



Drawing by T. White

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***Observations on Daniel Noel's The Soul of Shamanism:
A Defense of Contemporary Shamanism and Michael Harner***

By Susan Grimaldi

Daniel Noel, author of the new book *The Soul of Shamanism*, recently asked me to comment on whether I felt that his book had been fair to Michael Harner and contemporary shamanism in general. Because the book sets out to challenge the roots and the focus of contemporary shamanism-as Noel sees them-and it specifically assails Harner as well as Mircea Eliade, Carlos Castaneda, and various other writers on shamanism, I thought it appropriate to answer his question in one of the editorial forums of *Shaman's Drum*. Noel is, of course, aware of my fifteen-year association with Harner.

For those not familiar with Noel's book, he attributes the current interest in shamanism to the popularity of the "Don Juan" series by Castaneda, which allegedly awakened a spiritual hunger in the Western world, resulting from the cultural repression of direct spiritual experience. Expressing concerns about the shamanic movement's indulgence in "fictive fabrications" and its misappropriation of indigenous traditions, Noel ultimately suggests that a better, more appropriate "New Shamanism" may be found within the framework of post-Jungian imaginal psychology, particularly by the seeking of wisdom from the archetype of the great wizard Merlin.

Noel has obviously given much thought toward understanding the widening interest in shamanism. However, I was disturbed by several fundamental aspects of his book. For a book titled *The Soul of Shamanism*, it most curiously ignores the role of the soul in classical shamanic traditions, and it presumptuously reduces the soul to little more than a construct of the personal imagination. For a book that purports to examine the soul of today's shamanic movement, it fails to adequately address the breadth, depth, and variety of contemporary shamanic practices.

As Noel notes, he is neither a shaman nor an anthropologist. He is a religious scholar who is preoccupied with literary criticism and predisposed toward post-

Jungian psychology. By relying extensively on the literary observations and critiques of others - and by limiting the scope of his experiential research to attending a few introductory shamanic workshops - Noel manages to make a great many assumptions about the contemporary shamanic movement that do not stand up to careful scrutiny. He also indulges in devious innuendos and misguided, almost slanderous attacks that, instead of illuminating the soul of shamanism, chop at its very roots.

For example, inspired by several academic critiques¹ of Mircea Eliade's classic study *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Noel dismisses Eliade's scholastic emphasis on ecstatic shamanic flights as a fictive projection of the scholar's personal interest in celestial religions and ascensional liberation. Without bothering to examine the prominent role of ecstatic journeys - both upward and downward - in many forms of indigenous shamanism, Noel leaps blindly to his own fictive projection that "the West's idea of shamanism is not factual at all, but fantastic, fictive, a work of imagination."²

Noel blithely echoes the prejudiced perspectives of Ward Churchill and other culturalists who summarily dismiss non-Native participation in indigenous shamanic traditions as the acting out of culturally embellished fantasies. He consequently views the resurgent interest in shamanism-which he says has little to do with indigenous shamanism-as essentially a self-serving spiritual quest for meaning and personal healing. If Noel had conducted his own field research, perhaps interviewing a cross-section of people involved in the current revival of shamanism, he might have discovered that many are seriously involved in indigenous traditions, as well as contemporary practices. While most individuals have experienced personal healings along their paths, many regularly conduct shamanic healings for the benefit of family, friends, and others.

I cannot help but wonder if Noel's critique of the contemporary shamanic movement has been clouded by his personal views of Castaneda. In *The Soul of Shamanism*, Noel discusses a problem he encountered with a previous book manuscript, which focused on Castaneda's "Don Juan" books. Apparently, Noel's request for permission to use some extended quotes from the books was refused by Castaneda's publisher, possibly at the request of Castaneda himself. Whatever actually happened, the denial made it impossible for Noel to publish his manuscript, and it apparently embittered him against Castaneda. Noel admits, "I never did definitively learn who was wielding power over my poor project - nor did I learn why with any certainty. This brand of brujeria [sorcery] definitely got my attention.... It felt like amoral witchcraft was being directed right at me."

Due to the pronounced hostility toward Castaneda in *The Soul of Shamanism*, I found myself wondering if Noel was engaged in an academic vendetta against him-a vendetta in which Michael Harner gets targeted by indirect association. Indulging in a bit of fictive journalism, Noel mistakenly claims that Harner was on

Castaneda's dissertation committee. He then jumps to the conclusion that Castaneda's endorsement of Harner's *The Way of the Shaman* was instrumental in persuading Harner to leave his academic career in anthropology. Based on these false assumptions-compounded by his antipathy toward Castaneda - Noel concludes that the two must have been engaged in an opportunistic conspiracy.

