

# Shamanism, Process Work, and Extreme States

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I believe that extreme and unusual states of consciousness can be transformed so the emergence of their energy and inspiration benefits not only the individuals experiencing them, but also the whole community. Modern culture, however, leaves many people without the tools and support necessary to access the creative and healing potential of these often-troublesome states. In this article I explore several principles and approaches to working with extreme states, drawing on both shamanism and process work. My focus here is these specific aspects: 1) supporting people to believe in their experiences of ordinary and non-ordinary reality; 2) two-state work, or developing the ability to travel fluidly between states; 3) sentient work, or working on the core essence of an experience; 4) unfolding the message within a state; 5) three-state work, which involves connecting different states of consciousness and levels of reality; 6) soul retrieval; and 7) the shaman as a channel for the community.

First, let's clarify some terms. Shamanism is a mixture of ancient and modern wisdom that teaches people to travel into ordinary and non-ordinary reality for personal growth and healing, as well as to benefit the community. Mircea Eliade writes, "We shall find shamanism within a considerable number of religions, for shamanism always remains an ecstatic technique at the disposal of a particular elite and represents, as it were, the mysticism of the particular

religion" (1964: 8). Historically, he notes, the term shamanism referred to a phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia, with similar practices found in North America, Indonesia, Oceania, and other parts of the world.

Eliade also describes what shamans do:

Magic and magicians are found more or less all over the world, whereas shamanism exhibits a particular magical specialty, on which we shall later dwell at length: "mastery over fire," "magical flight," and so on. By virtue of this fact, though the shaman is among other things, a magician, not every magician can properly be termed a shaman. The same distinction must be applied in regard to shamanic healing; every medicine man is a healer, but the shaman employs a method that is his and his alone.... The shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld. (1964: 5)

Michael Harner, in *The Way of the Shaman*, defines shamanism as

...the great mental and emotional adventure, one in which the patient as well as the shaman-healer are involved. Through his heroic journey and efforts, the shaman helps his patients transcend their normal, ordinary definition of reality, including the definition of themselves as ill. The shaman shows his patients that they are not emotionally and spiritually alone in their struggles against illness and death. (1980: xiii)

This definition is particularly relevant to our discussion of extreme states, as defined by Arnold Mindell in his book *City Shadows*:

The word “state” means for me a momentary picture of an evolving process. The term “extreme” refers to the frequency which these states are met with by the ordinary person during everyday conditions outside of the psychiatric milieu. Thus they are rare only in terms of occurrence; the majority of their content and structure is experienced by all of us.... These extreme states show a chronically missing “metacommunicator,” that is, someone who is able to talk about the states as if they were occurring in another person. (1988: 13)

He goes on to say:

This definition of psychosis frees me to study these states as static momentary or cyclical processes which are evolving, have a purpose and an implicit order and direction. Furthermore, I am removing them from the ordinary categories of cause and effect, medical disease and cure, and placing them in the realm of phenomenology, which connects psychiatry to psychology, physics, medicine and sociology. (1988: 13)

This brings us to the role of the metacommunicator: that part of us that can stand outside of and reflect on whatever states of consciousness we are experiencing. The continuum ranges from states wherein there is an absolute ability to reflect and comment on our experiences, to states where there is very little or no ability to do so. Generally, the more extreme our state, the less we can metacommunicate, though there may be moments in the midst of even the most extreme states when some meta-position seems to emerge.

Extreme experiences are many and diverse, including spiritual events, drug-induced states, those often associated with psychiatric disorders, coma, and blends of the above. Great effort has been put into categorizing various states of consciousness, for example in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*. However, in my experience, all the methods described in this article can be utilized with any state, whether it is identified

as a psychiatric condition or a spiritual emergency. One of the disadvantages to categorizing states is that a labeled psychiatric condition may receive fewer alternative approaches. Knowing that differentiating states can also be valuable, I hope to foster a spirit of trying new interventions with various states of consciousness and letting the person’s feedback, rather than a diagnostic label, determine their treatment.

*Process work*, or *process-oriented psychology*, can be defined as follows:

Process-oriented psychology is a wide spectrum method of perceiving, differentiating, and enabling human signals, both close to and far from the personal identity of the doctor and patient, to unfold. The aim of process-oriented psychology is to allow these different signals and states to unfold in an individual way, which depends upon the client and the therapist, by focusing on the underlying process structures, which connect them. In fact, the most able therapist appears to be one who is familiar with all parts of psychology, including dream and body work, meditation, psychosomatic medicine, medical terminology, and treatments, relationship and family work, social work, etc. An empirical discovery is that present problems and issues become their own solutions, their own “cures,” if you will. (Mindell, 1988: 6)

Arnold Mindell’s books *The Shaman’s Body* and *City Shadows* present the underlying principles upon which this article is founded.

### **Acknowledging the Reality of Other Worlds**

Both shamans and process workers are trained to acknowledge ordinary and non-ordinary reality, or ordinary and unusual states of consciousness, and work to bring these worlds together: shamans journey, while process workers use two- and three-state approaches. Both process work and shamanism assist people in developing tools to negotiate not only mainstream reality but also different “worlds” or states of consciousness.

While traditional psychiatry emphasizes convincing people that these other worlds are not real, process work and shamanism focus on

accessing them without getting lost in them. Like many people, I personally have needed a great deal of support to believe in and explore these mysterious places. Following are examples of traveling into and believing in deep and unusual states, from my own life and from others with whom I have worked.

