

Part I Chapter 1

Through the Eyes of Hawk

The SunDance ceremony in its many variations has been a principle ceremony in some of the pre-European cultures of the Americas for hundreds if not thousands of years. In this ceremony, the dancers for three or four days and nights form a circle and dance individually to a tree in the center.

In the tradition in which I have danced, each dancer walks to the tree and says a prayer for others, the planet, oneself, or to whatever one's spirit feels drawn. Then the dancer gives an offering of tobacco or corn paho to the tree and Great Spirit. Now the dancer is ready for dancing to and from the tree while holding a prayer in one's intent, ideally dancing powerfully for a long duration to the beat of the drum and to the songs of the singers.

During this SunDance, the dancers go without food and, if possible, without water for the full three days. The ceremony is at an altitude of about 6000 feet (1.8 km) in the high desert where temperatures can reach up to over 100 F degrees (38 C) and easily drop 40 F degrees by night, where a sudden thunderstorm can bring enough rain that the dancers have to sleep around the circle in water puddles, and where intense gusts whip up the red dust, biting at the eyes.

After a day of this intense dancing with no food and for some no water, the body's reserves become severely challenged. In the 100 degrees (38 C) I have seen several dancers reach the tree in the midafternoon and keel over backwards to the ground until the healing team revives them. The SunDance, though, is far from a superficial macho endurance contest or a masochism rite.

One of the SunDance's purposes, in my experience, is to provide a focused, ceremonial context for the dancer to develop as rapidly and deeply as possible a primary shamanic power: the ability to intend.

What makes a person a shaman is the ability to use intent to function throughout an interdimensional existence. This intending ability is what enables the shaman to affect events in this incarnated dimension and to interact with nonphysical beings in this and another dimension.

In this SunDance tradition, a dancer prepares a ceremonial shield, often consisting of one or more symbols painted on leather on a

circular frame. The symbols usually represent a focus for the dancer's main intent in that SunDance.¹ Each dancer has a dancing lane to the tree starting from a pole at his/her position in the circle. On our poles we hang our shields. Then as we dance, we imagine weaving a symbolic energy strand from our shield to the tree, back and forth, back and forth. As the heat intensifies and the body weakens, we still have our shield to guide us, to remind us to keep our intent focused.

Shortly after the winter solstice, I would begin to reflect on what my shield will be for the next SunDance, which begins right after the summer solstice. For my sixth SunDance, I realized I wanted to not only dance on the ground as a two-legged but to also be above the tree and above the center of the circle to see and know the whole ceremonial dance as it unfolded in the luminescent fields for all the dancers, singers, drummers, logistic dog soldiers, and elders in spirit form with us.

Many years earlier when I moved to San Francisco, I would often drive across the Golden Gate bridge to the hills and mountain ridge leading up to Mt. Tamalpais. There I would hike to a spot to observe the grand Pacific Ocean maybe less than a mile (1.6 km) away. The constant wind from the ocean would bring the salty fragrance from a vastness in the west where my spirit could find solitude, even with the intensity of urban existence only a few miles away.

But I was often not the only one there, sitting cross-legged on a knoll. The hawks knew how to ride the updraft waves of the winds. Nearby they would appear to hang suspended in midair, only a few feathers fluttering, while peering sharply down into the valley, waiting for movements of the next meal.

Hawks are masterfully adept in their air balancing, and their keen vision from a high distance enables them to observe their world unfettered. This, I realized in reflecting on my upcoming sixth SunDance, is how I wanted to be in the dance when the blazing sun would beat down on me in the afternoons. I wanted to know and remember the larger vision of the SunDance as I was challenged with each next step in my dance. A hawk, I decided, would be the symbol for my guiding intent I would have on my shield.

¹ *Shield* usually refers to a protective object one uses in battle. The SunDance shields look very similar to battle shields (thus the name) but serve a very different function. My Sundance shield is a banner reminding me of my focus for the ceremony. Afterwards, my shields hang on my walls for years to remind me of my spiritual intent.

A few months later I was dancing to the tree with the image of a red-tailed hawk radiating from my shield hanging on my pole back in the circle. It was an intense and powerful dance for me, as have been all thirteen of my SunDances. The main teaching of my hawk shield, though, was yet to come.

After a Sundance until the winter solstice, I place my shield on my mesa (altar) where I see it daily. The symbol of my SunDance intent is almost constantly in my peripheral consciousness. The drum beat, the sacred pipe ceremonies, the sweat lodges, the tethered feathers flirting with the fierce winds, they all are there emanating from the shield, which is no longer a piece of stretched rawhide with paint. The shield is now an awakened, energetically breathing, ceremonial object joining with me in my daily meditations and ceremonies at my mesa with my sacred pipe and crystal skull.

