

Excerpts from the book, *The Shamanic Journey: A Practical Guide to Therapeutic Shamanism*, by Paul Francis.

Introduction

How This Book Came About

Thank you for reading this. As a book, it has been a very long time in the making. The idea to write it pushed itself into my consciousness many years ago. For a long time, it was just a slow-growing and tentative idea. I felt the need to tend and quietly nurture it and take the time to see what grew and developed. As it took form, I could see that what was emerging had deep and old roots. It turned out that I had been preparing for this for decades, starting with my earliest spiritual experiences, reaching right back to my early childhood and my first awakening experiences. Then came all the spiritual paths I explored; all the theories I learned (and the ones I then tried to unlearn!); the skills I was taught and then developed and practised; the books I read; the workshops I attended. All the dead-ends and the blind alleys; the many mistakes; the stumbling around in the dark; the breakthroughs and realisations; my personal losses and triumphs. And all the help I have had on the way, from the human world, and from the more-than-human world too. These things are the roots that this book emerges from. The roots go deeper still though, way deeper and older than the few decades of my own life on Earth. As we shall explore, shamanism is truly ancient. It is many tens of thousands of years old, maybe even hundreds of thousands of years old. In modern times, along with our assault on the animal and plant kingdoms, and on Mother Earth herself, humans have hacked shamanism down. In many places, shamanism was cut right back to the ground, that nothing visible was left. It was almost lost and destroyed. However, its roots are immensely strong and deep, and recently it has started to grow back. More than anything, this book is my attempt to do what I can to help with the regrowth and emergence of the beautiful thing that is shamanism.

A Practical and Experiential Guide

This book is a practical, step-by-step instruction manual. In it, I aim to give you as clear an understanding of the core principles and practice of Therapeutic Shamanism as I can. I will also take you through a set of exercises to help guide you into shamanic practice. As well as being a practical guide, the book is also an introduction to shamanic philosophy and ideas, and about a way of being and living. The book, if you let it, will take you on a journey. You will discover that shamanism is a highly practical and accessible form of spirituality. In studying it, you can learn techniques and practices that can have a direct and positive application in helping you with your life at all levels - spiritual, mental, emotional and physical. These are also techniques and practices that you can use to help those around you, both humans and non-humans. In addition, practising

shamanism does not require you to follow any beliefs or take anything on faith. Rather, it is a path of *direct, personal* experience. You do not need to 'believe' anything in this book, or anything anyone else tells you about shamanism. Rather, the book is simply a set of suggestions and exercises to try out, and ideas to think about. If you follow them and find they work for you, then you will find out the truth of shamanism for yourself because you will actually, *personally*, experience it. Doing that can truly change your life for the better. I will not go into how at the moment, as some of the ways shamanism changes you, and some of the things you will learn and experience, sound far-fetched until you have actually experienced them. I want you to experience them for yourself, rather than take them on trust. As the great Carl Rogers, who founded counselling, once wrote:

"Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. Neither the Bible nor the prophets - neither Freud nor research - neither the revelations of God nor man - can take precedence over my own direct experience. My experience is not authoritative because it is infallible. It is the basis of authority because it can always be checked in new primary ways. In this way its frequent error or fallibility is always open to correction." 'On Becoming a Person' page 23-24.

Our ancient birth-right

Before going any further, I want to clarify how I am going to be using the word 'shamanism'. How the word is used can be an issue in some shamanic circles, and so I need to briefly address this here. There is a lot of debate, scholarly and otherwise, about what exactly shamanism is and what it is not. What is usually agreed upon is that indigenous people generally are animists. Animism is the belief that not just humans but *all* things have a soul - a life-force and consciousness. This means that all things are alive and conscious (albeit conscious in a way that may be quite different to human consciousness). *All* things – other animals, plants, rocks, geographic features such as rivers or mountains, and even things like storms, thunder, and fires. In reality though, animism is not a belief so much as an *experience*. Shamanism is essentially the practical application of animist beliefs. Now, some people argue that not all animistic practices are shamanic. The problem is that there is no consensus as to where the dividing line is between shamanism and animism, and I have no desire in this book to enter an academic debate about this (you may, or may not, be relieved to hear!). So, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, I am using the word shamanism to mean any practical application of animism, as I want the scope of this book to be broad and inclusive. So, from now on I am generally just going to use the word 'shamanism'. If you are someone who prefers a narrower definition of the word then, there may be times that instead of saying 'shamanism', you think that I should be saying 'shamanism and other animistic practices'. If so, then I invite you to just translate it as such in your head. For in the end, they are only labels, and it is not worth letting definitions of them get in the way of the deeper issues.

