



# Under The Knife With The Spirits

Jonathan Horwitz

In the small consulting room, the surgeon had finished his examination. My eyes kept wandering to the chart on the wall that showed the intestinal system.

“Well,” he said, “there is some good news: the tumour is far enough up so that radiation won’t be necessary.....”



*My spirit body left the house and I walked through the wooden arch planted with New Dawn roses. As I walked through, a rosebud blossomed above my head and turned into a full-blown rose which seemed to be radiating its power down into my being. New Dawn! Encouraged by these words I continued out to our ceremonial fire-pit where my healing teacher was waiting for me*



He then explained the operation he was going to do. It wasn't possible from the biopsies to see if the tumour was cancerous or not, so it was necessary to treat it as if it were.

This would mean removing some of the colon where the tumour was, and then re-attaching the two ends. He explained the whole thing very methodically and, to him, it was routine and clear, although I didn't really understand - that this was happening to me! I had gone to the hospital thinking I was having a small procedure and now found myself staring into the unknown. Having worked with shamanic healing for over 30 years helped me to stay at least partly present, but I was still in shock. Then he added, "But there's something else. The scans showed shadows on your liver. We'll have to give you another scan to see if the

cancer has spread. If it has, we'll have to take care of that first."

I can see now that there is no way to say things like this gently, but the effect of his words was as if someone had just vacuumed something out of me. Instantaneous soul-loss.

In the impossible-to-hide lighting of the examination room I felt powerless to do anything about it. I felt like I had exhaled more than the capacity of my lungs and I couldn't inhale. I wanted to leave the claustrophobic chamber I was trapped in. I looked at my partner Zara. She was looking at the surgeon. I felt the assisting nurse looking at me.

"So, we've scheduled you for an MRI scan for...." He looked to the nurse. "The day after tomorrow," she completed.

We stood up. He put out his hand as he headed to the door.

I asked, "Am I correct in understanding that if the tumour is not cancerous now and is not removed it will become cancerous?"

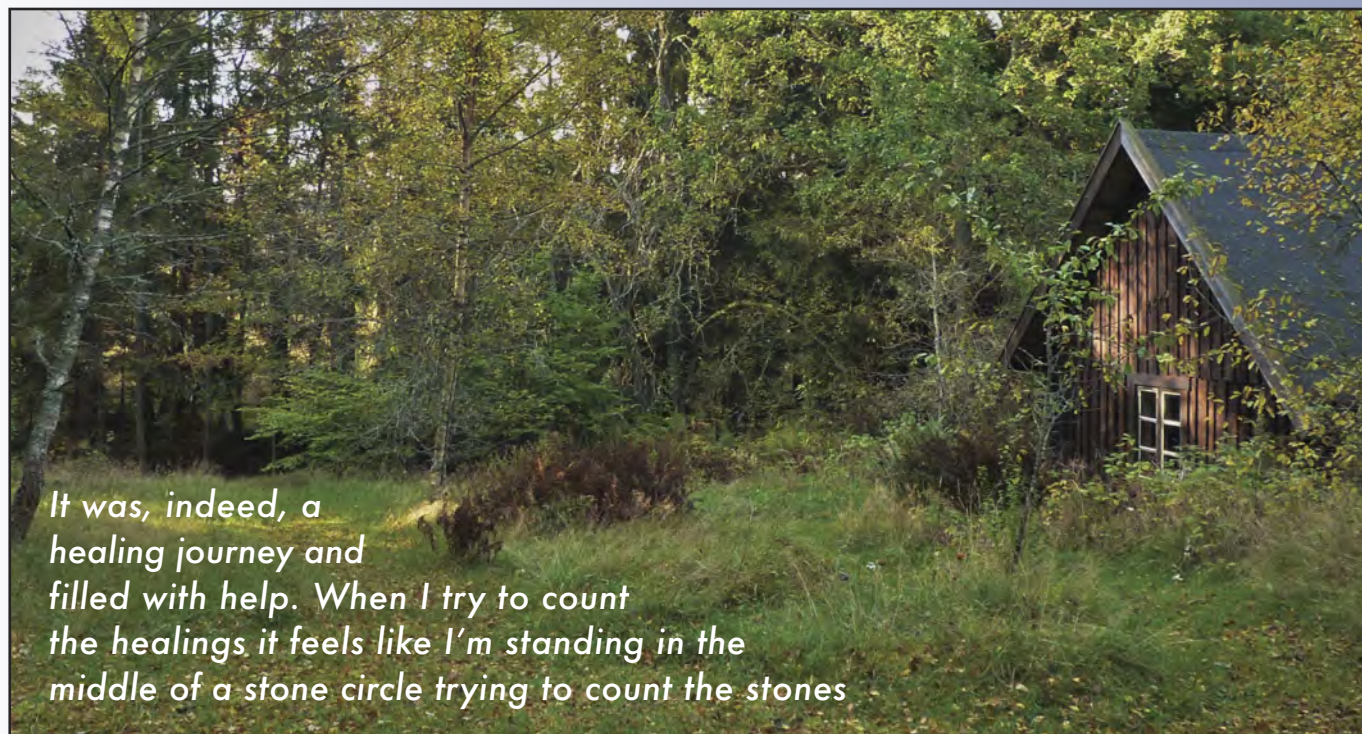
"Yes," he said, shaking my hand, "and then you'll die."

