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There’s a growing interest in shamanism, as we look for spiritual ways to reconnect with nature. Shamanic practitioner Mandy Pullen talks to Clare Gogerty about why it is right for our times

Photography: DARCIE JUDSON

Through one window of Mandy Pullen’s cottage in the Forest of Dean, a tall tangle of ragged robin shifts in the breeze, its frayed pink flowers dipping in and out view. “I like to watch it wave around, see the bees land on its petals, and the feathery seeds fly from it,” she says from the depths of a sheepskin-covered armchair. “I absolutely love it. It’s a bit of a teacher.”

As well as her garden, which wraps around the cottage and is filled with a jumble of vegetables, wild flowers and fruit trees, Mandy ‘caretakes’ a large area of land nearby. She sees this mix of woodland, pasture and quarry as her place of work, and her classroom: “I know the nature spirits there,” she says, “and where all the different trees are, and where all the different things live. It’s where I take people to reconnect with nature. I say to them ‘have a conversation with this tree’, or I leave them to find their own tree.”

This connection and response to nature is fundamental to Mandy’s shamanic practice which she has named Eco-Shamanism. At its heart is the idea that as humans, we are not separate from the earth or anything upon it, but rather we are the earth. “The way we experience the world is very cut off,” she says. “We need to approach it from our hearts and senses, and then we become part of it. Then, whatever happens to the world, happens to us. We are spiritual beings in the same ways a tree is, or a mountain, or a river, even a car. My last car definitely had a spirit. I’m still grieving its loss six months on.”

SPIRITUAL CURRENCY

Although shamanism has existed for thousands of years in different cultures, it is currently witnessing a revival as more people search for a nature-based, spiritual dimension to their lives. Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop website has taken to running interviews with shamans – an indication of its currency if ever there was one (although selling gold animal spirit rings at \$2,400 a pop seems a little cynical).

“When I was training in shamanic practice, I was constantly being asked what a shaman was,” says Mandy. “Now that rarely happens. I think that because ‘shaman’ doesn’t sound English, and isn’t loaded like ‘witch’ or ‘wizard’, it is somehow more acceptable.” Shamanism is also, she says, the appropriate response to modern times. “We are allowing spirituality in because we have to. If we don’t, we are going to kill ourselves through killing the planet.”

The word ‘shaman’ actually originates in Mongolia, but has been appropriated by a variety of different Western beliefs. “It is an ancient, cross-cultural technique,” says Mandy. “In this country, druids* are our ancestral shamanic practitioners, as are witches and herbalists.”

Shamanism became recognised in popular culture in the 1960s, when Carlos Castaneda, an author and anthropologist, wrote a series of books including *The Teachings of Don Juan*, which related his encounters with indigenous Indians in the Mexican desert. From this, he developed a way of shamanic journeying involving psychedelic peyote mushrooms, »

* Druidry is an ancient tradition that is undergoing a modern revival. It unites a love of the earth with a love of creativity, and celebrates the solar festivals with rituals and gatherings. For more, visit druidry.org.





Shamanism for Mandy (right) is about connecting to nature. Tools such as seasonal collages (left) and labyrinths (opposite) help to strengthen this connection



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which struck a chord with counter-culture cosmic adventurers. Another anthropologist, Michael Harner, went to the Amazon and experimented with the plant ayahuasca and repetitive drumming, developing what is known as Core Shamanism. His book *The Way of the Shaman* is regarded as a central neoshamanic text.

AN EARTH-BASED WAY OF THINKING

Although Mandy has never been interested in the psychedelic aspects of shamanism, and hadn’t connected with Carlos Castaneda earlier, one of his books, *The Active Side of Infinity*, played a pivotal role in her life. As a student on a foundation art course in 2004, she was in the library researching Caribbean plants for a painting about Mr Rochester’s first wife, when Castaneda’s book “jumped out” at her. Reading it, she experienced what she describes as an ‘epiphany’: “I had a physical reaction,” she says. “It felt like everything went ‘boom’ and suddenly opened. Like the bit in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, when a gold coin hits the bottom of the ocean. It was as though everything in my life had led me to that point.”

Although she had a place on an art degree course – examples of her work, including sculptural bull heads hang on the wall of her home (and outdoors, see previous page) – she decided that her path would lead elsewhere. Instead, she spent two years training to be a shamanic practitioner at The Sacred Trust, an established educational organisation specialising in shamanic teaching. Funding her studies by teaching classical and jazz piano, she finished the course with enough understanding of the subject to develop what she describes as her ‘earth-based practice’ and start her work in Eco-Shamanism.

