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My Path in Shamanism

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Introduction and Interview by Roger Walsh and Charles S. Grob¹

Born in 1929, Michael Harner is widely acknowledged as the world's foremost authority on shamanism and has had an enormous influence on both the academic and lay worlds.

Within academia, he conducted extensive fieldwork in the Upper Amazon, western North America, the Canadian Arctic, and Samiland (Lapland). He did pioneering studies of the Jívaro Indians of the Amazon (now known as the Shuar), and wide ranging studies of shamanism.

He also played a major part in alerting academics to the central role of psychedelics in shamanic practices and many tribal cultures. Harner's description of his own initiatory ayahuasca experience in the Amazon jungle, which is described in his book *The Way of the Shaman*, has become a classic example of the power of these substances. It provides a superb account of their importance to some shamanic traditions, their ability to introduce new world-views and effect personal transformation, and their capacity to render researchers more sensitive to, and comprehending of, the cultures and practices in which they are used.

After this experience, Harner went on to undertake extensive shamanic training, first with Shuar teachers, and then throughout many areas of the world. His combination of anthropological training, academic expertise, studies of shamanism in multiple cultures, and personal shamanic training, has produced a rare, perhaps unique, breadth and depth of expertise and influence.

In 1987, he left academia to devote himself to full-time work with shamanism, and created the *Foundation for Shamanic Studies*. The foundation funds research and publications, offers worldwide trainings in shamanic practices, has an international membership, and – in an intriguing cultural reversal – has reintroduced shamanic practices to parts of the world where the tradition was lost or suppressed.

His many publications include the books: *The Way of the Shaman*, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, *The Jívaro*, and a coauthored novel, *Cannibal*. His latest book, *Cave and Cosmos: Shamanic Encounters with Another*

Reality, was released April 9, 2013. *What Yogananda did for Hinduism and D. T. Suzuki did for Zen*, Michael Harner has done for shamanism, namely bring the tradition and its richness to Western awareness.

I came to the University of California at Berkeley in 1950, expecting to become an archaeologist. But then in the course of my archeological fieldwork, I found that the Indians living nearby were like encyclopedias that nobody was opening, and this alerted me to the incredible amount of knowledge that was available just by asking the tribal elders.

In 1956-1957, I did my doctoral dissertation research in eastern Ecuador among the Jívaro people, who are now generally called the Shuar. I returned to the Amazon in 1960-1961 to study the culture of the Conibo in eastern Peru, and I returned to the Shuar in 1964 and 1973. Around 1966, I went to Columbia and Yale Universities as a visiting professor, and then accepted a professorship at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York. I stayed there from 1970 on, sometimes also teaching at Berkeley. During my later years at the New School, I increasingly took academic leave to focus on shamanic work and teaching, and then in 1987, I pulled out of academia entirely in order to devote myself to shamanism.

How did you initially hear about the use of psychoactive plants?

I was aware of peyote and had read of ayahuasca use, but I had no comprehension of their importance. Then in 1956-1957 among the Jívaro, I suddenly found myself in a society of shamans. About one out of every four adult males and a much smaller proportion of females were shamans. In the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed them, and they said that I really should go on a vision quest at a sacred waterfall and take this drink of theirs. I realized that this was important, and I was just about to do it when the rainy season came and logs started dropping over the waterfall. So it was too dangerous—

because if we bathed in the waterfall, we could get fatally clobbered. Some years later, I did do it with them, but not until after being with the Conibo of the Peruvian Amazon in 1960-1961.

I first took ayahuasca at that time, with the Conibo. My fieldwork was in its later stages at that point, and I was attempting to get information on their spiritual system. The Conibo said there's only one way to learn about it—you've got to take the drink. So I took the drink.

I really didn't have much in the way of expectations. They had said you could see frightening things. They said it was known sometimes as the "little death"; that it could induce an experience like dying, and that some people in rare cases actually did die. But in the villages where I lived, the vast majority of the shamans were using it almost every night, so it was not that big a deal. My book, *The Way of the Shaman*, has a detailed description of that first experience of mine.

When you came down from it, what was different in terms of your own sense of yourself and what you were doing there?

At first, it wasn't so much the sense of myself that was different. But I was completely in awe of the fact that a whole other reality had opened up. This was a reality that could not be fantasy, because the experiences that I had were also experiences that the Conibo who took ayahuasca were having independently, down to concrete details, without us ever having talked about them with me beforehand. A shaman said afterwards that I really could become a master shaman—that I had gotten so much from my first experience that this was what I should do. Since it was a rare opportunity, I decided to avail myself of it, and that's when I actually got involved in shamanic training.