Humans have practised shamanism for the vast majority of our history. It is astonishingly old as a practice. It has thrived throughout all this expanse of time without the need for any sacred book or text to refer to (indeed, without any writings of any kind), and without the need for priesthoods or hierarchies to impose 'orthodoxy' and root out 'heresy'. It managed this impressive feat of longevity and survival because what people experience in practising shamanism is remarkably consistent. In practising shamanism and going on what are known as shamanic 'journeys', people

experience the same kinds of things, are taught the same kind of things, and are shown the same kind of things. It is a coherent and consistent body of knowledge and practice based on people's experiences.

As I have said, shamanism is also highly practical. It can be used for healing the body, mind, soul, and spirit. It can be used for personal and spiritual development, and for a whole host of other things. It has also helped us to live in harmony and balance with the other beings who we share this planet with. As we shall explore, probably more than ninety-nine percent of the generations of our modern human ancestors (*Homo sapiens*) lived as hunter-gatherers. As hunter-gatherers, our ancestors, *your* ancestors, would have lived and breathed shamanism. In terms of sustainability and longevity, hunter-gathering, guided by shamanism, was by far and away the most successful human culture that the world has ever seen.

Nearly lost, and now re-born

It is only in the last few thousand years, relatively recently in the history of our species, that we turned away from shamanism. This started with the foundation of the first city-state cultures, around six-thousand years ago (a period that we misguidedly call the birth of 'civilisation'). However, as we shall explore later, the seeds of our fall probably started some thirteen-thousand years ago, with the discovery of agriculture.

We did not just turn away from shamanism though; we waged a war upon it. With the help of religions and political ideologies (religious and atheist, communist and capitalist alike), shamanic cultures were systematically destroyed. A few survived into the modern era, in pockets in the world. However, many (although not all) of those that did survive did so in broken cultures, and in forms that were heavily contaminated with modern religions. Shamanic cultures were often ripped away from the land that they had been a living part of, and the wild land that they had loved was destroyed. Very few genuinely pure shamanic cultures survived into the modern age. In terms of what had once been a world-wide practice, shamanism was decimated. For shamanism, and arguably for most of the species on this planet as a consequence, what we call 'civilisation' has been a long and dark winter.

The recent resurgence and growth of interest in shamanism may at long last show that spring is coming though. However, shamanism is re-emerging into a very different world to the one it thrived in before. Our fall from shamanism has changed us profoundly. In later chapters, we will explore the way in which this has literally altered the way in which our brains are wired, and changed the way we think and perceive the world around us. On top of that, it is not just shamanism that we have waged a war upon. We have waged war on the natural world too. In losing the balance that shamanism gave us, we have brought life on earth to a crisis. The fate of not just ourselves as humans, but of literally hundreds of thousands of other species, hangs in the balance and depends on our actions.

In losing shamanism, we lost our way. We need it back. Indeed, our very survival, and those of our fellow species, may well depend on it. These are changed times. Unless something like bird-flu wipes out ninety-nine percent of the human population, then we cannot go back to the successful hunter-gatherer lifestyle of our ancestors. Nor is everyone going to do vision quests or sweat lodges, or pack in their job and go abroad to apprentice themselves to an indigenous shaman. That

is only ever going to appeal to a minority of the population; not enough people to make a real difference. So, if shamanism is going to be taken up again by people to a *significant* degree, then it needs to change. It needs to become relevant and applicable to the times that we live in now.

