Holger Kalweit

WHEN INSANITY IS A BLESSING: THE MESSAGE OF SHAMANISM

My body was quivering. While I remained in this state, I began tossing. A chant was coming out of me without my being able to do anything to stop it. Many things appeared to me presently: huge birds and animals. . . . These were visible only to me, not to others in my house. Such visions happen when a man is about to become a shaman; they occur of their own accord. The songs force themselves out complete without any attempt to compose them . . .

ACCOUNT OF ISAAC TENS, A GITSKAN INDIAN,
FROM *The Shaman's Doorway* BY STEPHEN LARSEN

The concept of spiritual emergency, which differentiates transformational crises from psychiatric disorders, is supported independently by evidence from many different fields. Particularly important are the data related to the shamanic traditions found in the historical and anthropological literature. Shamanism is the world's oldest religion and humanity's most ancient healing art; its origins very likely reach back tens of thousands of years to the Paleolithic era.

Shaman is a term used by anthropologists for a special kind of medicine man or woman or witch doctor, who regularly enters nonordinary states of consciousness to heal, obtain information by extrasensory means, or conduct rituals to influence weather or game animals. Shamanism is nearly universal; its practice covers the time span from the Stone Age until the present, and its various forms can be found in Africa, Europe, North and South America, Asia, Australia, and Polynesia. The fact that shamanic cultures attribute great value to nonordinary states of consciousness is extremely important to the concept of spiritual emergency.

The career of many shamans begins with a dramatic episode of an altered state of consciousness that traditional Western psychiatry sees as a manifestation of serious mental disease. It includes visionary experiences of descent into the underworld, attacks from demons, and inhuman tortures and ordeals, followed by a sequence of dying and being reborn and subsequent ascent into celestial realms. During this time, the future shaman can experience a wide spectrum of extreme emotions and behave in most unusual ways.

These symptoms suggest a grave psychiatric disorder when judged by Western medical standards. Yet, if this crisis is successfully overcome and completed, it results in personal healing, superior social functioning, and the development of shamanic abilities. The individual is then accepted by the tribe as an extremely important and useful member of the group. However, it is important to emphasize that strange experiences in themselves are not enough to qualify one as a shaman. Being a shaman requires a successful completion of the episode and a return to full functioning in everyday life. Shamanic cultures make a clear distinction between people who are shamans and those who are sick or crazy.

After having completed the initiatory crisis, a shaman is typically able to enter nonordinary states of consciousness on his or her terms and terminate them at will. The shaman performs this task regularly for the purpose of healing others, gaining deeper insight into reality, and receiving artistic inspiration. Like the shamanic crisis, these states have many features that Western psychiatry tends to see as pathological. In addition, many shamans have the means and the skills to induce similar states in their clients and are thus able to achieve dramatic healing of various emotional and psychosomatic conditions.

These observations suggest that the theoretical understanding of psychotic states and the practical approach to them existing at present in Western psychiatry have to be seriously reexamined and reevaluated. The evidence from shamanic cultures certainly supports the central concept of this book: that it is possible to approach some nonordinary states of consciousness in such a way that they have beneficial results for the individual involved and for the community.

We have chosen an excerpt from the writings of Holger Kalweit, whom we believe to be uniquely qualified to discuss the relationship between shamanism and the problem of spiritual emergency. He is a psychologist with many years of clinical practice, a deep interest in anthropology, and extensive experience in field research as an ethnologist in Hawaii, in the rest of the United States, and in the Himalayas. Kalweit combines in a very original way the study of shamanism, the mythology of various peoples, transpersonal psychology, and near-death experiences. In his approach, the cross-culturally obtained data are subjected to systematic interdisciplinary analysis. The result is a new transpersonal orientation that integrates anthropology, ethnology, and psychology.

Kalweit lives in Switzerland and works as a free-lance writer. His book Dreamtime and the Inner Space: The World of the Shaman describes shamans of different cultures as pioneers who have prepared the ground for modern consciousness research by their inner journeys and discoveries in the unknown territories of the human psyche. His book Ancient Healers, Medicine Men, and Shamans specifically explores the healing aspects of shamanism. Another book, Healing of Knowledge, coauthored by Amalie Schenk, discusses the inner way to knowledge and its relationship to the traditional approach to knowledge as practiced by Western science.

Western culture and medicine have declared total war on sickness and death: on death because it signifies the end of our earthly existence, and on sickness because it impairs our enjoyment of life. We look upon sickness as bad, something to get rid of as quickly as possible, to put an end to. We see it as something invading us: a virus, a bacillus or whatever, and so we experience it profoundly as an alien process that incapacitates, paralyzes, and destroys our body internally, as an unnatural state of affairs that should be suppressed by every conceivable means. In short, sickness and death are the gargoyles of our civilization.

