



The Game of Life

LEO RUTHERFORD, one of the first people to bring the teachings of the Medicine Wheel to the UK talks to JAN MORGAN WOOD about his life and how the 'medicine' has changed in the UK over the years

In my thirties I met a Liverpool Yoga teacher called Ken Ratcliffe and heard sense about God and spirituality for the first time in my life, a serious revelation. Until then I had thought it must be me that's insane, even though I was sure I lived in a mad world.

In my forties, I reached a massive mid-life crisis. Well, what else does a crazy repressed god-fearing, nature-fearing and own-body-fearing lifestyle bring? Circumstances – a girlfriend's invitation - took me to San Francisco for a holiday and I ended up living there for five years. It was the most brilliant place to go through a crisis as not only were there so many others in the same predicament, but there were some really good people teaching, facilitating, healing and helping.

In order to stay there I got a student visa for which I had to become an official student and I found a wonderful MA course in Holistic Psychology, which was as near what I would have created for myself as I could get. I learned a whole heap of good things, and in the second year was introduced to shamanism at a five-day course by Joan Halifax. This was like a window opening on a wider world as it brought psychology and spirituality together and made much deeper sense for me of the human condition. My condition!

Jan: Your courses on the guiding powers of the Medicine Wheel and shamanism have introduced hundreds of people to these healing ways. How did it all start?

Leo: I grew up in a convenience-Christian household. We were Christians for births, marriages and deaths and the rest of the time we were just guilty. After all, 'God' had died for us and we weren't doing anything much for 'him'. It didn't make sense, none of it, and I grew through puberty in a most incredibly confused state as what my body demanded and what 'good' people were supposed to be and do, didn't match in any way.

That sounds like quite a learning curve. What did you decide to do with this new perspective on life?

When I came back to the UK, I set up what I called 'Play-World', a mixture of theatre improvisation, dance and dance improv, non-competitive games, sound and voice - an alternative approach to the issues people took to psychotherapy.

I felt strongly, and still do, that therapy starts from the wrong place - 'What's wrong with you?' The prize for getting well then becomes banishment from the therapist or group, a sort of 'What d'you mean your OK, who are you kidding??' The impetus to stay stuck, to stay not OK, is virtually written into the contract.

So instead in Playworld, we played and had lots of good times; on longer courses, when tears and process came up, we spent time with it until we were ready to play again, then at a more real and fulfilling level.



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During this time I also began to offer the occasional workshop on the little bit of shamanism I had learned and soon found myself being asked for more.

Then in 1986 I went on a very memorable journey to Peru with Alberto Villoldo and the shaman he was then apprenticed to, don Eduardo Calderon. After that trip, many things subtly changed in my life and I began to be able to do things I couldn't have even thought of before.

Also that year, and the following year, Harley Swiftdeer, a part Cherokee medicine teacher who founded the Deer Tribe Medicine society, came to England. I spent several weeks with him continuing the learning I had started with him in California and imbibing more of the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. As time went on and I was being asked to teach more shamanistic work, I was better able to pass on what I had learned, gradually finding out that I had learned more than I realised!

I searched for a name as Play-World didn't cover this aspect of my work, and for a time put it under the heading 'Medicine Journeys', but that didn't feel right at all.

It was the following year when things really changed. I remember being invited to dinner by a well-known dance teacher, who talked to me about her work and asked if I thought she could put it together as a year course. Looking at her material, and listening to her, I came up with an unequivocal 'yes'.

It wasn't till I was driving home that the penny dropped - and I realised that perhaps I could do that too. I figured out that I had the map, the Medicine Wheel teachings that had been the foundation of the journey in Peru. The essence was that we had travelled first to the 'South' to heal personal history, then to the 'West' to make death an ally, to the 'East' to seek vision, and to the 'North' to ground in wisdom. I needed to find alternative ways to guide people to these Four Directions however, as much of the activities and ceremonies in the Peru journey could not be done here in the UK.

Such processes and perspectives were very new at that time and there was very little in the way of workshops or books. How did you make connection with people who

wanted to learn about that map, that Medicine Wheel?

I thought that maybe I could persuade eight or ten friends to join me in an experiment to try out such an idea and accordingly I put a little two line note at the bottom of the programme I mailed out in the spring of 1987.

Well, we put our dreams out there and sometimes the Universe seems to take little notice, but then again sometimes it turns out to have extraordinary ideas of its own. This was one of those startling moments. The phone rang - and then it rang and rang, and enquiries poured in - and in two months I had a list of over sixty people interested. (including Sacred Hoop's editors!) This was amazing.

