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SHAMANISTIC JOURNEY IN COMPARISON WITH FOCUSING

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1 My first contact with Shamanism....

left me overwhelmed and confused. I could put only parts of my experience into words. It was an experience which I knew very well from Focusing, but still something was different. This was my fascination: Focusing - the modern description of the changing-process - could be found in the oldest human wisdom, Shamanism.

Is it possible that men of the stone-age, to whom Shamanism traces back, already knew ways to promote the organismic healing process our culture has lost?

Michael Harner introduced me to the Shamanic journey in 1983. Since then I have been engaged in Shamanistic techniques. I tried to discover similarities and differences between the oldest and the newest knowledge about well-being and healing. My own experience was my primary basis. I had been working with Focusing for ten years. My daily work with psychotherapy clients offered further material. Besides that, I conducted some experiments with groups concerning the issue of „Focusing and Shamanism“.

The discovery of the great similarity between Focusing and Shamanism led me to the following question: whether or not the wisdom of early times may be systematized and verified with our modern scientific means. To be able to combine the two systems I must give you a short introduction to Focusing and those aspects of Shamanism which are relevant here. As my comparison is based on experience those who have experience in trance will probably understand better.

2 Focusing....

is the dynamic inner process which takes place when actual change is happening in a person. E.T. Gendlin discovered this holistic bodily felt process and described its steps. Focusing means to follow your mental and physical condition in a special way. You follow the change process systematically until the bodily felt change happens. Focusing needs a special access to your experience in order to induce the bodily felt process. (Wild 1983) This access occurs when you get in contact with a special bodily sensation, which is called the felt sense. The felt sense is not only physical like a muscle-sensation nor only psychical nor only cognitive, but a holistic bodily sensation out of which thoughts, emotions and images unfold. The felt sense is the extensive bodily felt sensation of the whole problem. The felt sense is not just there; it must form itself. This is the most difficult part of all, because it differs from the usual access to a problem. The felt sense forbids penetrating directly into the problem. It must be bodily felt on the level where it is conceptually vague. Only if you stay with this vague, uneasy sensation will Focusing start moving. In understanding the meaning of the felt sense, there is an immediate bodily felt change which is called felt shift. Felt shift is experienced as relaxation, relief, new perspective, direct understanding and is always combined with energy flowing. Such a felt shift is the sign for real change. Often it happens spontaneously when we stay attentive to the felt sense.

Between felt sense and felt shift there are some more Focusing steps which happen in unsystematic ways. (Gendlin 1968, 1978, 1982 1998.1999). This shall be enough about Focusing for the moment.

3 Let us consider Shamanism now.

Shamanism is said to be the oldest human wisdom the alphabets transmitted. This wisdom can only be reached by one's own experience. Shamanistic possibilities must be in human beings, otherwise they would have died in 20,000 years of existence. But they are found all over the world. As with everything else, Shamanism, during the many cultural contacts, had to undergo steady change. As Eliade puts it (1974), „But one cannot repeat it often enough: Nowhere in the world or in history there will be found a phenomenon that is really ‚pure‘ and perfectly ‚original‘

We are interested here in present forms of the phenomenon Shamanism, especially in Shamanism as a technique of ecstasy.

In my following description of the world-view and the healing system of the Shamans (Harner 1982), archaic ideas will be seen with psychological eyes and an attempt will be made to understand them.

The name Shaman derives from the Tungus from Siberia and means Medicine man/woman.

The Shamans are religious and medicine specialists. They are sensitive people. They are those of their tribe who fought the inner battle, who bravely went the spiritual way and through that received healing power. We could say in our language they are authentic people without defense because they overcame fear. The Shamans get their healing permission from their patients, just because they have shown they have the know-how. The Shaman is the mediator between the visible and invisible world. Thus, we come to the fundamentals, the beliefs of Shamanism. For the Shamans there exist two realities:

- 1.) The ordinary reality, this is our real outside world.
- 2). The non-ordinary reality; that means the Shamanistic, inner reality, where you can only enter in trance.

This altered state of consciousness is said to be paranormal in our western world (Scharfetter 1986)

As a matter of fact, it is only paranormal as long as one is alien to this state of consciousness. Psychotic people go astray in this non-ordinary reality; Shamans go there on purpose, and they know how to come back.

They undergo the "controlled foolishness" as Castaneda says (1973).

Authors have often tried to describe the Shamanic states of consciousness (Eliade 1974), but description may not catch the whole phenomenon.

