

A Shamanic Journey In Search of Common Ground*

By Mike Bell

Shamans have existed in our part of the world for thousands of years. The way shamans get outside the limitations of their own frames is to take shamanic journeys. They can take shamanic journeys. They can travel high up into the galaxies or down into the nether world—the world where life begins, where species share common origins. On their journeys they transcend time, space and distance.

Some of the shamans are shape-shifters. They can change their form and take on the form of an animal or of another person. This power makes it easier for them to move around in the places they visit. For our journey today we are selecting a modern shaman who understands the traditional ways and can shape-shift into animal species or a human member of the community. But he can also shape-shift into a modern service provider and pass freely among public servants and caregivers in organizational life forms. He's some talented fellow.

There are two particular reasons for choosing a modern shaman as our guide down into the Land of Organisms and Life Forms. First, though shamans have many powers, their primary power is as healers. As one of our great experts on shamans, Mircea Eliade has told us, there are two kinds of sickness: physical sickness and spiritual sickness—the loss of soul. The shaman is a specialist in the latter. He sets off to find the lost soul or spirit and return it to its owner. As I move around communities in the North and in

* *Editor's Note:* Management consultant Mike Bell spoke to The Primary Health Care Conference at Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada. His assigned topic was "Developing Communities and Health Care Systems." To bring together parties in conflict, he offered this foundation: "Those who want to discover common ground," he said, "must start by recognizing that they are standing on it." The ground he names is "Earth—nature—and the way it develops." He continued, "Communities and health care systems are life-forms, organisms. They are part of a living universe, a living planet. They develop the same way nature develops—according to the same developmental principles. He invited his listeners on a Shamanic journey.

and out of government departments or service organizations, I am often aware of a deep sense of loss of soul. Who cares for the caregivers?

The second reason for choosing the shaman as our guide is his strong sense of mission. The shaman exists for the community. The purpose of his journey is to acquire new knowledge and experience, to establish new relationships with other spirits, and to bring back this knowledge and these new relationships to benefit the community. We need new ideas and new ways of understanding this world in which we find ourselves. And somehow our quest to discover common ground between communities and health care systems is very much about developing new working relationships.

Now we meet him and the journey can begin. As the shaman comes forward, he invites us to pause for a moment. He asks us to reflect upon the journey we are about to undertake and to prepare our individual spirits to meet with other spirits that we will encounter in The Land of Organisms and Life Forms. He then begins to move, and move quickly.

As we follow him, we have a strong sense that we are falling—a psychic sense that we are traveling down through the layers of our own existence. We quickly pass through the frame of our personal experience, down through our family coding, down through the realities of our cultural coding, down through the institutional coding of our workplaces. When we come to a soft landing, we're in a very weird and strange place. We're back where life begins. We have arrived at the source of our own genetic coding, where our DNA has its origins. We are in a sub-atomic world surrounded by atoms and molecule electrons, protons and quarks, and waves and particles of all kinds.

As we get our bearings, we realize that we are surrounded by organisms and life forms all in various stages of development. There are two things that strike us immediately. First, everything is in a state of flux. Everything, continually, is changing. Second, everything is in relationship with something else and everything else. The whole of existence is organisms in relationship—creating relationships, maintaining relationships, dissolving relationships and moving on to form new relationships. Everything is interconnected.

We realize that we, too, are in relationship with all other species and with Earth itself. We can see now that we share a similar DNA with species that

were our ancestors. We recognize that the salt water that makes up most of our bodies is part of Earth's irrigation system. The minerals that make up the rest of our body are the same minerals as those that make up Earth's crust—minerals that came from the explosion that created our solar systems and planet five billion years ago. This is a real rush.

After giving us a little while to be overwhelmed by all the movement and relationship building, the shaman speaks. He says, "Observe the life forms and organisms. Can you see any common tendencies or patterns that all exhibit as they develop?"

At first we can see nothing—but when he shares with us his psychic vision, we can detect three dominant development patterns. First, we notice that all of the organisms and life forms, from the very moment of their existence, begin to differentiate themselves from every other organism. The human body starts out as a single fertilized egg, but soon the cells differentiate into brain cells, lung cells, kidney cells, cells of the central nervous system, foot cells and so forth. And this tendency to differentiate is consistent across all forms of existence. Galaxies differentiate themselves and so do species and communities and cultures. Aboriginal people are differentiated from people of European ancestry; Inuit peoples from Dene peoples, Dogrib people from Cree and Metis peoples. Nature, it seems, hates mono-cultures, but loves diversity.

