



STEPHEN DATNOFF

# THE GOOD RED ROAD

## Leslie Gray On Rediscovering America's Oldest Psychology

BARBARA PLATEK

**L**eslie 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](http://www.woodfish.org)), which promotes sustainability based on indigenous wisdom. Her work has been published in *East West*, *Re-Vision Journal*, and the anthologies *Ecopsychology: 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. We can't indulge in that narrow-minded viewpoint any longer. There is just too much soul wounding in our country for it to be dismissed.

**Platek:** *New York Times* columnist David Brooks said in a recent piece that transcendent experiences can be identified and measured in the brain. In other words, our brains are wired for these nonordinary experiences.

**Gray:** That makes sense to me. Indigenous people have relied on these experiences for millennia. The practices of shamanism, which involve the skillful use of altered states of consciousness, are conservatively estimated to be forty thousand years old. Interestingly our brain size has been the same for about forty thousand years as well.

**Platek:** How do we distinguish nonordinary experience from mental illness? How did you know that what you went through, for example, was a sacred vision and not a psychotic episode?

**Gray:** I spent two years doing intensive diagnosis of patients, administering psychological tests. I know how to recognize psychosis, and it involves a great deal more than just the presence of visions. If I were to assess my own nonordinary experiences, I would say that I was not out of touch with other people; I did not misapprehend my environment; I did not experience thought disturbances. Most importantly I felt quite whole and healed afterward. I felt more integrated, rather

**We have become so alienated that we are destroying our own life-support systems. You can't name another animal that does that. Nonhuman animals know that if they eat a certain insect for food, then they shouldn't destroy the flower that feeds that insect.**

than emotionally fragmented. And the experience was useful, rather than alienating. Furthermore, I had deliberately sought out a shaman in order to receive a vision, which is quite different from walking down the street and hearing a voice that tells you to walk into oncoming traffic.

**Platek:** How much more effective do you think psychotherapy might be if it acknowledged the human need for the sacred?

**Gray:** The word *psychotherapy* is from the Greek, meaning “soul healing.” Certainly Western psychology has lost touch with this original meaning, much to its detriment. For me, incorporating the sacred into my work is a question of responding to what clients are asking for, rather than dismissing their concerns. But it isn't necessary to include the sacred or the transpersonal in every psychotherapy session. If someone comes to therapy to overcome a fear of flying, for example, there are some cognitive-behavioral approaches that work wonders. The important thing is for therapists to listen and to assess the client's needs.

I read a wonderful vignette in an ecopsychology newsletter: A patient comes to a therapist and says that she has been having nightmares about the rivers being polluted and the air being fouled. The therapist interprets the dream as being about the patient's fear of aspects of her inner life. But our environment really *is* being polluted and destroyed, and many people are concerned or even frightened about it. Psychotherapy needs to genuinely respect the socioenvironmental context in addition to the intrapsychic experience. There is a famous story about psychologist Freida Fromm-Reichmann: She had a patient whom she successfully treated, but a few weeks later that person was taken to Auschwitz. The question is: Would it have been better to focus the work on getting the patient to safety?

We therapists need to understand when a client has needs that may not fit with our clinical orientation — whether it's a need for the sacred, or for contact with the environment, or whatever — and we should give a referral if appropriate.

**Platek:** You suggest that many of our problems result from a profound feeling of alienation: we have forgotten where we came from.

**Gray:** Yes, we have become so alienated that we are destroying our own life-support systems. You can't name another

animal that does that. Nonhuman animals know that if they eat a certain insect for food, then they shouldn't destroy the flower that feeds that insect. The shamanic paradigm is one of interconnectedness. The Chukchi people in Russia say, “Everything that is, is alive.” In contrast, we have created artificial environments that enable us to forget that we inhabit a living planet. If we ask children where chicken comes from, many of them will answer, “The supermarket.” We have forgotten that we are a part of the earth. As a result, we don't take care of the planet or feel that it is here to take care of us.