The shaman works by asking for help. But I felt so shaken that I had no idea what to ask for. Life, maybe?

Sitting in the car, Zara driving, finding it impossible to collect my thoughts. Feeling the soul loss. Paralysed would be an exaggeration. Stunned? Definitely. Facing Death.

Yes. It happens to all of us. If we were fully aware all the time, we would know that Death is with us all the time, right there at our shoulder. But life is generally too

*Below: Åsbacka, Jonathan's and Zara's home in Sweden*



*It was, indeed, a healing journey and filled with help. When I try to count the healings it feels like I'm standing in the middle of a stone circle trying to count the stones*



busy and so we 'forget,' or actively push it away - until Death is standing right before us, refusing to be ignored. Thousands of human beings have this experience around the world every day. On this day, I was one of them.

We live in the forest in southern Sweden. It is a very beautiful place. People coming for the first time often use the word 'Paradise' to describe it. For me it is home - and Paradise. 'Åsbacka' was the name it was given more than a hundred years ago, the hill on the ridge or, perhaps 'Ridge Hill.' Seven small cabins spread around a four-acre clearing in the forest. It is so quiet here that when Raven flies overhead, you hear its wings pushing the air.

Zara and I sat on the floor in the Drumming Room - where we sit in circle on retreats - and talked.

Both of us were stunned. There were so many unknowns in my situation - did I have cancer of the liver? If so, what would its treatment be? Was the tumour in my gut cancerous? Had it spread? How long would it take me to recover? Would I recover? - it was almost impossible, or so it felt, to come up with a clear mission.

Finally, with Zara's help I settled for a journey to my Spirit Helpers and Teachers to ask for help and healing for whatever the situation is in my body. A mouthful, yes, and a little clumsy, but I trusted that the spirits would understand.

The very first thing I experienced on the journey was a good omen. My spirit body left the house and I walked through the wooden arch planted with New Dawn roses.

As I walked through, a rosebud blossomed above my head and turned into a full-blown rose which seemed to be radiating its power down into my being. New Dawn! Encouraged by these words I continued out to our ceremonial fire-pit where my healing teacher was waiting for me.

It was, indeed, a healing journey and filled with help. When I try to count the healings in this journey it feels like I'm standing in the middle of a stone circle trying to count the stones.

My healing teacher was there, holding my head and stepping with me into the ceremonial fire to be cleansed. I also felt the power of her hands streaming through my brain, the power of her eyes as they looked into mine.

The space between my spirit body and my physical body is thin. I can feel my whole body-cavity and experience it as a huge cavern. I ask the 'Animal Who Walks With Me' to join me in exploring the cave. My teacher and healing teacher join us.

All around the cavern are vibrant flashing lights, illuminating the walls and ceiling. I see something organic hanging from the ceiling, like Spanish moss. It doesn't look so bad. I want to go further down the incline to explore. I ask my teacher. He agrees.

We come to a strange rectangular box-like object on the floor, about five feet long, three feet wide and three feet high. The top is smaller than the base. My teacher says, "That is treasure for you."

I can see it is attached to the floor of the cavern. I think it is the spirit of the polyp in my gut. "Yes," he continues, "it is a treasure for you. It will be a great treasure when it comes out." "How?" I ask. "It will be the key for unlocking the door of your new life." He pauses and looks at me, "We will do that when the time comes."