Shamanism for the present time

This book outlines my ideas as to what form that this new shamanism may need to be. It is therefore not a book about indigenous shamanism. I want to be clear about that. It is a book about what I call 'Therapeutic Shamanism'. Therapeutic Shamanism is born out of my experiences, study, practice, experimenting, and the teachings from my Spirit guides. It is intended to be a shamanic practice that is suited to the times we find ourselves in now, and of practical use in dealing with the challenges that we now face. Everything I say in this book I have confidence in. It has all come from my direct personal experience, and from many years of experience teaching students, and working with clients. All of it though I just offer as suggestions, for you to consider and try out. As such, I am well aware that it will not appeal to all of those who are interested in the shamanic path. It may not appeal to you personally. I hope it does, but if it does not, then that is fine. There is room for many paths and practices. I am most definitely not somebody who would say that my approach is the only right one. The important thing is not dogma, but what works, and different things will work for different people. There is a saying in shamanism 'Does it grow corn?', meaning basically 'In the end, the important thing is, does it work? If it works, then fine'.

This is the first of what will hopefully be a series of books. Each book will be based around courses I have run around specific themes in shamanism over the years, and so have been 'road-tested' so to speak. The starting point is what is called 'core shamanism'. This is based on the work of the anthropologist and shamanic practitioner Michael Harner. Harner sought to distil out what is common and nearly universal in terms of shamanic practice worldwide (i.e. what is not specific to particular cultures). In doing so, he coined the term 'core shamanism'. Taking core shamanism as a foundation, the books will then start to build and develop a coherent, modern Therapeutic Shamanism. This first book lays the foundations, in terms of both theory and practice. The second book, '*Revilding Your Soul*', will be about exploring the shamanic lower-world (the healing realm of Mother Earth and nature), in detail and depth. The third book, '*Beyond the Self*', will explore the shamanic upper-world (the healing realm of Father Sun and 'heaven'). Subsequent books will explore particular areas of shamanism including: safe middle-world journeying; the medicine wheel (a guide to flowing with cycles and seasons in shamanism); the totem pole (working with the human energy body, chakras, and meditation practices); soul loss and soul retrieval; healing ancestral and family wounds; death and dying from a shamanic perspective; plant spirit medicine, and more. There will also be a series of books exploring the links between shamanism, counselling, and psychotherapy.

A word about cultural appropriation

Cultural appropriation is the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of another culture. It is generally regarded as particularly unacceptable when a dominant culture appropriates elements of a minority culture, but without the minority culture's permission. It can be a very hot topic of discussion in shamanic circles, in terms of Westerners 'stealing' indigenous people's

practices and beliefs. It is certainly an issue that people need to be aware of in practising and teaching shamanism, and when it does happen it needs to be addressed. So, I wish to be clear that, in developing Therapeutic Shamanism, I have always tried to be mindful of the issue. As I have said, the fundamentals of Therapeutic Shamanism are based on core shamanism, which is not culturally specific, but the birth right of all human beings. Whereas certain practices and beliefs may belong to particular cultures, shamanism *as a whole* cannot be claimed by any one culture. In developing my approach, anything that I have added onto core shamanism has generally been taught to me directly by my own shamanic guides, and as far as I am aware is not specific to any particular culture. I have studied many different indigenous shamanic societies, but in terms of my own shamanic practice, I have never wanted to base it upon any particular indigenous culture. Rather, my intent has been to develop something that is at least a *relatively* culturally non-specific practice, as far as that is possible. It will inevitably have something of a Western, European flavour, since I am a Western European! But, given that, I try to keep my work as culture-lite as I am able, and uncluttered, flexible, adaptable, and applicable to modern-day 'civilisation'.

He or She?

