

The Garden of Lost Souls

Modern-day shaman, Sandra Ingerman is on a mission to bring wandering spirits back home.

By Caren Goldman

As I lie silently on a small, Native American rug on my living room floor with a red bandanna covering my eyes, the pungent aroma of sage burning in a nearby bowl is the only reminder I have that the woman lying next to me, listening to a drum beat on her Walkman, is journeying through a perilous, mysterious realm called the Void, on my behalf.

Finally, her tape clicks off, and as I wait for the next part of the ritual, the one that will “bring home the children,” an anticipatory rush surges through me. As Sandra Ingerman gets up and kneels over me, I feel her long, straight black hair falling in soft folds on my sweatshirt. Slowly and intentionally, she cups her hands and blows into my chest, above my heart. Immediately, I sense something swirling inside that seconds later circulates into the furthest reaches of my chronically cold fingers and toes. Now, for a change, even the tips feel warm. And they feel that way again, when she sits me up, blows into the crown of my head, and ends the ritual by shaking a rattle around me. My eyes open; our eyes meet. We smile. Ingerman speaks first. “Welcome home.”

Sandra Ingerman is a modern-day practitioner of the ancient healing art of shamanism. The word “Shaman” itself has been adapted from the Tungus tribe of Siberia and today is widely used by anthropologists to denote healers from many different cultures who journey outside of time and space in order to diagnose and treat illness. Archaeologists have found evidence that shamanism may be 30,000 or even 40,000 years old.

According to Ingerman, shamans believe that there are three major causes of illness: soul loss; power loss, which is related to the loss of one or more of the “power animals” that accompany us at birth; and spiritual possession. Soul loss, Ingerman says, is the most common cause of both physical and emotional disease. It

occurs when a part of the soul leaves the body, usually in reaction to a traumatic event. Symptoms of soul loss (and its subsequent feelings of estrangement and depersonalization) may include chronic and immune deficiency illnesses, coma, addiction, chronic depression, memory loss, and even codependency. People who make statements such as “I feel like I’m watching life like a movie,” or “I haven’t felt the same since my operation, or accident, or divorce,” she says may also be suffering from soul loss.

“Soul loss is actually a good thing,” she observes. “It’s the way the psyche of a person can survive a painful event. If I was going to be in a head-on auto crash, the last place I would want to be is in my body. Shamans believe that the soul part that leaves the body actually exists, and so they journey to ask “Where is it?” When they find out, they can then give their patients immediate feedback. Unfortunately, psychology doesn’t ask where parts of a person’s consciousness go when they disassociate. So instead of moving on with their lives, some patients spend years stuck in their therapists’ offices trying to figure out.”

Ingerman learned shamanism from anthropologist Michael Harner, the founder and director of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, and the author of *The Way of the Shaman*. Harner himself was trained in shamanism by the Conibo and Jivaro tribes in Peru over 30 years ago. He first became acquainted with Ingerman when she took a basic core shamanism workshop from him nearly 20 years ago as part of her graduate studies in counseling psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Since then, they have worked together closely...first as student and teacher and now as professional colleagues. Today Ingerman, who is the Foundation’s Educational Director, refers to Harner as her mentor.

After commenting in the introduction to her book *Soul Retrieval* that Ingerman's work is efficacious because of her extraordinary ability to use a classical diagnosis and ancient system to treat contemporary psychological problems, Harner bemoans the fact that all too often modern society dismisses the strange beliefs of tribal peoples as superstitions or prehistoric curiosities with no relevance to their own lives. "Certainly the widespread tribal belief in 'soul loss' as a major factor in illness has typically falling into this category," he says. Furthermore, he finds that overturning these stereotypes is extremely difficult, which is just one reason why he delights in Ingerman's success as a private practitioner, workshop facilitator, and author. Ingerman, he says, is teaching thousands of people in our culture that ancient shamanic methods for treating soul loss do indeed have "urgent applicability to the traumas of contemporary life."

Although Harner calls Ingerman a shaman, she refers to herself fondly as a shamanic practitioner. "Shamanism is something you do, not a name you take for yourself," she states. "My role is to get my students and clients to understand that from a shamanic point of view we don't make a distinction between emotional and physical illness. We are looking at what is spiritually out of balance in a client, and so our part in the healing process is to work with his or her problem on a spiritual level as an adjunct to other treatments. In other words, shamanism shouldn't be confused with medical or psychological methods.

Traditionally, when a shaman wants to access information to diagnose illness or do a soul retrieval, he or she begins the journey by listening to monotonous percussion instruments or by using psychoactive drugs. The shaman can then travel to realms of "nonordinary reality," which are divided into three major regions: the Lower, Upper, and Middle Worlds. But the realms visited by the shaman also contain numerous other worlds, places like the *Cave of the Lost Children*, or the *Void*.