Looking at the journey afterwards, feeling its power and taking it to my being, I felt that

*We go into the cave.  
There is a hole in  
the roof and a  
beam of light is  
shining down  
through the hole.  
I am standing  
there with my  
teachers and my  
spirit animal.  
The light is  
shining down  
through the roof  
of the cave.  
My teacher says,  
"We will take care  
of you, my son..."*



*My spirits removed a part of my liver  
and her animal spirit helper flew with  
it into the Sun, she told me,  
"You have been healed."*

*The next day my liver was scanned.  
Four days later, four days of considering my life,  
four days of the dark night of the soul, the surgeon  
telephoned. "You have no cancer in your liver.  
Even today I can still feel the joy  
his words brought to me*

there were many gifts of power, though I did not at the time completely understand them.

Often when I teach someone how to journey to the spirit world, the first thing they ask me after a successful journey is: "How do I know it's not just my imagination and I'm not making it all up?"

What I generally answer is, "You don't." Then I ask, "How does the journey speak to your mission?" After discussion, the journeyer often can see - or feel - that it does, in some way, give insight or power. It is then up to them to accept the gifts.

Sometimes they ask, "How do I know it's not just me talking to myself?" To which I reply something like, "If that's you talking to you, don't you think you'd better listen?"

Eventually, there comes a point in our lives when we know that the absence of separation between who we are and the rest of the universe makes the 'imagination' question totally irrelevant. In this case, for example, I felt certain that the organic matter hanging from the roof of the cave was the spirit of the shadows they had seen on my liver, but it did not feel dangerous to my being. Also, my teacher had told me that the rectangular object was a gift for me, the key to opening the door to my new life. I also know that my teacher's wisdom and understanding is unfathomable - he could have just as well said the

same thing about Death. My death, I thought. Yet at the same time I knew he was not shrouding his words because that is not his way. He wanted me to know that my life in my body was not coming to an end just now and that I had more work to do.

As the time for the liver scan approached I thought about what it could mean if the cancer had spread to my liver. I had no idea - and when one has no idea this makes fertile ground for fear to grow.

I was trying to push my fear to the back of my mind, but with limited success. Finally, with Zara's help, I came to the mission: 'I am going to the Spirits to ask for help, power and healing for the situation I am in.'

When I first came to this formulation I thought it was too similar to the first journey, but then I saw that the first journey was about my body - while the second was about my being. It turned out to be an amazingly powerful journey.

They say that at the moment of death, your entire life goes past in review. On this journey I experienced highlights, not only from my life, but also the points of power from many of my most powerful journeys over the past thirty-five years, initiations, deepest lessons, instructions and wisdom my spirits had shared with me since I started working with them.

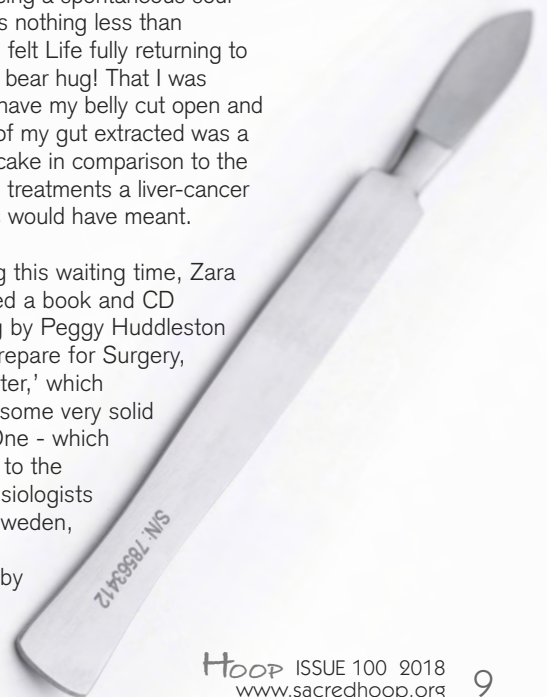
Toward the end of the journey, after my healing teacher removed a

part of my liver and her animal spirit helper flew with it into the Sun, she told me, "You have been healed." And my teacher added, "You have the power."