We do not, of course, have a gender-neutral pronoun for the third person singular in the English language. However, to keep writing 'he or she' all the time feels clumsy. I did consider alternating using 'he' and 'she' in different chapters, but personally I find books that do that jarring. So, I have decided throughout the book to use 'they' as a gender-neutral third person singular pronoun, for want of a better solution.

Shaman, or Shamanic Practitioner?

One last, but important, thing. I wish to clarify the difference between the terms 'shaman' and 'shamanic practitioner'. This is an area of some controversy. It really comes down to what we mean by the words. Michael Harner suggested, as a mark of respect, reserving the term 'shaman' for people in indigenous cultures who lived and breathed shamanism, and instead using the term 'shamanic practitioner' for modern 'Westerners' practising core shamanism. I agree with Harner on this. So, I am not a shaman. In the way that I use and understand the term, few people become *actual* shamans. In some tribal cultures, it is a hereditary role that you have to be born into. Even in the cultures where this is not the case, the training to become a shaman is long and arduous and generally begins in early life. Also, a true shaman spends their life living shamanically, and in a culture which wholly supports this. By contrast, for most Westerners, shamanism is something they come to much later in life and, given the constraints of living in the modern world, is something that is usually at best a part-time practice. To claim to be a shaman is a bit like claiming to be an enlightened being or guru. It is a state few people in the west will truly achieve. On top of this, the title shaman is generally considered not to be a title that one bestows upon oneself. Rather it is an honorary term, bestowed upon one by one's tribe or community. So, in core shamanism, for a Westerner the usual term is 'shamanic practitioner' not 'shaman'. It is a bit like in Buddhism; few people who practice Buddhism will become a Buddha, but everybody can be a Buddhist practitioner. So, I am a shamanic practitioner. With time and practice, you can be one too!

And so, the journey is about to begin...

This book, *if you let it*, will take you on a journey... you will experience first-hand the healing power of shamanism, and your eyes will be opened to a world of mystery and wonder, and of immense potential and possibilities. You do not need any special talents or powers, just an open mind. And you will come to trust this new way of being because you will *personally* experience it. To say that this will change your life for the better is a remarkable understatement. It will also go towards helping heal the world.

I hope you enjoy the book. Above all, I hope you find it to be a practical guide, and that it inspires you to embark on your own shamanic journey and find your own shamanic path.

I wish you happy journeying.

Paul Francis, 2017.

Chapter One

Getting Clear: What Shamanism Is (And What It Isn't!)

Where shamanism is from

In teaching shamanism beginners' days, one of the things I sometimes start with is to ask people where they think shamanism is from. Generally, people tend to associate it with a particular region or culture. Many people associate it with Native American tribes, particularly from North America, or sometimes from Central or South America. Other people associate shamanism with the Mongolian or Siberian peoples, or sometimes with the Inuit people of the Arctic Circle. Some people think of it as being African; some people associate it with aboriginal Australian cultures. The truth is that shamanism has been practised literally all over the world. Early humans lived as hunter-gatherer tribes, and as far as we know there has not been a single hunter-gatherer tribe in the history of the human race that did not practise shamanism (in the broad sense of the word).

Over thirty years ago, I studied shamanism at university. I studied shamanic cultures from as far apart as Nepal, Africa, New Guinea, Polynesia, and Central America; cultures from many different parts of the world. There is a book called 'Shamanism: An Encyclopaedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Culture', by Walter and Friedman. It is full of scholarly articles about shamanic practices throughout the world. There are sections on North America, with chapters discussing shamanism from the Inuit tribes of the North, through to shamanic practices around the south in the New Orleans area, and from the Atlantic east coast through to the Pacific west coast. Further sections in the book are on shamanism in Central America, South America, Asia, Siberia, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, India, Burma, Malaysia, Australasia, Africa, Scandinavia, and even Europe. Yes, once here in Europe we had our own shamanic cultures too.

