



STEPHEN DATNOFF

THE GOOD RED ROAD

Leslie Gray On Rediscovering America's Oldest Psychology

BARBARA PLATEK

Leslie Gray never intended to practice shamanism. She was completing a fellowship at Harvard University and following a traditional path toward a doctorate in clinical psychology when she suffered a neck injury in a car accident. After eleven different orthopedic specialists failed to relieve her pain, she took the recommendation of a Native American friend and sought help from a Cherokee shaman — a traditional healer — who was able to lessen her suffering. Having experienced firsthand the power of indigenous healing, she began studying it while she completed her doctorate. This dual path has helped her become a mediator between Native American and Euro-American worldviews.

A Boston-born, Los Angeles-raised woman of Oneida and Powhatan heritage, Gray is uniquely qualified to move between worlds. Though she does not recommend that we go back to the ways of the past — she has adapted her own “shamanic counseling” to the needs of her clients’ modern lives — she believes that shamanism can restore balance to Western psychology and medicine, which she sees as weighted toward a reductionistic science.

Gray has a private practice in San Francisco, California, and teaches workshops and seminars worldwide, sometimes leading travel-study trips to sacred sites. She has lectured at the University of California at Berkeley and the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and is the founder of the Woodfish Institute (www.woodfish.org), which promotes sustainability based on indigenous wisdom. Her work has been published in *East West*, *Re-Vision Journal*, and the anthologies *Ecopscychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (Sierra Club Books) and *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future* (Bear & Company).

I met Gray for this interview in her office in San Francisco’s Russian Hill neighborhood. She led me into the space where she sees clients, a room decorated with a buffalo-skin rug, eagle feathers, rattles and drums, and small bones and rocks. Several times during our conversation Gray emphasized the importance of nature in the healing process. She believes our isolation from nature in the U.S. causes us to feel alienated from our environment and ourselves. Being in touch with nature, she explains, is an essential part of what it means to “walk in beauty,” a Native American expression for being in harmony with oneself and all the living things of the earth.

Platek: How do you define *shamanism*?

Gray: Shamanism is the use of altered states of consciousness for the purpose of healing. Generally speaking, it involves traveling to other realms and making contact with spirit helpers. The word was coined by anthropologists who recognized

similar therapeutic methods being used in different traditional cultures around the world. They took the word from the Turko-Tungusian Siberians and applied it to the role of healer in many cultures.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some anthropologists began to participate in the shamans' rituals and actually go into altered states themselves to learn more about them. When these anthropologists' writings began to appear in print, it brought shamanism into the public eye. Books like Carlos Castaneda's *Teachings of Don Juan* became hugely popular.

We have now reached a point where almost anything vaguely indigenous and spiritual can be called "shamanic." I don't think this is a real threat to the practice of shamanism, though. America is given to spiritual faddism. When the fad has passed, the substantive practice of shamanism will remain.

Platek: How did you come to practice shamanism?

Gray: I started out training to become a psychologist. Then, while in graduate school, I began studying with medicine people. I had to hide this, because the academic environment at the time was not supportive of "alternative" healing. But the more I studied with traditional healers, the more in awe I was of their powers, and the more disenchanted I became with the work I was doing at a psychiatric hospital. I decided to move to the West Coast and take some time to sort things through. It was during that period that I had a vision: I was sitting on a rock in the middle of a body of water, and when I looked down at the water, it was roiling with snakes. All of a sudden a huge, dragonlike snake rose out of the water and devoured me and spat my bones back onto the rock in the four directions. When I reassembled, I was wearing buckskin clothing and had on a snake belt and a snake necklace. I had a buoyant feeling, as if I were being elevated. But then I made the decision to come back down. When I did, I knew with certainty that my path in life was to practice shamanism, but to find a new way to do it that would fit with modern times. I began to walk back down the hill with a feeling of balance and beauty in every step. I knew I had to create a bridge between these two healing modalities, and I also knew that it would not be easy. But I saw my good red road. I saw my path.

Platek: What is the "good red road"?

Gray: Our sacred path. Every path is unique. My good red road and yours should look nothing alike, because each is congruent with who we are.

Platek: Would you say that many of us in Western culture have difficulty finding our path?

Gray: That very difficulty is something about which people often come to me for help. I encounter a lot of people who are good at what they do but haven't found a way to channel those talents toward a path that's congruent with who they are inside. A great poverty of our contemporary culture is that there is no



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rite of passage to help us find our life's work or true purpose. We move from one thing to another mostly by process of elimination. We have no concept of opening ourselves up to whatever might be our calling. Shamanism allows ways to do that.

Platek: What do you think your professors and clinical supervisors at Harvard might have said about your vision?

Gray: They would have found my experience peculiar and certainly not "real" psychology. But so much has changed since then. The public now has a widespread hunger for the sacred, for a sense of the connectedness of all things. Modern physics seems to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all life. It does not restrict itself to a linear model anymore. Quantum concepts are more in

harmony with the shamanic view than with Newtonian physics.

Even those psychologists who approach their work in a strictly linear, logical manner will eventually be affected by these shifts in the scientific paradigm. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV* [DSM-IV] — the bible of mainstream psychology — now recognizes spiritual crises and experiences. There is an excellent book recently published by the American Psychological Association called *Varieties of Anomalous Experience*. American psychology categorizes nonpathological visionary experiences as "anomalous." Life-changing spiritual visions have been disparaged as nonreplicable and therefore "nonscientific." But just because you can't replicate an experience doesn't mean it isn't real.

(end of excerpt)