



# Creature consciousness

## The body's power to create a new shamanism

**Barry Cottrell** celebrates the human body as an animal body, revealing it to be a potential shamanic ally or power animal

**A**s long as we profess ignorance about our own creature manifestation and do not develop our energetic potentialities, we forget the crux of our astonishing existence.<sup>1</sup>

Many people live today with a strong, growing sense of expectation, often laced with apprehension, as if some radical and rapid process of change has been activated, involving a fundamental break

with the past which will release us into a new and unknown future.

It is as if a fresh wind of the spirit is blowing, drawing us ever more deeply into a whole new uncharted terrain, hurrying us along in a process of accelerated maturation toward a renewed vision of the world as a sacred place. Irrevocably, we are crossing a critical threshold into the embrace of a new consciousness and

within this crucible of the new, human nature is undergoing a vast and unprecedented metamorphosis.

### Recovering indigenous mind

An important part of this great spiritual watershed is the reawakening of our indigenous sense of belonging to the Earth. It is, literally, a 're-membering,' with the possibility to re-connect in fuller, more mature awareness with our eclipsed, primal spirit. The need is being recognized collectively within our culture for a more instinctual approach to spirituality, along with the individual need for self-empowerment. Together these needs have re-kindled the embers of shamanic consciousness, left smoldering in the western world from the onslaught of religion, science and the soulless ethos of mass consumerism.

Many of us have looked toward tribal spirituality and the practices of shamanism as a way of introducing a more Earth-based, instinctual sense of the sacred back into our lives; and we may have embraced shamanism as a path to re-membering or re-discovering our vital inner connection to the natural universe. However, this embrace needs to be tempered with discernment and awareness, especially when approaching the rituals and traditions of tribal peoples.

For San Francisco-based shamanic

<sup>1</sup>Yellow mare, known as the Chinese Horse, with Red Cows, in the Axial Gallery of the celebrated Dordogne cave of Lascaux.

practitioner and authority on indigenous traditions, Jürgen Kremer, the key to our re-connecting with the natural universe is not through appropriating the spirituality of tribal peoples but rather through the ‘remembrance in itself’ of what we are looking for in their traditions – through the ‘recovery of indigenous mind’. We need to nurture and be nurtured by our own indigenous traditions.

As Native American intellectual, John Mohawk, remarked: ‘I do not want people to adopt Indian rituals because I want people to own their own rituals. I want them to come to ownership out of experiences that are real for them. Then I’ll come and celebrate it with them.’<sup>2</sup>

We need ‘the medicine of remembrance’ – to remember our own indigenous roots. As Kremer points out: ‘This is the starting point from which all manners of shamanic healing may arise. This then is a healing process on behalf of the individual, family history, history, community; in short, it is the healing of the dissociative split and the recovery of participation in the phenomena.’<sup>2</sup>

### **Creature consciousness**

Of all the ‘medicines of remembrance,’ one of the most fundamental is ‘re-remembering’ our very own animal bodies. If we want to ‘save the Earth’, the nearest place to begin is with our own vibrant matter, our own piece of the sentient earth – through the physicality of our animal and animate body. For the human body *is* the earth. It is an animal body and as such belongs to the natural world.

We are part of Nature. Indigenous peoples have always known this and tribal societies generally embrace the animistic worldview in which the whole universe is experienced as alive, animated by invisible spiritual forces. We are human animals, just as a cat is a feline animal and a dog is a canine animal. It is this ‘creature consciousness’ – the grassroots awareness of our animal self and its bodily presence – that can be a powerful healing force, both individually and collectively.

In his landmark book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, ecologist and philosopher David Abram reminds us how to experience the animal body: ‘Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on – this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.’<sup>3</sup>

Abram eloquently describes how this sensuous awareness of the body is being reborn in our culture after ages of disparagement by religions denigrating our ani-

mal physicality in their search for spiritual purity: ‘Beneath the clamor of ideologies and the clashing of civilizations, a fresh perception is slowly shaping itself – a clarified encounter between the human animal and its elemental habitat.’

‘It is a perception that honors the immeasurable otherness of things, the way that any earthborn presence exceeds the calculations we perform upon it – the manner in which each stone, each gust of wind, each termite-ridden log or gliding sea turtle harbors and bodies forth a creativity that resists all definition. As though there’s a subtle fire burning within each sensible presence, a heartbeat unique to each being...’<sup>4</sup>

In the human animal this creature consciousness frequently gets repressed as, for example, in the delayed reaction to a trauma. In her article, ‘Reclaiming our Animal Body,’ psychologist Tania Dolley recounts a car accident from which she emerged unscathed and calm only later to succumb to classic symptoms of delayed shock. Instead of discharging the adrenaline which is mobilized to deal with the danger, as other

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animals would do by shivering or shaking, the human animal often overrides its instinctive impulses by means of the rational mind, so that the residual energy gets stored in the body, manifesting as symptoms.