Given that all tribes practised shamanism, then all tribes have, or would have had, their own word for 'shamanism'. In England, where I was born and raised, the original word has long been lost. The word we use in English, 'shamanism', is from the Tungus tribe of the Siberia/Mongolia region. It entered the English language (the only Tungus word to do so, to the best of my knowledge!) sometime in the 1600s. It was first applied by Western anthropologists to the ancient religion of the Turks and Mongols, and those of the neighbouring Tungusic and Samoyedic-speaking peoples. It then began to be used to describe practices found in other parts of the world including Asia, Africa, Australasia and the Americas, as anthropologists gradually began to realise how widespread and similar these practices and beliefs are. In the 1960s and 1970s, the anthropologist Michael Harner began to realise that you could take a shaman from anywhere in the world, say from the Amazon basin, and sit them down with a shaman from Siberia and (with the aid of an interpreter), they would describe incredibly similar shamanic practices and beliefs. What Harner realised, as he studied shamanic cultures, is that underneath the cultural trappings of a particular tribe's shamanic practice, there is a series of core beliefs and practices that are essentially common to all shamanic cultures.

For such a set of practices and beliefs to be so consistent throughout such wildly diverse and geographically widespread cultures is truly remarkable. It is almost as if these beliefs and practices

must be somehow innate; hard-wired into us. And in fact, as I will discuss later, this does seem to be the case. That aside, for these practices to be so widespread and so consistent, people must find that (a) they work, and (b) they are worth practising and pursuing.

What is clear is that humans take these core practices and beliefs and adapt them to make them relevant to the environment, climate and times in which they live. Harner wrote about this core shamanism in his classic book 'The Way of the Shaman', published in 1980. It is this book, and Harner's subsequent teaching over the last thirty-plus years, that is largely responsible for the current rebirth and renaissance of shamanism that we are now seeing in the West.

How old it is

So, shamanism has been practised throughout the world, and in a coherent and consistent form. The next question is how old shamanism is? This is a matter of much scholarly debate, and in some ways the answer comes down to how exactly one defines shamanism. However, there are cave paintings in Europe that date back to around 33,000 B.C. which are generally thought to depict shamanic practices. This would make shamanism at least 35,000 years old! To put this into context, the oldest of the organised religions (that still exist in the modern era) are probably the Hindu and/or Jain religions which date from around about 1,700 B.C., so under 4,000 years old. This makes shamanism vastly older than any of the existing organised religions. To put this in another context, the Roman Empire was at its height around 2,000 years ago, the domestication of dogs happened around 12,000 years ago, whilst shamanism was being practised 35,000 thousand years ago. Could shamanism be older still? The problem with going any further back in time is that definitive evidence becomes scant. One intriguing thing I saw on a television program a few years ago was a discussion by an anthropologist about a piece of yellow ochre rock that had carvings on it. The object had been found in the Blombos caves in South Africa. The proposal was that this object was probably a shamanic ritual object. Carbon dating put this carving back to around 75,000 B.C.. If this is indeed a shamanic object, then that makes shamanism nearly 80,000 years old. In 2008, in the same cave, the remains of an ochre-processing area were found. Ochre is widely used in shamanic societies for body painting. This is rarely done purely for ornamentation and decoration, but as part of sacred shamanic practices. This paint-factory has been carbon-dated at around 100,000 years old.

Interesting as these archaeological findings are, if you ask indigenous peoples how old shamanism is they would generally say that we have been practising shamanism for as long as we have been human. Bill Plotkin, in his excellent book 'Soulcraft', quotes an Inuit saying:

In the very earliest time, when both people and animals lived on earth, a person could become an animal if he wanted to and an animal could become a human being. Sometimes they were people and sometimes animals and there was no difference. All spoke the same language. This was a time when words were like magic. The human mind had mysterious powers. A word spoken by chance might have strange consequences. It would suddenly come alive and what people wanted to happen could happen, all you had to do was say it. Nobody can explain this: that's the way it was.' Page 122.

This saying contains many things that anyone already familiar with shamanism will immediately recognise. One is that humans can somehow 'become' animals. Another is that we can talk to animals and that animals can talk to us. Another is that there is really no difference between us and

animals. And yet another is that our words and our thoughts have power, and that our words have consequences and can take on a life of their own.

