

A CORE SHAMANIC THEORY OF DREAMS

Michael Harner, Ph.D.

With his core shamanic theory of dreams, Michael Harner introduces an inspired and entirely shamanic understanding of where dreams come from and how to discover their meaning.

—the Editor

This brief article is intended to outline and amplify the ten core principles of “A Core Shamanic Theory of Dreams” presented August 14 and September 25, 2010, in San Francisco at my first two public “Shamanic Dreamwork” workshops for the Foundation for Shamanic Studies.¹ The theory derives from years of fieldwork and cross-cultural study of indigenous shamanism, leading to the discovery of common principles and practices that were also extensively tested through experimentation and practice. In other words, the theory derives from core shamanism.

This article addresses the universal human experience of dreaming and offers to Westerners a radical new view of working with and interpreting dreams. These words are primarily intended for advanced students and practitioners of core shamanism, particularly those who have at least completed the Foundation

for Shamanic Studies’ *Three Year Program in Advanced Initiations in Shamanism*, preceded by the *Two Week Shamanic Healing Intensive*, or its equivalent. It is assumed that through their own personal shamanic experiences they have long since arrived at the conclusion that spirits are real; and that they have also come to understand through such experiences the practical application of that knowledge for successful healing and divination.

The article is not intended to convince others of the reality of spirits or of their characteristics, for practical shamanism is not a matter of argument or belief, but of firsthand knowledge arrived at experientially. Hopefully what is written here also may be seen by some indigenous shamans as an example of a long overdue Western recognition of the validity of what they and their ancestors have known since ancient times.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE: SPIRITS ARE REAL.

This first principle is the basis for all the other nine. It simply notes the reality of spirits, something that serious practitioners of shamanism already know from their direct experiences. This is knowledge fundamental to success in shamanic work.

THE SECOND PRINCIPLE: SPIRITS PRODUCE DREAMS.

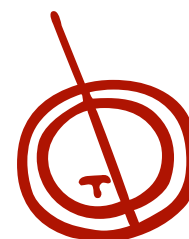
The second principle is one of the most important, for it states that “spirits produce dreams.” These spirits include the individual’s soul and any other spirits that have merged with a person or maintain an attachment to the person. In other words, there are multiple spirits producing dreams, not just a single human soul (or “psyche,” the soul made secular by the modern West).

The concept of a singular soul used

here is that of core shamanism. Although there are individual cultural differences regarding the singularity or multiplicity of souls,² the goal of core shamanism is to ascertain that which has been universal or near-universal worldwide in indigenous shamanic concepts and practices.

Multiple spirits producing dreams not only include the individual’s soul, but also embrace any others that possess (merge with), or maintain a closeness to, that individual. They can have an extended or brief effect on a person’s dream life, depending upon the periods they are present.

The theory does not claim that all dreams are produced by spirits.



THE THIRD PRINCIPLE: THESE SPIRITS HAVE A VARIETY OF CHARACTERISTICS, ALONG WITH DIFFERENT KINDS AND DEGREES OF POWER, AND DIFFERING PREOCCUPATIONS.

For example, dreams produced by the individual’s soul and helping spirits include those related to concerns about the person’s health and well-being. If persons are concerned about their health and well-being, they should not assume that they are alone in their preoccupations, for their concerns are typically also held by any guardian or helping spirits, as well as by their souls. All these spirits may produce dreams that include alerts and advice that may be expressed literally or metaphorically.



Michael Harner. Photo by Linda Sparrow.

The third principle implies that the shamanic practitioner needs to know the variety of spirits that may be involved with dreams and their characteristics. This especially requires substantial knowledge of the various kinds of Middle World spirits, as well as of those in the Upper and Lower Worlds.

THE FOURTH PRINCIPLE: SPIRITS PRODUCING DREAMS CAN BE: PERSONAL SOULS; HELPING SPIRITS, INCLUDING GUARDIAN SPIRITS; OR THEY CAN BE NON-HELPING ONES, SUCH AS SUFFERING BEINGS OR OTHER INTRUSIVE SPIRITS.

The “suffering beings” referred to here are characteristically unhappy souls of deceased humans who died suddenly or traumatically, usually do not know they have died, are commonly confused and unhappy, and wander aimlessly here in the Middle World. From time to time, they may heighten the illusion of still being alive by possessing, attaching onto, or keeping close to, a living person.

