

**THE SPIRITUAL ACTOR:
THE POWER OF SPIRITUALITY IN ACTING AND ACTOR
TRAINING USING SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND
NATIVE AMERICAN ANIMAL TOTEMS**

BY

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Theatre
in the Graduate School of
Binghamton University
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation into the power of spirituality in actor training through the use of Native American Animal Totems, and how that can be applied to the dramatic action of a text, specifically Chekhov's Three Sisters. In a five week workshop, five students and I explored this idea, culminating in a lecture demonstration on February 29, 2008. The students matched totems with characters, looking at how both the known (calling) and denied (shadow) aspects of a totem within us can be found in the characters of the text. We also looked at how "natural prey" totems can help in understanding the dramatic action of the play. Spirit and spirituality have a place in acting and actor training. Totem work is an effective tool for actor training. The synergism of spirituality through totem work expands, gives depth to, and enriches every other technique, tool, and method of actor training.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my grandparents, E. Ritchie Clark & Eileen Clark, who taught me the power of faith, hope, trust, and love. I am “richly blessed” to have had the chance to know them both for almost forty years. Even though they are sorely missed, they are never very far from my thoughts and their souls shine brightly in my heart.

PREVIEW

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	ix
List of Tables	x
INTRODUCTION: Living the Question	1
CHAPTER 1: An Introduction to Spirituality in Acting and Actor Training.....	9
<i>January 29th – Our First Night</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Actor as Shaman</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Native American Animal Totems</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Calling & Shadow Totems</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Shadow Work</i>	<i>20</i>
CHAPTER 2: Spiritual Foundation Practices for Actor Training	24
<i>January 29th – Intentions.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>January 29th – Meditative Breath-work as Actor Training.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>January 31st – Mirroring with Meditative Breath-work</i>	<i>32</i>
CHAPTER 3: Actor Training Using Native American Animal Totems.....	37
<i>Personal Totems.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>January 31st – Drawings.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>February 5th – Shadow Work</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>February 7th – Mirroring & Observing Using Personal Totems</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Character Totems.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>February 12th – Surrender vs. Control Exercises</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>February 14th – Discernment Exercises</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Following the Call</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>February 19th – Deepening the Surrender</i>	<i>79</i>
<i>February 21st – Spiritual Walking Meditation Exercise</i>	<i>84</i>
<i>February 21st – Intensifying Mirroring & Observing</i>	<i>86</i>
CHAPTER 4: How Spirit Moves Through the Text and Context.....	91
<i>February 7th – How is Spirit moving in the Play?</i>	<i>92</i>
<i>February 12th – How is Spirit moving in the Characters?</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>February 14th – How is Spirit moving through the Dramatic Action?</i>	<i>101</i>
CHAPTER 5: Scene Work Using Spirituality and Animal Totems.....	107
<i>February 14th – 1st Read-through of Scenes with Totem Work.....</i>	<i>110</i>
<i>February 19th – Creating a Totem Chart.....</i>	<i>114</i>
<i>February 21st – Predator & Prey.....</i>	<i>117</i>
CHAPTER 6: Crafting the Presentation	125
<i>February 24th – Four days until the Presentation</i>	<i>126</i>
<i>February 25th – Three days until the Presentation</i>	<i>131</i>
<i>February 28th – Dress Rehearsal.....</i>	<i>135</i>
CHAPTER 7: To See One Must Believe	143
<i>February 29th – The Presentation.....</i>	<i>143</i>
<i>Question and Answer Session after the Presentation</i>	<i>150</i>
<i>Evaluations/Testimonials.....</i>	<i>152</i>
CHAPTER 8: “TEAM TOTEM”	157
<i>March 8th – Wrap-up Session with the Students.....</i>	<i>158</i>

<i>My Personal Wrap-up – Take Nothing Personally</i>	161
<i>The Students’ and My Suggestions for Moving Forward</i>	166
CONCLUSION: Continuing the Dialogue	177
Appendix A: Original Workshop Lesson Plan	183
Appendix B: List of Totems and Their Qualities from Jamie Sams’ and David Carson’s Medicine Cards	184
Appendix C: Full Descriptions of Totems	185
Appendix D: Table of Personal Totems and Their Shifts	207
Appendix E: Table of Character Totems and Their Shifts	208
Appendix F: Discussion Topics, Journal Questions and “Heart-work”	209
Appendix G: Students’ Journals	214
<i>Cathy’s Journal</i>	214
<i>Betsy’ Journal</i>	224
<i>Doug’s Journal</i>	240
<i>Sarah’s Journal</i>	246
<i>Brian’s Journal</i>	252
Bibliography	258
<i>On Acting</i>	258
<i>On Native American Spirituality</i>	261
<i>On Consciousness and Spirituality</i>	262
<i>Websites Cited</i>	264

