

*The Shamanic and the Experience of Violence*

*(for a seminar on shamanism and violence, May 2006)*

Violent experience brings one into contact with levels of perception familiar to shamans, but without the protections of shamanic skills and traditions. This makes survivors of violence (and I include as survivors many perpetrators as well as victims) unwitting and generally unwilling mystics (not shamans), and changes their lives in ways not commonly discussed or pathologized in the West.

I hope that today we might explore how calling this dimension of the violent experience an encounter with “the shamanic” might open up a fruitful way of working with the experience of violence – one that can borrow and learn from the ancient traditions and modern iterations of shamanism.

A shamanic reality lies at the center of violent experience, and of the survivor’s perceptual world afterward. Understanding the shamanic dimensions of the survivor’s world is an important means of understanding the dark longevity and the appeal of violence, *and* why its amelioration must be approached at the shamanic level of experience.

By “the shamanic” I mean something that has the same conceptual status, or is at the same conceptual level as “the material” and “the metaphysical,” and lies, in a lovely Western way, between them. Very simply, I use the term “the shamanic” to describe

those levels or dimensions of human perception and possibly of reality that lie between and borrow from the ultimate and the mundane or material. I suggest that the survivor lives in this perceptual domain more fully – or it is more present to him – than it is to others who have not teetered at the brink of death or endured extreme suffering.

The shamanic dimension of perception/reality is *rooted* in the physical or material – most familiarly, illness, ritual objects, and nature itself are its ground and base. For survivors of violence, the relevant physical root is the experience of extremity and extreme pain – moral, psychic, and physical.

The intense experience of the body in violence launches perception into a metaphysical space that verges on the ultimate but does not reach it. In this shamanic perceptual field perception is unhinged from the limits of the physical, and experience sometimes touches on a sense of the ultimate.<sup>1</sup>

But the intense physical connections of the violent experience, its emotional content, its moral dimensions, and its manipulability make it quite other than purely metaphysical, and keep it tied to suffering.<sup>2</sup> The survivor does not generally enter the realm of pure light or the primal deity, but remains just this side of it, except when death is finally imminent. This means that the shamanic dimensions the survivor knows are not beautiful or salvific or redemptive. They are terrible and powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> I take for my understanding of the metaphysical here the work of Jess Hollenback, whose work on Mysticism is perhaps the most cogent I have found.

<sup>2</sup> The shamanic realm of perception is manipulable – the ultimate or metaphysical is not – as I am defining the terms for purposes here. This is a crucial distinction for survivors and for their healing.

Most often, we talk of the shamanic in terms of the activities of those who practice within its parameters. We talk of adepts who can enter and depart this realm of perception with some degree of expertise. But in violence we must talk of what happens when the shamanic is encountered by those who do not know what they have encountered, and who may have no vocabulary or conceptual frame for their experience.

When does “the shamanic” emerge in consciousness – when does it become the prevailing form of mind experience? In the case of violent experience, two events open the mind to the shamanic: First, the concepts by which one lives are shattered, submerged, or otherwise disappear; second, this occurs in the context of intense moral, physical, and emotional suffering and pain. In short, in violent acts all prior experience is suddenly rendered irrelevant in the context of intolerable pain. The “shamanic illness” occurs in an intense and unavoidable way.

This is because the body is neither static nor ultimately safe; it exists in space and time and is completely contingent. Not to know what is happening is not to know what to do next. Not to know what to do next is to deeply, inexorably, and anguishingly vanish as an actor in one’s life. Devastating as the experience is, it is not uncommon. We get fired; we are told we are not loved; we find ourselves in an accident. But we are usually saved by the mind’s great ability to fabricate, extend, and deny.

The suddenness, extremity, and intensity of violence preclude any of the mind's normal tricks, however, and leave the violated (and even the violator) in the place of disintegration. Such moments literally spell the end of the world as one knows it.

In violence, conceptual categories are rendered irrelevant or unavailable in a variety of ways. The friend has become an enemy. In the instant of a gun's firing, the safe street has become a war zone. But most powerful is the pain. The friendly, useful attached hand has been severed, and the pain feels like another being altogether. The little boy is shot, and the moral pain of one's immobility destroys all one thought one was.

This experience of disintegration has an embodied consequence that occurs past all conceptuality – the body in pain, failing guidance from the mind, begins to fight against what it defines as death, operating at levels below consciousness. It numbs and retreats and goes still.

