

**THE
SHAMANIC
INITIATION**

By Hank Wesselman PhD.

I AM ABOUT TO TELL YOU A MOST UNUSUAL STORY...something that happened to me while I was living on the flank of an active volcano on the island of Hawai'i. I now believe that where I was residing had something to do with what happened, although during most of my life, I would have scoffed at the very idea. But first let me introduce myself briefly and then let us talk more about shamanic initiation...

My early academic training was in ecology and evolutionary biology. Scientists tend to focus on their goals within an exclusively scientific, intellectual view of the world. I am no exception. I mention this to show that I was in no way preprogrammed for what was to occur. In fact, my scientific training and prejudices would seem to have preprogrammed me against having such an experience.

The Invitation

As an anthropologist who has worked and lived for much of my life with many traditional cultures in tribal Africa, and as a shamanic practitioner and teacher who is now entering the 28th year of my apprenticeship, I have both witnessed shamanic initiation among the indigenous peoples and I have experienced it myself. When I talk about shamanism at conferences and workshops, I am often asked what it means to be an authentically-initiated shamanic teacher, so allow me to offer some informal thoughts on what shamanic initiation usually entails.

Authentic shamanic initiation is not about having mastered a body of knowledge, nor is it about having 'spent time' immersed in this or that indigenous tradition. Authentic shamanic initiation is not achieved by having completed some long-term training program with a school or foundation, nor is it conveyed by having participated in many levels of ritual or ceremony.

These experiences may have their place in our personal spiritual unfoldment, yet authentic shamanic initiation is something quite separate from all of the above.

Let me also say that I fully agree with others (often indigenous people) who proclaim (often with fervor) that shamans are not produced by reading books, nor are they created in workshops, yet books and workshops do have their place in that they may bring the initiate into connection with an accomplished shamanic teacher who may recognize them for who they are and what they are becoming.

Connection with a teacher under such circumstances can be life changing, even life saving, yet it must also be said that the mantle of initiation is not conveyed to the initiate by the teacher as is common in other traditions.

Shamanic initiation is probably the least well understood of all the many forms of spiritual awakening... and it may also be by far and away the most powerful. The initiatory processes in Wicca, Meditation, Yoga, Kabala, Buddhism, Zen, Vipassana, Tai Chi, Qiqong, and even Kundalini or Kriya Yoga are like a stroll on the beach compared to shamanic initiation.

The Shamanic Experience

This is because the 'shamanic experience' almost always begins with some sort of personal crisis, often of epic proportions – an earth trembling, soul shaking, life altering spiritual emergence (or emergency) that can be utterly shattering – one that often looks a lot like mental illness to the Western medical world. The details may vary somewhat, but inevitably the inception of shamanic initiation brings the experiencer into a direct, transformative relationship with Death.

At the onset, Death almost always approaches the initiate in the form of a spiritual being. I'm talking here about The Angel of Death – an awesome spirit of immense power who may draw near to us in some culturally determined form in which it invariably functions as both a teacher and as a threshold guardian. As such, this great transpersonal being extends an invitation to directly experience the extraordinary Power of the Universe. This usually includes entrance into the mythic 'Other World.'

And if this were not enough, these initial revelations and the crossing of the threshold invariably come through the experience of death itself.

The Threshold Guardian

Years ago Jill and I attended a lecture by the esteemed mythologist Joseph Campbell in San Francisco in which he touched on this. On that day, he talked about 'the power that watches at the threshold to the unknown' as 'the force of transformation which can enhance growth or inflict disaster' – a good description of the shamanic initiatory experience. "As a teacher and protector," he said, "this force may bestow power and knowledge upon the aspirant, but as a threshold guardian, part of its job is to turn back spiritual questers who are not yet ready to encounter that which lies beyond the doorway into the other worlds."

Campbell also said this: "Anyone incapable of understanding spirits as 'gods' tends to perceive them as 'devils.' And for those individuals who are unready or unable to traverse the zone of magnified power and enter into the spiritual realms, the doorway remains closed."

Now it goes without saying that not all who encounter the Angel of Death survive the experience. But for those of us who do, this formidable being then becomes an omnipresent companion, the One who is always with us... the One who serves us as our 'Watcher.' This is not about Brad Pitt chatting up Anthony Hopkins in the seminal film *Meet Joe Black*... or is it?

