CIRCLING BACK TO MY ROOTS WHILE SEARCHING FOR THE SHAMAN WITHIN: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ENQUIRY

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Approval of the Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy in Mind-Body Medicine.

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Abstract

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Shamanism is the world's oldest integrated healing system. Cross-culturally this practice has survived marginalization to indigenous societies and has crossed over to the contemporary world. The reductionist model of the current health care system has prompted people to seek holistic and alternative methods to support their well-being. This has inspired health practitioners and researchers to investigate and experience the benefits of shamanic practices.

Following a yearning desire to explore shamanic practices, and to reconnect with her indigenous roots, the author, a therapist of native background, traveled to a remote location to participate in shamanic rituals with an indigenous community in Mexico. Using an autoethnographic enquiry approach, this dissertation research study provides an insight into the sacred healing shamanic practices and to the researcher's path to find the shaman within and her own wholeness. The researcher, who is the only participant in this study, collected data following qualitative autoethnographic enquiry guidelines. Narratives of personal experiences with shamanic practices served as data to transcribe and report this enquiry. The results of this study reveal the powerful cathartic effect shamanic practices had on the researcher as accounted expressively in this dissertation.

Dedication

To all the courageous Warriors of the Red Road, *el camino rojo*

Acknowledgments

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I am most grateful to my dear uncle Henry "Wild Goose" Niese, whose gentle spirit is my partner on this path; he inspired me to follow the Red Road, to face the wolf and to follow the sun, and I keep him near to my heart. To the Eagle Voice Center and Aunt Paula for their kindness and work to heal others.

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I am forever indebted to the members of the clan in Mexico, who embraced me and allowed me in their lives and ceremonies. The wisdom in their practices is infinite; Tenoch, Chicahua, Toltecatl and *abuelos*: *Gracias*!

Although they are no longer in this physical world, I am grateful for my grandparents, for their example was my inspiration. I would like to acknowledge my mother, whose perseverance and strength is her greatest legacy.

Finally, I would like to say a simple thank you to my gentle and kindhearted companion who left Mexico to follow me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION....1

Statement of the Problem....7

Purpose of the Study....9

Research Question....9

Researcher Background....10

Childhood....10

The Beginnings....12

Going Back to my Roots....12

Rationale for the Study....13

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE....16

Core Features of Shamanism: Chanting, Dancing, Drumming....29

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY....35

The Research Model....35

Autoethnographic Enquiry....36

Validity of this Method....39

Research Design....39

Participant Recruitment....40

Data Collection....40

Data Analysis....41

Reporting the Data....41

Ethical Issue....41

Limitations of the Research....42

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION....45

Finding My Brothers and Sisters to Share *el Camino Rojo* 47

Tenoch 48

Toltecatl 49

Chicahua 50

Setting 51

The Beginning 54

Surrendering (of the Ego) 54

Experiencing Letting Go: Initiation 60

Experiencing Ecstasy/Oneness 65

Danzando con los Osos [Dancing with the Bears] 66

Experiencing Anger and Fear 67

Experiencing and Overcoming Fear 72

Nonordinary State of Consciousness Induced by Sensory Overload, Dancing, and Drumming 74

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION 76

Reactions to the Research Process 76

REFERENCES 80

APPENDIX 85

List of Figures

Figure A1: Chicahua and Family 85

Figure A2: Oso, Melencayotl, and friends 85

Figure A3: Oso and Melencayotl 85

Figure A4: Oso: “Welcome to the Grandparents Prayer” 86

Figure A5: The Family at a Lunch Break while Preparing for a Ceremony in el Tuito ...86

Figure A6: Preparing the Land for a Ceremony.....87

Figure A7: Preparing the Land for a Ceremony.....87

Figure A8: Temezcalli in the *Abuelos*’ Home 87

Figure A9: Melencayotl Preparing the Altar for the *Temezcalli*. 88

Figure A10: *Abuelos* 88

Figure A11: Totlecatl.....89

Figure A12: Tenoch, Chicahua, (daughter), and Mazatl 89

Figure A13: Melencayotl and Tenoch Preparing the *Temezcalli*; el Tuito. 89

Figure A14: Helping the Clan Build the *Temezcalli* 90

Figure A15: Ceremonial Dance with Other Clans 90

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Mom: So why are you studying with those *brujos* [witches] in Mexico?
Me: Because I saw my grandparents, your parents, do shamanic work when I was growing up and I want to learn and experience shamanic healing.
Mom: People think they are all *brujos*. . . . When I was a child, your uncle Antonio was dying of cancer and the *machis* [shamans] went to help him. . . . They built a bed at the top of a *canelo* [Foye tree], and they placed him there. . . . For days the *machis* chanted and performed so many ceremonies. . . . He still died of cancer. . . . So why you want to be a shaman?

"First and foremost, avoiding death is not the purpose of shamanic traditions. Our Western mistrust of these systems often comes from the observation that shamanic healing may not have resulted in an extension of life" (Achterberg, 1985, p. 17).

My interest in shamanic practices began when I was a child growing up in the south of Chile. My maternal grandparents were the *curanderos* (healers) of the small rural community near Mulchen. For years, I observed their healing rituals, and I grew up thinking this was standard in the context of healing practices. Although the space created by time and distance from my childhood experiences expanded, I remained closely attached to my primal beliefs in shamanic practices. My mind, saturated with Westernized education and information, could never subdue the knowing of my heart. I believe there is an innate knowledge that surpasses the knowledge acquired by the mind. The universal knowledge of the ancestors, nature, and spirits exists within each individual and in their heart. It is there where one can access the ancient wisdom to guide one through life.

Although time and circumstances changed around me, I remained faithful to the fundamental concepts of native life and shamanic healing; to maintain health and well-being, one must remain in balance and in alignment with the universe. To reestablish

health or well-being, there must be a holistic view of the treatment that incorporates the mind, body, and spirit.

Thirty-five years later, and far away from my country of origin, I began to experience a return to my shamanic roots. The initial signs were subtle; there was the call to learn yoga, meditation, and mind-body techniques that culminated with a commitment to a doctorate program in mind-body medicine. The synchronicity of events that led me to meet people who influenced my life, and my own heart's desire, led me to follow a path as a healer. I became a therapist.

Looking from a wider perspective now, it is easy to recognize the people that came into my life to guide me gently back to my roots. A series of synchronistic events led me to cross paths with teachers whose knowledge prompted me to reconnect with my inner knowledge. In 2008, I met Venerable Kong Do, a Thai Buddhist monk. *Sifu* (the respectful term used for a teacher) was helping her daughter, who was a neurologist at the Cleveland Clinic, with a pilot study on the effects of meditation on pain and quality of life in multiple sclerosis and peripheral neuropathy.

While providing yoga and meditation to veterans who suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder in Camp Lejeune, NC, and motivated by the neurologist in charge of the program, I decided to visit the Cleveland Clinic and observe the study. The long drive to Ohio culminated with a long-lasting relationship between Sifu and me. We became student and teacher and friends. Sifu was the first one to speak about being present, detachment, and letting go and prompted me to learn about Buddhist philosophy.

A few years later, and while working in Bethesda, Maryland, as a mind-body therapist with wounded service members returning from war, the subtle voice in my heart

became stronger. Smothered by the noise of my mind and everyday liabilities, I continued to live a Westernized life while knowing there was something missing from it.

In 2011, I met Uncle Henry, a Native American healer of the Lakota Sioux Nation. Uncle Henry, an elder and a wise man, probably heard from my heart what I could not. Soon after we met, he extended an invitation to learn from him.

I spent many weekends at Uncle Henry's place observing, listening to his stories and teachings, and participating in his sacred ceremonies. Sitting in a circle around the fire during council nights, I finally found my tribe. At a farm in Maryland, in the United States, thousands of miles from my grandparents' farm, Uncle Henry spoke their same words, he described their same world, and he began to unveil my heart's desire.

As a mind-body therapist working in an interdisciplinary setting, I knew the importance of treating a person from a holistic perspective. The professionals around me also shared this view but never agreed on how to incorporate the spiritual realm into assessment and treatment. It was safer to point to the chaplain and let him or her perform a spiritual assessment as none of us were qualified to do it. Unfortunately, most service members associated this spiritual assessment with a religious tone and most of them refused to attend their appointment.

Combat veterans knew firsthand the pain and suffering generated by war. Somewhere in their experiences, they lost faith, hope, purpose, and even part of their souls, as candidly acknowledged by many. Achterberg (1985) addressed the soul affairs by stating, "To lose one's soul is the gravest occurrence of all, since it would eliminate any meaning from life, now and forever. Thus the purpose of much shamanic healing is

primarily to nurture and preserve the soul, and to protect it from external wandering" (p. 17).

It is here that one finds the fundamental difference between modern medicine and shamanism. The reductionist biomedical model, by focusing primarily on symptoms, illnesses, treatment options, and prevention of diseases, aims to *cure* instead of *heal*. Shamanism, on the other hand, concerns *healing* instead of *curing*. Krippner (2005b) offers an accurate definition of curing and healing: *curing* concerns symptom removal and *healing* concerns a return to wholeness. Hence, in modern medicine, the practitioner becomes "the curer of the disease instead of the healer of the sick" (Egnew, 2008, p. 255).

> So it is the quest of the shaman to heal. Heal on a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual level, all things of the Earth and sky. We are part of a whole, a collective consciousness that encompasses all things. If one part of the whole is sick and hurting, then all is sick. We ourselves are sick and cannot be whole until all is whole. (Brown, 1994, p. 206)

My inner wisdom directed me to ask questions during my assessment that would give me access to the service members' spiritual realm. Often, it was here that a missing piece needed to address in their recovery was found. What matters to you the most? What makes you happy and what makes you sad? They were the only three questions I asked in my assessment, which opened a door of exploratory possibilities.

Often, when confronted with illness, pain, trauma, or death, people turn inward in their search for answers (Grof, 1993; Moss, 2002; Sigmund, 2003). Intuitively, in these crucial moments, one searches for the inner guide, inner wisdom, Great Spirit, or God to provide strength and guidance.

Uncle Henry, my Native American healer and friend, was also an Army veteran who was eager to help the wounded service members by offering a traditional warriors'

welcoming and purifying ritual. Supported by the success of the mind-body techniques I provided to the service members, and the trust I had built with them, I offered to some of the soldiers the option to visit Uncle Henry. At his farm, the service members participated in purifying sweat lodge ceremonies.

Inside the sweat lodge and sitting beside them in these sacred ceremonies, I witnessed the cathartic effect and subsequent transformation of these men. This awakened an intrinsic curiosity to explore deeper native healing and shamanism. I thought of myself as an American woman with Chilean roots but completely Westernized by my education and experiences in the United States. Somehow, my working with the service members exposed the true identity and desire of my heart. There was a longing to reconnect with my own *curandera* roots and to find my own healing place.

Living in a world that is increasingly chaotic, plagued by wars, genocide, generalized violence, and separatism, adjustment can be difficult for anyone (Kets de Vries, 2014). This can be particularly difficult for someone who grew up in a native environment away from the comforts of modern life. Gradually, during the past couple of years, I became increasingly restless, and the more I became aware of my internal states, the stronger grew my desire to explore shamanic and spiritual practices. Whitehouse (2004) articulated this sentiment best:

> Presently, many Euro-Americans are showing an interest in various types of initiatory experiences that involve the expansion of awareness in general, and the expansion of awareness via shamanic techniques in particular. One of the reasons for this revival is, that in the process of migrating from other parts of the world to participate in the dream of the great American melting pot, most individuals left behind and therefore now feel cut-off from their connection to their traditions and practices of their own indigenous roots, which kept them feeling alive, vital, and connected to a sense of soul. (pp. 252–253)

There is an innate desire of human beings to find their true purpose and to reach self-actualization and transcendence. The father of humanistic psychology and founder of transpersonal psychology, Abraham Maslow, articulated the value of spirituality to reach the top level in the hierarchy of needs. This is attainable only when one relinquishes the self and moves beyond it (Maslow, 1994). The greatest gift I received from the service members under my care was the sensibility and awareness to search for my own self-actualization and the urgency to expand my realms of consciousness to reach my highest potential.

The call for me to initiate this inner quest was inspired while I explored spiritual practices with these veterans. My encouraging them day after day to be mindful, to be present, and to let go had a liberating effect as I was also yearning to let go. In 1980, Moss (as cited in Moss 2002) stated, "Christian mystics of German Rhineland saw letting be and letting go as the first step towards an inner encounter with God and Spirit" (p. 287).

I had practiced letting go and letting be during my countless yoga and meditation practices but never understood the true value of this statement. Letting go and letting be is about surrender and acceptance and about pursuing the heart's desire, even if this means at a great cost.

Thirty-five years later, and thousands of miles away from my childhood, I heard the call to reconnect with my roots and to search for this ageless form of healing practice. Although there was a deep love in what I did for the wounded men and women, I was still feeling alone, misplaced, and disconnected. I knew there was a discrepancy in my life that required attention. The desire to explore native spiritual practices grew stronger

and prompted me to search for the shaman within me. In October 2014, I bid farewell to the job I loved and all the things I once considered mine, and I moved to Mexico in a search for shamanic healing practices.

For the following 10 months, I participated in sacred healing ceremonies that allowed me to explore and process painful life experiences to which I was still clinging. With each participation, I took notes about my internal state, including my reaction to the ceremonies, to the environment, and to others. Participation in these ceremonies allowed me to write an accurate and expressive account of my personal response to these experiences and the healing process that took place while I searched for the shaman within.

The results of this study, although deeply personal to the researcher, highlight the powerful effects of shamanic practices on the healing process and provide a candid narrative of a transformational experience.

Statement of the Problem

The medical field is changing; medicine is reaching a state of integration. People are taking control of their healing and are no longer passive recipients of a diagnosis and treatment. Individuals are searching for an all-inclusive approach to health and healing and an active participation in the process.

In the past few years, a quiet movement has shifted from a passive to a more active search for less intrusive and more traditional methods of healing. This interest prompted the development of holistic health, in which the mind, body, and spirit are integrated. This newfound interest on shamanism gave birth to what Harner (1990) called “shamanism renaissance” (xi).

After two centuries of science-driven experiments and methods of curing, a paradigm shift occurred in those who sought a less anthropocentric approach (Harner, 1990). In indigenous shamanic practices, plants, nature, elements, and all animals and creatures are imperative to survival and as such are incorporated into the healing process. Although once indigenous practices were relegated to primal cultures, they are now an intense focus of research and attention. The field of mind-body medicine has incorporated shamanic techniques used for thousands of years; imagery, visualization, art, music, and chanting are some of the many shamanistic practices integrated into the mind-body medicine concept.

Although shamanism has been widely studied in the fields of anthropology and psychology, modern science is reluctant to accept that shamanism cannot be studied by a cause-and-effect scientific method; instead, shamanism is a method with a series of practices. Harner (1990) added, "The causality involved in shamanism and shamanic healing is, indeed, a very interesting question . . . but causality-oriented scientific research is not essential to [teaching] shamanic practices" (p. xxiii). How shamanic practices can aid in the healing process is a very personal matter. Healers, *curanderos*, and shamans follow traditional paths to the spiritual realms to find ways to help their clients. How this help is received and accepted is a very personal matter (Eliade, 2004; Harner, 1990; Walsh, 1990).

