

Medicine Stories

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Welcome to the first edition of Medicine Stories.

Medicine Stories is a quarterly featuring personal stories and poems that describe how Shamanism has been useful in our lives.

In Crow and Weasel, Barry Lopez's character, Badger says "The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves."

If you have personal stories or poems you would like to submit, please send to LRLion@aol.com.

Blessings, Lanz Lowen, Editor

Living with a Rattlesnake

This is the story of a ten year period in my life when I was struggling to stay alive despite being HIV+. I offer the following as my personal experience of how shamanism can inform, inspire and support a person in their daily life.

I became HIV+ in early 1981. I discovered this in 1985, when the HIV virus was identified as the cause of AIDS and my blood from a previous Hepatitis study was tested. I had long assumed I was most likely infected, so I took the news in stride, and continued to keep an optimistic outlook. That may sound naïve, but at the time, the thinking was AIDS was like TB and many other diseases, in which the majority of people infected would not develop symptoms.

In 1986, that viewpoint was shattered and replaced by a new mantra, "Everyone who is infected with HIV will develop symptoms and die of AIDS." A year later, I was hospitalized with a very serious pneumonia and soon after my T4 cells – an indicator of the progress of the HIV virus - plummeted to 250 (they had been 650 the year before). My previous optimism was quickly eroded by my fear of dying.

I began exploring my options. I couldn't imagine just fatalistically going along with the program; my current doctor told me I would be dead in two years. Yet, I distrusted the New Age notion that "You create your own reality". I didn't want to put all my energy and faith in shaping my own destiny, only to get sick and die and feel guilty about it in the process.

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Letter to the Young Boy About How It's Going to Be

By Stewart Mintzer

You will promise to change
and you won't.
You will go down the same neural pathways,
Conditioning the same old stuff,
sitting at dinners
making small talk about ball games,
thinking of leaving early,
hungering for soul
and learning invisibility.
You will interpret each bodily pain
as the whisper of death
and become a great tracker of process.
You will collect books
women on the computer,
art supplies, words,
and will reach sixty feeling a down hill slide
and the need for money.
You will be convinced you are a healer
and sure you aren't.
You will reach for vitamins, Aloe Vera,
stories, plump women,
for memory, for the lost names of things,
for the welcoming of prune juice, metamucil,
clean toilet seats,
and quiet rooms.
You'll see your mother die
and will start to read the obituaries.
You will do your wash at laundromats in Chico,
Arcata, Sonoma, Des Moines.
Your immune system will go
and colds will come sooner and longer
and you won't know whether its' chronic fatigue
or if Armageddon is around the corner
or if the universe is just your dream
and so long as you last
the world will be safe.
You will tell yourself its all ok,
and perfect,
and that it never really happened,
and if it did,
it's all just energy,
molecules and atoms with room in between
and you will come back to the mirror
and see your father's face.

Written and read at a Buffalo Brothers gathering in March, 2005

Rattlesnake

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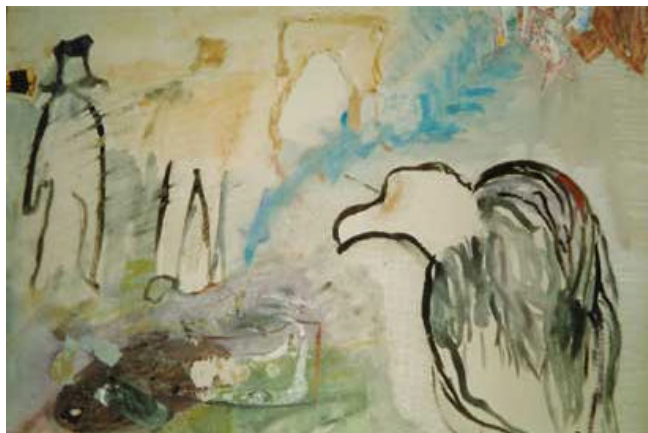
A colleague referred me to a physician who had written about the mind/body connection, and who turned out to also practice shamanism. In our first meeting, Lewis laughed at the notion of me 'creating my own reality'.

"What grandiosity. As if there aren't forces in the world greater than us." But then he became very serious, "It's definitely possible you might influence your odds, but it requires aligning with

forces greater than yourself." This simple shift in frame buoyed me like a life preserver. A moment before I had been in angst; now I felt hopeful and empowered. The idea of actively engaging, learning and influencing, and yet, not controlling the outcome made immediate sense to me.

On a routine day a week later, I came home from work and was met at the front door with an eerie feeling. As I unlocked the door and peered inside there was a distinct feeling of darkness and danger. It reminded me of times as a kid when I had feared there was a burglar hiding in the house. I couldn't see it, but there was a presence in the house that was foreboding and threatening.

My heart raced as I walked through the living room, the kitchen and out the back door. Instinctively, I found myself pulling a branch off a podocarpus tree and re-entering the house shaking the branch in front of me. My intention was to cleanse or clear and I systematically went through each room 'rattling' the branch in every corner.



When I was done, I felt more comfortable – the darkness, whatever it was, had backed off or lifted. My fear, which had been palpable, fell away.

