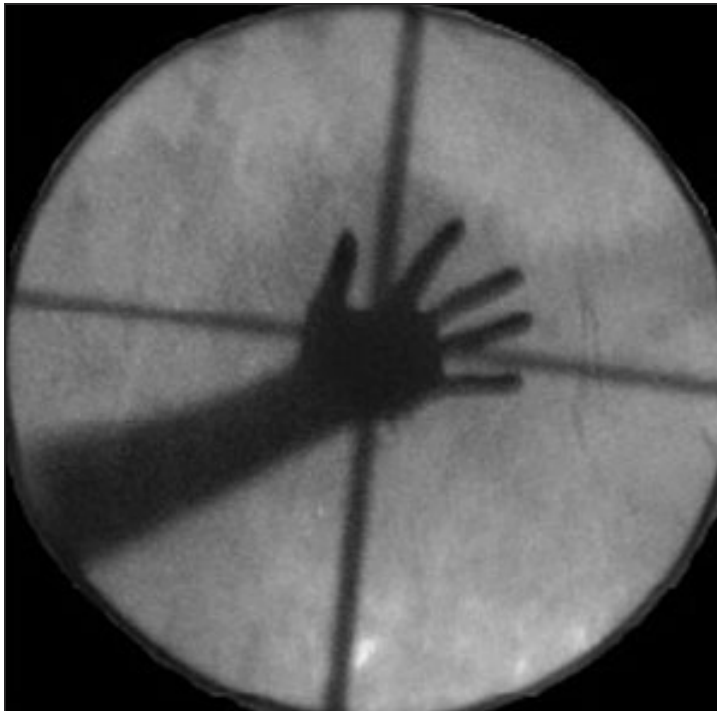


ESSAY

# Building A Shamanic Community

(While Having Wahoo, Laughing, Yippee-Skippy Fun)



*Jaime Meyer*

If you're like me you've spent a lot of time drumming in the basement. The first several shamanic groups I was involved with met at someone's house and inevitably the basement became the sacred space for the six or eight of us to conduct our otherworldly journeys. It was beautiful and powerful work.

But I felt a need to move out of the basement. Maybe it's because, in addition to my 25 years of shamanic studies grounded in the "Harner method," I'm equally influenced by my history as a playwright and street-theatre performer and by my academic education in the seminary. I have this penchant for working in larger groups and for building a community.

In the 1990's I felt confined by the structure and expectations in the mainstream theatre world. I laid aside dreams of "someday-I'll-be-famous-on-Broadway" and instead cofounded in St. Paul-Minneapolis the first theater company in the world for the Hmong community – an ethnic group from Southeast Asia, refugees from the Vietnam war era. It was professional suicide to do theater work in a community without money, a community that didn't speak much English and one that urban, hip white people (otherwise known as "the theater audience") were mostly afraid of. There was no theater tradition in Hmong culture, and the dozens of young writers and artists and the hundreds of actors I mentored over ten years built a kind of community that had never existed in Hmong culture before. It was difficult, slow, frustrating, glorious work. But every one of the ten plays we created and produced was, in effect, a healing ceremony for the Hmong people. That arts company still exists today, run by the next generation of Hmong artists, most of whom don't know I exist (which is exactly how it should be).

Around 2000, I began to feel confined by the shaman basement and by the monotonous WHOMP WHOMP WHOMP WHOMP of the "shaman's beat" in journeying groups. The genius of the Harner method is its ease for westerners who are spiritually constipated in so many ways, not out of our own choosing, but out of the shrinking curse laid upon us by the sensually-repressed, post-pilgrim, angry-male-god, money-is-everything culture into which we hap-

pen to be born. As powerful and useful as the shamanic journey is, the WHOMP-WHOMP and lying still creates for me a kind of bodiless experience. As I see it, the West's main theological problem is that we are disembodied. The West views the body—and the world—as a prison wherein the pure soul has fallen and is trapped until death. I can draw a straight line between that theological distaste for the body, the subjugation of women, gays, lesbians, pagans, artists, and anyone who is seen as dangerously embodied, and the destruction of the ecosystem viewed primarily as only "matter" to be used as we see fit, not pure soul. For me, to a large degree, the shamanic movement is about lifting this curse.

I wanted to practice shamanism, but I also wanted to bring my body more fully into this world. Learning to summon, fully enter into, and release erotic energy as an offering is every bit as important as learning how to journey to the spirit world. (Erotic in the classic Greek sense of *eros* as pulsing life force.)

So, I started offering Friday evening gatherings twice a month that melded the elements of a wahoo-infused pagan drum circle, deep contemplation of shamanic journeying, and ceremonies emerging from the wheel of the year, all with the socializing and a little sermonizing of a Sunday church service. I called it "Drumming the Soul Awake" and that name stuck.