I was part of an ecopsychology symposium in 1993 in which we met a famous gardener who grew food as organically as possible and who drew upon indigenous methods to tend the soil. This man was deeply connected to the earth. I asked him: “If you could tell people one thing that might improve their relationship with the earth, what would it be?” He told me that twenty-five years ago he would have urged people to move back to the land and plant a big garden, but now he would simply say, “Just grow something edible, even in a pot on your windowsill. Grow something, and see how the earth nurtures you.”

We need a psychology that behaves as if the earth matters, and as if nature and the environment are crucial components of health. Recent research shows that someone in a hospital room with a view of trees will recover more quickly than someone who has no such view.

Shamanism is the native psychology of this North American continent. Western psychology is a transplant from Europe and has never been integrated with this land and its traditions. If we could include Native American psychology in Euro-American psychology, I think we could have a holistic system. The method of healing that originated here addresses the whole person and acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life. Interest in nondualistic Asian philosophies is probably an attempt to address this lack of unity in the West. Native American societies have a lived sense of the unity of all living things, as expressed in the Native American phrase “all my relations,” which has been called a prayer and a cosmology in one breath. If we could incorporate that into conventional American psychology, we might create a genuinely “ecotherapeutic” model that would view human beings as part of a natural world.

**Platek:** What are some traditional values of this continent that might help us feel more grounded and more at home here?

**Gray:** The traditional native values of North America are balance, harmony with nature's cycles, gratitude, respect, and above all reciprocity: don't take anything without giving something back. I think these values are as relevant today as they were in the distant past. As a matter of fact, I think they could not possibly be more meaningful than at this moment in time, when we stand poised on the edge of disaster. If we are going to have a future, we have to tap into those values. An earth-based spirituality is the key to restoring our envi-

ronment and our sanity. I have nothing against technology, but technology should not be in the driver's seat; it should serve human values. The central spiritual question of our time is whether we will treat the earth as sacred or whether we will persist in our attempts to dominate it.

**Platek:** When native people connect to the earth, they are also connecting to their homeland. That is not true for most Americans, whose ancestors came here from elsewhere. Do you think it is important for us to reconnect to our original roots in order to feel a stronger relationship with the earth?

**Gray:** I wouldn't say it's obligatory, but I have seen the benefits of tracing one's roots to a particular soil and culture. I founded a small nonprofit called the Woodfish Institute, and each year we give out a prize to a Euro-American and a Native American who work together on a social-action project. One of the stipulations for the prize is that the participants themselves must be transformed through the project. The first winners were a tribal elder from the last piece of continuously occupied Native land in California and a university professor. These two worked together for months to dig out the grounds upon which to construct a ceremonial roundhouse, often ending their days over coffee. The professor learned from the elder and was greatly affected by her feeling for the land on which her people had lived for millennia. In fact he was so moved that he became curious about his own origins, and he traveled to Scotland, where his people were from. He said that for the first time in his life he felt he was walking on the bones of his ancestors. It changed him visibly. It was a wonderful exchange for the Native elder, too: here was this professor "sitting at her feet" to learn — *and* she got her ceremonial grounds prepared.

**Platek:** The Native American writer Vine Deloria has written that "the primary difference between the Western and indigenous ways of life is that Indians experience and relate to a living universe, whereas Western people reduce all things, living or not, to objects." How would a sense of a living universe help us?

**Gray:** To begin with, we would experience an increased vitality and sense of belonging. We would acquire a nonstatic view of health, recognizing it as something we lose and restore constantly. So we would seek to maintain balance, rather than focus on a cure for a part unrelated to the whole.

On a collective level, when we recognize that this is a living universe, we will begin to see the biosphere as family. A presenter at the annual meeting of the Society of Indian Psychologists said that she had asked her grandmother what the worst insult in the Navajo language was. Her grandmother told her a phrase that translates, "He acts as if he has no relatives." We need to focus on the relations between things, rather than just the things themselves. In a living universe the biosphere is our extended family.