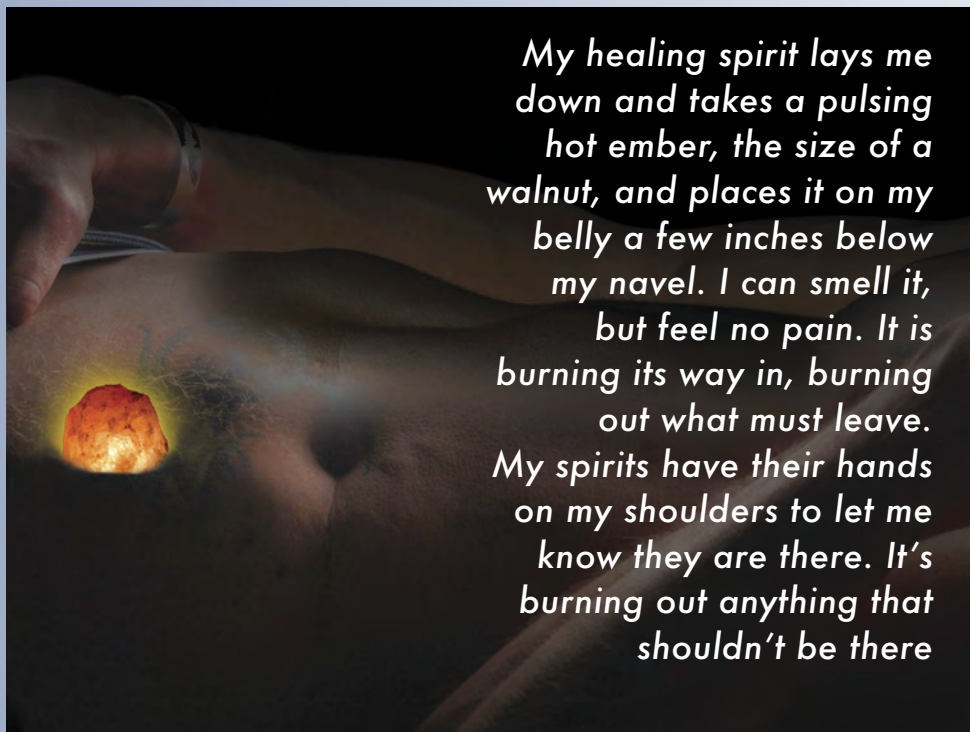
The next day my liver was scanned. Four days later, four days of considering my life and the crooked, beautiful, terrifying, peaceful, generous, selfish, loving, glorious and miserable path it had been, four days of the dark night of the soul, the surgeon telephoned. "You have no cancer in your liver. We have you booked in for removing the intestinal tumour on the eighth."

Even today I can still feel the joy his words brought to me. Experiencing a spontaneous soul retrieval is nothing less than ecstasy. I felt Life fully returning to me like a bear hug! That I was going to have my belly cut open and a chunk of my gut extracted was a piece of cake in comparison to the extensive treatments a liver-cancer diagnosis would have meant.

During this waiting time, Zara discovered a book and CD recording by Peggy Huddleston called 'Prepare for Surgery, Heal Faster,' which included some very solid advice. One - which was new to the anaesthesiologists here in Sweden, and well received by mine -







*My healing spirit lays me  
down and takes a pulsing  
hot ember, the size of a  
walnut, and places it on my  
belly a few inches below  
my navel. I can smell it,  
but feel no pain. It is  
burning its way in, burning  
out what must leave.  
My spirits have their hands  
on my shoulders to let me  
know they are there. It's  
burning out anything that  
shouldn't be there*

and the more you will remember. It's not about 'doing', it's about receiving and taking to your heart. Learning. Being. That's a different kind of action."

He paused. "Everything is reflecting, sending and receiving."

We go into the cave again, where, the large, strange box had been lying on the floor in the first journey. There is a hole in the roof of the cave right above where the box is, and a beam of light is shining down through the hole directly onto it.

The strange object is disappearing - but not really. The outline is still there, though physically it has disappeared.

I am standing there with my teachers and my spirit animal. The light is shining down through the roof of the cave.

My teacher says, "We will take care of you, my son."

was the use of healing statements to be read to the surgical patient immediately before and immediately after surgery.

I listened to the CD of guided-visualisation body scans once or twice a day, for more than two weeks, before the operation and again for a month after the operation. I feel they helped immensely, as did the recordings of Andrew Weil, Thich Nhat Hanh and Jon Kabat Zinn which I could listen to on-line.

By now, I was longing to have a deep consultation with my beloved teacher. My first two journeys had been to ask for help. Now I wanted advice, so I went to ask: 'What are the teachings of this time, so I can live them and let them into me so they can change my life?'

The help and the healings I had asked for in the first two journeys had taken the edge off the fear I had experienced, and I now felt ready to assume some responsibility with the help of my spirits.

