

Integrating Shamanic Methods into Psychotherapy

David Hammerman, Ed.D.

Evidence of shamanism dates back to prehistory, perhaps as early as 40,000 years ago, and the practices continue to this day. As a psychologist in private practice in Western society, I have had the opportunity to introduce and integrate shamanic methods with psychotherapy. My guiding principle is to help my clients, and over the course of many years, I have become pragmatic, using many varied methods and approaches. Depression, dream work, resolving therapeutic impasses, physical healing with spiritual and psychological components, empowerment, the removal of curses, soul retrieval, strengthening of the self and the releasing of shame are just some of the situations in which shamanic techniques can be used. Shamanism and psychotherapy are a natural fit in industrialized society.

How and when does a Western therapist decide to use shamanic methods? What are the indications and contra-indications for their use? How does the psychotherapist introduce and use these techniques? How do these methods influence the client and the therapy relationship?

Shamanic worldview

Shamanic methods uniquely access nonordinary reality, and draw upon spiritual dimensions for help. Nonordinary reality (NOR), a shamanic term defined by Harner¹, an anthropologist, Ingerman², and others, is outside everyday life, and is divided into separate worlds; the Upper World, which helping spirits inhabit and the Lower World where power animals are encountered. The Middle World in this shamanic cosmology is ordinary reality, and is experienced with the five senses.

A shamanic journey is the method most often used to enter a state of consciousness that allows access to nonordinary reality. By drumming or rattling the therapist and client can enter an altered state of consciousness and communicate with spirits in the Upper World or power animals in the Lower World, in addition to working with spirits in the Middle World. Beings encountered in nonordinary reality are experienced as real.

I use shamanic journeying with clients in psychotherapy to enter nonordinary reality. A journey allows the therapist and client to bridge ordinary and nonordinary reality and

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²

brings help to the client. Although the content of the journeys may seem unusual to the Western mind, the results are positive and healing. There are a variety of situations when shamanic practices are the preferred method over other therapeutic approaches.

Introduction of shamanic methods: Why and when

Experiential methods have been part of treatment ever since the beginning of modern psychotherapy when Wilhelm Reich introduced body-based techniques.³ Along with increased awareness and understanding of trauma in the last 20 years there has been a flowering of experiential mind-body-energy techniques to treat people who have experienced trauma. Hypnotherapy, eye movement and reprocessing desensitization (EMDR),⁴ TAT, somatic experiencing, past life regression therapy, and guided imagery are some of the approaches used today within psychotherapeutic contexts.

Bringing in spirit allies when there is a therapeutic impasse provides good consultation, as illustrated by Ellen's case example. I have also journeyed alone to access my helping spirits when I need consultation to help me understand what is going on either in the therapeutic relationship with someone in my practice or in the dynamics of a client. Using just the name or names of a person, members of a peer consultation group in which I participate journey to understand a case, with good results.

People suffering from depression, a sense of emptiness, or of "not being all there," particularly benefit from shamanic practices. The soul retrieval method brings back lost parts of the soul in ways that no other experiential method can do. Many clients who have a history of sexual, physical, or emotional trauma benefit from this technique. It is a way to re-invigorate, re-integrate without retraumatizing a wounded person.

Introducing shamanic methods into a psychotherapy treatment is a different process than what occurs in tribal societies or in a freestanding shamanic practice. In indigenous societies, or a freestanding shamanic practice, both client and practitioner share the same worldview, or openness to the same worldview, and there is little need for extensive explanation and education. Within a psychotherapy practice, some clients may be uncomfortable with any alternative to mainstream psychology, and may not be open to a shamanic approach. In addition, they may not want to tap into the spiritual dimension in their therapy. Therapeutic judgment determines when and how much to push the boundaries of a client's comfort level. It goes without saying that a therapist should not force a client to try anything they do not want to do.

If a client is open to trying a shamanic method, explanation is essential. Using such techniques requires expanding the worldview of the client to include concepts such as soul, energy, nonordinary reality, and journeying into Upper, Lower, and Middle Worlds. I find that most people intuitively and quickly grasp the shamanic worldview, and are interested in getting relief from their suffering. A brief discussion and perhaps some reading is usually a sufficient first step.

Just as building an alliance with the helping spirits is an important part of shamanic work, building an alliance with your client is crucial in psychotherapy. Unless the use of shamanic methods is well established with a client, as in the case of Ellen, it is contraindicated if there is not a positive therapeutic alliance. In tribal societies, the shaman has a respected position, and any person requesting their services knows them or knows of their

reputation, and views them in a positive light. A healing alliance is already established from the outset. When I have had clients see me just for shamanic work, alliance building is still important, and I must connect quickly with them in a caring, confidence inspiring way. If I cannot do this, shamanic work will be unsuccessful, and should be delayed until a better connection can be forged.

