

Shamanic Journeys  
and the healing  
integration of  
the inner child

for the  
wellbeing  
of the soul

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The idea that childhood experiences come to bear on who we are as adults has now been accepted as common knowledge. From Sigmund Freud's proposal that our psychological self is shaped during the first seven years of our life, to Stanislav Groff's ideas on the effect that birth experiences have on the formation of core beliefs and behavioural patterns in later childhood and adulthood, therapeutic and spiritual traditions commonly acknowledge the central role the past has in the shaping of our present.

One of the therapies that attempts, in a very explicit and direct manner, to achieve mental and spiritual health by addressing and healing childhood experiences, is Inner Child work.

The concept of the 'inner child' is certainly not new, but was first put to more extensive therapeutic use during the 1960's. It suggests that the human psyche has child-like aspects and that these aspects or parts can be accessed and communicated with to facilitate healing.

In therapy the focus is given traditionally to the wounded, traumatised child and the emphasis of the therapeutic work itself is on healing and nurturing this wounded aspect of the self. This is usually achieved by going into visualisation, and interacting with the inner child in much the same way that a healthy adult would with a frightened physical child, typically with the help of the therapist.

Much of inner child work was developed to help people who had been sexually abused as children - and who displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as adults - in order for them to come to terms with, and heal their past.

However, the relevance of inner child work is not limited to persons who suffered such severe trauma. We all carry with us the hidden beliefs and dispositions we formed as a result of our early childhood experiences, whether or not we are aware of those internalised 'personal laws' or 'script decisions' (limiting and unconscious core beliefs).

These are formed through our childhood encounter with the world, our interactions with parents,

siblings and peers, and later come to limit our adult perceptions, experiences and choices in a way that prevents us from living our lives to their fullness.

In the course of our work we have discovered that combining inner child work with shamanic journeying can prove to be an even more fruitful venture. However, remarkably, the full meaning behind the power of this work was revealed to us only recently, as we journeyed to the spirit world seeking advice on the writing of this article.

While psychologists referred to the inner child as a dissociated aspect of our psyche, the spirits see it as a lost part of our soul, which we have pushed away from us due to the force of the trauma, a part of us we deny because we unconsciously consider it to be damaged.

And although this is ultimately done for the survival and the wellbeing of our soul, as we shun that part, we also lose the wisdom and strength it has to offer us. It is through journeying, then, that we can reconnect with that part of ourselves, with the help of the spirits. In effect, then, the inner



child journey can be assimilated to a spontaneous or self-soul retrieval. By reconnecting with our inner child, we then learn about our own strengths and weaknesses, we learn to truly be ourselves and it is this help of the spirits, we believe, that makes inner child work so much more powerful when carried out in the context of a shamanic journey, as opposed to visualisation or active imagination work.

One of the most significant differences between visualisation work and shamanic work is the presence of a mediator, or therapist. While inner child work done by visualisation is usually, if not necessarily, directed by the therapist, when working shamanically we are interacting with the child with no human mediation and under the watching eye of our spirit teachers.

Working shamanically with the inner child, however, holds even more benefits. From a shamanic perspective, trauma is one of the main causes of soul loss. According to the shaman, when we suffer trauma parts of our soul escape and the shaman must journey to the spirit realms to return it if we are to maintain our health and balance.

From the perspective of the inner child, we say that when the child suffers its first trauma it is trapped in us, and as years go by, it is covered in layers, like walls which surround and protect it, gradually becoming thicker and thicker. One could assimilate this to an onion, with the child being the core of the onion.

To access the trapped traumatised child, we must gently peel the layers surrounding it until we reach the frightened child trapped in the center. If we try to rush or 'bulldoze' into the inner child, our attempt will fail and the layers will only get thicker to protect the child. This is why when working with the inner child by visualisation, therapists would typically take a long time to approach it.

While working shamanically we would likewise take time before directly working with the inner child. This is because people take a while to learn how to communicate with their spirit teachers, and gain trust in them, as well as trust their own journeying experiences.

The advantage that working shamanically gives us is in bypassing our critical mind (fears or ego) while journeying, something which is very difficult to achieve during visualisation or active imagination.

