

"Talking an Edgewalker's View"

Sandi Loytomaki

Recently I have been continually perplexed by the invisible 'powers that be' within the society I reside. I am no one special and yet, I am special because there is no one like me. A single Caucasian mother, raised in northern Ontario Canadian culture, residing in southern Ontario Canadian culture; European ancestry – maternally Italian, paternally Finnish – mountain folk and nomads, Sami stories circulating through those who dare to speak and acknowledge them (the stories of a schizophrenic relayed to a child, not knowing she was yearning to know who she is). A child not able to refer to herself as Canadian, for what was that? An adolescent who referred to herself as Finnish and Italian – Canadian, of course what was that? An adult referring to herself as her ... where she lives now, who she is now, physical ancestry that influences her, spiritual ancestry that influences her, and defining roles that others see in her.

Who am I? One voice. A voice of a woman wondering why we, in western society, like to categorize, label, associate, and in the end often dissociate as a result of the associations. I contain all the logical, rational thoughts within that can explain the whys, and when necessary will work within the established system – using their language/my language, so some might hear.

Many years ago I felt a calling. This was a calling that had come twice before, but the third time came also the listening. Along with the listening and the acceptance of that calling came a label to call myself "Shamanic healer." I had an understanding of that term, an understanding that was generated by the anthropomorphism of the time. It was acknowledged that I would use this label so that people would find me. In the end, I found my self and the self-imposed limitations of beliefs and theories. It was an interesting exercise and an enlightening process. This disclosure was met with recognition, confrontation, explanations and assumptions, ridicule, honor, separation and community, and further separation. What I understand now is that the reactions to this label were a result of people's beliefs. How could a white woman with blond hair (hmm, actually very short blond hair) be a Shamanic healer? "I have met a Shaman, you are not one," the words echo in the recesses of my mind. Interestingly I had not referred to myself as 'Shaman.' How does one meet a Shaman? Was this person they met a self-professed Shaman? Was this person they met recognized by their community? Was this person from the Tungus tribe? Is it possible for someone from western society, from a city, to be a Shaman? A Shamanic healer? "You know, I admire people like you. You are rebels," an Ojibwe elder's words echo as well. What did they recognize in me? And so the path to understanding language, developing a language, and using other's language or my own language unfolded. In this context, the use of the word language is referring to the selection of words used at any given time. What you will read is a personal epistemic exploration, a process still developing.

The term 'Shaman' is, I currently feel, an abstracted term developed within an entrenched patriarchal system, a Eurocentric style of approaching the world – which in its subtle forms is an exploration of imposed imperialism. An alternate way of expressing this could be looking at the world through one's own glasses – instead of acknowledging the world that others see through their glasses. This is a term is taken from one culture, the Tungus peoples of Siberia – this culture's one word, for one type of healer. This fact is quoted throughout the literature on 'shamanism'. There are a few who tread further – and begin to use the terms of individual cultures independently. And so the use of the term is exploited.

- shaman...one who travels between the worlds
- shaman-ism...the practice/techniques/tools of the shaman
- shamanic healing...the healing practice/techniques/tools of the shaman
- core shaman-ism...(ah, a recognition of the underlying principles common to cultures throughout the world engaged in the practice of ?) the core techniques/practice/tools of shaman
- urban shaman-ism...the practice/techniques/tools of the shaman in an urban setting

Perhaps this is oversimplified. And yet, we see the repetition and use of these terms in this manner throughout current writings, leading to a mindless association. “Where can I find American shamanism?” “I have studied shamanic journeying. I know all about it ... I took a weekend course with...” the words echo. When engaged with others, who often arrive because of the language of the times, I make a conscious effort to introduce an alternate language (culturally succinct), to educate, to deconstruct. In the end, the language of convenience, the language of acceptance is reconstructed – with new context, perhaps beckoning a mindful approach. Shaman-ism taught in a weekend? Is this an oxymoron? Is it not the realm of the Indigenous healer to be aware and careful of the use of language, as language carries within it an energetic code, a call to the universe? Why is the negation of the fullness of all factors involved an accepted practice?

