

# Excerpts from the book, *Rewilding Yourself: Discovering Your Soul's Deep Roots Through Shamanic Practices*, by Paul Francis.

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## Chapter One

### The Roots of Therapeutic Shamanism

This chapter summarises the key aspects of Therapeutic Shamanism and gives vital context for the rest of the book. It includes looking at: what shamanism is, what its origins are, why we nearly lost shamanism, what happened to us in that process, the state the world is in now as a consequence, why we need shamanism back, and how to develop a form of shamanism that is relevant to present-day life.

#### Flexible and (relatively) culturally-neutral

As well as being an approach that has grown out of Core Shamanism, Therapeutic Shamanism is an approach that has grown out of my own personal experiences and learning, and as such it draws upon many things aside from Harner's work. Above all else, Therapeutic Shamanism comes from what has been shown and taught to me directly by my shamanic Guides over many years. Like Core Shamanism, Therapeutic Shamanism is not drawn from any particular indigenous culture, and can be practised by anyone, anywhere. It is, of course, impossible to be completely culturally neutral, and Therapeutic Shamanism inevitably has a Western, maybe even European, flavour to it. That is because I am a Western European, and mostly work with Guides who I perceive in that way. That being said, in developing this approach I have deliberately tried to keep it as culturally neutral as I know how, in the hope that it can be a framework that has a wide appeal and can be easily adopted and adapted by people from other backgrounds. So, although I am European, I have not sought to give the work a Celtic flavour, for example. Nor have I drawn on the Norse traditions, nor Druidry, nor British or European gods and goddesses or fairy-lore, etc. Instead, I have tried to make this approach a set of underlying principles that can be applied and adapted to different cultures and locations. So, please adapt it and modify it as much as you like! Indeed, adding in the flora and fauna of where you live, and applying the practice in a way that is relevant to the culture that you live in, and to your daily life, is precisely what will bring shamanism to life for you. We will be exploring how to do that in detail throughout this book.

#### Shamanism and animism

Originally, the word 'shamanism' came from the Evenki people of the Siberian–Mongolian region

of the world and described their spiritual practices. However, the word entered the English language several hundred years ago and has since come to have a much wider usage and meaning. Shamanism is a branch of animism, the ancient and world-wide experience that everything is alive and has a soul or spirit (I will get into defining the difference between soul and spirit later in the book). Shamanism is a practical application of animism and is generally defined as the ability to go into trance at will, an altered state of consciousness, in order to communicate with the spirit world.

Now, some people argue that not all animistic practices are shamanic, since they do not involve going into a trance state to communicate with spirits. However, what exactly constitutes a trance is hard to pin down and depends on how you define the term. As such, the line between what is ‘shamanism’ and what is ‘animism’ is blurry, and far from agreed upon. In terms of this book though, it is not something I am particularly interested in as it is only of academic interest really, but if you are interested then I do address it in the next book in this series. So, whilst at times in the book some people may feel I should be referring not just to ‘shamanism’ but to ‘shamanism and other animistic practices’, to keep doing that would make the book clunky to read. I could have chosen to just use the term animism, since that already encompasses shamanism. But, the reality is that if I had marketed this book as being about animism, then many of you who are reading this probably would not have picked the book up in the first place. Most people do not even know what animism is, let alone have much (or any) interest in it. By contrast, interest in shamanism is huge and ever growing. Plus, as the philosopher Wittgenstein said, ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’. I know some shamanic purists who do not like it, but the fact is that the word ‘shamanism’ has come to be used by most people in a way that includes practices that are animistic but arguably maybe not *strictly* shamanic (if the word is defined in a narrow way). So, in the interest of making the book readable and not clunky (and in the interest of good book sales, too!) I am mostly going to use the term shamanism throughout the book and use the term in its modern sense — a broad term that includes other animistic practices. But, if at times in the book you think I should be referring to animism and not shamanism, then please feel free to translate the word in your own head when reading it.

## Not a religion

Shamanism is not a religion. As such, close to my heart as a teacher and a writer, is that people’s shamanic practice be based on their own personal experiences, and not on beliefs taken at face value, whether taken from me or anyone else. Everything in these books I offer only as suggestions. Therapeutic Shamanism is one of many ways of practicing shamanism. It will not be the right path for everybody, but I hope to explain it compellingly enough so that it feels like an interesting enough path for some to explore.

I never intended to become a shamanic teacher. For many, many years of my life my shamanic practice was an intensely personal and private affair. It took my Guides a *long* time to eventually persuade me to offer what I had learnt to others. Whilst I know the approach in these books does not appeal to everyone who is interested in shamanism, in teaching I have found that it does appeal to some people; that it sits well with them and works for them and, more importantly, is confirmed to them by their own personal experiences.

## Trance states and journeying

Shamanism is often broadly defined as being the practice of entering into trance states to communicate with the spirit world. Most commonly, this involves what is known as 'shamanic journeying', where the shamanic practitioner temporarily moves from ordinary consciousness and everyday reality, and travels the shamanic realms to communicate with the spirits. Precisely defining what constitutes a trance state is far from easy. But broadly speaking, it is any movement from 'ordinary consciousness' and into an 'altered state of consciousness'. Such states vary, but have certain common characteristics. There is usually an altered sense of time, with time either seeming to move more quickly or more slowly, or the experience of being more aware of the present moment. There may be a heightened sense of awareness. Or there may be the opposite — the experience of 'losing oneself' in the trance state.

Being in trance is not a black-or-white thing, but greyscale, in that such states may vary from being very light, through to being very deep. In some shamanic cultures, shamans usually work in deep trance states. For example, some Mongolian shamans have no idea what they do when they are in shamanic journeys, as they allow themselves to be completely taken over by the spirits when journeying, and as such they have no memory of what happens when they are in trance. As for light trances, we dip in and out of these all the time — when daydreaming, driving a car, jogging, painting a picture, listening to music, staring at a fire, and so on. Meditation practices such as mindfulness, and movement practices such as chi kung, tai chi, kum nye and yoga, are deliberately-entered trance states. As a body-centred psychotherapist, I see clients enter a trance state when they have moved from talking about content ("He said this, and then I did that" kind of stuff), and into being aware of their body, their feelings and their internal processes. The kind of shamanic journeying practised by most Core and Therapeutic Shamanism practitioners, the kind that we are working with in these books, usually is somewhere in between light and deep trance states. It is deeper than a light trance, and yet the practitioner still maintains some conscious awareness of what is going on in the journey.

Clearly, not all trance states are necessarily shamanic. To class them all as such would be to make the definition of shamanism so broad that it would become meaningless. In that case, what does define a *shamanic* trance state as opposed to, say, a daydream? Shamanic trance states are characterised by being in contact with the world of the spirits. They are the experience that beyond this everyday surface reality, there is a deeper, shamanic reality where everything is experienced as being alive and conscious.

What defines shamanism is the ability to enter trance and then go into this shamanic reality and communicate with the spirits. This is sometimes referred to as SSC — shamanic state of consciousness. What defines SSC is not whether it is a light or deep state. Nor is it about the means used to enter SSC. In many cultures the shamanic frame drum is used to enter SSC, of course. It is usually played at a steady and monotonous beat of somewhere between 180 to 260 beats a minute. However, the drum is not used in all cultures, and is in any case a means to an end, and only one way of entering SSC. Even the shamanic 'journey', where the shaman deliberately leaves this ordinary reality for a while, and enters shamanic reality itself is just a means to an end. It is just a means of entering SSC. I do sometimes see shamanism described as being primarily about shamanic journeying, that without shamanic journeying something is not shamanic. For me, though, this is missing the point. What makes something shamanic is the experience of being

connected to, and in communication with, the shamanic realms, *however* that is done. Journeying is certainly an important and central part of shamanism in many cultures. However, to think that shamanism is entirely, or even mostly, about doing shamanic journeys is to miss the true point and depth of it.