Ayahuasca was taken in every session; they didn't do much shamanism without it. At one time historically, the Conibo had the *muraya*—shamans who worked only with tobacco—and they were very respected. But by the time I was in the Amazon, there were no *muraya* around. However, I did use tobacco water with the Jívaro, which was a shaman's drink. You soak green tobacco leaves in cold water and drink the water or inhale it through the nose.

Did the tobacco drink induce visionary experience?

It heightens your perceptions, at least with that particular kind of uncured tobacco. It's very powerful. You're taking it to feed your spirit helpers, who love tobacco. It is also used to increase alertness, so that if there's a

sorcerer who's working against you, your spirit helpers will be alert and protect you. The Jívaro were very much involved in feuds and wars, in contrast to the Conibo.

Would the Jívaro use ayahuasca to determine whether or not to go on a raid or start a war? Would they use it to make a collective decision about their culture?

Well, first of all, we'd better all get in the habit, and I should lead the way, of calling them Shuar, because they want to be called Shuar.

No, the Shuar did not and do not use ayahuasca to make collective decisions. I know that's been *reported* for the Jívaroan Achuar, but it is not true there either. The Jívaro proper—the Untsuri Shuar (also called Muraya Shuar, or Hill Shuar), the people I worked with—felt strongly that normally only one person at a time should take ayahuasca, otherwise the contact with the spirits would be diluted or altered. However, sometimes two shamans would take it together, such as for healing work.

The Achuar is a different tribe?

Yes. They are a closely related Jívaroan tribe, with a mutually intelligible dialect, but some important aspects of their culture are different. For example, unlike the Shuar, they did not take and shrink heads. But anyway, getting back to your earlier question, *natemä*, which is the Shuar name for ayahuasca, might be taken for divinatory purposes by a shaman prior to a war raid. However, he would take it just to get some idea of whether they should do the raid, whether there were bad or good omens—in other words, whether it was propitious. It was also taken to divine if someone, through sorcery, was responsible for an illness or death. In the latter case, such a divination could result in an assassination raid.

What about sorcery? Among some peoples sorcery seems to be associated with ayahuasca use.

Yes, that is true. Over my decades of work in shamanism I've come to certain conclusions that helped me understand the Shuar, including their preoccupation with sorcery, or bewitching. In other words, "sorcery" commonly implies hostile or amoral action, and it is typically contrasted with healing.

First, let me say a few words about what shamans have discovered worldwide about the shamanic cosmology of nonordinary reality: There are three Worlds: the Upper, Middle, and Lower. The Upper and Lower, above and

below us, are completely in nonordinary reality, and beyond pain and suffering. In contrast, the Middle World, in which we live, has both its ordinary and nonordinary aspects. It is also the World in which pain and suffering can be found, occurring in both realities. Sorcerers specialize in doing their work in the Middle World. The Shuar are very much involved with Middle World spirits. There are Middle World spirits of all types, just as there are humans and species of all types here in the ordinary reality Middle World. Middle World spirits have not transcended Middle World consciousness. So the Shuar shamans can have at their disposal spirits who have a variety of personalities and behaviors, who have not emerged from the preoccupations of ordinary daily life. These can be spirits of any beings: animals, insects, or humans.

Working with Middle World spirits is both difficult and dangerous, and this is the world in which the Shuar shamans are enmeshed. They do not work in the Upper World, unlike a lot of other shamanic people. They also only go a little distance toward the Lower World—that is, only into the lakes and the rivers. A culture that is stuck with Middle World spirits is a culture that is going to have sorcery.

Sorcery is typically hostile action. In my ethnography on the Jívaro, I called it bewitching. There are terms in Shuar culture for someone who does this. One is *wawek*. A *wawek* is a shaman who's gone bad. They are regarded as bad shamans, even if they are in one's own family and are directing their efforts at dealing with common enemies, of whom they have many.

I can contrast that with the Conibo. They also have shamanism, but don't have this kind of aggressive behavior, and they include much travel to the Upper and Lower Worlds in their shamanic journeys.

I take the reality of spirits very seriously. In fact, their reality provides a parsimonious explanation for otherwise inexplicable phenomena. This parsimonious explanation was unfortunately thrown out of Western science in the so-called Age of Enlightenment. I think shamanism will eventually lead to a reevaluation of this anti-spirit belief, which I think is an Achilles' heel and missing link in science. So I work a lot, and very successfully, with the spirits.

How do you define a spirit?

A spirit could be considered to be an animate essence that has intelligence and different degrees of power. It is seen most easily in complete darkness and much

less frequently in bright light, and in an altered state of consciousness better than in an ordinary state. In fact, there's some question whether you can see it in an ordinary state of consciousness at all.

