



A shamanic approach to psychotherapy

(Psyche = soul, therapeia = doctoring)

Leo Rutherford

I first got involved in humanistic psychology/psychotherapy in the mid-70's when I was in a dire state of mid-life crisis. Those were the days when emoting was all the rage rather as if that was all there was to it. It was a start, though as a seriously repressed Englishman, I was a failure at it and came to feel I was too inadequate for the therapists!

Things moved on for me when I went to live in San Francisco and did the Fischer-Hoffman Process (as it was then named) over three months in early '78. I got well and truly into my buried emotions and life began to flow again. The following year I started an MA in Holistic Psychology at Antioch University West, a programme created and run by Will Schutz. This was an amazing adventure into my-self as we, the students, were our own laboratory and instead of studying Freud et al, we studied ourselves through therapies and experiences. We learned by practice not by theory, quite an educational change in this world in which theories have been so highly rated and practical experience left in the cold unless written up by some 'expert'.

At the University we had a course on shamanism and I realised how much wider and deeper was the

understanding of life and our human condition as seen through the eyes of the ancients - not their theories but their practices, how they related human psychology to the evolution of the Cosmos, thus placing us and our struggles in a much greater context.

The classic evolutionary path as seen by the Toltecs (Casteneda's don Juan was from this lineage) is that the first step is 'erasing personal history'. This means healing the inner child and the wounds of the past and so erasing the baggage we tend to hold on to. On the medicine wheel I was taught and work with, this is the South direction.

Next comes the West direction, 'facing death and making death an ally'. In other words living fully now with the embodied realisation that all life is temporary and that death is an

inevitable step back to the spirit world from which we came when we were born. When we die, and we all do, this journey is over, so live it fully while we are in a body!

The third direction is the North and this brings us to 'Stopping the World', meaning stopping the mind-chatter and moving beyond ego driven living to the recognition that everything is energy. With the chattering mind quietened, we can perceive reality differently - or perceive a different reality.

Lastly we come to the East and mastering our 'dream' of life. As someone devoid of troubling personal history, living fully in the moment and from the heart, able to move beyond mind-chatter, we become power-full people who are not buffeted so much in life's twists and turns. We are no longer 'dreamed' but become the 'dreamer'.

That is a very simple description of a life (or many-lives) journey to self-mastery and enlightenment. There is no separation between spiritual and therapeutic, as it is seen as all one journey. We know the journey is long and arduous and there are no shortcuts, though I must say these days I see that idea is very popular and short-cut promoting books sell remarkably well. I too have looked for short-cuts, read of short-cuts, observed people who reckon to have found them - and I remain totally unconvinced. The people I see really advancing in their lives have all been through the mill and worked dedicatedly

through painful old baggage. They have erased meaningful chunks of personal history, have quested for meaning in their lives, danced and journeyed to spirit worlds for guidance and deeper knowledge of the many realities. In other words have both healed the past and developed their future.

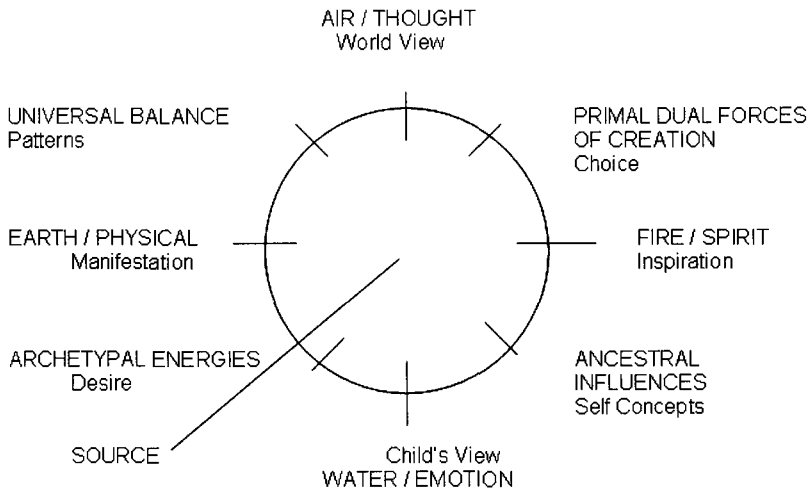
An overview of shamanism

- Shamanism is our ancient roots wherever we live and whatever sort of culture we have grown up in.
- Look back far enough in time and all of us come from shamanistic cultures.
- Long before such historically recent concepts as organised religion, humans sought understanding and knowledge of the wider Universe using a variety of experiential ways and tools which are just as applicable today as ever.
- These practices are still in use in a surprisingly large number of places in the world and many shamans of indigenous cultures are now teaching Westerners.