What shamanism is really about is being in direct contact with the world of spirits, and by definition this means being in an altered state of consciousness to a degree, and not wholly in ordinary (non-shamanic) reality. It is sometimes described as walking with one foot in this world and one foot in the other. It is the living experience of the two worlds, the ordinary and the shamanic, running in tandem through one's life, and having the ability to move between them at will. This movement between them, like other trance states, is not black-and-white but a scale. To do a shamanic journey is to temporarily put both feet into shamanic reality. However, if the rest of the time, the times when you are not journeying, then if both your feet are always fully in this ordinary reality, then you are missing what shamanism is fully about. There are certainly times when it is important to have both feet firmly in ordinary reality. But the point of shamanism is to experience the two realities running concurrently as a moment-by-moment thing.

So, whilst I do spend time doing actual shamanic journeys, wholly immersed in the world of spirit, that is only *part* of my shamanic practice. I also practice trying to be aware of the shamanic realms as often as I can, whilst going around my everyday life. For instance, when out walking on the beach near where I live, sometimes I may be lost in thoughts, and at other times I may want to just enjoy walking in ordinary reality and appreciate the view. However, at other times I choose to shift my attention into a light shamanic state and experience walking on the beach with my Power Animals and Guides beside me. Likewise, as I sit writing this book, my attention is generally on the computer screen in front of me, and of thinking about what it is I want to say. However, I can choose to take a moment to shift my attention and be aware of the presence of my Power Animals and Guides sat around me and supporting me. And sometimes it is not about my choosing to be aware of shamanic reality, but my Guides deliberately making their presence known to me. Sometimes when out walking, even when shopping in town, I may be aware of Panther gently leaning against my leg to get my attention. At night, when in that state somewhere between being asleep and awake, I am often aware of my Guides pouring information into me. And sometimes I tell them to shut up as I need to sleep, because I have work in the morning. It is all about choosing which realm to put your attention into at any given time, and the ability to move between them at will.

What makes something shamanic is the awareness and contact with the shamanic realms, not the depth of the trance state, nor the means of entering trance. This is why I find the precise dividing line between animism and shamanism problematic. Just because a culture does not practice something that looks recognisably like 'shamanic journeying' does not necessarily mean that they do not experience shamanic states in other ways. For me, if a culture has practices that lead to the experience that the world (and everything in it) is alive and conscious and can be communicated with, then that is a shamanic culture.

For me, living shamanically is about bringing my experience of the two worlds, the ordinary and the shamanic, closer together. In that sense, shamanic journeying is largely a means to that end. There are other means to that end too though. So, whilst I will be focusing a lot on the process of doing shamanic journeys (to the lower-world) in this book, I will also be outlining other practices

that help with developing an awareness of the shamanic realms and bringing the experience of the two worlds closer together.

## **Spirit-led**

As well as being the experience of the reality of the spirit world, shamanism is usually also defined as being Spirit-led. The shaman seeks to become the ‘hollow bone’ through which Spirit acts, or the ‘bone flute’ through which Spirit blows. The power of a shaman then comes not from the shaman themselves, but from their ability to ‘hollow out’, and from the strength and depth of their connection with their Guides. Therapeutic Shamanism is no exception. This is a Spirit-led practice through and through. ‘Hollowing-out’ is the practice of stepping aside from your middle-world stuff as much as possible, and from your own agendas and drives, beliefs and pre-conceptions, to allow Spirit to work through you without your getting in the way. It is something that I began exploring in the first book in this series, and is something that we will explore in more depth later in this book.

That the practice should be Spirit-led is why in my teaching I constantly remind students that their Power Animal and other Guides should be the ones leading the journey. I repeatedly tell students to *keep asking their Guides what to do and what needs to happen*. I try to really drill into my students that their job is to ask for the healing to be done, allow the Guides to work through them, and to witness and remember what happened so they can bring the information back into ordinary consciousness when the journey is finished.

As well as the power of the shaman being dependent on their ability to hollow-out, and on having a strong connection with their Guides, it is also dependent on who their Guides actually are. Sadly, the fact is that a fair amount of what I have seen at times in the shamanic community has in truth been more ego-led than Spirit-led. This is because the practitioner is not really hollowed-out, and so the journey is full of the practitioner’s own ego, beliefs, opinions and projections. It is also sometimes because the practitioner is working with middle-world guides (guides who, because they are of the middle-world, have their own egos, issues and agendas). So, in training new students, as well as placing great emphasis on the importance of the hollowing-out process, I am also at pains to stress the importance of choosing main Guides who are not middle-world beings, but true transcendent beings from the shamanic upper and lower-worlds, starting with the lower-world first (which is what this book is all about).

## **Abandoning hunter-gathering**

Central to understanding the Therapeutic Shamanism approach is to understand domestication and what I refer to as ‘the Fall’. In the Palaeolithic era (what most people think of as ‘stone age’ times), all humans lived as hunter-gatherers. Then, around 11,000 BC we move into the Neolithic era, which is characterised by the widespread use of agriculture. This is not to say that our Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer ancestors did not grow things. Some hunter-gatherer cultures do engage in small-scale agriculture. But the emphasis here is on small-scale. Mostly, hunter-gatherers hunted and gathered.

Hunter-gathering, in terms of human history, was by far and away the longest lasting and most sustainable human culture ever. The move from that lifestyle to the kind of agriculture we see spreading in Neolithic times is a truly radical departure. Daniel Quinn, in his books *Ishmael* and *The Story of B*, describes the kind of agriculture that emerges in the Neolithic period as being ‘totalitarian agriculture’. He also describes it as a move away from the ‘Leaver Culture’, that is, people who take only what they need and leave the rest. What emerges in its place is the ‘Taker Culture’, people who take more than they need and leave nothing (in other words, us).

Totalitarian agriculture marks a truly profound, deep change in both human consciousness and our way of life. Hunter-gatherers lived as just one of the species in a *community* of species. They did not see themselves as in any way special or ‘above’ other species. They knew and understood that they were part of an interconnected web of life. They did not see themselves as owning the land, but as being a *part* of the land; of belonging *to* the land. Although they hunted and gathered, this was done with respect for the other species they shared the land with, and with gratitude. All other species were honoured, whether animal or plant. Even the stones, the hills, the rivers and streams, and the land itself was honoured as being the body of Mother Earth. Everything was alive. Everything was sacred. Everything was Spirit.

How do we know this? Because how ruthlessly our Taker culture has persecuted hunter-gatherer cultures whenever we have come across them, invariably destroying their culture and wiping them out, some hunter-gatherer cultures did manage to survive in some places in the world right up to modern times, and still do exist to this day. Alongside wiping them out though, we often studied them too. The result is that we have hundreds of years’ worth of material recording what hunter-gatherer cultures were like; material from all over the world, documenting hunter-gatherers’ beliefs, customs, how they lived, and so on. What is remarkable about this material is that on the one hand there is an incredible diversity of beliefs, customs and lifestyles between different tribes. And yet, on the other hand, there is an incredible similarity in terms of their beliefs about nature, and the way in which they honoured and respected the natural world. Essentially, all hunter-gatherer cultures were animists. They not only believed, but *experienced* the world around them being alive and conscious, and saw themselves as part of the natural world, not separate from it.

In hunter-gatherer times, other species will have been in competition with us humans for resources. However, at no time did our hunter-gatherer ancestors set out to deliberately wipe out a competitor species. They never went out one day to systematically wipe out all the wolves or the lions or the bears where they lived. Quite the opposite. The other species were treated with great respect and reverence, and often referred to as brothers or sisters. In many cases, the other species were referred to as ‘the peoples’ — the animal people, the plant people and even the stone people; all kin to us, the human people. The idea of deliberately waging a totalitarian war on another species would have been simply inconceivable. It would have been crossing a line, and not in accordance with Great Spirit. It would have been an abomination. We know this to be true as we have many records of the horrified reactions of hunter-gatherer peoples when they witnessed us (so-called civilised people) crossing that line and waging totalitarian war on other species and engaging in totalitarian agriculture.

