

~LIVING~ BY WATER

True Stories of Nature and Spirit

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Fawcett Columbine • New York

1994

Shadow People



I moved here from many states. First, from the desert mesas of Arizona, where the Hopi Indians believe they keep the whole world spinning by their prayers and rituals. I also journeyed here from New York City, where what keeps the world spinning seems man-made. (Once during the great power failure of the late seventies, a co-worker woke up, shocked to find the sun still rising.) I also moved to this Northwest water, fog, stillness, and rain from the equally mist-shrouded South, where fundamentalists as

fervent and ever-present as kudzu eagerly await the Second Coming—that stopping of the world’s spin—with rapture. Eleven years I have stayed here in Seattle, the longest I’ve ever lived anywhere, because I’ve come to suspect that this is a shamanistic state.

The word *shaman* has its origin in the Turko-Tungusian Siberian language and describes those healers, often wounded themselves, who undertake journeys to enter the spirit world, there to witness, experience, and consciously bring back a vision for the tribe or what Indians call simply “the People.” The People is also what Northwest Indians called animals, who existed long before humans and who were mythic giants, gods, and goddesses. Everyone knows that Coyote, or Changer, that wily and benevolent trickster, helped create the human tribes of the Northwest; but he had guidance from all-seeing Raven, that high-flying Eagle spirit, from the not-to-be-outdone Fox, and from clever Blue Jay.

Whenever we forget these first stories, and so fall sick, out of sync, the shaman in each of us can remember and perhaps heal ourselves here in our homeland. This remembering of our proper place among the animals and the land, this inward-turning journey to connect the visible world with the invisible one that parallels our daily lives, is very much a part of our Northwest heritage and future. It also may well be how we gauge our success and the success of others.

Success in, say, Los Angeles, where the sun always shines, or New York, where city dwellers equate the sun with Con Edison, is a much more external affair. Perhaps if there is always illumination from lights or the sun, one must learn to live in the spotlight, seeking the Right Act, the Right Clothes, the Right Car, the Right Relationships. But in the misty San Juan Islands, in the gray, rain-swept cityscapes of Seattle, in the high, snowed-in hollows of the

Olympics, and the cloud-shadowed deserts of Eastern Washington there is so much hidden about the land, the lives. Here, what you see is not what you get. Here the Biblical scripture holds more true, for everywhere is “the evidence of things not seen.”

It is this mysterious evidence that Northwesterners have learned to value. It is also what lends us a mystical sense, both of our inner and outer landscapes. Look at Mount Rainier. She is seen and she is not seen, but that most mesmerizing of mountains is always present and felt. I’ve often told the story to my East Coast friends of my first year in Seattle. From January through March I’d not once seen “the Mountain.” I’d heard Rainier called this with the reverence usually reserved for great spiritual teachers, visionary leaders, artists.

Privately I scoffed at such deference to only one mountain — I, born in the High Sierra among a whole tribe of massive snow-shrouded mountains.

But then one day I was driving across the Mercer Island bridge and casually looked southward. What rose up over the water was nothing less than a blazing goddess. I came close to dying at that moment, not from awe, but because I literally lost control of the steering wheel. A friend righted it for me.

I still count that moment — meeting what I can only call a divine mother of a mountain — as a fixed point by which I navigate my life. For just as Mount Rainier broke through her months of mist, so it seemed to me that another world shone there on the horizon — the healing mystical world stood revealed beside my daily life. It reminded me of what Black Elk said, that “the central mountain of the world is where you are.”

Many Indian stories begin, “Long ago when mountains were people . . .” The Salish tale of Mount Rainier (also known as Tahoma, or “the great mountain, which

gives thunder and lightning, having great unseen powers”) tells of how this earth goddess Tahoma swallowed up land, tribes, animals and, finally, Changer, who was disguised as Fox. Tahoma gobbled up so much rock and water that she at last burst open, lavalike blood flowing down her sides. Changer made her into the translucent volcanic presence that Washingtonians today revere.

What we worship about where we live is what we decide is successful. Shamanism is not really a form of worship, it is an attitude toward life and all that is living. A mystic’s path is to hold dear shamanism’s nondogmatic, direct link with the spirit world as seen in the deities of land, water, and animals. This is quite different from the hierarchical class system of the East Coast, where what is holy is most often man-made. What we in the West strive to balance is the beautiful in both nature and art. We’ve had the advantage of learning from the environmental ravages of the East; we also live in the shadow of our own Western ancestors who all but erased an entire Indian culture, as well as their sacred buffalo, in the span of a single decade.

This heritage lets us come full circle in our mythology. We’ve moved from the what-you-see-is-what-you-get to what-you-can’t-see-is-what-you-must-get inner journey of the shaman.

If on the East Coast the journey was west across a continent to claim land, on the West Coast we have nowhere to go but across water. As everyone knows (and Eagle will teach you), humans can’t claim the sea. She comes and goes like Mount Rainier; she is too deep to till or plunder; she eludes our dominion just as she does our myth of ownership.

Not forgetting our balance and connection with the land and water, not forsaking our inward journey to remember a time when we were ourselves animals, mountains, and even the fertile salt water that first spawned us, is what the Northwest mysticism is all about. The shaman heals him- or

herself, not by an external, established authority, not in battle to conquer nature, but by changing on the inside, telling the story and so, perhaps, helping to heal the world.

There is an everydayness about this, a grounded and conscious direction, a sense of humor and self-mastery that seems Oriental. In the Northwest, where there is a mingling of Asians, American Indians, and white settlers who live by water, this mystical tradition looks to have found a spiritual territory.

Tess Gallagher, the native Port Angeles poet, said in a recent interview,

In the East, you take your measure more often from the community of man, but here you’re constantly aware of a very different kind of space and time. . . . I watch the tides come in and go out. I know there’s a force at work that’s very mysterious and which is doing its thing, all the time I think I’m doing my very important thing. . . . Part of what you’re doing as a writer is to make that silent language of mountains and trees and water part of your language. It’s speaking all the time and I hear it speaking.

This aliveness of all things is the most sacred element of a shamanistic state. If we know everything is living as we are, then we can hear the mischievous voice of Coyote cajoling us, “We animals were first and we created your tribes — listen to your elders!” We might also truly listen to the music Puget Sound makes, teaching us to be still and hear the deep within. We might see how slightly we know ourselves if we don’t also learn to love the shadows inside the gray and healing mists of our Northwest skies.