

# GROUNDING, CENTERING AND SHIELDING IN SHAMANIC PRACTICE

Crow Swimsaway, Ph.D.\*

How do you prepare for a shamanic journey? Do you turn on the drumming CD, lie down and journey? Do you light incense, or smudge? Is there an altar where you usually journey or do you set up an altar each time? Do you call the energy of the directions? Do you dance, sing, or pray to call on allies, teachers and ancestors to support you?

What does it mean to take or not take these actions?

Shamanic work is metaphysical work, or more accurately, bridging work which allows its practitioners, while keeping firmly connected to ordinary reality, to gain support, energy and information from parallel, "meta" realities.

Present day practitioners in other metaphysical traditions are well aware of the need to protect themselves. A common approach is to ground, center and shield oneself before starting any working. Clear guidance about this is sadly lacking in much neoshamanic literature and teaching. The significance of protective practices to tribal shamans is seldom made clear (perhaps not perceived) in the ethnographic and other literature.

Have your readings and ordinary-reality teachers shown you how being grounded, centered and shielded increases your power, effectiveness and safety? Have they taught how these practices are part of most tribal systems of shamanic practice? In fact, they are essential in protecting the shaman at work.

Why do we need to be protected? We have an innate ability to visit metaphysical shamanic realities, but we are not creatures of those places. We need to know we can return safely, intact and at will to our own reality. We need to know we can journey safely, protected against the unknown. There are shamanic energies far stronger than ours, and even helpful energies may present themselves in frightening ways. We need to be at our strongest when we journey.

We depend constantly upon the strength and guidance of our allies, teachers and guides when we journey. Is that sufficient?

For beginning students who do not yet know their allies, it is not adequate to say, "Your ally will take care of you", however true that may be. Beginners must be strong, safe, and comfortable as they learn to journey. With the first beat of the drum of the first journey, the beginner enters unknown territory. Who takes care of you until your guide appears? How do you know that this is, indeed, your guide?

More advanced students and practitioners rapidly realize that they do not have control of and are not under the control of the beings they meet when journeying. There is a great deal of interaction and exchange on many levels. I believe that those who have the most to give when they journey will receive the most in return. Thus, in matters of safety, those who go strongly into the journey will go the furthest, receive the most strength and protection, and learn the most from their journeying experiences.

No matter how experienced you are, simple practices for grounding, centering and shielding will help you gather your strength. They can be done in a few moments each time you prepare to journey.

*GROUNDING:* As you calm yourself to begin your journey, become conscious of your breathing. Let it be smooth, steady, calm and even. On each out-breath let your awareness and energy flow downward to the Earth. As you connect with Mother Earth, become aware of the steady, supporting strength which lies beneath you. As you become comfortable and confident in the strength the Earth has for you, become conscious of your in-breaths.

*CENTERING:* On each in-breath, draw energy back into your center. As you breathe in, feel the strength of the Earth mingling with your own strength. Be aware of the core of calm, centered power within you and from which you can act. Continue your calm breathing.

*SHIELDING:* Call up any shielding you want for this journey. Vibrational shielding in the form of colored light is an ancient shamanic tradition easily accessible to everyone: Surround yourself with light of a color which feels powerful. We often use golden light (such as you may find glowing in the tunnel to the Lower World) or blue light (after the Chumash shaman's protective 'egg of blue light'). We do not recommend white light; it is often too strong and may block positive as well as problematic events. Other forms of metaphysical shielding, including sound, costume, amulets, crystals and stones, have been used by traditional shamans; you can seek out and use them to good effect.

How about the altar, incense, calling the directions? These traditional practices also serve to ground, center and shield. If you have an altar in place, and regularly smudge and call in the directions, simply add the conscious intention to ask higher energies for help and protection.

Intention is everything in shamanic work! Do some research, ask your teacher, journey on it and discover how to bring these energies intentionally into your journey-work. In our personal grounding, centering and shielding practices we find that time spent setting up sacred space in which to journey is very helpful. The smudge which clears the space of negativity and the power of the objects on the altar remind us of our need to shield and of the protective energies available from Spirit.

Similarly, we sing and dance to open the journeying circle with the intention of strengthening our ties to the allies, teachers and ancestors we shall soon contact in the shamanic realms and asking for their help and protection in our work.

These practices are equally helpful in everyday life. Start every day with grounding, centering and shielding—it takes just a few moments—and see how you feel throughout the day. Big interview with the boss? Before you get up, calm your breathing. Ground, then center. When you go to your closet, ask, "What color will help me feel calm and strong?" That's the one to wear! Accessories? "Well, these amber and jet beads feel powerful ..."

It's easy to ground, center and shield each day and go forth prepared, strong and happy. Try it!

\*My wife, Bekki Shining Bearheart, and I are ministers of the Church of Earth Healing, Athens County, Ohio. We have been teaching about Shamanism since 1982 from Chicago to Baltimore and Rochester NY to Columbia SC. We offer workshops at all levels from Introductory to Advanced Practitioner. We have always taught the protective practices discussed in this article and our students comment on how helpful they find this approach. In recent years we have become aware, when our students work with other teachers and when

meeting students of other teachers, that such care is seldom found among neo-shamanic teachers. This lack of protection often creates problems. Our concern for this situation has led me to prepare this article.

© 2005 by Crow Swimsaway, PhD. This article is made available for personal use but may not be duplicated in any medium without permission of the author.