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## Destination Healing: Southern New England

### The Power Animal within ~ Shamanic Journeying

Written by Karen M. Rider



*With her long braids leaping in the air as she ran, the native woman looked back over her shoulder and called to me to follow her. "Faster. Keep watch!" She spoke in a language I did not know, yet, I could understand her. My spear in hand, I double my pace, jumping through spiny brush, ignoring the ache in my legs. She leads me deeper into the jungle; I wonder what we were running from. Or, are we running toward something? Why the rush? I trample through beds of exotic flora and trip over vines as long and thick as anacondas. I lose my footing and fall ass-first into thick, mossy green muck. Looking for a way out, I scan the brush and the reason we were running glares at me from the edge of the tall grass: a black panther skulks toward me, head hung low but never letting me go from its gaze.*


*I hear the native woman call to me. Frozen in fear, I dare not turn away from the dark beast as it circles its prey—me. Will the native woman abandon me or will she throw her spear at the big cat? My own spear is out of reach, stuck, like me, and pointing toward the heavens, where, I pray I will find my next, and final, destination.*

*I hear a voice. I assume it is the native woman, but it sounds not unlike my own voice, "You can not destroy the dark panther but you need not become her prey. Embrace her." Embrace the creature that wants to devour me?!*



Believe it or not, I escaped unharmed from this ordeal in the jungle. But, I must confess that this is an excerpt from a shamanic journey that modern-day shaman, Sandra Diamond guided me through back in 1999—a testament to the powerful imagery that a shamanic journey can evoke in the sojourner. Sandy, as her clients and colleagues fondly call her, and I reconnected last July, giving me the opportunity to refresh my understanding of shamanism and learn more about this Toltec Teacher and

**Ron and Joan**



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### Themes

**June/July 2009:**

Home

**August/September 2009:**

Movement

**October/November 2009:**

Living Visions

**December/January 2010:**

Shaman's fantastic gifts and recent world travels.

**Karen:** Sandy, help our readers understand what Shamanism is all about.

**Sandy:** Shamanism has been in existence for at least 10,000 years. It has been noted in indigenous cultures all around the world. In their respective tribes, shamans are intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. Shamans are capable of entering "non-ordinary reality" – an altered state of consciousness in which the shaman can access guidance from the spirit world. Usually, guidance is sought in the interest of the welfare of the tribe, for example, preparing for the harvest, herding and hunting. Sometimes known as medicine men (or women), shamans also heal sickness, cast out evil spirits, perform divinations, foretell the future, and engage trance techniques for vision quests and rituals for members of the tribe. Contemporary images of shamans frequently emphasize their ability to invoke and commune with the spirits of nature and all its forces: animal, earth, sea, air, and fire.

**Karen:** Are there different types of Shamanism in practice today, in modern culture?

**Sandy:** Core Shamanism refers to the thread of similarities in these practices, across cultures—whether you encounter Inuits from Alaska, Tuvans from Russia, Toltecs and Yacquis from Mexico or Lakotas from the Plains, you are going to find shared beliefs or practices. For example, a common, cross-cultural belief is that Mother Earth provides all the tools we need—the mountains, the sacred waters, the mystery of the forests, and the creatures that are apart of each environment—and these should be shown the greatest respect. One culture may use the name Great Mother; another will have some other name. Some of the practices that cut across cultures include drumming, burning of sage or copal (dried sap), and the trance state the shaman enters. Where we begin to see differentiation is in the particular traditions, myths and legends that are part of a tribal or cultural belief system.

**Karen:** For what purposes does a person seek out a modern-day Shaman?

**Sandy:** A person will seek guidance or assistance from a contemporary Shaman for healing what Western science frequently cannot heal... unexplained illnesses and maladies that fail to respond to medicine. I've seen a range of conditions in my clients. In addition, a Shaman gives advice on the complexities of every-day-life challenges.

