

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 30

The Shaman's Tale

One of the things we ask children is, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" They may respond--a fireman, a nurse, a policeman, a truck driver or many other jobs from the stable world in which they live.

Today, however, we know that children won't grow up in a stable world. They will grow up in a climate changing world. They need something to hold onto. Perhaps a different way of thinking, perhaps stories about people of other times that will help them deal with their future. Here's a story about the shaman.

The Shaman

Long, long ago, before there were different countries, or governments, or schools, or churches or cities and towns, or farms there were only people living on the land in different parts of the world. They lived in small groups close to the land and to the other animals. They knew that the other animals were somehow their relatives. Getting to know the land and how it lived was important because they were dependent on the land for their food, their water, the wood or snow for their houses—well, for their survival.

In some communities there were men and women with special powers. They were called shamans. They could understand the land in a special way. Where they got these powers from nobody knew, but people sensed they had them. Shamans just had a different way of knowing about the land, its creatures and other people.

As a child started to grow, the elders looked very carefully to see if he/she might become a shaman. The people needed shamans to help the community and to help them survive on the land.

These special children were not the biggest and strongest. In fact sometimes they were sickly, had disabilities or injuries with effects that could last for months or even years. But the elders didn't worry about these problems. They thought that young people who were sickly would be better able to help other people who became sick.

As they grew older these young shamans began to take on responsibilities to help the community in ways that no one else could. Some of them served as healers. They learned to use medicines made from plants. But they also learned to help people with mental or spiritual problems.

When a person had these kinds of problems the community felt that they had lost their soul—the thing within them that made them who they were. The soul had somehow escaped from their bodies. It was the shaman's task to go on a journey, find the person's soul and return it to his or her owner.

Shamans were famous for their journeys. People believed that they could travel up into the heavens above or down into the land beneath the sea to find what the person or community needed. This was especially important for finding animals to hunt for food. The people depended upon the shamans to survive.

When people had to move their tents or igloos to new locations where the hunting would be better they would always ask the shaman to tell them where to go. People even believed that some shamans were shape-shifters. They could take the form of animals and meet with them to negotiate agreements.

Shamans had another important role—to help settle disputes among people. People in a community often disagree with one another. The shaman would bring people together and find ways for them to respect one another and work out agreements.

Shamans mostly existed in ancient times but there are many native communities around the world that still have such individuals. But today we have doctors and nurses, judges and lawyers, scientists, counsellors and spiritual leaders. So why am I telling you about shamans?

I'm telling you about shamans because many of us have lost our relationship with the land and the living Earth.

I'm telling you about shamans because you are entering a very difficult and sometimes dangerous world. It is a very different world than the one we grew up in. It is a world where the climate is affecting all life forms. The danger is because we humans have damaged Earth and Earth is fighting back.

The key to turning things around is to find ways and means of creating for yourselves a future that benefits you, your families and friends and everyone else—and also benefits Earth. In a sense we have lost our soul. We need you to do what the shamans did, help us find it. Help us create a relationship with Earth and help your community build upon and strengthen that relationship.

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