Grandfather led with such power and magic that even when we took breaks between rounds, I wanted to stay in the sweat lodge, where I had been sitting for hours. On the fourth round, lights started to flash throughout the lodge, but I knew we were in total darkness. Suddenly something was flying around the lodge. I thought I must have been hallucinating from the heat.

After the sweat lodge was finished, I was so struck by the experience, but as usual, was shy to talk about it with anyone else who had been in the lodge. I had trained myself not to mention such things, afraid of other peoples' and my own judgments of such wild states. Also, I had been trained by some of my Native American teachers to stay quiet about the mystical experiences that happen in such ceremonies. However, this time I couldn't contain myself and asked someone who I knew had been in many sweat lodges if he had noticed anything more unusual than the usual other world experiences that come through. He said to me, "Oh, you mean those lights and that something was flying around?"

Years after this experience, I read a book written by Grandfather Wallace Black Elk. In it he talks about leading a sweat lodge, and says of the spirit that comes in:

So when that gourd comes into the lodge, he talks. All you are going to hear is a sound that sounds like a baby rattle flying around in there. But those stones in that gourd talk. There is a talk in that rattle, but you have to be educated in these spiritual ways to understand it. Other times you will see those little lights flashing around in the dark. I have a medicine for that. (1990: 62)

This experience was one of a whole series of life events showing me there are other worlds of experience available, if we can open up to

and believe in them. Studying shamanism and process work made this possible for me. Non-ordinary reality, like seeing a spirit flying around a sweat lodge, and ordinary reality, like going to the grocery store, are both important pieces of what is real. Non-ordinary reality helps connect us with nature, with the spirit world, and with the deepest parts of ourselves. However, if it is the only reality we experience, we have trouble functioning in everyday life. And while consensus reality is important for this functioning, we miss out on much of our creativity and inner experiences if it is the only reality we accept.

A man recently said to me that he couldn't stand being seen as someone with problems and issues, that his mind and feelings are just different than others, though he doesn't want them to be. He is highly interested in what life, death, the afterlife, and the universe are all about, but his friends aren't talking about such things. Assuring him that to me he was not someone with a problem, but rather someone with a spiritual calling, I welcomed him into the universal community of healers and people with similar callings. Helping someone feel connected to a community can be life saving. Living in isolation makes some people feel inherently flawed, whereas the right surroundings can help them see that they also have gifts which make it hard for them to be just mainstream.

Many people, myself included, have had unusual experiences throughout life, but have learned through family and culture to keep quiet about them. For example, I have always had a connection with lightning. Lightning struck my parents' house so often when I was growing up that they had to put lightning rods up; still, lightning struck! Finally, they managed to adjust the rods so that the lightning stopped blowing holes in the walls. I remember that as a child, while everyone was upset, I felt some strange sense of connection with the lightning. I come from a very sweet, loving family, but altered states weren't a topic at the dinner table. There were times growing up that I was afraid of being crazy for having such wild experiences.

When I finished graduate school and started studying with the most radical psychologists I could find, I tried talking to them about these experiences. They didn't condemn me, or tell me I was crazy. However, they never said anything specific about the states; there was no place for such experiences in their theories. So I learned to keep quiet about them, while continuing to work on the meaning that lightning has in my life. For example, now I think of working as a therapist, making lightning-like interventions, quick and illuminating, and full of light and energy.

In *The Shaman's Body*, Mindell says, "The world of non-ordinary reality inevitably involves confronting the most complex, the darkest, and most terrifying thing we have tried to avoid throughout our lives, the inexplicable spirit 'ally.' But the very name of this spirit figure indicates that it contains potentially valuable secrets" (1993: xiii-xiv).

I remember attending a workshop on working with power animals and allies. At the time, I was living in the woods. Suddenly a large red-tailed hawk streaked by my head, broke the window and flew right to the center of the house! I opened my door, and out it flew. This encounter put me in a mixed state of terror, awe, and happiness. In my next house, a red-tailed hawk sat on the power lines right outside, and when I went running in the morning, it flew along with me. By then I believed more in other worlds, and talked to the hawk as he flew near me. We waited for each other, like brothers happy to meet, and my life felt much richer with this connection to nature. Years later, I continue to learn from this bird in my dreams and other experiences.

Without the support I have received to believe in non-ordinary reality, I would have lost my connection to the spirit world and this incredible source of information. It has taken years and the encouragement of my teachers to feel comfortable revealing my other-worldly experiences. Even writing publicly about them now is still somewhat unusual. According to mainstream culture, I am a professional who should talk accordingly, and mentioning

dreamlike experiences is considered odd. Arnold Mindell has said in his classes that, "Dreaming is still the most marginalized part of modern western life" (Class on Inner Oppression, Portland, Oregon, 2001). Especially in the world of mainstream psychiatry, there are clear lines between "patients" and their unusual experiences, and "practitioners" and their rationality. Writing about my own altered experiences as a professional in a professional journal blurs these lines and breaks a cultural norm.

As a white man having shamanic experiences, I feel cautious speaking about them; whites have used other cultures' teachings in many hurtful or exploitative ways. Elders from other cultures have taught me a great deal, so I always strive to credit them, to ask their permission and respect their limits on what is appropriate to share and what is to be kept private, and to speak in a way that engenders respect for their great traditions. Non-ordinary experiences occur to people of all cultures, and I am interested in supporting people to bring out their own shamanic natures. Experiencing other traditions is sometimes useful in this process; however, such learning needs to arise from a relationship to the culture and its teachers, for it is out of such relationship that we hold knowledge shared with us in a respectful way. We must use careful awareness to support other traditions' teachers and elders so as not to exploit treasures shared with us. At the same time, everyone's nature needs to be lived out for a fulfilling life, and those with a shamanic calling need to share this with others to do their life work.