I worked busily to turn the idea into manifestation. It became three groups and started in October that year, the London 'Weekend', the London 'Weekday' and the Devon groups, and that meant I was fully employed doing shamanistic work - something I had never planned or even considered possible - and so it has been ever since.

Clearly I required a new name to work under, and I listed everything I could think of over several weeks, but nothing suited, no inspiration came. I remember one day thinking about my favourite medicine name, which had come to me back in my San Francisco days, in a highly unconventional and not at all PC - or should that be SC ('shamanistically-correct') - manner.

I was attending the last workshop of my San Francisco years before returning to the UK, at the Esalen Institute. It was drama training with Andre Gregory, the actor-director. Before the workshop I happened to be looking at a car in the car park which was called an 'Eagle', thinking that that was just the car I wanted when I got back to the UK - a medium size estate wagon in splendid colours. Then at the workshop Andre invited us to find alternative names for ourselves - so I spontaneously said 'Eagle'. Then Gabrielle Roth, also participating in the workshop, added 'Flying' to my new name. Gabrielle had been a tremendously important

teacher for me at the many workshops I had done with her over the previous four years and she knew me well. So I became 'Flying Eagle' for the next five days.

Now this workshop was a milestone in my life; it was the first time ever that I felt fully, unconditionally, part of a group - fully accepted without having to try, without being in any way needy, without feeling to some degree left out, or being quietly shown I was a suitable case for rejection. For once I felt fully in the flow. Hence the medicine name Flying Eagle took on considerable importance for me.

So when I found myself seeking a name for the new shamanic work I had found, it just suddenly, magically, came to me: eagles have wings. And there was the name - 'Eagle's Wing'. I added 'Centre for Contemporary Shamanism,' because it is not about history or copying old ways. It is about healing

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and helping people of today with the stuff of their lives, using the ancient wisdom of the shamans and ancestors who existed before 'God' became a chap with a son and priests told you what to believe, what you should think and how you were supposed to be.

I know that the Medicine Wheel continues to be a chief roadmap for life for you and for the people in your groups. Does it work as a tool for empowerment and healing?

The Medicine Wheel has Four Directions, like a compass, and each Direction calls our attention to a particular quality within us, and within Creation.

Above: Leo takes part in a 'blind run' where he aims for guiding voices with his eyes blindfolded

Opposite: an exercise to develop trust



It has been observed - by Carl Jung among others - that we are likely to be well up with one of these Directions, to be challenged to some extent by two more, and to have our biggest challenges in the fourth one.

In my own experience and in my work with people it has always been important that we connect with all four Directions, following a path of progress around the Wheel, learning from the challenges as we go.

For most of us, the Direction we need to attend to first is the South - which reflects the element of water, the inner child, the past, our wounds from childhood, the challenge to trust in life, to dare to be innocent like the Fool in the Tarot.

I do not know people who have healed all their wounding. I know people who say (boast) that they have, but I do not know anyone who truly has. This wounding is where we need to start, and if we avoid this, what we have not attended to follows us on our journey around the Wheel and keeps upsetting our progress in the other Directions. Much of the work I do attends to this 'South' healing, even when the specific work is being done in another of the Directions.

You call your work 'Contemporary Shamanism' - but do you use any traditional shamanic ways?

Yes. The traditional work I do includes sweatlodge, vision quest, ceremonies, shamanic journeying and soul retrieval, work with the luminous egg and the use of subtle energy. From the Afro-Brazilian

traditions I also use a version of trance-dance, which I have developed for today's people and circumstances, and which is a most potent catalyst to shift energy, open up stuck places and liberate the 'magical child'. In addition I use many tools from the world of psychotherapy and hypnotherapy which work extremely well with Western people and address directly issues of this culture. The total makes a unique mix.

Many folk - myself included - have experienced this unique mix through attending your year's course 'Elements of Shamanism'. How many of these courses have you done now?

In 2007 we embark on the twenty-second 'Elements of Shamanism' course. We - that is, my colleagues Dawn Russell and Andy Raven and myself - are always seeking ways to improve and develop the course, but it delights me that the original blueprint from the Medicine Wheel has proved itself through the test of time and remains the same.

Several hundred people have participated over the years and many are flourishing with their own practices or unique creations - such as the Sacred Hoop Magazine and Spirit Horse Camps.

Each year's course has been unique, challenging, growthful - and hard work! It is really great to see people taking and using the medicine, developing their own thing, expressing their talents, making their unique contribution to Life, the Universe and Everything.