Empirically driven studies seek to quantify cause and effect of an experiment, and conventional scientists reluctantly accept qualitative research to explain a phenomenon that is beyond what can be measured (Harner, 1990; Walsh, 1990). Shamanic practices work at the energetic spiritual level, which science is unable to quantify. Although

contemporary medicine is concerned with symptoms associated with either the physical body or the mind, shamanism is all-inclusive. Furthermore, shamanic practitioners are more concerned with spiritual health. "For the shamanic cultures, that purpose is spiritual development. . . . Health is being in harmony with the world view" (Achterberg, 1985, p. 19). The shamanic experience and the healing process are deeply personal in that they tap into the spiritual world of the individual. There is a need for modern medicine to embrace the primal wisdom of shamanic practices and incorporate these practices into the holistic approach of healing. Perhaps with the integration of these practices we can finally address health and healing *wholistically*.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide an insight into the powerful practices of shamanic rituals and transformational patterns in the researcher's development while searching for the shaman within. Using an autoethnographic enquiry approach, the author will reflectively narrate the lived experiences of shamanic practices in a remote location in Mexico.

Research Question

This dissertation examined the following question: *What was the lived experience of a therapist with a native upbringing participating in shamanic practices in a remote location in Mexico?* In addition, this dissertation research explored these secondary questions: *How did these experiences affect the healing process and subsequent transformation of the researcher? What recurrent themes were encountered throughout the experience?*

Researcher Background

In this autoethnographic enquiry, I am the primary researcher and participant. The main objective of this exploration was to participate in and observe my own reactions to the sacred ceremonies, the environment, and other participants. This study was not conducted to demonstrate efficacy of shamanic practices nor even to show how these practices are performed. Literature on shamanism and shamanic practices is ample. It is not my intent to explain shamanic practices. Instead, the intent of this autoethnographic study was to convey my experience and reactions to these practices as a participant observer of my-self.

To understand why I decided to conduct this autoethnographic enquiry, it is important for the reader to be familiar with my personal story and to understand what brought me to that point. This knowledge will give meaning to the experience and will facilitate a relationship with the author's narrative of events.

Beyond a reflective narration of the experience, I also reveal my vulnerability in an effort to expose my honest thoughts and the emotions elicited by my reliving this experience. By doing this, it is my hope to engage the reader in such a way that together, we can transcend boundaries between reader and writer and between researcher and participant.

Childhood. I was born in Chile to a young single mother. At the age of five, and because of economic hardships, I was sent to stay with my grandparents. They lived in the south of Chile in a small community situated in the depths of the Andes Mountains of the 8th region. There, my grandparents were the healers of the small community. They performed an array of healing practices to reinstate the well-being of the people in their

community. They knew how to cure *mal del ojo* (evil eye), *mal del viento* (wind scare), *mal del susto* (fright sickness), *empacho* (gastrointestinal problems), and *santiguear* (give the sign of the cross) and *correr ventosa* (cupping glass). They also had an extensive knowledge of the use of native herbs and plants.

As a child, I grew up witnessing native medicine and I believed it was the standard form of healing. In these practices, there was no separation of mind, body, or spiritual illness: the healing practices were all-inclusive.

A few years later, I moved back to live with my mother in Santiago. I learned quickly that the simple life I had with my grandparents was unparalleled in modern life in the city.

Inept in my adjustment to a life far from the farm and the sacred, I immersed myself in books and in a world of creativity that still serves me today. The absence of my father was never a significant issue of discussion, as my mother always avoided the subject by alleging that she was both mother and father.

My solitude shielded me from comparing our social economic situation with that of other people around me. I grew up happy with the few resources we had. Our life was occupied by moving from one place to another in the middle of the night to avoid paying the rent we could not pay and finding creative ways to survive. Because of these experiences, I grew very resourceful.

Food was always scarce and restrictions were always abundant. Afraid that I would follow in her footsteps of single motherhood, my mother imposed strict rules for socialization. She was tough and authoritarian, at the same time caring and overprotective. My circle of friends was limited to my relatives and a few family friends.

The beginnings. In 1992, I immigrated to the United States. Chile was far away; even farther was the farm life I left as a child. Like any new immigrant, I struggled to adjust to the new country and society. The language, the food, and the cultural differences kept me in a constant state of cultural shock for at least the first year.

Quickly, I learned the American way of living: effort equals improvement. Everything one might dream of is possible, and the American dream became my dream.

My professional career began with my cleaning baking trays at a doughnut shop's kitchen, followed by a short tour at the local hotel as a housekeeper. A couple of years after my arrival in the United States, I found the path that would take me where I am today; I began to work as a fitness instructor at a military base. The majority of my 25 years in my adoptive country I have spent at a military base working, studying, dating, and getting married to, or divorced from, a military man.

While working with the service members and seeing the devastating effects of the war in Iraq, I instinctively knew I had to incorporate spiritual activities, such as yoga and meditation, into their treatment. A few years later, I was a mind-body provider at the premier mental health facility for the wounded. There, I began to circle back to my roots, to where it all began, to my grandparents' world.

Going back to my roots. While a mind-body practitioner leading groups and individuals in therapy, I explored the incorporation of spiritual practices into their sessions. Guided imagery, visualization, yoga, meditation, chanting, journaling, and drawing were some of the techniques that allowed me to integrate the spiritual realm. Some colleagues considered these shamanic practices.

Intuitively, I knew that there was a missing link in treatment and recovery of the service members. The mind cannot be treated independently from the physical or spiritual body. The holistic approach to healing was the only one I knew, which I had observed in my grandparents 35 years earlier during my childhood. No one, with the exception of the chaplain, would address spirituality because it was considered a highly specialized area reserved only for those trained in religion.

With the incorporation of mind-body techniques, I was weaving in spiritual practices to reach out to the soul or essence of the wounded. The participants in such practices felt better or at least regained the hope that they would get better. The change did not happen only in those I led in therapy but also stirred emotions within myself. At the pinnacle of my career, I was feeling misplaced and restless and I had an abiding sense that I was missing something.

When I met uncle Henry and began participating in traditional Native American healing ceremonies, I felt as if I had found a path to get home. The question remained, where was home?

Rationale for the Study

Walsh (1990) concluded that there is a need for trained professionals to conduct research in the area of shamanism by participating in these activities. As a trained therapist of native heritage, educated in the United States, I believe it is important to understand the powerful effects of shamanic practices. After years of working as a therapist providing mind-body skills to people traumatized by war, I found some similarities between the practices of mind-body medicine and shamanic practices. These experiences led me to reach back to my roots and search for that ancient knowledge my

grandparents once revealed to me. The transformational effect of shamanic rituals cannot be described accurately as an observer only. Participation, in my opinion, is necessary to validate the subjective experiences others have reported from their observations. Walsh (1990) addressed this matter in the following statement:

> It could be especially valuable to study practitioners who have been trained both in shamanism and a Western discipline such as anthropology or psychiatry. Charles Tart has pointed to the need for new strategies to research consciousness-altering traditions. He suggests that we need participant-experimenters, or yogi-scientists as he calls them, who are trained in both, a consciousness-altering technique or tradition and in careful self-observation and analysis of their experiences. Perhaps we need shamans-scientists as well. (p. 267)

Feeling the need to reconnect to my roots and find my own spiritual path led me to decide to explore this route, which has been less traveled by researchers. To understand the language, symbols, and rituals used in shamanic practices, it is necessary for the researcher to participate (Johnson, 2007; Walsh, 1990). Detractors of this position allege that no one "has the authority to observe and describe and even presume to speak for the shaman people" (Johnson, 2007, para. 9). However, it is not the researcher's intent to speak on behalf of the shaman nor even to report observations of shamanic rituals. Instead, the rationale for this research was to provide an insight into the complexity of shamanic practices from a researcher-participant standpoint. From a reflective narrative perspective, I will describe my own experience with these practices throughout the entire process.

Quantitative studies on shamanism have focused on the physiological and psychological benefits of this ancient practice and provide empirical data (Harner, 1990; Moss, 2002). On the other hand, qualitative studies have focused on the subjective experiences of participants in shamanic practices. Only a handful of studies have been

conducted in which the researcher was also a participant (Glass-Coffin, 1998; von Kerckerinck, 2014; Whitehouse, 2004). Even more unusual is to find literature in which the researcher is also a therapist of native heritage who grew up observing shamanic practices in her family; hence, practitioner-researcher-participant-native heritage. In a nutshell, this journey follows the researcher to that place she calls home.

The importance of this study is in the exploration of several domains. At the personal level, I anticipated that I would experience profound changes, including personal healing and the re-encounter with the sacred with which I felt so close when I was a child. I call this home.

Professionally, I expected to gain a deeper understanding of spiritual practices to be able to guide others to find their own healing. In my professional practice, the population I serve is wounded beyond the physical, emotional, or cognitive body. As stated by many of the service members I encountered, they feel as if they have lost their soul. Spiritual injury is hard to diagnose, treat, or heal. The medical community did not acknowledge spiritual problems until its official introduction into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* (DSM-IV; Turner, Lukoff, Barnhouse, & Lu, 1995). In addition, it might be difficult for medical professionals to acknowledge this realm because of their own lack of spiritual awareness. It was my hope that by deepening my own experience of shamanic healing practices, I could be better equipped to help others through their own healing process. Socially, this enquiry has a value to those who seek to turn to shamanic practices for their own healing and transcendence.

There is a growing awareness of human isolation and individualism. People feel fragmented, disconnected, alone, and purposeless, often seeking alternative ways to find

spirituality and a path to wholeness (Harner, 1990). I hope that my research will show a different path to wholeness and healing using the ancient wisdom of shamanic practices.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

The term *shamanism* has been widely used cross-culturally to identify ancient healing practices that trace back 20,000 to 100,000 years ago (Achterberg, 1985; Eliade, 2004; Halifax, 1979; S. Harner, 1995; Kets de Vries, 2014; Peters, 1989; Walsh, 1990, 2007; Winkelman, 2009). The meaning of the term *shaman* traces to the Tungus people of Siberia and translates as *one who is excited, moved, or raised* (Eliade, 2004; Peters, 1989; Walsh, 1990, 2007).

Several definitions of shamanism are available depending on the time when it was studied. Eliade (2004), the earliest scholar to study shamanism in depth, offered the following definition:

> We consider it advantageous to restrict the use of the words "shaman" and "shamanism," precisely to avoid misunderstandings and to cast a clearer light on the history of "magic" and "sorcery." For, of course, the shaman is also a magician and medicine man; he is believed to cure, like all doctors, and to perform miracles of the fakir type, like all magicians, whether primitive or modern. But beyond this, he is a psychopomp, and he may also be priest, mystic, and poet. . . . A first definition of this complex phenomenon, and perhaps the least hazardous, will be: shamanism = techniques of ecstasy. (pp. 3–4)

This early definition added a component of mystery to an exotic practice only found in indigenous societies and far from the Western world's practices (Winkelman, 2009). Peters (1989), however, defined shamanism as the "first spiritual discipline or path leading to immediate knowledge of the sacred (gnosis). As such, it is the root from which other spiritual disciplines have issued" (p. 115).

Walsh (1990), M. Harner (1990), Krippner (2002), Halifax (1979), and numerous other scholars have agreed that the main feature of shamanism and shamans is the ability to navigate the spiritual realms using the induction of an altered state of consciousness

(ASC). Additionally, Walsh (1990) added that the shaman enters a trance-like state to travel "to other realms. . . . They use these journeys as means for acquiring knowledge or power and helping people in their community" (p. 10). Therefore, key factors in shamanism are (1) a voluntary entrance to an altered state of consciousness, (2) a journey to another spiritual realm, and (3) during these journeys, one's finding the knowledge to help others (Walsh, 1990). Some definitions of *shamanism* have centered on "practices and experiences rather than beliefs and dogmas" (Walsh, 1990, p. 12). In this sense, the best definition of *shamanism* was articulated by Harner (1987): "Shamanism is ultimately only a method, not a religion with a fixed set of dogmas" (pp. 4–5).

This trait of shamanic practices, although accurate, does not exactly embody the significance of what is identified as ASC, soul flight, soul journey, or cosmic traveling (Eliade, 2004; Peters, 1989; Walsh, 1990). Instead of one's losing consciousness, control, or dissociating, shamans willingly expand their awareness to access a higher state of consciousness while transcending the constrictive content of the mind (Davis, 1998; Hubbard, 2012; Kjellgren & Eriksson, 2009; Peters, 1989; Walsh, 1990; Whitehouse, 2004). Winkelman (2009) added, "The shamanic ASC is a conscious state of entry into another experiential domain in which the shaman is a self-controlled actor" (p. 461). In the context of healing rituals, some researchers prefer to call this a *nonordinary* state of consciousness (NOSC) instead of ASC (von Kerckerinck, 2014). Harner (1990), on the other hand, preferred to call this transitional state of nonordinary reality a *shamanic state of consciousness* (SSO).

To induce an ASC, the shaman may use rhythmic drumming, shaking or dancing (sensory overload), isolation, fasting, meditation, prayer (sensory deprivation), or

psychotropic plants such as peyote, ayahuasca, or Wilka (von Kerckerinck, 2014; Kjellgren & Eriksson, 2009; Harner, 1990; Walsh, 1990). Once shamans enter this ASC, they can travel to other parallel dimensions of reality to find within the spiritual realm the answers to help the community (Davis, 1998; Halifax, 1982).

It is important to highlight that shamanic ASC is a concept that has been subject to much debate (Price-Williams & Hughes, 1994). Various researchers have offered several interpretations, but still there is not a consensus for the definition of shamanic ASC. The definition of ASC offered by Tart (1972) was "a qualitative alteration in the overall pattern and mental functioning, such that the experiencer feels his consciousness is radically different from the way it functions ordinarily" (p. 1203). This definition does not suggest that ASC is a mental deviation, a dissociation or illness; instead, ASC is a temporary and voluntary variation in the average state of alertness (White, 1972). In two separate studies, M. Harner (as cited in S. Harner, 1995) and Walsh (1990) concluded that ASC is not linked to amnesia or "acute schizophrenic episodes" (p. 5). Hence, according to these authors, ASC is not associated with any pathology.

A more progressive and less ethnocentric definition of shamanism was offered by Villoldo and Krippner (1986): Shamanism is "not an institutionalized religion; rather, it is an attitude, a discipline, and a state of mind that emphasizes the loving care of oneself, one's family, one's community, and one's environment" (p. 85). Shamanic practices enable those who seek deep knowledge and answers to expand the realms of consciousness and to navigate through them. In a sense, all individuals have the capacity to open to higher states of consciousness and access other realms of realities to find answers and healing (S. Harner, 1995).

The shaman, a respectable figure within a community, is the healer, the counselor, the spiritual leader, and the mediator (Halifax, 1979, 1982; M. Harner, 1990; Walsh, 1990; Whitehouse, 2004). Halifax (1979) saw shamans "not only as spiritual leaders but also judges and politicians, the repositories of the knowledge of the culture's history, both sacred and secular" (p. 4).