These territories do not appear the same to every shaman, explains Ingerman. When she speaks about the Lower World, she describes a "kinesthetic" and "earthy" place where she experiences forests, deserts, caves, and large bodies of water. She describes the Upper World as ethereal. "When I'm there I am standing on

something cloud-like," she says. "it is not solid. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but the colors are brighter and more pastel than those of the Lower World." The Middle World comes closest to ordinary reality. "However I am still in an altered state of consciousness. I will see buildings, cards and people, but ai will be outside of time. Shamans usually travel to the Middle World to find lost and stolen objects. I would also travel there to speak to the spirit of a client who is in a coma or unconscious." Occasionally, Ingerman will also journey as a *psychopomp*...one who does not return displaces souls, but instead, helps them cross over to the other world.

Once in these territories, shamans go on fact-finding missions using all their senses, not just vision to assist them. Special animals known as power animals, teachers, and other guiding spirits (which may include fairies, elves, and various gods and goddesses) usually meet them to offer details about the spiritual cause of an illness and the spiritual healing techniques that can help a patient, family, or community. Ingerman has several helping spirits that she relies upon. One of the most trustworthy, a male power animal she met 20 years ago, remains unnamed; another frequent helper is the Egyptian goddess Isis.

Such helping spirits provide shamans with information that may be very different from their own personal insights or opinions. "When my ego creeps in, I know it," observes Ingerman. "The information I get about a person is usually not the same as the information my power animal gives me in nonordinary reality. And when I've tested it, my information usually turns out to be wrong."

For me, that assertion raises the question: Is the world of nonordinary reality "real" or is it made up? "That's one I get asked 100 percent of the time when people learn how to journey to nonordinary reality," Ingerman laughs. "I was brought up Jewish in Brooklyn, Ne York...not a place that validated invisible worlds or anything like this. But a shaman views things differently. A shaman would ask, 'Did you see it, or hear it, or feel it or smell it?' If a person answers yes, a shaman would then say, 'Well what's wrong with you that you think you're making it up?' It's easy to see why the question of whether nonordinary reality is real challenges not only our ego but also all that we hear from our parents, our

teachers, our government, our scientists and even our religious leaders.

A comparison of daydreaming, dreaming, and shamanic journeying may help clarify how Ingerman and other shamans receive their information. When we daydream, we make up and create everything that happens in our imagination. In a regular night dream, the opposite occurs... we usually cannot control any of the action or dialogue that is taking place. A shamanic journey falls between day and night dreams. While journeying, a shaman makes decisions about what he or she does, but not about what the spirits say or do.

"One might view a journey as a waking dream, or as information coming from the unconscious in symbolic representation," Ingerman says. "The beauty of it is that a person's experience is neither right nor wrong. Therefore, each person on a shamanic path learns to trust his or her own experience and not to follow any rules or doctrines except that this work be used to benefit all life and for the purpose of healing.

Typically, in order to diagnose a patient's illness and help begin the healing process, a shaman will journey to a place where power animals or teachers working in a healing capacity can provide information about the patient. If the shaman goes to the Lower World, it's through an opening in the ground...perhaps at the base of a tree or a well or a tunnel. The Upper World may be reached by ascending smoke, pushing off from the top of a mountain or climbing a tree.

During a soul retrieval, each shaman meets spirit guides and receives information differently. For example, Ingerman begins by drumming and singing a song her power animal taught her. Then she lies down next to the client. As taped or live drumming begins to alter her consciousness, she feels energy in her solar plexus leaving for an unknown destination in nonordinary reality. Once there she connects with her power animal, declares the intention of her journey, and waits for her power animal to guide her to the missing soul parts and disclose specific information that can help her retrieve them.

Since it's rare that a person's missing soul parts are found together, Ingerman and her guides usually travel to several different realms during a retrieval. Sometimes she finds that the soul

parts are merely lost and wandering in nonordinary reality because they do not know how to return. In these cases, she asks if they're ready to go and guides them back. Other times she may find them hiding out...wounded by a past event and, at times traumatized to the extent that they stubbornly refuse to return with her. When that happens, Ingerman usually tries to convince the soul that it's now safe to return. "However I'm always truthful, and if my client is still an alcoholic or suffering from a serious illness, I won't say that the trauma is past and everything is fine. I explain what is presently happening and how, by returning and being reintegrated into this person's life, the missing part can help." Finally, there are the cases of souls that she finds separated from their source because they were stolen by a parent, rejected lover, spouse or other thief, dead or alive, who is psychically holding on to a relationship and refusing to "let go."

