



## Crossing Boundaries: Psychotherapy Meets Shamanism

I've been working as a licensed psychotherapist in California for twenty-seven years and as a shamanic practitioner for thirteen years.

About four years ago I decided to integrate my shamanic healing practice and my psychotherapy practice. I keep both practices separate except in appropriate situations where shamanic healing might be a useful adjunct to the psychotherapy.\*

In each case that I've used shamanic healing with already existing psychotherapy clients, I have seen interesting shifts in healing that I don't think would have happened if shamanic healing had not been involved.

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\* I think it's important to note that it took years for me to decide to do this because in the state of California there is an ongoing ethics conversation supporting psychotherapists using only that modality of healing, or risk an ethics violation. The conversation occurs in the shamanic community as well and I had been cautioned to keep the two modalities separate. I did that for years as I continued to think about it. Finally, I realized that for me it was about healing not rules. However I combined practices I would do it ethically.

I have also received referrals from psychologists to do adjunct shamanic work with their psychotherapy clients. In these situations the psychologists interviewed me in order to understand what shamanism really is and to decide if they and we thought Compassionate Depossession might be appropriate for me to use with their clients.

Because I also work as a psychotherapist and may be able to distinguish between mental illness and spirit possession, they expressed feeling encouraged and hopeful about possible healing for their clients.

So far the success of this union of healing practices is fueling my excitement and awe. The work is updating and deepening and is expanding my understanding of healing.

I am happy to share an example of this work in a case study. The woman, Justine, who is the client in this narration, has given me permission to write about it.

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#### CASE REPORT

## **Psychotherapy and Compassionate Depossession Working Together**

This is a version of my Compassionate Depossession work with a psychotherapy client. I will discuss only the parts of the psychotherapy work that are relevant to understanding how shamanic work differs and has led to healing in a different way.

It was the late 1980's and I walked into the waiting room of my psychotherapy practice in San Francisco to meet Justine, a new client.

She stood to greet me; 5'10", composed, a quiet self-confidence filled her body, professionally dressed with an understated elegance, attention to detail. She was ki filled; present in her physical self.

Justine was in her mid forties, Caucasian, upper middle class in her adult life, had been married with her husband since she was in her early twenties and had adult children.

Irish, Scotch, English smart and savvy, experienced with diverse groups, focused on and committed to justice.

She chose a comfortable chair directly opposite mine.

She told me that she worked for the City of San Francisco's Probation Department, was a licensed social worker, had worked in the field (direct client work) for a number of years and now was doing administrative plus direct client work.

"The people at my level may now be required to carry a gun," she said. "The department is discussing it. I came to see you because this is really disturbing me. I don't want to carry a gun and I don't think I can."

What unfolded was her story about her father who had been a military man, more often not at home but overseas when she was growing up. When Justine was 17 years old, her father took her brother and a friend out hunting and her father was killed with a gun in an accident.

The doctor who came to the house when they got the news gave everyone in the family a sedative immediately.

Justine and her brother never knew what happened as her mother told them that no one was allowed to speak about it, including talking about or expressing any feelings about losing their father. They obeyed. Justine said that she thought her father must have killed himself because he knew about guns so it couldn't have been an accident. But she never saw his body. It was confusing and somewhat unreal.

During one of our psychotherapy sessions when Justine was talking about the possible mandate to carry a gun at work I asked her a question about her father's death. Her body flung back in the chair; her head all the way back toward the wall behind her so that I could not see her face, which was looking up toward the ceiling. It was similar to when a toddler doesn't want to get in a car seat in the car and she hyper-extends her body to make it all but impossible for the adult to get her in the seat. The body being taugth, stiff and hyper-extended.

Justine was making a gagging sort of sound that seemed to emanate from her throat.

"I'm choking!" She coughed out.

“It’s okay, Justine. You don’t have to talk. Just take your time. It’s fine. Let yourself relax. You’re fine. Yes. That’s right. Just let your body relax.”

When she had recovered her posture and her composure sufficiently I suggested she take off her shoes and count her toes one-by-one touching each with her fingers in order to get her fully back into her body.

“I don’t know what happened. Something happened. I wasn’t there. I wasn’t here. Something just happened. Can you tell me what happened?”

I described the situation.

This occurred periodically.

At this time the profession of psychotherapy was particularly interested in dissociative states. Multiple Personality Disorder was a popular diagnosis and a way of understanding certain dissociative states.