The direct encounter with the Angel of Death is not for the merely curious, the spiritual dabbler, the dilettante, or the well-intentioned amateur in search of the exotic. It is also highly unlikely that you will meet this great being at a New Ager angel workshop in some hotel ballroom.

Allow me to provide you, the reader, with a dramatic example of this encounter from my own initiation adapted from my first book *Spiritwalker*.

The First Encounter

In August 1983, my wife Jill Kuykendall and I were living in Berkeley, California, where I had completed my doctorate in Anthropology the year before at the local branch of the University of California. Jill was nearing the end of her first pregnancy and her ligaments were loosening up in preparation for birthing.

One morning just before the dawn, I emerged from my dreams to find her awake, unable to sleep because of her discomfort. I sat up sleepily and began to massage her, trying to help her relax. The magic that touch creates progressed slowly into a joyous marital encounter, yet despite all efforts, Jill remained uncomfortable and wakeful, and she turned on a light and opened a book to read.

I was in a state of bliss from all we had just experienced together and was just dropping back down into sleep when something triggered some inner alarm. In response, my mind abruptly resurfaced. I felt a peculiar tension in my body, and as my attention turned toward it, the feeling intensified dramatically, sweeping into me with a rush of sensation, much like a wave engulfing a beach.

With a jolt, my physical body became completely paralyzed in an instant. I was unable to move a muscle or even close my hands. I managed to open my eyes with a gasping intake of breath and saw momentary spots of light interspersed with strange geometric designs and zigzags against the darkened ceiling of our bedroom. A transparent arc seemed to coalesce out of the lights, and then the bedroom disappeared as though I had momentarily blacked out.

When my vision came up a heartbeat later, I found myself in a forest in almost total darkness. Around me in all directions, I saw tall, black tree trunks and branches. The overarching trees were huge, and the night was total and very still. The illusion was dream-like, yet vividly real. Paradoxically, I could still feel myself lying in bed and I could hear Jill turning the pages of her book.

(Note: Although I didn't know it then, this is much in alignment with the fact that shamans are known to be able to operate on more than one level of consciousness at the same time... and usually several.)

The fact that I was paralyzed could have been very disturbing were it not for the fact that my body was absolutely soaring with the most marvelous physical sensations that seemed to both surround and infuse me. They were exquisite, and quite suddenly the word ecstasy took on a whole new level of meaning.

As my gaze swept across the dark forest, I discovered that if I wanted to look at something, I drifted in that direction. My thoughts seemed to create action, and experimentally, I moved this way and that while I studied this incredible phenomenon with growing amazement. Simultaneously, I could feel the sensations intensifying. It was as though I was gripped in an invisible fist that was slowly squeezing the breath out of me. I could hear my heart thundering as its rate increased dramatically.

As my breathing became increasingly labored, I again heard Jill turn the page of her book, and I could just feel the edge of alarm around the borders of my being. Yet each increase in the sensations/pressure was accompanied by a euphoric surge of pleasure mixed with an indescribable joy, and my fear departed. As I continued to look around, perplexed, I sensed the presence of something else... and with this awareness, the 'something' cut through my absorption with this overwhelming rapture, drawing me toward the trees to my right.

There, among the shadowy trunks I saw a huge dark form. It was vaguely man-like, and I could make out what I thought was a head and body, but the body lacked arms or legs and was curiously elongated, flat and door-like all the way down to the 'ground.' The head was rounded and small. The entirety of the figure was completely black and featureless, towering over me like a silhouette or shadow standing upright. My mind struggled, trying to classify what I was seeing. The dark form was considerably taller than myself and looked somewhat like an old-fashioned, black keyhole standing upright among the dark trees.

The sensations continued to flow around and through me, exerting pressure both from within and without. I tried to move but I couldn't even twitch. I heard Jill turn the page of her book and thought to myself 'I've got to try and tell her what is happening.' But my jaw was locked and my entire body was as rigid as a stick

of wood. My heart rate continued to increase as my physical body shook with the force infusing me.

Determination formed within me then and with immense effort I finally managed to slur out two words “The trees...” and finally with even greater effort “The shadow... the shadow...” I stared at the dark form and wondered if I was dreaming. Then Jill turned another page and I thought not. This was vividly, intensely real.

Was this dark figure the source of the sensations, I wondered? And with that thought, the feelings of pressure, of force, suddenly increased to an intensity that was almost beyond endurance. They were terrifying and superb at the same time. I was fully conscious, fully awake, and had never in my life felt what I was experiencing in those moments – a full-blown ecstasy. The feelings of power continued to increase, almost as though someone was turning up a rheostat... and then suddenly I could no longer hear my heart. As I wondered if it had stopped, I felt myself ‘lift off.’