You've taken ayahuasca with both the Conibo and the Shuar. They sound like rather different contexts: different kinds of mental sets and perhaps different settings. Were your subjective experiences also different?

Yes, they were. I picked up on the local spirits and the activities in the area. What I would encounter would be not only cosmic knowledge, but knowledge of specific local spirits, the local peoples' spirits, and specific matters involving patients. So the local spirits do impinge on the experiences.

Could you say more about the "cosmic knowledge?"

My views of the cosmos derive from more than ayahuasca experiences, which were my lead-in to a broader view. But subsequent experiences of altered states of consciousness and shamanic states of consciousness independent of ayahuasca also had an effect.

When I came back from my first ayahuasca experiences with the Conibo in 1961, I started going through the anthropological literature with great excitement and expectations. I was convinced, like R. Gordon Wasson and others at that time, that all religions had their origin in plant-induced experiences. We all went through this stage.

Some of us are still in it.

Yes. But when you experience other methods of access besides the plants, then you discover that it's bigger than plants—that there's a whole other reality, and that there are different entrances into it. *That's* the really exciting thing, because you can no longer be a reductionist saying "the plants are doing it." This is what excites me. I see general patterns, cosmological patterns, regardless of whether ayahuasca or sonic driving is being used. So I take the idea of another reality very seriously. I take very seriously the idea that death is not death, and life is not life. [Laughs] But they're useful constructs.

Would you say that your thinking about the world evolved after you came back from your fieldwork with the Conibo and the Jívaro?

Yes. I published *The Jívaro* ethnography in 1972, and then my book *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, based

upon a symposium Claudio Naranjo and I organized at the American Anthropological Association meeting in 1965. The early 1960s were the critical period in our excitement about this field—wondering where we were going and what we were discovering. With regard to the evolution of my ideas, at first I thought it was all about the plants. I even got into the Haiti thing in those years and figured out there was a plant infusion being used to make zombies.

As an anthropologist I was interested in the role of these plants in human life and traditional knowledge. Although I tried some of the new chemicals that were becoming available at that time, they were generally not what I was interested in. I was, and still am, an anthropologist. I want to understand how things got to be the way they are and what the native peoples really know. I've never viewed natives as laboratories for our experiments in social science theory or psychological theory. I view them as teachers. The problem is that most Westerners are not ready for their teachings. I don't have anything against Sasha Shulgin's concoctions and so on, but they just don't interest me. I have greater interest in time-tested things and their historical consequences for humanity.

Eventually, I came to many dead ends. For example, I was sure that *pituri*, *Duboisia hopwoodii*, used by the Australian aborigines, was going to turn out to have *Datura*-like effects, but it apparently did not. The Inuit shamans seemed like another dead end because I couldn't find any psychotropic plant use among them, and they were certainly having strong spiritual experiences. The evidence was staring me in the face for a long time, but I didn't see it; that in perhaps 90 percent of the world's shamanic cultures they use a monotonous percussive sound to enter altered states of consciousness, rather than significant psychedelics.

Finally I got around to trying drumming. I had a bias against it being able to *do* anything, but lo and behold, after various experiments, it worked. Later I spent some time with Northwest Coast Indians who used drums in a very effective way for reaching the shamanic state of consciousness. I now have great respect for monotonous percussive sound—particularly at 4-7 hertz, in the theta range of EEG waves—for producing similar experiences and allowing one to get to the same altered states, if one has the proper training. Obviously there's always a difference between a specific drug and some other technique. But those differences are not

changes in the underlying cosmology or changes in the basic conclusions one arrives at.

So my path involves monotonous percussive sound or sonic driving. And that's what has made it so easy for me to teach shamanism through the years, because it's a legal, safe, effective, and ancient method. It teaches people that there's more than one door to nonordinary reality, which is something that shamans in so many parts of the world already knew. Of course some silent meditators can get to similar places. You don't have to have monotonous percussion sound; it just makes it a lot easier.

Would you say that such sound allows one to reach realities similar to those produced by visionary plants or drugs?

Yes, I do feel very strongly that way. But the path is usually more subtle and takes longer. On the other hand, access is constantly available and permits doing shamanic healing.

In an article you wrote on the use of Datura-type plants in European witchcraft, you suggested that their effects are quite different from, for example, ayahuasca and the tryptamines, or peyote and the phenethylamines.