We drum for about 90 minutes. All kinds of drums are welcome. No skill is needed, and no drum is needed—I have dozens for people to borrow. Dancing and ecstasy are welcomed but not required. It's not a wide open drum "jam." I lightly facilitate, which is a way of creating a basic structure that offers a sense of safety for newer drummers. My energy acts as a guide to create a sense of trust and openness, and also as a permission-grantor for wildness and unpredictability. My job is to make a path for Spirit to enter the room and play whatever song it wants to compose through us at the moment. No matter what the rhythm sounds like—feral pounding or tame groovin'—this first half of the evening has a cleansing, stress-reducing, re-balancing effect. We often end the 90 minutes panting, red-faced and ebullient, with a great shout of "Wahoo!" or a

satisfied sigh that is as post, post-orgasmic as it could be.

I often bring in a poem to drive the mood, or to act as a closing idea, like this one by Lalla, a 14th-century, Kashmir poet, translated here by Coleman Barks.

*The soul, like the moon,  
is new, and always new again.*

*And I have seen the ocean  
continuously creating.*

*Since I scoured my mind  
and my body, I too,  
am new, each moment new.*

*My teacher told me one thing,  
live in the soul.*

*When that was so,  
I began to go naked,  
and dance.*



After the first 90 minutes of what I like to call groovelicious rhythmocity, we take a break for snacks and conversation. This intermission is truly where community is built as people, now opened and cleansed by the spirit of the

drum, engage with another from a relaxed, centered place. It's beautiful to behold. Those who wish can then return for the second half of the evening: more directly shamanic, prayerful and ceremonial. This takes many forms, including doing a shamanic journey, a healing ceremony, or some other direct contact with the spirits of nature or the otherworld.

I started Drumming the Soul Awake because I wanted to offer an accessible, drop-in environment like a church but would also serve as a deep, healing or prayerful experience like a basement journey group. I also wanted it to be a teaching environment like a weekend workshop, as well as an opportunity for people to commune with their tribe. If you are sitting in a room with other people holding any kind of "spiritual" drum, you have likely walked a long, winding, confusing, often painful and lonely path to get there. You've probably had to shed some toxic mythology, you've wrestled with meaninglessness and the guilt of living in the destructiveness of modern culture, and you've probably had some bad things happen to you that you are trying to heal. The shamanic path as it is walked in the urban West is, in so many ways, an isolated and solo path, especially in the beginning. I wanted to let people understand that they are not alone, that there is a tribe, and I wanted to offer a way for them to find it.

The groups have been going strong for eleven years. On average about 40 people come each session. Some of them have come religiously (pun intended, I suppose) for all these years. Some drop in and out. Some come back after years away. I send an email a few days before the upcoming drumming session as a reminder, and I've found that the meditations I write in the email have become as important to many of the people as coming to the drums. Even the email is a community-building act.

Seven years ago the playwright part of me wondered if it was possible to use the basic structure of the Friday drums but expand it to a larger scale without losing the depth, intimacy, or the sense of the sacred in the room. So I began doing Winter Solstice Blessing. Everyone in the audience drums. A chorus of 20 women chant at various times to support the ceremonial ambiance. In act one, each audience member can have

spiritual toxins ceremonially taken from them by the Old Bone Mother, the dark Goddess of death and rebirth emerging from my own European shamanic tradition. After setting up a clear intention and safety for everyone, I embody her, and, dressed in black, I move slowly through the audience, bones hanging from two sticks like otherworldly wind chimes as the women singers create a slowly shifting, often dissonant, sonic undercurrent. The Old Bone Mother allows each person to give up to her whatever toxins they (or she) want taken from them. She agrees to carry these spiritual blockages to the other world, where they become food. This ceremony takes a long time by normal theater standards, but the energy in the room is magnetic. There is a curious and wondrous tension around a human male embodying this female presence, and I think that is part of the ceremony's power.

In act two, each audience member can receive a blessing from the Great Reindeer Goddess. She is embodied by nine of the women singers who move out into the audience singing and rattling the blessings over each person, while I vanish into a reindeer hide and dance with two enormous antlers to accompany them.

Like so much of my work in these years of leading experiences, I have my non-public personal reasons for doing the work. I do the solstice event because Reindeer asked me years ago to dance it once a year, and help it transform the culture's story of the Red-nosed, cartoon Rudolf who works for a toy factory CEO named Santa. The winter solstice event has grown over the years. Last December we did a three-night stand with audiences of about 140 people per night. Two years ago I started doing a summer solstice event structured similarly, in which the Marigold spirit comes to offer the audience mem-

bers an opportunity to change a story in them that needs to change.

Everything about my drumming groups has been an incredible blessing to me, and I freely admit I do these groups because they serve many of my needs—to deepen my relationship with



the spirits, to become a better ceremonialist, to dive into my immense fears of doing shamanic work, and, of course, to nourish my mammoth, gluttonous performer's ego. But of all the blessings that have come from these groups, I think the finest has been the building of a shamanic community.

That's not a term I came up with. It was suggested to me in an email from

Tom Cowan about three years ago. When I read and heard this phrase, it changed the way I saw the work and myself in relation to it. Maybe it's not just my pathetic attempt to sell myself as a magic-person, as I have so often feared. Maybe it's not just my bi-monthly ego-fest. Maybe it was the Marigold spirit, working through Tom's almost offhanded remark, who helped me change the story of what I was doing.

