PART 1: DEFINING TERMS; IN THE BEGINNING; SHAMANISM

To begin, let’s define some terms: **Indigenous medicine** is a term often used synonymously in literature with “**Traditional medicine,” “Folk medicine,” “Earth-based traditions”** and “**Ethnomedicine,”** although some sources differentiate between Indigenous/Traditional medicine and Folk medicine. They state that Folk medicine is less formalized and structured, consisting of healing practices and ideas of body physiology and health preservation known to some in that particular culture; it is merely general knowledge passed along informally and practiced or applied by anyone in the culture that has some prior experience, and they then share it among families or communities. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_medicine)

“**Ethnomedicine”** draws on approaches and methods from the social sciences, and is the formal study or comparison of Traditional medicine practiced by various ethnic groups and especially by Indigenous peoples. It is concerned with the cultural interpretations of health, disease and illness and the nature of local healing systems, but also addresses the health care seeking process and specific healing practices; it is sometimes also used as a synonym for Traditional medicine. (JEthnobiol Ethnomed. 2005:1:1)
The terms “Indigenous medicine (IM)” and “Traditional medicine (TM)” are often used synonymously or even together, being abbreviated as ITM. These terms generally refer to a comprehensive group of ancient health care practices, modalities or healing systems, existing before the application of modern science to health and refined over hundreds or even thousands of years, that are specific to, deeply rooted in and in keeping with, the country, societal and cultural heritage and/or ethnic population out of which they were created.

Developed to some degree by all cultures, Indigenous/Traditional medical systems vary widely, cover a wide scope and have historically been practiced outside of, and separately from, the more recent Western Biomedical/Allopathic medical model. As the WHO defines it, Traditional medicine is “the sum total of knowledge, skills, approaches, practices and products based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to a culture, whether explicable or not, that incorporate plant, animal and mineral-based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises, applied singularly or in combination, in the maintenance of health and well-being, as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illnesses.” World Health Organization [WHO], “Fact Sheet No. 134: Traditional Medicine,” (May 2003), available at http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/2003/fs134/en/; WHO, “Traditional Medicine: Definitions”, WHO/EDM/TRM/2000.1, 2000, available at http://www.who.int/medicines/areas/traditional/definitions/en/.

“Biomedicine” is a nonspecific term which refers to a broad field of study and category of medical practice. Based on the principles of the natural sciences, it borrows elements from the history of human and veterinary medicine, anatomy, physiology, genetics, pathology, zoology, botanical sciences, chemistry, biochemistry, biology and microbiology, applying them to the understanding, treatment and prevention of disease; it is also referred to as “Conventional,” “Western,” “Clinical,” “Scientific,” “Modern,” “Mainstream” and “High Technology” medicine. While Traditional medicine is concerned with the direct application of medical knowledge, Biomedicine looks at its history and involves itself in new research to push the limits of what medicine is able to accomplish.

(Seigen's Medical Dictionary.2012, Farlex, Inc)

“Allopathic Medicine”- synonymous with Biomedicine, is a term commonly used to identify the modern, mainstream system of medical practice in Western countries. It targets disease with remedies that treat or suppress symptoms or the condition itself and tends to produce effects different from those produced by the disease under treatment. (https://www.scidev.net/global/medicine/feature/traditional-medicine-modern-times-facts-figures.html)
“Complementary/Alternative Medicine” (CAM) are terms that refer to the healthcare practices that are not part of a country’s own tradition and are not integrated into the dominant healthcare system. Specifically, CAM describes a group of health care systems, practices and products not presently considered to be part of Allopathic medicine; it includes Traditional medicine, as well as modern practices developed outside of Indigenous communities. Sometimes the two terms are used synonymously, or TM may be referred to as CAM when it is adopted outside of its traditional culture. http://www.who.int/medicines/areas/traditional/congress/beijing_declaration/en/index.html

If a non-mainstream practice is used together with conventional medicine, it is considered “complementary;” if a non-mainstream practice is used in place of conventional medicine, it is considered “alternative.” (https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health)

“Integrative Medicine” is a term that refers to the blending of conventional and natural/complementary medicines and/or therapies along with lifestyle interventions in a holistic approach, taking into account the physical, psychological, social and spiritual wellbeing of the person. (https://www.scidev.net/global/indigenous/feature/integrating-modern-and-traditional-medicine-facts-and-figures.html)