In crossing that line, in adopting totalitarian agriculture, we moved from being a *part* of the land to seeing ourselves as *owning* the land. We began to see ourselves as being special and above all other species. For at its heart, totalitarian agriculture is saying: ‘We now own this land. *We* now

decide what lives on it and what dies. You goats, you can live on this land, as we now own you and want to use you as we wish. But all you other species who compete with the goats, or who eat them, you now die. Wheat, you can grow on this land, but all you other plants, we will now kill you. For this is our land'. To justify this we invented a god, the only 'one and true' god who, rather being a god of nature, now says 'Let us make mankind . . . rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' (Genesis 1:26).

That is what totalitarian agriculture is about: growing only the things that *we* want, using the land as *we* wish, and waging war on anything that gets in our way, and telling ourselves that it is somehow our 'divine' right to do so.

### **The Anthropocene extinction**

Slowly but surely the surplus food that totalitarian agriculture produces, and the extraordinary rise in the human population that this allows, has brought us to a crisis point. In the 3.8 billion-year-old history of life on this planet, there have been five previous mass-extinction events. These were all caused by geological events such as volcanic super-eruptions, asteroid strikes, or climate change. We are now in the beginnings of the sixth mass-extinction event, the first one ever caused by a living species; caused by us humans. In his book 'Harvesting the Biosphere: What We Have Taken from Nature', Professor Vaclav Smil gives an analysis of the changes in the earth's biomass from hunter-gatherer times to the present day. The conclusions are truly shocking. By biomass, Smil means the desiccated weight (the weight once water content is removed) of all living things. Smil makes these calculations: currently, one-hundred and twenty-five million metric tons of the biomass are humans, 425 million metric tons are animals domesticated by humans, and only ten million metric tons are wild vertebrates. In other words, all wild vertebrates together, that is to say, *all* the wild mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish in the world together, now represent *under two percent* of all the vertebrate biomass on the planet. *Ninety-eight percent* of the world's vertebrate biomass is now us humans and our domesticated animals. That is nine-thousand species of birds, 4500 species of mammals, eight-thousand species of amphibians, ten-thousand different species of reptiles, and the 28000 known species of fish — nearly sixty thousand species in total — we have killed off to the extent that they now make up less than two percent of the vertebrates on earth.

That is utterly horrific.

And, it is getting worse. Halfway through my writing this book, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2018, the first day of spring, the world's last male northern white rhinoceros died. The species is effectively extinct. We did not just *allow* this to happen. We actually *did* this, by hunting and poaching, and by habitat destruction. A month after that happened, I am sat with tears on my face as I type this. I am still overwhelmed with a grief about it that I just do not know will ever go. It is usually only the big iconic species going extinct (or being threatened with extinction) that we notice, and which moves us. But the truth is that the extinctions of these iconic species is but a tiny part of the picture. The real picture is much, much worse. Estimates are that extinction rates across species are anywhere between one thousand to ten thousand times higher than the usual natural rates, *because of human activity*. And it is not just vertebrates. New data gathered in nature reserves across

Germany showed that three-quarters of flying insects had vanished in the last twenty-five years. Similar studies in France and other parts of Europe have shown similarly catastrophic declines in insect populations. Given the vital importance of insects as a food-source for birds and many other animals, and as pollinators of plants, this shows we are facing the imminent collapse of whole ecosystems, of the ecosystems that we ourselves and our domesticated animals also depend on. For, as Albert Einstein said:

*"If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe then man would only have four years of life left. No more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more man."*

And it is not just the bees and other animals that we are wiping out. It is plants too. Around *seventy percent* of plant species that have been evaluated are threatened with extinction. Some estimates say that anywhere between ten-thousand and *one-hundred thousand* species are becoming extinct each year because of *human* activity. That is somewhere between twenty-seven and *two-hundred and seventy species a day*. Every. Single. Day.

We are committing inter-species genocide. And we carry on as if nothing much is going on. Most people go about their daily lives largely oblivious to the scale of what is happening in the natural world around them. All of this has happened since we turned our back on our hunter-gatherer, animist way of life. In fact, the very reason that most people are so oblivious to this is *because* of our turning our back on animism. For animism is not just a way of life. It is a deep, embodied, soulful connection with the more-than-human world. Our adoption of totalitarian agriculture marked a truly profound rupture in terms of our relationship with Mother Earth and the other Peoples. In turning to totalitarian agriculture, we began a process of breaking that soulful connection; that *sacred* connection. We began to see the earth, and the plants and animals around us, simply as 'things' that we can treat however we want. Far from seeing all things as alive and sacred, we now began to see all things as just commodities to be used.

Given that we take agriculture for granted and see it as normal, it can be hard for us modern humans to really understand what a *truly* massive shift totalitarian agriculture was in terms of our relationship with the other Peoples and with the Earth herself. So, remember this: we have no record ever, anywhere in the world, of any hunter-gatherer tribe destroying whole ecosystems. That does not make them saints. There is evidence that occasionally they hunted some species to extinction (although almost certainly not as a deliberate, calculated act). But that does not make them devils either. For when any species moves into an area where it did not evolve and where it previously did not live, if it thrives then there are almost always other species that suffer as a consequence (and usually there are other species that benefit as a result). That is nature. As humans, we were once a part of that natural process. And as such, we were never responsible for the collapse of whole ecosystems. But in the relatively short period of time since we adopted totalitarian agriculture, we have come to a point where we are about to destroy most life on earth.

And we call this 'civilisation' and call our hunter-gather ancestors primitive and savages.

## **Human population growth**

In a sustainable ecosystem, there are a series of complex checks and balances between species. The number of apex predators is held in balance by the availability of prey. For example, the

number of wolves will be limited by the number of deer. The deer population is in turn held in balance by the predation of the wolves. Keeping deer numbers in check in turn stops the deer over-grazing and destroying woodland habitat that other species depend upon, and so on. If you remove the wolves, then the deer population will grow unchecked, leading to the destruction of habitat that other species depend on, resulting in massive changes to the whole ecosystem.

Our hunter-gather ancestors were a part of this system and cycle of sustainable checks and balances. In some ways, these checks and balances act like the immune system in the body. No one cell, or group of cells, is allowed to grow unchecked. The development of totalitarian agriculture allowed us humans for the first time to largely remove ourselves from this natural process. By being able to increase our sources of prey animals and plants (our domesticated species) at the expense of all other animals and plants, we were able to grow our population to an astonishing degree. Apart from occasional checks on population levels, such as crop-failures or outbreaks of plague, the number of humans on the planet just kept on multiplying and growing. The human population has become like a cancer, growing uncontrollably. And of course, cancers, unless stopped, in the end destroy themselves by destroying the host they are dependent on. In this way, the rate of human population growth and the resources it requires has become a cancerous part of the earth. If it carries on unchecked, the end is inevitable. If we do wipe ourselves out, then life will go on in some form, of course, but the majority of the current species on the planet will be gone.

### **The domestication of ourselves**

Totalitarian agriculture involved the domestication of other animals and plants. In domesticating them, we gradually began the process of changing them to suit our own ends, to the extent that some of them became far removed from the wild animals that they originally were. However, it is not just *other* animals and plants that we domesticated in turning to totalitarian agriculture, but *ourselves* as well. We are a self-domesticated animal. Agriculture is a *very* different lifestyle to that of hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherers, on average, spent somewhere between two to four hours a day on all survival needs. That is between two to four hours to do the hunting and the gathering, to prepare food, eat, build shelters, make and repair tools and equipment, and anything else that needs doing. There would have been exceptions, but generally it was a lifestyle that provided a lot of free time for relaxation, socialising, and spiritual pursuits. It was also usually a lifestyle that provided a lot of personal autonomy and freedom of movement.

In comparison, an agricultural lifestyle is very hard work and time-consuming. It involves long hours clearing and preparing land, sowing, tending and protecting crops, harvesting and storing. It also means settling in one place, given the effort that has to go into clearing land to make it suitable for agriculture in the first place, and then keeping it free of ‘weeds’ and other ‘wildlife’.