For Tania Dolley, becoming aware of her animal body connects her to a tangible ‘felt sense’ of her embodied self: ‘Reconnecting with a deep sense of acceptance in this way subtly changes my relationship to my inner self or soul. It seems to call my spirit back into my body, eliciting a sense of ‘rightness’ as I feel an inner shift and the recognition of ‘Ah yes, this is how it’s meant to feel.’<sup>5</sup>

‘Becoming animal’ makes us more wholly human.

### **Shamanism and survival**

The awakening of our creature consciousness and the recovery of indigenous mind lie at the roots of our relationship with the natural world and resonate powerfully with our shamanic inheritance. The psycho-spiritual techniques we now call shamanism were born of the harsh frozen night at the

onset of the last ice age when our paleolithic ancestors faced a crisis of survival. Around 73,500 years ago on the island of Sumatra the ‘super-volcano’ Toba erupted. It was one of the largest volcanic explosions ever known to have occurred on Earth.

The eruption lasted two weeks with ash and gas reaching 30 miles into the stratosphere, shrouding the entire planet. A volcanic winter lasting six years was followed by the deepest cold bite of the last ice age, when the worldwide human population may have been reduced to as few as 10,000 people, rendering our ancestors an endangered species.

The arrival of the ice and night would have had a powerful impact upon the human psyche, the effects of which are still with us today. Our experience of being solitary, isolated individuals is very much a legacy of that time. The trauma of the prolonged darkness and the remorselessness of pervasive ice laid down the blueprint, not so much for an evolutionary expansion and unfolding of human consciousness, as for its becoming progressively more tightly bound up within itself. It would mark the onset of a slow spiritual death, or at least an imprisonment, which would continue right up to the present day.<sup>6</sup>

Before the ice and night set in, the primal human mind would not have been hidden, located privately inside the brain. Its fluid, expanded awareness would have been more pervasive, extending through the whole physical body, and beyond, into each vibrant natural form it encountered, and out into the very aura and consciousness of Earth itself. It would have been truly ‘creature consciousness.’

But now, with the shock of the ice, came a compression of consciousness, a massive psychic contraction, causing this natural openness, innocence and fluidity to freeze and shut down.

As the cold bit deeper, human consciousness would become progressively cut off from Earth’s spirit. And within this prolonged absence of warmth lie the origins of shamanism. For it fell to those gifted individuals – the shamans – with a propensity for trance and vision, both to locate the outer meat and also to provide the inner heat for the survival of the Paleolithic tribe.

From then on, it would only be these specialist ‘technicians of transcendence’ who could use their skills to help the tribe retain its link with that former, all-embracing awareness, lost during those aeons of seemingly endless time when the sun was banished and the ice held in its grip the very heart of humankind.



Left: **Giant deer**: this 16,000 year-old painting probably depicts the Giant Deer (*Megaloceros giganteus*) which became extinct some 9,000 years ago. Right: **Dancing sorcerer**: this engraving in the cave at Gabillou, also in the Dordogne, is from the same period as the Lascaux painting and shows a half-human, half-animal being, perhaps a shaman shape-shifting whilst in trance. The engravings in this cave are hair-line thin – described as being 'breathed upon the limestone' – and may have once been painted over.

Through their ability to *journey out of the body* the shamans transcended the confines of the ice, bringing back both spiritual warmth and nourishment and also guidance and advice from the worlds of the spirits, needed for the survival of the tribe.

### The power animal

The shaman never journeys alone. One central and essential feature of shamanic practice is the shaman's guardian spirit, or ally, who helps and protects the shaman in all of her missions and journeys into the metaphysical realms, where she goes to seek help or healing for members of her community.

Usually the shaman's ally is an animal – their power animal. For the shamanic quest is a quest for power, for a universal potency which the shaman obtains through their initiation and immersion in the often chaotic and dangerous astral worlds, and which they use to navigate and negotiate within those worlds.

Traditionally, the shaman's guardian spirit takes the form of an animal with specific, transcendent powers. The Yakuts of Siberia, for example, see this helping spirit both as an animal and also as a 'fiery force'.

'Every shaman ... must have an animal-mother or origin-animal. It is usually pictured in the form of an elk, less often as a bear. This animal lives independently, separated from the shaman. Perhaps it can best be imagined as the fiery force of

the shaman that flies over the earth ... It is the embodiment of the prophetic gift of the shaman ... it is the shaman's visionary power, which is able to penetrate both the past and the future.'<sup>7</sup>

The shaman's relationship with their power animal has been central to the survival of the human species. Witness the engravings and paintings of power animals in the cave temples of southern France and northern Spain, celebrating this vital and intimate relationship (see above). Prior to the discovery in 1994 of the monumental Chauvet cave, deep within the limestone gorges of the French Archèche, many people viewed the cave paintings and engravings from the Upper Palaeolithic – of which the overwhelming majority are animals – as nothing more than the sympathetic magic of primitive hunting cultures, directed toward success in the hunt.