According to Ingerman, my father was one of these. As she reported her experience after my soul retrieval, Ingerman seemed overwhelmed. Her vivid description of a tormented, abusive person with dark penetrating eyes and a menacing grimace, whose enormous negative energy she admittedly feared, fit my father perfectly.

As Ingerman tells it, when her power animal took her to the Void, she found herself "watching" me at the age of seven. My father, a muscular, ruggedly handsome man in his 30's was tightly clutching me. She said I was terrified...screaming, sobbing uncontrollably and begging him to let me go. Predictably, when he became aware Ingerman was watching, his rage escalated. Knowing that her spirit guides would protect her, she started intervening on my behalf. First she attempted to reason with him, but that was futile. He became even more hostile and directed his verbal venom at her. Frustrated, she decided to try using cajolery and trickery (techniques commonly employed by shamans) to distract him. She teased him with a doll (after all, this was nonordinary reality) hoping he would grab for it and drop me. But instead he mimicked her, maliciously thrusting me in her face like a toy. Other attempts failed as well. Finally she held out a large mirror. Even in the Void's darkness, it reflected an image that my father seemed to be curiously looking at for the first time. It arrested his attention, and at that moment Ingerman called out to me. Frantic, I

pulled away, raced toward her, jumped into her open arms and wrapped mine tightly around her neck. Then, as I watched, Ingerman calmly offered my father a lost part of his soul. Suddenly, his bellowing rage lost its wind. In silence, he accepted it.

"I've no doubt your father's childhood was traumatic, and during that time he lost many parts of his soul," Ingerman later counseled. "I don't know any details other than the part I returned to him was an abused and abandoned child. To know this will never make his or any other perpetrator's predatory actions less horrible. But it can make a difference in your life. He was living out what I call family karma. Soul loss begets soul loss, and until someone decides to break the cycle, it is passed on by every succeeding generation.

In my father's case, her observation turned out to be true. Just two years before my soul retrieval, as his health began to seriously fail. I had traveled 600 miles to see him in hopes of reconciling our long-estranged relationship. But he refused to discuss it. I returned home and sadly watched from a distance as his health declined precipitously. He became frail, bed-ridden recluse, laboriously breathing with the help of an oxygen tube that had become a permanent part of his anatomy. Yet even in that state, he raged so incessantly at anyone within earshot that even the paid help left.

Without the soul retrieval, I'm not sure I would have ever seen him again, but after it I did, compelled by the new feelings and insights about my childhood that I continued to experience weeks after Ingerman left. Long forgotten memories of events, not all painful, that took place around the time I was seven were now returning to me sevenfold. Each told me a story...my story...in a way I had never heard it before. Each was a piece of my life falling into place. They helped to make sense out of years of nonsense and informed me that I needed to once again risk visiting my father.

This time it was different, and so was I. Instead of pushing an agenda that would get him to admit he was a rotten parent, I simply asked him to tell me a story, his story. At first he adamantly refused; then, with no explanation, he agreed. Thoughtfully, he began by talking about a young boy who spent almost every day of his childhood being physically and verbally attacked by his

parents, grandparents, and even a great-grandparent. For two hours I listened, nonjudgmentally, to tales about the senseless beating he endured and the subsequent humiliation and shame he felt. As he wandered from one anecdote to the next, I discovered that the man before me was still an abandoned child who knew early on that his life was out of control. To protect himself and survive, he determined that when he grew up, control would be something no one would ever take from him again, even if the cost of that promise was to be a failed marriage, estranged children, and isolation from everyone in his life.

I accepted all I heard as truth, his truth, and I began to see him through new eyes. They weren't blind to the pain he had caused but were focused on the fact that he, like the generations in our family before and after him, had indeed suffered enormous soul loss. I stayed another day, listened compassionately to more stories, and left for home with two choices: to keep living in the past or to move on to build whatever relationship we could have in the future. I chose the latter.

Today, that experience still makes me wonder whether somehow the part of my father's soul that Ingerman returned to him is helping in an unknown way. I know there's no answer, but it does suggest that a soul retrieval is hardly a passive experience. To be effective, a client must be willing to receive what the shaman offers. For me it was a set of keys that opened many doors, especially one that allowed me to see the human side of an abusive father.

