

# One Experience of *Drumming in the Temple*

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Personally, I avoided Bekki's Drumming in the Temple workshop—it sounded too God-oriented for me.

I am neither a theist nor a deist. Theist? I do not care to follow a prescribed organization of faith and worship contained in the books of any religion. Deist? I prefer the "small gods." (See *Small Gods* by Terry Pratchett, 1992, for a wonderful exploration of this notion.)

I am very comfortable when Spirit manifests as shamanic allies, teachers and guides. The core of my connection with Great Mystery, they help with the spiritual and healing work I do for others. After thirty years of these expanding spiritual horizons, I felt no need to seek help for myself or anyone else from any deity. So there seemed little point in pursuing Deity through shamanic journeywork.

Now that I have (April, 2004), I admit I may have been wrong to deny myself the pleasure of this learning experience. Let me see if I can share what it was like.

The workshop began with discussion of deity as it may manifest for shamanic peoples. Then we took time to journal about and share our personal involvements with spirit and religion. Listening to the shared spiritual histories helped me understand the many paths we use to relate to Spirit.

Sometimes Spirit grabs us with unavoidable force. As I write this, a crow lands on a branch over the stream outside my window. I have never seen one in that spot before. Crows are a major manifestation of Spirit for me in shamanic work and daily life.

Sometimes we chase after Spirit, searching for forms to fill a felt need for a higher connection. Sometimes our connection happens through one or more of the many religious structures which place themselves between Spirit and people.

Our sharing completed, we began to journey.

*JOURNEY 1: Our intention was to seek answers to two questions: What face of the Divine speaks to me? What am I here to do?*

I journeyed as Crow, flying for a very long time with no sense of geography, direction or "going someplace," and no awareness of scenery below. Finally the visual aspect of the journey coalesced into a powerful awareness that I was flying

East into the twilight time of evening. Brighter daylight was behind me; ahead, the view darkened into night as the first stars began to twinkle above.

I became aware of a homestead below: a rude stone cabin, similar in color, materials and form to the rounded rocky crags dotting the close-cropped grassy hillsides; rough wooden sheds; and crude lines of fencing and pens which looked to be made of driftwood. There were also sheep, lots of sheep. (For Terry Pratchett on sheep, see *The Wee Free Men*, 2003. For less about sheep and more about Spirit—including a powerful psychopomp journey—*A Hat Full of Sky*, 2004.)

I landed in one of the sheep pens still in Crow form. As I pecked about among the droppings, I noticed an older grey haired woman sitting on a large outcropping of smooth rock just outside the fence. She was smoking a strange sort of bent cone of a pipe and singing quietly to herself.

She paid no attention to the Crow in the sheep byre and continued to face the other way as I changed into human form. I stepped easily over the low fence and walked around where she could see me. She motioned me to sit beside her on the rock. We sat together and enjoyed the fading light without any need for conversation, in spite of the strangeness of my "just dropping in" on her isolated life. She continued to sing and draw puffs from the pipe, which smelled very pleasant and herbal. It seemed that was all that was going to happen. I stayed a while longer, then sensing it was time to return to the workshop, left her and flew back the way I had come.

It appears that the divine speaks to me in the form of a goddess of a seere and isolated place; a goddess who dresses like a mountain peasant and has a powerful interest in sheep. Caught up in the intense reality of the journey, I did not investigate what I am here to do.

*JOURNEY 2. Most of us had incomplete or inconclusive first journeys. So for the second one we went back to complete, or explore more fully, what we had begun, and possibly finish our assignments.*

I flew back to the same location, in the same way I had in the first journey. Again I changed form in the byre and went to sit beside the woman, the goddess. This journey seemed to succeed the first one in time. She nodded to me in recognition and passed me the pipe which was smoldering away.

The smoke smelled and tasted of mugwort and something else with an almost bitter tang. It was a powerful combination because it took only a few breaths of smoke—yes, I did inhale—for me to begin having lovely visions of swirling colours.

As I sat, relaxed and enjoying the slowly changing visions, she resumed her singing. After a while I rose and began to dance: I don't much enjoy singing but do find pleasure and expression in simple movement. Soon she rose and began to dance with me. I do not know how long we danced together. It was ecstatic because the smoke and the movement took me totally into the moment; not outside myself, but very much into my true being while that being was very much present. The physical and spiritual sensations were identical to those I have experienced during peak moments of sexual closeness, although there was no apparent element of sexuality. There was no thought or planning, just moving in the easy pleasure of the absolutely peaceful sunset moments. I do not know how long we danced. Eventually, I became aware that we had stopped and were standing, completely at ease, facing one another.

She gestured for me to join her and moved toward the skin-covered doorway to the hut. I thanked her but said I must return. As I turned back toward the byre, she nodded and entered the hut.