In hunter-gatherer times, people generally lived in tribes that would have ranged in size from anything as few as twenty people, or up to an optimal maximum size of around 150 people. Once hunter-gatherer tribes got bigger than two-hundred people or so, they tended to split into smaller tribes. This has to do with the way our human brains are hard-wired, and something called ‘Dunbar’s Number’. Primatologists (scientists who study primate species — lemurs, lorises, tarsiers, monkeys, apes, and us humans) noticed that non-human primates live in ‘grooming cliques’. These

are tight-knit groups in which grooming is the principle means by which the members socialise and stay tight-knit. The size of these groups is not random. Instead, it is determined by the size of the neocortex region of the primate species' brain. Basically, species with bigger brains tend to live in bigger social groups. Realising this, in 1992 Robin Dunbar, a British anthropologist, was able to accurately predict average group size for thirty-six species of monkeys and apes based on neocortex sizes. Then, using the same predictive criteria, he calculated the maximum average and optimal group size for humans is one-hundred and fifty members, with an intimate inner circle of twelve members. He then tested this hypothesis against what we know about hunter-gatherer cultures and found that his predictions were mostly verified.

There are biologically-determined optimal group sizes in social species that depend on cooperation. This is not just true of primates either, if you think about it. Most social species that depend on cooperation have optimal group sizes — wolf packs, prides of lions, meerkat clans, and so on, and even colonies of bees and ants. When the group gets too large to still be efficient, then stresses and tensions emerge, and then it splits.

Hunter-gatherer groups of less than around twenty members would generally not have been viable long-term. Up to a point, hunting and gathering becomes more efficient the more people are involved, plus you need people to take care of the children and so on whilst hunting. Also, given the high degree of cooperation needed for successful hunting and gathering, the more socially-cohesive a tribe was, the more successful it would have been. But once 'Dunbar's Number' is reached, then to maintain group cohesion, the tribe had to divide into smaller tribes.

When we adopted totalitarian agriculture, however, we began to live in much larger communities than those we were hard-wired for. Initially these were agricultural settlements of a few thousand people. Later, we see the emergence of cities of hundreds of thousands, and then millions of people. Because we are not hard-wired to deal with this, this did indeed bring enormous stresses and tensions. Some of these tensions were practical and logistical, but some were psychological, and indeed spiritual, too. I will come back to the psychological and spiritual tensions later in the book. In terms of the practical issues though, managing these larger communities required the development of much more complex social structures, rules and regulations, laws and contracts. Disputes over ownership and inheritance of land had to be managed and settled. Jobs became more specialised, and so systems of bartering for services and goods had to be invented. Sanitation and access to resources such as water and fuel had to be managed. The result was we turned ourselves from wild and free hunter-gatherers, into domesticated and tamed beings. And the larger human settlements became, the more this process happened.

We call this process 'civilisation'. The word 'civilisation' is from the Latin *civilis* ('civil'), related to *civis* ('citizen') and *civitas* ('city'). So, in a literal sense the word just means city-based cultures. However, the word has far more meaning than that. This is because city-based cultures began to see themselves as 'better' than hunter-gatherer cultures, and even 'above' nature itself. This is why the adjective 'uncivilised' does not just mean someone who does not live in a city-based culture, but someone who is not socially, culturally, or morally 'advanced'; someone who is rude, thoughtless, barbaric, ignorant and uncouth. 'Civilised' people are not 'wild'. To people in the new city-based cultures, 'wild' became a derogatory term, meaning 'savage', 'untamed' and something that is 'out of control' (as if those are obviously bad things). Civilisation is all about control. Control over nature, of course, but also control over our own human *inner* nature. Eventually, as

we moved into cities and the first city-state cultures developed, the first organised religions emerged. Whatever else these religions may have been, they were also generally agents of further domestication and control. For central to the message of most of these religions is we have to guard against our ‘animal’ nature and natural instincts. They tell us that we cannot trust ourselves and our own instincts, or trust the feelings in our own bodies, and instead we have to do as we are told by the priests. We are told that we cannot trust our own *soul*, that the very ‘salvation’ of our soul is dependent on doing what the priests tell us to do and believing what the priests tell us to believe. The result is that we almost entirely lose touch with our true, authentic and deep souls. We lose touch with who we really are and were meant to be.

## The Fall

Although agriculture brought us undeniable benefits in terms of producing food surpluses to help us through hard times, it certainly came with huge costs. Despite these costs, though, from the start of the Neolithic (agricultural) era, around 11,000 BC, and up to the beginning of the Bronze Age, around 4,000 BC, we still seem to have been doing relatively okay. As I discussed in the first book, the archaeological evidence is that we mostly seemed to have been living in relatively prosperous and peaceful times. Then, around 4,000 BC there was a period of sudden global warming, part of the natural cycle of climate change. This resulted in massive crop failures. Prior to agriculture, humans, like all other species, would have been prone to changes in population size as the climate changed. In lean times, population numbers died back, and rose again in the good times. As a species, we would have been through countless cycles like this in the past. However, when this happens around 4,000 BC, we respond to it in a way that is radically different to anything that we had done before. For agriculture had changed us. It had grown within us the idea of ownership and deciding what lives and what dies. So, when the food shortages and starvation hit around 4,000 BC, it was only a small step to go from deciding which other animals and plants live and die, to deciding which *humans* would now live and which humans would die too. For the first time ever in human history, we see the emergence of large armies. These are entirely different from the war bands of hunter-gatherer tribes. Hunter-gatherers certainly skirmished with each other, but they virtually never went out with the intent of entirely eradicating another tribe, no more than they would have gone out to eradicate a competitor species. But this is exactly what we do around 4,000 BC. For the first time in human history, armies conquer and take the land of neighbouring civilisations, enslaving or slaughtering the people in them in the process. Within a very short period of time, we move from seeing warlords, to the emergence of kings and then emperors, as the first empires emerge.

At this time, for protection, we start moving *en masse* from agricultural townships and into the first true cities. And so, our lives change radically again. We see the emergence of all sorts of new specialist trades and professions. We see the invention of money and of writing, both of which will profoundly change and affect the course of human history. We see the rise of hierarchical societies, with enormous wealth inequality the likes of which we had never seen before. The social structures that had seen tribal and early agricultural societies care for the weak and the needy now collapse, to be replaced with poverty, begging, destitution and starvation. Personal freedom becomes curtailed and people became ‘subjects’, subject to the absolute rule of monarchs and emperors, who rule with the help of the new hierarchical, organised religions.

Alienated and cut off as we now were from Mother Earth, the religions that begin to emerge around this time are ‘sky religions’. They tell us that God is good, and that Goddess is bad; that we can do what we like with the earth; that earthly existence is something to be ‘transcended’. Reflecting the societies that they evolve in, they are hierarchical in nature, with multiple levels of priesthoods and initiations. ‘Ordinary’ people can no longer be in direct communication with spirit, but now instead have to go through priests. For the first time in human history, we see the notion of religious orthodoxy emerge, and the persecution of non-believers. Of course, we also see the rise of patriarchy, and the subjugation of women, of half of the human population, justified by the sky-religions elevation of ‘god’ and the masculine and denigration of ‘goddess’ and the feminine. Children and animals are similarly denigrated and treated with incredible cruelty. Our lives become enormously more complicated, with laws, contracts, taxes, political factions, and so on. And we see the start of the last six-thousand years of continuous warfare between rival kingdoms and empires, whilst we also continue to expand our totalitarian, Taker culture throughout the world, finding new lands to conquer and new hunter-gatherers to slaughter.

This is ‘The Fall’.