### **Helping Others Believe in the Spirit Path**

People from all walks of life have non-ordinary experiences, yet without the proper support may feel that this means they are "crazy." Following is an example:

A woman comes to see me telling me please not to think she is crazy, but she sees a jaguar running after her; she feels it chasing her and coming closer. She is terrified, and knows that some practitioners might medicate or hospitalize her. When we work on this, she becomes

the jaguar in a shape-shifting exercise. I have her drop to the floor and begin to move and make sounds like the jaguar. Shape-shifting takes her into an experience, and for a moment she can't quite tell if she is a woman or a cat, moving with incredible grace, energy and power. We talk about where she could use this cat's energy and power, its strength, grace and beauty. Though acting like a jaguar in the city may not be practical, acting like a proud strong beautiful woman may be very practical! She is studying to be a healer, and the jaguar provides the propelling energy she needs. When she started to feel her connection with this energy, and decided to expand her studies to include more shamanic training, she stopped feeling chased by the jaguar. The key to helping her was to believe in her experiences, and strengthen her ability to work with and integrate them.

Shamanic powers have various uses, but I am particularly interested in the myth of the wounded healer. Eliade talks of the role of wounded-ness in becoming a shaman: "Usually sicknesses, dreams and ecstasies in themselves constitute an initiation; that is, they transform the profane, pre-choice individual into a technician of the sacred" (1964: 33).

One of the roles of the "technician of the sacred" is that of being a healer. In some traditions, the word healer suggests the heroic healing of maladies, while in others it suggests bringing increased awareness without emphasizing healing the actual condition. Sometimes the healer does both.

I work with many people who have been diagnosed as bipolar, experiencing both manic high and depressive low states, and going back and forth between the two. Some clients seek help in stopping these swings though they are not currently in either a depressive or manic episode, while others see me during the midst of one.

One man came to me saying he felt energy pouring out of his hands. While he didn't want to take medication, he was concerned because he felt invincible and then did wild physical activities, like jumping from unsafe heights and

getting hurt. As a country person, he had always done things like this, but he had recently begun to cross a line and hurt himself by taking dangerous risks. He said the energy was like the healing power of Jesus, and revealed that he had always wanted to study healing. He decided to do so and gradually integrated his healing abilities into his work, eventually teaching his co-workers as well as the public some of what he had learned. Identifying with this healing nature of Jesus picked up the energy behind the invincible feelings that led to his self-destructive behavior, and the wild physical activity in which he hurt himself transformed into being a teacher of wild ideas. This was much easier on his body, and not only saved him from mainstream condemnation; it made him more of a success with the mainstream. Over the years, he has stayed in touch, and I know he has guided many people through the kinds of states that once plagued him.

Another man's symptoms manifested more publicly as he walked down the middle of the highway, sometimes dressed, sometimes naked. Now he uses his energy from the manic pole of his bipolar states to go deeply into studying spiritual traditions and healing. Both men developed their own healing powers and integrated their abilities in seeing, knowing, and healing into their work lives. Integration meant using the energy of their unusual states to enhance their lives. Originally this energy was creating great difficulty as they were running into lots of external opposition to their altered states, and being pressured to take medication and be hospitalized.

The key in these examples is that people aren't repressing an energy that society labels pathological; rather, they are finding a home for it that also works for them practically, and in the long run is more deeply satisfying than the highs and crashes of their bipolar condition.

Of course, not everyone diagnosed as bipolar becomes a healer. Some don't seem to change much. Others work on themselves and feel more in control of their lives, find their spiritual connection, or discover or reconnect with their artistic natures. Each person's process

directs how these changes evolve as their presenting problem of bipolar disorder changes.

In another example of unusual experiences, a young man and his family came to see me to confront his heroin addiction. He had hit rock bottom: his wife had left him, he had lost a good job and was about to be homeless, and his family was furious with him. As we were slowly moving through the family dialogue, I developed a hunch. He had a look about him that spoke to me not only of drug addiction, but also spiritual power. When I asked about his childhood dream he recounted an amazing dream about traveling to the earth's center and back. He described his early fascinations with otherworldly experiences, and was surprised that I saw something positive in his dreams, since everyone else saw him only as a down-and-out addict. I saw this man for only a few sessions, but following up with him revealed that he went into treatment, got a job, regained contact with his child and eventually reconciled with his wife. He not only stayed clean, but also went further into a sense of reconnecting with himself.

How did he live out these powers? It sounds like suddenly the addiction was not a problem and he simply returned to work and family life. However, there is more to the story. Our work initiated connecting with the inner richness and skill in moving fluidly through altered states that which appeared in his childhood dream. First he and his family had to rethink their image of him: instead of the down-and-out junkie, he began filling the role of the mystic, thus regaining his self-respect. In a family struggling with many problems, he became a role model. When they came to see me later on, his father, the person most against his son's addictions, had begun to explore his own spirituality, thus transforming his relationship with his wife. When the son saw himself not only as a disturber, but also as someone improving himself by living more spiritually, this was the second step in integration and had a ripple effect throughout the family.

