



NANA NAUWALD

***FLYING WITH
SHAMANS
IN FAIRY TALES
AND MYTHS***

Note from the author:

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"The World Tree" on page → is adapted from a story in Karl Kauter, *Unter dem Weltenbaum* (Berlin: Der Kinderbuchverlag, 1981), used by kind permission.

"The Tree of Dreams" on page → is adapted from Dietmar H. Melzer, *Regenwaldmärchen* (Friedrichshafen: Idime Verlag, 2000) used by kind permission.

All our legends are people's experiences.

These are true stories.

The myths of our ancestors are not fanciful stories or lies. If people of our age believe that many of these episodes are not true, it is only because they have less concentrated life juices than the Elders from whom we quote them.

The Greenland folk storyteller Oasarkak



*The Sorcerer of the Les Trois Frères cave, Southern France.
16,000 years old*

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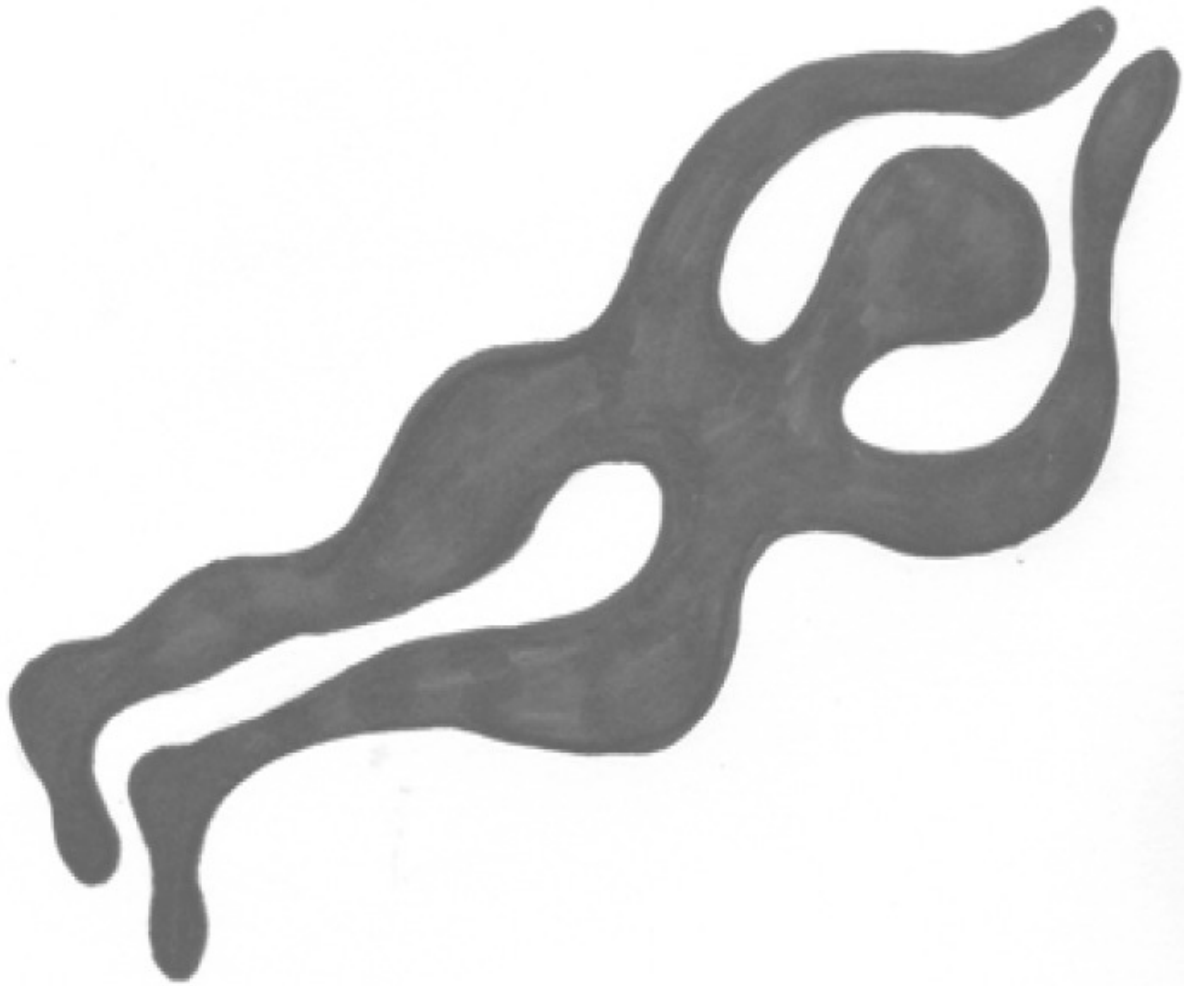
The Myth of the Origin of All Life