### **‘Civilisation’, power-loss and soul-loss**

All this means we are now living in *very* different times to our shamanic hunter-gatherer ancestors. But it has also had an effect on us that it is important to understand. Shamans say that, fundamentally, we get ill for one of two main reasons. These are power-loss and soul-loss. Power-loss occurs when we become disconnected from nature, from the interconnected web of life and our place in it. This disconnection weakens us. We lose power — literally losing our life-force and vitality. By contrast, soul-loss occurs when we lose part of our soul. This loss can happen for various reasons, one of which is that we may send part of our self away, part of our own soul, in order to ‘fit in’. Like power-loss, soul-loss leaves us weakened. Both soul-loss and power-loss leave holes in us. In this weakened state, other things that may not be healthy for us can infect us (we will look at what these things can be later in the book).

The understanding of power-loss and soul-loss is fundamental to shamanism. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors would have recognised the symptoms of them and dealt with them swiftly. As the Fall progresses, we lose all knowledge of soul-loss and power-loss, and how to recognise it and treat it. The result is that we now live in a society where soul-loss and power-loss are endemic. The symptoms of them read like a description of things that many people struggle with in modern-day life. Things like anxiety, depression, a sense that something is missing or lacking in life, addictions, procrastination, boredom, a feeling of not being good enough, a disconnection from the sacred and the spiritual, loneliness, and so on. These are diseases of ‘civilisation’, of the Fall. From what we know, they seem to have been almost non-existent in hunter-gatherer cultures. Many hunter-gatherer cultures do not even have a word for depression, for example, and seem to have mostly enjoyed good mental health, in part because of the understanding of soul-loss and power-loss, how to prevent them, and how to treat them when needed.

From a shamanic point of view, we are suffering from severe and chronic power-loss, at a scale unprecedented in human history. As if this was not bad enough, we are also suffering catastrophic levels of soul-loss, due to the way that we have domesticated ourselves in order to fit in and survive.

All this leaves us full of holes that other things can get into. However, unlike shamanic cultures that would wish to heal this, modern civilisation is actually based upon *keeping* us full of holes. For if we are full of holes and feel that, at some level, something is profoundly missing, then we can be sold things with the empty promise that they may fill the sense of lack that we feel inside us. Sold things like the latest clothes, lipstick, handbags, cars, gadgets, religions, the promises of politicians, toxic ideas about groups of people to blame and hate, sugar, processed foods, tobacco, alcohol, prescription drugs — the list is endless. The problem, of course, is that none of this really works. Whether we are conscious of it or not, deep down we know that something is wrong, and that the way we are living is not right. But we do not know what to do about it, because we have lost our understanding of power-loss and soul-loss, and so we do not understand what the problem really is, let alone how to begin fixing it. And so, we carry on, trying to find something to fill the void and make us feel better. Meanwhile, soul-loss and power-loss go largely unrecognised and untreated, and rates of depression, anxiety and suicide continue to rise.

### **Our disconnection from Father Sun**

In the modern era, it is not just Mother Earth (and the other Peoples that we share her with) that we have lost connection with. We have lost true connection with Father Sun too, replacing him with distorted projections made in our own image. We create gods who share the worst of human flaws. Gods who are capricious, violent, demanding, wrathful, vengeful and so on. Gods who demand servitude, obedience, penance and sacrifices of blood and gold. Psychopathic gods who wage wars, sleep with their sisters, rape, kill their parents; gods who send plagues, pestilence and floods, and so on. Narcissistic, jealous gods who demand our full attention, saying that we must worship them and only them. Gods who become obsessed with us humans, dictating how we dress, what we eat, and even what we do in the privacy of our own bedrooms.

Not all the gods are this bad, of course. Since they are created in our own image, and since we are not all bad, we also create gods who are compassionate, merciful, forgiving, loving, and so on (or a single god who has these qualities too). But, undeniably, the gods of the Fall are a very mixed bag, reflecting, as they do, all of human nature. These are modern ‘gods’, arising out of the damaged collective unconscious material that our self-domestication and the Fall have created. They are nothing like the gods that our hunter-gatherer ancestors knew. Our ancestors knew of the gods. They were to be respected and honoured, but there was no need to *worship* them. For our ancestors understood that the gods were so far beyond human that they had little if any interest in us. The gods had no more interest in us than a mountain has in us, or the wind or the rain. It is only as a result of the Fall, and our coming to see ourselves as so ‘special’, that we start to believe the gods (our new, human-created ‘gods’) are so obsessed with us.

### **The post-Fallen recovery**

The mess that we have gotten ourselves into since adopting totalitarian agriculture is not something that most people want to face up to, as it can feel overwhelming to do so. The majority of people prefer to ignore all this and go about their lives as ‘normal’, or focus on the ‘positives’. In many ways, that is understandable. Understandable though it may be, if we do not face up to the state

that we are in then, like ignoring a cancer, the problems will not go away. Instead, they will spread and become worse. One thing that being a psychotherapist (and a client in psychotherapy, too) really taught me is that things can only be changed, *properly* changed, if and when we have the courage to fully and unflinchingly face them. It is not something most people want to do (hence the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck referring to therapy as ‘the road less travelled’). And if we are to understand shamanism too, then it is important to understand that shamanism is not a light and fluffy path. The shaman is not someone who shies away from facing difficult things. Rather it has always been the role of the shaman to be the person willing to face the things that really need facing, to be prepared to see into the darkness and see things as they really are. Remember, that is even what the word ‘shaman’ means — someone who can see in the dark (and see the things that other people cannot, or will not see). And, the reality is that we really are in a truly incredible mess. What we have done, and the way we are living, is unsustainable and simply insane. So, it is no surprise that people like the author Daniel Quinn, naturalist Chris Packham, and academics like Jared Diamond and Yuval Noah Harari, call agriculture the single biggest mistake in human history because of where it has led us. In fact, amongst historians who study the Neolithic era, such views are by no means uncommon or that controversial these days.

Whilst we do need to unflinchingly face up to the reality of the state that we are in, doing so is of absolutely no use if all that happens as a result is that we sink into despair. I want this book to be about hope too; an uplifting book, and one that is about practical things that we can do about the situation we are in. Also, whilst not falling into the trap of ignoring or glossing over things, it is important to remember that it is not all doom and gloom. It is essential to keep some balance and perspective. For all the madness around us, there are signs that we are starting to recover our sanity.

In his excellent books ‘The Fall’ and ‘Back to Sanity’, the academic and spiritual author Steve Taylor details how over the last few hundred years, in many areas of the world, we have been slowly regaining a more empathic and compassionate way of being. He refers to this as the ‘post-Fallen’ recovery. For example, over the past few hundred years we have seen things like the abolition of slavery, universal suffrage for both men and women, equal rights for women, child protection laws, the right to free education, access to healthcare, care of the elderly, environmental legislation, the more humane treatment of prisoners, animal rights legislation and more humane farming practices, increasing tolerance of people’s gender choices and sexual orientation, and more. These changes started off slowly but gathered pace and have been moving much more rapidly over the last few decades. It is for me then not at all surprising that in the last few decades we have also seen the return of animism and shamanism to places where it had been eradicated. For, at the heart of shamanism and animism is a deep connection and compassion for all of life, and a way of living that is in a right relationship with others, both human and the more-than-human too.

Only a few decades ago shamanism was in a dire state in most places. Shamans had been ruthlessly persecuted for centuries, and shamanic cultures destroyed all over the world. In the West, of course, it had been almost entirely eradicated, and in the rest of the world there were few genuinely shamanic cultures left, and those that had survived were often struggling. Recently, though, there has been a huge surge of interest in shamanism. This is good news. For, whilst it is heartening to see the progress that we have made in the post-Fallen era, we do need to address the deeper issues too. Over the last few centuries, all the campaigning for a more compassionate world, all the activism and resultant legislation and change in human behaviour and awareness, has been an

essential part of our recovery and of our trying to turn the crisis around. However, in the end all such activities, vital though they are, are dealing with the symptoms and not the underlying cause. They are the antibiotics necessary to fight the acute infection, but alone they do not deal with the *cause* of the infection. The fundamental reason we are in this mess is because of our profound separation and disconnection; essentially, massive soul-loss and power-loss.