One of the many tools of knowledge is the Medicine Wheel. Everything can be placed on the medicine wheel and when it is in its rightful place, much understanding and transformation can take place. The wheel of human psychology is called the Star Maiden's Circle and it sits within the Wheel of Cosmic knowledge known as the Twenty Count.

THE STAR MAIDEN'S CIRCLE - the wheel of our life process

Essential Powers of The Star Maiden's Circle



The Star Maiden's Circle is our human process shown in a circle, and by facing each direction in turn we gain illumination and understanding of life issues, compassion for our life's challenges and struggles, and tools to aid self-transformation.

Medicine wheels have been used for teaching about the cosmos since antiquity. The remnants of stone circles can be found all over the world. The ancients saw their world in terms of circles and cycles and time as circular rather than linear. Medicine wheels teach of the workings of the cosmos, of the natural order, of the human's place in the natural order and of the purpose of life.

They show the powers that hold the Universe in balance.

The Star Maiden's Circle is a teaching wheel of the shadow, the dark and the light of being human and it helps us to gain insight to ourselves, and thus into all humanity. In the shadow, the 'Circle of Foxes' - or circle of our egoic self - shows how we can chase our own tail and create a mire of our own making. In the light, the Circle of our Authentic Self teaches us how to seize the chance to shift our consciousness, take responsibility for our predicament and change our circumstances. This is the path

of the hero/ine who walks the mythological hero's journey challenging demons, fighting dark forces and conquering for the good of all at whatever risk.

The name Star Maiden's Circle comes from STAR - pure light of awareness; MAIDEN - virginal, fresh; CIRCLE - the place where two principles meet. The directions are points of view. When we see clearly we can understand the meanings but when in shadow or half light and we cannot see properly, we can get fixated, addicted and confused.

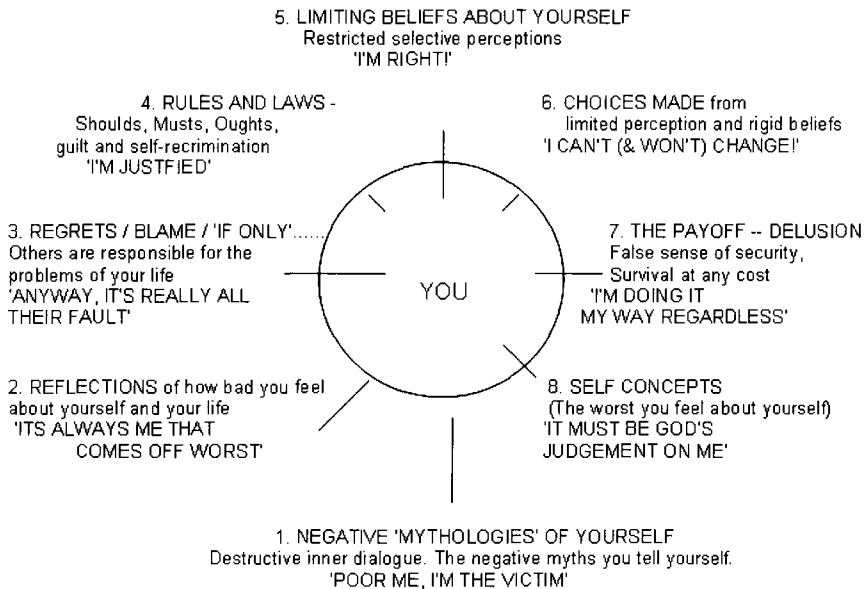
The Native American word 'OMITAUAYE OYASIN' means 'for all my relations'. It is traditional to say this when entering a sweat lodge and at other sacred moments. It means

'I do this not just for myself but for all I am related to'. And who is that? Its my blood relatives, it is all my human brothers and sisters; it is my animal kin, plant kin, rock kin, it is the whole planet herself. I am related to all that exists. While I am out of balance, depressed, angry, violent, I am a force for imbalance; for anti-life, (live backwards spells 'evil') and I am in need of healing. As I heal and balance myself, I become a force for good and for the healing of others.

Hence: all personal inner healing work is done for the good of all being.

Now let us look at the shadow aspects of the Star Maiden's Circle.