**Platek:** Are there common practices in shamanism regardless of geographic location or cultural heritage?

**Western psychology says that when something changes in your life, it will be reflected in your dreams. Shamanism says that when something changes in your dreams, it will be reflected in your life. So shamans work with dreams by going straight to the dreamtime.**

**Gray:** Each shamanic tradition is specific to a particular confederacy, nation, or tribe, but they do share the worldview that all things are connected. And there is a common belief in a nonordinary reality that shamans can access to bring back the power to heal patients in ordinary reality. This "shamanistic complex" has been found around the globe, in cultures that have never had any contact with each other. Most shamanic cultures see this nonordinary reality as divided into three worlds: an upper, a middle, and a lower. But there are some exceptions: the Australian aboriginal shamans work with a kind of circular time that is taking place all at once, called the "dreamtime."

Another near-universal idea is the phenomenon of soul loss and soul retrieval. Many indigenous cultures trace illnesses or life troubles to a loss of pieces of our soul. Our essential self can become fragmented as a result of shock or trauma, and shamans have the ability to retrieve the parts and restore wholeness. The style and methodology of "soul retrieval" vary across tribes, but the purpose remains the same. Shamans in the Pacific Northwest use "soul catchers": gourds or carved wooden cylinders. The Quechua of Peru wait until the suffering person is sleeping and then go to the place where the trauma occurred and make a trail with cornmeal or tobacco from that place to the foot of the person's bed so that the lost soul can find its way back. But the basic idea is the same across cultures: the shaman searches for soul parts and brings them back, and the individual is restored to wholeness.

Another common practice in shamanic cultures is sucking the disease out of someone. Often something that only the shaman can see is extracted. We might think of this as trickery or sleight of hand, designed to fool the patient, but consider this: the American Medical Association says that 65 percent of people who show up in the doctor's office are suffering from some sort of psychosomatic illness. Shamanic cultures understand this, though they wouldn't use the term "psychosomatic." For them it is the spiritual nature of an illness that needs to be addressed. Western doctors also know that without faith or hope, patients often don't get better. And we all know that our bodies tend to heal themselves given time. Shamanic cultures focus on fostering the healing process with beliefs, attitudes, and connection to spirit. In contrast, medical doctors focus on the science and leave the spiritual side to



ministers or whomever. What we really need is a combination of these two ways of healing.

**Platek:** Why do you think shamanism has become associated with the New Age and alternative-healing techniques?

**Gray:** As I said earlier, it has become a fad, just like yoga. When I originally encountered yoga, it was a contemplative, centering practice that helped you live a healthy, balanced life. Now it's being done in fitness centers with personal trainers and all sorts of accompanying merchandise — yoga outfits, DVDs, mats, and so on. And it's even being practiced competitively, like an endurance sport.

But to call shamanism “New Age” is particularly ironic, because it is the oldest healing practice on the planet. Shamanism has been around for more than forty thousand years and continues to be used by more than 300 million indigenous people in the world today. It's not just part of the ancient past. Western medicine accounts for only about 10 percent of the world's healing today. The rest is accomplished by some form of traditional healing. And as Western medicine becomes more and more expensive, I expect that percentage to shrink.

But American psychotherapy is beginning to wake up to the efficacy of shamanic practices. About twenty years ago I read an issue of Marilyn Ferguson's *Brain/Mind Bulletin* that suggested the future of psychotherapy would be “guided imagery combined with altered states of consciousness.” So maybe shamanism is the future. It is our “ancient future.”

**Platek:** If I had a problem I wanted help with, how would I go about recognizing a real shaman?

**Gray:** The same way we go about finding someone who is good at anything. It's always our responsibility to ask questions and use our best judgment. When we are dealing with someone who supposedly has great wisdom and understanding, the first question to ask is: “When I leave this person after having received his or her teaching or treatment, do I feel more powerful or less powerful?” When working with a real shaman, we should feel stronger, rather than dependent upon the shaman's power. We need to have faith in a healer, but not blind faith. We need to ask a lot of questions.

**Platek:** What if someone came to you who did not believe in anything except the rational tenets of Western psychology and medicine? Could you still treat them?

