

Shamanic Preaching

By

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As a longtime minister, I've come to believe religion is at its very worst whenever it drives us deeper into our own delusions, and at its best whenever it brings us closer to the reality around us. Delusional thinking defends us against the painful realities of life by enabling us to deny they exist. Reality, though full of beauty and joy, is also ripe with injustice, suffering, and chaos. Delusional religion copes by insisting the world is but an illusion, that we mustn't become attached to it, that it is fallen and sinful along with everything in it, including our own bodies, desires, and minds. Lucidinal religion, on the other hand, tells us the world is good, that we should care for it and delight in it, that we are made in the image and likeness of the Creator, and our work is to become more present in and aware of the reality around us.

It would, however, be extremely audacious for any of us to claim we have grasped reality, at least in its fullness. As the *Tao te Ching* says, "Looked for, it can be seen; listened for, it can't be heard; reached for, it can't be grasped. The name that can be named is not the Eternal Name. The Way is nebulous and void." Our senses operate within a limited range of frequencies and are extremely localized, meaning we can't sense much of the world, not even much of what's right in front of us. There's an entire spectrum of reality, on the quantum, microscopic, macroscopic, and cosmic scales, that we simply haven't evolved the ability to perceive. This doesn't mean those other dimensions don't exist. We've invented prosthetic devices like microscopes, telescopes, particle colliders, and their like to help us know they do exist.

In 1981, neuroscientists, David H. Hubel and Torsten Wiesel received a Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for their research regarding the visual cortex. In the 1950s they experimented with kittens, raising one group in an environment with only horizontal lines, and another in one with only vertical lines. After they matured, losing the neural-plasticity of their young minds, those raised in the vertical reality were incapable of seeing horizontal lines, and vice versa for those raised in the horizontal reality. This was so, it turns out, because the neurons necessary for seeing horizontal and vertical lines never developed in the respective groups. Just because they couldn't see them, however, doesn't mean horizontal and vertical don't exist. The point being, our brains are hardwired to perceive a certain reality and it becomes increasingly difficult to see reality in any other way.

This doesn't mean that what we do perceive isn't real, but it's only a partial, very limited, human interpretation of reality. To consider the whole of reality only in terms of our anthropocentric perspective is like drinking a glass of water then claiming to know the entire ocean, or like the parable of the three blind people who try to describe an elephant. One touches its tail and says, "It looks like a rope." Another touches its trunk and says, "No it looks like a snake." A third touches its side and says, "You're both wrong, and elephant looks like the Great Wall." Reality is at once the Universe's most abundant resource and its rarest gem.

In the shamanic tradition, it's the responsibility of our spiritual leaders to venture into the hidden realms of reality for the purpose of bringing back greater awareness to the entire community. This is often done through the ingestion of DMT containing plant compounds, like peyote and ayahuasca, often called "hallucinogens" in our culture, though they were traditionally called, "consciousness expanders," before being outlawed, and, today, they are increasingly called, "entheogens," meaning, *God-enabling* compounds. For the shaman, the "plant spirits" do not drive them temporarily out of their minds, causing them to hallucinate things that aren't real. Rather, they alter and expand consciousness, widening the doors of perception, making them more aware of the realities around us all.

As a minister in the U.S., it would be both impractical and illegal for me to hand out peyote from the pulpit, but I like to call what I do on Sunday mornings, "shamanic preaching." What I mean by this is that rather than attempting to inadequately answer questions or speak "the truth," I mostly question our common answers and challenge our cultural paradigms, so that everyone ends up leaving in an altered state of consciousness. Here's an example from an actual sermon I once gave on this very subject: "Remember, the first sin, according to the Christian tradition, which caused everyone to fall from grace, involved the ingestion of a mind-altering plant called the *Tree of Knowledge*." A simple statement like this causes us to see this ancient myth in a new light, helping us to expand our consciousness about it, just as shamanic preaching, in general, helps alter our thinking just enough that we begin recognizing realities we never noticed before. If raised in the likes of a proverbial vertical world, shamanic preaching helps us begin to recognize the horizontal, diagonal, fuzzy, and all the other lines we then become free to color outside the boundaries of our own minds.