It's virtually impossible to function under a strong dose of one of these tropane alkaloids. I had used *Brugmansia-Datura*-type solanaceous plants among the Shuar—and also had actually tried out the “witches” flying ointment back in the early 1960s in the United States. My conclusion, and the hypothesis I presented in that article, was that it was not possible to do shamanism using this very strong drug, which commonly made one unconscious for as long as thirty-six hours.

In my opinion, European shamanism had to give up the drum because of its noise, leading to persecution by the Church. An exception was in the remote north, in the Arctic, where its use was continued among the Sami—the Lapps—until the missionaries finally arrived there. In the more southerly European areas where the drum was given up, they shifted especially to mixtures involving the solanaceous plants, plants of the nightshade family. But these incapacitated you if you used enough, so you couldn't perform acts of healing and divination, having very little control over your experiences in nonordinary reality.

In that sense, it wouldn't really be very useful for shamanism.

This is why I think they distinguished the sabbat from the esbat, as I indicated in my book, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*. The sabbat was probably the journey where all the nonordinary things happened to the “witches” in an altered state potentially produced by these plants with the spirits, and the esbat the formal meeting of these shamans together in ordinary reality. It's just a theory, but it would explain why there is this peculiar dichotomy in European witchcraft, which was really a form of shamanism. This dichotomy wasn't there among the Sami in northernmost Europe in the beginning of the twentieth century, because they were still using the drum.

Are you saying that the Central Europeans used drumming also, and they had to give it up?

I don't have hard evidence to back up this theory, but I cannot conceive of them *not* having the drum. The drum was still being used in shamanism into the twentieth century in northernmost Scandinavia, the area where religious persecution occurred the latest in Europe. Teresa de Avilar was able to use the drum in her spiritual work in Spain, but she was a nun “in the service of Christ.”

There's also Mediterranean art showing the drum.

Yes. I think what happened is that they couldn't use drums if they wanted to avoid being discovered by the Inquisition, they had to have a silent way. The plant ointments were quiet and less discoverable. I've found the same thing in Inuit villages. They're not about to do shamanic drumming within hearing of other people, because they'll be singled out and reported to the Christian authorities. So the drum is really a liability in a situation of persecution.

Did you find any evidence of alternative plant use in Europe? Tryptamine-containing plants? Psilocybin-containing mushrooms?

I pursued that, of course. There's no hard evidence I know of, but presumably berserkers were using the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom to get into that state. There's some indirect supportive evidence proposed by R. Gordon Wasson.

Have you tried the Amanita mushrooms?

No, they are not in my experience. Among the Samoyed peoples—one of the most Western of Siberian groups,

not that far from the Sami of Scandinavia—shamans and nonshamans both sometimes ate or burned dried *Amanita muscaria* to help change consciousness for spiritual purposes. It's not something I've published yet, but as far as I know, that's the most westward evidence of psychotropic mushroom use in a native context in Eurasia. I think it's probable that this kind of knowledge was known slightly farther to the south and west in Scandinavia in the old days, à la the berserkers. The berserkers were violent Norse warriors who were likely possessed by the power of the mushroom, much as non-shaman Siberians still can be when they wish to have extraordinary physical strength and endurance.

Did you eventually “graduate,” to use a Western term, as a shaman? Did your teachers tell you that you were ready to go out and practice?

You never graduate as a shaman. It just goes on and on. Your teachers almost never tell you you're ready.

Just like psychoanalysis.

Ordinary teachers never know if you're ready. There are two types of teachers. One is the ordinary teacher, which is what I think you were referring to—somebody like myself or shaman teachers I worked with among indigenous peoples. Then there are the spirit teachers, who are the real teachers. The spirit teachers may tell you, and do tell you, what you can do, but all the ordinary living human teachers are just expeditors. The ultimate authorities are the spirits you work with, and they tell you what to do and what you can't do. That's one of the reasons that I feel it's usually a mistake for anybody to characterize themselves as a shaman, because the power can be taken away at any time. Anyone who claims to be a shaman starts getting focused on his or her ego. He or she, however, is almost nothing, for one is only a shaman when the spirits want that person to be a shaman.

Were you given any visions or insights by these plant spirits about the culture you come from? Its such a world-dominating culture. Are the spirits commenting on this?

Our culture is considered to be deformed and out of contact with these truths. I think that compassionate, healing spirits have a mission to try to communicate their existence to us so that they can get on with their work of trying to reduce suffering and pain in our reality. But they are not all-powerful. They can't do it without the

help of intermediaries, and shamans are especially strong intermediaries. And so, precisely because the spirits need help in this, they will teach you surprising things to encourage you to help them. But they are in one reality and we're in another reality, and the only way they can penetrate this reality, except in very rare circumstances, is with help from our side. We have our power; they have their power. When we go into alliance with them, that's when healing miracles and miracles of knowledge can come through.