I now journey shamanically on my own, using the simple process I learned months before my soul retrieval from the Foundation's core shamanism workshop. First, I lie down in a quiet room, turn on my Walkman, and listen to a drumming tape. Invariably, as I move out of this realm into nonordinary reality, the repetitive rhythm leads me back to my hometown, New York City, where, unlike people who are down to the Lower World through bucolic openings, I enter a manhole covering a poorly lit subway tunnel. As I race along the track, water in a storm drain rushes alongside me. Moments later I see daylight, the tracks and water disappear, and I enter a sunny glade where my power animals – raven, turtle, and/or dog – come to offer companionship and guidance.

Raven showed up the first time I journeyed, and answered affirmatively when I asked if he was one of my power animals. Intuitively I felt I already knew him – that he was the same sleek, black spirit that had come to me many times before in dreams, in other experiments with altered states of consciousness, and even in my waking life. I spotted the turtle off in the distance on subsequent journeys, and after the third time, when asked, she came closer and identified herself as another of my power animals.

The dog, rusty, who came to me last, is special. He's a dog who came to live with me when I was seven. Two years later, he disappeared forever while roaming the neighborhood one hot, summer day. Rusty was a huge, tan gentle giant – part Russian wolfhound, part Afghan, part German shepherd – who was a constant companion and source of solace during that critical time in my childhood. When he vanished, I spent hours, then days, then weeks and months looking for him. But that was then, and now, as we hang out together in the Lower World, there is an expanded awareness of my own story that fills in many of the passages that once upon a time were edited out.

As Ingerman sees it, a soul retrieval is a powerful, life changing process that should not be undertaken lightly or too often. Too many retrievals, she says, can overwhelm a person and result in depression and other symptoms. A soul retrieval isn't a spiritual aspirin. It's a step toward wholeness that can refocus the soul's journey.

Ingerman's own journey as a wounded healer began with a joyful, contented childhood. "Every day on my way home from school, I would sing and whistle to the birds, clouds, and the big oak tree in front of our house in Brooklyn. I happily wrote stories, drew pictures, played with friends, and loved my parents. But during adolescence, when I was thrown into the physical and emotional turmoil of puberty, everything changed. I was confused about who I was and fell from the grace that I knew had permeated my early experience." She suffered the trauma of being raped at 18, as well as a series of eating disorders and chronic depression.

Like many of her peers during the '60's Ingerman turned to drugs to fill a growing void in her life. Dropping out of Brooklyn College, where she was majoring in psychology, Ingerman

packed her bags and moved to a commune in San Francisco's Height Ashbury district. Six months later she left and returned to Brooklyn, but became restless and, after crisscrossing the country several more times, finally stayed put in San Francisco.

"I took a job as a bookkeeper and was doing very well," she says. "But on the day I got a letter telling me I could retire in the year 2013, I knew it was time to quit. So I did and decided to finish school." Ingerman completed a bachelor's degree in marine biology at San Francisco State and then enrolled at the California Institute of Integral Studies to get her Master's degree. "That's where Michael's basic shamanism workshop was offered. The idea of doing that for credit fascinated me. Afterwards, I was awed by what happened when I did my first few journeys. I had profound experiences with a power animal that answered a lot of questions that had been troubling me."

Ingerman confesses that her LSD experiences were the real beginnings of her spiritual search, "because LSD showed me another view of life and that had nothing to do with going to work or school or coming home and watching TV." But the shamanic techniques Harner taught offered her something more. "They were amazingly healing. They were the most powerful way I had found to get spiritual help without using any drugs. It made such a difference that I knew almost immediately that I wanted to learn how to turn other people on to it.

Reviewing some of her many drug experiences, Ingerman comes up with two reasons why shamanic journeying was so transforming. First she discovered that practicing basic shamanism was safe. There was no chance of overdosing on a meeting with her power animal. Second, with psychedelics she could never successfully translate her experiences back into ordinary life. "As the ecstatic high evaporated, I crashed back into the darkness I was trying desperately to avoid," she says. "Time and time again, my attempts to use drugs to escape from deep, life-threatening depression led to a reenactment of my original fall from grace. Nothing was really changing or could change, because the parts of my soul that could help me feel whole were missing – out to lunch. Studying and practicing shamanism changed that. Each journey empowered me in new ways. I began to take more and more responsibility for creating my life

differently than I had in the past, and I experienced a feeling of wholeness and the fullness of life that I had not been sure I would ever feel again.”

Ingerman hasn't studied with shamans in indigenous cultures outside the United States, but she has worked and trained with native and other healers throughout this country. She maintains that one reason she stays close to home is that her interest in shamanism is psychological, not anthropological. “After doing thousands of journeys and soul retrievals, my primary interest is still in helping people in our culture discover the amazing benefits of this work. I've learned that it's vitally important for shamanism to be adapted to the society in which it's practiced, and so I choose to incorporate contemporary psychology into my understanding of shamanism instead of isolating or discounting it.