THE CIRCLE OF FOXES



We begin the Circle of Foxes by facing South.

South: Mythology of self.

Example: *'Poor me, I'm not good enough, I fear I never match up, I don't deserve, I'm the victim, they all do it to me. I feel guilty if I receive anything worth while. Anyone stupid enough to think I'm OK must be an idiot ...'*

We can fall into the trap of 'entertaining' ourselves with repetitive confirmations of our failures and inadequacies and the seeming difficulties and impossibilities of life.

Southwest: The 'dream'.

Life manifests according to how we 'dream' it and then 'proves' us right: *'This is true because look what happens to me constantly out in the world. People are always getting at me, putting me down, showing me I am not good enough making me feel I'm undeserving. It just proves it all the time. I don't know why I bother. (And in extremis - 'I'll kill myself - that'll really show 'em. Then they will be sorry'.)'* Prophecies become self-fulfilling. Rage that is unexpressed ends up as damage against the self.

West: the way it actually works out. Hence the place of regrets and blame.

'If only... my childhood had been different, if my parents had loved me. It's all their fault really, I can't help being the way I am. If only people treated me decently now I wouldn't feel so undeserving. But I'm not going to give them another chance, I'll just hide myself away quietly!'

(Or alternatively: - *'If there's any messing, I'll get them before they get me.'*)

All children are wounded, it is a natural and unavoidable part of life. No parent is perfect, it is enough to be a 'good enough' parent.

Northwest: Rules and Laws:

'My rules are that people are out to reject me, that I am undeserving, that if I show who I am I will be rejected - and I am so it must be true.'

Guilt and shame live here along with 'should, must and ought'.

North: Beliefs and philosophies.

'I'm justified being the way I am. They're all against me anyway. I believe I am right and I am, it is proved over and over again. Nothing is going to change, the world has no proper place for me and that's that.'

When we are stuck in self-pity, we lose our sense of humour and tend to get righteous, prissy and defensive. In its extreme, this is the cradle of fascism and fanaticism - compleat believers who 'must' impose their beliefs on everyone else - for everyone else's own good, of course! The insecure find a false sense of security amongst hordes of other fellow fundamentalist believers.

Northeast: Choice, design & choreography of life.

'I make my choices in life according to my beliefs and my rules. OK it may not be a very rewarding life but it's the one I've got. I organise my life so as to

avoid pain, so as to survive somehow, and I do'.

To stay comfortably asleep, we need to blame others, the world, politicians and/or God, for forcing choices on us, or making the choices which we really want to make seem impossible.

East: the grand delusion - the payoff.

'What's in it for me? I do it my way. I survive. I avoid pain as much as possible. I don't get love but that's not coming to me anyway. My parents didn't want me and no one else does either. I am a mistake and what d'you

mean that's self-pity? Well, wouldn't you feel this way if you had suffered the way I have?'
The payoff is avoidance of pain and a false sense of security.

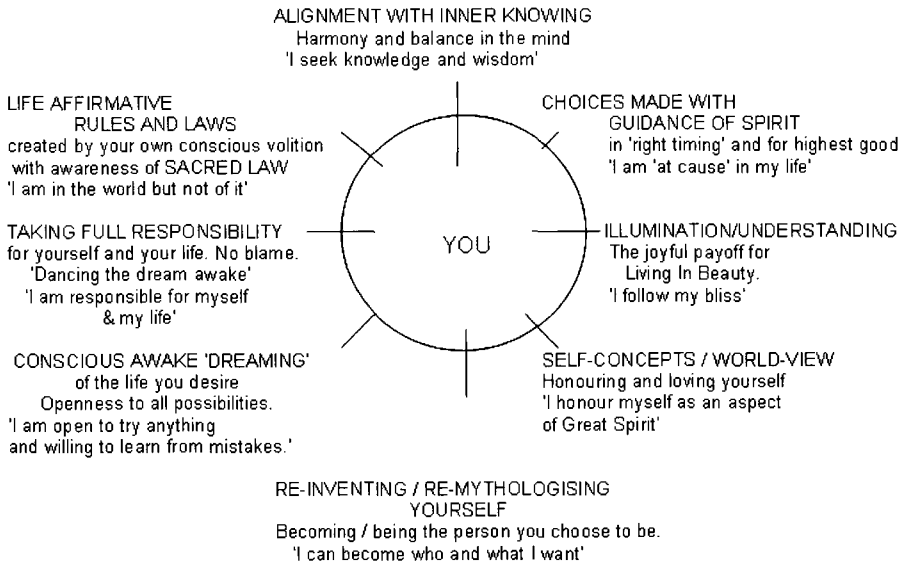
Southeast: Self-concepts.