Once relegated to primitive practices, condemned by religious groups and stigmatized as a pathology, shamanism has resurfaced into mainstream society and entered the medical field in part because of the increasing interest in a wholistic approach to health. The growth of humanistic and transpersonal psychology has triggered an inherent interest on this ancient form of healing (Harner, 1990; Walsh, 1990, 2007). According to Harner (1990), one of the main reasons shamanism has been dismissed as primitive practice and ignored as a feasible healing form, is the result of *cognicentrism*. Harner used this term to refer to the latent prejudice against other states of consciousness. Most of the studies on shamanism have been conducted by anthropologists and psychologists whose research has mainly focused on observation instead of participation in shamanic practices. When one is observing, without participation, one may fall into culturally constructed, biased, ethnocentrism (Harner 1990; Walsh, 1990, 2007). Even for an autoethnographer it is difficult to release preconceived ideas and expectations to be able to experience shamanism in its cultural context.

As a solution to this cognicentrism, Harner (1990) suggested that researchers participate in shamanic practices. In addition, he suggested that the modern practitioner would greatly benefit from learning shamanic practices. It is important to acknowledge the difference between a shaman and the use of shamanic practices. Many of us will

never get an opportunity to train for years with native shamans or even participate in their shamanic practices. The art of shamanism may take years to master (Walsh, 1990).

Shamanic practices, however, are skills that anyone can learn and share with others. Arts therapists, music therapists, mind-body therapists, somatic therapists, and even psychologists have successfully incorporated shamanic practices into their repertoires (Harner, 1990). Imagery, visualization, drumming, dancing, and all somatic practices are shamanic in nature (Achterberg, 1985; Harner, 1990).

Eliade (2004) simply summarized shamanism as a *technique of ecstasy*. From this definition of ecstasy is a "an overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement" (Ecstasy, n.d., para. 1). This broad definition of *ecstasy* as it relates to shamanism is not too divergent from the meditator who experiences bliss or the dancer's performing and transcending and almost having an out-of-body experience. It is safe to suggest that humans are wired to pursue ecstasy and altered state of consciousness (Walsh, 1990).

It is fair to suggest that ASC is more common than some may feel comfortable to admit. In extreme conditions of sportsmanship, athletes have revealed that they have access to a state different from their ordinary state, induced by exhaustion (sensory overload). This temporary state has been acknowledged by athletes and dancers as being in the zone such that although one is aware of surroundings, the senses are heightened to a level beyond that of ordinary reality (Harner, 1990). This is not to suggest that all those who enter ASC can easily become shamans. The suggestion, however, is that when readily accepting the possibilities, and under certain conditions, most humans can consciously and willingly enter an altered state of consciousness.

The broad expansion of practices such yoga, tai chi, meditation, and drumming groups have facilitated the inclusion and acceptance of shamanic practices (Harner, 1990; Walsh, 2007). Leaders in the field of self-help have also ventured into offering Native American rituals. All this has helped with the acceptance of shamanism and has prompted a personal search for shamanic practices. The experience of shamanic healing ceremonies have a profound transformative effect. My learning firsthand from a shaman equipped me with a profound understanding of this ancient art of healing.

Practitioners of shamanism believe illness is the result of a spiritual and energetic imbalance of the self and relationship with others (Eliade, 2004; M. Harner, 1990; Halifax, 1979; Walsh, 1990). A basic understanding found in these practices is that spiritually, people are not only connected to each other but also to every creature and element in nature. There is a spirit in all that is around all individuals and if they are disconnected or in disharmony with it, all fall ill.

Boulet (1989) offered a descriptive definition of this connectivity concept:

> In shamanism all of the existence is viewed as highly integrated. Literally, whatever exists has a soul. There is no division into organic and inorganic. There is no hierarchical structuring of consciousness with humankind comfortably ensconced at the top and ending with rocks at the bottom. All realities exist in simultaneous time. All forms of existence are to be recognized and respected and, in turn, to respect and recognize the observer. (p. 11)

One of the main divergences of Western belief, particularly among established religions and shamanism, is that human beings are the only ones in possession of a soul. This anthropocentric view of humans dismisses the profound benefits of a harmonious interaction between animals, nature, and universe. The consequences of this anthropocentrism are the exploitation of natural resources and discrimination against other creatures (Vining, Merrick, & Price, 2008; Whitehouse, 2004). Could this have an

effect on humans' health and well-being? According to shamanic philosophy, it has a profound effect as humans are all intrinsically connected by our spiritual forces.

It is the shaman's duty to assist in the reconciliation and synchronization of people's spirits with those in nature and the universal spirit (Davis, 1998; Whitehouse, 2004). In addition, "In considering the shaman as a healer, as restorer of balance it is not farfetched to think of him/her as an environmentalist or even as an ecologist of the group psyche" (Boulet, 1989, p. 12). Kets de Vries (2014) labeled shamans the "original eco-psychologists, pointing out the need for environmental reciprocity for the healing of humans, animals and the earth" (p. 6). To maintain and reestablish health or well-being, one must reconnect and realign with all these spiritual forces.

Wade Davis (1998) assertively summarized this idea:

> Shamanic medicine is based on a non-Western conception of the etiology of disease, in which health is defined as a coherent state of equilibrium between the physical and spiritual components of the individual. Sickness is disruption, imbalance, and the manifestation of malevolent forces in the flesh. Health is a state of harmony and, for the shaman, it is something holy, like a perfect reunion with gods. The maintenance or restoration of this balance is the shaman's duty and it accounts for his or her unique role as a healer. (p. 27)

It is not a coincidence that people who live in industrialized countries see themselves as separate from nature. Urbanization and migration to the cities collaborated to reinforce this sentiment. Industrialization and technological advances gave humans the illusion that they were masters of the universe and above other creatures. This anthropocentric viewpoint disconnects human beings from the web of interconnectedness and collaboration necessary to live in harmony and balance (Vining et al., 2008). Therefore, the consequences are devastating to the human spirit, leaving it feeling lost, alone, and rootless (Kets de Vries, 2014).

The current biomedical model, however, does not recognize *rootlessness* as an illness; hence it does not offer a cure. Shamanism and modern adapted shamanic practices, however, address this matter by incorporating rituals and ceremonies that aim to reconnect with nature, animals, and the universal force. This facilitates reestablishment of wholeness.

The shaman leads community rituals seen as necessary to reestablish balance and well-being. The heart of shamanic practices is the ritual, which may include dancing, chanting, drumming, or any other sacred ceremony practiced in community. These rituals, center of shamanic practices, are designed to establish homeostasis, equilibrium and harmony with the universe, and to aid individuals through life stages (Whitehouse, 2004).

The importance of these community rituals cannot be underestimated. In Western society where individualism, privacy, and economic achievement are such valued elements of modern lifestyle, community rituals are undervalued, inhibiting chances for collective growth and consciousness. Furthermore, at a fundamental level, "Community rituals reflect adaptations to primates' biological needs for group coordination" (Winkelman, 2009, p. 470). Thus, collective rituals are essential for synchronization among members of the community and with the environment for adaptation and evolution.

Interconnectedness with all existence is "one of the most powerful experiences individuals can experience as a result of their shamanic journey into expanded dimensions of reality" (Whitehouse, 2004, p. 210). During my participation in these sacred ceremonies, I understood that the power of these rituals develops a *collective mind* and transcend individual boundaries. The physiological synchronization of hearts and

breath was facilitated by the rhythms of the drums, the chanting, and the guidance of the elders. The community ritual in this sense has no parallel in modern society. The symbolic act of entering a sweat lodge or a *Temezcalli* by crawling into the Mother Earth's womb to purify is a powerful metaphor for transformation and transcendence. Inside the womb of Mother Earth, people can connect with their ancestors and spiritual guides, release attachments, pain, and suffering, and be reborn.

Rituals, symbols, and communal ceremonies are fundamental to shamanic practices. Regrettably, most modern societies have dismissed the value of rituals and ceremonies, or they have been reserved for religious purposes or formal, official ceremonies only. The inability of Western societies to uphold sacred rituals and rites of passages leaves people without a culturally sanctioned way to experience the sacred "interconnectedness of all existence" (Whitehouse, 2004, p. 212).

In direct correlation to the absence of sacred rituals and rites of passages Whitehouse (2004) speculated,

> Could it be that when sacred forms of passage are unavailable to individuals, multiple forms of addictions erupt within the culture as a shadow response to a deep urge for transcendence and connection that has been marginalized and gone unfulfilled? (p. 246)

Certainly, a provocative question about which I have long thought and based only on my own experience came to conclude it might be true.

From a shamanic viewpoint, the foundation of human empowerment and healing begins with the collective experiences of sacred rituals. When one experiences interconnectedness to all that is, one can truly "inspire empathy and compassion for others" (Whitehouse, 2004, p. 212). Achterberg (1985) added,

> Healing, for the shaman, is a spiritual affair. Disease is considered to have origins in, and gains its meaning from, the spiritual world. The purpose of life itself is to be indoctrinated and initiated into the visionary regions of the spirit, and to maintain oneself in concert with all things on earth and in the sky. (p. 17)

The reestablishment of well-being, spiritual balance, and harmony with nature is fundamental to shamanic practices. "Since human beings are considered a part of the natural world, and the natural world is understood to be alive with spiritual consciousness, the source of all healing resides within nature" (von Kerckerinck, 2014, p. 1). Moss, McGrady, Davies and Wickramasekera (2003) noted, "The native models (of healing) are spiritual because they demonstrate an awareness of a broader life meaning that transcends the immediacy of everyday physical expediency, as well as otherworldly transcendent reality that interfaces with ordinary reality" (p. 193).

Hence, the notion is that healing is intrinsically related to spirituality. It goes beyond the curing or absence of the illness, as it transcends suffering (Achterberg, 1985; Dossey, 1989b). According to the understanding of healing in the shamanic worldview, to transcend suffering and experience healing, one must become whole in mind, body, spirit, and interconnected with the universal force. Citing Dossey, Egnew (2008) defined healing as "the process of bringing together aspects of one's self, body-mind-spirit, at a deeper level of inner knowing, leading towards integration and balance with each aspect having equal importance and value" (p. 256). Consequently, wholeness is equal to healing.

In modern medicine, although the technology allows one to dissect the physical body, the spirit is neglected, and with that, the possibilities for healing. When the spiritual dimension is disregarded or dissociated from the physical body, it creates a duality of realms that are difficult to reunite. However, not only is the medical field

guilty of these assumptions but ancient Christian beliefs and agnostic groups collaborated to promote the physical body as a separate entity from the soul and the spirit (Clarke, 2010).

If mind, body and spirit are intrinsically connected, could the body be seen as physical container for the spiritual body? Clarke (2010) proposed, "What touches the body might also touch the spirit as well as a way of understanding that spiritual connection" (p. 654). Even if one feels inept to talk about spirituality, it is possible to communicate it using touch or other nonverbal practices. This suggestion relates directly to the inability of providers to address the spiritual realm as part of their health care assessment and treatment. Human beings need to be in contact with each other in addition to their need for independence, personal space, or individuality. There is an innate desire to feel connected and a part of the community. This can be only achieved by direct physical participation with other human beings. These needs were validated by a study conducted by Salzmann-Eriksson and Erikson (2005). This study showed the importance of physical touch as a spiritual need, as reported by the mental health patients interviewed for the study. In addition, touch "creates a sense of community and can therefore result in a higher degree of mental health by feeling acknowledged as a human being" (p. 851).

In sum, spirituality expressed in any form is essential to healing. Shamanism is a spiritual practice that promotes wholeness. It nurtures a relationship with all the parts that make the human experience and a relationship with all that exists beyond the self (Egnew, 2005).

Literature related to the subject of shamanic healing practices, and the benefits of these practices in health and wellbeing, has increased significantly (Achterberg, 1985; S. Harner, 1995; Hubbard, 2012; Ket de Vries, 2014; Moss, 2002; Walsh, 1990). Psychological and physiological benefits of spirituality (and religion) are well documented. Koenig (1999) introduced a comprehensive collection of over 1,100 studies. Additionally, *The Handbook of Religion and Health*, also co-edited by Koenig, cited and rated more than 1,200 studies on the health benefits of spirituality (Moss, 2002).

Although approximately 77% of people are willing to have their spiritual concerns addressed and incorporated into their health care plan, medical staff are hesitant to integrate any spiritual practices (Sigmund, 2003). The incorporation of spirituality into client/patient health care is challenging for many reasons: "Providers lack education in spiritual caregiving, lack of confidence . . . lack of time . . . concerns about inappropriateness, or lack of personal spiritual awareness" (Young & Koopsen, 2009, p. 53). In addition to these concerns, physicians are skeptical about addressing spirituality because the difficulty of assessing needs and measuring progress (Young & Koopsen, 2009).

Shamanism, as the oldest spiritual healing practice, has much to teach Western medicine. Originally associated with native or indigenous practices alone, some of the shamans' techniques have been adopted now into some Western healing practices. Although the medical field in general is falling behind the incorporation of spirituality into their clinical practice, some disciplines have successfully incorporated some of the features of shamanism and with that spirituality. Mind-body medicine, humanistic psychology, art therapy, and music therapy are the leaders in the incorporation of music,

drumming, chanting, dancing and shaking, guided imagery, and meditation (von Kerckerinck, 2014; Moss, 2002). All of these tools are associated with shamanism.

Core Features of Shamanism: Chanting, Drumming, Dancing.

> *The medicine of the drum . . . the drum is used to activate and heal our spirit, aligning the frequency of our hearts with Mother Earth. . . . The shaman considers the drum a horse that carries him to other realities in search of knowledge, power and healing.*
> —Translation from a medicine woman

Group chanting, drumming, and dancing are at the core of shamanic practices. The shaman leads the sacred rituals or ceremonies using a drum and other instruments. Members of the group also use instruments and their voices to synchronize in chants or prayers.

Synchronization of chanting in community has a profound impact: "Music exerts a number of influences that produce synchronization, including physical vibratory effects on the body and increased coherence in brain-wave discharges, leading to a coordination of emotions and cognition, and a sense of unity and connectedness" (Winkelman, 2009, p. 466). Ingrained in the collective unconscious, these forms of nonverbal expression serve as a way not only to communicate but also to release emotions. These practices elicit a variety of psychophysiological responses and have a direct effect on the brain. Winkelman (2009) affirmed, "The effects of tone and sounds in emotions enables music to have effects on health" (p. 467).

In a therapeutic setting, specific music has been introduced to induce states of relaxation that allow the activation of the parasympathetic response of the autonomic nervous system while promoting emotional homeostasis. Crowe (2004, as cited in Winkelman, 2009) stated that music has an effect on health and well-being. Furthermore,

chanting in a group, even more than individual chanting, can produce a cathartic effect that allows the release of emotions (Gingras, Pohler & Fitch, 2014; Winkelman, 2009).