Sickness to us is a blemish, a dirty spot on the self-deceiving mirror of our technological megalomania. Suffering and sickness are seen by our culture as something that emerges from a source hostile to the body, and so our fight against sickness, death, suffering, and physical pain is felt by us to be completely natural. Our static view of the world abhors any kind of change, except perhaps economic and technological. In particular we resent any alteration of consciousness and ontological change.

If we were able to understand sickness and suffering as processes of physical and psychic transformation, as do Asian peoples and tribal cultures, we would gain a deeper and less biased view of psychosomatic and psychospiritual processes and begin to realize the many opportunities presented by suffering and the death of the ego. Our long and continuous battle against death and sickness has so deeply taken root in our consciousness that even modern psychology has felt compelled to take up the cudgel against physical weakness and dying. Consequently, psychic and physical suffering have remained unacknowledged as a means of altering consciousness and as forces and mechanisms of transformation and self-healing.

In recent years a general revaluation of consciousness—that essence which pervades all our actions in life—has taken place, accompanied by a more positive attitude towards states of altered consciousness. Science has thus begun to reassess the sacred knowledge of past cultures and traditional societies which do not regard sickness and death as primarily evil and hostile, but acknowledge their positive internal dynamism. For these traditional cultures sickness, suffering, and death are manifestations of the body's inherent wisdom, to which we only have to surrender to reach areas of perception capable of revealing the true basis of our earthly existence.

They look upon life in the Beyond and on death as a way of regenerating and recovering from our earthly existence. They also see

sickness as a process that cleanses us of the bad habits we have accumulated by our false attitude to life. To die and to suffer a severe sickness are part of the basic experience of the shaman's path. This does not mean that every shaman has to undergo this kind of initiation—there are several other possibilities—but in the later stages of shamanic development they are a means of further transformation. We therefore have to let go of the prejudices we have held for generations and of our pessimism towards pain and suffering. We must learn to look death in the face and come to understand sickness as something resulting from an inner imbalance. Only then will we discover its true meaning in the context of our existence. Sickness is a call for self-realization, self-development, and in extreme cases—as the following narrative shows—a variety of shamanic initiation.

On his travels through Siberia, the Hungarian explorer Vilmos Diószegi collected many reports about shamanic vocations experienced as a result of sickness. Once he asked Kyzlasov, a former shaman of the Sagay tribe from Kyzlan on the river Yes, how he had acquired his powers. Kyzlasov reacted with a stony silence. But then his wife began to tell her husband's story:

> How did he become a shaman? Sickness seized him when he was twenty-three years old and he became a shaman at the age of thirty. That was how he became a shaman, after the sickness, after the torture. He had been ill for seven years. While he was ailing, he had dreams: He was beaten up several times, sometimes he was taken to strange places. He had been around quite a lot in his dreams and he had seen many things. . . . He who is seized by the shaman sickness and does not begin to exercise shamanism, must suffer badly. He might lose his mind, he may even have to give up his life. Therefore he is advised, "You must take up shamanism so as not to suffer!" Some even say, "I became a shaman only to escape illness."[1]

Sunchugasev, another shaman who was present, added:

> The man chosen for shamandom is first recognized by the black spirits. The spirits of the dead shamans are called black spirits. They make the chosen one ill and then they force him to become a shaman.[2]

Suzukpen, a former important shaman of the Siberian Soyot community near the Suy-Surmak River, narrated the following about his long illness and his calling to shamanism:

It has been a long time. With two of my brothers, the three of us went to hunt squirrels. Late at night we were crossing a mountain, going after the squirrels, when suddenly I saw a black crow right in the middle of the road.

We were advancing in single file. I was the first. I came nearer, but the crow kept crouching in the middle of the road. It stayed right there and waited for me.

When I reached it, I threw some snow toward it from a branch.

It never moved.

Then I hit its beak with my stick.

Kok-kok. The knock resounded loudly.

What was all this? What was going to happen to me? Because the night before—before seeing the crow—I had already felt miserable.

Next day I went back to where I had seen the crow. Not even a trace of it was to be seen, anywhere! Although the others, that is my brothers, had seen it too.

From then on, from the time I hit the beak of that crow, I became very ill. My mind was deranged.

I have been suffering for as long as seven years.[3]

Among the Siberian Soyot most prospective shamans become ill—girls between the ages of ten and twelve and young men at the age of twenty to twenty-five. They suffer from headaches, nausea, and loss of appetite. When a shaman is called to attend them he says that one of the mountain spirits wants to turn the sick one into a shaman. One shaman by the name of Sadaqpan from the Ulug Dag region was ill in bed for a year prior to his initiation. He suffered from a heart condition, frequently screamed out in pain, and behaved like a madman. He was thirty years old at the time. The Soyot call the time during which a spirit torments a future shaman *albys*. This period frequently remains a blank in the shaman's life; he cannot remember what happened. He gabbles confused words, displays very curious habits of eating, and sings continuously.

