 2010; Smith, 2008). It is an understanding that is resurging today in the writings of prominent ecologists like Lynn Margulis (co-creator of the Gaia Hypothesis) and David Abram. As Abram (1997) put it, human beings live in a sacred landscape that is a “field of intelligence in which our actions (and whole beings) participate” (p. 260). The stories that non-Western peoples have shared with anthropologists since the discipline emerged more than a hundred years ago carry these same suggestions (Bird-David, 1999). It is this same knowing that I realized, viscerally, on that cool Florida night when the trees and grasses responded to my gaze. I (Glass-Coffin, 2009) have reported elsewhere as follows:

As this polite greeting continued, I suddenly realized, viscerally, what I had been writing about for many years: that all Life is co-created as willing humans interact in reverence with the very Ground of Being that sustains us. This co-creation is reflected and nourished by the ways in which we interact with one another, by the ways in which we care for the material world that provides for us, and by the ways in which we relate to a firmament which both inspires and humbles us as we journey. Quite simply, I learned that night that, “as ye sow, so shall

ye reap.” Literally. I realized that if we want to change international politics, we would do well to start by honoring the earth as the Mother of us all. While this stance might be thought of as cliché, (yes, we should plant and harvest organically, stop polluting the rivers, and make efforts to slow down global warming), what I learned when I peeked behind the veil that night was more profound. Because we are all related and part of a giant web of belonging, the way we honor each element of creation, with offerings, with thanksgiving, and with prayer, has repercussions that are felt on many levels, from tectonic movements to pan-national awakenings. All life vibrates when the string is plucked regardless of which note is played. (pp. 64-65)

Until recently, most anthropologists have been unwilling to go on record as taking these assertions seriously (even though many describe personal experiences of unseen worlds to friends and colleagues over cocktails or at the gym). Instead, responses in scholarship to these assertions have been according to the predominant paradigms of the respective eras. Edward Tylor (1871), a unilineal evolutionist who was optimistic about the potential of rational thought as a tool for human liberation, thought the idea of an animated cosmos was an antecedent to more modern religious inclinations. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1910) asserted that the reason for such different approaches to the unseen between primitives and moderns had to do with fundamental differences of the mind. Bronislaw Malinowski (1944) and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1965) asked scholars to consider how the seemingly irrational beliefs about an animated cosmos inform behaviors and social structures, logically functioning to promote individual and social survival. Franz Boas (1961), the father of modern American anthropology, suggested that anthropologists should refrain from comparative judgments at all, choosing instead to frame statements of belief in terms of the cultures producing them. In general, the anthropological ancestors who compared and evaluated such beliefs between so-called primitives and moderns suggested that reports of transpersonal experience be considered in terms of economic, political, social, or psychological needs. By contrast, those who proposed that such beliefs be evaluated on their own terms tended to steer away from assessing the external validity of such ideas, privileging detailed description

### **Bridging the Ontological Divide in Anthropology**

over nomothetic inquiry.

Neither position moves one much closer to concluding that accounts of interdependence with the natural world should actually be taken *seriously*. Maybe this is because doing so would require *action*. Restoring harmonious relations with other forms of consciousness is the main message of indigenous wisdom teachings anthropologists have so diligently recorded. It is the message I personally received during my transpersonal peek behind the veil. But, really taking this message seriously would require change in the ways we as humans interact with our environment. It would require us to act as partners rather than patrons, as stewards rather than mercenaries. Instead, anthropologists who have heard these wisdoms and who claim to add indigenous voices to the record mostly stand silent as the Modernist constitution of these times continues to treat our Earth Mother as an *it* that can be managed rather than a *Thou* to whom we relate.

Yet, as I learned during that brief exchange of conscious awareness with the grasses and trees on that cool Florida evening, human acknowledgement and honoring of plant relatives has consequence. As a Cartesian worldview that privileges human consciousness alone continues to inform the modern world, huge tracts of land and water continue to be spoiled by governments and corporations who do not really grasp the situation. Meanwhile, the tipping point of environmental no-return moves ever closer.

