

## **The Blue Black Man Changes My Story**

I'm going to tell you a crazy story. Batshit crazy. I don't really want to tell you this story, and I've waited months because it gives me the willies to think that you will actually read this.

I am releasing this story not because I think it's so interesting, but because I have found that one strength of my teaching is that I am not any different from you. We are all doing our best to become open, to listen to the unseen, and to follow. Like me, you know it's far easier to say words like that than to live them. Because to live them gives you a standing reservation at the Batshit Crazy Motel.

By far the most frequent question people ask me is "How I know I'm not just making this up?" By "this" they mean the spiritual insights, the visions, the dreams, the flashes of clarity, the sense that a Presence is there guiding them, or even talking to them. For hundreds of years (thank you Rene Descartes) and longer, our society has pathologized dreams, visions, and the idea that the earth is a living presence that cares for us. No wonder you feel batshit crazy. The perfectly coiffed news anchor tells you are, every day, and they are the official storytellers of our reality.

Are spiritual experiences merely crazy? The dreams that end with a gasp as we wake, The flood of tears that suddenly emerge as we gaze upon sundrenched leaves, the images that pop into our head while driving, and this fiery yearning for – something g – in our belly. Are these our "crazy" talking, or are they communications from the Sacred?

That's what this story is about, and it begins about a year ago:

He had been coming to me for months, in dreams and in half-awake times. Ephemeral, a blurry shadow, a hint, a far-off whisper (am I making this up?). He became progressively clearer. African? Not exactly. Skin the color of fertile, dark earth. A round face, broad flat nose, and scraggly, blue-black hair flopping down around both sides of his face. Then he started appearing at the Friday drums – a hazy shadow walking through the room as drummers were lying down or sitting with eyes closed, journeying, each to their own version of the spirit world (am I making this up?). He was surveying my work.

Then, in late January, he appeared clearly. I was drumming for the people in the room. He put his face close to mine and said simply, "Come with me." He pulled at the top of my head, trying to pull me up, out of the room. I resisted, not from fear, but duty. I insisted that I don't journey when I'm drumming for the group. I have a job to do. I hold the space for others, I keep them safe, I watch for unwelcome, hungry visitors and send them away. Come later when I'm at home, I'll go with you then, I said.

The more I refused, the harder he pulled at the top of my head. Suddenly he jerked "me" out of me, and we floated about ten feet above the room. "Look down," he said, "He will take care of the people while you come with me." I saw "me" below, drumming, holding the space for everyone.

It's not unusual for me to be out of my body. It's not unusual for me to have these kinds of visitors. It's not that unusual for me to resist and argue with them. The unusual part was

having no choice. I suppose I could have stopped drumming and run panting from the room, but that would have been so unsafe for the drummers who were suspended between worlds. Perhaps he knew that I wouldn't do that.

So he pulled me out of myself and we went up to his world. As we travelled upwards, I felt secure and not afraid of him, I felt not exactly love coming from him, but acceptance, support and confidence. As we travelled up, I began to understand what I had sensed for months - that this was a teacher I had been asking for.

I've always had trouble with human teachers. I'm cynical and wracked with doubt and jealousy so I tend to think human teachers are new age mumbo-jumbo-spouters caught in their own ego-fest, who just want me to feed their pocketbook and magical self-identity. Certainly, the more I step into leadership roles, more than a few people have thought that about me. Yet when I have come into the presence of human teachers I have always left in awe at their abilities and wisdom, humbled and deeply chagrined at how often my doubt, fear and venomous envy obstruct, flatten and shrink me, again and again.

I don't remember what happened in the upper world, except that he came close to me and I began to weep with a sense of smallness, clumsiness and the fear that I was stupid, pathetic and unworthy. For what it's worth, that is my third most common experience when I deal this directly with Spirit (after sheer wonder and profound gratitude).