Integrative health care often brings conventional and complementary approaches together in a coordinated way. It emphasizes a holistic, patient-focused approach to health care and wellness—often including mental, emotional, functional, spiritual, social, and community aspects—and treating the whole person rather than, for example, one organ system. It aims for well-coordinated care between different providers and institutions. (https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health)

“Herbal Medicine/Herbalism” is a designation that includes herbs, herbal materials, preparations and products that contain plant materials or combinations of plants as active ingredients. Herbalism is the practice of making or prescribing plant-based herbal remedies for medical conditions and is considered a form of alternative medicine. (https://www.scidev.net/global/indigenous/feature/integrating-modern-and-traditional-medicine-facts-and-figures.html)

The World Health Organization (WHO) began work over two decades ago to develop a national policy on Traditional medicine. One of their earliest meetings was in Beijing (November 1999), where representatives of WHO met and issued a document to clarify their work entitled, "A Report of the Consultation Meeting on
Although they concurred that each Traditional medical system was as unique as its country of origin, they also recognized common characteristics and perspectives that most shared.

The report states:

• “Traditional medicine is based on a belief that health is a state of balance between several opposing aspects in the human body. Illness occurs when an individual falls out of balance, physically or mentally. The “causes” of imbalance could be change of weather; intake of certain food; external factors, such as magical or supernatural powers; mental stimulation and societal reasons. Traditional medicine tries to restore the balance using different therapies.

• Traditional medicine is based on the needs of individuals. Different people may receive different treatments even if they suffer from the same disease. Traditional medicine is based on a belief that each individual has his or her own constitution and social circumstances which result in different reactions to “causes of disease” and treatment.

• Traditional medicine applies a holistic approach. It considers a person in his or her totality within an ecological context and usually will not only look after the sick part of the body. Besides giving treatment, traditional practitioners usually provide advice on lifestyles and healthy behavior.”

These healing modalities, then, are understood to be complex holistic health care systems, whose foundation stems from the common understanding of the earth as a source of life directly and intricately related to human health. It is based on a world view of the body as part of nature, interacting with forces both internal and external to it, and emphasizes the need for balance between the body, mind, spirit and the natural world. In this system, health reflects a balance of these internal and external influences; illness, on the other hand, is a manifestation of imbalance and observation remains key to assessing the nature of the imbalance and providing the appropriate corresponding intervention.

Herein lies the fundamental difference between the Biomedical model and an Indigenous cosmological paradigm; the conventional medical model, young in its evolution yet popularly embraced, is characteristically biologically based. It views the human system much like an automobile, its anatomical parts fueled by chemical interaction. Physiologically mechanistic and independent of its local
environment and greater world in which it exists, it runs regardless of the nature of the roadways, amount of traffic or the quality/quantity of interactions with other vehicles. A well-running vehicle is **homeostatic**, possessing mechanisms that help regulate its system, enabling it to constantly be in a steady state. If it should break down, it simply gets fixed, and when it gets too old, past the point of repair, extra additives are put in the tank to keep it going until it gets junked.

The frame of reference for those living within an Indigenous culture or raised with Traditional medicine ways, however, is in stark contrast. For them, illness, healing and health are not isolated events; humans are not merely blood and bone nor are they separate from the totality of life. Life mirrors nature—it is cyclic; whether it be daily, monthly, yearly or a lifetime, physiologically, psychologically or emotionally—the body/mind/spirit of an individual waxes and wanes, ebbs and flows with changes that take place both within the individual as well as in the heavens, on the earth, and in relation to those with whom life is shared. Rather than homeostatic, this way of being is **homeodynamic**; life is continual movement, constant flux—a powerful yet recognizable dance that was, and still is for many, honored in ceremony and with ritual as a way to connect the within and the without.

It is commonly believed that, throughout history, some form of medicine was practiced by all cultures on the planet and it was not an isolated methodology. Rather, the promotion of health and the healing and cure of illness and disease was part of a larger system—a working and living portion of a culture’s entire cosmological system that interwove spiritual beliefs, an explanation of the universe, the norms and values of the society of which it was a part, and even tasks of daily living. Historically, with the advent of modern scientific thought, a dichotomy developed between the spiritual world and the physical, the “sacred and the profane” and, in the non-traditional world, spiritual belief, religion and medicine became individual entities without overlap; for most Indigenous cultures, however, they were, and continue to be, intimately intertwined.