'Feel about myself? Don't ask.'

How you feel about yourself inside when there is nothing and no one to prop you up, no one to impress, when you are alone in the middle of the night with nothing between you and the nitty-gritty of reality, shows you how much your old myths will benefit from work, from examination and from reframing.

THE CIRCLE OF THE AUTHENTIC SELF.

'Dance of the Coyotes'



South: Instead of negative mythologies and beliefs, we choose to be who and what we really want to be by application of will, intent and focus. We consciously re-mythologise ourself in spite of the old familiar self-negating stories, pain-games, habits, addictions, cultural conditionings and so on. We re-invent ourself in the Light of Awareness and reclaim our Authentic Self. We are then ready to learn through pleasure in living and giving, and we are available to experience what life, the Great Mystery, serves up for us. We become the hero/ine of our own life journey.

Facing Southwest, we take the stand of being open to all possibilities and experiences rather than governed by how it used to be or what 'they' will approve or disapprove of. We set out to consciously 'dream' into manifestation the life of our choice, always understanding that in this realm there is a time lag for a 'dream' to become 'real' and there are other 'dreams' going on too that may interact with or interfere with our own. We set practical intentions and work consistently to manifest them.

In the West, we choose to take responsibility for our-self, to stop daydreaming life away, and blaming others for our own situation. 'If only's' are exchanged for creative action. The West is the place of earth and the physical and so we get grounded instead of living in fantasy. The child-shield is

healed by 'passing through the body of the Great Mother'. We learn to take responsibility and begin to actualize our dreams and become co-creators of our own destiny.

In the Northwest, we touch on Sacred Law, the Laws of the Universe, of God, instead of getting bogged down with the societal mores of the day. We consciously make the choice to separate ourself from other people's 'shoulds, musts and oughts', and guilt that is provoked as a means to control us. This is not easy and extracts a price, as all personal psycho-spiritual growth and development does. The price is that one is no longer part of the society in quite the same way. Others may not sense much change right away, but you may feel a sense of loneliness/aloneness inside. Beware, though, if your ego gets off on the idea of being different and special and wants to tell people about it - that just means you are more the same than ever!

In the North we seek to touch our innate sense of knowing and to maintain openness to all knowledge and a questioning of all beliefs. We stop pre-judging people and situations and we are ready to dare to go with the flow of the seeming co-incidences of life and the nudges of Spirit. We maintain a state of 'beginners mind'. How we make sense of life will change with the shift of inner mythology, and we may find that we start to experience

things from new points of view. In this direction, the child-shield is healing by 'passing through the body of the father'.

Facing Northeast we can then make new choices from a place of inner balance and harmony. These can be free choices to act in the world instead of react, to choose from a self-myth of a balanced, co-operative, harmonious self.

In the East direction there is no longer any payoff or hidden agendas as nothing is hidden and we can open our imagination, the 'realm of the magician', to unlimited possibilities. This means opening to our spiritual vision to the Light, following our bliss, re-creating our life anew with acceptance of full responsibility for it.

In the Southeast we find that our self-concepts have made a mega-transformation and our attitudes and approach to life become fundamentally renewed and gloriously life-affirmative and joyful!

Transformation

This is, inevitably, a simplified and idealized picture. The work of transformation goes on – and on – as we chip away at the past until it no longer matters. I use the Star Maiden's Circle as a template when working with a client's process and it brings out piece by piece what is hidden. Quite often revelations come when facing a different direction than one would expect as the serial triggers embedded in the wheel point the client to the different aspects of themselves and their lives and the whole picture is revealed.

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Author of:

'The View through the Medicine Wheel' (O-Books 2007),
'Shamanic Path Workbook' (Arima Pubs - first pub 2001),
Principles of Shamanism (Thorsons 1996)

The book of Games and warm-ups for group leaders. (Gale Centre 1994)

Adam & Evil: the 'god' who hates sex, women and bodies'.
(Trafford Pubs 2006)

Eagle's Wing Star Maiden's Circle Practitioner Training Course starts October 31st and runs till March 2010. 4 weekends in London and a 4 day residential in Sussex.

Details www.shamanism.co.uk 01435-810233 / 810308

Leo Rutherford will be at AHPB's Humanistic Festival in 2010.