When working with the traumatised inner child, we are naturally afraid - afraid of letting go, afraid of what we might hear. We are trapped, in other words, in our critical mind. But the monotonous sound of the drums while shamanically journeying, and the shamanic state of consciousness makes it easier for us to let go of our mind, and hence of our fears, and allows us a more direct and full encounter with the inner child, enabling us to connect with and hear the wisdom and strength that we have become estranged from.

We tell here the stories of two women who journeyed shamanically to meet and heal their inner child, and the powerful effect these encounters had on their lives.

#### **GABRIELA'S STORY**

Gabriela was in her late thirties when she started working shamanically. Although she had suffered no physical or sexual abuse, she had suffered considerable verbal and emotional abuse from her father and older siblings as a child and felt rejected by them. As an adult she was not close to her father and siblings, and was constantly seeking their approval but rarely receiving it.

Gabriela was very judgmental towards herself and others, and was fully aware of that fact, but unable to change her patterns. She wanted her family to be just perfect, always happy and harmonious, doing everything together, and was frustrated whenever she sensed things were not going her way or 'slipping out of control'.

Additionally, although she was a very attractive and a successful business woman, Gabriela had very little trust and confidence in herself and her abilities and she was shy in public. Her shyness was usually communicated to the external world as detachment or haughtiness, and people would keep their distance from her, which further contributed to her feelings of rejection and inadequacy. In a sense, fearing rejection, Gabriela would reject people before they had a chance to reject her.

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Throughout years of therapy, Gabriela's story, which placed the root to all her problems in her relationship with her father, was further reinforced. The father, and the abuse she suffered from him during her childhood, became the hook on which all of Gabriela's problems in life were hung. Everything that went wrong in her life was attributed to trauma she suffered from her father.

This manifested to the degree that her husband and close friends adopted this story as true as well, 'She is like that,' they would say, 'because of her father.' Gabriela's over-engagement with her father and childhood traumas affected her relationships with her family, friends, husband, her whole world.

Gabriela did two shamanic journeys to talk to her inner child, after one year of sporadic





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shamanic work with other issues. It felt right at that time to take that further step in the work and have her meet her child face to face.

In her first journey Gabriela's inner child took the form of a boy with dark hair and skin. Although Gabriela was surprised to meet a child that was so drastically different to her real, physical self as a child, she had no problem in acknowledging the boy as an aspect of her that she needed to communicate with.

In this journey the child presented himself as very sad and powerless, and Gabriela spent the journey listening to the child, giving advice, and playing with him and 'mothering' him. She was the nurturing parent in the journey.

The child she met on her second journey was already markedly different. To begin with, the child actually looked like Gabriela, was a girl, with fair skin and hair, and Gabriela clearly recognised her as her younger self.

We might say that in the first journey Gabriela might have been afraid to interact with her inner child, and that a certain degree of dissociation or distancing from the child image was needed for her to face it. But this was no longer the case in the second journey.

The child in the second journey was different in more than just appearance, though. While the child of the first journey was completely helpless and powerless, the child Gabriela met in her second journey was much stronger. She had opinions of her own, and verbalised criticism against her parents, something which the younger real self Gabriela never had a chance to do.

What both journeys had in common, however, was the stance taken by Gabriela towards the inner child. While in real life, Gabriela perceived and experienced herself as weak or powerless, in the journeys, when facing her inner child - who is herself weak and powerless - Gabriela took the stance of a healthy, strong and powerful adult, counselling, advising and nurturing the child.

It was only in the face of the child's victimhood that she found this adult and empowered aspect of her self, and connected with it.

Furthermore, due to the enhanced sensory characteristic of the shamanic journey, Gabriela not only connected with these aspects of herself, she enacted and embodied them, she felt them, spoke them, and heard them in every cell of her body.

Added to this is the fact that Gabriela directed her empowering words and actions at the child, which is at the end of the day, a part of herself. So by objectifying this victim aspect of her in the form of the child, by dissociating from it, she also confines it, defines it, and has the opportunity to experience in herself an alternative aspect of her psyche. This is clearly evident in Gabriela's immediate reaction to the journey as well: while starting the journey feeling tearful and weak, by the time the journey came to an end, Gabriela was feeling energised and happy.