The son of a shaman called Sandyk from the area near the Sistigkhem told how his father experienced his call to shamanism:

At first, my father was sickly; he had a weak heart and so he suffered from attacks. That is why people thought he might start practicing the shaman's art. A spirit appeared to him, or rather two spirits: Säräl čoydu and Tämir qastaj. The first one was what we call a "great spirit" (Uluy aza). Near the Khamsara lived a famous shaman of the Aq čódu tribe, called Amyj or Taqqa. He was brought to see my father and told him, "On the fifteenth of this month you will become a shaman." Amyj was a great shaman.[4]

Among the Siberian Tofa, too, shamans become sick before their initiation and are tormented by spirits. A shaman called Anjataj suffered for three years from headaches and pains in his arms and legs. In his dreams the spirits asked him to become a shaman. He slept for three days in a row. When he felt better he followed his calling. The shaman Vassily Mikailovic of the Amastayev clan, who was initiated at the age of eighteen, was so dangerously ill that he could not rise from his bed for a whole year. Only when he agreed to the demands of the spirits did his health improve.[5]

Franz Boas has recorded the experiences of a Kwakiutl Indian who became a healer after having always doubted and been critical of shamans. One day he went out hunting with some others, paddling in a canoe along the coast. He saw a wolf on a boulder which jutted out from the rock face. The wolf was rolling around on its back and scratching its mouth with its paws. To everybody's surprise the wolf did not run away as they came closer but appeared to be very trusting. There was a deer bone stuck in its bloodstained mouth; it looked at the hunters as if it expected help from them.

The young hunter soothed the wolf, saying, "You are in trouble, friend. Now I shall be like a great shaman and cure you, friend. I will take out your great trouble and set you right, friend. Now reward me, friend, that I may be able, like you, to get everything easily, all that is taken by you, on account of your fame as a harpooner and your supernatural power. Now reward my kindness to you, friend. Go on! Sit still on the rock and let me get my means of taking out that bone." Later he dreamt about this wolf which appeared to him in the form of a harpooner. It told him where the seals were to be found and assured him that he would always be a successful hunter.

As time passed, he always managed to bring home a good kill. One day other members of his tribe found some crates full of food and clothing that did not seem to belong to anyone. But the contents of these crates had been contaminated with smallpox (perhaps intentionally by white settlers). All his hunting companions died and he was lying among them without hope when two wolves came trotting along and began to lick him. They vomited foam all over his body, which they then licked off again, only to vomit more foam over him. They continued to do this until he felt stronger. Then he recognized the wolf he had once saved.

Restored by the wolves, he continued to roam around with his brother wolves. One day, however, his wolf friend pressed its muzzle against his chest bone and vomited all its magical force into him. He fell into a deep sleep and dreamt that the wolf changed into a human being and told him that he would now be able to heal the sick, to project energy that makes people ill, and to catch souls. When he awoke he was trembling all over. Now he was a shaman. It felt good and he was all the time in a sort of delirium and sang the four sacred songs the wolf had bequeathed to him.[6]

Here is a somewhat similar story about Lebi'd, another Kwakiutl Indian. Lebi'd was ill for a long time, three winters in a row. When he finally died it was bitterly cold outside. The snow and the storm continued unabated so he could not be buried. Again and again the people had to postpone the burial ceremony. Suddenly he was heard singing a song, and the wolves that began to gather around his corpse were howling with him. Then the people knew that Lebi'd had become a shaman.

He followed the wolves into the forest, and although the people looked for him they could not find him. On the second day, a song could be heard from far off. In the meantime his house had been cleaned and all were waiting for his return. They had started a fire in his hearth, and the people beat the drum three times. Then Lebi'd appeared, stark naked. He sang a sacred song:

I was taken away far inland to the edge of the world,
by the magical power of heaven, the treasure, ha, wo, ho.
Only then was I cured by it, when it was really thrown into me,
the past life bringer of Nau'alakŭmē, the treasure, ha, wo, ho.

Lebi'd danced and danced, and when all the people had withdrawn and only the other shamans remained, he began to relate what had happened to him, as is the custom.

When he died, a man had appeared to him and invited him to go with him. He had risen to his feet and had been surprised to see his body lying on the ground. They had run far into the forest and soon entered a house where he was given a new name by a man called Nau'alakŭmē, who had transferred his shamanic power to him by vomiting a quartz crystal over him. Singing his sacred song, he had caused the crystal to enter him (Lebi'd) through the lower part of his chest bone. That is how he had become a shaman. The wolves, meanwhile, had changed into humans. As Nau'alakŭmē sang, he

pressed Lebi'd's head, first with his left hand, then with his right, and finally with both. Then he passed his hands all over Lebi'd's body and shook the illness out of him. He did this four times.