Under these circumstances, the dream memories of those deceased beings may become confused with the dreams of a living person, with the result that living persons may assume errone-

ously that they are having their own past life experiences. These dreams, like the lives of the suffering beings, often end suddenly or traumatically. It is important for the shamanic practitioner to be aware of this common confusion and to be able to help clients identify such dreams. To do such work effectively, the practitioner should have a full knowledge of possession illness and be experienced in treating it.

Intrusive spirits, through penetrating specific parts of a victim’s body, tend to result in localized illnesses or pains. The relation of these localized spirit intrusions to victims’ dreams is still under study.

THE FIFTH PRINCIPLE: “BAD” DREAMS OR NIGHTMARES CAN BE BENEFICIAL WARNINGS FROM ONE’S SOUL OR HELPING SPIRITS, OR MAY BE MANIFESTED BY NON-HELPING SPIRITS.

This principle follows upon the previous one and notes that dreams of being harmed or frightened can be of positive help as useful warnings when produced by the person’s soul or helping spirits. While this is true, bad dreams or nightmares may not be useful warnings, but rather produced by non-helping spirits whose own dreams are becoming

mixed up with the dreams and memories of the person. An example is a last memory by a suffering being of having been violently attacked, without any consciousness that the attack ended in death. If the suffering being possesses or lingers with a living person, such a pervasive memory can produce a nightmarish dream that is not a useful warning. It may alert a shamanic practitioner of the need for depossession work.

A nightmarish dream can, of course, also be a consequence of such a simple thing as indigestion or other bodily or mental discomfort. This does not negate the existence of a spiritual component producing the dream. The person’s soul or guardian spirit may be warning the individual that something negative is affecting that person’s health and needs to be given attention.

THE SIXTH PRINCIPLE: PERSONS OF SUBSTANTIAL SPIRITUAL POWER TEND TO BE RESISTANT TO RECEIVING UNSOUGHT DREAMS FROM NON-HELPING SPIRITS.

A spiritually powerful (power-filled) person is protected from spirit intrusions and unsought possessions. Because this power is like a protective force field, attempted intrusions and unsought possessions typically are repelled before they can produce dreams in the individual. As a consequence, the power-filled person is unlikely to receive unwanted dreams from suffering beings. Conversely, the reception of such dreams may indicate that an individual needs to take steps to replenish personal power.

THE SEVENTH PRINCIPLE: MAJOR HELPING SPIRITS CAN MANIFEST AS BIG DREAMS AND CONVEY IMPORTANT SPIRITUAL POWER AND INFORMATION.

A “Big Dream” is typically a manifestation by a guardian spirit or major helping spirit that brings protective spiritual power. It is most commonly of two types: (1) a sleeping dream that repeatedly comes to a person over a long period; or (2) a vision, that is, a single overwhelming waking dream. A vision may include important life-guiding information, or it may be followed, after

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- ◆ FIRST PRINCIPLE: Spirits are real.
- ◆ SECOND PRINCIPLE: Spirits produce dreams.
- ◆ THIRD PRINCIPLE: These spirits have a variety of characteristics, along with different kinds and degrees of power, and differing preoccupations.
- ◆ FOURTH PRINCIPLE: Spirits producing dreams can be: *personal* souls; *helping* spirits, including guardian spirits; or they can be *non-helping* ones, such as suffering beings or other intrusive spirits.
- ◆ FIFTH PRINCIPLE: “Bad” dreams or nightmares can be beneficial warnings from one’s soul or helping spirits, or may be manifested by non-helping spirits.
- ◆ SIXTH PRINCIPLE: Persons of substantial spiritual power tend to be resistant to receiving unsought dreams from non-helping spirits.
- ◆ SEVENTH PRINCIPLE: Major helping spirits can manifest as Big Dreams and convey important spiritual power and information.
- ◆ EIGHTH PRINCIPLE: The above principles apply to all kinds of dreams, including sleeping, waking and day dreams, and visions.
- ◆ NINTH PRINCIPLE: To learn the meaning of their dreams, people can merge with a helping spirit to call back dreams for study, or they can take shamanic journeys to their most important divinatory spirit helpers to obtain information.
- ◆ TENTH PRINCIPLE: These journeys should include the extensive study of metaphors, especially as they pertain to the meaning of spirit communications and thus to the meaning of dreams.

an interlude, by a sleeping dream doing the same. Big Dreams deserve great attention in the one's life and in shamanism.