The effects of the journeys on Gabriela's life were significant. First and foremost, she began to realise that she was using her father as an excuse for everything that went wrong in her life, and realised this had a domino effect on many aspects in her life.

Her interaction and relationship with her parents and siblings were changed, which also affected Gabriela's attitude towards her own children and husband. She began to make friends and became more involved with mothers in her children's school and other places. She felt more confident in herself, which led her to be less detached and distant with people, who in turn, dared to come closer to her.

The greatest change Gabriela noticed, however, was not feeling the aching pain of wanting to get the approval of her father and siblings, an experience she was finding especially liberating and gratifying.

## MARIA'S STORY

Maria came to shamanism in her mid-thirties. She was a shy and quiet woman, the survivor of childhood sexual abuse - she was abused by a neighbour over a period of three years, starting at the age of seven.

Maria had been in therapy for nine years before starting to work shamanically, but felt that therapy did little to help her with her issues. She was extremely timid and shy, had very low self-esteem and self-confidence, and was extremely self-critical. She always thought others were better than her, so she would avoid participating in any public activities and was very quiet in group situations. Maria was also ashamed of exposing her body in public, and would always wear long trousers, and long sleeved shirts.

She wanted very much to get her driver's license, but could not bring herself to take driving lessons. Just the thought of driving would paralyse her, she explained, and so, although not being able to drive was limiting her considerably, she never dared to even start taking lessons.

Maria did her first journey to talk to her inner child eight months into her shamanic work. Unlike Gabriela, the initial 'distance' between Maria and the child she met in her journey was smaller. She immediately recognised the child as herself, a 'little me'.

This is not to say that Maria was not afraid to meet the child. Her fear was simply manifested in a different way.

While for Gabriela, the fear expressed itself in making the child different from her, thus distancing the child from her adult self, for Maria the fear manifested in her dawdling at the beginning of the journey, lingering in her power place, as well as the relatively long time it took her to actually meet the child in the journey. It was also evident from the fact that when entering the spirit world the day would suddenly turn to night, making her feel fearful.

It was her close and healthy relationship with her guardian spirit, and the love and support she received from him that helped her to continue on her journey.

However, unlike Gabriela, who clearly encountered a powerless and victimised child, Maria came into contact with a very powerful inner child.





Initially this did not seem to be the case, as the child appeared to Maria as being cold and disconnected from her emotions. But as the journey progressed it became evident that the child was in fact a very powerful and wise teacher. Her initial coldness and detachment were in fact used by the child to mirror to Maria her own emotional state and behavioural patterns of being closed, of not allowing people in, and of being disconnected from her emotions.

However, in spite of marked differences, Maria's interaction with the inner child can be considered as an inversion of Gabriela's.

Here, we might say that Maria's wise and powerful aspect was externalised and objectified in the image of the child, while she herself identified with the victim position.

We can understand the healing process in Maria's case in two ways. As the child was part of Maria's psyche, we can say that by interacting with the powerful child, she had a chance to indirectly experience herself (or part of herself), as powerful and wise.

However, as the powerful person in this relationship is the child and not Maria herself, we might say that this is an indication that Maria was not prepared yet (as Gabriela was) to experience that facet of herself directly or fully, but only through the child.

Alternately, we might say that the encounter with the powerful child had a healing effect on Maria, since as she perceived and experienced the child as an independent entity, and recognised it as a living aspect of herself, Maria in effect discovered that she (or her child-self) was not as weak and powerless as she imagined it to be.

While Maria may have thought of herself, or of her child as weak, victimised and powerless, the encounter with a strong and healthy child may have countered that image, in effect correcting the past, and bringing about healing in the present.

Maria herself mentioned afterwards her surprise at meeting this healthy child that previous therapy had always reinforced as damaged as a result of her childhood experience of sexual abuse. Thus she was very surprised to meet such a healthy and strong child in her journey.

