

## Part Ten

### Becoming an Animist: Postscript

I've been an animist most of my life.

Let's see, when did I start realizing that the universe is alive, and that the various inhabitants talked to me in some way? Probably when I was very young. I always seemed to be fascinated by the world around me, it seemed alive in some way to me—although certainly not in the way I've heard a lot of pagans describe their childhood; I didn't build altars and suchlike, I didn't see sprites and elves, I didn't feel the presence of spirits.

I don't really remember having direct communication, and I don't remember seeing the fae and other spirits of the land, water and air, or feel the need to expressly honor them by building little altars and having little ceremonies. Mostly, they just wanted me to live with them, the way I was.

But I remember especially Crater Lake in Oregon and the places we visited on the trips west. I remember watching the stars a lot, and the moon. And the astronauts being launched into space; I remember watching not only the manned launches, but also the lunar probes being launched, and in one case, impacting on the moon, at home in South Shores, so starting before May 1964.

For me, from the early 1960s into the 1980s, space, the stars and anything about them were at the front of my attention, whether factual or fictional, whether mundane or fantastical.

There were also dreams, even when I was young; I don't remember a lot about them now, but dreams have always felt like communication to me. Some of them, at least. And there were the ones that were about the same places, at different times.

Sometimes I'd be dreaming and realize that if I turned and went down that road, for example, instead of the direction I was going, I knew that I'd end up at some other place that I had dreamed before. Or maybe, had been before, in another life, perhaps even on another world.

The earliest odd thing I can remember was when we camped at Arches (then a National Monument in Utah) the first time. I had gone to the bathroom and walked past the campsite on the way back without seeing it. Well, I saw it, but I couldn't stop walking—in fact, I apparently walked quite a ways. I remember thinking it odd that I wasn't able to stop at campsite, but I felt compelled—called—to keep on walking, my eyes locked ahead of me, down the valley.

As I recall, my sister Jeanie finally caught me and brought me back to the family. I don't really know what age I was, but I suspect around age 5 or 6. When I camped there in 1979, the campground didn't look at all like I remember, so maybe I'm remembering another place and just think it was Arches.

The first clear marker that I can recall as a young adult was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade (okay, as a pre-teen), just before my birthday, when I got hit by the car, so I guess I was 11, and I turned 12 in the hospital. Probably before that by at least 6 years, but 1970 is when I became convinced *as an adult* that the world contained more than what our culture accepts, that these other things would interact with me.

For most of the years I've been an animist, I didn't realize that "animist" was really the word for it, because when I was young, coming of age back in the 1970s and first realized I was probably an animist, the dictionary definition and the little bits I could find about animism (mostly anthropology and sociology and psychology) at the public library definitely weren't about what I experienced, what resonated with me.

But some things that I read, such as *Black Elk Speaks*, really resonated: the story related is how I experience the world; not as a medicine man, but as a person living in a world that contains medicine men, and spirit worlds, and all the other things that were described by Nicholas Black Elk and transcribed by John G. Neihardt, a world in which all that was the natural state of affairs.

And then I would read something else about "animism" as it was understood by modern scientists who study culture, and what they described was nothing at all like what I experienced, or what I read in *Black Elk Speaks* and elsewhere, what resonated.

My experience soon—well, just before my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday—touched on an aspect of that animistic world I live in, wherein perhaps the spirits were trying to select me to become a shaman or medicine man or some other role, but it didn't take—I didn't react in the right way.

A WEIRD person would say that I had nightmares, perhaps caused or aggravated by alcohol and marijuana use, and maybe related to the unusual brainwave pattern that I have (as we discovered later in trying to figure out what had happened).

Or maybe all of the above. As if naming the cause or contributors or correlates explains *anything* about the experience itself: it felt as if a terrible storm was raging just outside my mind, and the walls of my reality, between me and the maelstrom, was thin fabric, paper perhaps, and would at any moment collapse and I would be swept away.

That's a difference between the WEIRD way of understanding the world and the animistic way. WEIRD ignores the experience, while animism embraces it.

I think modern animists, like me, should try to embrace both sides. But more on that later.

Anyway, to counteract the visceral lasting terror of that experience, I backed away from the world as I experienced it, and the behaviors that might have contributed to the experience, and to rebuild the walls between my self and the terror beyond. I immersed myself in a more traditional WEIRD lifestyle, and got married and tried to be a good Christian without solidly committing to a denomination.

Later, that began to fall away, and I simply tried to be a good WEIRD modernist and materialist, classifying myself at various times as agnostic or atheist. That phase, too, passed, and I found myself empty.

But it was all a façade. I was still an animist; that was how I experienced the world. I just didn't know that was or could be the correct term for it. I never did find any other term that was quite right, either.

Eventually, I started reading up on and otherwise studying mythology, other religions, my genealogy, human origins, environmentalism, poetry, philosophy...a lot of different things, all of which helped confirm that yes, I am indeed an animist—even if at the time I still only knew the old, incorrect WEIRD definition of animism.

But that meaning of the word still didn't fit, and the things that I read about animism still didn't fit, because it was all rooted in Tylor's (and therefore the dictionary's) definition of animism, which clearly wasn't me and my experience. And when it wasn't rooted in Tylor's definition, it was based in other WEIRD ideas about experience and belief and the sacred and the profane and the natural and the supernatural. While some of it seemed to make sense in an intellectual way, it had little or nothing to do with my experiences.

Oh, there were traces, hints, in some things I encountered, like reading *Black Elk Speaks*, and Vine Deloria and some other works of indigenous writers—but not all of them. And I certainly didn't meet anyone who could direct me along the proper path.

So, I still didn't have a word for it. I had seen shamanism before (ala Castenada, who despite probably being a fraud, certainly wrote about the shaman's world in a way that resonated with me), but I knew that because I hadn't been chosen and schooled by the spirits when I was younger, I was not a shaman.

And, I was still terrified of the strangeness beyond the terribly thin walls of defense set up around my consciousness. The shaman literature always talked about animism in relation to the indigenous cultures in which shamanism occurred, but I clearly was not a member of that kind of culture. But then, I'd

read another of the classics on animism or religion or mythology, and that still clearly wasn't me.

Then, 1998 or more likely, 1999, I met an honest-to-goodness animist. Different from me, but kindred nonetheless. I began to entertain the idea that I might be an animist based on his explanations and our discussions about experiences.

I embraced the strangeness that I was afraid to be alone with, because I also met the love of my life, of several lifetimes. That was in 2000. Over the ensuing years, I learned more about what I believe, filtered through more of the materials available, read up on paganism and Neopaganism and the like—which while interesting, does not resonate much with me.

Finally, in 2014, I decided to look into the literature on animism again, to see what I might glean, not expecting anything great, but at least to look again, now that I knew more about the various kinds of paganism. After all, I had been reading over the past few years about paganisms, and some of that was interesting, and I read a few more recent things about shamanism, some of which seemed spot on and others that seemed, well, not what I experience. But close.

It was then that I encountered Graham Harvey's writings online, including his *Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, his edited collection of writings by a multitude of individuals taking part in the examination and creation of what some call the New Animism. Now knowing that there was a literature out there investigating animism at least in part from the perspective of actual indigenous practitioners, I looked up the writings of many of these writers, which of course led to others, and still others.

Now, I was finally encountering descriptions of animism that echoed my own experiences, my own knowledge of the world. I had found that other people out there in the world actually experience the world the way I do, the way that resonates deeply within me. And so I began to learn afresh about animism, and could start to understand it in a way that I could articulate.

I AM an animist.

And that led to this work.