Shamanic trance induced by drumming can elicit a powerful emotional response, including altered mood and strong physiological responses. Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between increased salivary Immunoglobulin A and decreased anxiety, tension, anger, and confusion (S. Harner, 1995).

To enter an ASC, the shaman uses repetitive monotonous drumming. Gingras et al. (2014), added,

> The frequency range of the rhythmic sequences used to attain ASC has been observed to correspond to that of theta EEG waves, and brain wave frequencies have been found to synchronize with rhythmic drumming with repetition rates between 3 and 8 Hz. (p. 1)

M. Harner (1990) highlighted the importance of rapid drumming to reach an ASC. In his Westernized course in shamanic healing, "Core Shamanism," he set the drumming to 220 beats per minute; this speed correlates to about 4Hz (Gingras et al., 2014). Monotonous drumming induces a deep state of relaxation, decreasing sympathetic function, increasing parasympathetic function, and increasing alpha-theta brainwave activity, hence inducing an ASC (Gingras et al., 2014; Kjellgren & Eriksson, 2009; Peters, 1989; Winkelman, 2009).

The benefits of drumming for health and physiological changes associated with it have been reported in several studies. Gingras et al. (2014) measured the level of salivary cortisol in two groups of people who were inexperienced in shamanic techniques. While one group listened to repetitive drumming with "instructions for shamanic journeying" (p. 6), the other group listened to instrumental music with instruction for relaxation. The results demonstrated a postintervention reduction in salivary cortisol in

both groups. The researchers did not find a significant difference between levels of salivary cortisol after the drumming among the drumming–with-shamanic-journeying group compared to the instrumental-with-relaxation-instructions group. However, the participants assigned to the repetitive-drumming-with-shamanic-journeying group reported that they felt "heaviness, a decreased heart rate, and a dreamlike experience" (p. 7). This study demonstrated that the benefits of shamanic drumming cannot be measured solely by endocrine response. Instead, the major differences are found at the emotional level.

In addition, other researchers have conducted and confirmed the therapeutic benefits of shamanic drumming, including M. Harner (2010) and Pohler et al. (2009). M. Harner's study demonstrated an increase in salivary immunoglobulin A (sIgA) "in experienced shamanic practitioners" (Gingras et al., 2014, p. 2). Pohler et al. (2009) studied drumming and shamanic intervention with cancer patients and found that shamanic drumming and guided journeying were also beneficial for relaxation and pain management (Gingras et al., 2014). Other studies have shown similar results with improvements in temporomandibular joint pain (Gingras et al., 2014; Kets de Vries, 2014).

In reference to one of the earliest studies conducted by Neher in 1961 in shamanic drumming, S. Harner (1995) wrote,

> Drumming as a tool for inducing shamanic trance and enhancing health or for any other purpose has been a subject of study only very rarely. Neher's research is virtually unique . . . . He concluded that his laboratory observations of activation of the brain by drumming were similar in stimulus and response to behavior in drumming ceremonies. Among those behaviors are brain wave changes and unusual subjective feelings, electrical activity in the auditory region of the brain, a trance state with organized hallucinations or unusual color, pattern, or movement perceptions, a variety of sensations (kinesthetic, cutaneous, auditory, visceral.

> And perhaps gustatory and olfactory), emotional and abstract experience (fatigue, confusion, fear, disgust, anger, pleasure, and disturbance of the sense of time) and muscle twitching. (p. 11)

The psychophysiological benefit of drumming and music in the shamanic context "has an ability to heal through the elicitation of emotions and by providing supportive cathartic expression that relieves troubled emotions" (Winkelman, 2009, p. 467). Undoubtedly, the literature shows that many researchers have studied shamanic practices with the consensus that it is beneficial, as it improves symptoms of illnesses, increases relaxation, and provides a spiritual avenue to wholeness.

Similar to chanting and drumming, dancing and mimesis, or animal embodiment, are additional important features of shamanic practices. Mimesis, specifically, can be traced to prelanguage societies; human imitations of animal movements are incorporated into shamanic rituals as a way to honor and communicate with these animals (Donald, 1991). Winkelman (2009), citing the work of Merlin Donald, offered, "These bodily movements, gestures, and facial expressions are an early form of symbolic communication and exemplified in expressive modalities found in rhythm, affective semantics, and melody that are typical of shamanic rituals" (p. 469).

> During the last Danza del Sol: I became "overpowered" by this need to dance in this particular way. I couldn't resist it. I felt this tremendous energy and strength. I bent over and started moving like a bear, I have never dance like this before. I danced for hours. . . . During the last night of my Vision de la Montana, "El Guardian" came to me and offered me a bear skin and told me to wear it in the next Danza del Sol. . . . I knew I had the bear spirit in me. (Tenoch, personal communication, February 7, 2015)

These rhythmic movements and imitation of animal behavior, central to shamanic ritual, are full of symbolism. Like chanting and drumming, they promote communication, expression, and synchronization with the group while promoting creativity, connection to

body, and self-awareness. In addition, these practices stimulate communal consciousness and group creative expression (Winkelman, 2009).

According to Peters (1989), this ritualistic feature traces back to Paleolithic times when depictions of animal embodiment by shamans were captured in paintings. Initially, the assumption was that the only purpose of this animal embodiment by shamans was to *possess* the spirit of the animal for hunting success.

Cottrell (2011) offered a different explanation for these early drawings of shamans and animals: "They are images, not so much of animals hunted in the outside world, but of the 'animal within.' They depict the shamans' power animals, invoked during trance" (p. 15).

Animal representations, mimesis, and one's invoking animal spirits are testaments to the interconnectedness between human and all-that-it-is around them. The power animal is the ultimate personal relation to another living nonhuman creature that accompanies individuals when they navigate the spiritual realms.

> The power animal is an aspect of this organic current of awareness. It may be understood as Earth's spirit configuring itself for the individual. The living, breathing Earth takes on a form and enters our awareness, so that we may relate to it personally and fully experience ourselves as belonging to this planet, so that it is truly our home. (Cottrell, 2011, p. 16)

Ceremonies and rituals celebrated in shamanic cultures maintain this traditional animal embodiment with the purpose of identifying with the power of the animal and for guidance during shamanic ASC. As symbolic rituals, Ellens (2014) added, "Mime and dancing, ritual enactments of struggles with the spirits combined with chanting, singing, and imitative vocalization are at the core of much shamanic activity" (p. 139).

There is a new paradigm in modern medicine *a shamanistic renaissance*, term coined by Harner (1990), and a preamble to what Dossey (2000) called *Era III medicine*. This new era in medicine embraces the benefits associated with shamanic practices and their correlation to spirituality, healing, and well-being, as extensively reported. Westernized, widely accepted mind-body techniques including yoga, imagery, and drumming have facilitated the acceptance of shamanic practices. More people are interested in learning these ancient practices facilitated by Western practitioners while others venture into the heart of the source. The need for self-actualization and enlightenment prompted me to search for these ancient sacred practices in hope of finding my own path to wholeness.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The Research Model

This autoethnographic enquiry focuses on shamanic healing practices as experienced by the researcher. The choice of method was influenced by the possibility of deep exploration of a topic that has a profound meaning in my life. The qualitative research design philosophy allows deep exploration of human complexities, and certainly, this method allowed me to do just that (Raab, 2013; Wall, 2008).

The exploration of shamanic practices has a twofold significance for me: professionally and personally. This study was driven by my desire as a therapist of native upbringing to find a deeper understanding of these practices and to find the native healer within myself. Autoethnography as a "method for reflexive research" (McIlveen, 2008, p. 13) allowed me to embed myself in a topic that is profoundly personal. As a practitioner of mind-body medicine, my native heritage and shamanic practices are intimately related to my professional practice, and as such, in need of exploration and expansion. McIlveen added, "Autoethnography is a reflexive means by which the researcher-practitioner consciously embeds himself or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation or intervention" (p. 13).

Field notes, pictures, artifacts, and memories of my participation in traditional shamanic ceremonies allowed me to reflect and reflexively narrate my lived experiences among the natives. In addition, my conducting an autoethnographic enquiry from this

analysis and reflection taught me as much about myself as I learned about the community with which I was embedded, from the process of self-discovery (Raab, 2013).

Richardson (1990) added, "Writing is not simply a 'true' representation of an objective 'reality': instead, language creates a particular view of reality" (p. 116). Autoethnography and reflective narrative allowed me to reveal my experiences and the insight I gained about shamanic practices and my own responses to the sacred ceremonies and subsequent transformation.

Autoethnographic Enquiry

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method of enquiry that blends autobiographic with ethnographic work (Chang, 2008; McIlveen, 2008; Pace, 2012; Raab, 2013). Creswell (2007) recognized five main characteristics of qualitative enquiry: epistemological approach is central to the enquiry, human subjective experience is reality, the topic is usually meaningful to the researcher, biases are included in the structure of the design, and emergent and inductive language are intrinsic to the method.

Autoethnography, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). In addition, autoethnographers venture in this field to create "autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation" (p. 742).

In this sense, autoethnographic enquiry presents an intimate account of the phenomenon investigated (McIlveen, 2008). This is accomplished when researchers are able to move back and forth from the ethnographic, wide perspective of their experience

in a cultural setting to the personal. subjective experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In doing this, the researcher must be willing to expose a "vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, retract, and resist cultural interpretations" (p. 739).

Pace (2012) added, "Autoethnographers reflexively explore their personal experiences and their interactions with others as a way of achieving wider cultural, political or social understanding" (p. 2). Usually, autoethnographers reveal their study in an evocative first-person narrative form (Ellis, 2004). Although the main component of autoethnography is storytelling, it goes beyond just telling a story. Chang (2008) best articulated it as follows: "It transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 43).

Commonly used in the fields of anthropology, sociology, education, and lately in psychology (Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Etherington, 2004), autoethnography is gaining legitimacy in other fields because of its unique approach: the researcher as the focus of the research. This method gives space to the researcher to explore subjective and emotional experiences spearheaded by the research and other participants. In addition, this method encourages creativity as a way to express and present the data (Etherington, 2004; McIlveen, 2008; Pace, 2012; Raab, 2013).

In response to some critics of this method of research, particularly in regard to the lack of analytical analysis, Ellis (2004) argued, "When people tell stories, they employ analytic techniques to interpret their worlds" (as cited in Pace, 2012). As a method that breaks the rigor of conventional analytical objectivity, autoethnographers seek to narrate a story without analysis and generalizations, thus preserving the integrity of the story as

such. Furthermore, Ellis (2004) clarified that readers "determine if the story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (pp. 194–195).

Researchers use this method to explore a theme that has a personal meaning to them. Hence, there must be a close relationship between practitioner and researcher in addition to awareness of internal states (Etherington, 2004). Moreover, Etherington suggested that "gender has a role to play in this. . . . Reflexivity has been influenced by feminist approaches to research, and is closely in tune with women's ways of knowing" (p. 16). This approach requires a deep exploration of one's feelings and emotions in addition to the development of critical reflexivity (Richardson, 2000). This development may elicit hidden and painful memories. Ellis and Bochner (2000) summarized this process: "Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore, well, that's when the real work has only begun. Then there's the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you've written or having any control over how readers interpret it" (p. 738).

Some of the most important characteristics of this research method as suggested by Ellis (2004) are: (1) the object of the research is the author and the narrative is a first-person account; (2) the life of the author is just as exposed as others and reflexively connected; (3) the writing style encourages readers to be actively engaged in the plot; (4) the storyline exposes some of the author's life details and emotions elicited by the experience. With this method of enquiry, researchers expose their vulnerability by expressing personal connection to the topic of study (Wall, 2006).

Although there are some similarities between autoethnography, autobiography, and nonfiction, the most fundamental difference is that autoethnography is "ethnographic

in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation" (p. 48).

Pace (2012) identified three research methods within autoethnographic enquiry: evocative autoethnography, analytic autoethnography, and grounded theory. The research method for this autoethnographic enquiry followed the traditional evocative autoethnographic approach and reflective narrative for analysis of notes (data).

Validity of this Method

One of the main concerns of orthodox researchers in relation to this method is validity. Because autoethnographers use storytelling, narrative, and fiction, some researchers believe that the data cannot be accurate or representative. Ellis (2000) counterargued this critique by stating, "Validity means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience is lifelike, believable, and possible" (p. 751).

Recollection of events, specifically those from childhood, is sometimes altered by time. Narrative to recall such events is important to fill the gaps omitted by memory (Ellis, 2000). Ellis recommended that researchers using this method write a scene or event soon after it happens, but if this is impossible, emotional recollection is another technique. Visualization, or journeying, a tool used and validated by transpersonal psychologists and mind-body practitioners, is also a practical tool one may use to remember events (Raab, 2013).

Research Design

The purpose of this enquiry was to provide a personal insight into shamanic practices and to report the transformational patterns that occurred during my journey as

well as those that occurred during the analysis of my notes of this enquiry. As stated earlier, the author is a therapist of native heritage, who grew up observing shamanic practices. In this study, I have sought to return to my roots and find the healer/shaman within me. To accomplish this, I traveled to remote locations in Nayarit and Jalisco, Mexico, and participated in various sacred rituals throughout a nine-month journey. This exploration was spearheaded by the call to search for my native roots in addition to my finding my own healing.

To maintain authenticity in my autoethnographic enquiry, I reflectively narrated the lived experiences that led me to transform and reconnect with my inner wisdom and the emerging experiences that surfaced while I was immersed in telling my story.

Participant recruitment. In this autoethnographic enquiry, I was also participant and observer of this study. Although others participated in these rituals, following the autoethnographic enquiry method, the author was the main focus of the research in the cultural context of shamanic practices (Chang, 2008).

Data collection. This experience took place over a period of nine months in Ixtapa, Ixtlan del Rio, and el Tuito in the regions of Nayarit and Jalisco, Mexico. The group of natives and the researcher traveled extensively throughout these locations to perform various rituals and sacred ceremonies. During this time (2014–2015), the researcher-participant took extensive notes about her experiences in the form of diary entries and personal memoirs including gifts, crafts, artifacts, instruments, pictures, and videos. Following the autoethnographic enquiry method, the researcher-participant is the storyteller, and her experience the data and method (McIlveen, 2008).

Data analysis. Autoethnographic narrative analysis derives from data collection in the form of researcher's memories, field notes of interaction with others, self-observation notes, and self-reflective notes. The term *note* is used instead of *data*. The researcher's notes are the data and were used to generate a comprehensive account of these data in a reflexive, narrative style. *Reflexivity*, or *reflective writing*, is a relatively new term in the field of research as it has been discouraged and dismissed from the scientific world because it involves subjective experiences of the researcher (Etherington, 2004). Etherington explained,

> To be reflective we need to be aware of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world. (p. 18)

In a nutshell, to be reflective, and to be able to write reflectively, one must have a strong sense of self and use oneself as a tool in the research. This may be seen as selfish, subjective, or self-indulgent for some traditional researchers (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999). In autoethnography, however, subjectivity and one's viewpoint are important in the creation of a personal connection with the reader and to interpret the data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Etherington, 2004).

Reporting the data. Ellis and Bochner (2000) asserted that the data are the researcher's interpretation of an experience. Faithful to this method, the researcher reported her notes (data) in a reflective, narrative manner that is engaging the reader to explore as closely as possible the author's experiences.