Noel barely mentions Harner's academic credentials and his years of field research, and he makes no attempt to challenge the integrity of Harner's published research. The truth is that Harner has devoted over forty years to studying shamanism, both in the field and through ethnographic material. He braved dangerous conditions in the upper Amazon jungle, living among the Conibo and Shuar tribes, where he studied and practiced indigenous shamanic methodologies and arts. He also did shamanic fieldwork in Mexico, western North America, the Canadian Arctic, and Samiland (Lapland).

Harner's wide-ranging knowledge of shamanic traditions has been recognized in many ways. He has been a professor and chairman of the Graduate Faculty Department of Anthropology at the New School of Social Research, and he has taught at the University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University, and Yale, as well as having served as co-chairman of the Anthropology Section of the New York Academy of Sciences. He has served on research grant committees for organizations such as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. His books include *The Jivaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls*, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, and *The Way of the Shaman*.

Incidentally, Noel also erroneously refers to Harner as a "former scholar," ignoring the fact that he is still considered a leading authority on shamanism. For example, *Natural History* magazine solicited a contribution from Harner for their special March, 1997, issue titled "The Worlds of the Shaman." He is currently preparing a new book for publication, and he continues to follow his path as a serious scholar in addition to carrying on his teaching and other duties. He has spoken twice by invitation at the Soviet (now Russian) Academy of Sciences, and he recently gave a plenary address at an international scholarly congress.

Noel wrongly assumes that the entire shamanic revival is built on the fictive writings of Castaneda, and that Harner must therefore have capitalized on the same fictions. Noel's assumption that Harner derived his core shamanism programs from Castaneda's work is easily disproved. For example, Harner's emphasis on the classic shamanic journey to the upper and lower worlds is not found in Castaneda's works. In addition, Noel makes the unfounded assertion that the emergence of "drumming circles" was inspired by Castaneda's books. The fact is that Castaneda's early books promoted the use of psychoactive plants - not shamanic drumming. In contrast, Harner's programs at the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS) have from the start utilized sonic driving as the primary method for inducing shamanic states-and they certainly do not make use of

entheogens. Unlike Castaneda's books, which claim to describe an indigenous form of Yaqui shamanism, Harner's core methodologies purposely do not try to imitate any specific regional tradition.' Instead, they provide non-culture-specific training for integrating shamanism and shamanic healing methods into Western life.

Instead of appropriating indigenous traditions-as Noel suggests - Harner is actively committed to helping indigenous people reclaim their shamanic traditions. The president of the Republic of Tuva acclaimed Harner's work through the FSS as being responsible for the revitalization of his country's traditional shamanic practices, which had almost died out during Soviet rule. Professor Mongush Kenin-Lopsan who is recognized internationally as the authority on Tuvan shamanism-made a speech at the 1996 World Conference for Psychotherapy, in Vienna, in which he honored Harner's role in reviving shamanism in Tuva. Kenin-Lopsan stated, "We are very grateful to Michael Harner.... We want to thank him because he helped to glorify shamanism on the whole and Tuvan shamanism in particular."³

Harner's contribution to the Tuvans was to send-at their invitation-a FSS team trained in core shamanism to help encourage the revival of shamanism in Tuva. During its ten-day visit in 1993, the team was called upon to perform numerous public healings in the presence of Tuvan shamans. The Tuvan shamans recognized the FSS team members as fellow shamans worthy of honor, and they even inducted the team members into the Tuvan shamans' society, Dungur ("Drum").

Noel reveals his lack of understanding of shamanic practices when he refers to the healing work of Harner and his trainees as "passive, unconscious fantasies," and when he suggests that people would be better off replacing such practices with "conscious engagement in what Jung called active imagination, an interactive dialogue with imaginal realities." Harner's practical applications of shamanic healing techniques are not passive, they are not unconscious, and they are not fantasy. These practices demand considerable focus and intent.

Noel's exposure to experiential shamanism in general-and to Harner's programs in particular-appears to be quite limited. His characterization of Harner's training programs is based on attending one introductory weekend workshop with Harner in 1990. Considering that Harner and the international faculty at FSS provide indepth training courses lasting as long as three years, it seems presumptuous for anyone to draw conclusions about the depth of Harner's work on the basis of a brief introduction. Despite his general bias against Harner, Noel makes an interesting observation: "In any case, I was impressed with my initial experience of his [Harner's] journey technique."