It is quite a few years since I was on 'Elements' and learning about

the Medicine Wheel - I remember it very clearly and it certainly brought my life into focus. We were a motley crew, as I remember. Have the kinds of people in the 'Elements' circles changed over the years?

In the early days it was those who were already on the outer sides of society who came; the avant garde, the edge-pushers, the laid-backers. Nowadays it is much more 'straights' who come, from offices and regular jobs - so we have to start from a slightly different place to make sure we can move forward together.

However, they tend to be more self-disciplined and once we get past the coming-together stage, we can push on quickly and get deeply into the process of transformation.

People are always seeking meaning and purpose in their lives, and a sense of clarity as to what they are living for, and what their place and their worth is. The course gives them all that, but not in a direct way. Through growthful challenges, through the sharing of truths without evasion, through experiences which lead to connection to the fabric of the Universe, they gain a much deeper sense of themselves and their purpose and potential. Life itself then takes on a different set of meanings.

Can you tell us a bit more about how you get to these 'growthful challenges' - what do you find most useful as tools for growth and awareness?

Obviously the Medicine Wheel is my background and foundation, I know where I am and where I am trying to go. It gives me a map of life and of the human being's process, especially using the amazing teachings found in the 'Star Maiden's circle which forms the central plank of the 'Elements' course. We recently took a group through a training process to learn how to use it as a shamanic life-expanding tool, and the experience was most rewarding and deepened our understanding of this amazing wheel.

Sweatlodge also is a magical ceremony. It brings all pretensions to earth as we come to it essentially naked - even though we may in this reality be wrapped in towels. In intent - which is all-important - we are naked. In the sweatlodge we are literally and graphically with the



Above: Leo beside the sweatlodge

Below: people dance during an evening of games and play



elements fire, earth, air and water - no messing. The chant 'Earth my body, water my blood, air my breath and fire my spirit' becomes a mantra of literal truth. A good sweatlodge brings a silence, a stillness, a sense of presence, in which the sky, the stars, the glow of the fire, become the stuff of life - as they always are; and the car, the computer, the TV, the bank balance, become the fantasies that they really are!

Dance is also a major part of my journey and my work, and has been most important to me since I first danced with Gabrielle Roth in 1978. Doug Blacksmith has drummed for me since 1991. We do several Trance-Dance workshops every year and always the transformations are remarkable. I developed this work out of several influences and it is a unique synthesis of Afro-Brazilian, West African, Gabrielle Roth's Five Rhythms, and my own take on people's needs.

The result is something different from other trance-dance forms, and a glorious way of moving through and beyond what therapists often call 'resistance'. It always feels to me that for a therapist (or healer of any kind) to complain that their client is 'resisting' - and therefore should behave differently - is simply the mark of a not very good therapist. If the client didn't have a problem, and therefore 'resistance', they wouldn't be a client! Resistance is fear of change and the therapist's job is to skillfully lead the client past the fear so they can face their 'stuff' and make the necessary changes.

This works best when done subtly and indirectly, and I have seen numerous people taken in the Trance-Dance way past their previous 'blocks' before they have even engaged 'resistance' - with dramatically wonderful results.

Since the eighties, many people like yourself have kept to these beautiful spiritual ways as a daily way of living and growing - and gained a wide range of knowledge and experience along the way. Are we seeing the emergence of a body of elders in the UK who can be a spiritual resource for the wider community?

Yes - but slowly. A number of older people are around who are walking the beauty path, and hopefully some of us will become 'elders' and guides for the future.

As to that future, it is good to remember that the world is in a 'pre-crisis' moment, and lots of structures are likely to shudder in the next five to ten years. This is when elders will be required to assist the difficult passage through chaos to a new form of order. So whether we are ready or not may well become irrelevant - we may well be called upon anyway.

I feel the Earth is going to take a hand in reminding us that we are part of her and not her owners and that we cannot trash her ad infinitum. This is all in line with the 2012 prophecies, and while a prophecy is only a prophecy, some big changes are clearly on their way. The USA is showing signs of last gasp reminiscent of the Roman Empire in its final stages and is creating an unpayable debt mountain which, if current crazy policies remain unchanged, could well lead to the Armageddon of hyperinflation and thus some poverty around 2012-2013.

Eagle's Wing has itself changed and grown over the years, and you have moved from London to a greener setting. What shape is it now?

I now live within a small 'accidental' community, with virtually no structure, and definitely no spiritual 'shoulds, musts or oughts'. The community is here to serve the people that live here, not the other way round. Often with organisations 'the community' becomes the arbiter and the members its servants (or slaves). With us it is the other way round, we do our best to help and support each other according to needs in the present moment, not according to theories, beliefs or strictures.