JOURNEYS IN SHAMANISM

All of which leads us to her cottage in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, in which she reads extensively – a toppling pile of esoteric books sits next to her fireside chair – listens to music, and plans workshops, pilgrimages and courses. She is keen to emphasise that she has no special powers, and that she is not a healer. “People experience profound changes on my workshops,” she says. “They heal themselves. I



am a guide, a rebalancer. I help them to unlock their potential to help themselves.”

An example of this is her ‘Learn the Shaman’s Journey’ workshop, where she teaches people about the shamanic world and, by drumming, builds a bridge to connect with the spirits. “Hitting the drum with a beater 4–7 times per second mimics the brainwave cycle,” she says, “and will take you to a trance-like place between sleep and daydreaming.”

Participants learn about the shaman’s map, which is made up of three worlds: the upper, lower and middle. Her guided shamanic journeys tend concentrate on the middle world. (Core shamanic journeying usually focuses on the upper and lower.) These middle world journeys are similar to meditation although, unlike meditation, they are internally active: participants start with an intention or a question then, once they are relaxed, Mandy uses her voice to take them to a place in the middle world. She leaves them while she drums and they connect with their spirits, and seek answers, advice or healing.

The spirits communicate via messages that only make sense to the individual: “If I was really into Star Wars, for example, they might present me with Star Wars images because I would understand what they refer to.” When the time feels right, she stops drumming, everyone thanks their spirits, and her voice brings them back.

MESSAGES AND METAPHORS

The concept of spirits, which Mandy describes as “beings that have passed from the earthly realm into the spirit world”, can be difficult to grasp for those new to shamanism. Eco-Shamanism, Mandy says, helps you develop a sensory awareness, a sixth sense, to connect with them. Once this becomes fine-tuned, you start to see messages all over the place. Robins have appeared to her a lot lately: one chattered outside a recent workshop, where a robin’s pincushion gall (a sticky, branch parasite) was also found on a rosehip in the circle of participants, and then there’s the ragged robin outside the window... “It’s a connection

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

JOURNEYWOMAN
The Mandy Pullen CV

- 1963** Born on Christmas night at the time of a New Moon, in Hampshire.
- 1982** Achieves Grade 8 on the piano, then doesn’t play again for 15 years.
- 1995** Son Will is born.
- 1990s** Runs a small organic veg garden and operates one of the first veg box schemes.
- 2002** Moves to a tumbled down cottage in the Forest of Dean with her young son and begins to restore it.
- 2004** Her book ‘Valuable Vegetables: Growing for Pleasure and Profit’ is published. Has an epiphany while reading Carlos Castaneda’s ‘The Active Side of Infinity’ and realises that the shamanic path is the way forward. Completes Foundation Art Course at Hereford College of Art & Design. Is accepted on a degree course but decides it is not for her.
- 2000** Teaches classical and jazz piano to fund her shamanic training.
- 2009** Finishes training to be a shamanic practitioner at The Sacred Trust.
- 2012** Develops Eco-Shamanism, runs workshops, training programmes, and leads pilgrimages.

with the natural world that is saying I am doing the right thing.” Rather than dismiss symbols and metaphors as coincidence, Mandy says we should pay attention and be patient; their meaning may not be immediately obvious. “You have to trust what you see and then wait,” she says. “Things will just pop up. That’s the earth spirit speaking.”

Another powerful metaphor for her is the labyrinth. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth is unicursal – there is only one way through it. It can be seen as representing our passage through life, or our journey from our outer to our inner worlds. “It’s important to stand in the middle for a moment and do something,” says Mandy. “Contemplate an intention, or receive some wisdom from an object or quote that has been left there.” She has a couple of portable labyrinths that she uses for workshops. “I like to work with labyrinths because your feet are on the ground, you are connected with the earth.” And, at the end of the day, being connected with the earth is what shamanic journeying is all about. Sitting in Mandy’s cottage near a forest, logs crackling, surrounded by plants and bees, feels like a pretty good place to start. 🌿
Learn more about Eco-Shamanism on Mandy’s website, mandypullen.co.uk. She will also be presenting at the Gatekeeper Trust Annual Conference, 25–26 November, where she will co-lead a river pilgrimage and a labyrinth journey; gatekeeper.org.uk.