So the main thrust that I had in the Amazon using plants continues in my present work using sonic driving. The main thrust was that they were attempting to alert me to the reality of the spirits, to get me involved, and to teach and involve others. But they never said explicitly why this was. Implicitly, however, it was to reduce spiritual ignorance and suffering in ordinary reality.

Can you meet the same spirits, whether you access these worlds via plants or via drumming?

You can meet some of the same spirits, but not all the same spirits, because the spirits of specific plants can possess you to varying degrees. Much depends on what the spirits feel you are ready for and need to access at a particular time. Some of the spirits that I worked with as allies in the Amazon I still often work with, but there are now others in addition. Some are less dominant than they once were, and others are stronger.

In addition to the compassionate spirits, are there malevolent spirits?

Yes. Here in the Middle World the spirits have the whole range of personalities that also occur in ordinary reality. What is "malevolent" is an interesting thing. Other species may view us as malevolent, such as when we kill and enslave them. But we don't view ourselves as malevolent, and we don't see our whole species as malevolent. So a lot of the so-called "evil spirits" are often basically just trying to make a living and exist in their own way just as we are. More often than not, they don't even know they're dead. They're just doing the same old thing, but they're doing it in a Middle World of nonordinary reality. And this can include simple things like insect spirits who intrude into people.

What conclusions have you arrived at about different kinds of spirits? You mentioned the Middle World

vis-a-vis the Upper and Lower Worlds. And there are spirits of animals, spirits of plants, spirits of ancestors, other deceased humans. Are there others that are neither human nor animal? Are there extraterrestrial spirits?

I'll start with ancestors, as they are very important. Compassionate spirits—whatever species we're talking about—are especially found in the Upper and Lower Worlds, and these spirits have compassion for suffering beings in general. But ancestors tend to focus on compassion for their descendants. That's one of the reasons that many shamans use ancestral spirits so much for help.

You wouldn't say that extraterrestrials could be Upper World spirits?

No. From our point of view all the galaxies in the astronomers' universe are still Middle World. Extraterrestrials, as much as we've tried to look for them, seem like an uninspiring search. If there are extraterrestrials, which I assume there are, that's fine. To me, that's not a spiritual matter. They're just people making a living somewhere on another rock. [laughs]

The Upper World extends beyond the material world. Consider the Tuvan shamans in Central Asia. When they go past the stars, they get to the nine heavens, and then there's the white heaven above. The Upper World is beyond ordinary reality, beyond the astronomer's universe. And the center of the universe for any shaman is right where the shaman is located in ordinary reality. You are the center of the universe.

Are there other spirits that one encounters, neither animal nor plant nor human? Or spirits of a particular place?

Yes. You can encounter the spirits of the elements, for example. They are very powerful, but they don't have compassion. You can also have spirits of place, but it's typically a constellation of the spirits of that place, including local ancestor spirits.

Are you saying that the three worlds are located inside? That they are internal constructs?

No, I am not. The shaman is an empirical pragmatist. The worlds are wherever the shaman sees them. The idea that all this is happening inside us is, in contrast, a theory.

How would you compare your shamanic cosmology to that of the Perennial Philosophy?

What shamans discover is consistent with much of the Perennial Philosophy. I think there's an unfortunate tendency among some scholars and writers to consider shamanism as primitive. But the hypothesis of a kind of evolutionary hierarchy in which the caste-based societies of the Indian subcontinent house the highest and most developed spirituality is somewhat naive. Once the spirits get their hands on you, it doesn't matter what your original intention was—whether you were going to follow the Buddhist path, Christianity, or whatever. Once you give the spirits an opportunity to teach you, they're going to give you what you need, not what you planned according to your culture's program.

Do you feel the spirits are always around everybody, every being?

Yes, the Middle World spirits are, but usually not the Upper and Lower World spirits. And this is part of the problem. There's a lot of spiritually caused illness in the world, because people are not aware of what's around them. Take "possession," for example. In my opinion, it's fine to do ordinary psychotherapies and chemical therapies and so on with people who are deemed to be psychotic or schizophrenic. That's great. But Western treatment typically ignores the possibility there may be spiritual forces involved in the illness. In the contemporary world we've rejected the possession model and substituted something which is more acceptable to Age of Enlightenment science. We're bogged down in eighteenth century science.

Have you seen cases of psychosis that were cured by shamanism?