All the other creatures present then took off their wolf masks and approached his dead body. As Nau'alakŭmē breathed his breath into him, the wolves licked his body. Before that, they had caused his soul to shrink to the size of a fly. His soul was then reintroduced into his body through his head. Immediately after that, his body came alive again. He started to sing a sacred song and—this time in his physical body—set out with the wolves into the forest where Nau'alakŭmē taught him not only how to cure illnesses, but also to send out sickness against others. He had also prophesied that Lebi'd would always dream about him and that he could come to him for advice whenever he was in need of it.[7]

These examples of how two Kwakiutl Indians experienced their calling feature an encounter with helping spirits in animal form—in both cases wolves, who were actually humans in disguise. The wolf vomits his magic strength into the Indian who—as is often the case in an altered state of consciousness—becomes euphoric. In most cases the experience of being resurrected after terrible torments, sickness, and near-death is accompanied by a feeling of euphoria, because the suffering has annihilated all former characteristics of the personality. The sickness is a cleansing process that washes away all that is bad, pitiful, and weak. It floods the individual like a raging river and cleanses it of all that is limited and dull. In this way the sickness becomes a gateway to life. In all cultures people who have a near-death experience encounter beings that represent the resurrection of life. These beings bestow life; they are bearers of divine power. After the sickness—providing it was sufficiently severe and frightening—a new life, a transformed existence, begins.

Lebi'd's story shows another typical NDE (near-death experience) characteristic. As he "dies" and leaves his body, he is met by a being from the Beyond and taken to a "house"—symbolic of a transcendent state—where not only is he given a new name to confirm his inner transformation, but quartz crystals—symbols of transparence, illumination, and magical power—are placed into his chest. The life-giving spirit splits off these crystals from himself and spits them out, thereby allowing Lebi'd to share the nature and the living strength of the spirit.

What happens next reminds one very strongly of methods of magnetopathic treatment, the laying on of hands by which negative

energy—the illness—is stroked away or literally shaken out of the body. This practice is common to psychic healers the world over. The restored Lebi'd is now the possessor of higher knowledge. The wolves and the life-bringer accompany him to his dead body and cause his soul to reenter it. Thereafter the life-bringer is Lebi'd's helping spirit, who will stand by his side whenever he heals anyone. Lebi'd became a shaman with the help of the essence of life itself, supported by wolves representing the forces of the animal realm. He became a Chosen One, capable of seeing life and nature undistorted, because the mask of earthly ignorance and delusion was removed from his eyes.

On the Indonesian Mentawai Islands, the calling to shamanism is also preceded by a sickness—in this case malaria—sent by the heavenly spirits. The person destined to become a shaman dreams that he ascends to heaven or goes into the forest to look for monkeys. If the spirits abduct someone chosen for shamanism to heaven he is given a beautiful new body like that of the spirit beings. After his return to earth, the spirits help him with his healing. In this way a new seer is born, known as a Si-kerei, someone who possesses magical powers: "seeing eyes" and "hearing ears."[8]

At this point we might properly ask whether the sickness is sent by the heavenly spirits themselves or whether it should be seen as a byproduct of a person's spiritual growth, of a process aimed at revealing to the sick initiate the heavenly—respectively, his inner—world. Be that as it may, in many tribal cultures the initial impetus towards transformation comes either from heaven or from the underworld, because that is where you are given a new body—the spirit body of the beings in the Beyond which equips the initiate with their knowledge and powers and enables him to transcend matter, space, and time.

Among the Zulus someone destined to become a shaman (Inyanga) suddenly becomes ill, behaves in a curious manner, and is unable to eat normal food. He will eat only certain things. He continually complains of pain in various parts of his body and has the most incredible dreams—he becomes a "house of dreams." He is quickly moved to tears, weeping at first softly to himself and then loudly for everyone to hear. He may be ill for several years before he sings his first great song. When that happens, the other members of the tribe come running and join in. Now everyone is waiting for him to die, which might happen any day. The whole village finds hardly any sleep at night, because someone about to become an Inyanga

causes a great deal of unrest. He hardly sleeps. And if he falls asleep, he soon wakes up and begins to sing even in the middle of the night. He may get it into his head to climb onto a roof and jump around like a frog, shaking himself and singing. His helping spirit keeps whispering into his ear and promises him that he will soon be able to give advice to those that come to him. He can hear the whistling of the spirits and converses with them in the language of the humans. Often, however, he does not immediately realize what they are trying to tell him.