His next step would be to live out his incredible innate ability to travel to other

worlds, perhaps by working with his dreams, meditating, or becoming an artist or healer. His family following in his spiritual footsteps fits the definition of shamanism—the shaman journeys and undergoes experiences for the sake of the whole. One of the classic indicators of a traditional shaman is going into altered states for the benefit of the community. Many people I have known who were able to kick severe drug habits became involved in helping and creating support for others to free themselves from addictions.

Substance abuse is often seen as a sickness based on addiction to a specific drug. However, an important question is whether an addiction supports a spiritual side that the person can't support through other means. If so, it may be possible to insist the substance use stop, if it is harmful, and help the client find the support for more powerful, direct, and positive access to the states the addiction supports. It is often the case, as with the heroin addict, that spiritual states seem more powerful and interesting than the addiction. The addict needs help to stop denying the negative effects of the addiction, and at the same time to believe in the deeper spirit fueling it.

One of the skills most necessary to support such states is the “feeling-skill” of being able to elder someone, to embrace all sides of a person, and empathize with the difficult development required of them. An elder steadfastly believes in another's ability to make it through the challenges they face, and helps this person gauge how high to set the bar of their development, so as to be tested but not destroyed. Some chinning bars are so low that pulling oneself up demands nothing, while others are too high even to grasp. The elder helps determine the right balance of rigor and comfort.

The elder also models traveling from ordinary to non-ordinary reality, between altered states and daily living. She doesn't ignore everyday reality, nor is she so swallowed up by it that she doesn't have time to spend in other worlds. We see the elder walking the spirit path during all aspects of life, not just in ritual or ceremony time.

### Two-state Work

One of the most useful skills for working with extreme states is a technique called “two-state work,” taught by Arnold and Amy Mindell, Kate Jobe, Joe Goodbread, and George Mecouch at the Extreme States Seminars.<sup>1</sup> Two-state work refers to being able to go back and forth fluidly between an altered state and ordinary reality, which has a twofold purpose.

First, the client may be stuck in one position, and need help remembering not to marginalize the other state. For instance, a normally very reserved person may get caught up in being wild and sexually revealing in public. They have forgotten their usual nature in order to get to their wilder side, but at another point they also need their reserved self, and may need help negotiating how these two sides will live in one personality. This approach helps people reconnect with other aspects of themselves when they are stuck in one position.

Second, traveling between states restores a position of awareness that includes them both. This perspective, referred to in various traditions as the witness, the metacommunicator, or the “Big You,” includes the whole personality under its umbrella. Fluidity alone could mean just flipping from state to state without much awareness. Awareness is the key to two-state work. In process work with more ordinary states of consciousness, role-playing and other techniques are utilized to resolve conflicts between different parts of ourselves. Because the metaposition is present, the two states know of each other, so the inner conflict is like relationship work. However, in extreme states the parts are often so split off from each other that our purpose isn't so much to negotiate a solution, as to wake up each side to the other's existence. One state has begun to dominate consciousness to the exclusion of the other. With two-state work, we aren't working on the splits between parts of ourselves, but between total states of consciousness. It is also important to note that in any one side of us there are aspects of the other, and part of fluidity results from both sides being included in, and potentially transforming into, each other. Seeing this,

however, requires the metaposition that two-state work helps restore.

Here is a therapeutic example of two-state work. John was in the midst of an incredibly excited, energized state. Unlike his “normal” introverted state that had been largely discarded, he was completely extroverted and living by the rules of this uninhibited state. He had stopped sleeping, was ripping his clothes off in front of friends and generally behaving outrageously. When we worked together, I played a mainstream part of him, speaking about the importance of taking care of everyday business, and watching for his response. I said, “John, wild is great, but you are going to get locked up if you keep ripping your clothes off in public. Can't you let your wild side out in ways that don't get you in such hot water? And how about some sleep, it's been days, and you are about to get kicked out of the house, how about the rent? Pay it!” John answered, “Who cares? Let them lock me up! I am tired of rent and all that stuff. I am free. People love me, and I love everybody!” I replied that I love freedom, but his roommates were about to put him in the psychiatric hospital where he wouldn't be so free. If he couldn't deal with me, this mainstream side, they will give him medications that will force him to.

Our dialogue continued and then he switched, grew more concerned, and said, “You really think they will lock me up? That doesn't sound very free.” He started to come down. I told him that I was going to take the up side he had been standing for, since he now seemed more on the other side. I shouted, “Who cares, I am free right now, that's all that matters! Let them take me away! I will never come down! I want to be high all the time!” John then said, “Hey man, you are going to crash, you fly too high. You are about to run out of gas.”

The sides went back and forth, and through this, rediscovered each other. The everyday side that was so far away came back. The sides finally found a way to maintain maximum freedom by also taking care of some earthly details; they found a temporary unification point.

If John had not been interested in the mainstream side, I might have needed a different approach, maybe joining him in the wild world and doing it even more, saying I was never coming down, to see if he would then speak for his mainstream nature.

John needed to knock out his normally conservative side to let his more social, extroverted nature finally come forward. After a while, however, he also needed his conservative nature again for functioning as he desired in the world.