In literature one finds different names (Scharfetter 1986).¹ Trance, possession state, ecstasy, mystical exaltation, inspiration, dissociative state. In traditional psychology these „altered states of consciousness" figure as pathological, with terms such as: hallucination, illusion, depersonalization, derealization. These diagnostic labels appear as totally inadequate, as it is a question of general human experience. This experience may be reached by means of hallucinatory plants, dance, songs, drumming, deprivation of food or sleep, or hyperventilation.

Different investigations led to the conclusion that there exists a general pattern of experience in altered states of consciousness which is independent of culture (Scharfetter). Included here are "oceanic self-demarcation", fearful dissolution of self and new visionary structuring. In the altered state of consciousness, the Shamans often

experience being cut in pieces. This is part of the initiation.

Physically this may happen in connection with an illness; psychically it may be an inner break-down, as a metaphor of our distraction and the splitting up of our identity in the world of our usual existence. A new order of the split parts of our self corresponds with the discovery of our real self. This splitting may also be understood as sorting or unfolding of a undifferentiated chaos into new wholeness and integration. The parallelism to Focusing is obvious: chaos means felt sense, integration is shift.

4 The world-view of Shamanism....

contains three worlds. In the middle world we live with our everyday consciousness. It is the world of men, animals and plants. The upper- and underworld one can only enter in trance, in the Shamanic state of consciousness. The underworld is synonymous with our unconscious, our dream-consciousness (Scharfetter 1986). In the underworld there exists a world of a different order. out of time, space, causality and logical connections. For the Shaman it is the world of death where he may meet, among others, his dead ancestors.

In the upper world, in the sky, the Shaman meets his spiritual teacher, whom he asks for advice. Scharfetter compares the upper world with an "upper consciousness". The upper consciousness may be reached in meditation, but may also spontaneously come into experience, in so far as it extends „over" the mentioned levels of consciousness, as it leads into „overawakeness" and concentration on the other side of "Ego" and "Gestalt" (Scharfetter 1986, page 402).

In these worlds, the Shamans undertake their journeys. Shamanic journey is a metaphor for an altered state of consciousness in which one experiences imagery.

The journeys are symbolic descriptions of the experience of change. The land to be seen is our psyche. To this imaginary journey belong the departure, the crossing of the doorstep, and the passing either through some sort of channel maybe a tunnel, a river-bed, a cave or upwards through a spring. To get to the upper world, they rise, for example, through a tree. Symbols often seen on these journeys are:

a valley as a symbol of separation, the castle deep inside as their core, their holiness.

Houses may represent different aspects of the psyche of the person. The magic flight or ride is often combined with intense emotion and clairvoyance. As a present from these journeys, the Shaman gets the capacity to heal, to see, and to predict the future, besides that, satisfaction, harmony, and a new feeling of life.

To the Shamanistic conception of the world belong also the belief in ghosts /spirits, a spiritual teacher, and power-animals. In addition, it encompasses a deep respect of nature and the cosmos where everything is in relation to everything. Some of these ideas may be strange for us at first. But we can easily translate them into our terms. Jung (1948) understands the "ghosts" as a projection of our collective unconscious. They are experienced as "ego-strange", whereas the "lost souls" are parts of our personal unconscious. If they arise, one feels released. The power animals may be understood as a personification of our own power. By visualisation of the power-animal one can bring back one's own lost power. It may be compared with the „alter-ego"-technique: a "twin-self" or a „double" (Castaneda) appears and helps to find one's own identity.

Let us mention now

5 The Shamanistic healing practices

There are two main forms of healing.

1. The restoration of power. For that the Shaman turns to the Shamanic state of consciousness, looks for the lost soul and brings it back to the body of the ill person. We know those patients who feel empty, powerless, and deficient; they have lost themselves, they are out of spirits.
2. Removal of damaging forces. Again the Shaman goes into a trance. Well protected with his own power animals, he tries to see what sort of ghosts or dead souls possess the ill person. For example a dead soul, not knowing it is dead, still wanders around in the middle world and occupies a vulnerable man. What we understand by symbiosis, the Shamans call possession. We could say: one is possessed by a damaging idea. In this case the Shaman tries an extraction in order to pull out what is damaging.

After this introduction let us try to compare Focusing and Shamanism. Let me be precise: We mean explicitly the "new" Shamanism that Harner studied with the Indians and taught to Western psychologists (Harner 1982).

Whereas the „old" Shaman was alone, the "selected" of his group, new Shamanism should be democratic, appropriate to the modern Western people and should let everyone do Shamanic journeys.