Ethical issues. The main concern for the author was the protection of the identity of other participants in the shamanic rituals. Although none of them were subjects of this enquiry, it was important to tell their story without identifying the individuals. These

participants had a profound influence on the researcher's participation in the sacred ceremonies. They were catalysts in facilitating processing, transformation, and healing, and they shared cathartic experiences during the ceremonies. The names of these people are kept anonymous and I will refer to them only by their pseudonyms.

Another subject of concern while writing this dissertation was the researcher's apprehension about exposure and self-disclosure. Narrative autoethnography encourages the researcher to expose a vulnerable self so as to connect with the reader (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). This requirement challenges the researcher's ability to navigate the boundaries of honesty and confessional experiences. How much one should disclose to narrate a very personal experience honestly is a challenge and a very personal ethical issue.

In addition to the above dilemma, in autoethnography it is also difficult to identify a conceptual framework that is worthy of a doctoral dissertation. This concept alone led to paralysis in moving forward on countless occasions.

Limitations of the Research

In the field of shamanic studies, Krippner (2002) affirmed, "Western interpretations of shamanism often reveal more about the observer than they do about the observed" (p. 963). This may be considered a limitation to any empirically oriented study. For an autoethnographic enquiry, however, in which the researcher is also the participant, it is an advantage. Autoethnography is about revealing the observer's subjective experiences within the cultural context of the group (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

However, and considering this statement to be very accurate, the author's background and upbringing involves the observation of shamanic practices as a child. Furthermore, the author was raised in a native community, and although she later received a Western education, her roots are still of native heritage.

Because the researcher was the only participant in this study, some of the limitations of this autoethnographic enquiry include:

A. Researcher was absent from some of the ceremonies because of:
    1. External factors:
        a. Extreme weather conditions (these regions experienced high temperature and rain). Some of the ceremonies lasted for several days and researcher was unable to meet the physical demands.
        b. Inability to get permission to participate in some of the ceremonies because of lack of proper preparation.
        c. Inability to access some remote locations.
    2. Internal factors: Personal reactions to ceremonies required rest or processing time, exhaustion, and illness
B. Analysis and conclusions for this study are limited to personal experience. Readers can generalize or identify with such findings or narratives.
C. Researcher biases are included in the reflection notes but inadvertent omission of these biases is a possible limitation.
D. The researcher may get wrapped up in her own story. To avoid this, Raab (2013) advised researchers to "offer different perspectives" (p. 16).

Honoring the call to explore my shamanic roots, I embarked on a nine-month journey to a native community in the regions of Jalisco and Nayarit, Mexico, to participate in shamanic rituals. Using an autoethnographic enquiry method, I offer an honest insight into those shamanic practices from the perspective of a therapist of native roots while searching for the shaman within. My intent is to describe such experiences candidly and reflectively by providing an account of my personal memories and an exploration of my self-observation and self-reflective data.

As a result of this enquiry, I uncovered the source of deep-rooted, unresolved issues that prevented me from developing a higher state of consciousness. In addition, I was hoping to become equipped with the ancient knowledge to help others to find their healing path. To do that, first I had to allow myself to heal. It is my desire to show others who are searching for their own healing or spiritual practice a way to it on the shamanic path.

CHAPTER 4

Findings and Discussion

We are all broken, that is how the light gets in.
—Ernest Hemingway

This autoethnographic enquiry explored the lived experience of a therapist of native upbringing during her search for the shaman within in sacred ceremonies in the regions of Jalisco and Nayarit in Mexico. During a period of nine months, I participated in shamanic ceremonies and collected notes to use as data to narrate these experiences reflexively. These experiences fostered profound changes in a process of self-awareness, self-confrontation, processing, and acceptance. The ceremonies elicited a shift in my consciousness, an openness to the collective consciousness, and an acceptance of a hidden truth only disclosed in a higher state of awareness.

This state of awareness was facilitated by a nonordinary state of consciousness that was enabled by sensory deprivation and sensory overload. This cathartic effect was mainly induced by communal drumming; chanting; dancing for an extended time; and sleep, food, and water deprivation. For days at the time, I followed a group of indigenous people to various areas, traveling extensively to secluded locations to participate in their sacred ceremonies.

> Finally, the day came. I sat in front on my computer facing the inevitable. Tell the story I went to unveil in Mexico. Subconsciously, I am resisting to avoid this moment; I must ignore it. My right eye is twitching for days; while my stomachache intensifies. My whole being is fighting; my body is resisting. "The physical discomfort or physical pain is a manifestation of spiritual pain" I said countless times not knowing how hard it was to acknowledge "that" pain. . . . I was broken. . . . During the sacred ceremonies I fought my evils and for the most, I defeated them. But now, while reading and writing about it, they become too real.

> I was broken. I am still broken but glued together. The hidden truth of a hurting soul is expressed in anger and sometimes rage. I knew that. In my office I had a sign that read "angry dogs will bite." (Diary entry)

This dissertation is not about observation, collection of notes, and the production of an empirical report of my observations. Instead, this study is about *telling* my story as it unfolded while I participated in shamanic traditional and sacred ceremonies. This type of study is neither indulging nor narcissistic, as some researchers have said of autoethnographers (Wall, 2006). The process is painful, confrontational, and cathartic. The narration of these experiences was as healing as it was disturbing all over again.

During my nine-month journey in Mexico, I joined a clan composed mainly of members of the same family. They traveled extensively through the country leading and attending ceremonies. To support their travels, they performed ancient Aztec dances for the tourists; they were solely dedicated to *El Camino Rojo* (the Red Road). Their purpose in life was to walk the Red Road. Sacred ceremonies, including, music and dances, were their means to live a spiritual life in an effort to honor Mother Earth, the ancestors, and to align with the energy of the universe. It was not something they did; instead, it was who they were.

In their company, I experienced and witnessed powerful sacred healing ceremonies. My travels with the clan brought me back to my roots. Clan members became my family, my friends, and my teachers. Furthermore, they became intrinsically invested with my own processing and healing. Under their guidance and support, I was able to stand the intensity of some the ceremonies that at some point became catalysts to my own healing.

Finding my Brothers and Sisters to Share *el Camino Rojo*

Uncle Henry introduced me to the Red Road or *Chanku Luta*. He said it was the Lakota traditional path and available only for those who were called to live a spiritual life. The Red Road, according to Uncle Henry, runs north to south and is a difficult path full of obstacles and hardships, but at the end there is enlightenment and a fulfilling life. When Uncle Henry spoke about the path, I never expected that I would follow it nor that I would find people outside of the Lakota community walking that path. As time went by in Mexico, and I had time to process the experiences, I understood that I was also ready to join the path. All of the signs were there; all the so-called *symptoms* and all of the right people aligned in my life to guide me to that path. Although I felt terribly alone at times, I was ready to honor my call.

A couple of months after my arrival in Mexico and a few failed attempts to connect with a shaman, I met the Jaguar man. Recovering from an illness, and disappointed about how things were unfolding, I went for a walk on the beach. As I had many times before, I saw the group of Aztecs dancers with their colorful attire. From afar, I looked at them and then just kept on walking. I was intrigued by these men, their dances, and their music, but mostly, I was intimidated by their masks and my inability to see their faces. This day in particular, I was feeling disheartened and lost. Too much had happened in the past two months, and nothing seemed to make sense. I felt as if I were reaching a wall with no place to go.

> Today I met the Jaguar man. While sleeping at the beach the sound of the drums abruptly woke me up. Embarrassed to be seen as rude, I didn't move away from the group of natives playing and dancing for the tourists. The dreamlike sound, dance, and colorful customs felt as if I was dreaming while being in the middle of their performance laying down with a bikini in the middle of their show. The surreal sensation wasn't complete until the end of the performance when the

> Jaguar man approached me. Reaching for my bag, I anticipated he was looking for a donation. Instead, he kneeled down and asked who I was and what was I doing there. His dark skin, leathered and darkened by the sun, was framed by a mask of an unidentified animal. His long black hair was adorned with a voluptuous head piece made of feathers. His dark brown eyes were encircled by black paint and a face mask left only his mouth uncovered. I questioned myself if I was still asleep or awake.
>
> He asked again why was I there. As someone who had just awakened and not very articulated, I said, "The Great Spirit instructed me to follow the sun during my last Sundance last year so here I am." As the last word was spoken, a sense of panic overwhelmed me and wanted to rewind the time and take back what I had just said. While looking for a way to backpedal my words, matter-of-factly he said, "Oh! we are having a Sundance next month, would you like to come?" There was no questioning about who is the Great Spirit, or what is a Sundance, or what do I meant by "following the sun." The search for my tribe had just ended and my journey to search for the shaman within and my own healing path had just begun. (Diary entry)

Tenoch

The Jaguar man was Tenoch, also known as *Aguila de Fuego* (Eagle of the Fire), and those dancing with him were his family. His older sister, Mezteli, and her husband, Melencayotl, were the *abuelos* (elders). They led the clan in sacred healing ceremonies. His two nieces also were dancers and apprentices of their parents. Tenoch's father, an 87-year-old man (Mazatl), was also a dancer and a crafter. Crow man, as he called himself, and I became fast friends. He crafted the *sonajas* (ceremonial instruments) I used in all the ceremonies.

In a few minutes, Tenoch shared with me details of his family dynamics: The group danced to make enough money to travel the country to participate in sacred ceremonies. They were dedicated to the Red Road, and they were in preparation for *la busqueda de la vision* (vision quest). As the group walked away, Tenoch grabbed his drum and followed them while inviting me to meet them at their dance meeting the following Monday.

> I recognized this man. Perhaps in a previous life, maybe in a different dimension, he was somebody dear to me. As a child, Tenoch had survived polio and overcame being paralyzed. He walks with a limp, but he can dance beautifully. Tenoch is a shaman in training, who like many others was called by the spirits of the guardians during his adulthood. Selling sweets on the streets at age 12, he was raped by an older man who later offered him money for his silence. In my eyes, he was whole and beautiful and the brother I wish I had.
>
> Tenoch was my guide through this Red Road in Mexico, encouraging me along the way when I thought of quitting. His energy poured into my depleted soul and helped me to get up each time I felt like staying on the ground. (Diary entry)

Toltecatl

Toltecatl was a tall, dark-skinned young woman in her early 30s. Unlike the others, she was not related to the clan. Instead, she was *abuela* Mezteli's apprentice. Toltecatl was called to her shamanic path while a teenager. She had her breaking point when an older woman engaged in an abusive relationship with her, abandoning her and leaving her confused about her own sexuality and self-worth. Since then, and for the past five years, she had been in and out of hospitals, afflicted with depression and other illnesses. Her last breakdown was the first time I met her. It was the first healing ceremony I attended and the also the first time I met the *abuelos*. On the fourth door of the *temezcalli*, she collapsed on the ground sobbing; she was processing whatever she had to expel. Abuela Mezteli kept her inside the *temezcalli* after everybody exited and helped her to release her pain.

Outside, lying on the dirt and near the fire pit, I felt her pain. It was too familiar to me. That night, she rode with me back to town, and we became sisters. Toltecatl was sensitive, intuitive, creative and had a vision to build a therapeutic center for children. She was preparing to attend her third *busqueda de la vision*, and each time, the mountain showed her a clearer vision of what she should do next. During the following nine

months, she was my friend, my sister, my confidante, and a partner to walk the difficult path of the Red Road.

Chicahua

Tenoch's wife, Chicahua, also became my sister. She was beautiful woman with long black braids and high cheekbones. From the beginning, curious about my past and my path, she sought out my company;, I became her confidante. Eager to know more about me, she innocently asked, "*Eres bruja o curandera*?" (Are you a witch or a shaman?) Laughing about her silly question, I answered, "Both."

She shared with me that she did not have memories from early childhood. Her childhood memories dated back only to her 11th birthday. She said, "I don't know why I can't remember anything before that. . . . Sometimes I want to know why . . . but sometimes I am afraid to find out."

Her *trabajo* (work), as she called the work during the ceremonies, was to remember childhood memories and to get rid of intense spells of anger and sadness. She could not understand why at the age of 40 she had angry outbursts, all directed to her husband, Tenoch. I knew the feeling all too well. "Hurting dogs will bite," I said to her in Spanish; "The unprocessed pain is coming out." Working together throughout the ceremonies, she acknowledged a horrible secret of incest and the reason that she probably did not have memories of her childhood. Chicahua confided that she felt uneasy talking to Mezteli about her pain and anger; after all, she was her husband's older sister. Chicahua also confided that she did not trust anyone and it was very difficult to relate to other women without feeling threatened.

I confided my own angry outbursts and my unprocessed experiences. A world apart apparently, we had so much in common and were on the same path probably for the same reasons. Throughout the nine months together, Chicahua, Toltecatl, and I shared more than the ceremonies; we processed together, supported each other, and held hands when the pain was almost unbearable. These two women and Tenoch's people were key players in my own work and subsequent healing. They served as catalysts to my processing and transformation.

Setting

The ceremonies took place in various locations, including secluded places in the mountains of Ixtlan del Rio in Nayarit and in el Tuito and Ixtapa in Jalisco. Extensive traveling and intense heat often left me exhausted and unable to participate in all of the ceremonies. In addition to travel, I faced the physical demands of setting up camp and building the *temezcalli* for the ceremonies. Abuela Mezteli would identify a place to set up a communal kitchen and the women would take turns cooking. Food was scarce as it was difficult to carry bags of food through the mountains. Our regular meals, for those not fasting, were limited to *café de olla,* tortillas, beans, and fruits. The places were specially selected by the *abuelos* after they asked permission from the guardians.

Although most of the ceremonies were led by abuela Mezteli, Melencayotl took the lead in a few. I noticed a difference between a female shaman-led ceremony and those led by her male counterpart. The energy generated was clearly different, not stronger or weaker nor better or worse but just different. Coming from a matriarchal lineage of the *Mapuche*, I found this very reassuring and familiar. The Chilean shamans, or *Mapuche machi*, are female figures regardless of their gender. It is not unusual to find

a male fulfilling the roles of the *machi* and dressing as a female *machi*. This has been mistakenly confused by the Westernized mind with transgenderism, cross-dressing, or even as a deviant act (Bacigalupo, 2007).

My grandmother also partnered with my grandfather to heal those in the community, but it seemed that my grandmother was more the spiritual guide. Glass-Coffin (as cited in Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016), referring to her experiences while studying with *curanderas* of Northern Peru, noted this difference as follows:

> On the other hand, the female healers with whom I worked felt their main role as healers was to "awaken" sufferers to their own agency and power-over-themselves. In essence, these *curanderas* emphasized that sufferers needed to "come into relationships with themselves," and accept/embody/celebrate all parts of their own lives as valid in order to become healed. (p. 61)

My personal relationship with abuela Mezteli, and my observation of her interactions with Chicahua, Toltecatl, and other women in the clan, was of empowering the female to find wholeness, to take ownership of the suffering and to partner with the sacred feminine forces of the universe. The moon, the morning star, Mother Earth, virgin Mary, and the *abuelitas* (*temezcalli* rocks) who deliver *la medicina* were powerful energetic forces and allies that guided us to heal.