Typically I share the imagery from my journey with the client, as they share their experience during the journey with me. I am careful to share the imagery in ways that can be heard by my client. Often the process of sharing brings great healing benefit.

Therapeutic impasse

I had been seeing Ellen, a woman in her forties, for a number of years in psychotherapy, and had used shamanic methods in our time together. Ellen used therapy well, but our work had reached an impasse. She was going through a particularly difficult period in her life, and felt that I was not listening to her, that I wasn't helping. She wanted to end therapy. I thought that I had heard her, but knew that I must be contributing to the impasse, although it wasn't clear how. We agreed to journey together to understand the therapy relationship. Here is a partial summary of those journeys:

Therapist's Journey: I went to the Upper World and found Ellen. She's very young, grieving, concerned about survival. The helping spirits gathered around me and began working with me. I had hurt her with words, and had been unaware that I was doing this. I had been pushing too quickly to get to some of her core pain and missed some important aspects of her experience, activating her defenses. I felt genuine remorse about what I had done. The helping spirits worked with me around phrasing and language, devising what I could say to her. In addition, they worked with me around accepting whatever decision she made about therapy.

Ellen's Journey: I went to the Upper World, and found my chief helping spirit, who told me to be open to my therapist.

Therapy progressed rapidly after this, as we both learned important lessons through journeying together. My helping spirits were able to work with me quickly, efficiently, and powerfully, understanding the therapy relationship and what I needed to do to dissolve the roadblock. Ellen's helping spirit prepared her to hear the words I needed to say. The helping spirits worked with each of us to open our hearts to each other.

Therapeutic impasses are a difficult and painful part of a psychotherapy practice, and I usually seek consultation from a colleague to help me when this happens. I now realize that my colleagues in nonordinary reality are also invaluable resources in understanding and repairing the therapy relationship.

Shame

Shame is an extremely difficult, often disabling, and usually hidden emotion. The sense of unworthiness, embarrassment, dishonor, and wrongness can be pervasive, harsh, self-punishing, and unrelenting. Jack, a client in his sixties, was writing a memoir chronicling his career. It included biographical and personal information, with descriptions of a marriage in which he felt shamed and abused. His deepest level of shame involved his difficulty and inability to stand up to his wife. We had talked about this in a variety of ways, but the sense of shame was untouched. With Jack's consent, I decided to journey to heal the shame.

Therapist's Journey: I went to the Upper World with the intention of asking for the healing of Jack's shame. It was foggy; I began thinking of other things, errands I had to do later in the day, other clients. There was strong resistance to healing. I saw a circle of sand, and it was blank. Nothing was drawn on the circle. I had a sense that I needed to get inside the circle for healing to occur but there was no way in.

When I shared this journey with him he revealed that an uncle had molested him when he was ten years old. He felt ashamed and humiliated, blaming himself for "letting it happen." While the first journey showed that he was not fully ready to heal, it opened up another source of his pervasive shame, and it could then be examined within a therapeutic context. Bringing sunlight to the causes and contributing factors of shame is often a first and necessary step for growth.

After a number of sessions focusing on Jack's feelings of shame, I also worked with the parts of Jack's psyche that were managing these feelings and associated beliefs. The feelings of shame were so toxic that they were buried outside conscious awareness, and parts of his mind protected him from feeling shame, although there was a price to pay for these defenses. He used considerable psychic energy to keep his feelings underground and when triggered by external events Jack experienced them as erupting from within himself, from out of the blue. He lived in a state of being half-awake.

In the past, I had used a variety of other experiential methods with Jack to help him deal with deeply buried feelings, with varying degrees of success. However, with this multilayered shame no method I previously used helped, even after Jack's protective parts stepped aside enough to allow him the possibility of healing. I did another journey, hoping the helping spirits would be gentle enough and wise enough to work with Jack.

Therapist's Journey: I went to the Lower World and Snake appeared, swallowing Jack whole. It began sucking out the venomous feelings from Jack's body. Snake then slithered into a pool of water, and regurgitated what it had sucked out into the water, where it was transformed. Snake returned and drew the venom of shame out of Jack's energy field.

Although this was not a "gentle" approach, within a week Jack began feeling better, more alive, more open. The feelings of shame were more available to him and less burdensome because they were loosened and reorganized. The pattern had shifted and

changed using shamanic methods. He did not have to spend as much energy pushing these feelings down outside of conscious awareness. One final journey helped.

Therapist's Journey: I went to the Lower World and Snake appeared again, circling Jack. Snake sucked shame out of the periphery of Jack's energy field, ingesting and transforming it.

His feelings of shame were not eliminated, but their venomous sting was removed. The outline of these feelings, along with the memories and events that helped create them, still existed within his psyche. There will still be times when he experiences them, but the disruptive and destabilizing power of shame was greatly lessened, freeing up psychic energy for a healthier life.