*(For a more detailed explanation, I invite you to download a copy of my “Energetic Medicine” article on this website’s homepage)*
Cosmological views, such as those held by Indigenous cultures, were often associated with the first form of religion known as **Animism**. Animism as a religion is based on the belief that all things—living and nonliving—are alive and have a vital essence or a spirit that can be contacted. It is the view that there is more than just the physical self; an individual is part of a giant cosmic web in which all aspects are interconnected and the universe consists of a complex network of forms, energies, and vibrations. This animistic worldview was neither contained to any one part of the world, nor limited to any specific Indigenous culture. Each cosmological system acknowledged and called this vital essence, life force or universal energy by a different name, including *ruach* for the ancient Hebrews, *chi/ki* in the Orient, *mana* in Hawaii, *prana* in India, *reiki* in Japanese, *huaca* in Peru, *nwyfre* for the Celts and *wakonda* and *manitou* among some of the Native American tribes of North America. (White, J/Krippner, S, Eds., *Future Science*, Anchor Books, New York, 1977)

The concept of life force energy became a distinctive element separating Indigenous medicine and Biomedicine; prior to research findings in modern physics, the study of Bio-electromagnetics (BEM) and field theory, early Biomedical practice refused to consider it a reality, whereas in the Indigenous medical world, acknowledgement of the existence of bio-electromagnetic "energy" was/is a matter of fact and the impact it has in healing and on life itself was/is never in question. Not merely a belief handed down generationally, in Indigenous/Traditional cultures the world over, it was/is a vital component of, and the foundational basis for, one’s relationship with all that there is, both in the seen and the unseen world.

Historically, the practice of Traditional/Indigenous medicine varied widely, relative to the societal and cultural heritage of different countries, with some developing and documenting highly complex and structured methodologies. A partial list of sophisticated traditional medical models include those created and utilized by the Indigenous peoples of China, Korea, Irani, India, Africa, Native American, Greek, Inca and Latina America/Mexico (Curanderismo). Oriental medicine, including acupuncture and adjunct modalities, is one example of Indigenous medicine from Asian cultures, while Ayurveda is the Indigenous medical system of India, both of which are thousands of years old.
It is believed that these practices developed out of the specific needs and characteristics of the culture, history, philosophy and availability of resources. But research has shown, in many cases, similarities existing between methodologies found around the world. Finding multiple cultures using similar modalities to cure a given health issue provides a strong indication that a particular methodology is particularly effective, having stood the test of time and having been corroborated across multiple civilizations. Acupuncture is a good example of this as there has been found to be not only a Chinese system, but also a Korean system, a Japanese system, an Egyptian version and even a Neanderthal version that predates all the others. Each of these cultures found ways to make the same concept work at different times in different manners without any interaction with each other.

The same circumstances can be found when comparing the Traditional medicine ways of the Indigenous tribes of North America. Native American medicine refers to the combined health practices of over 500 distinct nations that inhabited the Americas prior to European arrival in the 1500’s. Specific practices varied among tribes but, to a large degree, the similarities far outweighed the differences. Native American Indigenous medicine, as a whole, is based on the understanding that human beings are part of nature and health is a matter of balance. The natural world thrives when its complex web of interrelationships is honored, nurtured and kept in harmony.

Native American cosmology recognizes aspects of the natural world that cannot be seen by normal vision but which can be experienced directly and intuitively. One had to learn how to negotiate the dynamic interplay between internal influences and the external influences of the community and especially, those of the natural world, where unseen forces must be addressed and integrated, in order for balance—and therefore health—to be achieved and maintained on all levels.
WHAT THE ANCEINTS BELIEVED

- More than merely physical matter, all things, living & non-living, are alive & have a vital essence or a spirit that can be contacted.

- Not alone or isolated in the universe, all life is interconnected & exists in relation to the rest of the world. “We are all related.”

- Each organism’s energy is unique, moving & responding in specific ways & creates a field that expands beyond the physical form, intermingling with other fields.