### **Unfolding**

Many people become stuck in an experience, and don't need two-state work as much as they need help unfolding the altered and extreme state. The problem isn't in remembering another state, but in being able to process the specific nature of the one they are in. There are many ways of unfolding a process. The basic idea is that the altered or extreme state contains a story needing to come forward to some kind of completion involving expression and understanding. For example, in the case of the man with energy in his hands, certain specific aspects of the mythical story behind his identifying with Jesus needed to come out. Jesus could be the mystical power of changing water into wine, and out of this could have come a person who makes magical transformations. There is also the aspect of Jesus who through his suffering awakens compassion in everyone. However, as we unfolded this man's state, he was not only invincible, but also a healer trying to find an outlet for his healing, which came out through his fascination with his hands. So while many stories are associated with Jesus, this man's specific association was with the healing power of Jesus' hands.

Unfolding a state means discovering what other channels of expression, like movement, sound, relationship, vision, and feeling are trying to happen, and supporting their emergence. We require these other channels of expression to complete, fill out and integrate certain parts of our personality. It is like learning to ride a bicycle: I may not only need to watch someone ride, I may also need to feel

what this feels like as someone rides the first time, and then I may need to experience the pedaling and the balance through movement. Learning about new parts of ourselves, as well as learning outer behavior, benefits from a multi-channeled approach. There are even schools now organizing learning stations geared to each different perceptual channel in order to engage the whole being in learning.

Unfolding also means noticing what perceptual channel a person may be stuck in and helping them complete their experience there. Many people, for example, are frozen against their own aggressive movements, and enter altered states when an experience brings them right to the edge of such movement. Helping someone find a way to go into and complete that aggression may enable them to work through something rather than just enter an altered state and stay stuck. It is rather like the difference between the feeling of eating and digestion going well, or shoving in lots of food that just sits there. Once, in a class on altered states, one of my students started feeling strange and curled up in a ball. She wasn't able to come out easily, and I tested different movements with her, helping her curl up more and then supporting her internal state. Finally, I tried giving her some resistance. I pulled lightly on her arms, and a huge wrestling match came out, with all kinds of screams and shouts and laughs. She had a great time, and we discovered that the altered state was simply the beginning of this wrestling match between different parts of herself that were in conflict, particularly a part that wanted to come out and another that said she couldn't come out and how herself to the world. The wrestling allowed for this inner, "in her head" conflict to be worked out at a body level.

### **Sentient Work**

The other techniques I find most useful in helping people with extreme states come from Arnold and Amy Mindell's presentations of sentient work. Sentient work explores the deepest, core, non-dualistic, often pre-verbal feeling states we experience. Arnold Mindell defines sentient work as "...closely linked to

traditional Eastern, African, South American, and Aboriginal attitudes towards awareness. This awareness is interested in oneness, in the subtle experience and interconnectedness of all things, in the similarity between things, and in feeling related to all things” (2000: 38).

One way to help people access the sentient realm is to help them pick up the little flashes, or flirts, of awareness catching their attention. People are encouraged not only to catch these, but to shape-shift into them, that is, to become them! This is a technique right out of shamanism. I remember once skiing with the Mindells while they were developing these methods. Suddenly some unusual animal tracks in the snow caught our attention. Without thinking, they both dropped into the tracks and began moving like that animal, picking up the energy of the flirt. Our skiing was immediately more full of laughter and playfulness.

Another route to the sentient level is verbal. One can repeatedly ask people what is at the essence, or the root, of their experience, what was there before the experience arose. This gradually deepening verbal description will arrive at a space very close to the sentient realm, which can then be expressed through movement, art, and other creative forms. Arnold Mindell has demonstrated these verbal access methods many times in his seminars, and I use them regularly in my practice with people in extreme states. I have also been getting good results with some of my patients in coma, using verbal access to get close to their sentient experiences and watching their feedback.

This method works well with people who are uncomfortable with non-verbal methods of access. For example, I once worked with a man with several serious psychiatric diagnoses, trying many different interventions with the unresponsive state he was in. Then I tried a verbal description. When I said that at the bottom of his state was a mystic meditating, he gave me good feedback by nodding affirmatively. I said I bet that mystic would like his family to join him, rather than trying to pull him out all the time. He smiled, and his family went over to him. He took their hands, and led

them all into a deep quiet state, very unusual for that family. Articulating his sentient experience took me to the door of the state, and he was then able to pull his family in to join him in this world. My words made a bridge for them to walk over into the land of his sentient experience, which then became the whole family’s experience.

In another instance, Fred, who suffered from lack of energy and direction, was working on his feelings towards his angry father. I knew from experience that people tend to repress those parts of themselves that they identify with hurtful aspects of their parents. Fred was stuck partly because his father was so directive and angry and aggressive that Fred didn’t want to be anything like him. I tried to get Fred to pick up some of his anger, but he refused. It was too threatening to be even a little bit like his father. We went down through several layers and still he was against moving or showing any anger at all. Finally we reached a layer he was not against. At the root of his experience was pure energy. Saying, “Yes, pure energy,” I used a verbal access close to the sentient level, and he suddenly began to move his hands, showing something pouring out of his heart. He said he was in favor of pure energy, since it was God-like, not father-like. He suddenly remembered having had all kinds of spiritual experiences. He was able to act more powerfully in his relationships with his wife and family, having found a different reference point for being powerful.

These techniques are the most useful I have found for circumventing the opposition that usually marginalizes unusual states of consciousness. Sentient work addresses processes of marginalization. Our deepest experiences are not easily accessible because we push them aside due to family and cultural pressures. In extreme states, parts are often extremely split off, which is why they cause such problems. For example, people who have been diagnosed as paranoid often have tremendous resistance to picking up their own aggression. You can try repeatedly to get them to and it won’t happen. I have, however, used movement to show

someone a state that I imagine to be under their paranoid state, maybe someone very strong, or very hurt, and then watched for feedback. Going beyond the dualism can be incredibly relieving, and can help someone shift out of the extreme state. I remember an extremely paranoid man who, after lots of work and trying this several times, was able to say he that he did have the feelings I was demonstrating with my aggressive movements. This temporarily relieved him of some of his thinking that people were out to get him.