As I contemplate how this threshold experience changed my understanding of human/nature relationships, I am quite certain that I can no longer participate in a discipline that either relativizes or dismisses indigenous wisdoms without speaking out. I am, as is the accidental anthropologist character of Jake Sully in the modern fable *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), tortured as I consider how to translate this knowing, which is not new, to wider audiences in ways that will serve to awaken.

Yet, even as I lament the colonial beginnings of my discipline, I am heartened by the research of a few brave scholars who in the last decade have offered an opportunity to revisit the frames used to explain these assertions of human and non-human intelligence and connectivity. There has been an ontological turn in anthropology that allows for animism to be taken as something *sui generis* and as a useful and empirically valid term, not merely as something to be explained away

in functionalist or evolutionary terms. Key proponents of this turn include Viveiros de Castro (1996, 1998, 2004), Latour (1993, 2009, 2010), and Strathern (2004), although they are not the only ones talking along these lines. It is an approach insisting, as Jeremy Trombley (n.d.) asserted in the About This Site section of his website Struggle Forever!:

Existence is a perpetual process . . . “of becoming with” not of “imposing upon”—a process of building relationships and allowing oneself to be altered and affected as much as one alters and affects others. . . . [It is a radically constructivist turn that goes beyond epistemology where there is no ultimate ground, but] only the rich intertangling of heterogeneous beings working with, against, for, and in spite of one another. (para. 1)

In his blog, he also remarked that in this ontological turn:

anthropology becomes a practice, not merely of understanding others, but of constructing a world of relations *with* others. . . . one that behaves as if the world is not given, that recognizes the presence and active participation of all kinds of beings, and that is reflexive with respect to the kinds of relations and worlds it brings into existence” (Trombley, 2012, para. 3-4, emphasis supplied)

Because the ontological turn has allowed anthropologists to once again seriously ponder the intentions, methodology, and practical consequences of the discipline, the field may effectively bridge traditional and modern ways of knowing in ways that bring it closer to its original mandate than ever before possible (Clammer, Poirier, & Schwimmer, 2004).

### **The Ontological Turn: Disciplinary Relevance or Simply Relativism Revisited?**

Encouraged by this recent ontological turn in the discipline, I recently attended the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings in Montreal, Quebec (November, 2011), to listen to what some of the leading advocates of this position were saying. What became clear was that the ontological turn in anthropology is mainly being considered on the grounds of its ability (or at least its attempts) to give native peoples bargaining power when dealing with neo-liberal politics and multinational agendas. As Sylvie Poirier explained, considering native views on “being-in-

relation as an ontological, rather than an epistemological, position may bring more humanity to Western thought by providing a means for colleagues to consider more ‘seriously’ these other ways of being in [and relating to] the world” (personal communication, November, 2011).

It is certainly true that framing relationships between two-legged and other-than-two-legged sentients as social (as beings who are literal relatives and interact as kin) and political (as sentient beings who should have input to how the land that sustains them is used) allows for an expansion of anthropological inquiry. For most anthropologists engaged in this conversation, the power of this ontological turn is best understood within the scope of social and political action because it opens a potential space for negotiation between groups who compete for scarce resources such as land and water (de la Cadeña, 2010). The Rights of Mother Earth agendas that have recently been codified in places such as Ecuador and Bolivia are but one manifestation of the power of relational ontologies and ontological relativism to shape political and commercial futures in new ways.

But for most of those who write about the expedience of this ontological turn in anthropology, it still seems to represent more of a compromise with relativism than a recognition of relevance. As such, the discourse about ontological relativism that is gaining ground in academe may continue to disempower traditionally marginalized people in the same way that cultural relativism has done. Instead of empowering the native communities who stand on the other side of the ontological divide, where relationships between all sentient Beings—whether these walk on two legs or not—construct worlds, I fear it will continue to justify their minimization as primitive artifacts that avoid complete dismissal only through the loophole of relativism. Poirier (2011) recently noted that the entanglements that ensue when communities argue with governments, companies, and agencies across these consciousness-chasms “may at times be experienced by these Indigenous groups as a form of ontological violence” (p. 11) that causes much suffering. As a result, communities who argue for designation of lands as sacred sometimes find themselves leaving their ontological frameworks at the door because of these concerns. At least in some cases, communities choose silence when engaging power-brokers who determine the fate of lands they hold as sacred. This, as de la Cadeña (2010) noted, is precisely because such



ontological differences *cannot* be considered in a politics that codifies modernist separations of Humanity and Nature, Self, and Other. “This exclusion [of subjectivity for all but humankind] is not just racism; it expresses the consensual agreement foundational to politics” (p. 359). For this reason, local leaders often choose to simply remain invisible.