This much is often discussed in the literature of violence. What is not, is what happens next. From this point, in most literature on violence, the mind is left out of the discussion. It is assumed that people go into shock, or begin to repress, or enter a state of mind call derealization, which means that one need not study it.

But when the body separates itself from the mind, the mind actually doesn't stop being the mind. Freed from its earthly master, it may begin to wander and perceive the

*disembodied*. Never, ever happily, or with a sense of its own power, or with any way to know what it is doing, it enters the realm of the shamanic.

Let me read a very short poem selected somewhat at random from a collection of war poems. I say “selected at random” to make it clear that finding such lines is not difficult:

I saw his mouth's round crimson deepen as it fell,  
Like a sun, in his last deep hour;  
Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,  
Clouding, half gleam, half glower,  
And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.  
And in his eyes  
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,  
In different skies.  
Wilfred Owen, *I saw his round mouth's crimson*<sup>3</sup>

When the mind is overwhelmed and the senses surfeited by pain, the mind comes into something akin to the shamanic state of perception – and it begins to perceive or experience what seem to be realities beyond the physical and material. This is difficult to express except in terms that are called metaphorical, though they are not.

The experience of the world that ensues at the point of sensory and conceptual limits is what I am calling the shamanic. It has the following qualities:

- it feels at once real and unreal
- it is often synesthetic – sounds are tasted, images sing
- it is indescribable except in metaphor
- it feels incredibly large and possessed of an undeniable, ultimate truth
- it is accompanied by a range of negative and powerful emotions: rage, shame, disgust

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<sup>3</sup> in *First World War Poems*, Andrew Motion, ed. Faber and Faber, 2003.

- it has qualities that are impossible in or at least divorced from the quotidian: the dead speak, vision is not dependent on the eyes and a field of vision, time expands and contracts, space becomes traversable in a matter of seconds
- it seems that the imagination is working without effort to produce a world that may or may not have form and does not have an immediately discernible meaning.
- an experience that is salvific or eschatological may ensue – lights, the Father, ancestors offering help

I would imagine that by now anyone who has studied shamanism sees these as the familiar arena of shamanic practitioners. Shamanic practitioners operate successfully within these ranges of mind experience precisely because they have become aware of the imagination and make use of it consciously, and because they have conceptual categories that allow for contradiction, tolerate fluidity, and operate beyond the bounds of ordinary perceptions, expectations, and even pain. In the realm of the shamanic, in other words, the shaman has some degree of proficiency, though she or he as well could encounter levels of the shamanic for which she is unprepared. The shamanic adept dwells, at least at some times and in controlled ways in this perceptual realm; he is able to live at the edge of meaning and order and to tolerate the sense of the abyss.

Those who are not shamanic practitioners who nevertheless encounter the shamanic become different people than they were before, particularly if they pass the limits of all conceptual categories of their culture. They may seem insane for a time, or feel so. The

world seems to hold no meaning. They find the world a trivial place. They feel a sense of knowledge that is not shared with others. They believe that the surface of reality is only that, and that much lies beneath. They may at once worry and revisit experience of the edge and beyond and also dread and avoid it, because it was at once the most real encounter and the most terrible experience of their lives.

So what role can the shamanic play in individual and cultural healing then?

First, its perceptual realm must be acknowledged as central to the experience of the survivor of violence. It is a driving force. It has emotional power and moral consequences. It may be harnessed for good or ill. Evil may now seem real as an elemental force – such concepts as forces and energy beyond the perceived now make sense and are inhabited and explained by whatever cultural elements can be dragged to the scene. Angels and demons, witches, devils, possessed souls, evil ones are no longer the stuff of superstition (if they ever were) but ways of categorizing an experience that has no categories of its own. If these realms previously exist in the cultural repertoire, they are infused with new life and data, but often with little in the realm of expertise in their propitiation or management. Witchcraft accusations in any number of forms emerge; suspicion borrows from the realm of shadows.

This realm of the now-known, this domain of new mind experience, must be tamed and accepted as we tame and accept the rush of sensory experiences and learning during birth and childhood, and with as much care.

Here those knowledgeable of the shamanic have much to offer. Shamanic adepts have extended the limits of the conceptual into this realm, making it manageable and tolerable. They suggest ways of interpreting and working in this realm that are akin in efficacy to those we use in the more physical world. They allow for the redefinition of violent experiences and wounds as openings to other realms of mind experience.