- Changes in our vital essence/energy are affected by & mirror changes in environmental & planetary energies.

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW... AS WITHOUT, SO WITHIN

The Sun, Moon, planets, and stars have provided us a reference for measuring the passage of time throughout history. All cultures before recorded history charted the heavenly skies to make some sort of sense out of their environment & its relationship to their lives.
The finding of cosmological and practice similarities in disassociated parts of the world is not surprising, and I am sure theories have been postulated. I believe the answer, however, lies not in the efficacy of a particular methodology but, rather, from a deeper attunement with the collective.


(Personal note: Michael introduced me to shamanism when I walked into his basic class in San Francisco in 1990 and, for over a decade, I had the honor of training with, and learning from, this man. The depth of his wisdom and the height of his humor knew no bounds-dhp)

Michael and his colleagues researched Indigenous/Traditional cultures throughout the world and, over time, found that great commonalities existed amongst them in regard to worldview, belief systems, perspectives on illness and health, healing methodologies and tools; but of even greater interest were the similarities found with those individuals whose task was to travel into unseen worlds for assistance with healing.

This individual was called by many different names, each specific to the culture. The word that is most well-known in this century, however, is “shaman,” the origin of which comes from the Tungus people of northern Asia. They may be called other things within their own particular culture, such as “Sangoma” among the Zulu, “Babalawo” among the Yoruba, and “Kahuna” in Hawaii. Manifestations of shamanism may also differ from one ethnic group to another. (http://shamanismconference.org/shamanism/)
As Dr. Harner and his colleagues have defined it, "a shaman is a man or a woman who, at will, enters an altered state of consciousness (which Dr. Harner calls "the shamanic state of consciousness" or "SSC") in order to make journeys in what are technically called "the lower, middle, and upper worlds." World-wide, this state is achieved most commonly, but not exclusively, with the aid of "sonic driving; this entails the systematic use of drumming, rattling, singing or other instruments to create specific auditory stimulation that alters consciousness and helps maintain this altered state. These other worlds, accessible to the shaman in the SSC, exist outside of space and time and are regarded as an alternate reality; the shaman's purpose in journeying to it in the SSC is to interact consciously with certain guardian powers or spirits there, which are usually perceived as "power animals" or "allies" or "helping spirits." The shaman solicits the friendship and aid of such power animals in order to help other people in various ways, and he or she may also have spiritual teachers in this hidden reality who give advice, instruction and other forms of assistance. In summary, the shaman is a "walker between the worlds," able to see and enter realms intentionally that most people encounter only in dreams and myth, and from these realms the shaman brings back vital information for the healing of individuals, the community at large, or the earth itself."


The signature of a shaman, then, is the ability to find extra-ordinary solutions to ordinary problems and to alleviate physical pain and suffering through the intervention of transpersonal spiritual powers. In this way, a shaman is distinguished from other kinds of healers and medicine people who also serve their community. What designates a shaman is not the activities they perform, but his/her use of this specific state of consciousness which, in its use, provides the opportunity to derive the knowledge and power to perform those activities. For example, a shaman can be an herbal healer or an interpreter of dreams, but others who interpret dreams and heal with herbs may not be shamans; or, in another instance, unlike an herbal healer who might know from study of tribal lore which plant to use if someone is sick, the shaman will, on the other hand, go ask the spirits for assistance or they will go speak directly with the spirit of the plant to make sure it is the right medicine or they might go and confront the spirit of the dis-ease and talk to it directly (often accompanied by his/her guiding spirits).
In summation, the shaman journeys into alternate realities utilizing learned techniques, and these journeys are made at will and taken with conscious control. He or she is aware that there must be a specific intended mission while in that shamanic state of consciousness; it is not entered into for play but for serious purposes. They have work to do in the SSC and they must know the basic methods for accomplishing that work; they know how to get there, and they have a relationship with those helping spirits with whom they interact while there.

Spirits are defined in shamanism simply as those things or beings which are normally not seen by people in an ordinary state of consciousness. But shaman do not “believe” in spirits—they talk with them, they interact with them—they no more believe in the existence of spirits than they believe they have a house and a family; it is not a belief system, rather, it is a system of knowledge based on firsthand experience.