List of Figures

Figure 1 : Spirit Funnel Point Down.....	30
Figure 2 : Spirit Funnel Point Up.....	30
Figure 3 : Integration of Spirit Funnel Point Up and Down	31
Figure 4 : Image of a Mandorla	101

PREVIEW

List of Tables

Table 1 : Totems from students' original drawings (see Appendix C for the full description of totems)	42
Table 2 : Character Totems (see Appendix C for the full description of totem qualities)	66
Table 3 : Students' Scene Choices.....	109
Table 4 : Second Scene List.....	109
Table 5 : Totem Chart created 2-19-2008.....	114
Table 6 : Character Totems in Scene Work	134
Table 7 : Integration of Calling and Shadow Totems within a Scene	134
Table 8 : Mirroring with Personal Totems.....	136
Table 9 : Mirroring with Character Totems.....	137
Table 10 : Presentation – Scene work with totems	149

INTRODUCTION

Living the Question

We shouldn't fight shy of the term "spirit" in acting. [...] Sadly, there's not much time for the "spirit" in the cut-and-thrust of the twenty-first-century acting industry.¹

The psychological level of actor training has been the paradigm for the past hundred years. The modes of training we have today are as varied as the number of actors. They range from the inward centered "Method," to the outer directed Miesner technique, from psychological methods, such as Michael Chekhov's psychological gesture, to physical ones as developed by Meyerhold, Artaud, Grotowski, or Bogart, to the psycho-physical techniques as proposed by Bella Merlin in her book The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit. "All conscious systems in the field of acting," Grotowski said, "answer the question, 'How can this be done?'" Actor training, then, becomes a continual struggle of the actor to reveal his/her inner spirit so that he/she might transform the spectator.²

Historically, the theatre has been re-inventing itself over and over again. At the turn of the 20th century, the traditional constraints against showing feeling were being questioned. Freud's discovery of the psyche opened a previously closed door. With the

¹ Merlin, Bella. The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit. Hollywood: Drama Publishers, 2007, p. 47.

² Place, Jill. "Acting Magic." Actingintuitive.com. 6 January 2008
<<http://www.actingintuitive.com/articles/AM.4.07.htm>>.

emergence of the field of psychology, Realism, and the Stanislavsky “system” in the late 1800s, acting and actor training began to evolve in a new direction. For the past hundred years, actor training has delved deeply into the psychological, archetypal, metaphoric, social, and symbolic levels of acting. However, there is a growing movement in the world today for a deeper spiritual connection, a desire for consciousness and awakening to a higher level of awareness. I believe this call of spiritual longing is in actors; that the next step in the evolution of acting and actor training is to address that call. I believe the mission of actors today is to transcend the Psycho-physical³ actor training in order to reach the spiritual while at the same time including the best of what has gone before. What I propose is not new. It is old knowledge seen anew.

Today, actors are trained in body work, voice work, and various methods for connecting to themselves, their characters, and their partners. Every actor develops a set of tools to use for his craft no matter what technique he trains in, and every actor’s toolbox is as unique as the actor himself. The physical training helps release tension, removes blocks, and physical restrictions. Many theorists such as Michael Chekhov, Artaud, and Grotowski believed that through the physical we attain the spiritual. The psychological level of actor training delves into relationship dynamics, character development, actions based on the desires of a character, and script analysis. These methods help actors gain understanding and insight into symbolic and archetypal meaning.