Sometimes, I conduct a Soul Retrieval. With the help of a shaman, we consult with power animals, spirit guides, ancestors and angels for advice and wisdom. One could say that we are accessing our highest wisdom, our deepest knowing. It is akin to Jungian psychology with ritual and sacred traditions added into the mix. Another type of sacred work is Psychopomp, in which the shaman assists a client with dealing with death and dying, whether that be coming to terms with the end of one's own life or the death of a loved one. I have been called to a person's deathbed, to help release fear and ease the way for the soul to cross over.

**Karen:** Sandy, you've been really busy since our last opportunity to work together. Please, tell our readers about your experience and training in various Eastern disciplines.

**Sandy:** Oh, where do I begin? When I began to take this path seriously, I first studied with John Perkins and attended many Gatherings of Shaman. I attended workshops with Dr. Jack Kornfield and Dr. Stan Graf. An important initiation was as a Bon Jonqini, a forest woman shaman in the "Bon" tradition in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. The initiation took place at a monastery in the foothills of the Himalayas. In recent years, I have been traveling to Mexico to study the Toltec teachings with Don Miguel Ruiz, author of *The Four Agreements*.

I hold a Master's degree in Experiential Health and Healing and am a certified Hypnotherapist. This path has enabled me to integrate my skills in energy healing, T'ai Chi and QiGong, and the ancient Chinese healing technique, Tui Na, which I learned at Xuan Wu, a Traditional Chinese Hospital associated with the University of Beijing.

**Karen:** And, in your private practice, how you integrate shamanic work with

Embracement

## Deadlines

**Articles:**

April 25<sup>th</sup>

**Display Ads:**

May 1<sup>st</sup> to reserve space

May 5<sup>th</sup> for ad copy

**Calendar and Classifieds:**

May 5<sup>th</sup>

## Your Opinion!

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yes

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other healing modalities?

**Sandy:** I affect healing for the members of my community by one of many techniques, including energy work, chakra healing, Reiki, vibrational healing, crystal work, soul retrieval, egg cleansing and ritual. I also guide clients on shamanic journeys so that they can acquire insightful information themselves.

**Karen:** What can happen during a shamanic journey, Sandy?

**Sandy:** My clients are blindfolded to close off their association with their surroundings or "ordinary reality." He or she enters non-ordinary reality through a deep meditative process.

**Karen:** Non-ordinary reality? You mentioned this a few times. Please, elaborate.

**Sandy:** Of course. Non-ordinary reality is an experience that is outside the space-time continuum. For example, you are in your living room, not asleep but acutely awake, and you see yourself crossing a stone bridge beneath a waterfall somewhere in a rainforest. Then, you have a conversation with a jaguar that totally makes sense to you—and you receive information from the jaguar that illuminates your current life situations—this is non-ordinary reality.

**Karen:** How is this different from a drug-induced experience and other forms of meditation?

**Sandy:** If we speak in scientific terms, bearing in mind that I am not a scientist, this is a lucid dreaming state, a daydreaming state. Typically, alpha or theta brain wave activity would be present. A person is aware of the dream as ordinary reality.

Now, it could be said that LSD or other powerful hallucinogens can yield an experience like non-ordinary reality. However, the brain state triggered for a contemporary guided shamanic journey is triggered without the use of chemicals or drugs of any kind. Although some tribal shamans from the rain forests of Brazil, Peru and Ecuador use Ayahuasca, a powerful hallucinogenic to help them "see"



where a person's illness is and receive instruction on how to heal it, you aren't likely to find that in a contemporary shamanic practice.

**Karen:** I understand. Let's get back to the process or experience of the shamanic journey.

**Sandy:** In my practice, shamanic journeying begins with drumming, or sometimes I use tribal rattles along with appropriate background music. During a shamanic journey, clients merge with their higher consciousness, their deepest selves in order to encounter and "converse" with a power animal or a spirit guide or teacher. Some clients will merge with other aspects of nature of the elements. Some travel to sacred sites and experience sacred ritual.

