

The Non-Dualism of Shamanic Psychotherapy  
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“Normal Consciousness is just one point on the spectrum of reality, and there are many, many more.”

--William James, MD-- (1842-1910) Harvard Trained Physician and Psychologist

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“In Our Dark Times, a piece of us comes to an end. We must find meaning in the darkness.”

Thomas Moore-- Dark Nights of the Soul

At the age of 49, as a traditionally trained psychotherapist with more than 27 years experience in the field of mental health, and a plethora of personal experience as a psychotherapy client, I found myself overwhelmed by what is most typically labeled as 'a dark night of the soul'.

I was at my wits end and feeling 'stuck in the muck' of the darkness. In psychotherapy this is a condition that would be most likely labeled as “depression”. Earlier in my life, at times such as this I had sought out the benefits of traditional insight-oriented, ego-based psychotherapy. This time I knew, at least on an intellectual level, I was 'all talked out.' I felt psychotherapy would only be a regurgitation of all I had previously learned, I knew I had gone as far as I could go with that paradigm of change.

Synchronicity played its cards before me at that very juncture. I was reading Thomas Moore's book (1) trying to get a new perspective on moving through the morass, when a friend simultaneously loaned me a book she was finding particularly 'illuminating'. Since I could use any illumination I could lay my hands on, I accepted and began reading a book by Jamie Sams entitled “Dancing The Dream; The Seven Paths of Human Transformation.”(2) Moore's book was providing me with a new and valuable understanding of my situation on an intellectual and egoic level, but as a Buddhist meditator of over 20 years it was clear that his advice of just “sitting through the darkness” wasn't going to offer me the assistance I was hungrily seeking. It was in Sams' book that I was encouraged to explore an entirely different, paradigms for healing: the ancient discipline of Shamanism.

Ever the left-brained skeptic, I was, of course, more than dubious. Yet I also was up against many dead ends with other widely recognized approaches. Already I was a yogi and a yoga instructor. I ate healthily, took many natural supplements and Chinese formulas, along with acupuncture for 'brain health', and I worked out at the gym regularly. However the dark night still prevailed. And again, the universe was continuing to beckon me towards a different approach.

Out of desperation I placed a call to a woman who was both a psychotherapist and a shamanic healer. This choice was reinforced at a social event with my professional colleagues, when a new

addition to our practice mentioned that before entering graduate school in the field of mental health, she had practiced as an assistant to a very powerful local shaman. Reluctantly, I scheduled a soul extraction and retrieval with Jan Engels-Smith (3) and my journey of becoming a Shamanic Psychotherapist began shortly after, as is not unusual, through my own healing.

Seven years later, I am proud to formalize my studies and experience as a Ph.D. candidate in Shamanic PsychoSpiritual Studies through Venus Rising Institute. (4) I feel honored to be a member of the first graduating class in the country, where a program of this type is affiliated with a major university, The University of North Carolina at Asheville. I now practice as a shamanic psychotherapist.

Our Western culture, in which traditional psychotherapy was born and continues to exist, is one riddled with polarities. Good/Bad, Right/Wrong, Black/White, Self/Other Either/Or... to name a few. My Eastern philosophical training in Buddhism has allowed me to see these as 'dualities': Both/And rather than Either/Or; equals and mirror images of one another rather than opposites. However, my professional dilemma for the past five years has been the challenge of how to move beyond both of these models and form a practice that embraces psychotherapy and shamanic healing as a non-dualistic synergy and energy. To this end I present my model for Shamanic Psychotherapy.

While the parallels in these two arenas have been recognized in some recent writings and research, such as that by Daniel Foor,(5) for which I was interviewed at the beginning of my own evolution as a shamanic psychotherapist, I believe it is the non-dualistic approach in the integration of these two paradigms of healing that uniquely offers individuals a transcendent experience that exponentially increases the power of these modalities. Demonstrating, yet keeping separate, the healing power of these two approaches has proven in my direct personal and professional experience to have limited the benefits of each. But in the combining of the two, the benefit is clearly enhanced.