Many people rather not work with or think about the intangible, and maybe that is why we still know so little about the heavens and the earth, of the origin humans and animals. Maybe, maybe not. Because it is hard to fathom what will happen to us and where we shall go once we are no longer alive, there is a dark veil over all first beginnings and endings. How can we learn more about the most impressive mystery that surrounds us and keeps us alive, about all that we call air, heaven, and sea, and the meaning of human life in all the comers of the earth, as well as that of the animals, birds, and fish in all the land, seas, and lakes?

No, no one can know anything for sure about the beginning of all life. But those who have eyes and ears and remember what the Elders tell us still have at their disposal some kind of wisdom that can feed the hungry mind. That is why we are always listening with open ears when someone tells us about the experiences of passed generations. And through all those ancient myths, which we keep alive from our ancestors, the dead are talking. We communicate with all sages from long ago. And we, who apparently know so little, will listen willingly to them.

—Adapted from the storytelling of Inuit Apakak of the Noatak River, written down by Knud Rasmussen

1. Hidden Knowledge



In times past, there lived in the North a shaman named Nauja. Nauja wanted to shamanize in order to fly to the land of the great tides. Suddenly, the drum jumped at Nauja's left big toe and attached its handle there with a firm grip. The drum began droning ominously, its drum-head shuddering. Suddenly it moved forward as if seized by a giant force. While vehemently hissing and

rustling violently it took Nauja high into the air, all the way through the smoke hole, and three times around the house. He sang in complete ecstasy, still attached to the drum. Nauja flew over the house, surrounded by a shimmering rain of sparks.

—*Nauja's Flight to the Land of the Great Tides*. Inuit myth

The inner and outer travels in the shaman's worlds have been an important part of my life for more than thirty years. I have experienced wonderful things, heard incredible things, seen inexplicable things. I tried to understand, explain, and reason it all with my familiar thinking patterns for a long time. But this did not lead me to a real understanding of the living shamanism of indigenous peoples.

On one occasion, during a nightly healing ritual at the Rio Negro, it became clear to me that shamanism, in its varied ways, could be distilled into explanatory models, but in reality there is only one way to really grasp it: by personal, direct experience.

Shamanism, probably the most ancient art of structuring the worlds, is a way of experiencing. The art of experiencing is invariably connected with the person who is going through the experience. The cultural and personal heritage, the willingness and candor in letting oneself go with the flow of the spiritual life principles of the shamanistic culture, determine the profundity of the experience.

Although each ethnic group living with a shamanistic worldview has a unique shamanistic practice, all share, along with the shamanistic cultures of the past, the same basic worldview. The world structure is anchored in various layers, each with its own structure and life qualities, in the under-, middle and upper worlds. The passing of time is experienced as a rhythm of continuous renewal. Everything in existence has a soul, and is interwoven with all the visible and the invisible. Likewise, humans are also part of this living, ever-renewing and recreating fabric of life.

The keeper and renewer of the community's knowledge and communication with the spiritual worlds is a person who has distinguished him- or herself through a special vocation

or apprenticeship. This specially gifted person is still called a “shaman” (male or female) in Western usage, while each of the still-living shamanistic peoples has their own words in their language for these “exceptionally gifted people.”