Spirit and spirituality are not foreign to the process of acting. The roots of modern acting can be found in the ancient sacred rituals of the shaman. A shaman is a spiritual conduit for a tribe, a bridge between the world of reality and the world of the

³ This is the term used by Bella Merlin to describe Stanislavsky’s work as she uses it in the 21st century.

spiritual, a container for Spirit. Historically, shamans were expected to foretell future events; to travel beyond the boundaries of their bodies; to incarnate spirits of the mysteries; to risk life and death in performance. Regarded as the “guardians of wisdom,” they were to hunt the unknown, and to love and reveal the inner spirit which communicates with others at the deepest levels.⁴ The role of the actor-shaman in traditional societies was to lead audiences on a “ritual journey into their own psyches.”⁵ Furthermore, these first actors were sacred to their communities.

The purpose of the early shaman-actor was to represent the forces we encounter in life. These “spirits” were a dramatic mirror in which the audience could see life reflected. We no longer recognize these “spirits.” We see these now in secular, psychological terms rather than in spiritual terms, but this does not lessen their significance and impact on our lives.⁶ For thousands of years, the call of the shaman acknowledged the “vertical” dimension in life, the dimension of the soul, of spiritual longing.⁷

I would like to make a distinction here between psychological and spiritual levels, specifically for actor training. A general definition of psychological is mental or emotional as opposed to physical in nature, while the spiritual means pertaining to the spirit or soul. Spirit is the essence of who we are. When we talk about a spiritual level, we are asking, “How is this in service to Spirit, to my soul?” One definition of Spirit is “that which transpires behind that which appears.” We can also define Spirit as consciousness. It is our consciousness, our spirit, our soul that decides the meaning in the

⁴ Bates, Brian. The Way of the Actor: A Path to Knowledge and Power. Boston: Shambala, 1988, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the long vertical moment as “flow.” In performance, it is the state where action and awareness merge, destroying a dualistic perspective: a performer becomes aware of his action but not of the awareness itself (see Karafistan, Rachel. “‘The Spirits Wouldn’t Let Me Be Anything Else’: Shamanic Dimensions in Theatre Practice Today.” New Theatre Quarterly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 19: 162).

moment. The more conscious we are, the more we can hold a container for Spirit to move through us. How does this serve to help the world become more awake, more conscious? More importantly, what does this have to do with acting and training actors?

Few of the current techniques actively, openly, and concretely engage Spirit and spirituality in the dialogue. I surmise that, of the various acting techniques mentioned above, Spirit and spirituality are seen as a by-product. I do not want to infer that any of these methods should be thrown away or in any way pushed aside for something else to emerge. Each of these techniques is viable and creates the space to allow Spirit to come through. I am asking, can we use whatever method works for us and then actively and consciously engage Spirit and spirituality with it? Can we be present to Spirit in ourselves, in our training, and on stage? If we bring acting and actor training to the level of Spirit, what happens? Does it deepen our connection to ourselves, our partners, our character, the play, and the audience?

My journey started when I first saw Bella Merlin last year. I was inspired by how deeply and powerfully she connected to the students in a very short period of time. The message I took from that meeting was, “What would I do as a teacher? How do I want to inspire students?” I hoped to find a method of training that would allow students to become shamans in acting. In teaching basic acting processes, I had struggled with my voice as a teacher. I asked, as many others have, “Where’s the heart? Where does that authentic self come into play? How do you bring Spirit to acting? How do you help students bring their authentic selves to the stage?”

Our Authentic Self is our innate, authentic, natural, true, and spontaneous self. It is our essence, our core, not all the emotional “baggage”, habits, and masks we wear. The

basic principles of “going after a want”, “what’s your objective”, “overcoming an obstacle”, creating “beat objectives” for every line of text kept so many of my students locked in their heads that it produced acting “from the neck up”.

If the goal of a beginning acting class is to teach students how to “play an action”, then, when students arrive, we need to find a way to get them to give up their belief that there is a roadmap to acting, a set of steps outlined for them. They need to give up the belief that all they need to do is learn those steps and they will know how to act. Martha Graham says, “There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one you in all this time, this expression is unique.”⁸ Michael Chekhov, in his book To the Actor, said that the actor and the audience are in co-creation and that to attempt acting requires “a certain openness to the great forces of the universe.”⁹ I believe acting is a spiritual pursuit and, as actors, we are shamans, a spiritual conduit for the workings of God, Creator, Spirit.¹⁰ Whatever we want to call the life force of the Universe, I believe that through acting we tap into that invisible force and acting then becomes spiritual practice.