In psychotherapy we explore the Self, both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the ego, to understand and then rid ourselves of unwanted and unhealthy thoughts, behaviors, feelings and experiences. However this exploration does not happen in a vacuum. A safe and trusting relationship with the therapist is the necessary foundation that allows the client to move forward and deeper into the psychotherapy process. According to relational therapy theory (6) the first cannot happen without the second. In the West, we are a culture of thinkers, therefore it is essential to provide many therapy clients with the components of a cognitive framework before they can allow themselves to trust in a deeper, energetic exploration. In my experience as a shamanic psychotherapist, this cognitive/relational experience lays the framework from which the journeyer can proceed to plunge into the depths of deeper shamanic healing. It is only then, through the support of this scaffolding that the ego can relinquish its hyper-tonic grasping of the Self, opening up a portal through which the journey to the Soul can commence. And, then through a true and honest connection with the Soul, we can then have full and direct access to Spirit.

In traditional psychotherapy the Id/Ego/Superego are viewed as the manifestations of the Self. In shamanic healing this tripartite Self is only one aspect of the manifestation of our whole being, which is comprised of the trinity of Self/Soul/Spirit. Working at the level of the Self, the therapist is, in essence, helping the client to uncover the combination to the 'locked' ego. However, finding this valuable combination only places the tumblers in alignment, poised to spring open. Shamanic healing then proceeds to free open the lock, revealing the aspects of Soul and Spirit. It is only by working in the tri-fold realms of Self/Spirit/Soul that our deepest healing and transformation is invoked.

Bill Plotkin, Ph.D, (7) a depth psychologist and earth-centered Shaman describes "The Three Realms of Human Development: Ego Growth, Soul Embodiment, and Spirit Realization." He sees a healthy ego as, "skilled in imagination, feeling, intuition, and sensing, in addition to thinking." He believes that, "Adequate ego growth is essential to personal well-being and can not be bypassed through working in the other two realms" of Soul and Spirit. Psychotherapy of the ego is comparable to shoring up the walls of a well as you dig deeper, seeking to tap into the source of water. We shore up the self so that it does not collapse in upon itself as we move deeper towards the untapped healing of the Soul. I liken the experience of singularly exploring the healing of our wounds only through psychotherapy to that of riding in a glass-bottomed boat. From the safety of the boat we can see clearly the depths and riches of the vast sea below us, but it remains unexplored as we glide back and forth above it, only skimming the surface. Psychotherapy allows us to have a clear view of where we need to drop anchor and drop-in! But if we cling to the security of our glass-bottomed boat of the ego, there will always be a barrier that prevents us dropping deeper and moving towards a more complete healing via the Soul.

Shamanism is like the scuba tank and the shamanic psychotherapist is the diving instructor. But it is the individual themselves who must plumb the depths of their "Soul Self," which is often dark and frightening. The therapist provides the tools, but the individual must learn to use them for their own highest good and well-being. In Shamanic Breathwork™ (8), a particular form of shamanic healing, the breath and the choreographed music relating to the chakras are the tools provided. The SBW Facilitator is there to assist the 'journeyer', assuring that the needed 'oxygen flow and diving tools' are consistently available to this brave individual as they move beyond the ego and into the light and the dark of the depths of their soul. In other traditions of shamanic healing such things as drumming, rattling, energy extractions, soul retrievals, cord cuttings, sweat lodges, plant medicines etc.. are the tools that trained healers may offer.

Working with a shamanic psychotherapist allows the individual to rely on the relational trust imbued through the process of ego exploration to then drop more safely into the work of the Soul. Just as trust and safety, the first developmental stage of life according to Erik Erikson (9), are necessary to allow our infantile selves to begin to develop our fledgling ego in order to separate our self-identity from our caretakers, so too the trust and safety developed in the therapy relationship is beneficial in allowing that now developed ego to trust the shamanic psychotherapist and to feel safe enough to 'dive in' to the depths of soul transformation.