Shamanism is precisely the thing that understands soul-loss and power-loss, and how to treat them. This is central to shamanism, completely at the heart of it. We would not be in this mess in the first place if we had not turned our backs on shamanic practice. If we are really to survive, to really treat the underlying *causes* of the mess we are in and not just the symptoms, then we need shamanism back. For shamanism provides us with not just an *understanding* of the underlying causes of the state that we are now in, namely soul-loss and power-loss, but with the practical tools and techniques that are needed for the cure.

### **Shamanic practice for the times in which we now live**

Shamanism has always been a highly pragmatic and practical spiritual practice. Compared to the organised religions, with their written sacred texts and priesthoods to enforce orthodoxy, shamanism is dogma-free. What shamans have always done is take the core principles and practices of shamanism and pragmatically adopt them to make them applicable to the environment and times in which they live. As such, there is a huge variety in shamanic practices across the world, as the core practices are made relevant to working with particular landscapes and the flora and fauna found within them. If we are to develop shamanic practices that are relevant to our modern world, then we have to do the same thing that our ancestors have always done before us — take the core principles and practices and make them relevant to the times in which we find ourselves living. However, the times in which we now live, and the challenges we now face, are unprecedented in human history. If nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes moved from living in a forest to living in open savannahs or in an Arctic tundra, they would have had to learn to live and work with different animals, plants, and spirits. But adapting shamanism to make it relevant to the environment in which *we* now live is an entirely different challenge altogether. For of course, we now live in largely artificial environments, with little or no contact with nature. Even our gardens, our ‘natural spaces’, are not wild spaces but tamed and domesticated to meet human needs and standards. We mostly live surrounded by concrete, in towns and cities. But even those of us who live in the countryside are still surrounded by domestication, fields that are largely mono-cultures of the species that we decided we want to live there, hillsides and mountains that have been sheep-wrecked. There are few truly wild places left. We live in a world of the internet and smart phones, Facebook and Snapchat, money and banks, politics and religions, schools and jobs, mortgages and rent to pay, processed food, fashions and celebrity culture, and so on. How do we make shamanism relevant to modern life? How do we *apply* it to modern life?

Finding a way to make shamanism relevant to modern life is a challenge. It can be done though. Indeed, it *has* to be done if we are to survive. Doing it involves understanding in detail the way in which domestication has changed us. A modern domesticated carrot is scarcely recognisable as being related to its wild ancestor. Corgis and bulldogs are profoundly different to their wild ancestors too, and we are a very different creature compared to our wild, hunter-gatherer ancestors.

The changes in the modern carrot and corgi are obvious because they are physical and visible. Domestication did change us humans too, but in a less obvious way. We now have a mass of data from studies of ancient skeletons from a wide range of cultures as they made the transition from foraging to farming, in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The studies show that in all cases, people's height decreased, and overall health declined as a result of moving to agriculture. We did not begin to regain our height until comparatively recently. This is largely because early agricultural diets provided a drastically reduced variety of foodstuffs, resulting in nutritional deficiencies. Also, the higher population density of agricultural-based communities, the close proximity to disease-carrying domesticated animals, and poor sanitation systems all would have resulted in more infectious diseases.

### **Losing ourselves, and the creation of the under-world**

The really significant change that our domestication of ourselves resulted in though was not so much physical as internal. In order to fit into our new domesticated, tamed, complex modern society, we learnt to disown and repress huge parts of our psyche. In doing this we created a whole new realm — the under-world.

Unlike the shamanic lower-world, the under-world is still part of the middle-world. It is the realm of the human unconscious, both on an individual level (the personal unconscious), and on a societal level (the collective unconscious). It is probable that the under-world existed to some extent in hunter-gatherer cultures, as even in those cultures there was an inevitable necessity of suppressing the self to *some* degree in order to fit into a tribe. But in hunter-gatherer times, the under-world was tiny compared to now. Since domestication and the Fall it has grown enormously, a thousand-fold or more. Dealing with an under-world of this size and complexity is simply not something that ancestral shamans would have had to deal with. Consequently, traditional shamanism never needed to evolve the skills and knowledge needed to do complex under-world work and healing; it developed different skills and knowledge for different times. Whereas now, if we are to regain our sanity and heal, then recognising and dealing with the under-world is absolutely essential. For, much as we like to think that if we deny and repress parts of our psyche that they go away and no longer trouble us, the reality is quite the opposite. The truth is that our personal unconscious material profoundly drives, affects, moulds and shapes our personal lives (in ways and to an extent that most people are simply not aware of). And our collective unconscious, repressed material, profoundly drives, affects, moulds and shapes the society in which we live.

Our repressed, under-world material is both a symptom of and, most crucially, a *maintaining cause* of the problems that we now face in modern life. And since it is a problem that traditional shamanism had little or no knowledge of and never had to face, traditional shamanism on its own has limits as to how much it can now help. For example, in traditional shamanism, if a soul-part was lost — say through shock, illness, bereavement, or some other kind of trauma — essentially what the shaman needed to do was to find the lost part, retrieve it, and return it to the person who it belongs to. However, earlier on I said that one of the reasons we suffer soul-loss is that we send part of *our own self* away in order to fit in. Precisely because of domestication and the Fall, this is by far and away the most common form of soul-loss in modern times. This leads to two new problems that traditional shamans rarely if ever had to face. One is that, whilst a part of someone

seeking soul retrieval may genuinely want the soul retrieval (because they can sense that a part of them is missing, and the cost of that), another part of them, the part that sent that soul-part away to fit in, may not want that soul-part back at all. Unless this conflict is recognised and addressed, then usually any soul retrieval done is at best likely to be only partially effective, and unlikely to be permanent. The second problem is that soul-part was sent away for a reason. It was sent away in order to try and survive and fit in to modern-day life. If that part is then returned, and it is a wild, authentic and deep soul-part, then how do we live with that in the modern world? How does that part of us fit into modern-day life, into our family and our work environment? As I said earlier, modern society does not want people to be whole and powerful. Indeed, it is threatened by such people, for it is based on being predatory on our continuing soul-loss and power-loss.

## **Our slow recovery**

Obviously, the Fall has resulted in enormous damage. Thankfully though, in the process of our post-Fallen recovery, we have also learnt a lot. The last hundred years or so have seen the development of psychotherapy. Just as shamanism is specifically designed and equipped to deal with the problems of soul-loss and power-loss, psychotherapy (or at least any *deep* psychotherapy) is specifically designed and equipped to deal with the issues of the under-world. It provides a set of specialist tools and knowledge to deal with the issues involved in healing and developing a healthy middle-world self, and in finding a healthy way to live in modern society. And the good news is that, whilst shamanism and psychotherapy are clearly and categorically not the same thing, used well they also can be a remarkably good fit and complement each other. Used together (together with real-world activism and action), we have a cure not just for the symptoms of the Fall, but for its underlying causes too.

## **Modern shamanism and its role in our recovery**

Hence *Therapeutic* Shamanism. Just like our ancestors before us have always done, we need to take shamanism and adapt it and make it relevant to the times in which we find ourselves. These times are radically different and require radical, new and inventive applications. In shamanism, we have an ancient and extraordinary body of wisdom and practices. And (and that is ‘and’ not ‘but’), modern knowledge and practices have validity too. Sometimes I see a tendency in shamanic circles to put traditional and ancient practices on a pedestal. For me, the validity of something is not about how old it is, but about *how well it works*. Domestication and the Fall have been traumatic.

Both have come at enormous cost to us (and to most of the other species on the planet too). Our (still ongoing) post-Fallen recovery has been immensely hard won. As part of it, the knowledge and skills of psychotherapy have been incredibly hard won too. The pioneers of it, who set off into the darkness of the under-world to explore it, understand it, and bring that understanding and healing back to us, are every bit as heroic as the shamans who journey to the shamanic realms. I respect both shamanism and psychotherapy in equal measure. They are different practices, but practices which overlap. Any shamanic practitioners and psychotherapists who are open-minded will find the two disciplines have *much* that they can learn from each other, in a way that enhances both. Over the course of the books in this series, I will be exploring much of this. Having said

that, some books will focus more on the shamanic aspects of the work, and some will lean more towards the psychotherapeutic side.

