

*Magic & the Red Road* copyright 2010 Christine Carmines

As explained in my introduction to “*Forbidden Knowledge: An Alchemy of the Grand Quest*”, with the Agricultural Revolution Western Magic splintered into four branches (diviner, herbalist, bard, priest/priestess). Prior to that, its expression was embodied solely by the shaman. ‘Shaman’ is a Siberian term analogous to the Native American phrase “medicine person”. Both are, as Mircea Eliade defined in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, “technicians of the sacred”. That phrase encapsulates what it means to be either a modern magician or witch. Yet there remains much debate as to the necessity of either genetic inheritance or spirit selection in the contemporary roles. I will not argue either side here.

As a result of our Western fixation with dualism, Magic was divided into theoretical and practical branches. In truth it functions only as both and is utterly impotent as either. Likewise, it is our Western addiction to class membership and sexism which caused us to divide our technicians of the sacred along gender and socio-economic lines. Such divisions, far from defining Magic, merely fortified its splintering. It can be argued the theoretical/practical, magician/witch model which so permeated the West has also relegated Magic to the realm of superstition, wishful thinking and cultural ineptitude. For purposes of this article I am defining ‘West’ to historically include the British Isles, Europe, the Middle East and the North African continent, plus modern North America.

We, as Western technicians of the sacred, have contributed mightily to our own obsolescence. We have become so self-involved and inner-focused that we no longer recall our principle function. We have defined ourselves by what we are, not by what we do. While that works for philosophers, it denies us our only connection to the societies in which we live. We have lost our social role and also our social value. Just try telling most parents that you want to grow up to be a witch rather than a lawyer, a magician instead of an ambassador. It’s our fault really. Our secrecy has turned around and bit us.

Like the shaman, from whom we all evolved, it is our sacred duty to further the welfare of our communities/cultures. We acquired the knowledge we have to help heal our societies – not to sit on that knowledge like self-contented dragons guarding mystical hordes. We have become practically useless because we refuse to be practically useful.

The Red Road (literally the Path of Life) offers lessons to help us out of our self-imposed exile. The Native American peoples also suffered the Inquisition and its consequences. No one mentions it but the Inquisition is a euphemism for centuries of genocide against shamans and their societies, regardless of their ethnic identities. Like the Holocaust it was not entirely successful. Yet its scars run deep.

As Native peoples were forced to discard their traditional beliefs and values; we were forced to discard Magic – our traditional belief and value system in the West. Such older traditions were

degraded into either baseless superstition or poetic imagining. The medicine person's role as a cultural healer was largely stamped out. To this day that function has yet to be replaced. We see the terrible consequences in the rampant hopelessness, misogyny, alcoholism, drug abuse and obesity common in today's Native communities.

Look at the broader culture's problems with those same issues. Then ask yourself: is the similarity just a coincidence? I think not.

While I powerfully appreciate modern medicine, psychiatry and the good hearted in organized religions, I also recognize their limitations. None of them address the whole individual as a whole. What they each refer to as a "whole" is only so within the scope of their particular discipline.

Because Magic is mother to both science and religion it does not have that limitation, thus, neither do its technicians. Yet anyone who looks at us thinks we're archaic. Of course we are. That is how we act. We have abandoned (or just forgot) our main societal role. It is not to be literately obscure or spiritually marginal. Like the shaman we were gifted to be of use, to address the healing of our cultures (one person at a time), using the tools inherited from our ancestors.

The Red Road reminds us brilliantly of what we've left behind. If you spend anytime learning and translating the songs used in Lakota sweat lodges you'll discover something astounding. Though called prayers, they are really spells. Any modern wizard of the world would recognize them instantly. Being spells, they also remind us of something we've forgotten about the Western tradition.