As we progress with the journey, a client may experience any of three alternate worlds, Lower, Middle and Upper. Hopefully, they'll encounter all three, at different times, different journeys.

The Lower World is a mirror of our world (it has nothing to do with hell). It is similar to the dream phase of sleep. Here, you encounter your power animals. Even if the animals you encounter are mythical creatures, it is still the Lower World.

When the Guides and Teachers are more Human than Animal, you are in the Upper World. The Upper World functions at a higher frequency. Here we encounter Spirit Guides or Teachers... sometimes Angels or ancestors.

The Middle World is our world. It is our physical reality. When traveling in the Middle World, a client can get beyond ordinary time and space to visit a sacred site, or a loved one that is very far away. By way of the Middle World, long-distance healings occur.

When you are very advanced, the veils between these two worlds disappear.

**Karen:** By way of example, can you put my experience in perspective for the reader?

**Sandy:** Sure. The part of your experience that you described [for the reader] is typical of a Lower World Journey—the realm of the Power Animals. One of your power animals is the Black Panther. In post-journey dialogue, you and I discussed what the panther symbolizes for you, at this point in your life, and/or in relation to a life event. The inquiry process is unique to each person.

Another voice speaks, “Relax.” The voice is distant, soothing. It is Sandy’s voice. My body softens; I slip out of fear’s tight grip. I am lifted out of the muck. Shimmering gold mist cascades down my body, cleansing me. The earth is firm beneath my feet and the panther sits tall at my side. The native woman approaches. She takes my hand.

**Karen:** Yes, it was quite an in-depth inquiry we went through, once the journey was over and I “awoke,” so to speak, from that state of mind. The native woman, she was in the Lower World, how is that possible?

**Sandy:** In your journey, the native woman was most likely a guide leading you to the Upper World. Whether she represents a part of your self, an actual person, living or deceased, a spiritual entity, etcetera... This is something to explore through the inquiry process so that the client may derive personal meaning and insight. I am there to help you navigate through non-ordinary reality.

The panther walks by my side. We emerge from the brush into a clearing. Periwinkle skies surround us. The native woman sheds her glamour. Auburn waves caress her face. Eyes glistening like emeralds look upon me, gently. Extending her robed arms, she takes my hands. My panther rises.

Frequently, we take a Power Animal with us for help in the Upper World, where you meet Ancestors and Angels. You may also encounter mythical creatures who are more Human than animal. The Upper World experience can be more difficult to decipher. The Lower world is easier, since it is more like dreaming, so more familiar to us, in a way.

**Karen:** Tell me more about how you help a client derive meaning from these encounters.

**Sandy:** It is important to understand that interpretations and understanding do not usually come all at once, in one session. The deepest level of understanding and insight come after many journeys. The inquiry process is how I help my clients develop a relationship with their power animals and spirit guides. When the proper relationship is established, it becomes very clear why these figures have come and how they can help.

The questions that I ask are different for each person—there are so many variables to consider, such as a person’s state of health, mental and emotional state, daily life stressors, and so on. Along with the information a client provides, we might enter the shamanic journey with a specific question in mind, bringing the question to the power animals, guides and teachers. Sometimes, though, the question brought is not the one that is answered. Instead, the client may receive information on an entirely different, but still relevant, situation in his or her life.

Once the shamanic journey itself is over, I work with the client to understand the nature of the Animals and Guides they encountered so that their roles become clear and meaningful to that particular client. Two clients may both encounter a bear, but the bear probably represents something entirely different to each person’s life situation. Perhaps the greatest teaching is that the client is the source of all her wisdom, all her learning; the Shaman is there as a guide, facilitator, translator.