To work with altered and extreme states, we need to have many different tools in our medicine bags, to discover what works best with each person and each process. Many people are troubled by these states because they are, in part, a reaction to the familial and cultural marginalization of certain experiences.

One of the keys to sentient work is in the realm of creativity. Once people access these core experiences, the next step for personal integration, and a step that is often helpful for the community, is to express them outwardly. Trying to use verbal expression to communicate sentient experience is a bit like trying to display the contents of a river in a bucket. Sentience needs a bigger, more fluid container: poetry, painting, drawing, pottery, dance, song, drama, and other art forms are the best vessels to transmit this energy. Much shamanic teaching is conveyed through story telling or painting, rather than verbal description, for this reason.

One aspect of the theory of sentience is that it may be possible to re-route how certain energies manifest. Energy that manifests as physical symptoms, extreme states, and other painful experiences may be able to be expressed more consciously through an artistic avenue. I have found this especially true with people in the altered states close to death. If they can still draw or somehow create, they may be able to express themselves in satisfying ways that relieve some of the agony of these states. Shamanic cultures have always emphasized art and creativity. Your experiences find a new home as they come through you. You don't just have an

encounter with a spirit animal; you dance it, paint it, and create stories about it. Artistic expression enables the shaman to perform the essential task of bringing sentient energy back to the community. Mystical experiences are not meant just for an individual, but for the whole. For example, out of their own dreams an artist paints incredible images that everyone is dreaming and that the community needs. Maybe this is a spirit coming to help everyone. We also see this in process work. In a seminar working on difficult social issues, like racism for example, it is not unusual that many participants come in and tell the same dream. This dream is part of the solution to difficult problems and states that everyone suffers from.

### **Three-state Work**

I have been developing a method, three-state work, which combines sentient and two-state work. The premise of three-state work is that all states of consciousness are building blocks of awareness and are needed to help make an extreme state more accessible and useful. While two-state work leads to the kind of unification and undivided experience associated with sentient states of awareness, three-state work is a direct route to the sentient level. Two-state work leads to a greater awareness that can reflect on all of our parts as a connected whole. The unifying ground underlying the two states is the sentient level, or the third state: a unity of all parts and states. Because some extreme states are so difficult to integrate, it can be important to go directly to the sentient level, or things may stay stuck at a level of duality. At other times, it is also important to work with each of the two states, which can wake up our awareness through their presence. I was thrilled when I could show and work with two states. Now being able to go directly to sentience adds an option that works well with people who have a strong resistance to either or both states, or to having an awareness of both states.

Two-state work usually moves between ordinary and extreme states of consciousness. For example, in one of the cases cited of a person diagnosed as bipolar, the states that needed to negotiate were a quiet ordinary one and a wild

uncontained one labeled manic. The sentient essence under this polarity was a longing to be wildly extroverted and psychologically naked as well as introverted, quiet, and studious. In three-state work, the therapist would not only represent the state the client isn't momentarily identified with, but also would make some guesses at the sentient state and observe the client's feedback. For example, let's say John is momentarily in his extreme side, saying, "I am going to take all my clothes off and run down the street." I might take the other side and say, "John, you are going to jail if you do that, I don't think you will enjoy jail." Since jail and wildness both come up, I think freedom may be the deep sentient place John is trying to reach through this extreme state, so I use this word. I might start speaking about how wonderful it is to be free and be my whole self, or I might start moving freely and ask him to join me, or start singing like a mad monk. Next I see which of these three positions John is most interested in, and we go from there. If he takes the sentient free place I might say from the mainstream role, "I can handle that, it is good if people feel free." Or I might take the totally wild role saying, "I think you are trying to trick me into giving up letting it all hang out." I would encourage him to observe me in these different roles while he stays in a sentient place. The point is to develop a place of awareness from which John can see the interconnection between all of these states.

### **Soul Retrieval**

Another key aspect to working with shamanic callings is what shamans call soul retrieval. The process work counterpart is called working with marginalized parts of ourselves. Both approaches often focus on childhood and other times of major wounding in life. Sandra Ingerman, author of *Soul Retrieval*, defines soul loss as the effect of trauma, noting that whenever we experience trauma, we react by splitting off a part of our vital essence. Shamanic systems believe that the split-off essence goes into non-ordinary reality where it can be retrieved through the shaman's journey (1991: 11-12). Ingerman also notes

that shamans worldwide have associated illness with this loss of soul and vital energy, and therefore, soul retrieval offers a spiritually based path of healing (1991: 17). While the theories of shamanism's soul retrieval and process work's marginalization of parts correspond, their methods differ. The shaman goes into trance states to retrieve split-off parts and place them back into the client, while the process work therapist and client work together; that is, the client is an active rather than passive partner and may engage in role-playing, expressive and sentient work, and other methods of overcoming the effects of the marginalization.

I like working with mid-life crises because this process is a time when our split-off parts resurface to be integrated. They may present themselves through relationship troubles, health problems, work and career crises, spiritual dilemmas, and addictions. Nature often puts us in crisis when there is no way out without confronting our personal history. Both process work and shamanism discuss the need for us to work through our personal histories; Mindell in *The Shaman's Body*, and Castaneda in many books, particularly in later works such as *The Active Side of Infinity*.

