

2019-20 Climate Change Chronicle 18

Shamanic Thinking in a Changing World

As I'm writing this chronicle it is late September. We are in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. We seem to be in a depression with millions of people out of work while climate change remains a constant and unavoidable threat.

Last week we were experiencing smoke from the forest fires in the Western United States and the news is telling us about hurricanes in the Southern U.S. There is no doubt that we humans are the cause of this situation. How do we deal with all of this?

As I was thinking about this I remembered a famous statement of Albert Einstein. He said, "*We can't solve our problems with the same kind of thinking we used to create them.*" This reminded me of a different kind of thinking I first experienced in the Canadian North.

In 1980 my family and I moved to Baffin Island in the Eastern Arctic where I took a job as the Superintendent of Social Services. In my culture "land" was real estate. But the Inuit had a different way of thinking about things. In their culture land was part of them and they were part of the land. Time after time travelling into the thirteen communities to consult about services I heard the elders get up and say, "Learn from the land".

The idea that all things and people are commodities is not only flawed but dangerous. It must be replaced. More than a hundred economists have recently published a paper noting that the carbon economy we developed (supported by our political and legal systems) is the major cause of our climate change problems.

In this chronicle I'm going to suggest that a new kind of thinking may be found in the shamanism of the Inuit and other indigenous peoples. I'll explore this possibility with a number of my personal stories and my research on the role of shamans. In what follows I'll begin with a description of traditional shamanism. I'll then note some of the problems shamanism is confronting in the modern world. I'll conclude with some indications of how a more modern concept of shamanic thinking can help us deal with the problems moving in on us due to climate change.

Traditional Shamanism

I'm not suggesting we imitate the traditional shamans. But I think we can learn something from the shamanic experience that can help us 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 certain 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.

I have on my bookshelf a sculpture of a shaman with a spear through his body. This is one depiction of the “wounded healer.” Elders report that shamans would often go through long periods of physical or psychological sickness. These were seen by the elders as experiences that would help them understand the woundedness of others.

The shaman was also a mediator in the conflicts of others, 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 power. In some indigenous 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.

On one occasion I was doing a restorative justice workshop in an Inuit community on the west coast of Hudson Bay. There were a number of elders in the workshop. During the lunch break I asked some elders how they knew when to abandon the snow houses (igloos) and move to where the hunting would be better. One of the elders in the group said, "The shaman would tell us."

The Shamanic Transition

Government

Because the Federal Government could not provide health care and other services to Inuit in outpost camps, they decreed that the people had to move into communities. The majority of Inuit in the eastern Arctic moved off the land into communities in the 1950s and 1960s. Their wisdom was based upon their life as lived on the land. But when they moved into communities their culture did not prepare them to deal with schools, towns, municipal bodies, etc.

In a changing world it was very difficult for parents and grandparents to pass on their knowledge to their children. The traditional role of the shaman also changed. Let me illustrate these changes with three stories.

Science

In the 1980s, before the development of Nunavut, the Inuit homeland in the Eastern Arctic, the Government of the Northwest Territories decreed that scientists from the South who wanted to do work in the Arctic had to include in their research the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples. I was asked to facilitate several sessions of southern researchers.

The problem for the southern scientists was that traditional knowledge was not "scientific". They perceived it as just a collection of stories. The scientists were not decision makers. They just collected facts and figures and turned them over to political bodies to then develop policies.

But traditional knowledge didn't work that way. Indigenous people believed that shamans had a direct relationship to the land....like their own only

much stronger. I remember an early study of Inuit hunters done by two more enlightened scientists. It was entitled, "*I Am I and My Environment.*"

The concept of story is built into indigenous cultures. I remember a story about a small group of federal civil servants who came from Ottawa to begin negotiations on a land claim. At the beginning of the meeting one of the federal government negotiators said, "I hope you realize that the land we are here to talk about is federal land and belongs to the Government of Canada." The elders were shocked. They had lived on these lands for hundreds of years, long before there was a federal government. One of the elders stood up and asked, "If this is your land, where are your stories?"

Religion

On one occasion I was in a meeting with a group of elders and a young woman in tears. Her mother was a famous carver.... but also a shaman. The young woman asked the elders to tell her about her mother's life as a shaman. But the elders refused to do so. I strongly suspect it was because the elders had been converted to Christianity and the Anglican clergy had told them that shamanism was devil worship. Shamanism still existed but it had to go underground.

But not all the clergy saw shamanism as devil worship. A friend of mine, Father Pochat, a Roman Catholic Oblate priest lived and worked for many years with the Tlicho people in the western Arctic. One day I said to him, "Father, I have the sense that people use one kind of spirituality on the land and another kind when they are at Sunday Mass in the community.

He smiled and said, "You're right. Thirty- five years ago when I first started to work with the Tlicho I travelled with my dog team to the outpost camps. One day I was coming into a camp and I saw a man down on his knees before a tree. He had an axe in his hand and he was bowing to the tree. I didn't say anything." Fr. Pochat considered both types of spirituality to be valid.

Family Relationships.

My first experience with shamanism occurred in a Baffin community when a young couple came to me with a problem. One of their fathers was making unreasonable demands of them and they were afraid to disagree with him. I

said, "Well, when people get older they sometimes get cranky." They said to me, "But he is not really that old. He is only about sixty." I then said, "Well, when people live together in one house it is not always easy to get along with one another." But then they said to me, "He doesn't live in our house. He lives in his own house." Still trying to get at the nature of the problem, I made a few other useless suggestions. When they finally said to me, "Mike, our father is a shaman," I realized that they and their father were caught between two cultures.

An emerging New Shamanism

It has been 20 years since I lived and worked in the Arctic. But I'm sure there will be a continuation of the development I saw before I left. Children are using computers in the classroom, sometimes studying their own traditional languages. They are hooked into modern technology such as cell phones and GPS. The North has adopted southern forms of governance and adjusted to modern science.

I also suspect we will be seeing a re-emerging awareness of and connection to Earth and its creatures....and not only in the North. The previous forms of shamanism grew out of the need to survive in the harshest climate on Earth. I suspect that the new forms of shamanism will also be based upon a new relationship with Earth. But now the challenge is very different.

Their land is melting and ocean waters are rising. Caribou are getting trapped in deep snow on their annual migration routes. Hunters can no longer trust the trails and routes they have travelled for centuries. These are new challenges to the survival of their ancient culture. In fact all cultures, old and new, are being challenged as people everywhere face climate change.

So what will the new emerging shamanism look like? I don't have a crystal ball but I think it will reflect some of the influences and trends that are already appearing everywhere in the world.

First, the dominant and essential characteristic of the new shamans will be their awareness that they are part of Earth and Earth is living within them. They will have what scientist Barbara McClintock described as a "feeling for the organism."

Second, the new shamans will have a strong sense of a calling to share their relationship to Earth with others.

Third, I think they will be much younger men and women with a wide variety of skill sets. Their work will initially take place at the community level.

Fourth, the new shamans will understand systems – the old systems that are causing the problems and the new systems that will be supportive and healing in our relationship with Earth. But they will also be wounded healers because the ‘owners’ of the existing systems will fight back ferociously.

Fifth, I think they will develop from their love of Earth a spirituality to sustain them for the long haul. They will convert the churches to a greater calling. Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and Roman Catholic priest was asked where our guidance in this crazy and dangerous world would come from. He said, “It won’t come from the prophets or from the priests. It will come from the shamans.”

We started this journey with a quote from the world’s greatest scientific shaman, Albert Einstein. I think we should end with words he used to describe the task at hand.

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us “Universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.

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