



WHEN THE DOVE TAKES FLIGHT

Terminal Illness
as a portal into the
Shamanic Realms

Scott Janssen

When I entered Lanie's room in the hospice facility, her breathing was shallow and rapid, her eyes unfocused as though looking into some other realm. Her daughter, Gretchen, sat at her side.

Before I could introduce myself as the social worker she motioned excitedly toward the sliding glass doors overlooking the patio, "Look at that."

Outside, birds darted from trees to bird feeder and back. I followed Gretchen's gaze to a large dove perched on a low hanging branch. It seemed to be staring into the room, strangely still amid the surrounding bustle of activity. "He's been staring at Mom without budging for at least forty-five minutes," Gretchen said.

For nearly an hour we sat together as Gretchen told stories about her mother and reflected on the end of Lanie's life. During a pause near the end of our conversation, Gretchen looked at the dove and smiled, "He's still up there."

"What do you make of it?" I asked. Gretchen shook her head, uncertain.

I asked if she felt a connection with this winged visitor and she instantly answered "Yes."

"Is there a feeling that goes with this connection?" I asked.

"Yes," she nodded, wiping away the tears. "Comfort and peace."

We sat in silence for a while. "Do you have a sense of what the nature of your connection with this dove is?" I asked.

She smiled, wiped away more tears and said, "I think he's a helper. A messenger."

"And what is the message?"

"That soon Mom will be leaving. He's here to help her soul fly away; soon she'll be going to another world."

I left the room. Fifteen minutes later Lanie died. According to Gretchen at the moment of death the dove suddenly raised its wings and took flight.

When visiting people who are dying, I often feel as if I'm in a space between seen and unseen worlds. Experiences like the one in Lanie's room are common and come in many forms.

Near death experiences, out-of-body experiences, deathbed visitations - in which dying people are accompanied by figures only they

can see, death-related coincidences such as unexpected visits from a loved one at the very time that loved one has died, unusual animal behaviour of the sort Gretchen and I beheld, and seeing light hovering near the body of someone who has just died are all common.

Skeptics dismiss such phenomenon as the by-products of a dying brain, disease progression, psychological stress, medications or the untrustworthy perceptions of heart-broken family members seeking solace, but there is no conclusive evidence that any of these are behind such visions, journeys and visitations. In fact, there is growing evidence the opposite may be true.

Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick, for example, in their book, 'The Art of Dying: A Journey to Elsewhere,' comment that recent scientific research into visions the dying have of deceased family members, suggests that such visitations are not due to drugs and cannot be attributed to confusion, delirium or unconscious wish fulfillment. Patients and families experiencing these visions typically accept them as real, and find peace, comfort or elation.

As consciousness alters near life's end and thresholds between worlds become permeable, we need to listen carefully to what these travels and visions mean for

those who have had them, not only to help ease the transition of those who are dying but to learn what we can about the things we cannot yet see. We need to see as a shaman, embracing these journeys into the spirit realm, the appearance of animal helpers, spirit guides and glimpses into the afterlife.

Journeys into the spirit realm have long been common in the context of both shamanism and among the dying. For the shaman these journeys may be intentionally undertaken by entering trance states or cultivating dreams. They may be initiated for specific purposes such as to find cures, gain power or guidance, find spirit helpers, retrieve souls or experience visions. For the dying however these journeys are spontaneous and unexpected.

Probably the best known of these spirit travels is the near-death experience. Though these vary in specific content the general outline is well known – a separation of consciousness from the body, the spirit travelling to another realm usually characterised by peace, light and beauty, the arrival of deceased loved ones, holy figures or guides who appear to be waiting to accompany one on a larger journey.

Some people report panoramic memory, as events from their lives

'flash' by, others report glimpses into the future. The journey back to ordinary reality may be sudden or there may first be some communication about the need to return to ordinary reality.

Other journeys reported by critically ill patients are out-of-body experiences in which consciousness leaves physical form and travels within the visible world, moving around the room or, in some cases, travelling great distances to visit loved ones far away. Others report dreams that have an otherworldly quality of travelling to some other realm.