Not knowing about shamanism at the time, I didn’t have any real alternate ideas about what was happening to Justine other than she was experiencing a dissociative state.

Yet the second time this happened I was able to see Justine’s face and her eyes before her body flung back. The sense I got instantly was that I was seeing an "other." A different person. It was an uncanny look in the eyes, which I now recognize after more similar experiences. The look was not exactly menacing but definitely fierce in some way. It was a crystal clear visceral hit to me, even though I did not assign theory or meaning to it at the time.

As usual I logged the information into my river of hypotheses. What might be happening?

As we continued working together Justine got better and better about being able to know before this experience took her and being able to alert me.

“I’m getting that feeling, Alesia.”

“Yes. I can see it.” I saw it each time in her eyes and her tightening musculature. It was definitely something or someone else.

We discussed it in many ways.

Over the 30 years we've worked together, Justine has done work in segments. I may not see her for a year or two and then she comes in to work on something specific.

Justine told me early on that she was raised as a Catholic but has never practiced. Throughout these years she has let me know that she doesn't believe in religions, or spiritual practices for herself.

She's always been very matter of fact about this in a dismissive, matter-of-fact, there's nothing-more-to-say manner.

"I don't believe in life after death or anything like that."

For about the last eight years I have introduced shamanism into my psychotherapeutic conversations with clients when it seems appropriate. We may be discussing different ways of understanding an issue and I might say, "From a shamanic point of view..."

About two years ago Justine was curious about shamanism and asked me about it.

When Justine and I were working together she told me that her husband, Gerard, who rarely consulted a doctor, suddenly was having various physical symptoms and was seeing his doctor and other doctors he was referred to. Justine was concerned but happy that he was getting help.

As we talked she stopped suddenly and said, "Alesia, I want to tell you about an experience I just now had. I just saw my father standing right there (points in front and to the right of her). I know Gerard is going to die. Not right now but soon. My father was right there. That's how I know. I'm not telling my daughters."

Two weeks later Gerard died.

During a session a year later Justine began to talk about her childhood and I instantly saw the other looking out from her eyes (the same dissociated state).

I immediately interrupted her and asked, "Justine, what's happening right now?"

"Yes, I can feel it taking my body."

"Let's see if you can stay here with me." I said.

“What is happening? She said. “I feel like I’m disappearing but it’s better than it used to be.” Then fairly quickly she fully returned.

“I know that you don’t believe in life-after-death or spirit-type experiences but from a shamanic point of view it may be that a spirit is attached to you and if so, we can find out, and do something about it. Just take your time and think about it. When you’re ready let me know what you think.” I said.

“I do want to do that.” Justine said without hesitation. “Since I saw my father, it’s different.”

“Next time we meet we can talk about it more. We’d be doing something shamanic, not psychotherapy. Just take your time and think about it.” I said. “You can tell me then; there’s no rush. Whatever feels right.”

One week later Justine came in and said she was ready to proceed. I told her that this was not psychotherapy. I explained the concept of releasing a spirit; exactly what we would be doing and what I would be asking her to do.

The process was the usual template for psychopomp, helping a willing spirit to its natural destination after the body dies. In this regard it was unremarkable in any dramatic way.

Psychopomp is an ancient practice of helping spirits get out of this material world and go to the spirit world where they’re meant to be. Possession illness or spirit attachment is a normal and natural occurrence in many dying situations. Unlike exorcism, which is an aggressive and forceful process of removing a spirit from a person, Compassionate Depossession is a process in which love and compassion are employed and the possessing spirit ultimately chooses to leave its host for its rightful place in the spirit world.

After hearing my description of the process in which I would be speaking with any attached spirit if one were present and her participation, Justine agreed that she would like to proceed.

Justine easily moved aside so the spirit could answer my questions. The spirit did not give a name; identified as male and at a certain point, which I’ll explain later, was reluctant to go. When I enquired about a direction for his destination he immediately indicated that he

would go up and I began the slow process of assisting the spirit to go in the direction he had indicated, which he ultimately did.

The session came to a close after doing a healing journey for Justine and discussing aftercare that would be helpful.

In our next session the comments Justine made were the most enlightening and informative about this piece of work.

I asked her how she was feeling during the week following our work.

"I felt lighter. This thing that I had always thought was a part of me, that something was wrong with me, that I was damaged, was gone."

When Justine said this so simply, so directly I felt like weeping. How beautiful, I thought.