As long as indigenous peoples have to leave these insights at the door when arguing the case for environmental protection of sacred landscapes, ontological relativism becomes a term that simply dismisses the imperative of listening to indigenous wisdoms that humans are connected with each other and with the world. As long as wisdom keepers must remain silent in political forums about these wisdoms, everyone loses. In short, ontological relativism still side-steps the question of what is really important to consider as well as what is really real.

So, I come back to the questions at hand: Can anthropology expand beyond the episteme that separates real and unreal according to Cartesian assertions? Does the option really exist to share transpersonal experience in the academic worlds? Can anthropologists find a role that goes beyond objective reporting about relative beliefs and behaviors? What would happen if those in the field who have had personal experience of other realities were simply to drop the “and so they believe” qualifiers to report what they have witnessed when peeking behind the veil? Do not those in this position have an obligation to share these wisdoms within the walls of academe? Might willingness to go on record regarding these experiences perhaps provide a welcome bridge between the peoples under study who assert these realities and colleagues who have not experienced these other worlds first hand? Might opening the dialogue provide a new set of parameters for the discussion to unfold?

When I asked these questions of my colleagues at the 2011 AAA meetings, the responses I received were telling. After one panel devoted to a discussion about research on the invisible in the modern world, I was told that if anthropologists talked about these things [as really real], we would be perceived as naïve, gullible, and uneducated. Another panelist added, “when I decide what to share and what to leave out of my research, I choose to share only what makes the connection to other people’s experiences.” Like Poirier, I wonder how leaving ontological frameworks at the door disempowers scholars who have another story to tell, yet who are

afraid of losing credibility through the telling. As long as anthropologists who have had transpersonal experiences continue to speak and write to audiences as though these experiences do not matter, the potential for discussion of relational ontologies to expand discourse, and to act with the environment accordingly, will be lost. Because the culturally relative qualifiers are still so present in the discourse, even among anthropologists who take their informants’ views on the unseen world seriously, the potential value of such notions for Westerners, who hold much of the world’s economic and political power, is still left unconsidered.

While more sympathetic to my questioning than those panelists described above, even Poirier, who inspires with her assertions that indigenous frames be taken seriously, feels her role to be more that of the translator than the transformed. As she told me in an e-mail exchange after the AAA Meetings:

I think the work you are doing is indeed important and necessary within our discipline. This aspect of “transformation” of the ethnographer is also needed if we are to fully understand and consider seriously the worlds of the other. . . . [But,] as for myself, though I deeply respect those anthropologists who have chosen the path of transformation (and I guess I was transformed myself—otherwise there is no point to do ethnography and to exchange with the other), I have chosen to remain on the path of “translation.” (S. Poirier, personal communication, November 23, 2011)

As Poirier’s comments suggest, there is certainly room for translation, especially for those colleagues who have not experienced the transpersonal shift that has pushed me to write in new (and vulnerable) ways. Yet, for those who are impelled to engage this new path, my concern is whether academic discourse can be stretched to accommodate these voices. My hope is that those anthropologists who take ontological relativism seriously will support this expression.

#### **Transpersonal Experiences, Truth, and Transformation**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, William James (1902/2002) lectured and wrote copiously about the nature of mystical experience as Truth, insisting that the best test for the truth value of belief is not logical, but experiential and behavioral. As Kuklick (1981) summarized in his introduction about James’

philosophical Pragmatism:

A belief was true, he said, if in the long run it worked for all of us, and guided us expeditiously through our semi-hospitable world. . . . Beliefs were ways of acting with reference to a precarious environment, and to say they were true was to say they guided us satisfactorily in this environment” (p. xiv).