It was during these journeys that I first met the power animal Snake. I have since met Snake on journeys for other clients, and when I meet this spirit ally I know that shame and energetic pattern transformation might be part of the helping process. I also call on Snake for other healing tasks, and am learning through experience which situations Snake is best suited. The more I work with each spirit ally the more I learn about each one's capabilities and strengths.

As I continue to use shamanic methods for a wider and wider range of problems and conditions, I find additional spirit allies with different areas of expertise. Anthropologists report that shamans in tribal groups often have hundreds of helping spirits with different specialties to call upon for varied circumstances. The psychotherapist using a shamanic approach experiences a similar process; the more a therapist uses shamanic methods the larger the network of connections with helping spirits in nonordinary reality grows.

Stabilizing the self

A central problem for many clients is a lack of a stable sense of Self. After spending time with them and listening to their life stories, it becomes clear that they do not have a solid core Self to ground themselves and help them navigate and withstand the vicissitudes of life. According to Richard Schwartz, the developer of Internal Family Systems (IFS) Therapy, the core Self is both particle and wave: an active, compassionate inner leader and an expansive, boundaryless state of mind.⁵ Sandra Ingerman defines "soul" to mean vital essence, distinct from the body, the seat of "emotions, thoughts and sentiments."⁶ Soul and self are often used interchangeable, although there are differences. People with an unstable sense of Self often do not have access to wisdom greater than themselves, to the ability to form solid relationships. Shamanic methods can be used to help solidify and strengthen a sense of Self, and allow a client to function and lead from their soul.

James, a college student in his early twenties, came to therapy after a difficult three-month stay abroad, seeking help for his panic attacks and help with separating from his parents in order to stand on his own, an appropriate developmental task for his age. He also described energy cycling through this body, and his mood swinging up and down during the day. His trip overseas had turned out differently than he had expected, and during his stay he

often felt lonely and confused. He felt pain in his heart and his solar plexus, and many times felt he was having a heart attack, when in fact he was having a panic attack.

When he was just seventeen, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and was forced to drop out of school for a year. Because one of his aunts was a Buddhist nun, he was attracted to Buddhism: he actively studied it and developed a strong meditation practice. He was an excellent student at a prestigious college, although he felt out of step with the majority of his peers, who did not share his spiritual interests.

My initial therapy with him focused on helping him to tolerate and manage his emotional swings on a daily basis. I used experiential methods such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) and hypnotherapy to help him learn and use cognitive and emotional skills and inner resources to ground and center himself, and manage his emotional life. During the early stages of therapy I did not use experiential methods, such as shamanic practices or abreactive techniques that foster emotional release and reliving of past experiences, until he was sufficiently grounded and practiced in managing his emotions.

Shamanic practices are powerful, and at times destabilizing. Clients can experience strong reactions immediately after soul retrieval or other shamanic methods, and these reactions can be disorienting and confusing. Until a person's emotional container is strong enough, I find it is best to work on strengthening a client's ability to tolerate strong emotions rather than on deep exploration or using potentially upsetting methods. Through this process of stabilization a foundation for a stable self is built.

Perhaps in a tribal society, with community support for shamanic healing practices, the stabilization process that individual and group psychotherapy provides would not be necessary. Any period of disorientation and confusion experienced by a client in indigenous populations might be understood as part of the healing process, and others would support clients through it in the community. In Western society, which lacks community support, psychotherapy methods that foster stabilization are important since they provide the necessary emotional and psychological centering required for the next phase of work.

However, talk therapy and experiential methods for stabilization were not sufficient for James, as he was dealing with a life-long issue energy of bodily imbalances. Also, through his meditation practice, he was getting glimmers of some of his past lives and their carry over effects on his current life. After the stabilization phase of therapy I began to use shamanic techniques to continue to foster and strengthen a solid and stable sense of self, and to deal with his energy imbalances, past life influences, and to guide therapy. They proved to be more creative and innovative since they weren't bound by the laws of ordinary reality, and engaged the energetic and spiritual dimensions in deeper and more profound ways than other methods that I use.

Our sessions together began to have a familiar rhythm. After a brief period of talking and reflection, we chose an appropriate intention and shamanic technique, and spent nearly all of the rest of the session doing shamanic work together. Most sessions were devoted to using shamanic healing methods. An early mutual journey James and I did to heal his energy imbalances showed us where work needed to be done, and the spirit allies in nonordinary reality began to help.

Therapist's Journey: I went to the Upper world, and saw James lying down, weak, surrounded by legions of soldiers. My spirit allies were able to find a path through the circles of soldiers. James was not ready to let down his guard. He was able to stand up, let the sliver of an opening stay open, then he put on armor. I promised to return.