I am of the opinion that I have. However, it's very difficult to isolate the operative healing variables in any individual case, and also I'm not qualified to evaluate clinically what constitutes a case of psychotic behavior. Our Foundation for Shamanic Studies is a kind of university of shamanism. We train people who are already psychotherapists, physicians, and psychiatrists, and they can take home what they learn and experiment with cases of clinically defined psychosis. Certainly I've seen people exhibiting extreme behaviors, including alcoholics and drug addicts, who were then radically changed through depossession work.

The Spiritist church in Brazil, which has at least thirteen million members, embodies African, South American Indian, and some European elements in its depossession work. The president of the Spiritist church some years ago told me that a friendly Brazilian government turned over a mental institution to them for a year as an experiment. According to him, at the end of the year there were no more patients in the institution. Now, that's probably an exaggerated account. But it reminds us that one of our missions is to bring depossession work into mainstream Western life as a serious practice, in conjunction with other therapeutic practices. To make it work, however, you can't deal with people who are on mood-changing drugs. They have to be consciously present for the work to succeed. Meanwhile, one of the tragedies in our culture is the medical establishment's rejection of the possibility that there may be spiritual factors at work in these cases.

The work is really done by the spirits?

Not alone. The shaman has to work with the spirits. You have to have both forces in operation. Depossession is one of the most exciting healing approaches that I know of. We introduce only our most advanced students to it, after they've done at least three, and usually many more, years of work. Then they get the depossession training.

An interesting thing about possession illness is that it's relatively unknown in the New World native cultures. There is a little bit on the Northwest Coast, and some glimmers of it among the Inuit. It seems to be much more an illness associated with the Old World. There is some mystery here—why it's such an Old World thing, and lately imported into the New World.

Maybe it has something to do with the influence of the Church, denying the reality of the traditional spirits. If you deny the reality of the spirits, it makes you more vulnerable to unconscious possession. Whereas if you're working with the spirits directly, you would be protecting yourself more.

One typically gets possession illness when there has been significant soul loss through traumas, and loss of one's spiritual powers. If there are no shamans around, little can be done, but if there are shamans around they can remedy soul loss. So I think you're on the right track. When people are pretty empty spiritually, that's when there's room for involuntary possession.

On a personal level, how has the work with plants and shamanic drumming changed your own world-view about life, death, and spirituality?

Radically. I no longer view ordinary reality as the only reality. There's a whole other reality, and that reality is the bigger one. This one is just a transitory experience; you're only here for a certain number of years, but the other one is infinite. Whether you come back again, that's another question. Personally, I am not interested in reincarnating, because once you've been out "there," it's ineffable ecstasy and union. I feel this material world is basically just a short pit stop. But we should do the best we can to help here, because, compared to the Upper and Lower Worlds, this is a reality of suffering and pain. This is a Darwinian reality.

In fact, I consider our definition of life to be a very biocentric view. We are biological entities, so we define life in our own terms. But to me the whole universe is living, and it doesn't have to be only in biological form. Biological forms, by their very nature, go through the process of natural selection and evolve. Natural selection involves competition, and to survive competition requires that you have fear. Of course, you are also rewarded with the pleasure of the sexual act in order to create the next generation. We're talking now about DNA wanting to persevere. So the Middle World that we live in is a world where, in order to survive, one must experience fear.

When somebody has a great shamanic journey, that person is sometimes reluctant to return from the ecstatic experience, far away from the fear and pain of the Middle World. So we have very definite safeguards to ensure that one comes back. It's well known that some shamans can leave permanently, when they want to, but the trick is to come back here and do the healing work. We aren't given ecstatic knowledge just so that we'll look forward to our deaths. We are given this knowledge, and the spiritual empowerment that goes with it, so we can help to reduce suffering, pain, and spiritual ignorance here in the Middle World.

Death is no big deal. I'd like to stay around as long as possible to see how this life comes out, and to stay with my beloved wife, Sandra. But I certainly don't fear death the way I once did.

I'm still very much an imperfect human being, and it's never been my intention nor capability to be a perfect one. It's not an intention of shamanism to teach

people to lead inspiring model daily lives and to be gurus. Shamans are supposed to reduce suffering and pain through the hard work of healing others. That's their job. They also help the dying and the dead, because shamans also heal the dead stuck in the Middle World, if they want help.

Shamanism is very emotionally rewarding, in both acquiring shamanic knowledge and helping other people. My students often say what a privilege it is to do this work. And what is the work? The work is helping others, but shamanic practitioners end up feeling better about themselves! What looks like a sacrifice to the outside world is really the high point of the person's life. It changes your perspective. And of course you take less seriously things that should indeed be taken less seriously.