In Tucson where I live, every New Year a local pow-wow is held. While having a spiritual foundation, the event is mainly a social event where competition dances with prizes are open to dancers from tribes near and far. Handmade arts and crafts are for sale, along with my favorite: fry bread with honey (or sugar or beans and chili if you prefer). The whole public is invited. There is face painting for the children. And often down from Phoenix is an organization that takes in large wild birds that have been injured and can no longer compete in the wild. This year they had a red-tailed hawk, just like on my shield.

From quite a distance, she caught my eye. Or more accurately, I sensed her just as I began to see her on her perch. Immediately I began to move in her direction. Even at a distance of about thirty yards, her energy field radiated powerfully and beautifully.

At the booth, the trainers told about her and the other birds, what had happened to each, and how they had been brought to the shelter in hopes they would be healed, rehabilitated, and hopefully eventually be released back into the wild. But this red-tailed hawk would never go back. She had been blinded in one eye by a speeding car. Even as the trainers explained this, another hawk circled high above the pow-wow grounds. Hawks, as predator raptors, will attack other hawks. This injured hawk with only one eye would be an easy target were she released.

I remained at the booth perhaps for an hour, marveling at the smooth intensity of the energy field she radiated (“she” being a female hawk). It was more intense than I feel from most humans.

Back home that evening I knew I had to go back the next day to see if what I had felt in her energy field was just a figment of my

imagination from my excitement of being so close to a live version of my SunDance totem.

It was not. So while I listened to the pow-wow drum and singers at a distance, I basked in the unique radiance of this powerful bird, merging energetically with her just as I had with the tree in the SunDance. The trainers explained how an eagle with a broken wing had been brought to the shelter. As the eagle's wing healed, the red-tailed hawk helped to teach the eagle to fly again, even though in the wild they would have been severe competitors, even enemies.

As I sat near the perched hawk, immersed in her energy, it was as if I were sitting at a master's feet, receiving her teachings through transmission, which is always how the masterful teachings are communicated from teacher to student.

Since she would be returning to the shelter a hundred miles (160 km) away, I decided I would in my evening ceremonies include a time of merging energetically with her. As in my SunDance intent, I began to intend to connect with her luminous energy, merge with it, and see the physical and energetic world as if through her eyes, both her one remaining physical eye and her inner consciousness "eye."

Throughout the year I do most of my ceremonies outside under the Sonoran Desert stars. With the desert winds, I have even more of a sense of being in nature. Occasionally, rattlesnakes, skunks, foxes, and bobcats have passed nearby or seemingly joined me. It was quite a surprise to open my eyes and see a skunk standing beside me a foot away and at another time starting to leave only to hear the intense hiss of a rattlesnake's rattles about two feet behind me. (In neither case was I treated to a skunk bath or bitten.) So in this environment it was not difficult to hold the intent of seeing through the hawk's eyes soaring in the open skies.

Over time in the evening ceremonies I began to feel like my energies were merging more and more quickly with the red-tailed hawk in physical form a hundred miles (160 km) away. Given my energetic abilities, I am inclined to feel more than to see, and so I never had any visions or had any sense of physically seeing through her eye. I was never in a trance. But increasingly I did sense our vibrancies becoming more and more One. Never did I lose any of my own identity and take on hers. Rather, I felt like I was beginning to resonate at her frequencies while remaining also very consciously myself.

About four months after I began these nightly ceremonies, I went to a local concert. A friend whom I had not seen in a long time also

arrived. We began talking, and she asked how was my love life. She knew that for about three decades I had been giving workshops on and writing about sexuality. Likewise, professionally she was in a similar field. Without thinking, I blurted out, “Oh, I have a new lover. She’s a hawk.”

My friend was also mystically inclined and so would not likely be shocked by such a statement. I realized that in the openness of the moment with my friend, I had spontaneously and playfully expressed an insight that had been bubbling up in my consciousness.

While there were no erotic feelings in the connection with this hawk, the energetic intimacy was not unlike that with a long-term lover/companion. I knew this hawk’s essence. I could feel her inner being. There were no words and no passion, and the single luminosity when we merged felt not unlike when being in stillness and full presence with a lover/companion after making love.

Coital lovemaking, as well as other patterns of sexual contact, is a union of physical bodies. Merging of luminosities is a union of our souls, our beingness. It can be with or without sexual desire and sexual pleasure, but it is, nonetheless, union.

I began to realize that one who is a shaman must be able to dance in both the physical and the energetic, in both the incarnated dimension and the unseen intrinsic dimensions, and must be able to merge energetically in union with others when participating in a ceremony.

Ultimately, in one sense, there is no difference between the two approaches of the lover and of the shaman.

It is all about energy merged.