The second thing we notice is that all life forms have some type of consciousness or self-awareness, in different degrees and according to different modes of being. Earth has its own mode of being and it seems to have a psychic awareness of its own existence, as do all other species and organisms. Life forms manifest this consciousness through their ability to self-organize. The rapidly expanding universe self-organizes and so does Earth with its changing seasons and cycles for the migration of species. So do the various organisms and social structures. It is this ability to self-organize that manifests life and guides the nature of development.

The third characteristic that seems common to all development is communion. All organisms enter into and sustain mutually enhancing relationships. These relationships create dependencies among organisms. Each organism is continually interacting with its local environment. The local environment—composed of the other organisms—is continually

interacting with the organism and yet things seem to hold together within some kind of self-imposed boundaries. Communion exerts influence over differentiation and differentiation influences communion.

As we watch this relationship-building process, we become profoundly aware that all development is co-development. The horse can't develop if the grasses don't develop; the fish can't develop unless the nutrients in the lake develop; the child won't develop unless the family develops. The company won't develop unless its customer base develops; the economy won't develop unless the markets develop; the health care system won't develop unless the community, which is part of the system, also develops.

As a group we share our findings about the patterns of differentiation, self-awareness and communion with the shaman. He responds, "You have just recognized what your world would call the strategic framework for all of existence. These three principles are not only the context within which life occurs—they are also the driving forces behind all development. All existence—from galaxies, to the earth, to the single cell organism—develops according to the principles of differentiation, self-awareness and communion. So do communities. So do health care systems.

"Now that you have seen the broad context of life" says the shaman, "let us observe more closely the life forms around us. You will learn and understand more if you try to think like an organism."

He now sends us off in small groups to wander around, observe, take notes and report back to the group as a whole. When we return, we compare notes and have a heated discussion, but eventually come up with what one person calls "The Six Down To Earth Principles of Life Form Development." Here they are:

The Six Down to Earth Principles of Life Form Development

1. Go with what works. Organisms are very practical. The fundamental concern of all organisms is their own survival—and they survive by continually anticipating the future in some way. They experiment. They do this by taking signals from their past and bringing them forward to modify their future. (Systems folks call these signals "feedback loops."). When organisms are ready for development, they put out feelers to new levels. If the feedback is positive, they move. If it isn't, they try something else. But

they always move from one stage to another by building on what works. What organisms don't do is develop long-range plans with imaginary long-term strategic objectives or speculative scenarios.

2. Respect the nature and pace of development.

Organisms always build from the ground up. They take signals from their local environment and move from where they are to places of greater levels of complexity. They develop at their own pace, and the pace of development differs even among similar organisms. Thus, the Yellowknife, Inuvik and Fort Smith Health Boards, to use a local example, may all find themselves at different stages of development. They develop at their own pace. They don't follow development criteria that are imposed upon them from the outside. They don't follow 5-year strategic plans, or 3-year budget cycles, or 1-year operational plans that are superimposed unilaterally by a central authority. When they try to do these things, they often fail.

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3. Build capacity. Survival depends upon an organism's ability to grow and develop. Organisms do this in one of two ways. Either they build capacity within themselves by acquiring new skills and resources, or they build capacity by entering into symbiotic relationships, mutually enhancing relationships with different organisms. (Nature is full of such relationships—the pilot fish that attaches to the shark to clean out harmful bacteria, the bird that cleans the teeth of the hippopotamus.) As we stated before, all development requires co-development. But the main point about capacity-building is this. Organisms build upon what already exists. They start from where they are, not from where someone else would like them to be.

4. Respect self-organization. What an organism needs is order, not control, and most of that order comes from the organism itself through its ability to self-organize. It only exercises control over others when it is threatened. (The antibodies rush to fight the infection). Here's an important point: the focal points for self-organization are distributed throughout the system—even in complex adaptive systems. There is no central control mechanism, no central brain, no deputy minister or CEO, no queen bee that determines how order will develop. As organisms become more complex, the



order functions are further distributed throughout the system in individual cells and units.

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5. Learn to tolerate chaos. As organisms develop, they continually experiment. The experimentation often creates disturbance and what seems to be confusion. But as the Nobel Prize Winner Ilya Prigogine has pointed out, order seems to emerge out of chaos. When things are stable or in a state of equilibrium, there is no development. This is true of single-cell organisms, caterpillars that change into butterflies, teenagers and institutions. The only way organisms can develop is to pass through periodic transitions. These can be turbulent, but some turbulence is normal.