When she conducts an interview prior to performing a soul retrieval, Ingerman relies upon her training as a psychological counselor to help her get information about her client's current issues. Her background also comes in handy when she writes and lectures, translating the shaman's world into language her students, clients, and psychotherapists can readily understand.

In her first book, *Soul Retrieval*, she uses instructions and anecdotes to explain the process of mending the fragmented self. Her second book, *Welcome Home*, goes a step further. Ingerman writes that on one hand the book is intended to help individuals move out of the healing process and into following their soul's journey. However, “it is also meant for helping professionals who are looking for ways to facilitate their clients' shift to a focus on the present and the future.” Her third book, *A Fall to Grace*, is a visionary fiction work that details her own spiritual search over the last twenty years.

Ingerman reasons that modern psychotherapy stands to benefit immensely if it will risk establishing ties to shamanism and possibly other transpersonal modalities such as past life therapy. In *Soul Retrieval* she says: “Our prevalent model of psychological healing is based on the client actively ferreting into his or her own past in order to uncover trauma lodged deep in the psyche and concealed or obscured by defenses. By using vehicles such as free

association (Freudian), artwork (Jungian), or hypnotherapy to journey into the unconscious, the client is, in a sense, a shaman traveling to retrieve his or her own lost soul. I have great sympathy with this approach, because exploring within oneself and learning the richness of one's own soul can be a valuable growth experience for almost anyone.”

However, for the soul to be explored, it has to be in residence. And since modern psychotherapy doesn't address the issue of where parts go when a person disassociates, how well can it succeed with the therapist talking to a person who isn't home? People sometimes spend years in psychotherapy, she laments, before feeling safe enough to allow their vital soul essence to return, “if it ever returns at all.” In other words, we often repeat negative themes in our lives over and over again because we can't resolve our original soul loss. For example, a child who was abandoned by a parent at an early age may wonder why, as an adult, she keeps winding up in relationships where she gets abandoned. If that person were to have a soul retrieval in conjunction with other therapies, Ingerman believes she would stand a better chance of resolving her issue. “At that point, the therapist would be able to help her build self-esteem and healthier life patterns that would allow her to stay alive, be present in her body, and learn positive ways of relating to the self and others,” she asserts.

Ingerman sees a day when soul retrieval will be widely used as an adjunct therapy by trained people in all types of helping and healing professions. Until then, she warns against people who take a basic shamanism workshop or read her book and then hang out a shingle offering shamanic quick fixes. To help prevent that from happening, Ingerman recently changed the format of her soul retrieval workshop. At first she taught it over a weekend to students who had completed one or more of the Foundation's basic workshops. But now a week long training is offered only to advanced students. And for the time being, the only way to find someone Ingerman believes is qualified to do this work is to write to her for a referral.

In Shamanic societies, the term “wounded healer” is used for one who is called to the healing path. Traditionally, wounded healers have experienced a near-death episode, a psychotic break or a life-threatening illness and

then returned, on their own, with a greater understanding of the territories to be traveled in helping others. Ingerman knows these territories well. She has had not one but three near-death experiences. "I know I'm very fortunate to have survived even one, let alone all of those experiences," Ingerman admits. "But I also believe that all those of us who have made it to adulthood are in some sense wounded healers. We have experienced a variety of emotional and physical problems that allow us to have empathy for others who are suffering.

Before leaving my home in Toledo, Ohio, for hers in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Ingerman lights a candle and burns sage one last time. This time the ritual is a simple one. We're sharing the peace between us and preparing to say goodbye. When I asked the rather predictable

question "What's ahead?" her answer doesn't surprise me.

"I don't know," she says matter-of-factly. "A few years ago, when the United States decided to go to war with Iraq, I journeyed to Isis. I asked her what I should be doing during this time. I knew that I couldn't change things, but I wanted to know how I should behave or how to improve my attitude. The message she gave me was profound. 'Some people have to be willing to tend the garden while all the destruction is going on.' That message really stuck with me. I have made a choice to be a 'garden tender,' no matter what is going on around me. And as others still feel a need to destroy, I have found it crucial to support those who continue to garden and tend to life.

RESOURCES

For information on workshops given by Sandra Ingerman and associates:

Sandra Ingerman

www.sandraingerman.com

www.shamanicteachers.com

The Foundation for Shamanic Studies

www.shamanism.org

Books by Sandra Ingerman

Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self

Welcome Home: Life After Healing

Medicine for the Earth: How to Transform Personal & Environmental Toxins

How to Heal Toxic Thoughts: Simple Tools for Personal Transformation

Shamanic Journeying: A Beginner's Guide