I experienced, in this journey, meeting again many of my spirit helpers, some of whom I had not seen for a long time. I felt so held, feeling them around me and showing their support by their presence.

When I met my teacher he was warm and welcoming. I asked him my question and he answered quite directly: "Never take anything for granted. Every moment is a gift. And any moment that gift may be taken away. You know this, but you must allow it to lead you in life."

Keep your eyes open. A good exercise is to look for details. Notice things. The more you notice, the more you will notice,

His words did more than reassure me. Later, I realised that they were even preparing me for death.

Although the state of high alarm I felt when I was first diagnosed had diminished, I was still not feeling at all comfortable with the thought of giving myself over to the hospital system, let alone a five to eight hour operation.

I had not been a patient in a hospital since I was ten years old, and whenever I visited people it was always with the feeling of entering an alien limbo world, and a feeling of relief when I left. But the power, healing and help I had received from the spirits in my

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three journeys urged me on to prepare for the total experience.

As much as I was not comfortable with my situation, I felt I now had what I needed to step into it, so my next journey was asking for a healing for me, so the operation and recovery goes well and smoothly.

Some years ago, I realised that many people (myself included) ask for what they want when they go to the spirits. The spirits, in their wisdom, often respond with what we need.

In the beginning, it took me a while to see what they were doing. At first, I thought they were - at worst - ignoring me, or - at best - teasing me. But once I saw that what I needed was what I really wanted, I have always been grateful for their insight and compassion.

In this case I got the healing I asked for and more. My healing teacher and my teacher took turns until my whole body and being was vibrating on a cellular level.

My Teacher then gave me instructions: "Do not resist." At the time I thought he was referring to the healing power I was receiving from them, but later I felt strongly that he was talking about the whole process I was going through with the tests, scans, the up-coming operation, the hospital stay and possibly much more. Today I understand it as: "Do not resist Life."

In the periods between the journeys, my life went on as 'usual,' but not really. My goal was to be as well prepared as possible before the physical operation. With this in mind, I asked for a healing for the polyp itself, to make the surgeons' work as easy as possible.

When I got to the ceremonial firepit, the area around was crowded, not only with the spirits who had been there on the other journeys, but lots of what seemed to be 'ordinary' people. Also present were three

Kachinas, the spirit people of the Pueblo Indians. Suddenly they all shout. I understand they are shouting to scare away the spirit of the illness. They shout again and once more.

My healing teacher lays me down, walks over to the fire and takes a pulsing hot ember, the size of a walnut, and places it on my belly a few inches below my navel. I can smell it, but feel no pain. It is burning its way in, burning out what must leave.

My teachers have their hands on my shoulders, not to trap me or hold me down, but to let me know they are there. It's burning in, and out, too, as anything that shouldn't be there is being burned out.