At the same time, a shaman is typically enmeshed in daily life, has a wife or a husband, has children, is a hunter, farmer, banker, computer operator, or whatever. Part of your daily routine is spent in ordinary reality, and that's fine. It's all the better that you be grounded in that, so you have sort of a microvacation. Then when you are called upon to do really serious spiritual work, you'll be recharged and go back to it with full force.

The idea in shamanism is not to try to be a gentle exemplar for everybody else all the time, and not to be in a constant mystical state. That's fine, but that's a different tradition. So you'll often find shamans engaged in joking and mildly outrageous behavior when they're off duty, much like you might find emergency-room physicians and nurses having an "inappropriate" sense of humor about things. Nonshamans often can't understand this. Then when you go back to work, boom! You're back in the trenches.

Do altered states implicitly convey something about ethics? Do they teach people to live more ethical lives?

Experiencing an altered state that occurs in the Middle World would not necessarily do that. However, outside the Middle World, the shamanic state of consciousness gets you in touch with the teachings of the compassionate spirits. These are concerned about reducing pain and suffering, and do indeed make it more difficult for you to be unethical. It's not that you can't be unethical, but you're going to have a harder time being unethical.

Similarly, people who begin to study with us may not at first have any interest in ecology. But after a few journeys they start having a different view, one

they never expected, about the interconnectedness of all species and the planet that is their home. Once you start realizing we're *not* superior to the rest of the cosmos, but that we're just part of it, this creates a more compassionate and ethical orientation. And if you know that material reality isn't the whole ball of wax, you can drop your focus about getting everything you can in this reality before you die. A fellow wrote a book he actually called *Die Rich*. What an amazing concept, huh? I think he made a lot of money doing it, but I don't know if he's still alive. [laughs]

Someone else wrote a book about dying empty—giving everything away before you die.

That's more like it, yes.

The spirits may help you do what you do, but you're still choosing to do it, right?

I think it's a two-way thing. The spirits have an effect on you, and you're never utterly disentangled from them. There is a kind of osmotic effect, so that the spiritual connections permeate you. Right now, while I'm talking to you, I'm seeing several of them. Not because I'm calling them in, but because I'm touching on a subject that they feel strongly about.

But the real effect is when you're on duty and not in your ordinary life. Your ordinary life is often quite imperfect. I think that's the way it's supposed to be, because if you were too satisfied with your ordinary life you wouldn't have the attraction to this other reality.

Most people who really take this path seriously have suffered significantly. Perhaps not in the dramatic, traumatic way it's portrayed in some of the Siberian literature, but they have suffered. They're hoping there's more to life than this.

Once you start interacting with these spirits, they guide you in certain ways that are no longer entirely your free choice. You may go on a journey wanting something, and then they give you what you need, not what you want. So, there is that feedback.

But what about those who take a path of sorcery; they're making that choice, right?

Persons who go down the sorcery path have often been unknowingly possessed by suffering Middle World spirits who have hostile orientations. To that degree, "free choice" can be a questionable term. The compassionate healing spirits will stay with you as long as you

don't go down the sorcery road, but if you do, they'll leave you. We're like rechargeable batteries, and we get spiritually recharged constantly as long as we're working in alliance with compassionate healing spirits that want to reduce suffering and pain here. When, let's say out of anger, we make a big mistake and decide to "get even" with somebody, then the healing spirits disengage. They will not support you in such actions. You still have that residual power—the battery was charged—and you can do damage for quite a while. But ultimately it's going to fail you because the power source will be gone. And whatever you put out there comes back to you multiplied. That's when it's disastrous for you, for your protective power has left. There are sorcerers who can keep going for awhile, who are drawing on spirits other than the compassionate ones, but it's a big mistake to go down that path.

One advantage of shamanic education is that you learn you can get angry at somebody, but still protect him/her spiritually, and thereby protect yourself. But people who aren't trained shamanically usually won't have the discipline of knowing that they should control their spiritual powers when they get really angry.

Have you ever tried the combination of plant medicine and drumming at the same time?

With peyote, of course. But peyote is so mild that it's easily done. However, with a strong dose of ayahuasca you don't even want to hear a dog barking or a child crying. It's too overwhelming. With ayahuasca you want to hear the songs, which are great, and they can connect you very strongly to your spiritual allies. But they involve no drumming.

Carlos Castaneda renewed interest in shamanism and had a tremendous influence on contemporary psychedelic culture. What do you think of Castaneda?

He performed an important role. He showed the Western world that non-Western peoples could have a fascinating and radical perspective on reality, even if they were barefoot. And he also helped provide some sort of framework for people in the psychedelic movement who were having a hard time figuring out how to organize their experiences.