Also, as Non-ordinary reality (NOR) exists outside of time and space, it enables the shaman to move between worlds or between past, present and future. They do not journey haphazardly; having learned how to travel, they have gained information about the cosmic geography of NOR, so that one may know where to journey to find the appropriate animal, plant, answers, or other powers. This otherworld does have a structure and substance—just different than the one we normally know and live in. These are not imaginal realities; some of Dr. Harner’s research around the globe involved gathering detailed information on different shaman’s journeys, from which he actually mapped out the worlds. The results showed a remarkable consistency that exists among tribal cultures the world over as to the structure of a non-ordinary reality and he found, in many cases that it was often represented as a world tree.

Although not every shaman performs the same services, the methods they all employ that set them apart from other healers or leaders in the tribe is that of working with the spirits. Dr. Harner has found in his research that there are three primary areas in which the shaman alone can work on behalf of his community.
1. **Divination** - Defined as any method for discovering information about ordinary reality issues or problems through non-ordinary methods; examples of these are tarot cards, runes, pendulum or, in shamanic work, by asking the spirits directly for information. In this case, the shaman would journey into non-ordinary reality to find lost objects or seek answers to questions; often these questions were about such matters as location of food resources for the tribe, career or location changes or about a particular health problem. Once in NOR, he/she would receive information from the spirits and bring back an answer.

2. **Psychopomp** - This term literally means, "to conduct or to lead souls." A standard service in many cultures, here the shaman acts as a guide to lead or conduct the soul of a dying person into the next world; it is helping people to die, moving the soul from life into death, to make that choice and take that journey to the "other side of the veil.” They also work at the other end of the spectrum, assisting before or at births to help a new soul make a safe entrance into this life. In addition, they also work with those souls who are already dead who may be in need of assistance to move on. For one reason or another, Souls can get trapped between this world and the next, get caught or stuck between lives, and need help too.

3. **Shamanic Healing** - Here, healing is looked at from a spiritual perspective. From the point of view of core shamanism, disease is caused by one or a combination of several things. The shaman may do a diagnostic journey prior to meeting to ascertain what work is necessary or they may be informed in the course of journeying into NOR as they’re working with an individual. Three main categories were found across traditions; these are power loss, soul loss, and extraction of spiritual intrusions.

   a. **Power Loss** - Power loss can be defined from the point of view of core shamanism which teaches that we all have spirits in particular animal forms-known as power animals-who are around us and who protect us and keep us healthy. Loss of this helping spirit is considered loss of one’s spiritual power which could lead to chronic problems such as depression, illness, or misfortune. In this case, a power animal retrieval is performed; here the shaman journeys into NOR, finds it and assists in its return, bringing back a helping spirit manifesting in animal form whose characteristics and qualities are such as to help the suffering individual. Often specific messages are given from this helping spirit to the person to better assist them with ways to maintain power.
b. **Soul Loss**—Soul loss is based on the concept that our soul is like a hologram and we can lose parts of it and still operate in the world; losing all of the parts would constitute death. It occurs when we lose part of our spiritual vital essence; this can occur with trauma, at times of great confusion in our lives, even something as simple as being jolted awake by an alarm clock. It is important to know that not all trauma necessitates soul loss and soul loss is not always caused by trauma—it is different for every person.

Soul loss is not a negative event, per se; it is a survival technique, a way for our body and psyche to survive an experience—it is the healthy part that leaves to get through the event. However, problems can develop when the soul part that split off does not, or cannot, come back on its own and needs assistance to return. This can manifest for an individual as feelings of disassociation, periods of memory loss, addictions, and even chronic illness and depression; a person can get a sense of it for themselves if, after an accident, surgery/medical procedures, death of loved one or powerful life event. They may not feel fully present, have one or more “blank areas” in their life or feel a vague sense of emptiness. It is also possible to have “collective” soul loss, in cases where whole communities—or countries—experience traumatic events; animals and land can also experience soul loss.

In this case, the shaman will perform a ‘soul retrieval”—a journey into NOR— and, working with their helping spirits, will ask if there are parts out there ready to come home. Being led to those part(s), they will assist in their return; it may also be the case where the shaman’s helping spirits provide a healing on the part prior to return and may also return with messages for the individual.

c. **Extraction of Spiritual (Power) Intrusions**—This occurrence, found in shamanic traditions worldwide, is based on the concept that every illness, both physical or emotional, has a spiritual form and “intrusions” can enter and create problems. Illness due to an intrusion usually manifests as localized pain or discomfort, often accompanied by an increase in temperature which, from a shamanic point of view, is connected with the energy from the intrusion.