Some might say that these are best left alone, and I do not suggest that these openings are in all or even in any cases redemptive. They are merely there, and may exert their influence on the mind of a survivor whether he wishes them to or not. So for example one may feel visited by one's dead relatives in dreams – whether this proves salutary or not. But the shamanic perspective allows one to explain these visitations in ways that feel more adequate than a psychological explanation. They may offer some sort of action to be taken as well – talking back, for example, or propitiating, or listening, – that might prove helpful.

At the same time, it is shamanic elements – the deep and abiding conviction of the presence of currents of reality/experience that are beyond the seen – that can lead to destructive actions and tendencies in communities recovering from war. These can be conceptualized as Manichean forces, secret cabals, witches and demons, and other forces that are difficult to control or manage in the context of everyday reality and may in fact be hidden from it as they continue to exert their influence. It is critical that communities understand and work with the shamanic dimension in the process of returning from war

to some sort of peaceful existence. If they do not, they are likely to remain haunted, to seek out unseen enemies, and to fail to make use of a critical tool of healing and renewal.

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This might well be an act of violence. It has many of the elements of a violent act:  
suddenness, pain, confusion,

shamanism and violence s in context in violence and oppression

perspectives on humanities and social sciences in the community

Human beings are, particularly at the edge of life and death, practical. They are moved to survive, and to use what is at their disposal to do so. The human mind is an instrumental one. The shamanic then, for the one who experiences this sort of background, unmediated, powerful reality, is not merely to be experienced: it is to be engaged and used to survive. We think of this most often in terms of shamanic practitioners of many ilks, from the Tibetan monk who exorcises demonic forces and helps the deceased across the bardo, to the Eskimo healer who treats wounds by the laying on of hands to calm the frightened cells.

“The shamanic” is often described as being found in various forms of religious experience, including certain intense forms of prayer, rituals, experiences of grace, and even exorcisms. But it is not tied to these and often breaks their bonds. Practitioners who would use this dimension to some purpose must learn the careful and conscious manipulation of mind events, operating individually and creatively within a fluid dimension. Many survivors of violence are not so trained and the fearsome realities of the non-material they encounter may well destroy their religious beliefs.

The human body is a large set of sensory organs and response systems designed first and foremost for survival. There are many levels of perception, the most familiar to us being the physical: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, kinesthesia (or the position of the body in space) and the awareness of the inner organs – stomach ache, heartbeat). The constant barrage of information from these sensory gateways is managed by certain brain systems below consciousness and in consciousness. Conceptually, in a process that happens largely below our awareness, we define everything that comes at us. Generally we evaluate it as good or bad as well – which is a polite way of assessing danger and safety. Beyond the conceptual, our more primitive brain processes continuously analyze bits and pieces of reality that may well escape our conscious notice – the color of a man’s shirt, for example – for their potential danger.

Should this sort of condition continue – as it does in war and the other cases of massacre and genocide with which I am familiar – what I am calling *the shamanic* begins to emerge.

The shamanic is, first, what the mind experiences beyond the given categories and the information of the standard sensory perceptions which usually dominate our conceptual lives. This level of experience is often called “derealization” – more popularly it is called “shock.” It is assumed that not much is happening when we are in shock, that we are numb. But numbness is not blankness. Here begin, in fact, a different range of perceptions or experiences that in more controlled contexts might be taken for wisdom or enlightenment. The problem is, our very human bodies, anxious to keep us alive and in the world, cannot stand the feeling of groundlessness, and we cannot tolerate the lack of form that confronts us.

It feels like death, and above all the human machine is designed to perpetuate itself.

What does this mind experience beyond the conceptual and the physical look like? And how might we think of it – might we have other senses that recognize it and present it to our bruised consciousness? Might it be the product of brain activity alone?

The mind experience is most easily understood as becoming evident to the imagination – which in many traditions is understood to be not a product of solipsistic thought but a form of awareness. And so we begin to imagine we see the little girl speaking to us from

a spaceless space; we sense ourselves floating above all and seeing a loved one crying though he is inside a house some miles from us.