I started out alone doing workshops but now 'Eagle's Wing' is a loose association of perhaps seven or eight people. The key is loose. We are not an organisation, and we do not employ anyone except on a casual basis.

Howard Charing has been my working partner since 1996 and this came about because we do very different work and can complement each other. Together we



Teaching circle during a camp at Pennant Valley, Wales

can offer something more complete. Also we can share admin tasks and costs which is a great way of mutual assistance.

We stay small and loose because once anything gets big and has people depending on it for their livelihood, it very soon loses its original purpose. I always remember my introduction to industry when I was eighteen at Rootes Group, car makers they then were. 'What is the purpose of the company?' we neophyte apprentices were asked. Not one of us got the right answer, we all talked about making better cars and nice things like that. The answer was 'to make money'!

It is the same with any organisation whether it purports to make things or to be 'spiritual'. Once you become an organisation, your main aim soon

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The sweatlodge is made ready and the fire is lit





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Leo Rutherford gained an M.A. in Holistic Psychology at Antioch University in San Francisco, where he unexpectedly came across the ancient wisdom of the indigenous shamans. Since then he has continued to learn from a wide variety of teachers.

Now it is his great joy to pass on to others some of the experience and knowledge that has helped him to transform his life. A process that goes on and on...

Published books: 'Way of Shamanism' (Thorsons 1997 & 2001), 'The Book of Games for Group Leaders'. (Gale Centre 1994), 'Shamanic Path Workbook' (Arma Publications),

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becomes to survive and build 'the organisation'. It is only by remaining individual and loose that you can keep your integrity and maintain your original purpose. So that is what I have done and Eagle's Wing has not grown and does not train people to become 'Eagle's Wing leaders' but helps them find their own uniqueness and teach and facilitate from that.

Although many of us, like you, use traditional shamanic ways, they are often adapted or interpreted for today's people and circumstances. Do you see a new form of shamanic 'tradition' emerging?

Not yet. We are not ready, and the melting pot needs to continue for some time, otherwise the change could metamorphose into another 'right way/only way' and become a totalitarianism in disguise.

We need to watch out for those who want to take the emerging movement over and meld it to their ideology. Every renaissance brings out those who want to harness the power of the people to themselves, and every spiritual path is endangered by those who want to create a 'religion' out of it. After all, you can't become powerful and wealthy by being small and true to your integrity, you only do that by becoming a big shot controlling lots of smaller people and imposing your beliefs and your heavily disguised version of 'freedom'. We need to say no to that - anything new and worthwhile needs to

emerge gradually from the grassroots, without coercion.

Personal growth only happens personally. None of us can grow anyone but our-self. Real worthwhile change and development cannot be directed from above, or organised politically, it can only happen at the grassroots level. Anything else becomes a dictatorship of one sort or another.

At over 70 now you show no signs of retiring! What are you hatching next?

There is a book about the-Medicine Wheel titled 'A View through the Medicine Wheel,' for which I am currently seeking a publisher. I have another book in the pipeline about 'petty tyrants' - those irritating, annoying, pesky, awkward, authoritarian, bossy etc. people, and how to use them as a free workshop for your growth and development - and have fun while you are at it - secretly!

Ah, that streak of playful humour - I remember how vital it is on a spiritual seeker's path!

Of course! So last year I created the 'Heyeokah-Trickster Workshop' to bring back the joys of play from the Play-World days into a shamanistic setting. This was a great success, hysterically funny at

times and a real liberation of the magical child.

This year I am re-creating my workshop on petty tyrants and how to deal successfully with them. And I am looking forward also to offer our unique 'Practitioner Training in the Star Maiden's Circle' with my colleagues Dawn Russell and Lorraine Grayston. This is for all those who will benefit from really understanding and incorporating the Medicine Wheel, including therapists and healers, all of whom will benefit from this amazing tool. We teach this course primarily in an altered state - the 'second attention' in Carlos Casteneda/Don Juan terms - so that it is learnt subliminally as well as literally.

The Star Maiden's Circle is an extraordinary teaching process which encapsulates the issues of life in both the shadow and the light of understanding, and maps out attitudes and paths necessary for turning one's whole life around or helping another to do so.

I remain always open to and looking for inspiration and strive to be available for it to come and touch me and show me the next unfolding step on the path. I feel that good things emerge gradually and show us the path ahead. Just now and then a major life shift occurs and a big turn in direction, but that is a rare and priceless gift.