Although some actors, teachers, and theatre technicians acknowledge that acting can be a spiritual practice or experience, there is still a lot of emphasis on the psychological/metaphoric/symbolic methodology in modern actor training. With this resonance, actor training can become result-oriented instead of process-driven, which can make it difficult to include the spiritual. In looking at this, I discovered I had been

⁸ Cameron, Julia. The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity. New York: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 75.

⁹ Chekhov, Michael. To The Actor. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. xxiii.

¹⁰ Throughout the rest of this paper, I will use the term “Spirit” to mean whatever your image or concept for a universal life force is. In Eastern philosophy, it is called Chi, a life-force and energy that flows through all things both animate and inanimate. This is a comparable idea to Native American philosophy.

compartmentalizing two areas of my life: my acting/teaching self and my spiritual self.

When I asked, “What is my part in the evolution of theatre,” I brought together my two greatest passions, my love of acting and my love of all things Native American.

Spirituality belongs in acting and actor training. We can use spiritual practices and Native American Animal Totems to bring both acting and actor training to the level of Spirit.

To find a way to include Spirit and spirituality in acting and actor training, I set out to explore the questions: Do Spirit and spirituality belong in acting and actor training? Can actors actively engage the mystery of Spirit and spirituality in acting and actor training? Can acting be spiritual practice? As modern day shamans, can actors bring the message of Spirit through a character and a play? Is it helpful, needed, and valuable? Can we use spiritual practices and Native American Animal Totems in our acting work? How does one combine spirituality, totem work, and the traditional methods of actor training in concrete, practical ways?

How would knowing and using Native American Animal Totems and spirituality help actors? Native American Animal Totems are symbols of specific kinds of energy we are manifesting and aligning with in our lives. Characteristics and activities of these totems reveal much about our own innate powers and abilities as well as what we have denied or buried about ourselves. By studying the totem, we are able to call upon its archetypal energy whenever needed. How can that then be applied to the dramatic action in a text? If we can find a dynamic way to connect to our spiritual self through the use of Native American Animal Totems, does that have value to us as actors?

I designed a workshop to test the efficacy of using spiritual practices and Native American Animal Totems in acting and actor training. In this paper, I will discuss the

workshop I held and how the five students¹¹ and I lived the above questions on a weekly basis. The workshop was held over the course of five weeks, meeting twice a week for three hours each night. The first week involved exercises on “observation”; the second week on “relationship” to self, others, characters, the play as a whole; in the third week, “given circumstances”; the fourth week “dramatic action”; the fifth, our presentation (see Appendix A). To this structure I applied the question, what would it look like with spirituality added? The dramatic text I used to experiment with in this process was Anton Chekhov’s Three Sisters.¹²

I video taped each night’s session with the students’ written permission. All of the statements and quotations from the students in this paper are taken directly from those taped sessions. I also asked each of them to keep a journal of their experience throughout this workshop which they would hand in to me at the end (see Appendix G). I wanted them to express their thoughts, ideas, and any significant experiences they had had in that journal. I also gave them questions to write about after each session, as well as homework, which I called “heart-work”¹³ (see Appendix F).

Each of the following chapters will cover the subjects we discussed, the exercises we used to explore this new work, what we found, and the students’ reactions as we moved through this process. I have divided the chapters into subject matter instead of the date of the workshops. Some chapters include more than one night of work, most notably Chapter Three. Some chapters also revisit different nights of work with different subject matter, as in Chapters Four and Five. In each chapter, along with the students’ comments,

¹¹ I have changed the students’ names to protect their privacy.

¹² I used the Van Itallie translation of this play. Chekhov, Anton. Chekhov: The Major Plays. Trans. Jean-Claude Van Itallie. New York: Applause Books, 1995.

¹³ I use the term “Heart-work” because it helps remind the students to engage their hearts and authentic selves as well as their intellectual, academic minds.

I briefly include my responses to what I was going through personally as a teacher of this work.

In Chapter One, I introduce the question of spirituality in actor training, Actor as Shaman, Native American Animal Totems, and Shadow Work. In Chapter Two, I discuss the spiritual foundation practices we used. Chapter Three covers Native American Animal Totems and how, as individuals, as characters, and collectively as a group, we explored their use. Chapter Four deals with how we explored spirituality in the dramatic text. Chapter Five involves how we approached scene work with spirituality and animal totems. Chapter Six covers our last week of the workshop and how we crafted our presentation. Chapter Seven includes the presentation, the Question and Answer session following the presentation, and testimonials from students who attended the presentation of this work. Chapter Eight covers the final wrap-up session with the students involved in the workshop, their suggestions for moving forward, and my ideas for continuing this research. Chapter Nine is my conclusion.