Melencayotl was the fatherly figure; he was strong, encouraging, and sometimes pushed us to extremes. He was concerned with the preparation of the clan to sustain exhausting ceremonies that lasted days. Mezteli embodied the motherly figure while appealing to the female energetic forces. She pleaded to the moon, Mother Earth, and to the *abuelas* to purify, heal, and protect us.

My first encounter with the *abuelos* was not all that welcoming, as they viewed me with suspicion. I was a Chilean, Americanized woman with blonde highlights who

was looking for something. It did not make sense to them. Tenoch and Chicahua interceded for me and assured the *abuelas* that I was not another *gringa* trying to have a quick native experience to brag about to my circle of "new age friends." Some of the hotels around the area of Puerto Vallarta and Punta Mita had tailored their spas to accommodate a supposedly shaman-led temezcalli experience for tourists. The last thing the clan wanted was a nosy tourist trying to get a look at their sacred traditions.

I never told the *abuelos* that I had some experiences with Native American healing ceremonies in the United States. Neither did I tell them about my grandparents. I did not want to sound condescending, and in reality, this was different. I wanted to experience this path with a child's mind. Tenoch and Chicahua, on the other hand, were more than ready to tell them about me and my purpose for the journey.

> I am an outsider; in the United States I have an accent, in my own country I have an accent, in my indigenous community I look White, in the US I look Hispanic. . . . I came to accept I don't have a defined outside *me*. (Diary entry)

Subtly, the clan engaged in political matters, protesting in their own way the adverse political climate of indigenous people. As in many other South American countries, indigenous groups fight the intrusion of the government in the appropriation of territories and the overexploitation of natural resources. Their civic engagement and strong ties to the earth energized them to speak out against the violence and intimidation from military groups against indigenous communities. Hence, commitment to protect the group from external threat was just their duty.

> During la Busqueda de la Vision, I drove Tenoch and his family to the mountain. At the fourth day, we piled up in my SUV and drove back down the mountain, passing a couple of brand new all-terrain trucks. Wondering how could anyone live there and own those kind of vehicle, I asked Tenoch about it. As a matter of fact he replied, "These are *narco* land. They 'let' us use the land and have our ceremonies. They don't have any problems with us." (Diary entry)

Probably anticipating that I would not resist my first *temezcalli*, Melencayotl advised me to leave if I felt dizzy. He also changed the purpose of the *temezcalli* from preparation (for *busqueda de la vision*) to cleansing, so it would not be too intense for me.

The people in the clan were as important as the setting and the ceremonies; they were all catalysts for the introspective process that took place within me. The clan shared everyday life affairs, which included their spiritual path; this was important to me as it set the tone for me to trust, let go of fear, and surrender to the possibilities the ceremonies offered. From the beginning of this journey and throughout the nine months, several themes emerged consistently even after my return from Mexico. These recurrent themes in reaction to the ceremonies, the environment, and the other participants, are worthy of exploration: surrendering/letting go, feeling of ecstasy/oneness, anger/fear.

The Beginning

Surrendering (of the ego).

> Ultimately, however, he cannot escape from the fact that his wholeness and welfare depend on his fulfilling his inner mission and living from his essence. If, consciously or unconsciously, he concerns himself solely with his work in the world and exercises and establishes his world-ego alone, he is bound in the end to fall prey to a specifically human unhappiness. And this happens whether or not his personal virtues and achievements correspond to the values and expectations of the world. (Graf-Dürckheim, 2007, p. 4)

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *to surrender* is "To agree to stop fighting, hiding, resisting, etc., because you know you will not win or succeed. . . . To give the control or use of (something) to someone else. . . . To allow something (such as habit or desire) to influence or control you" (Surrender, n.d.). The definition of *ego* is, "The self especially as contrasted with another self or the world. . . . The one of the three divisions of the psyche in psychoanalytic theory that serves as the organized conscious

mediator between the person and the reality especially by functioning both in the perception of and adaptation to reality" (Ego, n.d.).

At the pinnacle of my career, doing what I loved the most, I felt unease. Although my days were filled with continuous expressions of gratitude, I felt a restlessness that required attention. Helping others find their own path to healing was both exhilarating and fulfilling; I was only content when helping others, and I could lose myself in those moments. Still, away from my therapeutic setting, I was sad, angry, and unhappy. Something was not aligning. I found myself *liking* my success and regretting it at the same time. The identification with my ego was a powerful reason to continue that path and the life I had, but a voice in my heart kept screaming to let go, surrender the ego, and search for something that had been until then unknown to me.

In my life, I had everything for which an ordinary woman could hope: a marriage to a wonderful man, a house in an affluent neighborhood, a profession that allowed me to fulfill my path, and a position of privilege. "This letting go of the ego, however, means much more than merely relinquishing all those objects to which during his lifetime a man has become attached. It entails the giving up of the entire life pattern that has revolved around the 'positions' taken by the ego" (Graf-Dürckheim, 2007, p. 35).

> *Doy la cara al enemigo, la espalda al buen comentario porque el que accpeta un halago empieza a ser dominado, el hombre le hace caricia al caballo . . . pa' montarlo*. [I face the enemy, but I turn my back to the compliment because those who accept praises begin to be dominated, the man pets the horse before he wishes to mount him]. (Facundo Cabral, 2012, as cited in Lucie, 2015, pp. 12–13)

The process of surrendering my ego was not a spontaneous event. Instead, it was in the making for a few years. First came the need to explore spiritual paths using yoga and meditation, which intensified later with Uncle Henry's friendship and teachings.

Initially, I was hesitant to meet with Uncle Henry and learn about Native American healing. I was embarrassed to jump from one subject to another and be seen as too erratic. People might question that I was learning about Buddhism and yoga and then going to move on to Native American healing. My insecurities and low self-esteem did not allow me to see the parallels between these two spiritual and healing practices.

Halifax (1989) asserted, "Buddhism and shamanism offer training in the art of lucidity, awareness, or mindfulness. This cultivation of awareness is rooted in the ground of motivation or intent. This is where healing begins and where suffering begins to cease" (p. 168). I sat to meditate in silence. Sometimes I chanted sacred mantras to open the third eye; to clear the mind; to feel united in mind, body, and spirit; to feel oneness with the sacred and with the Universe. In the sweat lodge and in the *temezcalli*, I sat in silence, I chanted, I prayed, I played my *sonajas*, and I felt united with the Great Spirit.

As the veil of ignorance began to lift, I became aware of my internal states, my identification with the ego, and my unhappiness in knowing there was something else I had to do. I was no longer content with a mundane life; I needed to find my wholeness, my oneness, and connection to the universe and to develop my internal potential. I felt a call to conduct a search that I could no longer ignore. The voice in my heart would not let me turn a deaf ear as the need to leave became stronger.

A couple of months prior to my surrendering, I visited Uncle Henry and told him about my problems. In his wisdom, Uncle Henry knew I was scared to change. My leaving my life and surrendering my ego identification was not an easy task, and he knew I was facing the unknown. He said, "Listen: Once, many years ago, I saw Father Wolf. . . . I didn't expect it. It was dark and I was attending the fire. . . . I turned around

and there He was staring at me. I was so afraid I ran to the house and closed the door. . . . I missed out the opportunity to meet Father Wolf because I was scared."

> Today I met with Uncle Henry at the farm. When I told him I was sorry I couldn't go every weekend, with a grin on his face, he stated, "Right! You are busy working and doing a Ph.D.! You keep your nose in the books but you are missing out. You need to look! Look! Don't be afraid. When confronted with the unknown, you will be afraid. It is okay to be scared but don't let the fear paralyze you!" (Diary entry)

Berman Fortgang's (2002) simple words of wisdom came to mind: "Fear is the greatest obstacle to any wisdom trying to reach us" (p. 166). Uncle Henry knew he had wasted the opportunity to learn from Grandfather Wolf and warned me to acknowledge the fear, listen to my inner guidance, and let my heart go. He insisted that I "look, look!" as if my eyes were not seeing. Uncle Henry was repeating what I had already learned in yoga and Buddhism: to see is awareness.

On July, 2014, at Uncle Henry's Sundance and during the healing ceremony, I asked the Great Spirit for guidance: "What should I do about the sadness, do I need to leave? and where should I go?" I pleaded. As the clouds moved passed the Sacred Tree and cast the shadow on the ground, the answer was clear: "Follow the sun."

> In its infinite wisdom, the Great Spirit was telling me to turn away from the compliments because I was beginning to like them. In an environment where success is measured by the public appraisal one receives, I was enjoying too much the recognition, even if it came from those that were under my care. My work, or any true healer's work, should come from a place of compassion and unconditional love where there is no place for the ego. As a shaman, a true healer is a man or woman of service to those in need. There should only be love and compassionate care for those who need it. The healing mission must be one of love and respect for humanity. (Achterberg, 2000, p. 57)

"That is what I saw in my grandparents and that is what my heart wanted to find" (Lucie, 2015, p. 13).

Three months passed before my decision to leave prompted me to pack my belongings and quit my life as I knew it. Not knowing exactly what the message meant, I reached a certainty that I had to surrender all and go. Each day I got closer to verbalizing my decision, I agonized, as I was beginning to surrender my control, what I thought to be my life, and what I knew to be mine. In a sense, I faced death. I was surrendering more than my everyday life; I was surrendering my ego, what I knew to be me, what identified *me*. In September, 2014, I stood in front of my work colleagues and announced that I was leaving. Some of my friends praised my courage for leaving everything behind to "follow the sun." In my heart, I knew the sun was leading me west and south, closer to my indigenous roots, and I was eager to follow.

> When one answers the call to surrender ego and detachments it happens with an abundance of pain. The Great Spirit had guided me to this place to detach, to surrender all ego properties and become a whole person ready to learn and receive the ancestral medicine. (Lucie, 2015, p. 13)

The great father of yoga, Maharishi Patanjali, described *ego surrendering* in the *Yoga Sutras* (Patanjali, 1990) as a necessary step to achieve *Samadhi*. The obsessive mind, which is concerned with the *I*, creates the separation from oneness with the Source. *Isvara Pranidhana* is the method of quieting the mind by focusing on the sacred being, allowing the unification with the true self. "Just surrender yourself unto Him, saying, 'I am Thine; all is Thine; Thy will be done.' The moment you have resigned yourself completely, you have transcended your ego" (p. 41). B. K. S. Iyengar (1996) added, "When the feeling of 'I' and 'mine' disappears, the individual soul has reached full growth" (p. 40).

Alluding to the concept of oneness, Graf-Dürckheim (2007) described man's struggle to exist in two realities, one earthy and one mundane, which he called *historical*

world and *transcendental being.* In the transcendental being, people search for wholeness: "To find the light, this Being calls him forth beyond the laws and boundaries of his little personal life, to the service of Greater Life" (Graf-Dürckheim, 2007, p. 3).

Similarly, De Ropp (2002) compared life calls, searches, and purposes with games of different levels that people play during their lifetime. At the basic level are the *low games*, which are motivated by ego, fame, or glory. The *higher games*, or meta-games, are played by those concerned with beauty (art game), those concerned with knowledge (science game), and those concerned with salvation (religious game). At the highest level is the *master game*, only dared to be played by a few. In between the low and high games are the *householder games*, whose players' main concern is raising a family without ever playing either the low or high game.

> But the Master Game is played entirely in the inner world, a vast and complex territory about which men know very little. The aim of the game is true awakening, full development of the powers latent in man. The game can be played only by people whose observations of themselves and others have led them to a certain conclusion, namely, *that man's ordinary state of consciousness, his so-called waking state, is not the highest level of consciousness of which he is capable.* In fact, this state is so far from real awakening that it could appropriately be called a form of somnambulism, a condition of "waking sleep." (De Ropp, 2002, p. 21)

For a couple of years, I felt the call to play the master game. Everything in my mind screamed for me to ignore this call as a protective mechanism, knowing in anticipation the pain this game would cost me and others. Nothing made sense, although the plethora of reasons to be complete and happy flooded my mind. As a therapist, I was playing the game of recognition, and ego was feeding itself in abundance. My roots as third generation *curandera* pulled my true self back to my path and demanded that I revise the game I was playing.

When everything turned meaningless and unfulfilling, every day became dark and surreally dull. I was painfully aware that I was living in the historical world while my heart was searching for the transcendental being. In a sense, I was fighting the lower game and had to respond to the challenge to play the master game. I was concerned with my inner life and my purpose. My "etheric self," or true heart's desire, was longing to align with my divine purpose (Shumsky, 2008, p. 63). I wanted to help others heal from their trauma from a place of absolute devotion, love, and compassion. For that, I had to surrender my ego and let it perish.

Victor Frankl (2006) assertively concluded, "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives" (p. 99). Humans possess an innate desire to believe in something bigger than themselves, to find purpose and live a meaningful life; "The will to meaning is man's primary concern" (Frankl, 1978, p. 28).

To let my ego identification perish was the first step into this journey as I was surrendering old patterns of toxic behaviors that prevented me from growing and transcending. On this process, Christina Grof (1993) stated, "The experience of ego-death is the primary stage in a process of death and re-birth" (p. 120). As death, this came with a great deal of pain. To find my wholeness and reconnect with my shamanic roots, I had to allow the process of ego death and rebirth to unfold. Only then could I begin my search for the shaman within.

Experiencing letting go: Initiation. After a few weeks in Mexico, and while searching for a way to connect with the local natives, I felt violently ill. Local doctors suspected it was the dengue virus. Without warning, one morning I felt weak and my

body began to ache intensely. I could not leave my room. I laid in bed, and in a matter of minutes, my body began to shake violently. Scared, I waited a few minutes, trying to make sense of this assault on my body before I reached for the phone. I was unable to dial the numbers as my hands could not stabilize my fingers. My jaws and teeth shook uncontrollably. My mind raged with fear, my head was on fire, my body was in horrible pain, and my back was freezing. When I finally reached somebody for help, my temperature was more than 103 degrees. The pain was unbearable; even the contact of the sheets with my skin hurt intensely. The visiting doctor was able to control my temperature and I got some rest for a couple of hours. This cycle of convulsive fever and pain lasted for days.

The high fever and pain punished my body while the loneliness battered my heart and soul. Alone with my little dog, Jenny, I cried for all of the things I had let go. With indignation, I screamed to the Great Spirit, "What else do you want to take away from me? What else do you want me to give up?" Following my heart's desire, I had left everything I knew to be mine and drove to Mexico to search for my path. In my car, my material life was summed up by two suitcases, my laptop, a sewing machine, and my little companion of 13 years, Jenny. Images of my home, my husband, and a comfortable life passed through my mind as if the ego intended to suffocate the voice in my heart. I had left everything behind, and I felt so alone.

A few days later, and while still sick from the dengue virus, my little Jenny's health began to deteriorate. Pancreatic cancer had been undetected by her veterinary doctor, and now it had plagued her body. Jenny succumbed fast to the illness. My witnessing her wasting away brought one of the most intense pains I have experienced. I

had to let go of the most precious part of my life and the only real possession I had carried with me in my journey. My letting her go reminded me of all the people I had to let go in the past. I grieved the loss of my father, the loss of a baby, the loss of husbands, the loss of my childhood, and the loss of my trust.