Spells become bratty demands and whiny requests only when the Magic that underlies them shares an assumption which dominated Western culture for over a millennium, namely that humans can/must control Nature (referred to as the "fear school" of Magic in *Celluloid Warrior*). When an older, shamanic and inclusive view of Magic is adapted we realize that humans do not control Nature because they are merely one part of Nature. Their actions affect, but can not command (referred to as the "wonder school" of Magic in *Celluloid Warrior*). Only our fragile egos imagine us as the cerebral cortex of the universe.

Spells are actually designed to put us into the flow of our lives with awareness, attention and comprehension. Thus we are able to achieve manifestation with balance and tranquility. That is the core lesson of Alchemy and each of those four traits represents an Element with accompanying training exercises (see my Alchemy Article for expansion). Thus Magic, like the Red Road, is a journey that teaches us humility before Nature. Such is a crucial lesson which industrialized nations still refuse to acknowledge. I guess we are waiting for the ice caps to melt, just to be sure.

Why don't we just reclaim the best from our collective past and use it to reshape our future? What are we so afraid of? As the Native peoples are re-discovering the power of the *Canunpa* (Sacred Pipe

brought to the People by White Buffalo Calf Woman, pronounced 'cha-new-paw]) to sponsor their healing, why are non-natives so reluctant to examine what has always been the Sacred Pipe of Western culture – the 4 Magickal Weapons, representing the 4 Alchemical Elements? Is admitting that we might have thrown the baby out with the bath water really that threatening?

Smoking the Canunpa (with red willow) sends the prayers (spells) of the people to *Wakan Tanka* (the Great Mystery). It is a solemn act as ritually codified as manipulating the 4 Magical Weapons. The Canunpa simply unifies into one what Alchemy represents as four. The underlying principles are identical. The very same principle was hijacked by Christianity into the Communion Cup. Therein Christ became the intermediary force that facilitated the same connection. Pagan spirituality recognizes specialist communicators (shamans, oracles, diviners) but does not believe intermediaries are necessary. Anyone is free to beseech the sacred at anytime.

Just like the Canunpa, those Elements re-connect us with our world. We can empathize with the Lakota phrase, *mitakuye oyasin* (we are all related) because we experience our connectivity on a daily basis. That can be achieved by doing the 4 basic exercises of Alchemy. Developed from children's games anyone from kindergarten onwards can do them with no degrees, no guru and no special heritage required. It boggles my mind how much knowledge is wasted every day.

The final pearl offered by the Red Road to modern wizards of the world, is Respect. Once we all received instruction in the concept – in school and at home. Now few know, while even less care, what it means. I believe that its demise was a long time coming and began, ironically, with a prime Judeo-Christian tenet. The Bible considers humans 'the crown of creation'. To everyone else in the ancient world we were just another creation in the vastness. The Bible establishes us as hotshots. Thus we are obliged to respect nothing, except our especially volatile God. We are the best, above even the angels, or so we were told.

Look where we ended up. Somehow I doubt the angels would want to trade. The other view of Magic, presented here, does not consider humans as the best that's ever been. We are just another experiment in the rhythm of creation. It is a humbling view that also engenders responsibility. We become responsible as a result of recognizing our interconnectivity. It follows logically. Responsibility does not follow logically from the superiority granted us by the other model.

Presently because we technicians have allowed Magic to become so distorted, so misrepresented, so ill-defined and so feared, it has become largely irrelevant and shunned. I have not been encouraged to share my knowledge by my magical colleagues. My culture has not expressed appreciation for my perspectives. I do not consider Magic superficial fluff, a discipline based on illogic or a fantastic albeit vain hope. I do not fit the mold. My insistence that mystical things make sense just isn't sexy.

Only shamans and medicine people encouraged me to do this – to speak out, to make available what I was taught, thought and developed. They've been insisting for almost twenty years. At last, it is time

to step up and remind the West that we too have a Red Road. Western cultures existed many millennia before the organized religions that have divided us. As Black Elk saw, only a century ago, human experiences are shared, our Magic is complimentary and indeed, *mitakuye oyasin* (we are all related). Let's get on with fixing this mess before the clock runs out.