Here is an example. Steve is a powerful logger, and a foreman at work, yet at home he behaves very passively. He and his wife came into therapy because she was bored with him and ready to leave the relationship. He never stood up to her, and refused to make decisions or assert himself in any way. When I asked Steve why he was so passive at home he said his father abused everyone at home, and he was afraid that if he let out his aggression he would be an abuser too. In this case, we needed to do the psychological equivalent of shamanic soul retrieval. In throwing out the abuser, Steve threw out his spunk in relationship. We went back and worked on the original problems with his father by role-playing a childhood scene where his father was yelling at the children. I encouraged Steve to experiment this time with different ways of using his adult power and wisdom to respond. He was finally able to hold his ground in a centered way that was effective,

and that he himself felt good about. Through this exercise, he was able to confront his father in a way that differentiated his identity from his father's. He had retrieved this part of his soul and saved his marriage.

Ingerman might have achieved something similar by lying on the floor next to the client and going on a shamanic journey to find the lost part of his soul. When she found it, she would breathe it into his head and in other ways reconnect this part to him. While the methods are different, the goals and outcome are very similar. Both shamanism and process work support the whole person emerging, remembering marginalized parts, and welcoming them back into a deepening sense of self.

### **Bringing the States Back to Community**

The shaman also goes into other worlds for the sake of the community, bringing back information and energy in accessible forms. She translates her visions into advice and inspiration for the daily life of the people. Here too lies a connection between shamanism and process work: both utilize art to translate and express the deep sentient level of reality, or direct contact with the spiritual realm. Bringing deep experiences into the world doesn't address "curing" a situation or state, but instead considers how individuals can utilize these states for everyone's well being. From this standpoint, getting better means using these states, not just feeling victimized or suffering from them. The shaman lives at the edge, and her goal is not to achieve normalcy, but to find a useful relationship to altered states. In his book *Beyond Fear, a Toltec Guide to Freedom and Joy*, Don Miguel Ruiz speaks eloquently about this evolution in his own process of learning to bring magical information forward to the community.

Out of many altered states comes a message or direction for the world, and effecting social change is another way to bring something back. One historical example of this is seen in the great Native American leaders who went on vision quests and returned with new directions for their communities. One can still buy posters inscribed with Chief Seattle's visions of

living in peace and harmony with nature. The conflicts and difficulties in social issues can seem unsolvable, and thus entire communities can become depressed. However, the shamans show us that there is a wise spirit, a source of guidance, behind the great problems we face.

Several years ago, a Jewish mystic, who was a shaman in his own way, took me to meditate in the archaeological zone behind the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, one of the most holy spots of Judaism. He showed me how to journey there. I was seeking information for my personal life, which came through, but surprisingly I also got tremendous guidance about addressing the issues between the different religions focused in that area. Out of that vision came the inspiration for starting a conflict work project in Israel. Whenever the situation becomes too difficult on the outside, I go back into the power of that vision that guides me forward.

Part of my job as a therapist is to help "shamans" who go into deep experiences find an outlet for integrating their advice to the community. I remember working in a seminar with a woman who had life-threatening symptoms. We went into her sentient experience, and she became a tree. In this space, her symptoms weren't present. Coming back, she had a message for the group about connecting with nature, following yourself and the beauty of nature. One young man I worked with self-mutilated, cutting himself all over his arms. We worked with the altered state of his cutting, and the most amazing thing came out. He went to school in a logging community where the young men talk quite a bit about cutting down the forests. What he wasn't aware of in his cutting himself was his feelings about the forest. His self-mutilation was an attempt to feel what the trees feel. In this was a message for his community, and we worked on how to bring up some of these views at his school, particularly at assemblies on the environment where clear-cutting forests was never discussed. I expected he would be terrified to bring this up, but he was thrilled, and his cutting also stopped. He was carrying a message, and

needed help and encouragement to bring it forward.

Sentient work has brought a surge of creativity into process work. People can travel to the most essential levels of being, and emerge to manifest these experiences not as symptoms or other problems, but as poetry, painting, dance, story-telling, drama, pottery, music, social action projects, and other creative expressions.

The shaman moves freely between self, other and community. Mindell highlights the need for this fluidity between the worlds when he says

Shamans must pay attention to unusual events in themselves, their clients, and the environment. Since a shaman must be able to lead a normal everyday life, she also develops attention to everyday reality, a focus that Don Juan calls the “first attention.” But the shaman must develop the attention for unusual processes—namely, the “second attention,” which perceives the dreaming process. (1993: 236)

As well as bringing creativity and vision, in shamanic cultures there are many ways that the shaman’s experience is for the whole community. For example, everyone may be present for a healing, so everyone experiences healing, not only the patient. The shaman’s visions may concern either the community’s spiritual or practical well-being. Native American shamans had visions of where to find game in hunting, where to make winter camp, and many other practicalities. The shaman may also perform ceremonies for the spirits who bring helpful weather.