At this point it is still unclear whether he suffers from a sickness that will turn him into an Inyanga, or whether he is just crazy. If the people think that he is destined to become a shaman they say, "Ah, now we can see. It's in his head." The helping spirit (Itongo) is at first perceived rather vaguely by the sick person, who cannot properly understand it. For that reason, the other members of the tribe must help him to disentangle what he has seen and heard. Soon the Itongo will say, "Go to so-and-so and he will give you medicine." After that the initiate improves. When the helping spirit finally promises to stand by him he says to the sick person, "It is not you that will talk to people but we will tell them everything they need to know, whenever they come for advice." If the relatives of the sick man do not want him to become a shaman they summon another recognized healer and ask him to appease the spirit. In that case the spirit may leave the man but in all likelihood he will be plagued by sickness for the rest of his life. Even if he does not become an Inyanga, he still has higher knowledge and the people say of him, "If he had become a seer he would have been a great seer, a first-class seer."[9]

The Mundu mugo, the shaman of the Kenyan Kikuyu, receives his calling and his spiritual support from God (Ngai). It is however assumed that he has an inborn disposition for healing. The impulse for the initiation as a Mundu mugo arises from a sickness characterized by dramatic dreams, hallucinations, inability to concentrate, weak eyesight, and abnormal forms of behavior. At the same time his family is visited by a series of misfortunes and accidents. If another Mundu mugo then describes all these signs as meaningful, the initiation is confirmed and publicly sanctioned.

This is followed by the initiation ceremony. If the novice is poor and cannot afford the expensive festivities involved, a ritual is nevertheless performed to relieve his suffering and to accord him the status of an "unconfirmed" Mundu mugo. If he is rich and can pay for the

appropriate festivities, he becomes a fully recognized Mundu mugo. Thereafter he specializes in particular skills such as prophecy, diagnoses of illnesses, knowledge of herbs, restoration of the fertility of women, unmasking of sorcerers, or curing mental illness.[10]

According to Young Sook Kim, the calling of Korean shamanesses expresses itself in various physiological disturbances, conspicuous forms of social behavior, outrageous activities, impoliteness, and a lifestyle that inverts traditional cultural values. For instance, the prospective shamaness may wear winter clothes in summer, bathe in cold water in winter, reveal secrets which are taboo to mention, or begin to tell the fortune of anyone who happens to be passing in the street. This illness is known as Sinbyong, "caught by the spirits" or "the spirits have descended," and may be accompanied by visual and auditory hallucinations. At first the relatives find it difficult to establish whether such a woman is really mentally deranged or whether they are dealing with a vocation for shamanism, because in many cases the initial symptoms are practically indistinguishable. The Koreans believe that the spirits visit especially those whose maum (heart or soul) are "split" and upon whom a tragic fate has been bestowed.[11]

In Korea, shamans (Mu dang), 60,000 of whom are at present organized in a professional association (the number of nonregistered shamans is estimated at over 140,000),[12] are no longer accorded a high social status but find themselves on the lowest rung of the social ladder, together with prostitutes, shoe menders, soothsayers, Buddhist monks, and dancing girls. Many more women than men feel called upon to become a Mu dang, although there are some men or hermaphrodites who feel attracted to shamanism. On the Korean mainland, 90 percent of practicing shamans are women; on Cheju Island, up to 60 percent. The behavior and dress of male shamans is extremely effeminate.

The calling for shamanism occurs in three ways:

1. By birth into or adoption by a Mu dang family
2. By Mu dang apprenticeship
3. By a spontaneous feeling of vocation

The most frequent case, the psychic experience of a calling, begins with a sickness that cannot be cured by customary methods of treatment. The person concerned hears voices, speaks in tongues, can absorb only liquid nourishment, and grows as thin as a skeleton.

Bouts of depression and a manic compulsion to dance until unconscious alternate. The sick person goes on long walks into the mountains or to the sea and has dreams in which helping spirits give instructions and reasons for founding a new cult. The novice shaman is overcome by visions of the native pantheon of Gods or may acquire his objects of power by suddenly falling to the ground. After a tragic event such as the death of a relative, an epidemic, famine, or economic ruin, a person may become a Mu dang apprentice if the Buddhist monasteries, to which the mentally ill go to be cured, are unable to alleviate the symptoms of the sickness. In such cases the spontaneous calling is followed by an apprenticeship, extending over several years, with an older and experienced Mu dang.[13]

We would like to illustrate the genesis of this sickness with reports about the calling of two Korean shamanesses:

> Mrs. Lee Kum Sun's boyfriend died at the age of twenty, which greatly distressed her. Shortly before that, her parents had arranged for her to be married to her present husband but her dead boyfriend kept appearing to her in her dreams. At the age of thirty-two she began to see him in her dreams continually and developed the first signs of her sickness. One day she dreamt that she ran barefoot and completely naked to the foot of a mountain where a white-bearded man appeared to her and promised her health and good fortune. At the age of forty she was initiated by an old shamaness. After that everything went well and her health was restored.
>
> Mrs. Oh Un-sook disliked her husband from the very beginning. After several years, unusual symptoms developed. She lost her appetite, was unable to eat meat or fish, only drank cold water, and developed headaches. She spent most of her time alone. These symptoms lasted about ten years. When she was forty years old she dreamt of thunder and lightning and of a pillar of light that struck her head three times. Thereupon three old men from heaven appeared to her in a dream. One day she saw a vision of a great general riding on a white horse who approached her. Thereafter she dreamt many times that she went to bed with this general. At the age of forty-seven she was initiated as a shamaness and all her symptoms disappeared.[14]