The proof of Truth is in the pudding, so to speak. It should be measured according to its application to actual practice. Furthermore, as James recounted, it is the direct experience of the transpersonal, which he referred to as “immediate luminousness” (p. 19) rather than mere belief that holds the power to transform behavior—radically, suddenly, and completely.

More than 100 years later, Barbara Bradley Haggerty (2009) found the same thing to be true for the hundreds of interviewees she spoke with in her quest to understand spirituality, scientifically. Almost all of those she interviewed who had personal experience of the transpersonal had one thing in common: they were changed overnight by their transpersonal encounters, alleviating addictions, halting the course of degenerative illness, or overcoming depression and other pathological states as they encountered meaning and connection to something greater than themselves. These direct encounters with the numinous changed lives, when accompanied by what James (1902/2002) called a reasonableness that only need make inherent sense to the one affected.

As I consider the findings of both James and Haggerty, I find tremendous resonance. I *know* what I experienced in a way that makes convincing others of the reasonableness of my experience irrelevant. As a scholar, an academic, an anthropologist who has been transformed by this knowing, I can no longer hide what I now know. I continually ask myself, What must I *do* with this knowing? What is my ethical responsibility now that I have glimpsed behind the transpersonal veil?

I have written about what happened to me that night in a number of venues (Glass-Coffin, 2009, 2010) and, in these publications, I have asserted that I can no longer employ the “as-if” qualifiers when I describe my transpersonal experiences. One thing that I have wondered is whether anthropology, as a discipline, can continue to stretch in order to accommodate the sentience of non-human others who respond to human

intention. As I have noted elsewhere:

I cannot deny the call to action that my own extraordinary encounter engendered. Thus, although I have continued to struggle with whether or not experiential anthropology can expand its reach to include the kinds of interactions and relationships to which I gained access that night, I continue to move down a path that for me, at least, seems the only ethical path to follow. Since that threshold moment in 2006, I have, like many anthropologists before me, found myself shifting my focus from ethnographic reporting to a more explicitly shamanic course. Along the way I have facilitated pilgrimage and ceremony, and I have apprenticed more deeply with the plant spirit of San Pedro. I have become certified as a teacher of the Pachakuti Mesa Tradition that don Oscar Miro-Quesada founded. Most recently, I have begun teaching others how to ethically engage with elements of the unseen world to foster healthy relationships with those forces and powers. Moreover, because, along the way, I have become more and more aware of the intimate ways that we are connected in thought and its consequences to a universe in flux, I have expanded my net of services to include the task of teaching others to awaken to this consciousness of connection. I have come to live the dictum that I first heard expressed by my friend Oscar, that consciousness structures matter. (Glass-Coffin, 2010, pp. 212-213)

As a result of this experience, I have found myself asking, on more than one occasion, whether “the discipline that has nurtured me for so many years [can] stretch to embody a new cognitive map . . . with regard to relationships between the human and the nonhuman or the seen and the unseen worlds” (Glass-Coffin, 2010, p. 212) and, if it cannot, I have wondered whether I can ethically stay within the walls of academe or if I should just leave, as did Michael Harner, Angeles Arrien, and the late Felicitas Goodman, to name a few colleagues who made that choice.

Before I make this decision to abandon the world of academe and the confines of my discipline, however, I find myself drawn to challenge the boundaries of academic discourse. I find myself returning to Renaissance understandings of what higher education was designed to accomplish—to transform, to enlighten, and to engage (Palmer, 2009). I have been emboldened

by the work of the multi-year HERI study on spirituality in higher education, which demonstrated how more than 130,000 students at more than 300 universities yearn for opportunities to explore their connections to that which lies beyond as a regular part of their academic experience (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010).