The actual encounter was a healing one for this precise reason

– it had served to change Maria's point of view, or the story she was repeatedly telling herself about her childhood and herself as a consequence of the abuse.

She also received a direct and jarring message from the child that served to wake her up to the reality of the abuse – Maria asked the child why she did not stop the abuse, or speak up for herself, the child rebuked her by saying: "You offend me! I was a only a child. You were only a child".

As in Gabriela's case, Maria's second journey to meet the child was markedly different. This time, she was not reluctant to start the journey and meet the child.

She started off the journey dancing and feeling joyful. Fear still crept in as she entered the lower world, but the encounter with the child took place almost immediately. In the second journey the child was already less remote and cold with Maria, and as their interaction continued she became warm and playful.

We might say that the increasing warmth and openness of the child and the strengthening bond between her and Maria, from journey to journey, is a marker of the increasing integration of this child aspect back into Maria's self and psyche.

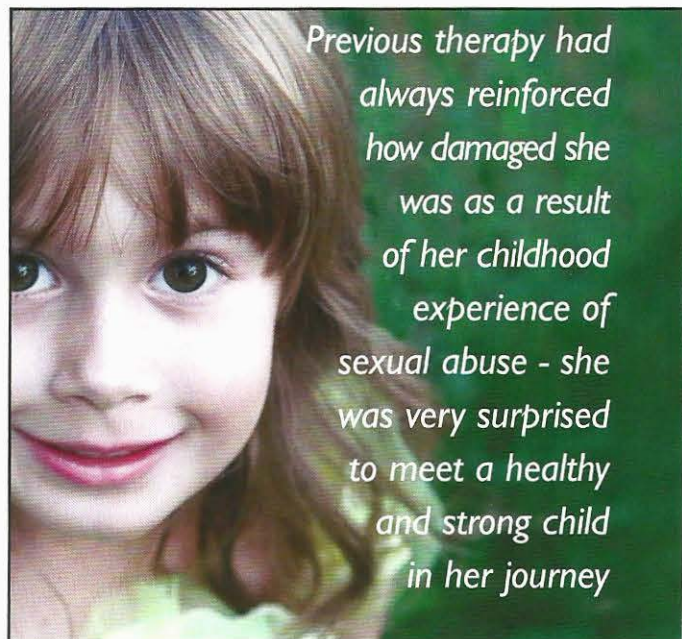
Following her inner child journeys Maria (as well as her family, friends and colleagues) noted a marked difference in her. Not only did her attitude towards life in general change for the better and her gloomy outlook improved considerably, Maria's appearance also changed. She got a new short haircut that showed her face and complimented her, and started wearing dresses and short-sleeved tops.

The topics that she wanted to work on in subsequent sessions indicated that she now recognised that positive change in her life was possible and she wanted to enjoy life more to the fullest.

These two journeys had a clear 'domino effect' in Maria's life and accelerated the effectiveness of future shamanic work she undertook. Maria has recently passed the written exam for drivers and is currently taking driving lessons.

#### THE NATURE OF CHANGE

The renowned psychotherapist, Milton H. Erickson, dealt



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extensively with the question of change: how it happens, either spontaneously or promoted in the course of psychotherapy.

It is this issue precisely that we have tried to look at in this article, by exploring the power of inner child work in conjunction with shamanic journeying. It is our hope that we have demonstrated that the use of a combination of inner child work with shamanic journeying stretches well beyond working with people who have experienced child sexual abuse. Indeed, although space constraints have limited us to discuss only two cases of this work here, we have worked with and witnessed remarkable change in people dealing with varied presenting problems and issues.

How, then, do people change? Although we might never find one, or indeed any, definite answers to this complex and deep question, we feel that exploring the rapid and dramatic change that can be promoted by shamanic work, takes us one step further in glimpsing the richness of human existence and of therapeutic transformation.

Perhaps an insight Erickson himself had about his own work might apply to the power of shamanic journeying as well:

*'I have viewed much of what I have done as expediting the currents of change already seething within the person and the family – but currents need the unexpected, the illogical, and the sudden, to lead them into tangible fruition'.*

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Please note: All the people appearing in the photos are models.