

## CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 28

### Enter, the Shaman

Some years ago I was giving a workshop in Rankin Inlet, an Inuit village on the west coast of Hudson Bay. There were a number of elders in the group all of whom had lived many years on the land. During one of the breaks I asked them how they would know when it was time to abandon their snow houses and move to a place where the hunting would be better. One of the elders said, "The shaman would tell us."

I'm not suggesting we try and become shamans. But I think we can we learn something from the shamanic experience that can teach us how to make a transition into a climate changing world.

The psychiatrist Carl Jung was a serious student of shamanism. In 1924-25 he lived with the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona and a year later spent time with the indigenous inhabitants of Mt Elgin in Kenya.

Shamanism is undoubtedly the oldest form of spirituality in the world. It preceded established religions by many centuries and is still found in many cultures around the world.

Shamans have a "calling", a vocation to serve the community. Sometimes they were discovered at an early age when communities recognized within young people special powers or insights. The elders would work to nourish these powers.

Shamans are healers. According to Mircea Eliade, a leading authority on shamanism, there are two kinds of sickness—physical sickness and spiritual or psychological sickness—the loss of soul or spirit. It was the latter type of sickness that the shaman treated. He or she would search for and find the lost soul in a sort of alternate universe and return it to its owner. Shamans were often referred to as "wounded healers." In many cases they would go through long periods of physical or psychological sickness. These were seen by the community as experiences that would help them understand the suffering of others.

The shaman was also a mediator not only among people in the community but also between humans and other animals. Because the people saw themselves as kin to other animals, the shaman's ability to negotiate with animals was a significant role. In some cultures people believed that animals gave themselves to the hunters. So there were many rules about caring for the land which was the home of the animals. There was a concern that if the land was abused the animals would not give themselves to the hunters the next time they came to the area.

Finally, the shamans went on spiritual discovery journeys into another dimension up into the planets or down into the cellular nether world beneath cultures. They would make

these journeys to find and return lost souls, to negotiate with animals, to find a path into the future, and so forth.

So how does the shamanic world help us understand the challenges in the anthropocentric world we have entered?

**Transition.** The shaman is a person who moves between two dimensions. He or she realizes that their visible world is not adequate. Something else is needed. And so it is for us as we watch our current Earth-damaging systems. We are now living in a different world—the Anthropocene—and we must make a transition to this different dimension.

**Community Healer.** Our climate changing world leaves many of us on the edge of despair. We seem helpless to deal with what is happening and are experiencing a loss of soul. Like the shaman we all have a vocation—a mission to help our community deal with this loss of soul by discovering a better world. We must also be aware that carrying out our role will be difficult and could wound us. It might evoke hostility from those who want things to remain the way they are.

**Mediator.** The role of the shaman is to mediate a relationship between our species and Earth and its species. So it must be for us. We must find ways and means of negotiating with one another about our damaging practices and systems so we can create a mutually enhancing relationship with our species and Earth.

**Journey.** Like the shaman we must transform our lives and discover our role and vocation as earthlings. Part of this process is to journey to other worlds and other communities either literally or through our research and communications. All over the world communities are struggling with the harsh realities of climate change and coming up with alternatives. We can learn from them.

When I look up and see the eagles flying over our community I sometimes think of the shaman. For the Gilyak people of Siberia the word for eagle in their language is also the word for shaman. The eagle's eyesight is eight times more powerful than our own. We desperately need a better way of seeing what we are doing to Earth, where we are going, and how we can create a better future for our families and future generations. .