So, in the spring of 2012, I asked the academic officers at my university for the opportunity to try an experiment in the classroom that might allow students to have more first-hand encounters with the numinous. I asked if I might teach a class on shamanism that introduced students to a shamanic toolkit for engaging non-ordinary states of consciousness. A debate ensued about whether what I was asking to do violated (or not) the public mandate about teaching religion in the classroom. After multiple discussions with administrators, faculty, and students, the provisional consensus was that, as long as I was focusing on teaching a method rather than a doctrine, I could engage the students in a one-semester experiment to see whether an experiential pedagogy might provide the means for students to more deeply engage the big questions in their lives. A growing trend in higher education to feed heart as well as mind (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010), as well as increased awareness of student demand for educational experiences that do more than simply fill minds with facts (Astin et al., 2010), provided me the tools to effectively make my case. So, with 39 brave students who enrolled in my course entitled Introduction to Shamanism: Shamanic Healing for Personal and Planetary Transformation, during Spring semester 2012, I engaged in an experiment to see just how far anthropology might bend to take transpersonal experiences seriously.

In that course, students had two options for enrollment. They could take the course for an academic grade with three credits, or they could take it Pass/Fail and simply show-up to all required sessions during the 15 week course. Each of the sessions lasted approximately three hours and introduced the students to techniques for engaging in what Harner (1982) has termed *shamanic states of consciousness* so that students might quiet the ego-mind in order to experience the transpersonal. Techniques facilitated by the instructor included mindful meditation, shamanic breathwork, music, chanting, and repetitive vocalization, as well as use of scent, ritualized performance, and shamanic journeying aided by guided imagery, percussive/repetitive sound, breathing, and focused intention to induce these altered

states. After these experiences, students were encouraged to free-write about insights obtained as well as to pay attention to their dreams and to keep a journal between class meetings. Students who enrolled for the academic grade were also asked to write weekly reflection papers about their experiences, as well as to write an academic research paper, which compared their experiences with published studies of shamanism including its symbols, functions, and uses in particular cultural contexts.

Student evaluations of course content, which were based on a 6-point Likert scale, yielded averages of 5.75 for course content and 5.9 for the teacher. Comments on what they liked most about the course included statements that students valued “the many lessons I learned that will help me get through life,” the “new spiritual resources, skills, tools, and understandings” gained, the opportunity for “personal transformation,” and the sense of “sacred community” that was built along the way. Students commented that they felt “safe,” “connected” and “healed.” Two students of the 38 who participated in the course evaluations chose to make their comments public. They said:

This course helped me gain an experiential understanding of the power in giving ideas form through ritual. Utilizing our inner energies, desires, and imaginations to project healing into the world must be the first step in bringing humanity back into balance and reciprocity with the Mother. (Mark Wardle)

Shamanism was a beautiful experience that opened my mind to the systematic harmony of the universe. I’ve never learned so much about myself. The meditation practices changed my life in ways my mind can’t even comprehend. Before this experience, I thought that the world was out to get me. Now I know that whatever I desire, the universe conspires in helping me to achieve it. I used to gaze down at the ground, but now I’m noticing the beauty of the world around me. This experience opened my mind more than I ever thought possible. I wish that everyone could experience . . . [this] to enter into the realm of self-awareness, connection, and spirituality. (Kayla Aiken)

But, what did this course have to do with anthropology? In his seminal work with Conibo and Shuar shamans during the 1950s and 1960s, Harner



(1982) became convinced that the transpersonal experiences that informed their worldviews were not relativistic imaginings at all. Instead, these experiences were simply unavailable to most moderns. In his words, one of the main obstacles to taking seriously the possibility of meaningful exchanges between human and other-than-human entities is a prejudice that is a very real counterpart to what anthropologists refer to as ethnocentrism. Harner (1982) wrote:

To understand the deep-seated, emotional hostility that greeted the works of Castaneda [whose books brought accounts of these kinds of exchanges into popular awareness more than a decade before Harner's *The Way of the Shaman*], one needs to keep in mind that this kind of prejudice is often involved. But in this case it is not the narrowness of someone's cultural experience that is the fundamental issue, but the narrowness of someone's conscious experience. The persons most prejudiced against a concept of nonordinary reality [where awareness of the kinds of human/non-human interactions being discussed here are best able to be discerned] are those who have never experienced it. This might be termed cognocentrism, the analogue in consciousness of ethnocentrism. (p. xvii)

For more than a hundred years, tribal peoples have shared their understandings of an animated cosmos with anthropologists. But it is thanks to Harner that this wisdom is now firmly ingrained in popular culture, even if it has not yet permeated academic spheres of consciousness and responsibility. While there is growing awareness in anthropology that authors do a tremendous disservice to indigenous communities when leaving their reciprocal relationships with non-human relatives out of the equation, this ontological turn in the discipline is still not easily accommodated by many anthropological colleagues. Harner's quest to make shamanic states of consciousness widely available to multiple publics provided a tremendous service to a world shaped by ayni, karma, the golden rule, symbiosis, and living intelligence. But, most of this service occurred beyond the halls of academe.