**Karen:** Does a person choose their power animals?

**Sandy:** It has been my experience that the Power Animal chooses you. The powers of that animal fill in the spaces that we need to provide depth and meaning to our experiences... knowledge or wisdom we need to acquire or a perspective that needs to shift. Power Animals are teachers. When a piece is missing, we call on a Power Animal to provide us with what we need. This is

tricky to pin down... for example, in the Lakota tradition of the Plains, fox is known for Camouflage. In Chinese Shamanism, fox is a Shape-shifter... in the rainforest of Brazil, snakes are Shape-shifters. We must learn from the animals what they are gifting us with and why. It is very personal and very sacred.

**Karen:** What results or benefits can a person realize from a Shamanic journey?

**Sandy:** This varies with each person. My first journey opened doorways to realities I did not know existed, so I continued with this work. For others, one journey is enough.

The benefits, should you embrace shamanism, include a full understanding of the universe, of god/creator and nature and yourself. You can experience anything that exists in the universe, experientially, not intellectually, and then you understand your place in the universe. That is a benefit that can last over your lifetime.

**Karen:** Indeed. I know imagery from my journey still filters into my daily experiences.

**Sandy:** Yes, and so it does depend on the individual, what one takes away from the experience, just as it would depend on the individual what she or he takes away from a night at the opera. For example, if a person is rigid, there may be issues with giving up control to one's higher self. Some folks are unimaginative in their waking life, so they may have more difficulty having a rich experience in the shamanic journey. However, it is my experience that anyone who wants to do this work, can. Anyone who is determined can apply the lessons received each time and expand their full potential as a human being. The work is that profound.

**Karen:** In what ways might some one not be a candidate for this type of shamanic work?

**Sandy:** Someone who not open to spirituality, a "doubting Thomas." In addition, persons who are very ego-driven generally are not candidates for this mind-opening work. Finally, some folks accept that "what is reality" is composed only of what can be gathered from the five senses—these people have difficulty with deep meditative work like shamanic journeying.

**Karen:** How is Toltec related to shamanic journeying?

**Sandy:** Toltec is a sub-group of core shamanism. It can best be described as "meso-American Zen Buddhism." A Toltec is a person who is a creator, an artist, or a dreamer of his or her existence. A "Nagual" is a person free to interact in or have influence in non-ordinary reality. This is a word that can mean shaman, too.

**Karen:** What do you suggest to someone who wants to learn more about shamanism? Where do they begin?

**Sandy:** I invite anyone who is curious about shamanism to call me. It is best to begin experientially rather than intellectually. I could recommend many books, but it is the experience that is vital. Reading, to affirm or further clarify experience, can come later.

**Karen:** Sandy, you've also been leading trips to sacred sites in Mexico. What's that all about?

**Sandy:** It is, literally, a divine and healing experience for those who choose to take the trip to Teotihuacan. Literally, this means the "place where humans become divine." During the six-day trip, you enter the same sacred pyramids and plazas as the ancients, reenacting the rituals that they believed would join you to your highest, divine Self. In order to that, the person you are now must die a symbolic death, which allows you to merge with your divinity and be reborn into a state of joy, bliss, and personal fulfillment. We follow 2,500-year-old Toltec teachings, as conveyed through Don Miguel Ruiz, during the course of the trip. Time is set aside for light recreation, solitude and rest.

I take a small group annually and there is an application process. The next trip is in the planning stages and I am reserving spaces for those interested in the excursion. We typically go around the end of July or the middle of August. If someone is interested in attending, they should call me for specific dates (860-665-9034).

*No path stretches before us or behind us. My steps are their steps; their steps are my steps. We are the same, yet different, my panther, my guide and I.*

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Karen M. Rider, M.A. writes a variety of articles, stories, and reviews to educate, enlighten and entertain the reader. As a promotional copywriter, Karen specializes in helping holistic health businesses communicate to their target audience with clarity, integrity, and creativity. Karen resides in Connecticut where she shares life's adventures with her husband and daughters. She is working on her first novel. [KarenM\\_Rider@cox.net](mailto:KarenM_Rider@cox.net) .



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Writing with clarity, integrity and creativity.

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