Mildred was a hospice patient who made such a journey. By her own report she had been extremely nervous and fearful all of her life, often avoiding people and at times falling into deep depressions. Then, close to death with acute pneumonia she travelled out of her body to a place she described as 'heaven.' There she met someone she described as a 'wise old woman' who hugged her and told her not to worry any more.

When Mildred returned to ordinary consciousness she was no longer afraid of death and her social anxiety had vanished.

The connection between such spirit journeys and illness is well-

Opposite: dove images in the stained glass windows of the Бейбітшілік пен келісім сарайы (The Palace of Peace and Reconciliation), Atyrau city, Kazakhstan



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Below inset:
Lakota elder
Nicholas Black Elk.
Photo 1948

known among shamanic cultures around the world. The list is very long of people who are beset by near fatal illnesses, leave their bodies and have striking visions from which they draw sacred wisdom and power, often returning to begin their roads as healers and seers.

As was the case with Mildred, these visions and visits to transpersonal realms altered the lives of these holy men and women in ways that were deep and meaningful.

Prior to his illness-induced spirit-travels, for example, the Native American, Seneca holy man Handsome Lake was known for dissolute and selfish behaviour. He was, by all reports, transformed by his experience into a man of spiritual insight, moral strength and concern for others.

When, as a young Lakota man, Black Elk returned from the edge of death reporting a vision of an otherworldly realm where he'd been given guidance and spiritual power,

the response of his neighbours was not to dismiss these reports as caused by oxygen deprivation or chemical abnormalities. They took him seriously. What if we in modern healthcare did the same? What if, instead of dismissing these events, we asked: Where have you been? What did you see? What have you learned? How are you changed? What can you teach us?

Another nexus at which end of life and shamanic experience often intersect is in the way the natural world conveys new meanings, affirmations and messages.

In the shamanic way of seeing, the natural world - rivers, animals, trees, rocks - is alive with spirit and may have messages for us or render us aid. The natural world holds signs, omens and transmutable power.

Reports of unusual animal behaviour around those who are dying are plentiful. In their study 'Comfort for the dying: five year

retrospective and one year prospective study of end of life experiences' the study's authors, Peter Fenwick, Hilary Lovelace and Sue Brayne, found that 45% of professional helpers working in hospice and nursing home settings, who they surveyed, reported instances of an animal that seemed to hold some significance for the dying person appearing at the time of death.

The dying and their families also report synchronicities in the natural world apparently attuned with unfolding personal events: a rainbow that appears at a propitious time or a sudden clearing of the sky on a rainy day.

Even insects - the butterfly at the window behaving strangely or the spider spinning its web in the window sill which drops down on its thread just as a person dies - may be perceived as significant.



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For a majority of people who report such interactions with the natural world, these things are taken very seriously, and are often accepted as transpersonal. Rather than chalking such things up to delirium, we would do well to follow the lead of traditional cultures and remain open to the mystery and possibility of these experiences. When we do so we might ask: What does the tree say? What message did the bird bring? What do you see in the blood red sky?

Another dimension of shamanic experience often reported by those who are dying is the arrival of spirit helpers or guides who come to help with their transition. In traditional cultures the idea of spirit helpers is well-known. They may be discovered in dreams, trance states, through rituals or the use of sacred plants. They might arrive in human form, appear as animals, sacred beings or natural forces such as lightning.

Among the dying such helpers usually appear in the forms of deceased loved ones, though sometimes they are religious figures, friendly strangers, or - in rarer cases - animals. These experiences appear to be very common.

In their book 'At the Hour of Death: A New Look at Evidence for Life After Death,' Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson conclude after a multi-year, cross-cultural study into these experiences that approximately 25% of those who are dying report such visitors (though if true, the actual percentage is surely higher due to hesitation to report due to fear of ridicule, or an inability to report due to physical inability or non-responsive states).

Another person I had contact with was Mike. His spirit helper came in the form of a child. For the months he had been a hospice patient he was angry and depressed that he was dying. His wife worried he would never find peace. One day, she heard him talking and poked her head into the room where he lay in his hospital bed. Seeing no one there she assumed he was confused. Later, he told her he'd been talking with a friendly little boy who had reassured him that all was well and that he'd be back on Tuesday to guide him away.