My drumming and ceremonial work doesn't belong to me or my fears or desires. These Fridays belong to the spirits, and each of us who show up are just doing the job articulated by Teilhard de Chardin, the early 20th century Jesuit priest: to build a new earth, to build a communion with the earth and a communion with Spirit through the earth. Building a shamanic community involves fun, companionship, and shamanic work. Hardly any of the participants are there because they want to become shamans, lead workshops, or see clients. It's not "training" (even though I do teach skills). They arrive mostly because they are seeking a way to live in this horrible, awesome, grieving, beautiful world — a way that makes sense to them — and because they need the medicine that only the Spirit can offer.

Recently I had a divination with Malidoma Somè, a diviner from the Dagara people. He told me many useful things, but he

scratched his head and was sort of mystified when it came time to give me a ritual prescription. He said that when people come to him, the rituals he prescribes are almost always about them — about how to make them stronger or heal them, or get them right with ancestors and elements. But in this case, the ritual prescription was not for me. He told me that my rituals were to be done

for my community. In fact, each time I work for the community, I am supposed to conduct a set of rituals to bless and empower the people who are there — and those who are not there. It makes gorgeous sense to me. And I guess that means I do these for the rest of my life. It has always made sense to me that a shaman is deeply embedded in a local community. I think this is why my shamanic work has taken the form it has.

I've always wrestled mightily with fears about the power, responsibility, and realness of shamanic work, as I'm sure everyone reading this has. My community has blessed me by attending and letting me do this work. And they have blessed me by chastising me when I let my fears rule me. In the emails I sent out about the recent summer solstice event, I started getting responses from the community asking why I describe the experience as all about "wahoo, laughing, yippee-skippy fun." "You know it's far more than that. Why don't you call it what it is?" they chided. The answer is

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simply that I always swing between seeing my work as beautiful, prophetic and necessary, and thinking that it's just "f---n nuts." This is an ongoing fear of power, I freely admit it.

And that's why the community chastises me — because it's not nuts. Beauty is not crazy. Loving this mysterious, living earth is not crazy. Bending down to the well of life to draw a few drops of healing water onto thirsty lips is not crazy. Trying to open oneself to a world and a cosmos that is conscious in some inexplicable way is not crazy.

What's crazy is those who tell you to quench your thirst for the Holy by buying the next gizmo. What's crazy is making offerings of your time, your heart, and your body to feed the gods of consumerism. To hunger for the blue glow of the TV evening after evening and shut out the song of that rising moon, to clench your fists and moan over the slowness of the laptop, while, unnoticed, the morning sunshine dances on the curtains, THAT'S crazy. Crazy!

We are not the crazy ones, we are the 10,000 new voices re-baptizing the wind, the water, the stones. The world needs you to go crazier. The Holy needs you to lose that mind.



**BONES OF THE ANCESTORS  
SHAMANIC CONFERENCE AND GATHERING**

Easter Seals Camp, Squamish, BC, Canada  
May 9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> 2012

It seems auspicious that in 2012 we are called by the Ancestors to gather with this intent for we have neglected the Ancestors by whose blood and breath we are here.

We have forgotten that we are the transient pathway between the Ancestors and the Descendants; that we ourselves are in the same breath both Ancestor and Descendant. By neglecting and dismissing the dead and ancestors of all the families of this planet we dishonour ourselves and stanch the flow of the two rivers.

blood and breath that could, should, maybe not, dream the Descendants into being. We have been remiss in celebrating the Ancestors that sing to and call us to sing to the ones to come.

This is the prophecy of 2012 we should pay heed to and the spirit directed purpose of this Gathering.

This is an all inclusive residential Shamanic conference to bring together in community any and all who wish to share, experience, and be part of, to explore, and celebrate the ancient wisdom and experience of the spirits and of the Ancestors, Mother Earth, the ancestral stars and the magic of Faolin Mac Tiré the First Shaman and of each other.

Morning Meditations – Healing Circles – Shamanic Smynthing – Sacred Ceremonies – Workshops - Teachings - Shamans Market

Plus the opportunity to witness the Initiation of Wolven Path Shaman

Teachers from Canada, US and Great Britain – Including:

Tom Cowan, Howard & Elsa Malpas, Christina Pratt, Sangoma John Lockley, Stephanie Helberg, Rob Murphy & Dr. Eve Bruce, Jeff Stockton, Tira Evans, Dr. John-Luke Edwards, Jan Engels-Smith, Alleson Lansel, Marie Josée Vermette, Shoshana Avree, Alison Skelton

For more information and to register:

Email: [sacred@circleofgreatmystery.com](mailto:sacred@circleofgreatmystery.com) Call: 1 604 209 6980

Visit: <http://www.circleofgreatmystery.com/2012.html>

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**CORRECTION**

In article "The Shimmering World" by Meg Beeler, which appeared in the spring issue of the journal, credits for the photograph on page 25 contained a typographical error. The correct spelling of the photographer's name is Carol Crestetto.