‘I’ (whatever ‘I’ was in those moments) drifted slowly upward through the trees until I was suspended in mid air high above the ground, turning slowly in space among the leaves and branches. I could still feel my physical muscles shaking with the force flowing through my body. To fight against the enormous strength that enfolded me seemed absurd. The huge dark form before me was obviously immensely strong, and yet it hadn’t harmed me.

It was then that I understood with great clarity that I was dying... that my heart had stopped and I was already dead, and with this realization, I felt an overwhelming sense of acceptance that whatever happened next would be right in the eyes of the Universe. With these thoughts, my sight began to brighten and

a roaring sound appeared, like static or 'white noise' or hissing water or the rushing wind perhaps. Yet the trees and branches around me were inexplicably still. And I, suspended in mid air with shards of sheet lightning flashing around me like phantoms, simply faced the Dark Being and waited to see what would happen next. My acceptance was total and my curiosity was now fully aroused.

And then... as abruptly as the experience had begun, it stopped.

At this moment, I heard my heart begin to beat again, and I was placed back on the ground (gently). As I watched, entranced, the Dark Shadow Being changed, shifting shape somehow or altering its integrity to become an ordinary shadow blended with the trees. Simultaneously, the sensations that had held me rigid began to flow out of me in slow surges, each one less powerful than the last. Progressively, the trees and the Dark Being dissolved and our bedroom reappeared before my astonished eyes. The paralysis ceased abruptly, and I sat bolt upright in bed, my heart pounding and my muscles shuddering in shock. Tears were streaming down my face as I turned to Jill, but she was now asleep.

The residues of sensation faded until they were gone, and the world was ordinary once again. The first light of dawn was illuminating the eastern sky. My mind was reeling. For a long time I sat lost in thought, wondering what I had just been through. The whole experience was much too real to have been a dream. As my mind raced through the experience again and again, it returned repeatedly to dwell on the identity of that mysterious dark form.

In the days that followed, I felt completely different. I also thought it odd that I had categorized the dark form as 'the shadow.' I was aware that Jung had conceived of the 'shadow' as a mental construct or projection of the repressed side of the self. I considered this idea at some length. Could the dark shape have

been a creation of my own mind? It had seemed quite separate from myself, but if it wasn't a mental projection, what was it? It had felt neither hostile nor benevolent, but as I was held in its vise-like grip, I had become aware that it expressed feelings, and one in particular. As I was spun slowly in mid-air among the tangled branches in the shimmering darkness, the formidable being had seemed curious about me.

The entire event had had the quality of a challenge, as if something or someone were saying to me "Here, let me show you something – now what are you going to do about it?" But who or what had issued the challenge, I wondered.

Although I didn't know it then, my initiation into the shaman's world had begun. Let me also add that many years would pass before I fully understood who and what the dark guardian actually is. I discussed the encounter at length with several indigenous shamans who crossed my path, and their response was unanimous. They all smiled knowingly and said (in so many words): "Ahhh... so you have met the Dark One and experienced 'the Press.' Welcome to the club."

So these (for me) are the givens. The 'invitation' to walk the shaman's path begins with a direct encounter with the Angel of Death. This seminal event may be so intense and so ego shattering that the boundary between spiritual emergence and spiritual emergency may become elusive. For the psychologically unprepared, this experience may temporarily unhinge the initiate's grip on reality, for we understand with absolute certainty in those moments that the Angel of Death sees straight through our house of cards, for nothing can be hidden from this formidable being. This encounter is the 'death and resurrection experience' well-documented in the ethnographic literature – the dismemberment of the shaman's old personality and its reformation into an entirely new form.

The Death Vibration

Another important point needs voice here. Those who have read my *Spiritwalker* trilogy will recall that the Angel of Death reappeared at various opportune moments until it became increasingly integrated into my 'soul complex.' In response, I have come to understand something else with certainty.

This integration with the Spirit of Death endows the shaman with a peculiar 'vibration' that can be felt by other shamans as well as by some sensitives and psychics. This 'death vibration' can be downright scary to some people and especially those who are still dependent on religious dogma or who are fearful by nature. I occasionally cross trails with startled folks at conferences and workshops who are able to pick up on this vibrational fingerprint in my field.