“Several volumes would be needed for an adequate study of all the problems that arise in connection with the mere idea of “spirits” and of their possible relations with human beings...But the study of shamanism does not require going into all this; we need only define the shaman’s relation to his helping spirits.” M. Eliade

In doing this, do we negate an understanding? Do we negate others’ perspectives? Do we create categories of what is and what isn’t based on how we see the world, instead of what is the reality experienced by some? My search to answer these questions, keeps leading me to answer “yes.”

Language is at once expanding and contracting. There are some descriptions of this area of human existence (shamanism) that do acknowledge a variety of cultures, and the cultures’ words for various types and forms of healers/medicine people. And yet, there is the reliance on the language of “shaman” applied to all. It is like a fall-back position. If it works, don’t fix it. Does this not necessitate the exclusion of some cultures’ healers/medicine people, going so far as to say that a shaman does not exist within certain realms of experience? For example, there are those writers who contend that magic is not the realm of the shaman, while others indicate it is. Could this exemplify the necessity of using a culturally succinct language for the types and forms of healers/medicine people? Has the language of a culture grown out of the culture itself ... instead of aligning with another culture’s language? We continue to categorize, label and associate with what has been written before, no matter the implications – without mindfulness given to the meanings and history of languages. This perspective necessarily then allows us to understand some things – and miss other things.

“One of these things, it seems to me, that most of us eagerly accept and take for granted is the question of beliefs ... One can see how political and religious beliefs, national and various other types of beliefs, do separate people, do create conflict, confusion and antagonism – which is an obvious fact; and yet we are unwilling to give them up ... One can see obviously, that belief is separating people, creating intolerance; is it possible to live without belief? One can find that out only if one can study oneself in relationship to a belief. This after all is the truth: to have the capacity of meeting everything anew, from moment to moment, without the conditioning reaction of the past, so that there is not the cumulative effect which acts as a barrier between oneself and that which is.” Krishnamurti

I am reminded of being compared to a South American healer who specializes in using entheogens, and told that I knew not what 'spirit is about' since I did not engage in these practices. Later, an individual who had engaged in a culturally displaced ceremony arrived on my doorstep, traumatized. Physiological adaptations to this person's environment completely disregarded, the manifested imbalance was a result of this person's society/community, and not common in the other's cultural context. And so, this pattern continues intermittently. Has our quick-fix society facilitated our approval and acceptance that something (even if not complete or full circle) is better than nothing?

Perhaps in our examination, we are missing the point. What about culture in its purest sense – the way the people interact with their environment? Is it not important that we hold all perspectives in view? Quantum physics provides a reflection here. It explains how reality unfolds/enfolds based upon where we attend or focus – if we focus on one event, reality is that event. Assuming this is a perspective we can use to assist us in understanding the world, if we look through our glasses at one thing – we see that one thing. What about the other 'things' that are there – do they or do they not exist? Are they, or are they not important? Perhaps when leaving out some of what remains in our periphery, we miss very salient information. Indigenous knowledge systems, or spiralist thought, allow us to flow between the microcosm and the macrocosm – taking in the 'one thing', and then acknowledging that 'one thing' in relation to the whole (or all other 'one things'). How then can we attempt to explain a form of thought or experience that is outside our focus of analysis and still assume we have full understanding if we do not adapt our style of focus?

In an attempt to trace my familial ancestry, as a way of explaining why I was the way I was (conscious recognition of our 'knowing' had long since vanished), many different healing traditions and knowing systems arose. I have appreciated the term "edgewalker," as it evokes for me the person that walks on the edge of many different worlds. And so, being of mixed cultural heritage, raised in a separate cultural environment, living on a land with another cultural influence (that of the original peoples of that land) – I walk in many worlds at one time. The maternal lineage from which I descend is northern Italian ... from here Strega traditions and Christian mysticism traditions call out to me. The paternal lineage from which I descend is Finnish – with ancestry traced back through the Sami – a name change in our family history coinciding with a resettlement of the Sami people in Finland ... from here Sami traditions call out to me. I was born on the southern part of the Canadian Shield, ancient rock on the North American continent. The forest, the waters, the rock, the meteor that fell to earth in this area, the people of the land (human, animal, plant, mineral) teach me in the whispers of the wind ... from here arise similarities to practices of the original peoples, the indigenous peoples of that land – the Anishnabe ... the environment calls out to me. And then, having limited accessibility to physical mentors/elders ... they arrive in spirit form ... the spirits call out to me. And I recognize that I am physical and spiritual all at one moment.

