

Essay 3: Animism

If you step into the city of New York, you would fall into a hall of concrete lined mirrors. You would tumble beyond the smells, textures, and sensations of the non-human world – everything would be conditioned to your liking. If you came from a diverse and sensuous reality, you would forget it. Becoming numbed by sterilized human world of dead things. Losing the perspective originally gifted to you at birth, forgetting your animistic heart.

It's especially in cities where nourishing an animistic heart is a difficult task. There are barely people who say hello to one another, let alone to the world. To maintain an animistic heart, to continue being an animist through your life, you must continuously see the world as an animate force. Animism is normative consciousness; it is a conscious experience of the world – it is not a science or religion or philosophy. To live this kind of perspective is to respect all things around you, to relate to them. It will change your definitions of who's a person, a teacher. "Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us" (Kimmerer p.58) Having an animistic heart would open a world of gifts – perspectives, lessons, sensations. The world would feel much less lonely.

Tribal cultures in their religions, keep Animism alive through their values. Although their creation myths, practices, and rituals are all unique to their area, there is a basic understanding that the world around them should be respected. One way tribal cultures teach this mindset is through their unique initiation rituals. *Crying for a Vision* shares a ritual that celebrates

lamenting. It's a ritual that asks men who want to take part to, among other vitally important elements, lament publicly and privately for the world to answer his call. With the help of his community over the course of weeks, the voluntary lamenter builds an *Inipi* lodge, gathers materials, and fasts on a mountaintop – humbling himself, weeping for an answer. Why the men choose to go through the ritual is because "...it helps us realize our oneness with all things, to know that all things are our relatives" (Tedlock p.21) It satiates a need to have a connection with the world, nourishing an animistic mindset. By extension, it also ingrains animistic values into younger members of the community. The lamenter doesn't go up to the hilltop to self-reflect, he doesn't listen to his own thoughts or other human beings. He listens for an answer from the other peoples of the world, watching and weeping at the ants crossing his path, the birds circling over him, the sun dancing in front of him. And after he has spent his days in the non-human world of peoples, he returns to his community, where they listen to his experiences. The Shaman and other holy leaders reflect, translate, and communicate with both him and the others who chose to take part. This reinforces the importance of not only his ritual, but also of the beings who chose to answer his call. Everyone feels connected with one another and the world – a feeling of purpose flows through the ritual.

In tribal communities, the role of the Shaman is critical beyond their responsibilities in rituals. The primary role of the Shaman is to maintain the communication between the non-human world and human world. They are sensitive translators, integral to maintaining the balance between the wants and needs of complex systems. Tribal community members, as everyday people with their own social needs and responsibilities, can find it challenging to properly communicate respect to beings unknown to them. It is the role of the Shamans, the people who live in the twilight of human and non-human, to help with this communication. As Harvey wrote "...the precise and proper way to show respect depends where you are, who you

are, who you are respecting and what they expect...sometimes we need shamans to do the talking for us...to us.” Shamans are not docile vessels, waiting for the animated world to channel through them. They may be gifted visions, like in *Black Elk Speaks*, but it is how they interpret and act upon those gifts that make them a proper Shaman. It is how they bring their community together. In *A Shaman’s Journey to the Sea Spirit Takanakapsaluk*, the Shaman takes a dangerous journey down below, into the deep into the icy world of the goddess Takanakapsaluk. It’s here where he consoles the goddess, answering her anger with kindness – with respect and courage. He untangles her hair with his hands, listening to her speak in her spirit language. After some time, she gifts him a hint to her troubles and once she’s completely calm, she disappears with her sea creatures, promising rich hunting and abundance. While the Shaman is down below consoling Takanakapsaluk, he’s aided in his journey by his community members as they chant in a darkened home, hearing the sighing and puffing of the sea between songs. When he returns, he translates what the goddess has said and asks that everyone confess any breaches of taboo they might have committed so that Takanakapsaluk’s promise could be fulfilled. It is here where community members release any troubles they have been holding onto as well, confessing their taboos openly. Any wrongdoings are forgiven, their confessions being celebrated because it is through their confessions that they allow everyone the joy the gifts the Sea goddess wishes to give. Without the role of the Shaman, this consolidation could never have happened. By listening and acting accordingly, Shamans maintain the invisible threads between ecology and humans. Through their ritual, medicine, magic and study, Shamans keep the community open to the world with their practices, ensuring that beyond human voices can continued to be listened by humans.

Animism is present and maintained in tribal peoples because they didn’t smother the Earth to build their communities. They wove themselves into the world and prayed, they built their lives and deaths in communication with the world. Shamans, in their unique placement

between humans and non-humans, maintain this woven relationship. Though this doesn't mean that the community is passive in its making. This tapestry of experience is maintained by the community not only by respecting their Shamans, through listening and adapting to the Shaman's advice, but also by practicing initiation rights to ensure that their youth can also grow to know the animistic world.

Like the world around us, every single person in a tribal community acts. They have their own roles within the community and ultimately they are their own actors in their lives – like any people outside of tribal communities. What sets tribal community members apart, is their respect of all the other actors in the world. The winds, otters, bears, seas, they listen to all the peoples of the Earth. They actively maintain these relationships through their rituals and shamanistic practices and some through the very language they speak. Though, like the elder speaking to Kimmerer about her frustrations with learning Potawatomi, “with fingers on his lips [he said] *You don't have to speak it here, if you speak it here, patting his chest, they will here you.*” (Kimmerer p.59) Animism ultimately is being conscious of the world, it is to speak to every being and, most importantly, to listen.