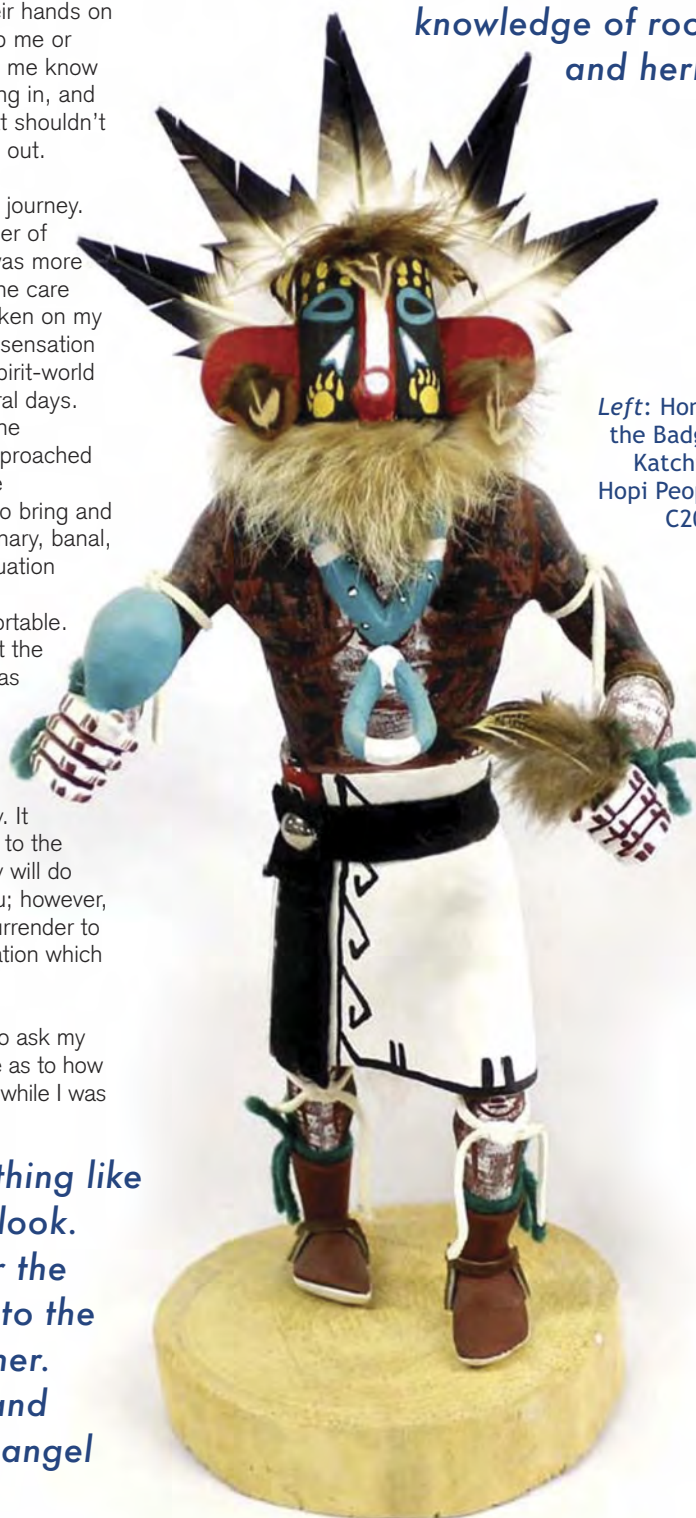
I felt healed after this journey. The overwhelming number of spirits who showed up was more than encouraging, and the care and actions that were taken on my behalf, and the physical sensation of the operation in the spirit-world stayed with me for several days.

But, as the time for the hospitalisation rapidly approached and the hospital sent me information about what to bring and how to prepare, the ordinary, banal, physical reality of my situation began to become more noticeable -and uncomfortable.

I realised one day that the feeling of my situation was very similar to the feeling I had as a twenty-two year old, days before being drafted into the US Army. It is one thing to surrender to the spirits, knowing that they will do everything to support you; however, it is something else to surrender to the power of an organisation which is totally impersonal.

My next journey was to ask my spirits for help and advice as to how stay connected to power while I was in the hospital.

*I had set up a small altar with the Badger Kachina, when a nurse walked into the room. Her eyes fell on the kachina. "What's that?" I explained about Honan, the Badger, the doctor spirit of the Pueblo people because of his knowledge of roots and herbs*



Left: Honan  
the Badger  
Kachina  
Hopi People  
C20th

*The nurse smiled. "I've never seen anything like that before," she said, taking a closer look. It seemed that Honan spoke to her. For the next eight days every time she came into the room, the Spirit of Healing came with her. Somehow we felt a strong connection and she became our own personal healing angel*





Above: an image of the blue-skinned Medicine Buddha which Jonathan had on his hospital room altar

Like the previous journey, this one took place entirely around the ceremonial fire-pit.

The first piece of advice came from the Red Kachina being; "You have to remember to dance in the hospital."

"But I'll be full of holes and tubes," I protested.

But the Red Kachina dancer wasn't to be put off.

"You can dance, you can dance the dance you need to dance."

Soon after, my teacher came, showing me a steel rail. "What does it tell you?" he asked.

"Inflexibility," I answer.

"That is how your connection to us will be while you are in the hospital: inflexible, direct, shining."

A bright ruby-red hummingbird came to me and whispered in my ear. Suddenly, I am sitting in a strange place at a table next to an oriental woman. She says to me, "Be yourself. If you want to eat

with your fingers," picking up a morsel of food from a bowl and putting it in her mouth, "eat with your fingers. Be you -and enjoy it."

"What is this strange place?" I ask. "This is how it will feel in the hospital. Remember the steel rail. Don't bend. Of course, they will take care of you, but be true to yourself."

I don't really understand. She says: "You will. And remember to smile."

Before returning, I met my teacher again. He said, "Come back to yourself. Remember to come back to yourself. We will be there to help you and you will be strong."

