

Shamanism and Paganism

by Trent Deerhorn

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I have often been asked to comment on the similarities and differences between Shamanism and Paganism. After presenting to a Pagan gathering this summer, the comment was made that Shamanism is what happened when Paganism decided to have leaders in their religious community, much like priests in the modern church.

To a certain degree, this may be true. Shamans have certainly been integral to a community and have, at times, been delegated a leading role as a spiritual advisor. In fact, in many cultures the shaman was highly revered and would be cared for by the community. The Shaman would attend to the physical, mental and spiritual needs of the people, and the community would provide for his/her needs such as food and shelter.

When we look closely at the work of the shaman, however, we soon see that there are many more similarities than there are differences between the shaman and the pagan. Both tend to acknowledge a deep connection to the earth. Some shamans, like myself, see the striking correlation between the masculine and feminine forces of nature as well as that of the masculine and feminine forces of Creation itself. While some pagans attach more importance to one over the other, most pagans and shamans see the balance and harmony between the two as more important to honor. One may have more of an affinity to one than the other, but both are of equal importance.

Many shamans honor the Seasonal Celebrations, those Holy days that Pagans call Sabbats. However, this largely depends on the individual tradition in which the shaman has been trained. North American shamans are trained more in other aspects, so the focal points of celebration and ceremony shift, for example to the Sweat Lodge or the Sun Dance. The purposes of these ceremonies, however, are still quite similar to the ceremonies of other cultures. The 'how to' shifts more than does the 'why'. When one examines shamanic traditions around the world, it becomes less and less likely that one will see as many differences as similarities.

Having been raised with exposure to many Pagan philosophies and beliefs, it is natural for me as a Shaman to see "all as one". This concept is reflected in North American shamanic practices with the statement, "Ho Mitakuye Oyasin," which means "all my relations". This is a statement of confirmation of the closely interwoven relationship between the self and all that is in the entire universe, to which we can lend strength and healing and from which we can also receive. This concept is universally shared by the majority of shamans and pagans.

Generally, the only difference between the two practices that I have experienced is of individual preference. To help with healing and ceremonies, I may call on the Spirit Keepers of the Four Winds and God and Goddess. Others may call on power animals and ancestral spirits for assistance, or on specific angels and saints. The most important aspect is the intent that is set forth.

This concept can cause difficulty for some Christians. It can be disconcerting for members of an organized religion to think that each and every one of us has a direct and unique connection to Deity instead of going through a hierarchy of religious leaders. It can be even more astounding that shamans and pagans have access to the very same angels and saints as their religious leaders. Yet it is nonetheless important to see the bridges that exist if we are ever to move beyond the elitism of one religion over another.

There is much obscurity about shamanism and paganism today because of the aspect of secrecy involved in the practices. This secrecy has been what for many generations has allowed the deeply mystical practices to survive persecution. Let us not forget that even today, the practice of Paganism or Shamanism is punishable by imprisonment and/or death in some countries.

Why do so many people still practice Paganism and Shamanism? I think, it is an intrinsic part of our spiritual self. It appeals to anyone who likes self-responsibility, has a deep connection to nature, a respect for masculine and feminine energy and who prefers a more loosely organized free-flowing structure. What paganism and shamanism are not, is an opportunity to lower moral expectations. We might even have a higher sense of morality because of our personal connection to Deity and Spirit. It is easy for some to be excused by a religious leader for an indiscretion. It is not so easy to be excused for the same indiscretion by Deity. Deity tends to make us work a lot harder to become better

people today than the ones we were yesterday. Having said that, is it any wonder so many people are afraid to get in direct contact with Deity and Spirit? Even though we are forced to work harder at personal development, the connection itself can be unsurpassed.

So many people today have lost the deep spiritual connection that assures them that they are indeed a treasured child of God. Paganism and Shamanism are both based in the deep knowledge and understanding that divine love is a given. That is why we have to work harder, we want to. It is in our cells and our DNA, it is part of our honoring of our Divine Parents. We know we need them to survive and that there is a symbiotic relationship between us and them. They need us to respond to them so that they can flourish. This is perhaps the strongest similarity between Paganism and Shamanism. It really doesn't matter which came first, the chicken or the egg. The fact is that both exist and each is intrinsically connected to the other. That interconnectedness is something that ripples outward and encompasses all that is.

So mote it be.

Trent Deerhorn