**Gray:** Absolutely. In fact, that is primarily what I have done for years. It is not necessary to “believe” in shamanic work. It's only necessary to see results. Shamanism does not have a dogma — like, say, Confucianism — or a text like the Koran or the Bible. It does not have laws or rules. It is a way of being, of relating to the world. That is why it is called “the way of the shaman.” Above all, shamanism is a methodology, a set of techniques that, when applied, result in healing. There is no need to subscribe to a belief system for a methodology to work. The techniques either get results or they don't. Shamanism evolved from a kind of radical empiricism during a time of low medical technology, when we were forced to use our minds to heal our bodies.

**Platek:** What are some other differences between Western psychology and shamanic healing?

**Gray:** The Euro-American school of psychology has Christian underpinnings. This worldview says we have been kicked out of paradise because we are bad, and we need to spend our time here on earth atoning in order to go to a far better place. In this fractured view of existence, the earth has no role in mental health. In contrast, the indigenous worldview says that the earth is sacred; that this *is* paradise. This is the Holy Land, and we should therefore rely upon nature's example in formulating a model of mental health.

Another difference between the two views is the notion of what health is. When I used to teach Native American studies at Berkeley, I would offer an A to any student who could come up with a Western model of health. No one was ever able to do it. The West developed only a model of disease. Therefore all of its treatments are based on a negative model. They are all “anti”: antidepressants, antipsychotics, antihistamines, antibiotics, and so on. And we are constantly being told that we have to “fight” this or that illness. This is a dualistic way to look at healing. The Native American model is a model of health. It is about the restoration of balance to body, mind, and heart. It assumes that we sometimes go out of balance, and good health depends on restoring that balance.

There is simply a greater understanding in shamanic traditions of the power of the mind to affect the body. Often in Western psychology we underestimate the mind's power. Walter Cannon, who wrote an article called “Voodoo Death” in the 1940s, pointed out that when we mistake a coiled rope in the corner for a snake, our autonomic nervous system goes

through the same reactions that it would if we had encountered a real snake. It's the mind's belief that triggers the body's reaction. Cannon also explored the aboriginal phenomenon of "bone pointing" — that is, an aboriginal sorcerer points a bone at someone, and within a few days that person dies.

**Platek:** How were you trained to treat someone who's suffering from, say, depression, from both a clinical-psychology point of view and a shamanic one?

**Gray:** In the clinical model as it stands now, the first line of treatment for depression is medication. If the patient has the right kind of insurance, he or she can also get a few sessions of talk therapy. There are other treatments in Western psychotherapy, but these two are the most common. In indigenous healing, the condition of depression would be called "dispiritedness," and the focus would be on "reinspiring" the person.

**Platek:** What is the shamanic definition of *spirit*?

**Gray:** I'm not sure it's any different from the nonshamanic definition. What is different is that, in shamanism, spirit is not limited to human beings. Rocks, animals, the earth, and so on are seen as having spirits. Also in indigenous cultures, spirit can be directly engaged and used as a source for healing. One time I went to see Wallace Black Elk speak here in San Francisco. He was discussing using the sweat lodge to access spirits in order to heal cancer. One young man asked him, "What if you ask the spirits for help, and the help is not forthcoming?" Wallace got down on his knees, shook his fist in the air, and said, "I'd say to those spirits, 'I am not getting up from here until I get the help I need!'" You could see the shock on the young man's face. He had a very ethereal notion of spirit. But Wallace, like most shamans, believed in showing the spirits that you mean business. In shamanism contact with spirit is personal and immediate.