Noel takes undue issue with Harner's instructions that students learning to journey into non-ordinary reality start by visualizing themselves entering a hole in the earth and looking for animal allies there; he charges that these suggestions

pre-program the journey experience. Harner's suggestions are minimal, and they offer new participants a useful and classic shamanic entry point for exploring the rich fabric of non-ordinary reality. Moreover, I can attest that Harner often encourages advanced students to explore their own avenues for achieving ecstatic states.

Noel's concern about shamanic programming seems a little hypocritical, considering that he later asserts that Western shamanism should be based on embracing the Merlin archetype through active imagination. Noel promotes the figure of Merlin as an archetype of shamanic wisdom that does not draw on indigenous tribal motifs and traditions. Merlin is perhaps an appropriate choice for Noel, as he traces his personal origins to British roots, but I feel it is narrow to view Merlin as a primary path to knowledge for all Westerners. Many Westerners have no ancestral connection to the British Isles or the Celtic tradition. Many have ancestral links to other traditions, be they Nordic, Slavic, Hispanic, African, or Native American.

Many Americans have roots that have grown deep into the North American soil. They have lived in the American landscape, surrounded by the realities and stories of Raven, Bear, Eagle, and Elk. Their desire to reconnect with these aspects of nature and with all of creation does not necessarily mean they are copying tribal motifs. Aspects of nature are imprinted in all of us, reminding us of our link to creation. It has to do with being human and with embracing a basic need and innate desire to connect with the spiritual powers of creation.

Having studied at the Jung Institute in Zurich and the Jung Foundation in New York, undergone years of Jungian analysis, and taught Jungian theory on the college level, I feel qualified to comment on Noel's proposal that shamanism be explored through post-Jungian imaginal psychology. I agree that, by delving into the personal and collective unconscious, Jungian psychology addresses a more comprehensive approach to the total human than do previous psychological theories. Jungian methodologies can help us learn about our complex human nature, they can encourage us to embrace the spiritual components of our beings, and they may even help us recognize the transcendent nature of the soul. However, the primary emphasis in Jungian psychology remains on understanding the personal psyche, becoming conscious of the self.

Noel promotes post-Jungian imaginal psychology as constituting the most authentic form of Western shamanic spirituality. It may provide a starting point for going beyond the boundaries of the psyche, and it may be useful in preparing a person for shamanic initiation. However, shamans ultimately work with transpersonal powers that are far greater than the human mind-powers that do not fit easily within the framework of Jungian analysis.

There is certainly much more to shamanism than imaginal therapies. A shaman may utilize psychological suggestions, but the signature of a shaman is the ability

to find extraordinary solutions to difficult problems and to alleviate physical pain and suffering through the intervention of transpersonal spiritual powers. In my own shamanic counseling practice, I have witnessed countless recoveries and miracles that have occurred as a result of shamanic healings. I've seen severe allergic reactions quieted and chronic rashes disappear within hours of healings. I've seen intensive care patients - who were considered beyond saving by their doctors - recover their life force after shamanic healings and be released from the hospital within one week. One patient who was laboring near death with an elevated heart rate regained a normal beat within seconds of a shamanic intervention, and then sat up with a glow of well-being. Such healings provide confirmation that forces beyond the imaginal are present in shamanic practice.

Although contemporary and indigenous shamanic methodologies may differ in ritual details, they still have much in common. Indigenous shamans travel into the realms of the gods and ancestors, seeking clarity and knowledge beyond the confusion of the Middleworld. As they seek guidance and healing for individuals and communities, they grapple with the powers of the universe and the great mysteries of life. Today's shamanic healers embark on much the same voyages. Through the shamanic journey, they can tap into the compassionate wisdom of the ancestors and align themselves with the powers of creation. They can still seek strong spiritual connections and experience the profound joy of ecstasy. In short, the shamanic journey has much to offer precisely because it is an effective doorway into the world of shamanic realities. It is those transpersonal realities - not imaginal fictions - that are at the heart and soul of shamanism.

Notes

1. Noel refers to critiques by Edmund Leach. "Sermons By a Man or a Ladder," (Yew York Review of Books. Oct. 20. 1966: 2S-31); Jonathan Z. Smith. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987); David Carrasco. *Waiting for the Dawn: Mircea Eliade in Perspective* (Boulder, CO:Westview, 1985); and several others.
2. All unidentified quotes are from *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities* by Daniel Noel (New York, NY: Continuum, 1997).
3. Quote from *Achieving Personal Wisdom: through Shamanic Journeying*, a video by Michael Harner (Mill. Valley, CA: Foundation for Shamanic Studies, 1996).

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