As a matter of fact, Carlos himself had quite a difficult time organizing his own early experiences. That's how we first met. After I came back from the Conibo to a position at the University of California at Berkeley in

1962, I gave a talk one evening on “Drugs and Reality in the Upper Amazon.” Carlos was a graduate student, and he read about that talk, so he looked me up at the 1963 meeting of the American Anthropological Association. He said he was curious about how I organized these experiences conceptually, because as yet he had no framework. So I shared with him the Upper Amazon perception of reality through ayahuasca and other substances.

Then when I heard him start talking, I was blown away by his accounts, because they were so beautiful. In fact, I encouraged him to write them up. So within a few weeks he came back to Berkeley with an account of his first peyote experience, which later became a chapter in his book. It was great, and I encouraged him to write more, and he brought some more a few weeks later. At *that* time, I think he was pretty much on the level about what had happened to him.

I encouraged Carlos to write a book-length manuscript, which he then did. He eventually published it with the University of California Press, because the New York commercial publishing establishment wasn't ready for it, and couldn't cope with it. In fact, the first review in the *New York Times* of Carlos' book, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, was written by a specialist on the don Juan of Europe, of the Renaissance! He wrote a short, very critical, uncomprehending review of it. The *Times* had no idea of what was happening. Much later, after Carlos was popular, the *New York Times* assigned more appropriate reviewers.

One of Carlos' most important contributions was introducing the terms “ordinary/nonordinary” reality, which remain immensely useful. The American anthropologist Robert Lowie had earlier used “ordinary and extraordinary,” but nothing quite works like “ordinary/nonordinary.” Unfortunately, in later books Carlos didn't really distinguish adequately between those anymore. The first two books were closer to shamanism and to what I consider to have been experiences with a psychedelic base. Later, Carlos shifted more into his own world. His later books have very little to do with shamanism and a lot to do with Carlos' own world, such as his construct of Toltec shamanism—nobody knows who the Toltecs *really* were. It's simply an archaeological concept.

Many today believe that most of what Castaneda wrote was a sham. Do you think that don Juan, his mentor shaman, was a real person?

My Path in Shamanism

I think don Juan was real. However, I think some aspects of him described by Carlos were composites, and other aspects, described in the later books, were “dreamed” by Carlos. Early on, Carlos invited me to go visit don Juan. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to travel with him down to Mexico, and I've kicked myself ever since. But don Juan and I were in contact through Carlos. Carlos wanted to get that book published. When he mentioned this, don Juan said that he didn't really know if it was important, but if Carlos really wanted it, he'd help. So he had three power masks made. One was for Carlos' literary agent, one was for Carlos, and one was for me. I can tell you that these masks are the *real* thing. They are, in fact, very dangerous masks.

These are actual physical masks? Why are they dangerous?

Yes. I can show you mine if you want to see it. I just ask you not to handle it, okay? They are dangerous because they have immense spiritual power that's of the Middle World.

Carlos never got out of the Middle World. You'll never find any reference to the Lower World or the Upper World in his books, nor do you find any reference to healing. He was in the world of the sorcerer. Not surprisingly, the people that are attracted to his disciples' workshops often are not people who are oriented toward compassion and healing, but rather to power alone.

They're trying to amass power?

Yes. However, power alone is not shamanism. But I loved Carlos. He was a great raconteur, and he spoke the way he wrote, but with humor. You could sit for hours listening to him. You would have been enthralled. But Carlos was really not interested in shamanism, per se.

Have psychedelics been a part of your life in more recent years?

Not in recent years. I haven't felt that they are important anymore. I felt that they were important at one time—useful as an entree. But these days I don't want to get too deeply in there, except when I'm working. And then I usually like to get out after half an hour or so.

What do you say to students who want to take psychedelics?

It's fine if they want to do it; that's their business. But I don't want my students to get the idea that they *have*

to do that. I want them to get the bigger picture—that there's another reality and that it's accessible by various means.

What legacy would you like to leave to future generations?

Well, if I were to die tomorrow, I'd feel that I'd done more than I had ever hoped. I feel very lucky that way. I never envisioned this path, and I never envisioned so many students wanting to seek it. I am satisfied with what has already been accomplished, because now there are so many people who are well-trained and prepared to work with and learn from the spirits shamanically, so that I'm no longer essential. The movement has its own momentum. So, I'm now very relaxed. What is my legacy? Well, my students as much as anything, because they will carry on, and some will go farther than I have ever gone.

Note

1. Reprinted from Walsh, R., & Grob, C.S. (Eds.). (2005). *Higher wisdom: Eminent elders explore the continuing impact of psychedelics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (By permission of the author; copyright Michael Harner, 1998, 2005)

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