He smiles and pats me on the shoulder: "We are not through with you yet". He chuckles. "Remember who you are. Remember who you are. That is what it is all about."

Looking back on my stay in the hospital, I can see that is exactly what happened. With the help of the spirits, I was myself - and also, inflexible, direct and shining.

Under normal circumstances, it would be very difficult for me to be inflexible, but in the hospital it wasn't about being rigid, it was about being inflexible in my determination to go through the whole experience as well as possible in every way. And that's what happened.

The morning of the hospitalisation was not easy. Zara and I stood in the kitchen of our beautiful home, both of us knowing there was a chance it could be the last time we ever stood there together.

It was time to go. After parking the car at the hospital, approaching its huge greyness, I looked at the building and my teacher said, "This is the Temple of Healing." Suddenly, it wasn't so grey, and I knew I was stepping into a great life-adventure.

I felt blessed that I was allocated a single room. I was told to do this and that, and was happy that I didn't have to get into the bed and that Zara was allowed to remain.

We were both calling our spirits asking for help. I had set up a small altar with the Badger Kachina on the bedside table when a nurse walked into the room. Her smile was radiant.

As she looked around the room to make sure that everything was alright her eyes fell on the kachina.

"What's that?"

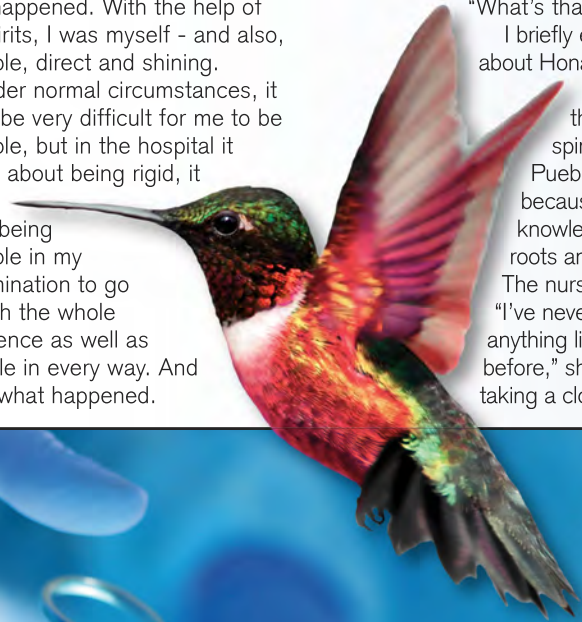
I briefly explained about Honan, the

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The nurse smiled. "I've never seen anything like that before," she said, taking a closer look.

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It seemed that Honan spoke to her. For the next eight days every time she came into the room, the Spirit of Healing came with her. Somehow we felt a strong connection and she became our own personal healing angel.

Eventually, Zara had to leave. Before trying to sleep, I took a quick look at my emails, my family and many friends wishing me well. It warmed my soul and I felt so beautifully held.

My Teacher whispered in my ear, "We are all connected." And I suddenly knew that even if it had 'only' been one other person wishing me well on this journey, then that one person would be bringing the power of the universe.

It was all so strange. The next morning they wheeled my whole bed with me in it out of my room down the hall to the elevator, and then down, emerging into a pea soup-green painted basement corridor.

So this is it, I thought to myself. I wasn't waiting. I was breathing. I was looking, thinking: "If this is the last I see, I'd better see." What I saw was the gift of being alive.

Eventually, I was wheeled into the preparation room. A man sat next to me and asked questions about allergies and past illness, as others packed me so that I couldn't

move. It felt like when my spirits were holding me on the journey to let me know they were there. I felt very comfortable!

The man who asked me the questions had very deep eyes and looked a lot like one of my dearest friends. I felt even more relaxed and deep trust as he put needles into me.

I told him I'd been preparing for the operation and that I had some things I'd like to have him read as I went under. I gave him the piece of paper. He read them out loud and asked, "Is this what you want me to say?"

"Yes, please, and on the other side is what I want to hear when I am waking up".

"All right," he smiled.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes. I am ready."

He gently touched my arm and in a beautifully confident and relaxing voice read aloud:

"After this operation, you will feel comfortable and heal very well. You will come back to yourself, and you will feel well and recover fully. You will feel comfortable and heal well. You will feel comfortable and heal very well."