**Platek:** Could you give a case study in which you treated someone using shamanic techniques?

**Gray:** One woman I treated was a psychotherapist who was struggling with career and relationship issues and described herself as "depressed." When we began meeting, she would cry for most of the two hours. We worked together for almost three months. In one session she told me she'd had a dream the previous night in which a red spider had attached itself to her vagina. She asked me, "What does it mean?" I told her that deciphering meaning was the Western way to work with a dream, and that the shamanic way would be simply to remove the spider. She agreed to a ceremony for removing harmful power intrusions. She lay on the floor, and I sat behind her head with a power object in one hand and a rattle in the other. As I utilized the sonic driving of the rattle to enter a state of nonordinary consciousness, I noticed a spider crawling up the pillow I was seated upon. At first I tried to ignore it and focus on the task at hand — removing the nonordinary spider. But finally I picked the critter up in my hand. When my client saw the spider, she shrieked and turned white. It was exactly like the one in her dream — same color, same markings. I took the spider, released it outdoors, and then returned to the extraction of the spirit spider. After that session my client

showed dramatic improvement. She reported feeling more energy, actively pursued job interviews, sought new relationships, and no longer described herself as depressed.

**Platek:** Do you ever do traditional Western dream analysis?

**Gray:** I've actually got a knack for dream interpretation, but I rarely practice it now, because I find the shamanic way of working with dreams so much more effective. Western psychology says that when something changes in your life, it will be reflected in your dreams. Shamanism says that when something changes in your dreams, it will be reflected in your life. So shamans work with dreams by going straight to the dreamtime. If we are stuck in ordinary reality, then we are likely stuck in the dreamtime as well. Frequently I will give a client a power object to place under his or her pillow at night. Usually that will get people's dreams moving and give them healing dreams.

**Platek:** How do you put yourself into a nonordinary state?

**Gray:** In my office I typically use drumming, repetitive motion, or working with an eagle feather in front of my eyes. I might also use sage or sweetgrass; their smells trigger nonordinary states. The techniques I've learned might not work for someone else, though. They'd need to learn what to do directly from their own helping spirits.

**Platek:** You said earlier that illness occurs when we are out of balance. How does shamanic counseling help restore balance?

**Gray:** In one Navajo ceremony the patient enters a hogan with friends and family. The patient sits on a beautiful sand painting and is surrounded by those close to him or her, who are singing healing songs. There is extraordinary beauty in the songs, the sand painting, the carved fetishes, the healer's clothing, and so on. Beauty, in this context, is considered an indispensable component of healing. In Native American languages there is no word for "art." It is simply assumed that if you are going to make something, you will make it as beautiful as possible. In the Navajo language the word for "balance" and the word for "beauty" are the same. There is a great appreciation for the role of beauty in healing. Everything that I have in this office space, I chose for its natural beauty. I try to return my clients to the "beauty way." I think the healing power of beauty is too often ignored when working with dispirited people in Western psychotherapy.

**Platek:** We try so hard to fix ourselves or make ourselves better somehow — whether through therapy or spiritual pursuits. It is as if we feel that there is something inherently wrong with us.

**Gray:** Yes, that goes back to the difference between the Western model and the shamanic one. The Western model is one of disease. It is a static model that looks to fix something and be done with it. The Native American model is a dynamic one: the idea is *not* to eliminate the "bad" and replace it with the "good," but rather to keep the balance. That is why, in Pueblo ceremonies, at the most sacred moments, the clowns emerge from underground kivas and make fun of the elders

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and the medicine people and even the ritual itself. No one is safe. The idea is to make sure to include the Totality. How can you have the concentric without the eccentric? How can you have the intrinsic without the extrinsic? How can you have a wave without both trough and crest? What would light possibly shine out of, if not darkness?

**Platek:** How can we recognize when we are out of balance?

**Gray:** We may notice that there is not enough synchronicity in our lives, or that we feel alienated or disconnected from ourselves and others and our surroundings. In our culture we usually wait until we are suffering to seek help. No one ever comes to my office and sits down on the couch and says, “You know what, Leslie? I feel wonderful!” Suffering is what brings people into therapy. By the time someone ends up in my office, that person has not heeded the early warning signs of being out of balance.

**Platek:** When psychologist Carl Jung was feeling out of sorts, he would retreat to nature. He would carve in stone, cook over an open fire, and play at the water’s edge until he felt like himself again. It seems important for each of us to know what helps us feel right with ourselves.

