

## Shamanism, Soul Retrieval, and Healing Trauma

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As a licensed psychotherapist and shamanic practitioner, I have found shamanic healing in general and soul retrieval in particular to be the missing element in our health and mental-health system and an important component in the healing of trauma. Our current medical and mental-health system is incomplete and sometimes inadequate to help us fully heal because it only addresses the physical, emotional, and the mental, and often fails to consider the soul or the spirit. Despite great advances in medicine and technology, we are sicker and unhappier as a nation than ever. In order to heal trauma, we need to heal the soul or the spirit.

Shamans believe that when trauma or pain occurs, part of the soul can fracture off and leave the body as a natural way of dealing with the pain. Once the soul part leaves, it gets trapped out in space and time and is unable to return on its own. It has been the role of the shaman throughout the world for tens of thousands of years to perform soul retrieval to return the lost and fragmented parts of the soul when there has been trauma. Shamans believe that all illness and disease (including disease, i.e., lack of ease) is attributed to a spiritual imbalance and that one of the factors causing the imbalance is soul loss. Shamanism seeks to restore an individual to wholeness and balance, and one of the methods of doing so is by bringing lost soul parts back. Shamanic healing should not be considered a replacement for mental-health or healthcare treatment by a professional, but rather should be a part of our approach to healing the whole individual.

Soul retrieval is the shamanic healing modality performed when there has been soul loss. Everyone has soul loss—it is the body's natural self-defense mechanism to deal with any kind of trauma, shock, pain, or loss. The causations of soul loss are many and include, but are not limited to, any type of abuse (sexual, physical, mental, emotional, spiritual), the death of a loved one, including the death of a pet, divorce and separation, an accident, surgery, hospitalization, long-term illness, chronic pain, witnessing violence or death, and severe financial stressors such as bankruptcy or the loss of one's home.

The symptoms of soul loss include, but are not limited to, disassociation, memory loss, addiction, depression, suicidal ideation, and not feeling like oneself after certain traumatic events. Adults who disassociate most likely experienced some form of trauma or abuse as children. They developed what I call an autonomic nervous system response of disconnecting from the body as a way of coping with the pain and trauma. Many of my clients don't remember their childhood or large segments of it. This occurs as the body's way of erasing a time period that is too painful to be remembered. Addiction is the body's way of attempting to fill in the empty spaces or holes where soul parts have left. Alcohol, cannabis, drugs, tobacco, sex, food, gambling, and shopping are attempts to fill in the empty spaces. When significant parts of the soul have left due

to trauma, then depression or suicidal ideation can manifest. Numerous times, I have heard clients who have battled depression say they feel "empty" inside or that they feel like they have a hole inside of them. Clients sometimes tell me they haven't felt the same since a certain event such as an accident, surgery, divorce, or death of a parent. Soul retrieval is bringing parts of the soul back to where they belong, with the client.

Trauma experts and leaders in the field of energy psychology know that an important part of healing trauma involves employing healing modalities that access the right side of the brain. Shamanic healing techniques such as soul retrieval are one of many such right-brain modalities along with Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, Emotional Freedom Technique, guided imagery, and creative visualization to name a few. In *Invisible Heroes, Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal*, Belleruth Naparstek writes, "As debilitated as most PTSD sufferers are with using words to process their trauma, they can readily respond to nonverbal engagement—to images, symbols, metaphors, sensations, and feelings, to drawing, writing, conscious breathing and movement."<sup>1</sup>

Metaphors and stories have historically been used in shamanic medicine to assist clients in healing. A soul part will often show me pictures or images as a metaphor to describe further the experience that caused it to leave. Years ago in doing soul retrieval for a client, I found a soul part standing in a barren desert holding two heavy leather satchels and hunched over from the weight of the bags. The soul part was showing me that my client was carrying a heavy burden and felt alone, deserted, and unsupported in the world. Sometimes, I see soul parts showing me arrows in the heart, an obvious reference to a heartache, and when the arrows are in the back, I know it is a betrayal.

I perform soul retrievals with the intention to return whatever lost soul parts are not only ready and willing to come back, but the one or ones that will most significantly improve the client's healing. Sometimes, a client comes to me because of a specific trauma or incident, such as the death of a spouse or an accident, and I will return the soul part that left when the trauma occurred.

Returning soul parts can be from any age, including soul parts that leave in utero. It is not uncommon to discover soul parts that left in utero at various stages or in the first year of life because the mother did not want the child. An example is a teenage girl or young adult who was single when she got pregnant and either did not want the child or her parents pressured her to abort the baby. The fetus feels the energy of not being wanted.

Over the years, I have seen many clients come to me after they have tried traditional Western medicine and other approaches to healing, and yet still have the same problems such as depression or anxiety. I believe that soul retrieval is the missing element in our health and mental-health system. Western medicine focuses on the physical, mental, and emotional. We have medical doctors and many complementary physicians such as acupuncturists who work on the physical body. We have psychiatrists, psychologists, and psycho-

therapists who work on the mental and emotional bodies. But who in our culture works on healing the fragmented and fractured soul? That has been the domain of shamans for thousands of years. It's time we look to the ancient healing techniques employed by shamans and give them a place in our mental-health framework to assist in the healing of the whole individual.

Peter Levine, one of the nation's foremost experts in trauma, wrote in his book, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*:

Shamanistic concepts and procedures treat trauma by uniting lost soul and body in the presence of community ... these procedures do seem to succeed where conventional Western approaches fail. My conclusion is that significant aspects of shamanic practice are valid. When it comes to trauma, we have much to learn from the ways these traditional people practice their medicine.<sup>2</sup>

We all need healing for our torn and damaged souls and our weary spirits, and I believe everyone should have soul retrieval as part of their medicine. I am continually impressed with how my clients benefit when soul parts are returned. A client who I will call Sam (not his real name) was referred to me by his therapist. He had two mental breakdowns and a stay in rehab in the five years prior to seeing me. In the first session, I did soul retrieval for him, returning three soul parts, and I also did a power retrieval for him. One of the soul parts that left when he had one of his breakdowns told me he was "a broken man with a broken life." Fortunately, returning soul parts do not come back in with the same trauma that triggered their leaving in the first place. On the contrary, they come in healed and whole, bringing a gift in the form of some assistance to help the client. Once healed, I dialogue with the soul part, asking how it wishes to be of help and support to my client in being reunited with him/her. This particular soul part said it would help heal Sam's heart and his life, bring back happiness and joy, and help him find peace. I received an e-mail from him a few weeks later writing that he "experienced joy for the first time in years."

Another client, who I'll call Susan, came to me after she left a physically and verbally abusive boyfriend whom she described as a sociopath. She had PTSD and a tremendous amount of fear in her body. In her first session, I retrieved two soul parts that left due to the abuse. The first soul part to come back brought her the gift of helping her "reclaim her sense of self and to help her on the path of self-discovery and healing her heart and her spirit." The second soul part brought to her the gift of "greater self-confidence, self-esteem, self-love, and to help her nurture and care for herself and guide her on her path to healing." Susan continued with several more sessions and is now free of the fear and PTSD that was gripping her. Her work with me is complete, and she now experiences calmness and a renewed sense of joy and excitement for her future.

It is our duty and responsibility to seek ways to heal the whole person, on all levels, incorporating a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual bodies. Looking to the wisdom of the

ancient ways of healing to assist us may be one of the ways to bring us into greater health, healing, and wholeness.

## References

1. Naparstek B. *Invisible Heroes, Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal*. New York, NY: Random House, 2004:29.
2. Levine P. *Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1997:60.

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