What I remember most is coming back down into my body, like putting on those perfectly fitting old shoes. Again, he wandered the room, inspecting the drummers. Then he came close to me, almost smiled, and said simply, "See?" He curled his wrinkled dark knuckle toward my forehead and touched me. As though someone had switched on a light in the room, I could suddenly see everyone's - words fail here - energy body? Everyone was a dark purplish, the color of the eastern sky just as the birds start singing in the morning. Except for one body which was dull orange, and one behind me, bright yellow. He waved his hands over the orange body and it slowly turned purplish. Then he was gone. I thought maybe he was teaching me how to do this kind of thing, but I wasn't sure. Did I make all of that up?

I wouldn't say he "visited" all summer because that sounds too friendly. He showed up, about every second or third night, to wake me up or grab me before I fell asleep. I knew he was coming because my entire body would begin shaking. "Come downstairs," he would say in his simple way. Not a command, just a simple fact. Given our history, I knew there wasn't a choice. But also I began to realize I was involved in something - I didn't know what, but I knew that I needed to open myself to it, to see it through.

And so I didn't sleep well from March through August. Every third night, and then every second night, I was up most of the night. I can't remember most of what we did, and I don't understand why the whole night would pass before we were done, and I'd wake up on the couch or floor covered in dried tears and snot.

There was a string of a dozen nights where my dead father arrived to hold my hand and sit with me, and those nights I wept all night long with regret for not being more awake to him when he was alive. I wept for all the inevitable weaknesses and flaws I have that I will pass on to my two sons. Each dawn when it was time for him to leave, I begged him to bless me, and

he always, plainly said, "Of course," in an almost incredulous voice. Looking back now I think, "What an idiot you are. What do you think he was doing night after night, if not blessing you?"

Holding the day job and the family together during this seven months wasn't easy, especially since I couldn't explain what was happening. And I didn't want to.

One night I asked him who he is. An ancestor, he says. From when? From far enough back that counting doesn't matter he said. I asked him his name and he said something garbled in some thick-tongued language. I was half asleep at the time and I forced myself to wake enough to type it into my iPhone which I use as my alarm clock. I felt so drugged I could barely type and I fell back asleep. The next morning I looked at it and it read: M'anAw'ak'e. I read it again and again trying to remember that accent. But then I just looked at the letters: Man Awake. Cripes almighty. Is this some kind of joke? I just started calling him Blue-Black Man.

And so all summer I was shaky and weak, distracted and irritable, which is why I cancelled the drumming groups for the summer. I thought maybe I'm just tired from working a stressful job that I didn't like much. Maybe I had not been attending well enough to protection and I've taken on people's projections and psychic waste or maybe someone had knowingly or unknowingly attacked me psychically. Or maybe my long anticipated mental breakdown, standard fare for my family, is finally upon me. Or maybe it's just hard to feel great in the daylight when you are up nearly every night weeping with your dead father and being swept away by some blurry, garbled-tongued old Blue-Black Man.

In July I did do one drum that I couldn't cancel, in St, Cloud. I felt like hell and looked worse, but they really wanted me to come. Again, Blue-Black Man stalked the room, finally turning to me and saying, "See?" Everyone in the room burst into what looked like the charts on the doctor's wall that shows the human vascular system, with that network of blue and red lines running up and down the body. But in this version, all the veins and arteries were moonlight silver-lavender, and I could see the energy pulsing through each body. Two nights later he woke me up, took me outside and told me to look at the trees. I looked at them and all of a sudden every tree around me began to radiate light the color of Mountain Dew. He was trying to teach me to see.

Which is ironic as hell because for three years I've been half blind from having emergency eye surgery for a detached retina, because my right eye suddenly just blew as I left a Twins game one day with my son. Freakishly rare the doctor says. Now my right eye is correctable to about 20-gabillion, and my vision is constantly fuzzy. So for three years I've stumbled around like a drunk, tripping on shoes and edges of the carpet, staring down, not being able to tell if that's the last step or the floor. I lose my balance while standing still. I suddenly jerk and duck, dodging the large white bird crashing into my head that is actually just another bright flash of light erupting in my eye. I often have to tilt my head crazily and glare out of my good eye like a pirate in order to see.

I didn't read much for those three years, but early in the summer I committed to reading a scholarly book about shamanism from the early 1980's. One of those books with German phrases that all the PhD's in philosophy know, and muscular, acrobatic, academic prose. The kind of writing that blogging and Facebook put to death forever.