The connection with the spiritual world of ancestors, plants, and elemental forces enables the shaman to work within his or her community, always dealing with the renewal of harmony within the individual, and accordingly within the whole community as well. Shamans regulate the relations between worlds, realities, and their expressions in life through their ways of communicating with visible and invisible forces. This ability is based on the mastery of deliberately shifting through consciousness and worlds, independent of our concepts of time and space, apart from the ego.

The modern reality of our Western society is miles away from this life determining concept of shamanism. And still—or because of this—the experiential knowledge of shamanism is increasingly drawing the attention of the medical professions, psychologists, therapists, artists, and spiritual seekers.

The occasions for this growing interest are manifold, but at the same time it boils down to one universal focus: the desire for a renewed contact with the original spiritual and cultural roots, the wish to reconnect with the “knowing of the Elders,” in which we do not stand apart from the universal life force, but participate in the bigger whole. This “timeless knowing of the Elders” is based on the understanding that all-that-is—visible or invisible—is related, and is affecting one another.

As a guest in communities that still keep this “knowing of the Elders” alive, I have heard incredible things in nightly storytelling circles: about shamans who were able to live under water, could change into animals, were able to travel in the world of the dead, heal the sick with their songs, and still many more miracles.

To be all ears entails an “imaging” listening, which does not only involve the ear, but is an experience through all senses. Listening brings both a premonition and an awakening of body memories that have always been there. This way, from the “incredible,” no *faith*, but a *knowing*, arises.

The experience of the living, shamanistic knowing in indigenous cultures of South America helped me to change and refine my filters of perception. I followed a rising passion and curiosity to search for correlations with this “knowing of the Elders” in our European cultures. Equipped with this new lens of conception, directed inwardly and outwardly, I discovered, in addition to references to early, shamanistic-oriented European cultures in archaeological findings, still living roots of these primeval times in the ancient heritage of fairy tales, covered with layers of dust from the ages and banished for the main part to the nursery room.

Some wind was blown through the dust, some adjustment was needed in the filters of perception—and see how, in the amply filled pot of fairy tales, many “stars” are twinkling with knowledge about the reality behind the “real world,” the “other world,” and the “world behind, above or beneath the world.”

Shamanistic wisdom doesn’t lie behind every fairy tale, but the magic stick in some fairy tales, even today, stands for the well-known shaman wand. The “sleep” of the fairy-tale hero can refer to an extraordinary state of consciousness, a “clairvoyant sleep,” enabling a meeting with “beings from the other side.” Hidden behind this is the knowledge that a “voyage of the soul” is possible, acquiring experiences that may lead to solving questions of the “waking reality.”

The helpful animals in fairy tales can indicate the spiritual animal helpers of the shamans. Human metamorphosis into an animal points to the gift of the shaman’s transformation.

The motive of transformation— maturing by way of dying and reviving—is a way of describing the core of shamanistic aspiration, the ritual death as transformation process.

Amid the rich field of the spiritual heritage of fairy tales I would like to awaken the curiosity, the researcher's mind, and the joy in those who are interested in shamanism and are searching for traces of the more or less hidden knowledge of the shamanistic heritage in order to be touched by it.

Fairy tales and myths are carriers of knowledge about correlations with structural frameworks of life philosophies through all ages since the beginning of language. For a long time, clever researchers of fairy tales have been able to read, decipher, and structure this information. One of these researchers who devoted himself especially to finding correlations between fairy tales and shamanism is Heino Gehrts in Germany. About the shamanistic contents of our fairy tales he wonders if the narrators of these fairy tales were aware of the fact that they contain hidden meanings and how long did they know it. He deduces that they knew it, as long as there still remained a consciousness of this second reality beyond their own of this fairy-tale world that is real to the shaman in his soul flight. This leads to the conclusion that our fairy tales were understood in their essence, up to the day when the last witch was burned. And that was not so very long ago. . . .

