

Journeying with the Spirits of Nature

I did not seek wildness. It chose me, bringing panther cubs and river meanders, mystery and galaxies into my life. I did not look for cellular memory. It found me, threading ancestral wisdom with the knowledge of stones and trees. I did not want this solitary path. It chased me from childhood, flowed into every awareness, taught me to keep going no matter how great the grief.

The practice of shamanic journeying, a direct and experiential way of exploring the cosmos, has been used for over 30,000 years. In its essential, or “core” form, it is a trance-induced, out of the body journey to non-ordinary reality, taken with intent and discipline from a known place into one of the spirit realms. It is based on assumptions not usually held in our western culture: that spirit beings are all compassionate and need our embodied forms to help do their work; that we can learn from the signs and omens provided by nature and the spirit worlds; that we can leave our bodies and see with pure consciousness; and that in reciprocity we heal both ourselves and our world. When we take a shamanic journey, our part is to set our intent, observe carefully, and mirror and reflect on what is shared with us.

Journeying to and working with the spirits of nature—plant and animal spirits, the spirits of stones and springs, mountains and winds, sun, moon and stars, and the elements—lead us to ways of harmony and balance with the universe. They take us beyond the boundaries of ego and into deeply felt interrelationship with all things. They offer experiences of transcendence, healing, and transformation.

For most of us, steeped in the separateness and individuation that define our culture, it is a gift to discover deep connection and reciprocity in the spirit world. Even without a particular cultural and spiritual immersion, the spirits make sure that we learn the value and necessity of reciprocity—the mutual exchange of energy, appreciation, and respect, deepening over time—in nearly every journey.¹ They teach us what we need to know, and sustain us in the process.

Each individual making a journey has a unique experience, and, in journeying, we engage a process of inquiry about how it works for us. It is said that the spirits give us exactly what we need. Yet we are never working alone, never have to rely just on our own resources, because spirit helpers want to work with us. The more we seek a respectful partnership, the more the spirits we call upon will assist and engage with us. Almost all journeys are taken with a power animal or to ask for assistance from a teacher or spirit helper. When we encounter something scary those spirit helpers stand by our sides to help us keep going.

Even a first journey to a particular spirit being can offer deep insight. A novice circle journeyed to the weather spirits for teachings, for example, and brought back these messages:

“Weather shapes the earth by moving the elements around, which lets the earth renew itself.”

“I cannot teach you. You must observe me.”

“I create great chaos when you do not pay attention to me. Honor me.”

“Drought lets the elements relax.”

“Interference comes from toxins, which weigh down the air and the forces of weather.”

“Help us by healing your hearts.”

Spirits often offer repeated visits to healing places, like the mineral pool in the journey that follows, as a way of helping us humans move forward on our personal soul journeys. They also may give very specific and literal suggestions in response to our questions.

I slither down a very muddy, slippery tunnel. I find no impediments, but the tunnel is very long, and feels like a birth canal. The Mother is pushing out. Am I ready? I slip into a warm, nurturing, mineral pool. I ask the spirit of water what focus I should have. “I hold you, feed you, keep you alive. Do everything to teach about this.” Then I ask how to teach about reciprocity. The spirit of water suggests that people collect lake, creek, or ocean water to bring to the ceremony, and that each person return some of the water back to a special lake, creek, or ocean, which will spread healing intent out into all the waters of the world.

Disintegration and dismemberment, those age-old practices of letting go of ego and moving into formlessness, may also be used in a shamanic journey.² The shift into pure consciousness—no body, no mind, no awareness of “self”—can be followed by intentional merging with a spirit being for healing, transmutation, or a deeper experience of the qualities of the being, as in the journey that follows.

I slide down to the mineral pool. I take in nutrients from the water, then watch my flesh disintegrate and be eaten by fish. Bones settle to the bottom and become sediment, some moving down river, some returning to earth. I merge with water and begin water’s down river journey. Fluid, bubbly, joyful, expansive—ever widening, ever evaporating into air and recondensing as cloud. At places where toxins and pollution enter the river, water contracts, can’t breathe; it shapeshifts into atmosphere or congregates in toxic pools, some water sacrificing itself so other water can continue to move, breathe, be alive with oxygen. River expands into the Amazon, feeding creatures, supporting life, having reciprocal relations with humans, plants, fish, air, earth, even fire. River expands into ocean. At the icy poles, water is in a reciprocal relationship with the northern lights and magnetic forces. Water remembers other water on other planets (Mars) and universes. Water carries memory to maintain connection. As I disconnect from being merged and return to my self, I ask the

spirit of water what it wants from me. I hear “Expansion, shapeshifting, fluidity, reciprocity of this medicine work.”

Learning that “water carries memory to maintain connection” is a profound one for me even as my intellectual mind does not fully understand. The “reciprocal relationship” of water with the northern lights, and the notion that water remembers other water on other planets, remain mysterious to me still.