Occasional examples of mythical, semi-human figures in other caves, such as the sorcerer of Les Trois-Frères on the edge of the French Pyrenees, had already bolder commentators, like mythologist Joseph Campbell, to view ice-age cave art as the product of a shamanic culture, in which certain animals are experienced as possessing transcendental qualities in their own right. With the discovery of the Chauvet cave and an abundance of animals hardly renowned for being hunted and eaten as prey, the signs pointed very directly toward their being painted for the qualities they pos-

sess as power animals.

As archaeologists David Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson suggest, 'a significant component of Upper Palaeolithic art ... derives from altered states of consciousness'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, they are images, not so much of animals hunted in the outside world, but of the 'animal within'. They depict the shamans' power animals, invoked during trance.

The two animals most frequently depicted in Chauvet are rhinoceroses and lions, dangerous animals that were not on the Paleolithic menu. As guardian spirits they possess strength and courage, essential qualities to assist the shamans in negotiating the rigours of both the visible and the invisible worlds during that harsh epoch. By entering altered states of consciousness, these artist-shamans were able to experience the presence of the spirits, who for most people existed in the worlds beyond. The interior of the caves brought the spiritual dimension so close to the physical that, in the act of painting or engraving, the shamans were simply 'touching and marking what was already there.'<sup>9</sup> In making these images, they were externalizing or 'fixing' the sensed presence of their power animals.

In his monumental study of our deep past, *Prehistoric Belief*, archaeologist and shamanic practitioner, Mike Williams, emphasizes the reality of this experience for our ice-age ancestors: 'These were no longer *images* of the spirits people were



**Eototo** (by the author): the chief of the Hopi kachinas – spirit beings found among the Pueblo peoples of southwestern USA. Eototo is the spiritual counterpart of the village chief and is said to belong to the Bear Clan.

seeing, but the spirits themselves'.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps this was the first time in human history that a need of this kind had been felt and expressed, to give permanent form to a spiritual reality that had become inaccessible to normal human consciousness. The shamans of the Upper Paleolithic were reaching out to a dimension of life that had formerly been perceived by their ancient ancestors as inherent within the very substance of Earth itself. Through engaging in the rituals of their cave painting and engraving, they were expressing an urgent religious need, in the truest sense of religion – to re-connect with Earth's animating spirit that permeates all life.

### Our most tangible guide

In the 21st century we have arrived at a point in our evolution where we no longer have to rely upon elaborate rituals and ceremonies from the past, or heavy astral psychism, to see or move into 'the worlds beyond'. Advances in our understanding from modern physics have already indicated that spirit, matter and consciousness are all forms of energy.

Matter is seen as condensed spirit, a denser form of energy on a slower rate of vibration than many other levels of spirit, but it is a spiritual energy all the same. The material world is seen as but one of the myriad of interpenetrating realms of existence or dimensions of experience within an unbounded, entangled universe. From this perspective, the physical world we see, hear, touch, smell or taste is the world beyond, only perceived 'strangely' through the senses. We

do not have to propel ourselves out of the physical body and soar away from Earth in order to sense the centring warmth of our own eternal, living flame or spirit. It is right here.

Ken Carey's beautiful transmissions of wisdom, *Starseed: The Third Millennium*, puts out the same message: 'There is but the finest veil between you and a full-dimensional perception of reality, the filmiest of screens between you and your eternal self. You require no elaborate technique or ritual to release this veil. You need only open to the organic current of awareness that in every moment flows to you from the source of life.'<sup>11</sup>

The power animal is an aspect of this 'organic current of awareness'. It may be understood as *Earth's spirit configuring itself for the individual*. The living, breathing Earth takes on a form and enters our awareness, so that we may relate to it personally and fully experience ourselves as belonging to this planet, so that it is truly our home.

In traditional shamanism the power animal does not manifest physically; it may have a strong presence, but it has always remained transcendent – a denizen of 'the worlds beyond.' With the transformation in human consciousness taking place today, this relationship may also shift to a new level of manifestation and intimacy, bringing the spiritual more deeply into the physical.

Just as the elephant or giraffe – or any other creature – carries the majesty and dignity of its species, so, as members of the human species, we can now grow

into the dignity and majesty of our own 'creatureness' and embodiment. As we re-discover the 'sense of rightness' of being a human animal, what was once transcendent can draw closer and express itself physically, becoming immanent. Through our very own 'creature manifestation', our sensuous, animal body can become our most immediate animal ally and our most tangible guide. Our physical body becomes our animal guardian – *our own true power animal*.

Understanding this – that the human animal can be a power animal – becomes part of a new vision, a new mythology, the essential rainbow bridge, which the human tribe needs to cross in order to open its heart, expand its awareness and experience that 'organic current of awareness' flowing into it, bringing a more vital and majestic experience of being alive. ☛

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