The "new" Shamanism is a technique for individuation and self-healing. The "old" Shamanism had a sociohygienic function, i.e. it had to maintain equilibrium on the earth. It had ethnological importance. The "new" Shamanism aims for individual effect. What are the similarities and the differences between the oldest - let's say old-new healing system,

Shamanism, and the newest healing System, Focusing? (At the end there is a table with this comparison). The aim of both methods is well-being, being open and free of problems. Both work with an altered state of consciousness; with both it may happen that light trance moves to deeper levels of consciousness. This happens more easily with the new Shamanism than with Focusing. The modern Western Shaman just lets things happen. The Focuser observes with awareness.

Surely the old Shamans also observed clearly; otherwise they would not be able to bring back messages from the non-ordinary reality. They intuitively must have had Focusing awareness. The "new" Shamans do not know that automatically.

Both try to promote an individual inner process without offering any content. One may compare Shamanistic rituals with Focusing instructions: both are a sort of framework without any given content.

Both Systems work if one strictly follows the instructions and if no resistance arises.

Actually it is nothing else than the one natural organismic process which happens in people if they allow it. We will talk about the differences of the two later on. In this experiencing process, objectivity and subjectivity mingle as well as the inner and outer world. According to the conception of the world we nowadays use words like „felt sense" whereas the Shamans say „non-ordinary reality". Shaman descends from an archaic, magic conception of the world where there is no separation of inside and outside. That means the seen figures were taken to be concrete instead of symbolic.

Often people today make a Shamanic journey, they often see exactly the same figures, but they do understand them symbolically as parts of our unconscious.

It may happen however that these inner pictures obtain the character of objectivity and the one who experiences that does not find the way back out of the "controlled foolishness"; thus he experiences a psychotic attack. This danger exists, but seldom occurs. This experiencing process is holistic; both body and psyche take part. The bodily awareness got lost in the Western world during the period of rationalism. Thus the whole process got lost. Gendlin overcame this culturally caused separation from the holistic process by discovering the felt sense and by finding a new and secure way to it. On the other hand, the Shamans did not separate from the body. The part taken by the body is obvious when they are dancing. When they make their Shamanic journey, they want to be sure not only to see a film but to experience it; therefore they enter through a narrow tunnel in their imagination. We know from scientific experiments that in the holistic experiencing process both sides of the brain take part. Don (1977) showed that for Focusing. The Shamans knew the special rhythm of the drum that caused the falling into trance. This special rhythm also is effective on both sides of the brain (Harner). Thus, holism is guaranteed.

6 Focusing only happens on a client-centered foundation...

only if the focuser is empathic to his experience. Shamanism also demands respect for the inner pictures without any sort of violence. If one is disrespectful to the images, the ghosts are directed in the wrong way, that means negative power and destructive ideas take over. As a modern Shaman woman put it: „in the state of love one may embrace the sun; without love one will burn out.' The most fundamental differences between both ways are: Focusing is more democratic and needs no means. Focusing is open to everybody, it can be taught and learned. Because of the little steps, the dose of experience may be regulated, it is less dangerous. Being in touch with the felt sense, deeper levels of consciousness are usually not reached; the contact to everyday consciousness is not lost.

The new Shamanism according to Harner also tries to be democratic and let everybody make Shamanic journeys but limits soon become visible. The encoded messages of the Shamanic imagery remain unknown as it often happens in dreams, the key to the enclosed knowledge is missing - the felt sense. Only with Focusing can everyone become his own Shaman. Without Focusing, modern Shamanism lacks the security of clairvoyance. It remains a method of dreaming with all the advantages and disadvantages of dreams. If the new Shamans do not understand a dream, they make another journey to receive a new dream to understand the last one.

Could the two methods complement each other? I think so. First one should learn Focusing to better understand the Shamanic journey imagery.

7 Focusing and Shamanic journeys ...

intend to reach different layers of consciousness. Welwood described four levels of consciousness. He called them „grounds within grounds" (Wild 1983, page 19, Welwood 1977)

1). The situational ground

is the felt sense of the situation, the way in which we have an implicit felt sense of the immediate situations we live in.

2). The personal ground

is our world-view in a background way. How our biography, our behavior, our patterns of personal meaning shape our consciousness.

3). The transpersonal ground

is the way in which the whole organism is attuned to the patterns of the universe and the life process itself.

4). The basic ground

is the pure immediate presence of the world before the individual organism identifies anything.