In Shamanic Breathwork™ the facilitator is trained to use their knowledge of the 'Cycles of Change' to assess and assist the individual to move forward along a spiral path, moving deeply from Self (Ego) to Soul and into harmony with Spirit. This is NOT a linear path, in the way that traditional psychotherapy is viewed. The shamanic facilitator is trained to see the work surrounding; family of origin as the point of stepping off the linear path and onto the spiral of change. Using the insight-oriented understanding of family issues and patterns gained in traditional therapy, we move beyond the linear path and begin our soul-based journey. As we are guided to move even more deeply into the woundedness of our ego through our soul work, we peel away the layers of our childhood pain. But unlike in traditional psychotherapy, we move beyond the limitations of the paradigm of words, and we are now working with the energy of the pain.

As we proceed around the spiral, time and time again, shedding the layers of our childhood pain, we begin to glimpse a view of our true and pure soul, the core of our being. This leads us to meeting our 'Inner Beloved', the next cycle of change. From here we are led towards our 'Sacred Marriage' through which our Self and Soul merge and are then ready to drop fully onto the path of Spirit. It is at this juncture that we uncover our truest and purest calling, our 'Sacred Purpose'. It is here where Self/Soul/Spirit are so completely aligned that we will transform our wounded egos into our truest and fullest identity. Here we move from our self of a 'Human Doing' into a 'Spirit Being'. We embrace fully at this time that we are in fact spirit beings having a human experience! It is through the guidance of a Shamanic Psychotherapist that we are brought to this place of stepping fully onto the path of our life, where we begin incorporating the lessons that we were brought into this lifetime to master.

In my practice of Shamanic Psychotherapy I also employ the elements of nature to assist individuals to understand and navigate their spiral paths and their cycles of change. These elements are incorporated into the teachings of Venus Rising Institute™ where my training has taken place. Water/Earth/Fire/Air/Spirit are tools that indigenous shamans of all cultures share in common. Malidoma Patrice Some in his book "The Healing Wisdom of Africa" (10) describes in detail how shamans use these elements in ritual and ceremony. In Shamanic Psychotherapy I employ the elements as taught by Linda Starwolf (11) to assist clients in accepting and releasing the distress they experience on the Spiral Path of Transformation. These elements relate to the process of rebirth which is necessary to transcend the limits of the ego, move fully through the souls transformation and fully embrace the path of spiritual wholeness. In the womb, we gestate in the element water. As we prepare for birth we move into the element of earth. As we move into the birth canal we are propelled into the element of fire. As we are reborn we surrender into spirit. And as we transcend our ego fully we move into the lightness of air. In facilitating an understanding of the cycle of change and its corresponding element, the individuals I work with are then able to assist themselves in moving more fully into the experience, rather than resisting it. Working with these elements of healing assists the individual to view their experiences in a way that does not pathologize them, but rather aligns and attunes them with the most core healing elements of nature itself. (12) It shift the focus from the words of the story being told onto the power of the storyteller to make meaning for themselves within the culture of earth-based healing.

It is my belief and my experience, particular to the western culture within which I work, that the combination of my training as a traditional psycho-dynamic relational therapist combined with my initiation as a shamanic healer, has provided me with the skills, tools and the maps to assist those brave individuals who seek my services to undertake a journey of transformation. This powerful journey allows and facilitates the movement from Ego through Soul into Spirit, and it is the integration of the work in these three realms that leads us to enlightenment and sets us on our path of Sacred Purpose.