The especially “good stories” do not supply intellectual information to the listener or reader; they primarily appeal to his or her senses and emotions. Stories—in whatever way they are presented to us, as myths, fairy tales, legends, or folk stories—are interwoven into the listener's actual reality through the oral legend. “Good stories” are more than just entertainment; for the listener, they open doors to a congruent atmosphere for “co-experiencing” that may lead to personal scopes of experience. The terms “fantasy” and “imagining” become less important when, during the

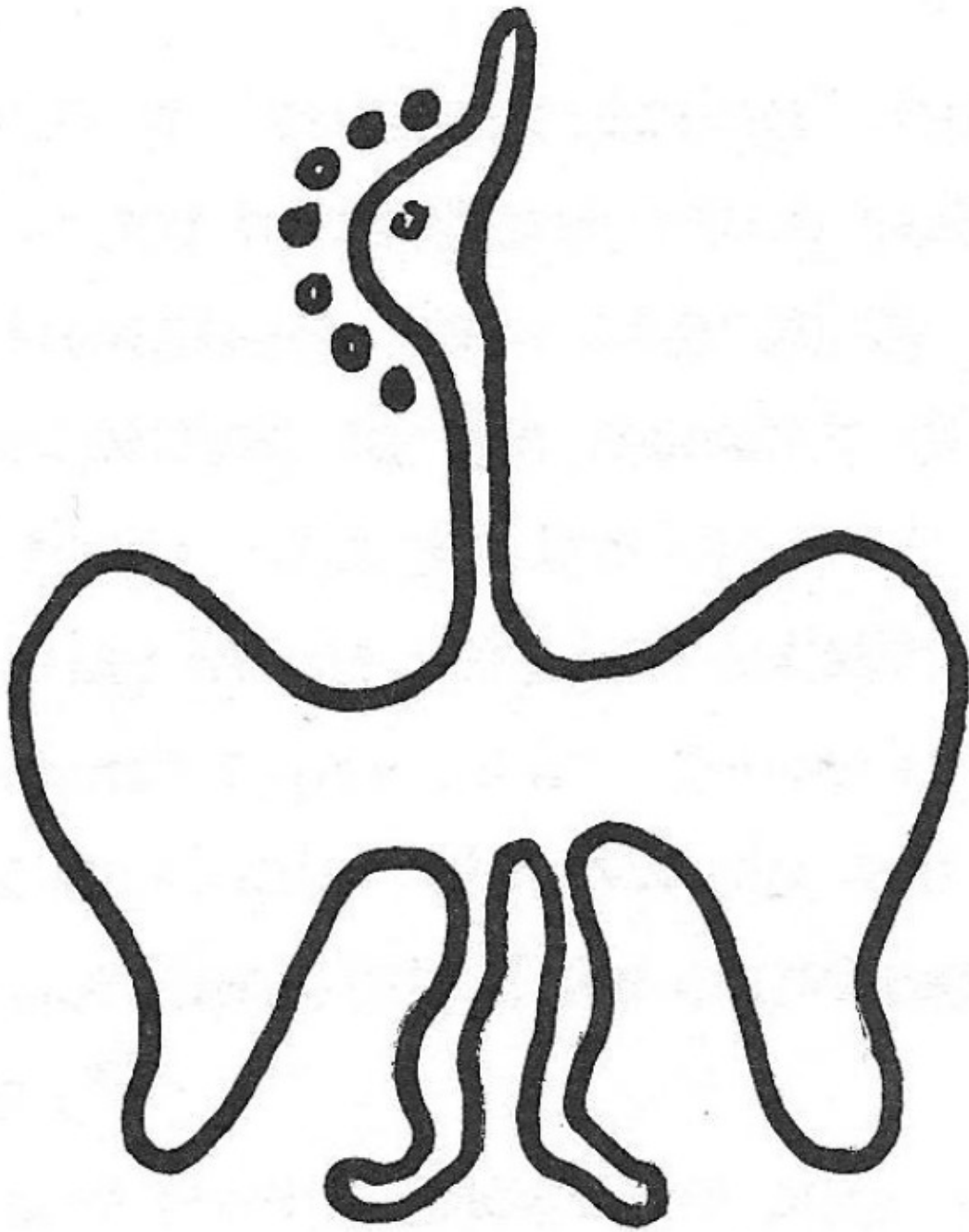
listening process, there is a close encounter with the person's own reality. Touching the versatility of the personal reality by means of "stories" not only causes the hero or heroine to jump into other worlds; the emotional touch of the narrated happening has the power of to make the reader or listener become part of the ever-newly fantasized "flying carpet" of a complete reality. Neither analysis of the story nor characterizing it as a "shamanistic" fairy-tale will do this.