6. Learn to recognize the manifestations of spirit. All organisms seem to have the capacity to manifest life or spirit through four basic functions. These are distributed throughout the system. We can see these most clearly in human organizations.

- The ability to discern, animate and channel spirit—THE LEADERSHIP FUNCTION
- The ability to care for and restore spirit—THE HEALING FUNCTION
- The ability to protect and safeguard spirit—THE PROTECTOR/GUARDIAN FUNCTION
- The ability to acquire knowledge and pass it on to future generation—THE LEARNER/TEACHER FUNCTION

When we finished our work the shaman reappeared. We made our report and he smiled. We could tell he was pleased. Then he spoke.

“You set out on this journey to the Land of Organisms and Life Forms to discover the common ground between the development of communities and the development of health care system—so that both could develop together. You have done well. You must now bring your knowledge and wisdom back for the benefit of your communities and health care systems. What will you tell people back in your communities and in your systems? What have you learned in your journey through The Land of Organisms and Life Forms?”

We thought for a moment about our journey. One by one people began to speak.

“Let’s start thinking about the wholes—not the parts. Everything in the universe is interrelated. The health care system is a single, interrelated system that includes headquarters, regions, local communities, nursing stations, social services, non-profit agencies, housing services and the people we are serving. They are all part of the same system. We cannot make changes in one part of the system—say at the headquarters level or the community level—without impacting all parts of the system.”

“Let’s re-think the nature of communities. A community is not really a place on a map. It is really a network of relationships. Let’s place the emphasis back on the relationships. Let’s go back to the traditional aboriginal definition: “A community is an intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate. Every human community is part of the Earth community.”

“Let’s re-think what a healthy community is. It is not just a community with good services. It’s a community where people have an intimate relationship . . .

- with the spirit of the land (their primordial relationship)
- with their own inner spirit,
- with the spirit of their families, neighbors and culture,
- with the spirit of their organizations.

Let’s place the emphasis back on relationships. The services are important—but they are only a means to an end.”

“Let’s re-think what we mean by Primary Health Care. It is not just the point of entry into an array of services—health promotion or disease prevention, assessment, diagnosis and treatment. Perhaps it is the means by which we help individuals develop healthy relationships and assume responsibility for their own health, their family’s health, the health of their communities and the health of their local environment.”

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“Let’s place the emphasis back on effectiveness—on doing the right things—and put less emphasis on efficiency.”

“Let’s stop emphasizing what we can’t do—and start emphasizing what we can do. We are having successes, many successes. Let’s be like organisms. Let’s identify our successes and build on what works. Let’s share them with the rest of the network. Let’s also build upon our individual and group strengths, not on our limitations.”

“Let’s sort out our priorities. Let’s stop developing fancy multi-colored manuals that no one reads, carrying out constant corporate re-organizations, and creating expensive strategic plans that have a beard on them the day they are born. Instead, let’s teach people how to monitor activities, read and analyze feedback, become sensitive to small changes in their environments, plan for the short-term, make regular adjustments to procedures, and relate to one another.”

“Let’s learn to respect the reality of self-organization. Let’s accept a certain amount of chaos as inevitable—as a sign of growth. Let’s stop panicking and trying to control everything. Most of the time communities and systems don’t need control. What they need is order. And there is a difference.”

Let’s acknowledge and honor the signs of life and spirit that are all around us.”

“Let’s make the key word for Primary Health Care ‘network, network, network.’ And to build the networks the key word is going to have to be ‘trust, trust, trust.’”

“Let’s care for the caregivers—and help them to heal.”

“Let’s realize that the work we are all doing is essentially spirit work. For most people who do what we do, work is not a job—it is a vocation, a calling. We need to call up and share the spirit of healing.”

We finished with a sort of flourish. The shaman said nothing for a bit. Then he just smiled and nodded his head in agreement. After another slight pause, he said, “I want to leave you with a gift, a memento of our journey

through The Land of Organisms and Life Forms. It will be a reminder of where you have come from and where you will return to.”

He looked down at the earth beneath his feet and began to speak softly

Oh Great Spirit, our creator,
All over the world the faces of living ones are alike.
With tenderness they have come up out of the ground.
Look upon your children,
That they may face the winds
And walk the good road to the day of quiet.
Fill us with the light.
Give us the strength to understand, and the eyes to see.
Teach us to walk the soft Earth as relatives to all that live.

(Adapted from the Lakota Prayer in *Earth Prayers*)