#### Quotes from Notable Practitioners Knowledgeable in the Dualism of Traditional and Shamanic Healing

Andrew Weil MD (13) “Good Shamans are master psychotherapists” pg. 6 “...patients are more than Physical Bodies. To understand health and illness you’ve got to look at the mental and emotional and spiritual dimensions.” pg. 7 “...integrative [healing] embraces all therapeutic options that may be of value. That includes many that aren’t even on the radar of conventional medicine--- simple, low-cost interventions like breathwork...” pg. 8

Ann Drake Psy.D (14) “I realized that there are key elements of shamanism within each of the main theoretical traditions of psychology.” p.41 “In my work I discovered that each of the major psychological is better understood by including an understanding of energy. Each of us is an essence or soul that carries an awareness of our higher purpose and place in the universe. I now believe that the major task of psychotherapy is to heal the personality so that ones truest essence can emerge.” p.42 “Traditional shamanic practice may need to expand to embrace the workings of the western mind... Thus each tradition has much to learn from the other” p.52

Bill Plotkin Ph.D (7) “A mature ego understands the occasional necessity of surrendering to--- or being defeated by--- a force greater than itself, sometimes during the death-rebirth of soul encounter (when ego surrenders to soul) and other times during ego transcendence (when ego surrenders to spirit). Ego obstructs personal development when it gets stuck, lost, or entrenched at any life stage...” p.39

Howard Brockman, LCSW (15) “... energy psychology, process-oriented psychology and core shamanism. The combination and integration of these three distinctive paradigms makes a unique and highly effective model for change that lies at the foundation of my successful clinical practice.” p. xvii “... most developmental psychology textbooks do not discuss spiritual issues as part of the normative human developmental life cycle. In fact, the acknowledgment and existence of the soul, as evidenced in our work with energetic origins... is absolutely central to the consistently successful therapeutic outcomes of our clients.” p. xxv

Alberto Villoldo Ph.D (16) “Talk psychotherapy often is not enough to achieve healing. Psychology believes that once you become aware of hitherto unconscious 'complexes' and 'drives', you can become free of their noxious influences. Shamans, on the other hand, believe that intellectual cognizance barely scratches the surface and is not enough to bring about healing.” p. 61

Jan Engels-Smith LPC (17) “I started my personal quest for understanding through science, which led me to psychology... Initially, my spiritual study seemed to move me away from my earlier scientific studies, but ultimately it brought me back full circle... I now understand all my studies to be one study--- the art and science of universal consciousness. I no longer see the disciplines as separate...” p.4 “In our Western culture, we have doctors who specialize in everything imaginable except for the soul. To me, this care of the soul is the missing link in healing.” p.23 “During traditional therapy, people often understand what has happened to them on an intellectual or cognitive level, but still change does not occur.” p.28 “After a soul retrieval previous therapies increase in value and understanding. The multilevel healing allows the person to process information from the perspective of wholeness...” p.29

Charles Walker, Ph.D. (18) “I believe that the blend of traditional psychotherapy with shamanic principles makes for an excellent PsychoSpiritual fit. Breathwork in particular is so helpful for clients dealing with a full range of clinical issues in that breathwork allows the client to access their personal unconscious for deep seeded issues repressed and also allows them to access elements of spiritual healing and insight held in the Collective Unconscious. I have found that clients who regularly practice shamanic principles of healing and insight into their lives to have a much richer and deeper experience of their lives on all level.”

Donna Roy, LPC (19) “The healer is needing to make sense of the Egoic needs within the clients culture in order to help them move beyond it. It involves stepping into the other persons reality and looking at where the the healing will happen. Shoring up the ego strength allows the client to be able to tolerate working in deeper realms. In Hopi “Hakomi” means standing in relation to many realms, it is a multilevel experience. There are many ways of perceiving alternative realms. The embodiment of both the realm of the therapist and that of the shaman is essential rather than just going through the motions. Stories alone limit the healing experience because they are dualistic. It involves facilitating the telling of the story but then shifting the paradigm beyond the story to the storyteller and experiencing non-linear storytelling. Working in the realms of Self/Spirit/Soul allows for healing on ALL Levels.”

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