A modern shaman of the Huichol Indians of Mexico, Don Miguel Ruiz, says:

Toltec ancestors understood that earth is a living being. Such a worldview is still held by native peoples all over the world. If the ground is parched, they dance to bring rain. They play the drum and sing. They build a fire. The important part of their ritual is that they make their intent to Mother Earth to bring them water and earth responds. They do not consider the relationship of their intent and the earth’s reaction to it to be a mystery. This level of relationship cannot be understood through

the reason alone. The native point of view is that of a shaman. In order to transform, humans will have to adopt the shamanic perspective. (1997: 39)

I try to bring this perspective to my work with people in altered states, noticing whether they are excited about bringing their experiences back for community expression. Often there is an interest in developing healing abilities, or in expressing the experiences through art forms, and using the information and energy gained for social action and world change.

The key for therapists in relating to altered experiences is to know something about them both intellectually and personally. Reading books such as Arnold Mindell’s *The Shaman’s Body*, Mircea Eliade’s *Shamanism*, Michael Harner’s *The Way of the Shaman*, all of Carlos Castaneda’s books, and *Soul Retrieval* by Sandra Ingerman, is a good start. However, intellectual knowledge isn’t enough. Therapists who want to work well with extreme states must open up to and work on their own altered and extreme states. In my experience of supervising therapists, those who have not worked on their own unusual states of consciousness will almost always have a negative effect on the client. They will either go against the client’s unusual states, or will not be able to help the client work with them. Once therapists are comfortable with altered and extreme states in themselves, they can help clients go further. One of the greatest fears clients have is that they will go into these states and not come back, so the therapist who practices moving between these states can congruently give the client a sense of safety in working with them. I often use the analogy of the differences between going into a deep forest alone in the night, and going into a forest with a guide who knows the paths and has lots of experience in the woods. Going into the woods without a guide can be dangerous and is too far into the unknown for comfort and safety. However, with a guide, the experience can be awesome and inspiring.

Process-oriented guides look for the wisdom inherent in the client’s process, and follow this.

Safety comes from having a companion, and from having someone who is there to remind you to believe in yourself and help you follow the steps of your path. Part of this wisdom of the therapist comes from training; part comes from the intensive personal work required. Many therapists I have supervised have remarked on how their clients are always working on what they just worked on in their own personal growth. This is part of the magic of this kind of therapy; on one plane it looks like client and therapist, and from another perspective, it is two people journeying and growing together.

### Conclusion

Process work and shamanism use similar and different methods to take people safely into the land of the unknown, into spaces beyond the known patterns and forms defined by consensus reality. Learning to come and go fluidly through these other worlds is the path of the shaman, who does this work for the whole community. Creativity and social action are among the most relevant ways to bring these experiences back. As therapists, we need to know how to recognize shamanic callings in our clients. By working on unusual states in ourselves, we can congruently communicate the safety and beauty available in experiencing the sentient realm. We can also develop specific skills that help us to facilitate our clients' journeys.

Writing this article has been a healing journey for me personally. Going public with some of these experiences takes me into new terrain. Also, giving attention to these sides of myself gives me time to focus on my dreams. The experiences come back again when they are valued and given more attention. The other night, at the end of a yoga class after a long day of work, the teacher led us through some guided imagery, something about being a grapevine. I felt myself slipping off into dreaming, into the worlds between wakefulness and sleep. Suddenly an exquisite animal was present, looking into my eyes. I recognized this incredible great cat looking at me and was so

drawn to its grace and beauty. Now that I am on vacation, I have time to utilize my process work techniques to help unfold the energy, the movement, the relating of this animal, and to travel into its essence. Maybe it is this energy that is behind my writing this article. Appreciating the unknown, going into it, moving beyond our fears of living and dying, and then bringing the information back to the community—this is what I love about shamanism. Process work is, for me, a modern shamanism. For some of us with a shamanic calling, process work methods are our spirit canoes carrying us down these waters of life force, vision, and vitality, for our loved ones, our communities, and ourselves.

### Note

1. For information about the Extreme States Clinic, contact [kjobe@igc.org](mailto:kjobe@igc.org)

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Shamanism is one of the earliest and farthest-reaching magical and religious traditions, vestiges of which still underlie the major religious faiths of the modern world. The function of the shaman is to show his or her people the unseen powers behind the mere appearances of nature, as experienced through intuition, in trance states or during ecstatic mystical visions. Shamanism: A Concise Introduction traces the development of shamanism in its many fascinating global manifestations. Looking at shamanic practices from Siberia to China and beyond, it provides an accessible guide to one of the world's most ancient, notorious and frequently misrepresented spiritual traditions. Shamanism, religious phenomenon centered on the shaman, a person believed to achieve various powers through trance or ecstatic religious experience. Shamans are typically thought to have the ability to heal the sick, to communicate with the otherworld, and often to escort the souls of the dead to that otherworld. Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! External Websites. Shamanism is the most ancient spiritual and healing practice known to man. In fact, shamanism and shamanic healing date back to over 100,000 years and have been practiced all across the globe well before our current technologies of communication were possible. How is it that the idea of shamanic healing has been so present and prominent throughout our world history? There must be something to it. Shamanism is an ancient collection of traditions based on the act of voluntarily accessing and connecting to non-ordinary states or spirit realms for wisdom and healing. The word "shaman" comes from the Siberian Tungus tribe. And it means "spiritual healer," or "one who sees in the dark." What is a Shaman? Principles, concepts and teachings of Shamanism. Types of Shamanism in the World. It is a circular process in the sense that, once the four steps have been carried out, the process is usually enriched by a new cycle from the previous one. Likewise, the order of these steps is dynamic and variable, so that it is not always necessary to follow the same sequence. The pillars are the ones that follow: Establishing the objective or purpose. Build energy or power. Cleansing or releasing the path.