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BODY & MIND

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Shamanic journey seeks peace, wholeness

Durham woman taps ancient healing practice

by Robin Flanigan

Church service was about half over when a dull, heavy pain coursed through Mara Bishop's chest and stomach. All she knew was that it had come from an unfamiliar man in his 30s sitting to her left in another set of pews, and that his suffering had something to do with his daughter. In high school at the time, Mara wanted to comfort him, to offer a hug or at the least a knowing glance. But she figured any gesture would be inappropriate. Instead, she sat distracted and full of heartache until the service ended and the stranger walked down the aisle, doused his fingers with holy water, shook hands with the priest and disappeared out the door. The experience left Mara feeling drained. It had been overwhelming and confusing and she didn't know what to do with it. She would now. After years of studying ways to control a level of intuition she says once felt like a sixth sense overloading her system, Mara, 30, is sought after by people who want her help understanding their past and preparing for their future. Being able to regulate an acute insight - what she calls a "shift in perception" - does wonders for her own mental health. "When you're intuitive, you're open to other people's energy, including their emotions," said Mara, who also works full-time as a Web site designer, during a recent interview at Foster's Market on Chapel Hill Boulevard. "And there are a lot of painful emotions floating around." In 1996, Mara began practicing shamanism, the ancient art of asking the spirit world for assistance in healing others. Now, as one of at least three shamans in the area with similar training, she sees about 10 clients a week and her practice is growing through references and advertisements. Shamans (pronounced SHAH-mahns) say they enter another state of consciousness to go on a "journey," during which they ask for spiritual assistance. They believe that all illness or imbalance has a spiritual component, and that spiritual healing, as a result, can have a significant impact on the physical body. In other words, shamans believe they can help people recover more quickly from surgery, for example, if they focus on mending their spirit. According to those who practice it, shamanism - a Siberian tribal word - has rules but no dogma of its own. It can complement organized religion, though. In fact, Mara does shamanic work with her 56-year-old mother, a practicing Catholic, and her 79-year-old grandmother, a practicing Jew. Shamanism and traditional medicine aren't strange bedfellows, either. Both aim to remove the unwanted and replace the lost. They just go about it in different ways. Unfortunately, Mara said, those in her position are given a fraction of the credit doctors receive for aiding in better health. Although shamanism has been around for centuries, people still regard it as primitive, as something without purpose in contemporary society. Mara said she understands the cynicism, particularly with the growing number of "embarrassing" and "cheesy" fortune tellers setting up shop along highways and using scare tactics to make their money. But her aim, she explained, is not to predict the future or serve

as a "data dump" for people seeking quick answers to life's complex problems. Instead, she views her work with clients as more of a partnership. She said she gives information and suggestions so that they can make productive, long-term changes for the better. And she teaches private classes and gives lectures on her craft, she added, because her main interest is in helping others learn how to help themselves. She said she believes everyone has an intuitive aptitude. Just as with athletics -some people have a natural ability to shoot hoops while others have to work at it. But anyone can bounce a basketball. As for her own ability, Mara takes none of what she sees on her journeys for granted. "I have to stop myself from being surprised," she said. "I view this as a privilege - as sacred - and I treat it with an incredible amount of respect and reverence. Because I know it's not about me."