Mythos and Logos

Before going further, I feel it necessary to clarify the difference between mythos and logos. Mythos is something that is metaphorically true, but not literally so; it is something that is meant to be taken as a metaphor only. Logos is something that is literally true. The Inuit quote is intended as mythos. It is not saying that a human can *physically* transform into an animal. What it is alluding to is that a common experience in shamanic trance work is often a *sense* of 'becoming' an animal. In shamanism, this is known as shape shifting. It is also common experience in shamanism to be able to communicate with animals. In fact, central to shamanism is the practice of working and communicating with what is known as a Power Animal.

It is not a religion

One can find quotes similar to the Inuit one in other cultures, from all over the world. The point is that shamanism was once our *natural* state, our natural way of being, the world over. In fact, the idea of indigenous tribes *practising* shamanism is a distortion. In the West, being religious is an option. We can choose to be religious or not, and we can look around and pick the religion we want. For many Westerners, if we are religious at all, it may in reality be only a relatively small part of our daily life.

Shamanism is different. It is not a religion. In indigenous cultures, there were no people in the tribe who were not shamanic. Yes, the tribe may have had a designated shaman or shamans, but everybody in the tribe would have lived and breathed shamanism. The shaman was simply the person who was better at it than other people (in the same way that in the tribe there would also be somebody who was best at hunting, or best at looking after children, or best at storytelling, and so on). For indigenous people, shamanism was not something they did for only part of their daily life. Nor was it something only the shaman did. Rather, it was in a very real sense what people actually were; how they *experienced and related to* the world around them, moment by moment. It was literally *a way of being*.

Shamanism is, or was, our natural state. For our human ancestors, it is what it was to *be* truly human. It was intrinsic to how we lived. Now, if you accept the theory of human evolution, we modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) are somewhere between one hundred and sixty thousand and two hundred thousand years old as a species. Let us take the round figure of two hundred thousand years. This means we have been living and breathing shamanism as a species for two hundred thousand years. Now, say in a hunter-gatherer society you would have had children by the time you were aged twenty. That is five generations every hundred years. So, over two hundred thousand years, that is ten thousand generations of ancestors. Now, imagine if each generation of your ancestors is represented by just one person, and they are standing behind you in a line, a line of ten thousand people representing ten thousand generations. If each person is standing a yard/meter apart, the line is stretching back behind you for nearly six miles (nearly ten kilometres). Now, taking another round figure, let us say that we stopped practising shamanism here around two thousand years ago. That is only the last hundred generations of your ancestors. That means

nine thousand and nine hundred generations of your ancestors were shamanic. Put another way, that is a staggering *ninety-nine percent* of your human ancestors lived and breathed shamanism.

So, shamanism is deeply familiar to us. It is in our ancestral DNA, and literally wired into us. I know from teaching shamanism that, once you get what it is, shamanism will feel deeply familiar to many of you who read this book. For many people, learning shamanism feels like they are remembering something that they already half-knew, but had not realised that they had forgotten. Reconnecting with shamanism often feels like a homecoming; a reconnecting with a piece of oneself that has felt missing. In rediscovering (or remembering) shamanism, it often feels as if the world around one becomes more vibrant and alive. In fact, of course, what is happening is that we are waking up to the aliveness of the world around us, which is why the process is sometimes described as ‘waking from sleep’.

In the next chapters, I will discuss the core shamanic beliefs and practices, and how shamans see and experience the universe (and how this relates to much of what we now are understanding in physics). I will explore what shamanism is for, what it can do for us, and what it offers the world. And I will discuss why we nearly lost shamanism, why we so desperately need it back, and why it is relevant (in fact, essential) for the modern age.

I hope you enjoyed this free excerpt. To find out more, or to purchase the book, go to:

<https://www.therapeutic-shamanism.co.uk/book/the-shamanic-journey/>