The experience, including my own behavior, struck me as extremely odd and I happened to refer to it during my next visit with Lewis. He was intrigued. He had me describe the experience and then asked a curious question,

"If you could imagine the presence in your home was some type of animal, what might it be?" Without hesitation, I replied, "A vulture".

Lewis didn't react, but calmly instructed: "Maybe this vulture spirit has some type of

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Awakened

By Pete Blake

I sit amongst entwining roots,
Within branches of ancestral tree,
I reconcile this soul they touch,
Bridging paths though sacred earth.

I feel the land within my skin,
Watching clouds in southern skies,
I wear the feathers of vision flight,
An eagle eye that flies up high.

Across dancing winds, through Karri trees,
With the healing scent of native leaves,
Seasons of the southern lands,
Red earth beneath these traveled feet.

And I stand beneath the Southern Cross,
A tree amongst the night time sky,
Ceremonies under the silvery leaves,
A web of circles within the land.

Like the fire within the sacred stone,
The light within the Earth,
The man upon the rock I am,
Within a circle of many I sit.

I share this place of ancient myth,
My heart within these sacred lands,
I hear the voice of spirit song,
A song for those of sacred ways.

*Western Australia, 2003
Visit www.primalvision.net
for more of Pete's poetry.*

Rattlesnake

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message for you. Why don't you draw a picture of it as a way of honoring it? See what comes up."

I had never had a physician give me homework, but I liked the idea. I decided I would paint the vulture. I can be creative, but literal representations are beyond me. However, with the first stroke of my paintbrush, the head of a vulture appeared and then his hunched over body. I was surprised and pleased; he looked realistic. With a few quick strokes the vulture was done, but I found myself continuing to paint.

Soon there was a casket and a group of people attending a funeral. Along side the people in tall black hats, was a child on which I glued a photograph of my grandmother. In the casket was a young man; tall and thin, handsome and only 21 years old. I imagined him scared and unhappy and that dying was partly an out for him.

Studying the painting, I began to realize the vulture represented my own death and that in some way I had called the vulture to me. But I wasn't ready to die. In fact any ambivalence I had about life had evaporated along with my health.

Later, when sharing the painting with my aunt, she reminded me that my grandmother's nephew had died of TB at age 21. Besides raising the hair on my neck, this further reinforced my determination to survive.



When I described the painting to Lewis, he had me talk with the vulture; to thank it for coming; but to make it clear that I wasn't ready to die. After I finished my dialogue with Vulture, Lewis asked me if there was some other spirit animal that I might call into my life to help me grow healthy. Before Lewis finished the question I saw, flying toward me, a large Bald Eagle.

This was the beginning of a long association with Eagle as my primary power animal. I began journeying to Eagle, and listening to his guidance. The Vulture visited my house once more, although not as intensely as before and then seemed to retreat from my life. There was much that I learned during this time – about connecting to nature, about appreciating Spirit, about recognizing parts of myself that I'd neglected over the years.

To further influence my chances of surviving I began acupuncture, meditation, and routine journeying. My health was slowly improving and my T-cells were edging upward. After about a year, they were consistently above 500 – which was contrary to medical predictions that decline was inevitable. I felt encouraged and a part of me deepened with each journey and the time spent reflecting on life, death, health and Spirit.

I was feeling hopeful, and fairly trusting of my emerging spiritual path. But I needed a sign, something tangible that would reassure me that I wasn't making all this stuff up.

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Rattlesnake

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About this time, my mother asked if I would go to Alaska with her. Although initially I resisted, I decided it would be an opportunity for me to see eagles and to visit the Chilkat River, known as a refuge for Bald Eagles in the winter. I had never seen a bald eagle, and I yearned to find an eagle feather, which would somehow confirm and reinforce this strange path I was traveling.

My Mother and I took the ferry up the Northwest Passage to Haines and the next morning I obsessed over finding the absolute cheapest rental car in the state. After several hours of phone calls and haggling, a beat up old car was delivered to our hotel. We climbed in and headed for the Eagle preserve. Ten minutes down the highway, we turned a curve and the strong morning sun flared through the windshield. I yanked down the overhead visor. As I did, a long black object floated down – glancing off the top of my head and into the backseat.

I asked, “What was that?”

“It’s an eagle feather”, my Mom, responded matter of factly.

I was stunned. And excited; I began imagining that if there were eagle feathers in the rental cars, I was sure to find lots of them at the winter preserve even though it was summer.

Over the next two weeks, I studied a number of eagles, but I never once found an eagle feather. By the end of the trip, I began to understand. I had wanted an eagle feather. And an eagle feather had fallen from the sky, hit me on the head, while I was driving a rental car. What more of a sign did I need? I returned from Alaska filled with the beauty of open expanse and encouraged and motivated to keep exploring this pathway.



Soon thereafter while journeying about HIV, Eagle took me to a cave that was filled with rattlesnakes. I have a fear of snakes, particularly venomous snakes, so I was concerned about this journey and its implications.. When I mentioned it to Lewis, he told me about a Native American tribe in the Southwest where each year the shamen perform a ritual in which they pay honor to the rattlesnake.