It felt good to read again, even though it took me a long time, page by page. I came to an account described by an old shaman from some tribe somewhere telling about his initiation in which he was taken by his teachers out to the wilderness where they cut him open and implanted crystals throughout his body, including inside his penis. It was a way of amplifying his ability to receive and transmit earth energy. I read the passage again and again and I just could not tell if he was describing an otherworldly experience or a physical one in this world. When shamans talk they often don't draw a distinction between worlds as we do. But I simply I refused to believe it was "real" – that teachers would cut open a guy's penis and shove a crystal in it. My "Eeewwww!" dial was turned up to 11

Blue-Black Man appeared to me as I read this passage. He said "It's good you are reading that because that's what I will make happen for you when you go to the wilderness this summer."

Then he gave me an assignment to begin listing all of the regrets I can think of. He said he had to take me "all the way down into regret" in order to clean the space inside to make room for the crystals. I understood that all this weeping all these months was an extended cleansing. Long, arduous, interior cleansing.

Later that night, after another session with Blue-Black Man, I was awakened by a bat, flitting terrified through the house. I trudged out in the darkness, raised the squeaky old garage door and retrieved my son's fishing net. I stood in the living room watching it fly back and forth, knowing that it wasn't using vision to dodge lights and windows. Even though it was lost, and perhaps terrified, it moved through the space with lilted, swooshing grace. On the third easy swipe of the net, I caught him. I opened the door of my house and let that scared, misplaced creature from the otherworld fly free into the warm, endlessly open night, back home to its people.

In late August, we canoed to the boundary waters, me and three wonderful women who came along to hold the space for me. I wasn't exactly sure how the whole thing was supposed to go, and that inspired me to feel nervous and stupid. Shouldn't a guy know what he's doing, or why he's going on a ceremonial trip to the wild? But my history on this spiritual path has been one of sometimes tossing open the doors and leaping across the threshold. We don't always want to do it like that, but especially, as I did in this case, if you feel supported and guided, leaping is an appropriate choice sometimes. After a few fairly grueling portages between lakes, we arrived at a very private lake and made our camp. The pieces of the ceremony slowly revealed themselves over the next two days as I read the landscape, my thoughts and my flashes of images and insights.

The day before the ceremony, I asked Blue-Black Man for instructions for the three women. He told me to teach them this song that they would sing to the fire for as long as it took him to do his work on me in the woods:

Ah Shah Way  
Ah Shah Way  
Ah Shah Way  
Ah Shah Way

As he explained it to me, "Ah" is the inconceivable (to me) openness of the universe, of creation. It's the first syllable in that famous Indian chant "Om" (sometimes spelled A-U-M-). It is the ungraspable, unnamable power of creation, the moment before the big bang, the open mouth of God/dess before the words "let there be..." flow out. This is an invocation to those powers, and the best translation is "Come..."

"Shah" is the sound we hear, and also the feeling we feel, when that breeze suddenly moves through the upper leaves of the trees – that beautiful sound, that refreshing feeling, and that sense of mysterious presence coming to enact a change. In essence, this word means: "draw close."

"Way" has a sense of completion, or of focus. It is not at literally the English word "way" like "path" but that is not a bad image for what the word implies.

Taken together, the chant Ah Shah Way means: Come, immensity, come powers of creation and re-creation, come, unutterable mystery, come close, affect, change and do what needs to be done (to re-make me, to re-shape and focus me on this next turn on my path).

By the way, that song now belongs to us all—you can sing it (come up with your own melody if you want, or learn the one I use). You can sing it for yourself or for others, or for the world, it's okay with him. Just don't try to sell it.

The ceremony was very simple. We gathered at the fire, where I voiced that list of regrets to the fire and the three helpers. It was a confession of sorts. It went on and on. Pages of regrets.

Then while the three women sang that beautiful little song for I don't know how long to hold me, to carry me like a canoe across the waters of mystery, I wandered off to the woods, fell pretty much unconscious, and Blue-Black Man did what he said he would do.

