**Lifelong Learning**

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**From Wild Caught Stories**

I oftenuse stories to communicate about the role of art in community life. I have found that stories can be a good way to link discussions about community arts practices to the people and places they impact. And, if the stories are shared with grace with an open heart and mind, people usually get a lot more from their telling than from a ponderous pile of facts and opinions.

One of these stories is about a shaman 10,000 years ago who is leading a community in its preparation for a critical hunt. I have used this imagined saga to remind folks that, for most of human history, the activities considered central to community well-being (healing, blessing, mediating, mentoring, commemorating, interacting with the spirit world, etc.) have been facilitated by people who have used what we now call “art” as an important part of their practice. At times, I have referred to the shaman as the pre-art artist.

Some weeks ago, I had the privilege of helping to facilitate a two-day gathering of artists and arts administrators who have been participating in a multi-year leadership development program for small/midsized arts organizations in Minnesota sponsored by Arts Midwest. This retreat was convened to give the participants an opportunity to mutually explore some of the burning issues that had emerged during their time together in the program, which was called ArtsLab. As you can imagine, a lot of stories were shared.

During one of the many breakout sessions the conversation turned to how difficult it is for the arts community to advance the notion that artists and art making are essential for community health and vitality. At one point in the discussion, I shared the idea embodied in my shaman story, referring, once again, to the “shaman” as the pre-art artist who, relatively speaking, had only recently been moved out of a central role in community life.

When I finished, a woman in the circle indicated that she had something important to say about my description and use of the word, “shaman.” She said that many in her Ojibway community and the broader Native American community regarded the use of the term, “shaman” as both disturbing and disrespectful. She went on to say that the widespread use of a word that had been appropriated from one particular community (the Tungstic people of eastern Asia) to represent the diverse and complex global universe of sacred indigenous practices and roles, had created a picture that was both simplistic and distorted. She said she just wanted to let me know how it was.

My first response was, “Wow!”  Part of me wanted to imagine that she was talking to someone else.  I’m thinking, “Hey, I read all those books, I did my research, I’m not a callous person—and heck, it’s just a word” But, of course I know very, very well that there is no such thing as “just a word.”  Words beget the stories that define history and shape the beliefs and actions that often determine its winners and losers. And, here in front of me was a respected writer and community leader saying in a very forthright, but courteous way, that this particular word mattered a lot to her and many others.  I looked around the circle and mumbled something like, “I’m sorry. There was no offense intended. “  The discussion quickly moved on the other things, but I did not. I was back in school and that moment marked my first day of class.

Over the course of the next few weeks, I read quite a bit and I talked to a number of people. One colleague, gently, but firmly reminded me that she too had brought the “shaman” issue to my attention some years ago. I had no recollection of the conversation, but knowing her, did not doubt that it had taken place. That I had had not taken it in revealed that I was dealing with more than ignorance on my part.

Some of my reading took me back to the roots of my incomplete education. Many of these books and articles referred to “shamanism” as a coherent set of beliefs and practices manifesting across many cultures over tens of thousands of years of human history. I was struck by the numerous descriptions of “shamanism” in the context of modern psychological theory in what seemed like an effort to ground “primitive mystery and magic” to a knowledge base that had been scientifically validated. While none of what I reviewed cast indigenous spirituality in an overtly negative light, I could see very clearly how I had come to view “the shaman” as a singular priest-like presence whose practice was both ubiquitous and uniquely different and apart from more modern religious observance.

The “new” information I encountered came in many forms. I talked to a number of people, native, and non-native, to discuss the word, its use by anthropologists, historians and educators, and how it is regarded by Native Americans, and others. These conversations also explored the power of words and our responsibility to question assumptions about how they will be taken when they are used. Many of my “tutors,” also recommended texts they thought might be helpful.

One article in particular, called *Shamanism, New and Old*, by University of California at Davis professor Jack D. Forbes, encapsulated much of what I learned from the various sources I encountered. In his article Forbes first makes it clear that  “indigenous people refer to their own holy people and curers by other terms such as doctor, medicine person, spiritual leader, elder, herbalist or diagnostician, recognizing a wide variety of callings and skills.”  Others I spoke to added that the roles and activities often defined by anthropologists as the province of the “shaman” are often carried out by different individuals or whole communities depending on the context or circumstance. Forbes’ piece also describes how the labeling of indigenous spiritual practice as “primitive,” “pagan,” or “shamanistic” has contributed to a “misunderstanding of and denigration of non-European cultures.”  With regard to shamanism he points out that the definition of the term found in Webster’s dictionary could just as accurately be applied to mainstream Christian religious practice. He goes on to say:

“The fact of the matter is that there is no such religion as ‘Shamanism’ since all of the religions of the world make use --perhaps equally-- of the tools of the ‘shaman’ including liturgy (ritual), songs, incantations (recited prayers or formulas), and direct contact with the spiritual world (visions, ecstasy) in order to bring about changes on the physical plane.”

Many, including Forbes, also talked about the ironic, but, but equally problematic byproduct these oversimplified and inaccurate representations, namely the more contemporary practice of romanticizing and commercializing indigenous spiritual life.  These programs, workshops, retreats, etc., organized by non-natives (and some natives), often mix Native American and eastern spiritual teachings as though they were one and the same. In the context of a history of serial betrayal, stolen homelands, and genocide these multi-cultural spiritual appropriations are regarded by many Native Americans as particularly insensitive.

I am aware that there is a wide range of opinion among indigenous peoples regarding these complex issues. My task these past few weeks has been to sort through what I have found and come to my own sense of what is right. I was prompted to look at these issues because something I said was disturbing, and yes, hurtful to a colleague I respect.  I am thankful that she had the courage to speak her mind.  That I did this out of ignorance is no excuse. I feel strongly that ignorance perpetuated by “well meaning” people is often far more dangerous than venal misrepresentation. What I have learned during this time of questioning has made a strong impression.  It has deepened my understanding of the power of words and stories to both hurt and to heal.  It has also strengthened my commitment to question my own assumptions about people, and places, and experiences, that, for whatever reason, lie beyond my ken and, most of all, to continue to acknowledge and learn from my mistakes.