**Gray:** Most people find unity in nature, though our definitions of *nature* may differ. We don’t have to climb Mount Everest; we just have to return to that place that gives us a feeling of being whole. Finding healing through being in nature is fundamental to shamanism everywhere. A great Inuit shaman used to say of the stark, pristine arctic wilderness, “We find wisdom out in the great solitude.”

But we shouldn’t be alone all the time. Relationships with people also help us to feel whole. Connection with a wise person — an elder, a teacher, or just somebody with whom you can speak heart to heart — can be profound.

**Platek:** You mentioned experiences of synchronicity — meaningful connections between seemingly disconnected people, places, and events. What is the importance of synchronicity in our lives?

**Gray:** In shamanism meaningful coincidences are usually a sign that your life is in alignment and harmonized. This is different from just feeling happy or healthy. You can have synchronicity in life and be sad. Sadness is a natural human feeling. I would be worried if someone never felt sad. We are

not looking for constant happiness. Rather we are looking for the sense that life is flowing along the way it should be.

Synchronicities allow us to feel congruent. It can be difficult to hold on to that feeling when something untoward happens. If people experience a loss, they feel they are out of harmony somehow. But often they aren’t. I am not against feeling good, of course. Feeling good is wonderful. But it is not the same thing as feeling synchronous or in alignment.

**Platek:** What about when we encounter a “sign” — perhaps a rare animal or bird? I am thinking of a woman who had several visits from a large turtle at a time when she was moving through her life at high speed and needed to slow down.

**Gray:** Well, signs and synchronicities are two different things. Synchronicities are indications that we are in right relation with what is around us. A sign is usually interpreted as a signal to take some action. If we are lucky enough to have an animal come to us as a sign, then we can think about the medicine ways of that animal. A turtle carries its home on its back, for instance, and remains stationary when there is danger. So when we see a turtle, we can think about not being in a hurry, or we can think about being self-sufficient.

Signs require reflection and interpretation. They can be difficult to decipher, but it’s important to pay attention to them. Let me give an example of someone ignoring a sign: I once worked with “Lydia,” a woman who wanted to obtain a power animal — a type of guardian spirit. In most Native American cultures a guardian spirit tends to be an animal that uses its medicine to help us. Farther north, among the Inuit, the guardian spirit is in male human form for a female shaman and in female human form for a male shaman. (Guardian angels in Christianity may be vestiges of this tradition.) Anyway, when I told Lydia that her power animal was an alligator, she was visibly disappointed. She thought she should be an eagle. She *felt* like an eagle. But the thing is, we don’t identify with a guardian spirit; it comes to help us with precisely those things we lack and need. I tried to tell Lydia about the medicine ways of alligators, but she wasn’t willing to hear it, and she went on her way.

I ran into the same woman a couple of years later, and she told me that not long after I’d retrieved that guardian spirit for her, she’d been in the Southwest seeking a vision. She was sitting on a rock in an altered state, and she had a vision of herself surrounded by alligators. The creatures began to speak to her about how they can live in two worlds: land and water. They also told her that they move slowly but are lightning fast when they grab their prey. When she returned from that trip, Lydia began to apply these qualities to a dilemma in her life. She adopted the style of the alligator, remaining still until the time came to pounce. This turned out to be just the approach she needed.

**Platek:** People sometimes jump to conclusions and see signs everywhere. Someone might hear a song on the radio

and take it as a sign to quit his or her job.

**Gray:** Yes, when people do that, they are not really grounded. They need to feel the earth under their feet before acting. Some people have the idea that we create our own reality, but this notion is disrespectful to the universe. It doesn't honor the complexity of existence. We are neither making life happen, nor is life simply forcing us to do things. There is an exchange, an interaction.

**Platek:** Many spiritual traditions point us toward some transcendent place — heaven or nirvana — to find the sacred. You said earlier that for indigenous people *this* is the Holy Land, right here under our feet. Divinity permeates every leaf, every stone, every atom of this earth.