As an art form evolves, it takes previous knowledge and includes the best it has to offer within the next level. With the emergence and refining of the field of psychology, the evolution of the modern theatre has followed that path for the past hundred years or so. Actor training has grown in archetypal, symbolic, metaphorical traditions. We are on the cusp of the next evolution of acting. Through this thesis, I will illustrate a spiritual approach to deepening our understanding of character development, relationship dynamics, and conflict within the dramatic action of a text in actor training.

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to Spirituality in Acting and Actor Training

*Inside you there's an artist you don't know about....Say yes quickly, if you know, if you have known it from before the beginning of the Universe.
~Rumi¹⁴*

January 29th – Our First Night

When I walked into the classroom for our first night of the workshop, on January 29, 2008, it was with a whole lot of questions garnered from my research and background knowledge. I was excited to share ten years' worth of work, knowledge, and ideas to see where it would lead us. The books I had chosen to use in the course of this workshop were Jamie Sams' and David Carson's Medicine Cards and Ted Andrews' Animal-Speak and Animal-Wise.¹⁵ I also wanted to make this workshop a collaborative effort of discovery and exploration through our combined passion for acting.

¹⁴ DuBois, John ed. "Masnavi Book I, 599-607." Armory.com. 6 July 2008
<<http://www.armory.com/~thrace/sufi/poems.html>>.

¹⁵ Sams, Jamie, and Carson, David. Medicine Cards: The Discovery of Power Through the Ways of Animals. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Andrews, Ted. Animal-Speak: The Spiritual and Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publishing, 2002. Andrews, Ted. Animal-Wise: The Spirit Language & Signs of Nature. Tennessee: Dragonhawk Publishing, 1999.

Both Sams/Carson and Andrews have done in-depth work on the habits, behaviors, movements, and characteristic patterns of animals. There are distinct differences in the books by the authors. Sams/Carson's Medicine Cards lists 46 different animals, each with a specific quality assigned to it. It discusses both the "calling" and "shadow" aspects of each totem, in a concise manner; while Andrews' books, Animal-Speak and Animal-Wise, delve more deeply into the natural habitat of each animal and provide more information on their behaviors. His books also provided us with information on predator and prey, which became important when looking at "actions" and "conflict within scenes". All three were used when working with any of the totems.

We started with the questions “What is spirituality?” and “What is acting as spiritual practice?” I did not ask these questions that night expecting answers, but rather to open the door for this investigation. I wanted to explore and discuss three main ideas and their relationship to acting and actor training: the Actor as Shaman, Native American Animal Totems, and Shadow Work. We started by exploring the definition of Spirit as awareness, consciousness, Being, a universal energy that flows through all things.

Spirit has been called by many names: God, Creator, Higher Power, the Authentic Self or Higher Self, soul, or heart. In fact the word “hu-man” is a Sanskrit word meaning “aware of god.” The very definition of being human is conscious of god.

We then explored the idea of the witness part of ourselves, what Eckhart Tolle in his book The Power of Now calls “watching the thinker.”¹⁶ He describes this as that part of us which is not all caught up in personality, ego, or how we present ourselves to the world. It is the part of our being that lives fully in the now with a sense of loving detachment. It is our most compassionate, authentic self, our connection to our spirit and our soul. When we connect to the witnessing self in the present moment, we are in the *Now*. The *Now*, as Tolle describes presence, is all we ever have. However, Tolle says most of us are so caught up in reliving the past or worrying about the future that we are rarely ever fully “in the now”. Yet that is the only place where we have any power, where we are focused and open. The simplest and fastest means of finding out whether we are truly present is to first ask, “Am I still breathing?” Of course we are, only how conscious of our breath are we? When we increase our level of awareness, we increase our ability to be present.

¹⁶ Tolle, Eckhart. The Power of Now: A Spiritual Guide to Enlightenment. Novato: New World Library, 1997, p. 14.