The presence of this death vibration may explain why the Christian priesthoods during the Middle Ages reacted so strongly to the witches and their men of knowledge and power. They most likely possessed this vibration as they were the holders of an ancient body of wisdom and technique that had been passed down to them from the pre-Christian tribal shamans of Europe and Britain. If the priests were able to sense this vibration within them, intimately connected as they were with both Death and Nature, it may explain why the church tortured and killed hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of shamans in response.

Shamanic Illness

Once the initiate has survived the encounter with the Dark Guardian, the next stage in their initiation then begins – a time of tests, trials, and tribulations, often called ‘shamanic illness’ – a time in which the initiate is brought face to face with their fears and the flaws in their own character. In response, one’s life and one’s health can unravel in truly spectacular ways, often in a very short period of time. Yet anthropological ethnography confirms that this is also part of the authentic shamanic initiatory experience.

There is light within each of us, and there is also darkness. We’re not talking here about Judeo-Christian concepts of guilt and sin. We’re talking about the more evolved and the less evolved aspects of our selves, and especially those parts of our personality that may be drawn to the negative polarity.

Stop for a moment and consider your own dark secrets. There is no denying their existence. They are there within us all to varying degrees and try as we may to stash them away where no one will see them, these less than savory aspects of ourselves are the ground where we are brought face to face with our lessons – the ones that we chose to resolve when we came into this life. The goal for each of us is to acknowledge them – to accept their reality and their power, and then to say to ourselves “ah – so this is what I came to work on.”

It is then, precisely then, that the whole life game changes. As we begin to examine the flaws in our character, we are brought into deeper understanding of our own self-nature... and this is the path on which we are led inexorably toward self-realization and authentic initiation.

To deny our shadow aspects is always an option of course for the law of free will is always honored by the unseen forces that monitor our lives. But this is a poor

choice in the end because the further we progress along the path of power and knowledge, the more vulnerable we become to those flaws in our own character.

Interestingly, we 'inherit' many of our character flaws directly from our mothers or fathers lineages. These are distortions or damaged soul aspects that are often transmitted from generation to generation within families across time. We acquire these ancestral imprints the moment we are born because they came with the physical body that we currently inhabit. They are recorded in the energetic matrix of our Body Soul, and they represent some of our life lessons. As such, they too serve us as aspects of our initiatory experience.

Conversely, we may also bring these negative self-aspects into this world with us as distortions from our own ancestral Oversoul Field – perhaps as soul wounds that were still unresolved when we made transition from previous lives.

As we pass through life, we become aware of these distortions within ourselves through our experiencing of them. In response, we may be amused or shocked, thrilled or appalled at something we have said or done or thought. But each time we are brought face to face with these unsavory twists in our own character, we are given the opportunity to choose. And that is what the whole game is all about.

The foreword in my second book *Medicinemaker* bears these thoughts from a Japanese sage named Moshi:

*When heaven is about to confer a great office upon a person,
It first exercises their mind with suffering,
And their sinews and bones with toil;
It exposes them to poverty and confounds all their undertakings.
Then it is seen if they are ready.*

These words accurately describe what took place during my own experience of shamanic illness, a period during which I lost just about everything except my wife and children... and that was touch and go for awhile. And what sort of shamanic illness did I endure? It took the form of an ongoing continuum of vivid dreams and visionary encounters, spontaneous paranormal experiences that involved a series of connections with one of my descendants.

These 'dreams of the future' further shattered my conceptions of what is real and more than once brought me to the edge of madness. In response, my carefully constructed scientific paradigm of reality began to disintegrate... and in those early days, I had nothing with which to replace it.

Yet I was also to discover, as all shamanic initiates do, that as we progress through this stage – the school of hard knocks – we are brought into relationship with the spirits who continue our training. For the shaman, the real teachers are the spirits themselves, and as initiates, we may 'surrender' to whatever these transpersonal forces may decide to constellate within and through us... or not. The choice is ours, but in the process, we may be introduced to many levels of reality, awareness and experience until eventually these wise beings become our spirit allies who may on occasion serve as advisers.

For those interested, these experiences and more are recorded in the three volumes that make up my Spiritwalker Trilogy (*Spiritwalker*, *Medicinemaker* and *Visionseeker*). For those interested in a home study course please check out our 6-CD collection, *The Spiritwalker Teachings: Journeys for the Modern Mystic*.

Mahalo...Hank