## **Power dynamics**

In this next section, I do want to look at one crucial understanding that has come out of psychotherapy, something that I feel *healthy* modern shamanism *must* be aware of and take on board. It is something that is at the centre of the Therapeutic Shamanism approach. In its relatively short history, psychotherapy has made enormous strides in understanding what constitutes healthy (and unhealthy) power dynamics in a healing relationship. In the early days of psychoanalysis, the model was largely of that of the analyst holding power over the patient (with some examples of analysts even seducing their patients as ‘part of the healing process’).

Particularly since the emergence of the humanistic therapies in the 1950s, much has been learnt about what the power dynamic needs to be like for a therapeutic relationship to be healthy, and what constitutes abuse of power. There has generally been a movement away from a ‘power-over’ model, with the therapist having power over the client, and instead towards a way of working that seeks to empower the client as much as possible. This has now spread into areas beyond psychotherapy of course. These days, seeking to empower patients, students and clients, and an awareness of issues concerning the abuse of power, is now commonplace in medicine, education, social-work, and in many other fields. Having an awareness of issues around power dynamics really should be central to anyone who is working with people in any kind of a healing capacity. Shamanic work is no exception to this. So, in Therapeutic Shamanism, when doing any kind of healing work for anyone else, the aim is always to seek to help empower the other person, and never to disempower them.

## **Left-brain and right-brain**

In the first book in this series, ‘The Shamanic Journey’, I referred often to the theory that the two hemispheres of our brain function in different ways. This theory is based upon the research of psychobiologist and Nobel Prize winner Roger W. Sperry, done in the 1960s. What Sperry found was that the left hemisphere of the brain is more verbal, analytical, logical and orderly than the right brain. The left hemisphere is better at things like reading, writing, thinking in words, logic, sequencing, linear thinking, facts, and maths. By contrast, the right hemisphere of the brain is more visual and intuitive. It has a more creative and less organised way of thinking. It is better at things like imagination, creative visualisation, daydreaming, art and music, expressing emotions, reading people’s faces, empathy, intuition, and holistic thinking. From Sperry’s work arose the notion that one hemisphere of the brain may be dominant in an individual person; that some people are more ‘right-brained’, and other people are more ‘left-brained’. In ‘The Shamanic Journey’ I used the terms ‘left-brain’ and ‘right-brain’ as shorthand to refer to two different modes of thinking and being. I used ‘left-brain’ as shorthand to describe a more logical, rational approach to the world, a way of operating that is less emotional and empathic, and more concerned with physical reality, self and separateness. I used ‘right-brain’ as shorthand for a more metaphorical, non-linear, imaginative, and spiritual approach to the world, a way of being that is emotional and

empathic and filled with a sense of interconnectedness (in short, a more shamanic way of approaching the world).

Since the book has been published, a couple of people have commented to me that the theory of brain hemisphere dominance has largely been discredited. A team of neuroscientists did indeed set out to discover whether one hemisphere of the brain can in fact be dominant over the other. After two years of analysis using magnetic-resonance imaging of a thousand people, they concluded that, in terms of the level of brain activity, there was no evidence for one hemisphere having dominance over the other. What they found is that, although the two hemispheres of the brain do indeed function differently, they work together and complement one another at all times. We do not only use one hemisphere at a time. Everything we do involves both hemispheres of the brain, whether what we are doing is logical or creative, factual or metaphorical. For example, the left hemisphere handles language, but the right hemisphere helps us to understand context, and helps us understand intonation and emphasis. Likewise, the left hemisphere handles mathematical equations, but the right hemisphere helps out with comparisons and rough estimates. By the time this research had been done, however, the idea of people being either left-brain or right-brain dominant had entered popular culture and persists to this day. But these days, because of the research done using magnetic-resonance imaging, it is now often regarded as pseudoscience.

What is important to understand though is that whilst there is no evidence that, in individual people, one hemisphere of the brain is more dominant in terms of brain *activity*, it is still a scientifically-understood fact that the two hemispheres of the brain do indeed function differently, in the way that Sperry discovered. In "The Shamanic Journey", in referring to left-brain and right-brain, I was referring to these two different ways of perceiving, processing and approaching the world; on the one hand a more self-centred and unemotional way of being, that experiences the world as a place of separation and individuality, and on the other hand a more holistic and empathic way of being that experiences the world as a place of interconnectedness. This fits the scientific evidence. Now, whilst the evidence is also that, whatever we are doing, both hemispheres of the brain are equally active (and so in terms of brain *activity* no hemisphere is dominant), what we are conscious of and then act upon is a different matter altogether. Each hemisphere perceives different things, perceives reality in different ways, and has a different value-system and context for processing and responding to things. Both are equally active, but we are by no means equally *conscious* of both.

What we are conscious of is largely about what we have been trained to focus on. For instance, in interacting with people the left-brain will be focusing on the words and facts, and the right-brain on emotions. The left-brain value-system will then process the information in terms of logic, practicality and separation, and the right-brain in terms of empathy, emotional response and connection. Both are happening at the same time. But obviously, what we are aware of and then choose to act on is another matter. For example, training soldiers to go into battle involves training them to ignore feelings of empathy and their own emotional responses, and to instead make decisions in a logical and ruthless way. The right-brain empathic and emotional responses are still there, but the training is to not focus on them and so they are repressed (which may lead to problems later on, in terms of PTSD). By contrast, training people to be counsellors involves training them to pay attention to reading people's faces, to emotions and to feelings of compassion and interconnectedness, in order to build an empathic, therapeutic relationship. In other words,

whilst it is true there is no dominance between the hemispheres in terms of brain activity, it is true that there is dominance in the sense of which hemisphere's responses we pay attention to. In that sense, some people are indeed more 'left-brained' in that they focus more on physical reality, separation, rationality and so on, at the expense of empathy, emotions, interconnectedness and so on. And of course, we live in a largely 'left-brain' dominated society, compared to our hunter-gatherer ancestors, for the 'right-brain' perceives the world in an inter-connected, empathic more-than-physical, and, essentially, *shamanic* way.

The research showing that both hemispheres are equally active in people is interesting in terms of reconnecting to a more animist/shamanic way of experiencing the world. For it shows the right-brain's empathic, interconnected and shamanic perceptions are in fact going on all the time. It is just that, in turning away from shamanism we just stopped paying attention to them. The Fall was not the process of the right-brain shutting down, but the process of us shifting our attention and focus towards the left-brain, and of valuing the left-brain's perceptions more than those of the right. In that sense, the process of learning shamanism then is about learning to value and to pay attention to something that is actually going on in you already, and which always has been there.

### **Unpacking a journey — the left-brain has a place**

The language of journeys is symbolism and metaphor. Sometimes the meaning of them is clear, but sometimes really not. And even when the meaning appears clear, there can be many deeper and more hidden layers. And sometimes they are packed with teaching, about specific plants, animals or stones, their healing medicines and how to work with them, and other techniques. When you come out of a journey you have a treasure trove of things to unpack. So that is why I usually suggest writing the journey down, as you *will* forget the details in time. It can be amazing to read back over old journeys and be reminded of what happened (and what you have forgotten). Once written down, the left-brain can really come into its own in terms of looking things up and doing research. Your Guides have given you a gift of teaching with a journey, but it is up to you to do the research and learning.

### **Mythos and logos**

It is important to remember that shamanic journeys are mythos not logos; mythos meaning *metaphorically* true, and logos meaning *literally* true. In the history of the world, over the last few thousand years an enormous amount of damage has come from people taking things that are mythos (sacred books, for example) and thinking they are literally true. And I have seen problems arrive when people think that shamanic journeys are a literal truth. Shamanic journeys are like dreams. They are full of symbolic meanings, not literal truths. You cannot use them to find out 'facts'. They are instead the realm of meanings, relationships and insights.