Lillian Becker grew up shy and sheltered, which made it easier for her later to bury the things she wanted to forget. She had gotten married, gotten on with her life. But four years ago, while on her way to visit her parents in Greensboro, a car accident brought it all back: a hospitalization for an illness that required humiliating, invasive treatments when she was a fourth-grader; and, at the age of 14, the rape by a family friend on the cold bathroom floor of her church. "It just seemed like my whole life was just shot down in that moment," Lillian recalled of the wreck, which damaged her lower back. "I really felt alone in the universe, that the whole thing wasn't fair. Like before, I was doing everything right and, boom, out of nowhere something horrible happened. It really shook me up." She tried a mix of traditional and alternative therapies for her injury, and sought counseling for the vivid memories that had resurfaced. All of it helped but none of it made things good enough. She felt as if she had lost pieces of herself along the way, as if she should return to her old church in Greensboro, face her greatest fear and feel whole again. Last month, she had a dream that she did just that. After waking up with a yearning to return and somehow make things right again, she set up an appointment with Mara. The two met months earlier at a party, and although Lillian was hopeful Mara could help her out, she had no experience with this type of work and showed up for her first shamanic journey feeling apprehensive. Any doubts disappeared after it was over. Mara first told Lillian that during the journey she had seen a girl about 10 years old sitting at the top of a tree. Lillian took that to be herself in the fourth grade, when she went to the hospital. It made sense to her because she loved climbing trees at that age. She felt safe in the highest limbs. But more mind boggling for Lillian was that Mara also had come across a teen-age girl with long brown hair and bangs sitting on a bathroom floor. "When those words came out of her mouth, I just about fell out of my seat," Lillian remembered, still emotional. "I don't know how it works, but she made an instantaneous believer out of me. She was bringing back pieces of my soul. "I have to say that it doesn't matter if this is all in my head," she continued after a short pause. "Whether it's something that took place in reality or something that took place in my head, what difference does it make if it helps me, if it heals me, if it makes me more complete?"



Mara stands, eyes shut, in the middle of her southern Durham office as she prepares to "rattle in the spirits," a way of asking for spiritual assistance before she starts on her journey. She holds up a drum made for her by a Massachusetts shaman and waits a moment in silence. The shamans say the drum is the horse you ride to the spirit world. Slowly rocking from right to left, eyes still closed, Mara starts beating the skin on her instrument with a steady rhythm that bounces heavily

off the white brick walls and floor. Steve, her husband, joins in with his drum and they sway at different angles, their beats perfectly matched. Lillian, here for her second journey, watches intently from a couch against the wall. The beats get faster after about five minutes, then stop. Mara puts down her drum, lowers the shades to block the sinking sun and turns off a brass lamp, then motions for Lillian to take her place on a futon in the corner. She lets the copper fountain by the futon continue its gurgling. It's time for a diagnostic journey - a relatively short trip to the spirit world that will tell Mara what she needs to do for Lillian this visit. The women lie on their backs side-by-side. Mara rests her right arm on the bridge of her nose, covering her eyes, pressing the palm of her left hand flat against her belly. Lillian keeps her hands crossed at the wrists. Steve starts to drum at just under 200 beats per minute, circling the room expressionless as the vibrations scatter and converge, eventually sounding like distant church bells. Walking to the edge of the futon, he locks his elbows and beats above the women's ankles, moving the drum slowly to his left until he passes over their still faces. He circles the room twice more before Mara sits up. She taps Lillian on the shoulder and tells her she has some more healing to do. Lillian gives Mara permission to go on a longer journey, one that should reveal just how much work needs to be done before she can let go of her painful past. As Lillian lies back down, Mara reaches for a cardboard box and pulls out a scented, purple satin pillow, she plans to use instead of her arm to block out any hint of light. "I don't think the original shamans had these lovely little eyebags," she quips, folding her hands as she lowers herself next to Lillian. Steve starts drumming again. Lillian registers no emotion, although later she will say she felt warm and nurtured during it all. The first time, she said, she felt nothing. After about 20 minutes, Mara removes her eyebag, rises to her knees and blows ceremoniously into Lillian's chest and the top of her head-a symbolic gesture signaling the return of all that was lost. She shakes a rattle around Lillian's frame and the journey is complete. Lillian, after hearing Mara had seen a spirit cradling her like an infant in front of a fire, is reassured once more that she is getting her life back, getting rid of the rage she has felt so passionately for so long. "I'm pretty sure it's gone now," Lillian, visibly refreshed, said of the anger. "I've said that before, so I'm not going to say this is the last time. But I'm pretty sure." Shamanic journeys with Mara Bishop range from \$40 to \$100, depending on the type of work to be done. She can be reached at 419-1074 or by e-mail at intuition7@aol.com. Her website is www.WholeSpirit.com. **Please note that my e-mail address has changed since this article was printed. It is now mara@wholespirit.com**



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