In the next few days Mike's mood greatly improved and he told his wife and son he was at peace and ready to go.

He died peacefully, as predicted, the following Tuesday, helped on his journey, his wife was sure, by his nameless little friend.

Some would reflexively resort to a framework of 'seeing' that is materialistic and reductive, explaining Mike's experience away and distrusting his and his wife's reports of their shared experience.

Opening our minds does not preclude the search for material explanations, but it requires that we see more deeply into the value and possibilities a shamanic lens offers for deepening our understanding and ability to serve. If we open to traditional wisdom we may find ourselves asking: Who is here with you now that I cannot see? Why have they come? Where are you going?

In shamanic cultures Mike would be encouraged to define for

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himself the meaning of his experiences. His reports would not be dismissed; his interpretations involving the transpersonal would be accepted.

Not that shamanistic cultures are overly credulous. There is a supportive context in which others, elders and the wise among them, are available to help make sense of the messages and meanings of dreams, visitations and unearthly travels. These experiences are then woven into stories, acted upon, and become part of a person and a community's identity. Over time, they may even be used to transmit wisdom, cautionary tales and history.

This is a very different story-telling context from the conventional skeptical paradigm which often greets those who are dying. Even when they are not met with doubtful expressions or rejection, those who are in the liminal space around death are seldom encouraged to really process and share these visitations, journeys and encounters.

Herein lies another value of shamanic cultures generally - the reverence for sacred stories. What if, rather than discounting and explaining away such experiences, the dying and their families had the opportunity to tell their story and define its meaning for themselves? What if, instead of doubt, there was a context in which such stories were taken seriously?

When the Shawnee prophet Lowawluwaysica came back from near death telling people he was now called Tenskwatawa



(Shawnee: 'The Open Door') nobody rolled their eyes and went on calling him by his previous name, they listened to his story and called him Tenskwatawa.

Right now, we do not know the cause of any of the mysterious experiences we've been considering. There is nothing scientific about rejecting them out of hand and supposing underlying physiological, psychological or pharmacological causes, yet this is often what happens.

Of course, it must be said that some hallucinations are caused by disease processes, medications and psychiatric states, but these typically manifest in ways that are far different from the coherent, personally meaningful experiences we have been considering.

For such instances a conventional approach may be warranted. Similarly, not all people are comforted by these experiences. Some may prefer conventional narratives and benefit from more conventional approaches to processing these experiences which minimise their transpersonal nature.

For the majority, however, the shamanic lens provides a respectful and empowering perspective which can enhance our ability to

understand and serve. A perspective generative of insight and meaning which, for all we know, science may one day catch up with as the work of near death and after death researchers like Osis, Haroldsson, Fenwick, and others in quantum physics and energy psychology is beginning to suggest.

Perhaps there is no place better than the threshold between life and death for testing these waters and bringing a shamanic spirit back into the heart of our modern understanding.

In the background of all that has been said is perhaps the most important convergence between this threshold space often reported by dying patients and shamanic ways of knowing the world - the immediate experience of the soul and belief in a larger spiritual realm ultimately more real than what we see before us. It is a realm alive with things we cannot explain simply by using a mechanical and materialistic paradigm.

Perhaps one day shamanic wisdom will emerge as the preferred perspective from which to take soundings into these depths.

In his book, 'The Way of the Shaman', Michael Harner suggests that the accumulating evidence on near death experiences and the power of these events in the lives of

those who have had them has encouraged a search for better 'maps' with which to understand these occurrences. Many, he points out, have found their way to maps that honour the wisdom of shamanic methods and ways of seeing.

Many of us who work in hospices and in palliative care have long since learned not to dismiss these experiences, but we have yet to develop a good way to help people open them up and explore their meaning. As the boundaries between life and death become porous, states of consciousness often become altered and sleep cycles and dreamtime change, I have found no better map for understanding such things than that offered by shamanism. It is, and will continue to be, one of the first sounding leads I reach for when travelling in these mysterious waters.

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