In one of these two shamanesses the calling was triggered by the tragic loss of a lover, in the other by an unhappy marriage. Psychologists would no doubt say that these are clear examples of a desire to escape an unsatisfactory reality. However, such a conclusion would be somewhat premature. We must not overlook the fact that an un-

happy marriage and the death of a lover are traumatic experiences which can provide fertile ground for entering an altered state of consciousness. Traumatic shock can cause the collapse of psychic structures, whereupon a more subtle and paranormal sensitivity begins to grow from the ruins of normal consciousness. Lee Kum Sun met a white-bearded old man—the archetype of wisdom—and Oh Un-sook had a vision of a Korean cultural hero—also a symbol of wisdom and strength. Moreover, Oh Un-sook shares the General's bed—a further pointer to her intimate connection and fusion with the transpersonal.

Oh Un-sook's vision of a pillar of light also reinforces the impression that we might be dealing with an illuminating manifestation which afforded her contact with the Beyond and heavenly beings. These two simple narratives indicate that we may not be confronted by abstruse creations of a deviant mind but rather a high form of intuitive insight.

Eduardo Calderón, a Peruvian healer (*curandero*), began to be plagued by disquieting dreams and visions in his childhood:

> During my youth from more or less the age of seven or eight years I had some rare dreams. I still remember them. I remember dreams in which I flew, that my ego departed from the state in which it was, and I went to strange places in the form of a spiral. Or I flew in a vertiginous manner: sssssssssss, I departed. I tried to retain myself and I could not. Strange dreams, strange. I had these until the age of more or less twelve or thirteen. . . .
>
> I have seen things as if someone opens a door and the door is closed. I have had nightmares, but not ordinary ones. I have seen myself introduced through a hole in the air, and I went through an immense, immense void. I have felt numbness in all my body as if my hands were huge but I could not grasp. I could not hold up my hand.[15]

He began to follow his call to serve mankind at an early age. However, his ambition to study medicine was frustrated by the poverty of his family. So he had no other choice than to earn a living by the use of his artistic talents. At the age of twenty-one he developed a typical shamanic illness that modern medicine was unable to diagnose or treat therapeutically:

> In Lima I was studying fine arts and suddenly I began drinking and spending everything on drink. I came down with a rare sickness. It happened that on one occasion I saw a cat on my left shoulder. It was enough that with that impression of a cat everything that I did was overturned . . . and I lost the power to hold things in my hand and to stand up. I completely lost all my strength. I could not hold myself up in a standing position and walked like a sleepwalker, according to what they tell me.[16]

Eduardo's family had faith in the health abilities of curanderos and called in a woman healer conversant with the properties of herbs. She gave Eduardo a mixture of juices extracted from plants, whereupon he vomited up a dark brew despite the fact that he had not drunk any other liquid. He immediately improved. On the basis of his experiences during his sickness he decided to become a healer. He supported himself by working as a longshoreman and by producing pottery at home. At the same time he became the apprentice of a local curandero. He also studied with various shamans in Chiclayo, Mocupe, and Ferranafe in northern Peru. For several years he acted as assistant to these curanderos until finally his teacher in Ferranafe pronounced him fully qualified.

He was twenty-eight years old at the time and had served four years as an apprentice shaman. He swore never to misuse his powers and to apply them only for the benefit of mankind. Eduardo considers shamanism to be a simple matter of "seeing," a skill or trade anyone is capable of acquiring providing he regularly trains himself in it. It is however open to question whether such training and practicing alone will ensure success, because Eduardo—as his life history shows—was called to his trade by a higher power. Moreover, we must not exclude the possibility that he inherited certain shamanic propensities because both his grandfathers were shamans.

From a description given by W. Sieroszewski we can gain an idea of the liberating and healing qualities of the shamanic seance when the shaman himself feels stricken and debilitated by illness. The Yakut shaman Tüsput, who was critically ill for more than twenty years, could find relief from his suffering only when he conducted a seance during which he fell into a trance. In the end he fully regained his health by this method. However, if he held no seances over a long period of time he once again began to feel unwell, exhausted, and indecisive.[17] In general, the symptoms of an illness subside when a candidate for shamanism enters a trance. The same phenomenon was observed by L. W. Shternberg in the case of a Siberian Gold shaman

that even his colleagues were unable to cure. Only when he learned how to enter a trance state did his illness leave him.[18] Similarly, G. Sancheyev mentions a shaman who at first refused to follow his calling but was forced by illness to consort with the spirits and hold seances, which in the end led to his recovery.[19]

The story of the Yakut shaman Uno Harva also features a relief from illness once he agreed to take up shamanism:

> I became ill when I was twenty-one years old and began to see with my eyes and hear with my ears things others could neither hear nor see. For nine years I fought against the spirit, without telling anyone what had happened because I feared they might not believe me or make fun of me. In the end I became so ill that I was close to death. So I began to shamanize, and very soon my health improved. Even now I feel unwell and sick whenever I am inactive as a shaman over a longer period of time.[20]

Adrian Boshier describes the illness of Dorcas, the daughter of a Methodist preacher, who is now a recognized Zulu shamaness (sangoma). For three years she was bedridden and during this time could absorb only small quantities of food and drink. At night she left her body and visited distant places; in this way she traveled everywhere. Even the white doctors were at a loss. Then one night her dead grandfather appeared to her in a dream. He said he would enter her body and continue his work on earth in this fashion. Being a devout Christian she did not agree to this. After that, other shamans appeared in her dreams, scolded her, and called upon her to become one of them. These visions became more and more frequent, passing before her inner eye like pictures on a cinema screen.

One night several famous sangomas came to her bedside. Chanting a song, they seriously advised her to submit and make a shamanic headdress for herself. She still failed to understand what was happening and wanted to be cured by ceremonies and rites of the Apostolic church. She was taken to a river to be christened. They guided her into the water, and just as they were about to submerge her she was lifted up by a gigantic snake under her feet—her grandfather! Her mother then took her to an aunt who was herself a shamaness. Soon many other healers and shamans assembled, beating their drums and exhorting her to get up and sing. She then danced and sang hour after hour. That was the beginning of her training, and from then on she followed the instructions of the spirits.[21]

A refusal to follow the call leads to unnecessary suffering. The

South American Guajiro shamaness Graziela, for example, was asked by her helping spirits to travel with them to the other world. But she says:

> I do not like traveling to these distant places. My spirits often invite me go there, but I prefer not to go with them. Sometimes I say to them, "I do not want to go with you." Whenever I turn down such an invitation I develop a fever and become very ill. That is my punishment. Then I must chew manilla to get better again. I receive many invitations.[22]

Every sickness is an attempt at healing and every healing an attempt to escape from the everyday neurosis of ordinary consciousness so as to arrive at a more subtle and, in the last resort, superhuman form of perception. The sicknesses that arise as a result of a calling are surely the highest form of illness—a sacred illness which by its power makes it possible for mystical and metaphysical insights to arise. As we have seen, this frequently happens without regard to the feelings and wishes of the chosen one who, in most cases, is not aware of the fact that his body is undergoing an initiation. To resist such a process of transformation is a natural reaction to that which is unaccustomed, mysterious, and without limit. The initiate struggles against both his pain and suffering as well as the future social functions he will have to perform as a shaman, which all too often will deprive him of the possibility of leading a normal everyday life.

Resistance to psychophysical change and a disintegration of the normal structure of existence has always been part and parcel of the transformative process. Because of this, it forms at least a partial aspect of every rite of transformation. Rejection of the new and unknown is a standard human response. True, existence itself is change, but the leap from three-dimensional to multidimensional perception and experience is the most fundamental change. To reach a translogical form of knowledge or realm of wisdom, celestial beauty, and spiritual essence is one of the most ancient experiential goals of mankind.

The central issue raised by this chapter is therefore: Why do we have to become ill before we can accept a new insight? Why is the entry into a more comprehensive level of experience so frequently marked by sickness or, one might say, a cleansing process? Purification plays a prominent role in the life of all communities that are close to nature. While our culture attaches primary importance to

physical cleanliness, other cultures still have knowledge of psychic and spiritual methods of purification which might well be compared to our psychotherapeutic techniques. We see life as a relatively uniform and continuous process marked by merely peripheral changes, whereas so-called primitive cultures tend to see personal development as a series of leaps from one mode of existence to another. This is clearly shown by the traditional rites of passage conducted not only at birth, puberty, and death but especially at the breakthrough from everyday existence to a spiritual dimension, as experienced by religious adepts—the leap from the human to the superhuman.

The important stages in a person's life are connected by periods of inner purification so that the individual, being properly prepared and in a clear state of mind, undistracted by customary thought processes and memories, may progress to a new and unburdened existence. This purification may take many forms: either purely physical such as vomiting, perspiration, fasting, pain, fever, and cleansing of the body with water, or intense psychic isolation during which the memory of the constitution of one's ego is shed; extreme exhaustion which disrupts the regular functioning of the organism and the psyche; and actual sickness which brings internal obstacles and defilements to the surface and, indeed, expels them, thereby producing a heightened sensitivity for the process of being—a sensitivity that ultimately enables the shaman to diagnose and heal the illnesses of others.

Frequently the shaman enters a patient's state so thoroughly that he himself experiences the symptoms and pains of the illness and, in this way, acquires special knowledge as to its cause. There are several reports about shamans who went so far as to take a patient's illness upon themselves in order to destroy it. In the course of their painful existence, many shamans have physically experienced countless illnesses and are therefore conversant with a wide range of physical and psychic reactions.