Together with Harner, and armed with student evaluations of my recent course on experiential shamanism, I have more confidence that the deep ontological wisdom of connection and consciousness can and should be taught in ways that allow students to be transformed by these wisdoms. I see Harner's legacy as

a template for transformative learning in the classroom. I am committed to presenting these age-old wisdoms without the "or so they believe" qualifiers in my writing and my teaching to assist in awakening moderns to new/old ways of being-in-relation-in-the-world.

If, as a discipline, anthropology wants to have continued relevance in the world, those who have been transformed by experiences of the transpersonal must begin sharing what has been learned. Because I have been transformed myself, I cry out against the ontological violence that still privileges human action, and will search for ways that move those who read my work to compassionate action in the world. I can no longer engage in the sin of omission that has kept anthropology at the margins of pressing world problems. I count upon the support of my colleagues, who honor the principles of cultural and ontological relativism, to stand with me.

I know as I believe, and I believe as I know, because I have seen beyond the veil; it is there, in shamanic states of consciousness, that one is most often transformed by one's experiences with unseen realms (Goulet & Miller, 2007). Through that threshold experience, I became personally aware of the relational imperatives that have become the focus of a new ontological turn in the discipline of anthropology. Now, even as many academics are silent about the role of Spirit in the academe, or (worse still) insist on explaining away the power of these connections to restore individuals, their communities, the natural world, and the cosmos to harmony, I bear first-person witness to the reality of unseen worlds as I teach and as I write. As I (Glass-Coffin, 2010) have written elsewhere:

These are the narratives that I am willing to articulate. They are narratives informed by Spirit, by deep awareness of relationship with other sentient beings (not all of whom walk on two legs), and by service to a greater whole. They are narratives that may or may not be accepted by my academic peers. Whether or not my peers choose to accept these narratives, however, they continue to serve as bridges between consciousness and matter, between Self and Other, and between participant and observer, in ways that I am confident reflect the resilient legacy of our discipline. As I think about new materials with which to construct narrative bridges between myself and those others who may listen . . . I have replaced

anthropological detachment with engagement and embraced the understanding that comes through surrendering to the unknown. I am ready to reaffirm the power of this kind of anthropology as a force to be reckoned with, as we open ourselves to the possibility of shaping material futures through our conscious engagement with the world (p. 215).

My choice to teach a course on experiential shamanism, as well as to write narratives challenging my anthropological colleagues to take up the gauntlet of ontological relevance, is best expressed by the students themselves, who are the hope of a new generation of scholars and citizens. As one anthropology major who enrolled in my course commented early in the semester:

There is wisdom that can be gained, and that which our education system lacks, by not only observing but participating in ritual saturated with symbolism and meaning. Our culture can discern meaning from words, but can we easily see what the placement of objects, the organization of chaos, and even our own movements and that of others can mean in the allegorical ritual of our daily lives? Speaking as an American I think that we have a lot to learn from those who some think of as primitive for their lack of education but who in actuality are infinitely wiser than [we are.]

What student evaluations of this experimental course in anthropology affirmed to me is this: Taking transpersonal experiences seriously might, indeed, make anthropology more relevant to a 21<sup>st</sup> century world, which is urgently in need of reassessing the roles of sentience and relationship as economies crumble, as human action becomes more environmentally unsustainable, and as the I-it orientation of modern worldviews threatens to destroy the earth. And, however it is received by academicians who dismiss these experiences as culturally relative, rather than relevant, it is an imperative that I am willing to engage, as the only ethical response to my own experience of the transpersonal.

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### About the Author

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