> The state of inner dying has led to rebirth. Now, they face a very different way of existing. The old self has perished, and as they tentatively emerged into their new lives, they often feel gentle inner guidance from the deeper self. (Grof, 1993, p. 164)

Christmas 2014 came and left, and through sunny days, I laid in the darkness of the room. With unopened windows, I grieved Jenny, and everything her death signified. Holding on to her blanket, I cried. I blamed myself for holding onto her for so long. I blamed myself for keeping her alive too long, for holding onto her, unable to let her go when she was probably in pain. Remorse and intrusive thoughts inundated my mind: "She probably needed to leave sooner, she probably was in pain all the way from the United States. . . . The trip was too long for her and she must have been in so much pain."

Clinging to those I love was my way to cope with my insecurity and fears of abandonment, and Jenny was not the exception. Now, all the pain that had accumulated for years was pouring out of me with the tears. For days, I felt her absence in my arms. I needed her.

> Is it time to let you go?
>
> I don't want to see you in pain. It is ok to go. Tommy will be waiting for you and then you both will be waiting for me. We will be together soon. It is ok if you want to go. Mommy will miss you but I will be ok. I don't want you to suffer or to have pain or discomfort. I will miss you. As I look at your little face and touch your bony back I wonder if you know how much I love you. You have been my companion for thirteen years, and you are the last thing I carried from my past. Everything stayed behind but you, my little one. You endured the long trip to Mexico, maybe in pain, and for that I am grateful. Your little body looks so small and fragile right now, almost breakable. . . . I don't want you in pain. (Diary entry)

Jenny was the catalyst to my truly beginning to let go. I was holding onto so much more of what seemed so apparently left behind. Leaving my husband, my job, my house, all my material belongings, was just the superficial layer of possessions I was carrying with me. It was the deeper layers of memories and pain that I also had to let go.

Cognitively, I understood the concept of letting go and detachment but in reality, all of my anxieties and suffering were because I had not let go of deep-rooted pain experienced in the past, and until I acknowledged that, it would not go away.

Did my illness, Jenny's death, and my solitude mark the beginning of my ego death? Was I experiencing ego death? Winkelman (2010) observed that shamans' "initiatory sickness involving personal death reflects the fragmentation of the conscious ego. . . . The death-rebirth experiences reflect the death of one identity in development of another" (p. 113). Furthermore, this "transformational process happens under overwhelming stress" (p. 113). By no means am I proposing that I had an initiatory shamanic death and rebirth during my illness. Instead, I am suggesting the possibility that anyone, including me, under tremendous stress, can experience ego death and rebirth.

Certainly, during the healing ceremonies held inside the *temezcalli*, I experienced aspects of death and rebirth. The *temezcalli* itself is a metaphor for one's re-entering the Mother's womb to purify, heal, die, and be reborn. On my first experience with the *temezcalli*, I wrote,

> In Spanish and in Nahuatl, Melencayotl explained, "*El temezcalli*, is a sacred cleansing and healing ceremony of our ancestors Mexicas [mee-shee-kas].
>
> It is in the womb of our (*Tonanzin*) Mother Earth we clean, we renew, we died and we are reborn. We enter her womb with humility and we ask the guardians and ancestors to confront Tezcatlipoca (our darkness).
>
> Abuelo Melencayotl was in charge of this *temezcalli*; he smeared the water on the *abuelas* (rocks) uniting the two opposite elements, fire and water; abuela Mezteli was the one who received the *abuelas* with the deer antlers and covered

> them with medicine (*copal*); Tenoch, the jaguar man, was the Aguila de Fuego. He took care of the fire and passed the rocks into the *temezcalli* for abuela Mezteli to receive. Each had a role. And each role had to be mastered. They had to learn how to work with the spirits of the water, fire, air, and earth.
>
> Toltecatl was the *ahumadora* (smoker). Her role was to clean us prior to entering the *temezcalli*. Outside, and besides the fire, was the altar with a buffalo skull, plants, *copal*, tobacco, the pipe, fresh food donated by the participants, and anything that represented the sacred.
>
> "Each *puerta* [gate] represents a cardinal point and the four elements," stated Melencayotl. "I asked the protecting guardians permission and their blessing to continue with our *temezcalli*." As we turned East, South, West, North, he played the conch shell. We lift our hands to the sky and then down to the earth. We kneeled down with humility to ask permission to proceed to the guardians.
>
> I grabbed a handful of tobacco, presented it to all six guardians and offered it to the Grandfather fire. Entering from the left, I asked permission: "*permiso para entrar por todas y con todas mis relaciones,"* and crawled inside. *Tierra es mi cuerpo* (Earth is my body)
>
> *Agua es mi sangre* (Water is my blood)
> *Aire mi aliento* (Air is my breath)
> *Fuego mi espiritu* (Fire is my spirit). (Diary entry)

Inside the *temezcalli*, one can experience intense emotions and profound changes. Alteration of states of consciousness induced by the *temezcalli* extreme heat and the rhythmic drumming and chanting allowed me to explore beyond my ordinary consciousness. Past hidden experiences can resurface and be available for processing. Because of the extreme heat, breath work inside the *temezcalli* is more accelerated, rhythmic, and deep. In addition, breathing through the mouth is encouraged as it has a more cooling effect.

Holotropic breath work, a technique developed by Stanislav and Christina Grof, focuses on a breath pattern that is similar to the one used in the *temezcalli*. This breath, in addition to music, facilitates the exploration of internal states beyond regular consciousness (Grof, 2012). According to Grof and Bennett (1993), the exploration of the subconscious facilitated by altered states of consciousness could allow one to access what he called the *perinatal* level of consciousness. At this level are not only stored

memories and traumas of childbirth, even from within the mother's womb, but also a passage to the collective unconscious (Grof & Bennett, 1993, p. 29). It is possible that when one accesses the memories of the perinatal stage and the collective unconscious, one may experience the pain, suffering, and empathy for other beings who have had similar experiences. At this level of consciousness, one may experience universal connection.

Grof and Bennett (1993) also identified a second level of consciousness that Grof called the *transpersonal* level. This level extends beyond one's ego and physical body. "Both of these two levels of consciousness are central to death-rebirth experiences and other aspects of shamanic practices" (Winkelman, 2010, p. 114).

Experiencing ecstasy/oneness.

The assumption of being an individual is our greatest limitation
—Gary Doore

> I felt ecstasy. . . . Tonight in that circle, I felt as if my body no longer belonged to me. Instead I was a cell of the whole organism of the creation. I felt connected to the other humans, to the large tree beside the circle, to the drum, to the moon, to the stars and to the bears. There was no longer separation or individuality. I was equally part and extension of the others. Tonight I danced with these amazing creatures. They were not humans dressed with a bear skin; they were bears. The bear spirit ascended into these men's bodies and embodied them; took over their bodies, and danced with us. In that circle, I was a part of the whole universe and the ecstasy now is impossible to explain as to think about describing it just bring tears to my eyes.
>
> Beyond personal ecstasy, tonight I experienced collective ecstasy. Someone once told me, "Ecstasy is that small precise moment when happiness is so intense and you feel like crying." This brief moment lasted hours.
>
> Tonight I felt an effortless and spontaneous sensory awareness and attunement to others.(Diary entry)

Danzando con los Osos [Dance of the Bears]

This ceremony took place in the mountains about two hours from Ixtlan del Rio, in the Nayarit region. During this ceremony, nine clans from all over Mexico gathered to

celebrate la *Danza de los Osos*. *Tio* [Uncle] Manuel was the leader of the clans and host of the ceremony. Tenoch, Chicahua, and I rode in my vehicle while the rest of the clan was already at the site. One of Melencayotl's sons-in-law was the head of the Bear clan dancers in that region, and they were offering a ritual to the full moon that evening.

After a purifying *temezcalli* in preparation for the ceremony, the ritual started at dark. Nearly 100 participants lined up to be cleaned by the *ahumadores* and slowly entered and took positions around the large circle drawn around the fire pit. On one side was the drumming circle. The chanting and dancing intensified as the fire grew stronger. The full moon had a glowing halo around her, providing the ceremony a mystical tone. The men, covered with full bear skins, entered the circle in crouched position, dancing and growling like bears. The rhythmic sound of the drums and the monotonous cadence of the dance quickly induced us all into a state of consciousness that was other than ordinary. A combined heartbeat followed the drum and the energy grew stronger as the bears danced around the fire.

Moving closer to the crowd, the bears playfully teased us by getting close enough for us to touch their skins, which created a sense of exhilaration. The drumming and chanting intensified as the bears invited the participants to connect with them and dance around the fire. Everybody wanted to touch and feel the skin of the powerful animal. Holding onto each other, all of the participants and the bears danced around the fire for an unknown period of time. The drumming became a collective, synchronized heart beat. I looked up to the moon and I felt the overwhelming bliss of being a part of something sacred and ancient. The bears growled as we moved along. In front of me, the bear-

man's skin became soft and alive. The bear-man was no longer a man with a bear skin covering his body; bear and man were one.

In that moment, and at that level of consciousness, I was a part of the whole; there was no individuality. There was no beginning nor ending and no distinction between human or animal. Time and space disappeared, and I experienced an overwhelming feeling of peace and love that is impossible to describe without indulging in literary terms. Maslow (1994) called this bliss state a *peak experience* in which "the whole universe is perceived as integrated and unified" (p. 59). I was able to access this deep spiritual experience in several occurrences while participating in the ceremonies.

Loss of individuality, feelings of wholeness, and the unification with the whole organism are just some features one may experience when reaching an altered state of consciousness. It is also "the hallmark of mystic experience, regardless of its cultural context" (Deikman, 1990, p. 51). Unification of mind, body, and spirit, and tuning into the collective mind by relinquishing ego-centered individualism is a powerful step toward healing (Dossey, 1989a). The liberation and detachment from deep-rooted pain and trauma is accessible during nonordinary states of consciousness in which the mind is no longer limited by the constrictions of consciousness. In this state, the organism finds a way to reestablish healing (Winkelman, 2010).

Experiencing anger and fear. The purifying *temezcalli* was full of excited participants who were preparing for *la busqueda de la vision*. One by one, all of the *abuelitas* were brought in carefully by the *Aguila de Fuego*. With respect and reverence, the visionaries received the *abuelas* with a *bienvenidas abuelitas!* (welcome grandmothers!). After the 52nd *abuelita* was in, it was nearly impossible to breathe.

Melencayotl shouted, "The door!" The darkness of the *temezcal* was as obscure as my thoughts. The third door, also called *la puerta de la muerte* [the door of the death] is where one lets go. Participants must let their fears die and let go of all that holds them back. "You must trust the medicine of the *abuelas*; they will not burn you; do not be afraid," commanded Melencayotl. Chicahua and Toltecatl gasped while dropping to the floor and burying their faces to find some comfort in the coolness of the dirt.

Sitting straight up besides the fire pit were Mezteli, Melencayotl, Tenoch, *Oso* (Bear-man), and two more clan members. They all faced the *abuelas* and the steam emanating from them imperviously. Melencayotl demanded of Toltecatl and Chicahua, "Sit up straight! If you can't sustain a hot *temezcalli*, you will not be ready to confront the mountain for four days!"

> I was hurting. My shoulders, my arms, my lungs, the thin skin covering my eyes, my heart. . . . Anger overcame my pain and fears. Rage replaced my almost in progress panic attack. A rage-like involved me and I needed to get out. Melencayotl kept throwing water over the rocks and with each splash I felt the weep of hot steam brushing my skin as if a thousand razor blades claimed ownership of it. Beyond misery, anger; beyond anger, rage. An overwhelming anger prompts me to reach for Melencayotl's buffalo horn and toss it out of the *temezcalli* so he is unable to pour any more water. . . . Instead, I dropped to the ground, feeling the pain in my shoulders and back while holding my breath. My groaning is suffocated by the drums and chanting of those still sitting.
>
> *"La puerta*!" Finally, shouted Melencayotl and an overpowering sense of relief urged me to crawl out of the *temezcalli*. Outside, lying beside the fire on the cool dirt surrounding the pit, face up to the stars, I cried and wondered what was that rage about. The rage was not because of the heat; it was pain trying to get out as anger. The pain was beyond the blistering heat. (Diary entry)

"Hurting dogs will bite," I used to tell my patients. "That anger/rage is unprocessed pain. . . . You must get rid of the pain in order to relieve the anger." I even had a sign in my office. It made sense to all, including me. Intellectually, I knew this statement to be accurate but had not recognized yet my own relationship to pain and

anger. During the ceremonies, anger surfaced in the most unusual manner, but I recognized it.

I questioned the source of all this anger and the location of that hidden space in the memories from the past that brought up pain in the form of anger. Self-reflection after ceremonial encounters brought me back to childhood. I hypothesized that perhaps the loss of my father at young age had something to do it. Apparently, my father had left us when I was two years old. After a few years of trying to make a living for both of us, my mother decided to leave me with my grandparents. I remember those years as the happiest moments in my childhood. Life after I returned to live with my mother was difficult. In precarious conditions and with little companionship, I wrestled through my preteen to teenage years. Socially inadequate and concerned only with academic achievements, my world was confined to a one-room home. Looking back now, I realize how much I needed the presence and companionship of my parents.

As an adult, I began to notice the intense love, and also resentment, I felt toward my mother, apparently for no reason. Again, I could not pinpoint why. As with Chicahua, maybe my subconscious suppressed some traumatic memories that I needed to uncover and process.

A couple of months prior to my leaving the United States, a psychologist friend of mine suggested that I had symptoms consistent with posttraumatic stress of abandonment. Anger, insecurity, anxiety, my need to cling to those I loved, and a need for control were some of the characteristics she recognized in my behavior. Unsure whether this unofficial diagnosis had anything to do with me, at a very deep level, I knew it was close to the truth.

She elaborated on my symptoms and how my search for wholeness made sense, and how, unaware, I was also looking for healing. My failed relationships indicated also a repetitive abandonment pattern. Was I searching for partners that physically or emotionally would abandon me? Or was I abandoning people before they would hurt me? Both suggestions sounded too familiar.

Emotional and physical abuse, poverty, lack of a safe place to live, lack of proper nutrition, and lack of supervision in combination with abandonment can be powerful sources of pain and subsequent anger outbursts (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988; Grof & Bennett, 1993). Childhood traumas associated with abandonment, abuse, and neglect are associated with late onset of posttraumatic stress disorder and social anxiety disorder (Anderson, 2000; Cloitre et al., 2009; Prock, 2015). Abandonment, as the loss of a loved one to death "cuts all the way through the self" (Anderson, 2000, p. 11) and can be easily carried on into adulthood.