Unfortunately in the writings of ethnographers, the word, "dream," is often used without careful inquiry of the indigenous peoples about just what they mean by the word in specific contexts. For example, it is commonly not clear whether what is being described is a sleeping dream, a day dream, a shamanic journey, or a vision.

THE EIGHTH PRINCIPLE: THE ABOVE PRINCIPLES APPLY TO ALL KINDS OF DREAMS, INCLUDING SLEEPING, WAKING AND DAY DREAMS, AND VISIONS.

This principle derives from the meaning of "dream" in Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary and common usage. The definition of dream used here is: A succession of images that occurs when one is asleep; or awake; the waking ones can be involuntary or voluntary. If a waking dream is unusually vivid, it can be called a vision. As an example of the application of this definition, shamanic journeys can be seen as disciplined voluntary dreams without ordinary reality guidance, i.e., they are not "guided imagery."

THE NINTH PRINCIPLE: TO LEARN THE MEANING OF THEIR DREAMS, PEOPLE CAN MERGE WITH A HELPING SPIRIT TO CALL BACK DREAMS FOR STUDY, OR THEY CAN TAKE SHAMANIC JOURNEYS TO THEIR MOST IMPORTANT DIVINATORY SPIRIT HELPERS TO OBTAIN INFORMATION.

AND THE TENTH PRINCIPLE: THESE JOURNEYS SHOULD INCLUDE THE EXTENSIVE STUDY OF METAPHORS, ESPECIALLY AS THEY PERTAIN TO THE MEANING OF SPIRIT COMMUNICATIONS AND THUS TO THE MEANING OF DREAMS.

The ninth and tenth principles are linked together here: In shamanism, one can use voluntary dreams to discover the meaning of involuntary dreams. Two commonly used are the call-back of a

dream and the shamanic journey, both employed by the original dreamer since usually no one is better qualified to discover the meaning of dreams than the dreamer.

Both can result in literal or metaphorical communications. Except in shamanic initiations and training, the identities and meanings of metaphors are not normally shared with others, for they are communications from the spirits that not only go far beyond any words, but also are sacred and personal.

Metaphors encountered in a shamanic journey, for example, are perfectly tailored for the specific journeyer to interpret. They should not be assumed to be relevant to other persons, including clients, for they are multilayered and emotional communications based on the spirits' intimate knowledge of the journeyer and would not have exactly the same meaning to others.

It is the responsibility of the journeyer to decipher the meanings of metaphors without outside assistance from others, for none is as qualified as the journeyer to know the real meanings of an encountered metaphor.

If, however, persons are not able to undertake shamanic journeys or dream call-backs successfully for themselves, they may find it useful to seek qualified shamanic practitioners and request their assistance. In keeping with the ethics of core shamanic work, such divinatory practices should be carried out by practitioners only if requested. Otherwise, shamanic practitioners could risk taking away from others their spiritual freedom.

The interpretation of dreams has been an enduring human interest. In thousands of cultures on all inhabited continents, shamans developed time-tested knowledge for understanding dreams, knowledge made possible by their spiritual tools and work with spirits. In the West, both the shaman's tools and "intercourse with spirits" became forbidden by the Church and subsequently dismissed as fantasy in the Age of Enlightenment.

The last century or so has seen multiple efforts to devise theories of dreams, but there remains the Enlightenment's

legacy of a strong aversion to taking seriously the shamans' claims of the reality of spirits and of how to work with them. The recent revival of shamanism in the West suggests that such an ethnocentric paradigm may not be the wave of the future.

Hopefully this brief article may encourage more research on the wealth of indigenous knowledge, published and unpublished, that is awaiting respectful study. One challenge is that the relevant shamanic information that survives is scattered among hundreds of cultures and therefore not easily amenable to generalization.³ Perhaps an even greater challenge for Westerners is for them to pass through the shaman's doorway and to test for themselves the reality of spirits and their relationship to dreams. ☸

Michael Harner, Ph.D., is an anthropologist who pioneered the return of shamanism and the shamanic drum journey to the West. He is the President and Founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. His books include The Way of the Shaman.

NOTES

1. The ten principles outlined here have been slightly revised since their original presentations in August and September 2010.

2. For example, see my 1962 article, "Jívaro Souls," *American Anthropologist* 64:258-72.

3. The unparalleled archives of the Shamanic Knowledge Conservatory of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies exist to bring together such information, but unfortunately the Foundation does not yet have the facilities to provide access to them.

4. I wish to thank Sandra Harner for her valuable support and editorial advice.



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