It hurt. It terrified me. I could vaguely hear myself howling. This is where words fail again, and all I can say is that I've been torn apart by the spirits before, and this wasn't that. I've been healed by the spirits before, and this wasn't that. I've been re-shaped and squashed and dissolved and eaten and transformed into radiant birds and snakes and I've been embraced by and even sexed by the spirits, and this wasn't any of that. I can only put it like this: he reconfigured my shamanic DNA.

Perhaps most important, he deepened the agreement between me and the spirit world. He placed a heavier burden of responsibility on me in terms of caring for our community and doing deeper work. He demanded more commitment and less doubt. He demanded less irreverent, self-deprecating humor as a cover for my intense insecurities. He told me that my story of the previous 12 years was now done. That story: "Ah, gee, I'm just a funky, kind of funny, kind of smart weirdo, and so take or leave what I have to say, shucks, I'm just so confused and stumbly, and well, whatever..." If you've been to any of my drums in 12 years you've heard me tell that story about myself overtly and subtly. I've battled against it, but it has been the sub-floor to my teaching. He said it's fine to be funny, he likes to laugh too, but the time is past when I'm funny because I'm embarrassed or afraid of carrying medicine for this world, and of helping carry my people into the presence of sacred, healing power, or of being a real teacher.

He demanded I speak truth about the powers that have made an agreement with me. He taught me two skills, divination and the waving the hands over the energy body thing. (Actually I had been doing this somewhat unconsciously for a long time when I rattle over people at the end of a drumming night. Now it's clearer why I have done that for so long, and why people have so frequently said that my rattle is an amazing instrument.)

So here is the "real-world" kicker to this story.

Over the span of a few weeks before and after this initiatory experience, my wife, who had been ill for 16 years with a mysterious chronic illness had what can only be described as a miraculous recovery. She had been ill since a few weeks after we were engaged. She got a virus that landed her in the hospital, and I don't think it's an exaggeration to say she just never fully recovered. After 16 years of operating on about 50% of the energy everyone else has, suddenly over a few weeks in July and August – as I was preparing for my wilderness trek with Blue Black Man and the three helpers, she became full, vibrant, smiling, pain-free, alive in ways both of us had stopped expecting long ago. She began to transform from being a woman at war with her body. My husbandly identity began to crumble. I was becoming less needed as caregiver, the eternal "wonderful man," constantly sacrificing my needs and living in abject loneliness in order to carry the family on his shoulders.

Do you see that both of us were re-configured from the inside? The system, the intricate web of assumptions and interactions upon which we had built our marriage shattered, and blew away in that breeze: Shaaaahhhhhhhh. Both of our lives – individually and internally – changed. A few months later she decided to leave the marriage. Her leaving made room for her to become the person she wanted to become and could not become inside our marriage. And her leaving released me from the confining role of caretaker that I had dutifully played for nearly 20 years.

May it be in the highest good for all involved. This is the basic prayer of ritual work, of shamanic healing. May it be in the highest good for all involved. (This is the difference between shamanism and sorcery by the way. The prayer in sorcery is "May it be good for me.")

I don't mean to make sweet marshmallows out of divorce. We both perpetrated awful hurt on one another for a long time, most often in passive aggressive ways and most often, unconsciously. But not always. But in each part of our lives, there are a dozen stories going on simultaneously – some visible, and, most, not visible. In order to heal and bring meaning to our lives, it's helpful to explore all of the stories, and ask which ones really accurate. We need to ask which stories demand the most from us – the most love, the most work, the most wonder, the most courage.

I don't like telling stories about my experiences with the spirits. They always smack of ego to me, and I'm always worried I'll exaggerate to make myself sound cool. I also think it's generally disrespectful to the spirits to tell about the visitations, just as it would be disrespectful to blog about the wonderful things your lover does to you. I write this account only in hopes that you may see that those experiences you have may not be so crazy. I see that we are constantly in initiatory experiences. We are either being prepared for the next ceremony or we are in it. The voices of our culture tell us to ignore, suppress our initiations from Spirit. We are urged to distract ourselves from or to medicate our initiatory experiences. I write this only to tell you there is the other option: live it.

A phrase I came across many years ago attributed to a Yaqui medicine person provides me constant help: "Every creature is crouched in eagerness to become its next shape."

May it be so.