*Journey 3 was done to discover if "initiation" is appropriate, available and relevant to my path at the present time. Led by Bekki, we had talked about union, merging, being consumed or incorporated and about reaching a new level of knowledge but I was still a little unclear as to what initiation by a goddess might mean. I hoped the journey would clarify the concept and what it might physically include.*

I flew back to the same place, it was night now and fully dark under a clear sky. I changed and went to sit on the rock. Eventually the goddess came out and, taking my hand, led me to a hilltop behind the sheep byre. It was a steep, rocky climb—there seems to be little horizontal land here—but not too far. The hilltop was smooth and more or less level. She had me lie down. She said that my eyes must stay open, staring at the stars.

The air was amazingly clear and the sky filled with uncountable points of light, crisp against the blackness and hardly twinkling. Either she left me there or I simply became unaware of her. As I lay quietly and very alone, there was a shift in my consciousness. I felt like I was dying. Or at least, undergoing some major transformation.

I am simultaneously fading down into the earth and up into the stars. I am aware but do not have the capacity for bodily movement. I think, with a start, that my body has ceased to exist: I do still have an existence but it is entirely one of awareness, of simple beingness. There is no bodyness, no embodiment to me. I lie for an endless time spread between earth and sky. At some point my embodiment, awareness of my body, returns. This is a surprise but not an unpleasant sensation. I lie with it for some time before rising. After trying my legs a little uncertainly, I walk back down to the byre in hopes of finding the

goddess before I am called back. She is not visible and it is time to go so I take Crow form and return.

Between journeys, I looked through Michael Jordan's 1993 *Encyclopedia of Gods: Over 2500 Deities of the World*, brought by one of the students. I came across Sirtur, a Mesopotamian Sheep Goddess known to Sumerian, Babylonian and Akkadian peoples. This is where sheep were first domesticated so she would have been significant, thousands of years ago. The landscape where I have been journeying fits descriptions of the Mesopotamian foothills (the "hilly flanks of the fertile crescent" where so much of western civilization began). I wondered, have I found Sirtur?

*Journey 4 was an open journey to complete what we began in the first three.*

I flew back to the same place and time with the intention of finishing out the night. For a long time I sat on the rock alone under the stars in their preternaturally clear sky. It was simply, totally, quiet. I felt very peaceful. I do not know if I received an initiation, but I did feel changed, in a different state of mind, body and spirit. I felt more calm and peaceful than usual.

Eventually the goddess came out and we sat together on the rock. Later there was the suggestion of change in the sky. We looked at one another and, without a word spoken, decided by mutual consent that we would sing and dance in the Dawn together. We had been dancing for a long time but so gently that we were not tired, when the sky suddenly became very bright and the sun suggested that it was ready to burst over the hilly horizon.

About then the drumming for the journeying speeded up and I knew it was time to return.

*Journey 5 was to examine what purpose this connection with Spirit might serve. Allies, teachers, guides and, many times, ancestors we meet in our journeys are there to help us deal with specific aspects of our lives (mundane or spiritual. If we are doing healing work, they may serve specific healing functions. In this context it is quite reasonable to enquire what my goddess connection is for.*

Again I flew to the goddess in Crow form. This time I changed some distance away from the dwelling, and found myself walking with her through the sheep pastures which flowed naturally around the rocks and over the roughly rolling hills. The landscape is beautiful, but rugged and austere. Except for an occasional small tree or bush popping up among the rounded rocks, nothing grows here except very short grasses. We saw only one small stream in all our walking so water must be rare and precious.

A pair of sheep dogs joined us in our ambling. They were very attached to the goddess, staying right at her heels except when they dashed off to discipline a

wandering ewe. I did not count tails but there were quite a few sheep. From childhood experience (an aunt kept sheep on the farm where I lived with my father's mother), I expected they would flock together; instead they were sprinkled evenly throughout the whole area we walked in. There were two rams in pens near the hut and many of the ewes had lambs with them. Their coats were very dense and long; it looked like time for spring shearing.

As the goddess and I walked and talked it became clear that she is not a typical shamanically useful connection. Her help for me will not be in solving any particular kind of problem or in doing healing work with me. She is first and foremost an important element in my spiritual pursuit: a direct connection with Deity; a *real goddess*, not an ally, teacher, guide or ancestor. Beyond that, she is certainly a very earthy being and will help me when circumstances challenge my grounding. She has lessons to teach me, especially about prosperity.

She reminds me that domesticated animals were one of human kind's first sources of wealth: portable, storable, increasing in value. Being self-mobile they are better than valuables that have to be hidden away and/or carried wherever one goes. They are also naturally capable, with a little help and care, of increasing their number and value; a good kind of property to have. Thus, this goddess has had millennia of experience in helping people grow and save something which increases prosperity. This is something—she is quick to remind me—I can definitely use help with. She is my prosperity goddess!

It took some time to achieve this realization and, with excellent timing, the recall beat began as realization dawned. I thanked her and said good-bye but did not know when I would next return.

*Journey 6 was our first journey on Sunday, a reconnection journey.*

Again I found myself flying into the beautiful twilight over this rugged, almost empty landscape. Again the goddess was waiting for me, sitting and smoking on the rock near her hut. She offered the pipe as soon as I joined her and it again had a very powerful effect, visionary but not exactly hallucinogenic. Perhaps this smoke is truly entheogenic: it is certainly in the context and company of a goddess that it has its effects. There is a bit of irony in this situation. In ordinary reality I do not use psychedelic substances. I have yet to find one that has any significant effect on me. Yet here, in a shamanic realm, with my consciousness already altered, I am granted an intense visual response to a very psychedelic smoking blend.