In these cases, once the cause is established, the shaman will move into a shamanic state of consciousness (SCC) and, with the assistance of helping spirits, look inside the person, “see” the intrusion, and extract it from the body. Although this aspect of illness is commonly recognized
among Indigenous cultures, there are a variety of ways in which a shaman may divine the places where the intrusions exist, “power up” or prepare prior to performing the extraction, to extract the intrusion and how and where to release it.

It is important to understand that spiritual intrusions and their extractions are not the same as a possession and an exorcism. These intrusions are not evil; they just do not belong in the person’s body. An intrusion is easily recognizable to someone performing an extraction, taking a form that clearly does not belong in the body. When removed, it does not necessarily need to be destroyed; in many cases, it is merely returned to its natural home or is either placed in a container of water next to the patient or thrown towards the closest large body of water, where it is “seen” going into its depths, thereby being neutralized.

In addition, it should also be noted that, in cases where physical symptoms manifest simultaneously, conventional medical care might also be necessary; based upon the degree of severity, both may be appropriate as shamanic healing, while working with the non-ordinary aspects of an illness, is not a substitute. While it is the case that spiritual healing can, indeed, lead to physical healing, specifically in the case of a spiritual intrusion, where physical repercussions could appear in a fashion similar to the western concept of infection, the resultant ordinary aspects may need to also be addressed.

Spiritual/Power intrusions, like communicable diseases, seem to occur most frequently in urban areas where human populations are densest. From a shamanic perspective, this is because many people, without knowing it, possess the potentiality for harming others with eruptions of their personal power when they enter a state of emotional disequilibrium; this is especially possible when the emotion stems from reaction to an external source, when common responses such as anger, resentment, jealousy and hatred are exhibited.

People not familiar with shamanic principles and/or the existence of energy fields, do not have a guardian spirit or a power animal to shield them, nor do they know how to work with their own energies to maintain boundaries so as to avoid reception of others’ energies. In turn, most have no knowledge that they, too, may be harming others unintentionally with their own emotional
Shamans believe when people are unaware that their hostile energies can penetrate others, the potential for unconsciously causing detriment to their fellow human beings is great. To become conscious of one’s spiritual/energetic behavior, and understanding the ramifications that could exist, can be beneficial for all.

While it is the case the majority of spiritual power intrusions are unconsciously sent, it is also a reality that intention has an effect; an individual can send, or be the recipient of, these potentially harmful energies if intentionally utilized. For an individual who chooses to intentionally “throw medicine” or send these harmful energies, repercussions are usually swift. It is good to be aware that there are specific spiritual principles regarding this situation, as well as a variety of available methods that can be considered and/or implemented; however, that discussion lies beyond the scope of this current conversation.

(Personal Note: As this topic is one with which I am familiar and have experience, you are welcome to contact me for more information-dhp)

When someone feels a need for healing work of this sort, with either a traditional shaman or a person trained and experienced in these practices, they may encounter a gamut of possible variations. As individual differences often exist in regard to procedures/requests and etiquette before, during and after (usually based on tribal tradition or spirit “suggestions”), it is always advantageous to respectfully ask questions to promote greater understanding, ease and trust; this is strong work for everyone involved so having a sense of things can be helpful. Generally, the shaman/practitioner will listen to the individual, determine, with spirit's help, what the person needs and then, based on what's been heard, rebalance the system, either by taking out that which does not belong or replacing that which is missing. Sometimes the above methods are utilized either alone or possibly in conjunction with other spirit medicine (plant, animal, stone) and, in some instances, the spirits could relay through their intermediary if there are specific tasks or behaviors for the patient to assist them in regaining that balance.

In Indigenous/Traditional medicine, it is understood the physical body can only heal up to the point that nature can be reversed; however, even if the physical system is past the point of reversing itself, this work can still assist
in creating wholeness of the spirit, help to empower, and provide peace and comfort, regardless of what is happening to the physical body. This approach is about healing versus curing and ultimately, it is not only possible, but appropriate, to facilitate healing the spirit into death, allowing a person to die healthy.