"Remember when I knew that Gerard was going to die because I saw my father standing there?" She asked me.

"Yes." I nodded.

"Recently I had a dream where Gerard took me down into a garage; into a room. It was bright white; the kind of white you don't like. And people were standing straight up like my father did when he was here in front of me. They were all packed in there. Just standing, totally silent.

"I knew that wasn't for me. I had to leave. I started up the stairs. Gerard took my hand and said, 'Come back.' I woke up."

We sat in silence for a while.

"Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the process?"

"It was like when I was hypnotized before dental work. I was conscious physically. I felt like I stepped aside when you asked me to.

"I let the spirit speak...When the spirit said he was male, he flowed into my heart like water...there was no space!

“A few weeks ago before we did this, you know, when I went to Vietnam I randomly met a monk who said, ‘Your heart is open for more compassion for others.’

“*Now, Alesia, my heart is a spiritual place; not just an organ.*”

We marveled over this together and let it sink in. Then I continued. “Let’s get back to the process for a minute, if that’s okay.” I said.

“What was happening when the spirit told me I was being bossy?” I asked.

Justine smiled. “You were being directive. You told the spirit to move toward the Light. It didn’t want to take the chance.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It was afraid. What if there wasn’t a place for it? The spirit then was like a stubborn child. It thought... ‘Maybe I’ll just disappear and be quiet.’

“And I, Justine, thought... *I might stop too.*”

Here Justine laughed as she said, “I’m sure you’re not surprised, Alesia; it went right along with my personality.”

We both laughed appreciating Justine’s love of being in control.

When she gets into certain states that are challenging she can become dissociative and experiences a feeling that someone may be trying to trick her. (This was like the spirit being afraid that there really wasn’t a place in the Light for him to go.)

“It’s very amazing.” Justine said. “Just receiving that information that Gerard was going to die.

“In my life now in general everything is connected. I’ve had a daily gratitude practice for quite some time. Now I practice compassion.

“Something changed for me.” She continued. She was silent for a minute.

“Alesia, will I do that thing again and disappear?”

“I don’t think so.” I said.



“I don’t think so either.” Justine smiled. “We’ll see.”

She didn’t speak for a moment. She looked at me and said. “I think it was my father.”

This work with Justine was deeply moving. As we continue our work, I think about particular aspects including the fact that it was only in the deposal work, not in the psychotherapy, that she revealed how she had been living for over fifty years with the belief that there was this part of her that was wrong, that was damaged.

Also, I’m considering the fact that this healing “took place” in three sessions.

I say, “took place” but I don’t consider healing to be associated with conventional time in that healing can and often begins before it shows itself in material-world-chronological time. And it often continues simultaneously subterraneanly and above ground, observable by those around us especially.

What really strikes me is that if psychotherapy had been the single, the only healing modality we worked in, this healing may never have occurred.

I also continue to ponder the intermingling of the personality of the host (client), and the speech of the spirit. This is exemplified by the spirit’s perceived “bossiness” of the practitioner, and the fear of being tricked, which the client had identified as an issue of hers from the past. (Justine said that “being tricked” stems from never having seen her father’s dead body, never knowing how he died, if in fact he did really die; and the resulting confusion about that. Also, being tricked that her parents would always be there for her as a child, and her father wasn’t.)

So I am questioning the genesis of the personality of the host/client and the speech of the spirit, and the relationship of each to the other. I’m wondering if now that this spirit is no longer with her, will Justine be differently free from these fears?

Also regarding “bossiness” I’m thinking about my manner. I’m thinking about how my intent to assist and direct the spirit in the direction he indicated he wanted to go manifested. I think I may have been too insistent in a rigid way? Over involved in hurrying because I sensed the spirit’s hesitation and felt unsure of being able to accomplish getting him there? It’s crucial to be relaxed and not hurry the process. It’s good for me to think about these questions as it may have worked better for me to settle into the present more and ask the spirit about his hesitation.

That also encourages me to consider my attitude/perspective about “accomplishing” in doing this work. Expanding my understanding of the work by releasing this as a goal.

And finally I know that the questions I ponder and ask myself and the answers are crucial in my development of understanding the world of healing and my relationship with it. How I perceive what’s happening and how I cooperate in all healing is a continuing question. A reminder to myself that there’s no hurry and staying in the present acuity is where I can tune in, listen, perceive and learn the most about the deep mystery of dying, living and healing.