Experience has a way of leading one exactly where they need go. This path of discovery revealed many 'secrets' to me. The dogma, the politics and the leading religious trends of a time influence what people talk about and what people accept. These models influence the underlying beliefs and cognitive concepts a society develops. I was born the way I am – being able to communicate with the world (physical and spiritual) around me. As a young child, it was clear to me from a very early age that certain things should not be known. It is not that anyone necessarily came out directly to indicate such, rather the actions and responses dictated the underlying belief, which you were supposed to believe. And so, accommodation being the rule of the day, I acquiesced for many years. As a youth trying to reconcile what I was seeing with what I knew within, I recall a slap in the face and the words yelled, "you are not to question, you are to believe!" Ongoing acquiescence.

Then, one can only acquiesce for so long, as the body reveals what lies within. And issues of health and balance will call to one. In later years, explorations of my Italian heritage through discussions with the elder women, would yield less than fruitful results when using an Indigenous healing system language, an ancient language - the language of the Strega. This part of our heritage was long removed from our family, giving over to the principles and faith of the Catholic Church. Discussing the church and posing the same questions in a Christian context, or posing questions in relation to daily activities, for example about food, opened the doorway to the secrets that were disguised in 'acceptability'. A stunning example was the combination of spices each elder woman placed in her tomato sauce for pasta - heralding medicinal plants that would assist the digestibility of the food. Different sauces for different base foods. Long lost to these women were the medicinal properties of the plants, however the tradition was retained. To me, this is an example of the whispers on the wind - those things that cannot, at one time in history, be spoken for fear of recrimination.

In the course of reading the limited resources available in writing on Sami healing traditions, the words illuminated that there were no women healers. And yet, in discussions with people, I was continually led to one elder - a woman, Elina Helander, who was taught orally by both her father and her mother. Since then, some other writers have yielded similar truths. Was the first information wrong? No. However, it was that person's truth/understanding at that time. Perhaps this is the 'one thing' that they saw at the time. Elina graced me with sharing. This led me to recognize that although we were hundreds of miles apart, that she lived a tradition and I was reclaiming a tradition - the same knowledge revealed itself to both of us. I am humbled and honored by the ability to share with her. And to know that one day this sharing will be available to others.

Continuing in my personal exploration was the search for why I had access to knowledge I was recognizing as the domain of sacred knowledge of the Anishnabe. (Many of my friends of this nation prefer the term Anishnabe as opposed to Ojibwe. They have told me the term used by the 'whites' was a misunderstanding from how the language was spoken. Somehow Anishnabe was spoken and Ojibwe was heard. There are some friends who continue to use the language of acceptance, Ojibwe. I use both, respecting whom I am with at the moment.) Now, if a person is born on a land - does that make them indigenous to that land? If they are drawn to assisting other people when they are in a state of imbalance, to return/restore balance - are they healers, involved in medicine ways, shamanic in nature? What if there are other people who are seen in the society of the time as the indigenous people of that land, the original people of that land; are those people not indigenous because their ancestry hails elsewhere? Should a person be what they are put on this earth to be - or be what a society says they should or should not be? How does the language the person uses, the language the society uses, the language the world uses open the possibilities to the person and close possibilities to this person? Experience is the purveyor of life. Life is experience. Each day, each person is faced with opportunities and choices - some which they make in a conscious and directed manner, some which they make automatically. How do these choices affect how we see and interpret the world, and each other? How are these choices influenced by the beliefs we hold, whether they are acquired, adopted or original to our selves? When the answers to questions yield volumes of writing - why do we choose to look at some things and not others? Why do we assume that the volumes would be too much, and that a little is adequate - or rather, something is better than everything?

And so, here I am, perceptions or reality or, simply my perceptions? It matters not and at the same time matters fully. Here I am ... standing for the rights of my children - the next generation(s), serving those who arrive on my doorstep, dreaming of reindeer, allowing the questions and searching for the answers ... continually striving to live in balance within this blessed place I have chosen to live. Thank you for exploring with me.