And so we have at the time of violence, in war, repression, crime, in large social groups and the intimacy of a hidden rape, the encounter – on the part of both perpetrator and victim – with a level of experience that makes a mockery of what is expected and understood. The normal senses are overwhelmed, and the hormonal washes that allow for some sort of response are quickly depleted. Normal categories make no sense, and fall apart. The emotional cost of this category disintegration is severe. And as the circle of experience closes, the body fights against what it perceives as death.

It is perhaps little wonder that people often describe what happens at this point as a “near death experiences.” But they are not *just* near death experiences – they are more correctly named experiences of the overwhelming of normal sensory experience and conceptual categories, which include an encounter with the perception of death. They produce not only incomprehensible experiences, but ones that create incredibly intense emotional reactions, until these too are exhausted and numbness ensues. In that numbness, other experiences counter to everyday logic and expectations may be registered by the problematic sense organ of the imagination. I say problematic because in the West it is ill-understood and maligned.

Particularly among those trained in the rationalism of the West, the shamanic presents itself as a denial of all they know. Yet I would argue that even in those cultures with shamanic adepts and an awareness of these forms of experience, the shamanic dimensions of violence are extremely powerful and beyond normal shamanic experience.

Unless violence is explicitly tied to the shamanic dimension and fully articulated and encoded in cultural terms, those who experience violence experience certain realms of the shamanic without the aid of a conceptual frame to hold it. This means that in cultures that recognize and legitimize the shamanic and those that do not, shamanic dimensions are critical to individual, social, and cultural recuperation from violence.

I could call these dimensions something else, but our Western vocabulary for the intangible but also terribly embodied experience of violence is limited and inadequate, and tends to force the experience into truncating boxes, be these moral, psychological, or something else. “The shamanic” at least does not do further violence to the survivor’s experiences of moral conundrum, contradiction, synesthesia, vastness, and terror, allowing all of these their due. It suggests possible ways of working with these experiences and explains their power. Most important, it recognizes the ways in which violent experience is both embodied and mystical.

The survivor of violence has mystical experiences (as I will show), but these are always rooted in the most extreme experiences of the body. The shamanic allows for this physicality of the metaphysical.

Let us take an imaginative example. You are walking down the street, and suddenly a car leaves the pavement and heads right for you – then runs up a streetlight pole and flips onto its back. There is the screech of metal, the whine of rubber on asphalt, the suddenness of the event, the deadly silence after. What happens in that silence and just before it, in the moment? One tries to make sense of the event, and fails. Perhaps without thinking, one runs away from the car. Perhaps one is frozen to the spot. At that

moment, when nothing can be understood, when events have just transcended the known and recognizable and predictable and crossed all categories we know and expect: cars stay on roads, they don't attack pedestrians, and so on – we verge on the shamanic.

But we are not there yet. So far, we have just broken the normative frame and found ourselves without a way to categorize or define what we are experiencing.

Now imagine that the moment of chaos continues and worsens: the car not only jumps the curb, but it hits you. Suddenly you are overwhelmed with pain and you cannot make sense of it and do not try – a nonverbal, animal utterance comes from you – a groan or a cry that may well seem to come from someone else. Then, to make it more horrible, the car not only has hurt you, but you look down to see that the small child whose hand you were holding is beneath the car – perhaps your mind, desperate to find some sort of category to make sense of it all, suggests she is a rag doll. Perhaps you lose consciousness. Perhaps you take hold of yourself or of the child to re-establish your reality, trying to make it all alright again, to see that nothing has *really* changed. The attempt to re-establish some sense or order continues, though your hands shake and your mind cannot even recall your name. Soon, a series of hormonal washes creates an unfamiliar but overwhelming state in you; numbness or hysteria. You are not yourself. Eventually you can take nothing else in – not even the kind firefighter saying “please be calm.”

Two things have happened. Your senses are overwhelmed and you are in physical and emotional, and even moral pain (how could you have let this happen?). All comes to seem as if it were a movie. Your conceptual categories feel absurd and inadequate, to the degree you can reclaim them at all.

The feelings that accompany this experience of pain and the collapse of categories are perhaps the most terrible of human feelings: they are called by the inadequate word “horror,” and include the too-trivialized sense of deep disgust and revulsion for what is perceived. There is terror, an elaborate, intense form of fear born of the combination of unpredictability and awful knowledge. There is a sense of rage as well – at one’s inability to place oneself in space and time – physically or mentally. As one disappears as a cognizant and self-determining entity, one encounters the existential root of shame.