When a journey offers an ecstatic experience, joy from the journey carries over into mundane life, creating opportunities for shifting consciousness and opening to more appreciation of the visible as well as unseen worlds.³

I start twirling down the tunnel. Lots of toxins in my body leach out. I slide into the creek, and immediately start disintegrating. I surrender, saying “OK, spirits, if this is what you want...” My flesh peels off, feeding fish and bacteria. Cougar picks up some bones, feeds them to her cubs, saying “We all used to eat each other, share our DNA, and share our energy, nutrients, and essence with each other. This is how we are part of each other and related to all, on this deepest of levels.” Vultures come and peck at my bones, feeding their children. My remains sink into the ocean, settle on the ocean floor, are pressured over time into sedimentary rock and are, much later, thrust up and into the atmosphere. Even at the most elementary particle level, we intermingle, become new stone or bird or mountain lion. From the ocean floor I find a thread of light and travel out past the brilliant sun to the more brilliant Source of all. I merge. Pulse. Expand. Expand until light fills the cosmos. I radiate in bliss. Later, as I separate and prepare to return, I ask how to carry light back, and recognize other light beings better. “The more you become light, the more you will know how to recognize other light beings. The more you shift into light-being energy, the less you’ll need to cleave to your suffering and the more you will illuminate with fluidity. You will experience no ‘I,’ just light.”

Spirit helpers frequently emphasize the importance of reciprocity. Some of the simple guidance given me by the spirits of water exemplify this:

“Energy is transmitted through water. Treat water as if it is your baby. Give earth the same love in order to heal it.”

“Make a relationship with me every day. This also means relationships with all the other elements. The more relationship you have, the more you can exhibit my qualities: fluidity, constancy, and so on.”

“When you pee, think harmonious thoughts: you are sending your water out to merge with the other waters of the world.”

“Use your relation with me to fuel your environmental work. The more relationships you have, the easier it will be to keep going.”

One of the most satisfying and powerful ways to do shamanic healing is in concert with others. Whether it is done in a room together or around the world at the same moment, the power of the connection, the healing, and the intent is multiplied exponentially. For example, in December 2001 many shamanic practitioners focused together to cleanse the toxic fumes that were poisoning workers and residents alike at the World Trade Center. Afterwards, many people reported seeing the golden light or feeling harmony like that experienced in the journey that follows.

I fly to the sacred mountain with Eagle, enter the cave with the old ones, and go up to where I met wind before. I merge with the spirit of wind. We blow off the mountain, across South America, up Central America, up the East coast, seeing the beauty of the whole planet. We are fierce mountain/hurricane wind. Arriving in Manhattan, we blow into the toxic tower vortex. There is no oxygen; everything is stagnant, stuck. The spirit of wind tells me this is like cutting off our nose to spite our face: we are poisoning ourselves. It asks me what we need to see to wake up. “You have created toxins, fear, violence, and now it spumes around Manhattan making people sick, trying to get their attention.” Mountain air keeps exchanging and mixing with toxic fumes. Air dissipates by spreading around whatever is in it. Suddenly a great golden ball descends and it is peaceful. I breathe deeper. The atmosphere of all of Manhattan is changed by so much energy/attention/focus from around the world at once. Golden light seeps up the Avenues, into homes, calming everyone. It is very strong for about five minutes. Then the toxic air mixes again with mountain air. Everything goes gray, then black: there is so much suffering it overwhelms us all. I sense spirits trapped and many energies swirling at once. Now begins an exchange of gold and dark, gold and dark. Mountain wind sweeps in and blows up river; particles filter into the Hudson and back into the ocean. I breathe down into earth, back up into stars. Some starlight filters into air. Much hard work, both energetically and in awareness, before I return to the mountain, thank the elder circle for help and support, and return.

After this journey I returned to clarify, and ask the spirit of air what it does with toxins.

“I carry them. Some drift back into earth, which devours them. Others go onto land and sea creatures, who are sickened by them. Air toxins are more widespread and damaging than any others, since I move so freely. Stop making them. Transmute what you can, but concentrate on noticing the effects of your poisons and stop them at the source.”

We all have capacity to transform suffering and experience “interbeing”: the emptiness, or boundarilessness, that allows us to feel connected with all living creatures.⁴ In a state of interbeing, breath, light, and energy move through body, heart, mind so strongly that cosmic connection is all that is important, and ego dwindles away. In this state, the universe becomes a vast open expanse. Possibilities and hope abound; sensations and perceptions arise and fall away moment by moment. Awe takes over, and the portal opens into wondrous, amazing mystery.

Shamanic journeying gives us body knowing and soul knowing, that, in turn, can fuel our work at cellular levels. It is a path full of the richness of the unknown, the wonder of the cosmos, the brilliance of the stars. It is a path that can guide us in living the spirit grandmother’s advice: *“Love the earth. You must take care of the earth or we will not live.”*

¹ The centrality of energy exchange to the interdependence of all living systems is clearly put forth by deep ecologists and Gaia theorists. For an excellent summary, see Macy, Joanna, and Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 1998.

² In the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris, Isis searches for her brother’s dismembered parts to make him and the world whole again. In the Tibetan Buddhist practice of chod, the meditator intentionally visualizes her dismemberment as a means of going beyond ego.

³ Perceiving with our bodies, breath, and attention helps us put aside constructs of behavior, habits, and internal dialogue. It can move us away from linear thinking and open us up to the formless, perceiving with what Zen Buddhists call big mind. The more expansive our perception, the wider and deeper the possibilities open to us.

⁴ Coined by Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh to describe the Buddha’s core teaching of dependent co-arising; also referred to as “interexistence” by some theorists.