James' Journey: Lots of energy, experienced shifts in my way of seeing. I see myself as a male... I have an increased sense of needing people...What can I get, how can I help them?

My journey revealed the strength of his defenses, but showed a path through them to his core Self, while James experienced the beginning of a connection to his inner Self. Our two journeys were complementary and linked. I have found this to be a common experience when journeying with my clients. Sometimes the contents of the journeys are almost exactly the same, but usually the results of mutual journeying complement each other.

Energy imbalances show up in James as a bipolar disorder. Traditional Western treatment approaches, which emphasize medication and talk therapy, did not address his energetic experience. The following journeys from James' therapy illustrate how using shamanic methods can allow the therapist to access and transform the client's energetic reality in a direct way.

James was familiar with chakras⁷, a metaphysical system from India that describes psychological and spiritual development in energetic terms. In the first journey I merged with a healer, working energetically in nonordinary reality, doing an extraction. I am unfamiliar with the healing techniques used by the Healing Buddha, or even the notion of a Healing Buddha, but James identified this healer when I described my journey to him.

Therapist's Journey: I journey with the intention of healing the second chakra, an energy center associated with sensuality, sexuality, emotions and creativity. This center is located around the solar plexus. I went to a healing circle in the Upper World, met the Healing Buddha, and merged with him. I held James, felt his energy off kilter along the second and third chakras on the right side of his body. There was a clump of energy, a ball, and a sense that karmic experiences were causing the instability. I cannot heal right away. I took the ball, which had lumps on it, out of the energy body and placed it in a bowl for meditation and release.

The next journey was confusing to me. Until it occurred, I did not know that I could be in two different places at the same time in nonordinary reality while a part of my consciousness stayed in the Middle World. I have learned through my shamanic practice to trust the process of the journey and nonordinary reality; whatever happens needs to happen. This guideline has been difficult for me to follow, as the logical, rational part of my mind

7

often wants to shape the journey, or doubt the usefulness and truthfulness of the experience, particularly if it is one that I haven't previously encountered.

The following journey also demonstrates the importance for the therapist to have the ability to tolerate new experiences and strong emotions. Trusting the experience is key.

Therapist's Journey: I was fluctuating between the Upper World and the Lower World. Confusion. I found myself in both worlds simultaneously. In the Upper World I found James in a past life as a member of the Ku Klux Klan. He was angry at the world, at himself, and directed his anger outward. Chaotic energy. In the Lower World a power animal, Snake, did direct healing work, straightening the energy flow in James' body, stabilizing him.

Intention directs the work and experience of any shamanic method. The bulk of the journeys during the rest of his therapy focused on balancing and aligning his energetic field and healing past life influences. As the work advanced his sense of self became stronger and more stable, energetically he was more balanced and grounded. In my journeys in nonordinary reality for James my vision grew clearer, he became stronger and more present, and helping spirits appeared with whom he had a strong connection. The increasing clarity of vision I experienced paralleled the growth of his overall solidity of self.

Effects of shamanic methods on psychotherapy

There is a natural tendency for a client in any therapeutic relationship to see the therapist as having special power. When a therapist uses methods of helping that involve the spiritual dimension and nonordinary reality there can be an amplification in the perception of power attributed to the therapist, and this can cause further difficulties in the therapeutic relationship. If a client overvalues the therapist's power they may tend to undervalue their own abilities.

Demystifying and educating a client about shamanic methods and the use of shamanic practices is crucial in lessening the negative effects of overvaluing the therapist, and counters a tendency some clients have to be passive. Teaching shamanic skills helps remove the mystique, and makes the therapeutic process a collaborative one. Ellen, Jack, and James all learned to journey, and participate actively in their own healing, an empowering process. In addition, through their own experiences they learned the importance of being a vessel for the helping spirits, and of working with their spirit allies. Rather than attributing any positive healing solely to the therapist, the importance of nonordinary reality, of spirit allies, is personally experienced by them as the primary helping source.

Conclusions

Shamanism and psychotherapy complement each other. As shamanic techniques access help, wisdom, and guidance from the spiritual dimension of nonordinary reality, they extend the range and scope of therapeutic interventions available to the healing process. Mainstream psychotherapy, with its focus on the psychological dimensions and rooted in contemporary

culture, offers approaches that are valuable on their own, and facilitates the effectiveness of shamanic methods by providing an anchor and context for their use. In addition, therapists who use shamanic practices can increase their impact through follow up within the therapy relationship. Through the application of shamanic practices therapists act as bridges, dancing between healing approaches, connecting two worlds, the nonordinary spiritual realms and ordinary reality. Therapists also act as explorers, bringing new methods and insights to the psychotherapy process, further expanding the frontiers of healing.

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