Unlike most of the Western culture which thrives on individualism and independence, Indigenous cultures are based on cooperative sharing within a community that is interdependent—with each other, the land and Divine Source, Creator, the “That Which is Greater.” This is true of their approach to medicine as well. In shamanic work, the power of healing comes from another person being willing to intervene in the spiritual realms on someone’s behalf. Far from being intellectually based, these ancient practices, founded on centuries of previous experience, require considerable focus, intent, trust and respect. It is serious, but extremely loving, work; the intention of it, in all cases, is a return to wholeness, a re-empowering of self, a healing of the spirit. And the spirit world is more than cooperative, more than willing to support our growth into fullness as human beings, which is our right. For it is not merely the individual who benefits; as we become whole, our wholeness moves out onto the rest of the planet, and the more whole and full the planet becomes….which is as it should be.

**SPIRITS OF NATURE/POWER OF PLACE**

Most Indigenous cultures, even those that have been significantly acculturated into surrounding “mainstream” societal structures, continue to maintain their animistic-based world view, values, principles and practices; these spiritual traditions are considered “earth-based” traditions. Though historically and geographically diverse, as seen earlier with shamanic practice, similarities exist. One common belief held world-wide and for centuries, is regarding the relationship of human to nature. In these traditions, because all aspects of the natural world are invested with spiritual life—have a spirit that can be contacted—they are able to reach out to “2-leggeds” (humans), just as “2-leggeds” are able to do the same; in both cases, it is often the shaman, the “walker between the worlds” that is able to both contact and hear them. It is clearly NOT nature worship—rather, it is an interdependent, respectful, collaborative two-way relationship,
established often for healing or for divinatory purposes; in the latter case, this often takes place in order to ensure the health and safety of the community. The spirits of nature are able to be contacted (or heard), and, entering into relationship, human and the natural world work in cooperation for the benefit of all.

In these traditions, the whole earth is considered sacred but historically, in each culture’s home-land, it is often the case particular places have been found that were felt to hold powerful earth energy. It was not always the “spirit-talkers” only who could perceive this energy. Indigenous traditions not only taught that the land was alive, they were shown; for the people, the land on which they stood in all directions and the sky above them was part of the community—extensions of each other, the entirety of their world was family. To honor the land was to honor both the ancestors, the ancient ones who went before and who still stood watching, and honor those coming after, the next generation to whom the traditions and the land would pass. In this way, continuity was not merely a philosophical or scholarly concept; it was a daily life activity.

Raised with sensitivity as a result of this understanding, individuals could find themselves drawn to these places to attune themselves with the energy. They did so in a variety of ways, including vision quests, pilgrimages, the walking of ancient trackways and walkabouts, or in moments of quiet ceremony or meditation on what they felt to be sacred sites. In this way, a person was able to open themselves up to the teaching, inspiration and healing that came with communing with the spirits of that place or with nature....and, as with any relationship, they were respectful in their interactions, always knowing afterwards to say thank you. The person usually did so by offering a gift considered sacred within their culture such as blue corn, tobacco or seeds (something that was biodegradable) expressing gratitude for the gift of this union.

In addition to those places of powerful earth energy, often discovered to have underground water running or strong electro-magnetic pull, there were—and are—points on the earth felt to be especially connected to certain aspects of Divine power. Natural places are the most basic sacred places: stones, springs, mountains, islands, and trees were, and are, locations where the anima loci or ‘place soul’ can best be felt and approached. These
particular places then come to be considered sacred places when humans recognize and acknowledge them. In many traditions, those with shamanic training were either especially sensitive to these spirit-filled places and were drawn to them, found them by means of divination techniques or by speaking with their guiding spirits. Once found, these places were utilized. It was for this reason special spots were honored with circles of stone, groves of trees, sacred wells, monuments and with ritual. The landscape was seen as a living temple, and worship occurred, not in houses built by man, but on the sacred earth and before an open sky. Those sacred places or holy sites were known to heal the body, nourish and replenish the soul, and open a door to the Divine through communion with the spirits of nature. Different places had different spiritual qualities and an individual could have a personal spiritual relationship with these qualities.