The primal fear of abandonment is accentuated when confronted at such a young age with the loss of one or both parents (Anderson, 2000). The grieving process extends into one's lifetime, often incapacitating healthy relationships. Self-esteem and the sense of worthiness suffer a catastrophic blow and can often develop into self-destructive behavior. Inability to self-regulate intense emotions such as anger often result in conflicted interpersonal relationships marked by codependency or belligerence (Cloitre et al, 2009). Anderson (2000) argued, "It is the way in which your fear and anger are turned against yourself that gives abandonment grief its particular character" (p. 11).

> "She has gone to deep end or she must be going to a mid-life crisis or something," said my husband. "You have lost your mind," said my mother. I am glad I lost my mind and I can clearly see with my heart. I am glad I have gone to the deep

> end to see both the surface and the bottom. . . . Everything in between is where I have lived. (Diary entry)

The labyrinth walk was one of my favorite activities. In silence, I would instruct the patient to walk to the center, paying close attention to the path, to each step, and to notice the changes in the patterns on the floor. I told them that once in the center, they would look out to the entire labyrinth, 360 degrees, and the pattern would make sense. Sometimes when one walks one's life path, one does not pay attention to the changes and may deviate from it. As in the labyrinth, there are signals indicate which way to go. Often one does not pay attention to those signals, but they may be captured by one's inner wisdom and higher consciousness; the mind gets in the way. If one wanders off the track, eventually one will feel lost. I heard my voice over and over again until my mind was finally subdued and I could hear my heart.

The longer I participated in the ceremonies, the clearer it became to me that my friend was right. My inner wisdom had guided me to follow a path to help others to heal, who in return gifted me with the awareness of my own trauma. One ceremony at a time, I was unveiling the truth of my anger and discovering the source of the pain. The ceremonies allowed me to see myself from above and from outside. As if in a labyrinth, I could see the pieces of the patterns coming together, showing a clear picture of my life and my path.

What did this mean to me? I found the source of anger. I asked myself, <u>what do I do with the pain</u>? A veil began to lift right in front of my face. After 40-something years, I understood the source of it all. I had to accept, forgive, and move on. I wondered whether that was even possible.

Experiencing and overcoming fear. After traveling for five hours through the regions of Jalisco and Nayarit and up the mountains of Ixtlan del Rio, we arrived on time for the last purifying *temezcalli* of the evening prior to the initiation of the ceremony. A tall man, clearly Caucasian, with a British accent, was running the *temezcalli* that evening. I never knew who he was, but judging by the way people deferred to him, he was a clan leader or chief. Exhausted from the trip, I did not want to take part in the *temezcalli*. Chicahua, excited about it and used to the intense heat, encouraged me to do it, explaining that to take part in the ceremony that evening, one should attend at least one cleansing *temezcalli*. Reluctantly, I was the last one to enter and was placed in the second row of a very crowded *temezcalli*. It was evident from the beginning that I was not going to last more than a couple of doors as the heat intensified with the welcoming of 58 *abuelas*.

During the second door, I requested permission to crawl out. Once outside, I laid on the ground wrestling with my emotions and a bruised ego, questioning whether I was lacking faith or trust. I heard somebody panicking, crying to get out, and soon two young girls emerged through the door. I invited them to sit beside me. They could not describe what they were in panic about nor what had happened to them, but it was not necessary. I understood; we shared the fear.

The heat in that cleansing *temezcalli* was the strongest I had felt so far. Each drop of water on the 58 rocks raised an unimaginable wave of steam, punishing my body with scalding heat. "*Rezen, las abuelas les trae la medicina; confien en ellas, recen, canten!"* ["Pray, the grandmothers will deliver the medicine; trust them, pray, chant"). I doubted my faith and my ability to let go my fear and to trust the *abuelas* would not burn me. The

inner circle, closer to the rocks, sitting up straight, peacefully drummed and chanted untouched by the wave of steam, while in the back I tried desperately to dig at least one of my arms in the dirt to get some comfort. The space was tight and it was difficult to change position other than just sitting straight up.

> Today, during the *temezcalli*, I experienced intense fear. I am upset about it. I shouldn't have participated. I was tired and hungry; is this really for me? Or is this just resistance? Is it my ego trying to merge? I walked out of the *temezcalli* because I was scared. Maybe my ego was hurt. In a sense, crawling out of there was letting go of my ego. What was I really afraid of? (Diary entry)

Overcoming fear. This ceremony involved participation of two clans to provide healing to a woman who was grieving her husband's death. It lasted about four hours.

> Upon entering the room, I had no fear, I had no expectation but I was excited about the possibilities. All I knew was that I trusted the people around me and Tenoch was nearby. After a few minutes of preparation, the medicine man asked for the door to be closed, and to cover the entrance so no light could be filtered through the already blackened space. The darkest obscurity inundated the room and a sudden change took place within me. The darkness induced an unknown sensation of panic. Seating around me were many others, and I wondered if anyone was as scared as I was. This sensation was beyond fear. I was holding on to the comfort of the light breaking through the edges of the door. Looking around for a small blink of light, I could not find any. My heart began to race fast and my breath followed. My mind wondered for an excuse to justify my escape. But I didn't have an honest one other than I was simply terrified of the dark. My eyes were open but there was no light.
>
> I closed my eyes in an effort to regain some kind of control. "It is dark because my eyes are shut," I comforted myself. . . .
>
> I breathed and began to chant with the rest in an effort to comfort my fear. The drumming and singing went on for minutes or hours. The time was suspended at some point. With wide open eyes I followed the sounds around the room when people began to sing louder. Little circles of light began to appear in the darkness playfully moving and bouncing from one side to another and up and down.
>
> Unable to comprehend what was going on, I wondered how was the *abuelo* able to manage the lights from one place to another without stepping on people sitting on the floor around him. Suddenly, a loud rattle near my ear brought my attention back to the moment. As the rattling sounds intensified, a second sound added. It was el *silbato negro* [black whistle]. In a beautifully synchronized dance, I heard the rattle and the whistle moving rapidly from one place to another while the sparkles moved fast all over the room. I was absorbed

with this vision; what was I experiencing? I felt drops of water splashed in my face and wondered when did the leader bring water into the room.

The sounds and the chanting intensified as the people, excited, shouted, encouraging the spirits to manifest. The old woman who requested the healing ceremony was laughing. She was happy and I was no longer afraid. In this dark room, when the door of the lodge closed, a passage to the spiritual world opened. Guests were invited and they accepted the invitation; the spirits of the ancestors and loved ones came to us and provided healing and hope. (Diary entry)

Nonordinary state of consciousness induced by sensory overload, dancing, and drumming.

The darkness was interrupted by a couple of candles. The steady drumming intensified, followed by the prayers. Abuela Mezteli played the conch shell to the six directions and in Nahuatl, she requested permission to the guardians and to the spirits of the ancestors. Offering burning sage, *copal*, and tobacco to the cardinal points Toltecatl (la *ahumadora*) cleaned us one by one and arranged us around the altar.

Along the night more, people arrived and the chanting and prayers continued as the *abuelos* added more flowers and seeds to the altar. The next morning, we gathered the flowers and the altar and walked down to a park. The drummers were already in position. Arranged in a large circle, we began to dance. We danced for six hours. Los *guerreros* with the most beautiful and colorful head pieces seemed to gather more energy as the time went by. The sun was blazingly hot. If I was tired, I didn't know it.

El canto de mi pueblo se estaba perdiendo.
Pero los abuelos hablaron con el fuego,
pero las abuelas hablaron con la luna,
por eso aqui estamos todos cantando

El rezo de mi pueblo se estaba perdiendo.
Pero los abuelos hablaron con el fuego,
pero las abuelas hablaron con la luna,
por eso aqui estamos todos rezando

La danza de mi pueblo se estaba perdiendo.
Pero los abuelos hablaron con el fuego,
pero las abuelas hablaron con la luna,
por eso aqui estamos todos danzando (Melecayotl; Diary entry)

The ceremony began at sunset with a vigil that lasted all night. The altar, created with flowers and seeds, was at the center of the room while the drums and participants chanted without rest. The next morning at sunrise, we began to dance and continued

dancing in nearly 100-degree temperatures until late afternoon. I had been up for two days and the heat was unbearable. I was exhausted and my body could barely move. The drumming intensified as if they knew I was about to quit or fall out.

Dancing was one powerful way to induce a profound trance-like state. In communal dances, and in support of healing rituals, the movements of the body were the nonspoken language of the consciousness. The higher the state of awareness, the more fluent and synchronized the dance. As noted by Batson (2009), unintentionally, without effort, the mind, body, and spirit tuned into the sounds of the instruments and the movements flow naturally

These ceremonies brought experiences that are hard to explain. I struggled to overcome my fear of opening the door to healing by allowing the *abuelas* to deliver *la medicina*. It took nine months and countless ceremonies finally to release most of the long-held pain. It came at a great cost of physical demand and emotional exhaustion. The healing process is still in process. I am aware now that every step of my life has led me to where I am today; even the painful events are a blessing and essential to my growth. It was not a coincidence to have met the people I met, each of these souls are partners along my road. Some are gone, some I let go; some are still with me on this path. Shamanic rituals and the people with whom I shared them were catalysts to the transformation that took place. I am certain that this would never have happened in a different setting or a different environment.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This autoethnographic enquiry explored the lived experience of the researcher who for nine months embedded herself with a clan of Nahuatl to travel and participate in shamanic ceremonies. Following the autoethnographic protocol, I was the subject of my research. I intertwined the experiences with autobiographical information and profound introspective work triggered by the ceremonies. During this journey, I collected data in the form of journal entries, notes, pictures, videos, and artifacts. They served as instruments expressively to narrate my experiences.

The abundance of literature in shamanism and shamanic practices validates this ancient form of healing to help people heal, transform, and transcend to higher states of awareness. Although literature in shamanism is ample, autoethnographic literature in shamanism is scarce or nonexistent. Moreover, the uniqueness of this study is found in that the researcher, who was trained and educated in the United States, is of native upbringing, and third-generation *curandera*. I was called to go back to my roots to search for the shaman within. In the process, I overcame fears, surrendered ego identification, and processed deep-rooted pain. In the field, and on the go with the clan, I felt alive, vulnerable, humble, and connected.

Reflections on the Research Process

My time with the clan was nothing short of magical, beautiful, painful, exhausting, liberating, and cathartic. I experienced the unknown and crossed the physical realms into the spiritual. With each experience and ceremony, I navigated dimensions that are accessible only from an altered state of consciousness. My own limitations were set forth

by my insecurities to deliver adequate scientific research that is worthy of culminating in a dissertation fit for a doctoral program. Day after day, I second-guessed myself whether this was good enough. The fear of inadequacy and lack of trust in my ability stared me in the face, and I allowed it to paralyze me temporarily. I faced the wolf. I could not write. How could I write a dissertation using an autoethnographic method when most students in a Ph.D. program would write using a rigorous quantitative method? How would my mind-body medicine community take this autoethnographic enquiry and validate it as legitimate research? Often when confronted with the question, *What is your dissertation about?* I would hesitate about responding honestly and made up a *slightly* different subject. My answers would vary from "spirituality and healing" to "healing and shamanism." I was terrified to tell the truth and proudly announce "I quit my world, directed by the Great Spirit, I followed the sun and moved to Mexico to find my own *curandera* roots and my own healing, and this is what I wrote about." Still, I am uncertain that the scientific world is ready for autoethnography as a scientific method of research.

Introspection was defined by Tart (2000) as "the observation of one's own mental processes" (p. 156), which is hence difficult to quantify objectively. I am cognizant that introspective accounts of my experiences were difficult to convey to the reader. It would have been easier to report measurable physiological changes that occurred while I participated in the ceremonies, but that was neither the purpose nor the essence of this dissertation research. Uncle Henry had taught me to look and experience instead of "keeping my nose in my books." As stated best by a Peruvian shaman in Glass-Coffin

(1998), “To live is to experience. . . . Reality isn’t observed or recorded, it is lived!” (p. xi).

I set myself on a journey, consciously articulating that I was answering the call to search for the shaman within, claiming my own *curandera* roots and native upbringing. This journey was a call to claim my personal mythology; that is, my story influenced by my cultural beliefs and upbringing (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988; Krippner, 1990).

I acknowledged I was broken and that I was searching for my own healing. My heart had led me to my path as a healer, but I realized I had to heal myself so I could truly understand the healing process. In helping others, I was hiding my own unprocessed traumas. It was easier to hold onto anger than to surrender the ego and release the pain.

At the end of my nine months in Mexico, I craved the cold, the winter, the spring, the processes, and cycles of nature. I learned to follow the sun and to let it go each evening. I learned to love the heat and also the cold. I learned to appreciate the winter and the expectation of the spring. My following the sun showed me the importance of balancing darkness and light, heat and cold, drought and rain, spring and fall. Life is about cycles and about surrendering to the constant motion of the universe and the ability to synchronize harmoniously with all that it is. This can only be accomplished when one surrenders one’s ego, the need to control, when one lets go of painful experiences and attachments, and when individuals love without conditions or fear. It is only when one accepts that one is just a diminutive part of the Grand Organism but essential to maintaining the energetic balance of the Universe, only when one unites with one’s own inner wisdom, can one heal oneself and begin to heal others.

This was not a love story. It was neither a story of transformation nor transcendence. It is a narrative of a journey to find the shaman within, to find healing and to find wholeness. Following Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey diagram, my own journey can be summarized as follows: I received the call to adventure, I met the helper, crossed the threshold of adventure, experienced tests, encountered helpers, experienced an ecstatic union, transformational flights, and return (Campbell, 2008).

I set myself on a journey of facing the unknown. Countless times, I faced the wolf inside me and wrestled with its fury. The wolf stared right at my face but I did not walk away.

> This confrontation is the first test of courage on the inner way, a test sufficient to frighten off most people, for the meeting with ourselves belongs to more unpleasant that can be avoided so long as we can project everything negative into the environment. But if we are able to see our own shadow and can bear knowing about it, then a small part of the problem has already been solved: we have at least brought up the personal unconsciousness. (Jung, 1959, p. 20)

I surrendered my ego identification and I let go of my life. I lost family and friends who could not accept my change. At the end, I was alone, but I met my true brothers and sisters with whom I share *el camino rojo*. I searched and found the shaman within; she was always there waiting to embrace me. I found and confronted the source of pain and forgave those who hurt me. *El trabajo* is not done; it is in progress. That is my path. *O Meteo, Okahe*! Each day we die and are reborn; life is a cycle.

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Appendix

Figure A1. Chicahua and family.

Figure A2. Oso, Melencayotl, and friends.

Figure A3. Oso and Melencayotl.

Figure A4. Oso: "Welcome to the grandparents prayer."

Figure A5. The family at a lunch break while preparing for a ceremony in el Tuito.

Figure A6. Preparing the land for a ceremony.

Figure A7. Preparing the leand for a ceremony

Figure A8. Temezcalli in the *abuelos*' home.

Figure A9. Melencayotl preparing the altar for the *temezcalli*.

Figure A10. Abuelos.

Figure A11. Toltecatl.

Figure A12. Tenoch, Chicahua, (daughter) and Mazatl

Figure A13. Melencayotl and Tenoch preparing the temezcalli; El Tuito.

Figure A14. Helping the clan build the *temezcalli*.

Figure A15. Ceremonial dance with other clans.