### **Other practices (there is a lot more to it than just the journeying)**

In a shamanic culture, shamanic journeying, the act of going into an altered state of consciousness to communicate with the spirits, would have been done within a wider context of other practices,

principles, knowledge and beliefs. This wider context would have included things like: a detailed and cohesive understanding of the different realms, physical and shamanic; knowledge about the different spirits; knowledge and practices concerning working with the local Plant, Animal and Stone Peoples; creation stories, stories about our relationship with the other animals, stories about how animals or plants got their gifts and powers, and lots of other stories and myths; ancestral work and knowledge about how to work with the dead; ethics and taboos (what was and was not allowed); a model of the human energy system and bodies, and techniques for working with them; practices for protection and maintaining one's energy field; and many other things, including an understanding of the role of the shaman within that culture. So, important though journeying may be, in any particular culture there would have been far more to shamanism than just the journeying.

In founding Core Shamanism, Harner kept the practice relatively free of anything other than the shamanic journeying itself. This had the advantage of making Core Shamanism relatively culturally neutral and portable, so that it could appeal to as many different people in different places as possible. However, whilst this makes it a good starting point, if one is to deepen shamanic practice the journeying has to become integrated into a wider context. In any society, the role of the shaman is one that exists within that particular culture, with that culture's social norms, values, myths and beliefs, practices, problems, and so on. It is also a practice that is about connecting to the land. As such, it is about connecting with the Ancestors, the other-than-human Peoples, and the Spirits of the land in a particular region.

So, if we are to develop a deep shamanic practice with a rich and relevant context, then it needs to involve far more than just journeying. We need to add other practices and knowledge. Some of these things are not going to be 'shamanic' on their own, but the point is that they provide the shamanic journeying with context and relevance. The books in this series are about shamanic journeying, but they are also about developing the larger context needed for a deep shamanic practice. And one that is relevant to the societies and places in which we now live; one that you yourself can take and make relevant to the society in which *you* live, and which is strongly rooted in the land in which you live too.

I want to finish this chapter just briefly outlining what some of these wider principles and practices are in Therapeutic Shamanism . . .

## **Ethics**

Although shamanism is used in some cultures to harm others, and by some people in this culture too, personally I have no interest whatsoever in using it to harm other people. It seems to me that we have more than enough ways to do harm in our culture without my wishing to add to that. For that reason, I focus on the healing side of shamanic practice. As such, fundamental to Therapeutic Shamanism is that it is an ethical practice. I know there are lots of practitioners who work in ways that I would consider unethical. That is between them and their conscience, and between them and their guides ('guides' not 'Guides, for if they are working unethically then their guides are almost certainly middle-world beings). I need to do what is right for me and sits well with my conscience and with my Guides. As such, it is of the highest importance to me as a teacher and writer that what I teach and write about is based on solid ethical practice.

I find that reliably ethical behaviour is something that arises more from within than just from some externally-applied rules. This leads us on to the importance of another key component of Therapeutic Shamanism: Metta.

## Metta

Therapeutic Shamanism is a compassionate practice, or at least one that strives hard to be compassionate. Being compassionate may seem like a given for a spiritual practice. Unfortunately though, this is not necessarily the case. I have seen plenty of examples of shamanism where compassion is lacking, to say the least, and where shamanism is used for personal gain and to do harm to others. Personally, I call those traditions sorcery and not shamanism. However, the people who practice them are often adamant they are shamans. Whatever the terminology though, for me, compassion is something I am to keep at the heart of my shamanic practice, my teaching, and my writing.

A problem with some spiritual traditions, however, is that they tell you that you *should* be compassionate, but they do not necessarily help you to *become* more compassionate. This is where metta-practice comes in. Metta is a meditation technique designed to help you cultivate loving kindness within yourself. If people have heard of metta, they usually think of it as being a Buddhist practice. Most often it is thought of as a Tibetan Buddhist practice. Interestingly, Tibetan Buddhism was heavily influenced by the earlier Bon tradition in Tibet. Bon, in turn, evolved out of even earlier Tibetan shamanic practices. So, it is quite possible that metta is originally a shamanic practice. Certainly, that is what my shamanic Guides tell me. However, whatever its origins (and I do not really care, to be honest — I am more interested in whether something works and is useful), metta is an easily learnt and highly effective way of developing compassion within oneself.

The heart of metta practice is to start with showing yourself loving kindness. Only once this self-compassion is established do you then move on to other people, starting with the easy people (people that you like). After this, you can then move on to people that you find more challenging, and then to all people and all things.

I did outline how to do metta practice in the first book in this series. I also described some more specifically shamanic ways of doing the practice. However, if you have not read the first book, or wish to find out more about metta, then you will find plenty about it online.

## Gratitude

Shamanism is about opening to connection. Practicing it makes you more aware of what is around you. In modern times though, becoming more aware of the state of the middle-world, and to what we humans have done to it, can sometimes feel overwhelmed and even lead to feelings of despair. There would be no point to the practice if it just led to despair though! It would be no good for you doing it, and you would be of no help to the people and Peoples around you (and remember, shamanism is about service to the community). The despair has to be managed. Because of this, I incorporate gratitude practices into Therapeutic Shamanism. Gratitude practices are a remarkably quick and effective antidote to despair. Another strong antidote to despair is to transform it into

empowerment. I first came across this personally through the work of the wonderful Joanna Macy and the set of practices that she has developed called 'The Work that Reconnects'. If you do not already know about The Work That Reconnects, or wish to find out more, then I would suggest having a look online at [www.workthatreconnects.org](http://www.workthatreconnects.org). I incorporate and adapt many of the ideas and practices from it into my teaching and writing. And on a personal level, I find it an essential part of my own practice and my ability to be in and cope with this human middle-world.

### **Exercise One: Showing your Power Animal Gratitude and Appreciation.**

Make a list of all the things that you feel grateful about with regard to your Power Animal. Do not just do this in your head, but actually write them down. All the things that you like and appreciate about them. All the things that you admire about them. All the things that you appreciate that they bring to you, and the things that you appreciate about your relationship.

*Then sit and sense your Power Animal in front of you. Take your time to really feel their presence.*

*Now, slowly, one by one, with feeling, read out the list to them.*

*Just sit in silence in each other's presence for a while afterwards. Do not expect a response in terms of them saying nice things back to you. This is not about you. This is about you expressing gratitude and appreciation to them, with no strings, conditions or expectations attached. This is about you giving.*

You can repeat this exercise with any of your other Guides too, of course.

### **Shaman, or Shamanic Practitioner?**

One last, but important thing. In the first book I discussed the difference between a 'shaman' and being a 'shamanic practitioner'. In founding Core Shamanism, Michael Harner suggested reserving the term 'shaman' for people in indigenous cultures who live and breathed shamanism, and instead using the term 'shamanic practitioner' for modern 'westerners' practising Core Shamanism. He suggested this as a way of respecting the vast difference in the level of skill and knowledge between people who have been raised and trained in a shamanic culture, and 'westerners' who have not been immersed in shamanism all their lives. I agree with Harner on this. In tribal cultures, the training to become a shaman is long and arduous and generally begins in early life. A shaman is someone with an immense level of skill and knowledge, and someone who has spent their life living shamanically and in a culture which supported them in doing this. By contrast, for most 'westerners', shamanism is something they come to later in life and, given the constraints of modern-day life, is something that is usually at best a part-time practice. For a 'westerner' to claim to be a shaman is simply to not understand or respect the level of skill and knowledge that being a shaman really involves. It is a bit like claiming to be a buddha. The reality is that few people who practice Buddhism will become a buddha, but everybody can be a Buddhist practitioner.

On top of this, in tribal cultures the title 'shaman' is usually not one that individuals claim for themselves. Instead, it is a title bestowed upon someone by their tribe or community. A 'westerner' claiming to be a shaman is a bit like someone bestowing a knighthood on themselves. It does not

mean a thing (other than that maybe they have illusions of grandeur).

So, I do not call myself a shaman. I am a shamanic practitioner. And we can all be shamanic practitioners. That is what these books are about.