Everyone has had those moments and periods of time when time seems to go away, when we “forget” ourselves, when we have become so intensely focused that we actually become expanded. That is presence. That is living in the “now” or “flow”. When in “flow”, we actually become more aware of everything around us, not less. Senses are awakened and open to a heightened level of sensitivity. Perhaps we may be more aware of spiritual dimensions and less aware of the mundane and daily routines. We started our discussion that first night with these questions and ideas on spirituality and its efficacy in actor training.

Actor as Shaman

In delving into this new territory, I brought up the concept of the actor as shaman with the students. A shaman is a bridge between Spirit and people, someone who moves between worlds, between the physical and spiritual realms, and communes with the spirits for the community’s benefit. Can actors bring a shamanic perspective to their acting and actor training? How can actors be a shamanic bridge for the audience?

That night we defined shaman as an emissary of Spirit. The etymology of the word shaman means “one who knows.” Knowledge of other realms of being and consciousness are the basis of the shamanic perspective and power. Shamanism is based on the premise that the visible world is pervaded by invisible forces or spirits that affect the lives of the living. By nature shamans/mystics are going directly to source. They are the “container”, the conduit, in which Spirit shows up. As actors, we are conduits for the voice of the playwright. By exploring other characters, actors explore themselves. By

participating in the experiences of actors, members of the audience can understand their own experiences.¹⁷ Could we also be conduits for Spirit as actor-shamans?

The journey a shaman takes is one in which the shaman establishes a connection with one or more of the spirit worlds through altered states of consciousness and is able to control these states and to communicate with spirits whilst in trance. Historically, the shaman's performance gave access to secret mysteries, visions, and voices from the spirit-world. We "move between worlds" all the time - home, work, family, friends, and colleagues. We play different roles with different people and situations. We might not recognize just how much we naturally do so. If we have ever sat looking out a window day-dreaming, then we have experienced an altered state of consciousness and could appear to others to be in a trance. So in a way, we are all shamans.

The shaman makes use of spirit helpers, with whom he or she communicates, all the while retaining control over his or her own consciousness; the shaman is aware of many levels simultaneously. The spirits represent wisdom and knowledge from "the other worlds." The shaman's spirit helpers are spirits in the form of animals and the use of totem items such as rocks are common. These items are believed by shamans to have special powers and an animating spirit. Once the connection to "the other worlds" is established, shamans become the container for the message Spirit has for the outer world. This connection can be likened to the energetic connection between actors who bring the message of the play to the audience.

In the shamanic worldview, everything is alive and carries with it an inherent virtue, power and wisdom. Spirit helpers, or power animals, are common to shamanic practice. Shamans are the keepers of the sacred knowledge of life. They are tied to the

¹⁷ Bates, p. 6.

rhythms and forces of nature. They are capable of walking the invisible and visible worlds. They help people remember that “all trees are divine and that all animals speak to those who listen.”¹⁸ Shamans adopt the guise of animals, wearing skins and masks, to symbolize a reawakening and endowing of oneself with specific energies. Ancient shamans used totems and images to assist the members of the tribe in coming face to face with the divine mystery.

Among the benefits of drawing a parallel between the actor and the shaman is the need for a simple awareness of a deeper self and how to open this self up to an audience on the stage to create empathy and truth. Can we as actors hold the physical, psychological, metaphoric, archetypal levels as well as the spiritual? Can we be the container for Spirit in our acting and allow Spirit to move through us?

I liken the journey of an actor to the journey of a shaman. If we adopt the premise that actors are shamans, that actors connect on many levels simultaneously, then through our personal connection to Spirit, acting and actor training becomes spiritual practice, like that of the shaman surrendering to Spirit. The shaman is the “stimulator of the collective imagination, the one who makes sense of experience and puts into perspective the lives and deaths of his community. This is also the contemporary role of the artist today.”¹⁹ We, as actors, let go and surrender in the moment to the desires of the character, allowing our spirit, our authentic self to guide us. This then allows a deeper connection with our partner, which allows us transformation, our partner’s transformation, and the audience’s transformation. It is the truest form of what Stanislavsky called Communion.²⁰

¹⁸ Andrew, *Animal-Speak*, p. ix.

¹⁹ Karafistan, p. 152.

²⁰ In *An Actor Prepares*, a whole chapter is devoted to this term, which Stanislavsky describes as “a moment of spiritual intercourse” (see p. 209-240).