During the ceremony, they are bitten, but because they respect the rattlesnake and give thanks for its gifts, they are usually spared death. This sacrifice and ritual provides another year of honor so that the tribe will be able to peaceably coexist with the many rattlesnakes living among them.

I was intrigued by this story. Perhaps by honoring the rattlesnake, by seeing HIV as a teacher, I too could survive. Given I had already been bitten, my survival depended on finding ways to peaceably co-exist with the virus – by learning Rattlesnake medicine, rather than trying to kill the messenger. I began journeying to Rattlesnake, who was

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forthcoming and very instructive. I learned about setting limits and refusing to be tread upon. I cut my hours back at work, jettisoned empty relationships, and more carefully focused my limited energy.

I learned about the power of stillness and the value of passion. Rattlesnake didn't waste its energy in diffuse activity – it moved with intention and when it struck out, it did so with great resolve. My life lacked this clarity and passion. I had routines and "To Do" lists, but these often dulled my senses and kept me from what had heart and meaning.



I began to focus only where I felt passion. I created a video of long-term AIDS survivors as a way of fueling my hope. I repeatedly reached out to my father - on his terms - and slowly cultivated a relationship that by its very existence was healing to both of us. I threw myself into studying shamanism and leading groups for HIV+ men.

For the next five years I continued working with Eagle and with Rattlesnake. Although I lost many friends during this time, my own health continued to be stable and my T-cells reached 600. My belief in my ability to influence my health, the supportive actions I was taking and the instruction and comfort I was receiving from shamanism was definitely working.

Unfortunately, beginning in 1995, my health became tenuous once again. I was more and more easily depleted and had to be careful not to exhaust myself. I began having minor symptoms related to HIV. However, I still had a strong belief that I could influence my health and that I needed the help of the Spirits. Through my journeys, I got the idea to orchestrate a community ritual honoring AIDS as a teacher. My hope was that honoring the virus might help myself and others in our co-existence with HIV.

A small group of us went down to Carol Proudfoot Edgar's, a Lakota healer and teacher who had become instrumental in my shamanic explorations. At Carol's we circled, clarified our intentions and then journeyed for information about a 'Community Ritual Honoring Rattlesnake'. I had a very clear journey in which a Badger appeared, told me he was very fond of rattlesnake, and offered to help me with the ritual. I could tell from Carol's reaction that she was excited about my Badger journey.

The next morning I sat wondering about Badger. Having grown up in South Florida, I wasn't quite sure what a Badger was. I had a clear image from my journey, but I knew nothing about the animal, its characteristics or medicine. Impulsively, I looked up Badger in the Field Guide of Mammals; it looked just like the animal in my journey.

The brief description was informative, but one phrase jumped out at me – "Fond of rattlesnake, the Badger is evidently unharmed by the venom unless the snake strikes its nose". Badger had my full attention. That morning I took my first of many journeys to Badger.

Badger helped in the creation of our community ritual which we conducted several months later. Badger also became my most influential power animal during this period.

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He taught me about fierceness, which I had always associated with aggression. Badger said, "There are times when you have to be fierce in order to keep things in balance." I took this as a signal that how I related to the HIV virus needed to shift. Rattlesnake didn't seem to be pleased and refused to show up in journeys if Badger was present. His observation: "Sure he's fond of me, he likes to eat me."

There was a toughness and resolve to Badger energy that was thoroughly new to me. I welcomed Badger energy and Badger's instructions. I made a Badger mask and danced Badger at an all-nighter. I cultivated his fierceness in my body. He rallied me for a fight, saying I had to be more determined to live than the virus.

This stance prepared me for a pivotal shift in how I related to the virus. I had enjoyed good success in co-existing with the virus, but now my health was once again eroding. My T-cells had begun a slow, but persistent decline. A new test, one that measured viral load – the amount of virus in the bloodstream – showed mine was sky-rocketing.

For years, I had eschewed AZT, the only Western medicine that was available to fight HIV. However, a promising new class of HIV drugs called protease inhibitors was emerging. Although I had unwaveringly rejected Western meds for the previous five years, I was surprised to find myself ready to try a 'cocktail with these new drugs. This seemed consistent with the shift in my relationship to Rattlesnake and re-righting of my balance. Badger goaded me to move forward and continued to fuel me psychically.

The drugs worked almost immediately for me. Because I was a drug virgin (we're talking HIV drugs), I had no resistance and the combination of drugs effectively reduced my viral load to undetectable levels. Ten years later, this is still the case. My health is excellent and no longer the focus of my shamanic journeys. For the first time in my life, I could journey on behalf of others and on behalf of the world.

I have no doubt that I am alive today, because of the HIV medications I take daily. However, I also fully believe that if I hadn't been helped by Lewis, by Eagle, by Rattlesnake, by Carol, by Badger, I wouldn't have been around long enough to benefit from these potent drugs. Shamanism informed my approach to living with HIV and living with HIV informed my approach to living with Spirit. For all of this, I am deeply grateful.