Focusing starts with the situational ground, with the felt sense, out of which the next ground the personal /biographical ground immediately unfolds. Focusing therefore does problem solving in the first place. The Shamanic journey intends in the first place spiritual experience and therefore enters the transpersonal and the basic ground. The personal grounds may also be attuned. That's why I recommend first the solution of personal problems by means of Focusing. then one should start with Shamanic journeys in order not to abuse transpersonal experience for escaping from personal problems. (By the way, sometimes a transformation of personal problems takes place during a transpersonal experience for example by a death experience.) These four levels of consciousness may be ascribed to the three Shamanic worlds.'

The middle world corresponds to our everyday consciousness, with the situational ground. The underworld corresponds to the personal ground (the archetypical unconscious). The upper world with the „over consciousness" would include the basic and the transpersonal grounds.. These are artificial differentiations; they overlap each other.

Finally I want to pick up the ideas of the beginning. We want to discover the knowledge of early times and use our scientific and humanistic possibilities to understand the ancient wisdom and adapt it to our conditions. How could the new integration be done? Frightened by what the future may bring, some flee back to magic ideas. The new consciousness must not be a falling back to irrationalism, to the old Shamanism. Neither should the old wisdom get lost, nor should our rational thinking be put aside. The new consciousness is the integration of all levels.

Focusing as a holographic process leads to this. The old Shamans just extracted the bad and sick. We nowadays know that nothing can be destroyed, energies only can be moved. For therapy that means to accept, integrate, and transcend the dark side, our shadow instead of doing exorcism and throwing the bad symbolically into the sea. Our therapy must be compatible with our world-view. We can explore the magic-archaic and the mystic-archetypical by means of Shamanism.

Thus we can bring the past into the present. But we dare not stick to it; we must go on. Both ways - Focusing and the new Shamanism- make it possible. The absolutely new problems we are confronted with may be experienced and understood in their cosmic dimension in states of altered consciousness. With Focusing, Shamanic techniques can become more evident. Focusing can make the Shamanic beginner into a master –

(After this theoretical explanation the group experienced a Shamanic journey to the upper world.)

8 TABLE: Focusing – Shamanism

<u>Focusing</u>	<u>Shamanism</u>
develops within the body	bodily experience is reached by access through a "tunnel in the earth or up through a tree"
	<u>altered state of consciousness</u>
awareness of felt sense, minimally altered state of consciousness	maintained by ritual, drum, drum dance (altered state of consciousness necessary, normal consciousness cannot stand energy)
	<u>process maintenance</u>
floating awareness to felt sense and therapist (?)	drum, sessions in group, lying down (except the Shaman)
	<u>levels of consciousness</u>
	situational personal /biographic transpersonal basic
situational and personal/ biographic problem solving in the first place	transpersonal and basic spiritual experience in the first place
	<u>organismic process</u>
different modalities of experience: images, verbal, handling, body, all senses, process may be completed	mainly imagery (encoded and like dreams, I Ching, Tarot, symbols, fascinating but not understood) verbal: singing
	<u>holistic process of both hemispheres</u>
implicit= right brain, intuitive explicit= left brain, thinking combined = shift (EEC-impulse) proved	drum with low frequency affects both hemispheres (Theta /Alpha waves)

Relationshipclient-therapist
client-Shaman

client = is own therapist
 therapist = supervisor of process

spiritual teacher is counsellor for client,
 whom he meets in trance also:
 be your own shaman

commitment

absolutely necessary
 Focusing is or is not
 shift is or is not

necessary for deep process;
 without commitment: sort of in
 a film, imagery as dream
 new Shamanism: discipline not
 clinging to the images

Focusing first

Shamanism afterwards

Healing

self healing

unfolding
 felt sense till energy flows
 (Therapist-pacing)

Shamanic journey~ getting imagery
 (new Shaman alone)

healing by therapist / Shaman

therapist gives instruction
 to get rid of destroying
 inner critic (therapist-leading)

Shaman finds the lost soul,
 brings back power
 Shaman extracts damaging power

client~centered attitude

"cure and care"

Means

no instrument
 means in us - felt sense

rituals, drum, drug, mushrooms
 overloading, deprivation
 hyperventilation

possible without crisis

often crisis at the beginning

Initiation

not necessary, small steps to it

cutting through old patterns

Knowledge~Wisdom

Knowledge of science

wisdom of the cosmos

general

process of understanding learned
by Focusing

afterwards with Shamanism to
other levels of consciousness

individual, group not necessary

mostly in group, energy in equilibrium

results of Focusing, follow-up in
Shamanic journey

Shamanic journey brought to
climax by Focusing

start with the body, problem solving,
understanding is aim
Yang is aim

reference to mother earth
equilibrium of Yin and Yang

mostly sitting head up, I am the leader,
not totally giving in, always
awareness

feeling gravitation of earth, surrender
under magic power, dangerous

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