**Gray:** In the West we try to separate the mundane from the sacred. But when I hear a client say, "I shouldn't bring this up. It's too mundane," I know he or she is about to say something important. The so-called mundane may be the very key that opens the cage in which we find ourselves. The word *mundane* comes from the word *mundus*, which means "the world, the earth." But somehow we take it to be pejorative. In fact there are many English words related to the earth that we use in a negative way: *dirty*, *seedy* — even *earthy* is not necessarily considered a good thing. There is no North American Indian word for "earth" or "nature" that is pejorative. For example, there is no Indian word for "weed."

**Platek:** You also said the most fundamental Native American value is reciprocity.

**Gray:** Yes, don't take anything without giving something back. That may seem simple, but it isn't. Had we included that value in the prevailing culture from the beginning, I dare say we would not be in the ecological mess we are in today. Reciprocity and gratitude are necessary values for us to have to be proper caretakers for this place and to use its resources well and replenish them to keep the cycle of life going. Most Americans have long held the attitude that this continent had an endless supply of land and resources: no matter how we treated it, it would never run out. As recently as the early seventies there were no fines for littering. People would go to a park and leave trash. In contrast Native people have always tended the land, whether by controlled burning to avoid disastrous forest fires, or by burying fish beneath corn to regenerate the soil, or by rituals of gratitude toward the earth to reinforce behaviors of reciprocity. I believe these practices teach us about the healthiest way to be here, the healthiest attitude to have toward our home. The word *ecology* comes from the Greek word for "home."

**Platek:** Could you imagine a day when the DSM-IV might list as a pathology "lack of respect for nature"?

**Gray:** That would be a good start. Most of our current psychology has a complete disregard for humans' relationship to the environment. There are exactly two references to the natural world in the DSM-IV today: seasonal-affective disorder and bestiality.

**Platek:** Many of the values held by shamanism are often

## **Most of our current psychology has a complete disregard for humans' relationship to the environment. There are exactly two references to the natural world in the DSM-IV today: seasonal-affective disorder and bestiality.**

associated in the West with the feminine. Do you see a link between the need to revive indigenous values and the need to restore balance between masculine and feminine energies in our culture?

**Gray:** Yes, I do. In this regard we can learn a lot by incorporating the image of White Buffalo Calf Woman, the bringer of all the sacred rights to the peoples of the plains, into our American spiritual story. In fact she represents the Americas. There is simply nothing like her in Old World spirituality. She would have to be both a Madonna, because of her motherly beauty, and Jesus Christ, because she is messianic and brings the ceremony of communion. She both creates and destroys, so she would have to be compared to the Hindu goddess Kali. And it is important to remember that she is an animal, a buffalo. We can find variations of her throughout the Americas — the Virgen de Guadalupe, for example. In the Southwest, if you go to the church at Taos Pueblo, you will find over the altar a brown woman surrounded by corn. Even though the Pueblo Indians had Christianity forced upon them, they could not abandon the idea that Mother Earth was the sacred provider and therefore should be the focus of our gratitude. But she is not suspended on an unbalanced cross. The cross at the entrance to the Pueblo church is centered, like the cross dividing the medicine wheel into four equal quarters. The equal-sided cross points to a balanced masculinity and femininity.

**Platek:** What is the single most important idea that indigenous wisdom might impart to us as we move farther into the twenty-first century?

**Gray:** There is a longing in our culture for transformation. From an indigenous point of view, transformation takes place reciprocally and invokes the whole culture. Until we actually achieve this, the nation itself will suffer from soul loss, just like a person who has experienced some trauma.

There are also many practical things we can learn from indigenous cultures. For example, how to build and maintain a sustainable community, which Western culture has forgotten. And we need to learn to establish rapport. A Native American council meeting begins by passing a talking stick, so that everyone gets a chance to speak and be heard. This is done because it is acknowledged that, without rapport, almost any dialogue is going to encounter great difficulty. To make the changes that are so necessary right now in American history, we must find places of commonality from which to begin. ■