There is a song I was taught by a giant wolf, many years ago, a song to sing when I need help. I realised that I had to sing this song and when my friend the

*The next time my eyes opened I was lying in my bed in a dimly lit room. It felt cozy, like a cave. I moved my eyes around. A nurse came and stood by my bed, smiling. "Hello," he said. "Hello," I answered. "How do you feel?" he asked. I looked at them and it felt like I smiled. "I feel great! I'm alive!"*

anaesthesiologist finished reading (or was it before?) I started to sing the song as I felt me and my bed move toward the operating room; "Ae yo ae ya aio ae ya ae yo a aio..." The wolf was lifting her chin to the Moon.

My eyes opened a crack. We were moving through a brightly lit corridor. The surgeon was saying it all went well, someone else said it took eight hours. My eyes closed.

The next time my eyes opened I was lying in my bed in a dimly lit room. It felt cozy, like a cave. I moved my eyes around.

The hospital.

A nurse came and stood by my bed, smiling. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," I answered.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

I looked them and it felt like I smiled. "I feel great! I'm alive!"

Through the years working with shamanism, I have often read and





heard people talk about how long it takes to recover from an operation, how the anaesthesia can cause soul-loss, how difficult everything is after an operation - and, yes, all of these things can be true. But they don't have to be.

One thing that helped me was taking specific homeopathic remedies to help clear the anaesthetic from my body, another was having a loved one by my side almost all the time and hear her singing, rattling, asking for help for me.

I also had cards in my room with key teachings from my preparation journeys that I read to myself again and again.

Several others were also journeying, or doing ceremony, to ask for healing for me long distance. I had so many many people sending healing and help, I could feel the incredible power of love coming through, and how strong it was, how much it helps.

The day after the operation I was helped out of bed to a rolling device I could lean on, and, with Zara on one side, and our angel nurse on the other, I walked!

The first twenty steps were a challenge, and then suddenly I realised I could do it!

I started laughing. I felt good, and the next day I felt better, walking with only a stroller, and each following day I walked more,

ate more and felt much better than the day before. One by one the tubes came out and after eight days they sent me home.

My whole experience proved to me beyond any doubt that we all are connected - everything with everything - that the power of the Universe is everywhere and not only accessible, but surrounding us, embracing us and flowing through us.

Of course, I have always felt the truth of this. But now I know through extreme experience.

Also, I am absolutely sure that if I had gone into the hospital feeling isolated and alone (disconnected), my experience would have been entirely different.

Before going in, I had reached out to friends, family and my shamanic community, asking for help, love, prayers, and healing.

I didn't keep it secret, I opened up and asked for help. I allowed help to come.

By the time I reached the hospital basement before the operation I felt so connected that I knew I was prepared to die - and I also knew that I would not. And, when I woke up, I knew I was ready to live.

Death does not only come in the hospital. None of us knows when it will arrive, and I know that life in

this body is not forever, and that I am closer to death now than ever before in my life. In the meantime, I am alive, perhaps more than ever before. So the question is, how am I going to live?

A shaman is not a shaman because they have a powerful personality, or says clever things or are a good performer. Shamans are shamans because of their connection to their spirit helpers and teachers, and the world around them; because of the way they dance with the power of the Universe.

The shaman knows there is only one way to step into fear and that is by asking for help and allowing himself to receive that help.

Looking back on my hospital experience I can see there were many factors that brought me through in a way that felt empowering, peaceful, inspiring and healing: the circle of friends - and friends I have not yet met - who held me in their hearts in many different ways; the homeopathic remedies; the books and records Zara found with exercises to prepare myself before the operation, and to heal me after; the surgeons and staff, our angel nurse, who did their work not only with expertise but also compassion; and the spirits who guided me, held me, healed me.

All of these manifestations of love were equally important - and they worked together, knowing it or not.

Later, someone said to me, "You were lucky." I just smiled.

The old Vikings used to say that one was either born lucky or unlucky. For me, words like 'lucky' and 'coincidence' and 'intuition' are shorthand words we use which really mean 'The spirits are dancing with us.' We only have to dance with them.

Jonathan Horwitz has been working with shamanism since 1972. In 1986, he founded the Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies together with Annette Høst and has been teaching internationally ever since. Jonathan served as European Editor for A Journal of Contemporary Shamanism and is a frequent contributor to Sacred Hoop Magazine. He continues to lead workshops and retreats with his partner Zara Waldebäck, internationally and in the woods of southern Sweden at Åsbacka where they live.  
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**Below:**  
Jonathan and  
Zara in New  
Mexico, almost  
exactly a year  
after the  
operation