"He found himself in a giant hall, with ceiling, floor, and walls lavishly painted with animals, birds, and peculiar signs. There were images of mysterious beings he had never seen; stories were told in colorful images, fantastic signs were glittering in all the colors of the rainbow . . . 'All these images tell about the past, they are speaking to you,' said the old sage. 'They are telling you a story, the story of your ancestors and the story of your children. Memorize them well, pass them on to your children, so they may learn from the stories of the ancestors. Watch the sun, because it gives you the power of life; preserve the sea and you will never suffer from scarcity. Now go down to the village and tell what you have seen.'"¹

Experiences have to be told, because by word of mouth and the absorbing senses of the listeners, "the world" and its history will be created, again and again. This does not only happen in concepts like "dream-time" in far-away cultures, but also in the middle of a high-tech society like ours—new realities can arise from old roots.

¹ In: Christof Heil, *Der Zauber der Zypressen. Märchen und Mythen aus Mallorca*: Edition Orient, 1992

2. Tales of the First Shamans



In an infinite void I set out for
a journey without distance.

On my way from star to star,
on heavenly tracks,
I meet the higher power.
I fill my hand with stardust,
I touch the edge of the moon,
I return to the earth
on the green meadow.
The powers of the heavenly spheres
will rush in and help me.

—Song of a shaman of the Chukcia,
from Juri Rytchëu, *Der letzte Schamane (The Last Shaman)*





All statements about a “culture-creating” human activity and about the spiritual world behind this thing called culture are but guesses. These presumptions have constantly changed over the course of history according to the research of the time and the spiritual attitude of those who did the research.

Look at life today in the very few existing “original” indigenous communities doesn’t give us any better clues concerning the origin of human community life. Would we understand more about the origin of our humanity if we could exactly date and classify the “first shaman”?

The old myths and stories about the acts of “special” people, “the divinely inspired,” can permeate and connect us with the time behind the boundaries of our own lives, with those “deeds.” This inner connection enables us to consciously enter the unique personal experience of the reality of a “multiverse.”

Also, pictures and carvings of people who, according to what they tell us, were divinely inspired—such as the “Bird-man of Lascaux” or images of the world- and shapeshifter Odin with his two ravens on Scandinavian image-stones—tell stories that let us drink from the well of memory of the spiritual worlds and our ancestors’ knowledge.

In almost all stories and images that speak of the “first shamans,” the shape of the bird as messenger of the shape-shifting and shamanistic flying ability plays an important role. Even now, the feather of a “shamans crown” in shamanistic communities stand for the ability of the bearer to magically fly. In some cultures, feathered ritual vestments of the shamans resemble “bird’s clothes,” as a visual expression of the ability to move to and fro among all cosmic spheres at will, from life to death and vice versa.

The Swan Woman as Ancestor Mother of the Shamans



In the Far East, in the land of the Burjates, there once lived a young man named Tangkalsingh. One day, Tangkalsingh heard the wing-flap of a big bird above his dwelling-place, and he saw five swans flying across the sky to alight on the nearby lake. At first he thought, "Those are migrating birds, heading north." Then curiosity got the better of him and he decided to take a closer look at these birds. He went to the lake, crept unnoticed toward the birds, and hid behind a shrub. There, Tangkalsingh saw that they were not really migrating birds, but five most beautiful maidens, who had taken off their swan gowns in order to take a bath. He waited for the right moment, snatched away one of the blossom-white feather gowns, and hid again behind the bush.