Modern Western medicine might consider it superfluous, even somewhat obscure or eccentric, for a healer to involve himself so intensely in the process of an illness. Nevertheless, the logic of doing so can hardly be doubted. It is based on the premise that someone who has himself experienced and overcome the pain and suffering of an illness will best be able to diagnose and effectively treat it. Western medicine, of course, rejects the image of the wounded healer, the sick doctor who has cured himself. It places too much stress on the purely

technological manipulation of the patient and has therefore become increasingly alienated from the actual experience of the patient's condition.

If we wanted to summarize the effect of a long psychosomatic sickness on a shaman, we would have to say that the essential criterion lies in his talent to enter into an intensified exchange with reality, thereby transcending the material demarcations between objects and people. It lies in the very nature of the shaman to perceive the pulse of the universe in himself and others and, by going along with it, to influence and change it. His approach is based on empathy and unity with actual life-forces and therefore is inimically incompatible with the dichotomies and codified differentiations of a materialist philosophy.

A sickness that is understood as a process of purification, as the onset of enhanced psychic sensitivity giving access to the hidden and highest potentials of human existence, is therefore marked by very different characteristics than those ascribed to pathological conditions by modern medicine and psychology—namely, that suffering has only negative consequences. According to the modern view illness disrupts and endangers life, whereas the shaman experiences his sickness as a call to destroy this life within himself so as to hear, see, and live it more fully and completely in a higher state of awareness.

The symptoms of shamanic sickness are in most cases confused, undefinable, and follow no known pattern. Moreover, physical, psychic, and social reactions are closely interwoven. Particularly noticeable are forms of behavior that reject, and even deride and ridicule, accepted customs and standards. Initiates become holy fools who systematically put the world on its head or indulge in unworthy, shameless, and perverse behavior incompatible with established morality.

The fool exposes the limitations of human criteria, confronts us anew with the undefined nature of our cosmic existence, leads us backstage to make us aware of the artificiality of our cultural values, and then shows us a world without limit, because it is neither categorized nor ordered in accordance with artificial opposites. The sick jester removes these opposites, tears down external and internal barriers, and causes us to tumble head over heels from our tailor-made world of lines and demarcations into a more comprehensive and holistic dimension that has no beginning or end.

We have seen that often not only the shaman himself but his

whole family are visited by misfortune, as for instance in the case of the *kikuyu* or the Korean shamanesses. In Siberia, too, the relatives of a shaman are "sacrificed" as soon as signs of shamanic sickness appear in a member of the clan. The effects of the call to shamanism are wide-ranging, and sacrifices have to be made for that call.

The Koreans talk about a "bridge of people" (*indari*) that comes into being when a member of the family is chosen to be a shaman and another member has to die as a result of this. They refer to this process as "spanning a bridge over a human being" (*indari non-nunda*). A God has "entered into" the shaman and, in return, demands another human life. However, if the clan is willing to submit the member destined to become a shaman to the requisite ceremony of initiation as soon as the first symptoms of obsession or sickness manifest themselves, indari is not inevitable. But most families are unwilling to have a shaman in their circle, so the indari phenomenon occurs quite frequently. According to the investigations made by Cho Hung-Youn, indari occurs on average seven or eight times in every twenty cases of shamanic vocation.[23]

Frequently we find a combination of sickness and out-of-body experiences. The suffering drains the organism of its will to live, whereupon consciousness feels itself freed of the body and sheds it like a lifeless container. The dying are led to far and distant places. "There is not a single place the exact location of which I do not know," says the Zulu shaman James. Again and again we are told, "At night in my sleep I go everywhere." The Peruvian healer Eduardo flies "into the air through a hole," and Dorcas, the Zulu sangoma, leaves her body at night to fly through space.

If the near-death experience deepens, the person concerned establishes contact with supersensible entities. The journeyer enters a world which presents itself to him symbolically in many different ways: as "a house of life," a "wise old man with a white beard," or a spirit animal that transmits a new understanding of life to him. Sometimes the spirits furnish humans with a body in their own image, as is reported by the natives of the Mentawai Islands, or the bringer of life—as in the case of Lebi'd—vomits a crystal into the adept which fills him with supernatural strength.

His journeys to the Beyond often take the shaman to what he calls "the edge of the world," which we can take to mean the limits of human existence. Equipped with qualities normally found only in spirits or spirit animals, and made sacred by his contact with wise men and bringers of life, the shaman now truly has "eyes that see and

ears that hear." He now has "a split soul and a split heart" or feels like "a house of dreams." The sacredness of the world has given him power and thereby has chosen him, sometimes against his own will, to act in accordance with his expanded knowledge of being and to introduce this knowledge to our human world. He has been caught by the spirits and must serve the spiritual world.