The first thing I ask is, "What is in this smoke?"

It is mugwort, she replies, because she loves the smell. She loves to have it offered to her as a smudge and burnt offering too.

"What else," I ask, "what gives the smoke that bitter tang?"

It turns out there is a mushroom that grows in the high pastures among the sheep dung that she dries and adds to the mugwort. It is rare; she only occasionally finds it on damp early spring mornings. And there is a little of a large red mushroom that grows elsewhere: it sounds like an *amanita*, probably *muscaria*. One might expect interesting results from that combination.

We sit and talk for a long time about my prosperity. Apparently even sheep goddesses have a divine perspective on human problems and can give wide ranging advice. I am currently focused on writing and publishing books on shamanic topics, with a completed manuscript plus other material well underway but no firm prospects for publication. I am seriously working on this and she encourages this as a genuine and serious way to increase my prosperity. Her major piece of advice is to seek and use more and more help from others. I tend to be a loner and she insistently repeats that I can't do it all on my own if I want prosperity and success from writing.

Too soon, it is time to return but I honestly ask if I can see her again soon. She agrees.

*Journey 7 was a journey in which we asked our deity for help for another person; a journey for healing. The results were personal so I won't share them here.*

*Journey 8 was the last one, a long journey because there was so much to learn. The focus was to ask about honoring our new divine connection and through that to learn more about her or him. This can include: images which honor the deity; spirit houses where the divine may dwell; affiliations such as emblems or symbols, tools, colour and other correlations; ceremonies and rituals; initiatory practices and ways to dedicate oneself to the deity and its work; manners of purification; and ways to become infused with divine energy. There were endless possibilities to explore. One could devote a lifetime to fully developing a divine connection. Many have. What could I discover in one, not too short, journey?*

Well, I learned quite a bit, really. I learned that my goddess is a Sky Goddess who developed her greatest strength during the Iron Age. As a Sky Goddess she can be fierce, extremely powerful and very destructive. Think Lightning here, Lightning striking the bare upland of rocks and scarcely covered soil repeatedly, repeatedly. The initiation I experienced is also a fair example of what she can do, with no seeming effort: a word and a gesture to effectively pillory one over a hilltop and spread one's soul so thin it stretches from earth to sky and loses—and gains—so much. Endless energies pass between Earth and Sky. She moderates these, standing, as goddesses and shamans must, at the threshold betwixt and between. She can take, or stretch, one over that threshold.

The Iron Age was the beginning of the time of power for blacksmiths, those coworkers with the shaman with Fire, those movers and, more importantly, those material creators who learned to tame the fire element and produce, produce, produce tools and weapons unlike any used on this earth before. My goddess knows that blacksmiths were women as well as men. She wants me to honor Her with an Iron Image of Goddess. It could be a tool with her on it. It could be a knife of Hers. What other tool better carries that blend of durability, flexibility, strength and *edge* that is Iron? It could simply be an image of Her.

Colours are important to her. Yes, the shamanic colours: red, white and black. For her Black is the night sky and beaten iron. White is lightning, the stars and the core of the coals. Red is the fires, the forge, the sunset sky. Only these colours matter.

I should build for her a shrine. It is a small domed building with a central smoke hole covered with sheep skins. As she spoke these words, showing the building to my imagination with sweeping gestures of her toughened, leathery brown hands, my mind flashed to ghere (yurts). I don't know if that is what she wants; there is no such building where she now lives though these buildings are common to many Asiatic herding folk. She says the smoke hole is vastly important: you need to be able to see the stars when you are inside her shrine.

And I should make sacrifice for her. Lambs. She is a Goddess of Sheep!

Finally, I should smoke mugwort. The various mushroom bits do add something, she says, but the mugwort is the thing. She says it has been used as long as people have been people. Well, as long as people have known and done important things (I think she may have been referring to Sheep and Iron here: they are most important for her). I know people have used mugwort for thousands of years. I grow, harvest and dry it and have burned it as smudge at least a thousand times. I have not yet smoked it. I wonder where I can get a pipe like hers.

*The class stood to drum and rattle for this journey which some students did as a 'walking journey.' Some of us danced and sang as our goddesses and gods gave us these ways to love and honor them. It was a long and exhausting journey. At some point I returned to ordinary consciousness and realized that almost everyone else was ready to return too. Soon I helped to drum the rapid beats which ended the journeying and was almost the end of this delightfully intense weekend of shamanic work.*

We were all dazed after two days close to deity, embodied manifestations, anthropomorphic personifications of Spirit. We felt muzzy, elated and filled with Spirit. Whether you have a personal connection with Spirit or not, I recommend this workshop. You will be changed by it. I was.

I suggested to Bekki that, in future, she call her workshop “Drumming in the Temple, Drumming in the Mountains.”

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