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SHIELDWOLF *and the* SHADOW: ENTERING *the* PLACE *of* TRANSFORMATION

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■ Abstract

This paper speaks from a poetic voice and briefly discusses the untamed nature of metaphor and narrative. Then the story is shared. The tale relates to how healing of identity, after eons of racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of social isolation and internalised sorrow, requires deep abiding patience. Situated in transpersonal or spiritual space, the story suggests how Indigenous narrative crosses thresholds between reality and fiction. These are united in an "ontopoetics" of soul, a uniquely postmodern Indigenous sensibility that is also nothing terribly new. The story of Shieldwolf and the Shadow is a contemporary Indigenous tale of the place where transformation is undertaken, without fear, and with every intention that life itself will change beyond our reckoning. It may be possible that past bloodlines can be cleansed and our future restored to justice and peace – at least in some personal and contingent way. What we see in contemporary story is a potential for transformation that has eluded us for generations, and this is an echo of the wisdom of our elders.

■ Situating metaphor and story

My sense of these issues is subjective. Enter this space with me, if you please. Although I am all of these things, lecturer, counsellor, psychotherapist, researcher, to play the games of modern social life, my feeling shared here is contra-ordinary. Let these thoughts be whatever they are. I write to speak from the voice of difference, as an artist, painter, singer/songwriter, Indigenous mystic and queer man of prayer. So these words are impulses from heart, more so than mind. They come from personal experience, more so than books. They enact art and culture, rather than only critiquing or reflecting on art and culture. This being said let me contradict myself and situate the story of Shieldwolf and the Shadow in context.

In my clinical *and* life experience, metaphor is the image and form evoked through word, phrase, gesture and presence (Erickson & Rossi, 1979; Ferrucci, 1982; Rosen, 1982). Oh, how presence is most important. Rather than word-on-a-page, metaphor is that part of story that is made-present by action. Presence is shared, mutually staged, and so is encoded with multiple and subjective meanings (Cortright, 1997; Overholser, 1985). Likewise, story is like poetry because it has various types of flow, stop, space, silence, and beat ... Poetry is itself the essence of metaphor, because of how words and images evoke the soul and restore one to health and well-being (Bowers, 1996; Bowers, 2001, 2005). In this way, an onto-poetics of soul reconciles ontology and poetry, empirical and subjective, science and spirit, reality and metaphor, medicine and holistic healing. Ontopoetics is a postmodern manifestation of an older form, and affirms, reawakens and fans the flames of an ancient Indigenous sensibility. This is in respect of the wisdom of our elders.

Yet the soul must already be awake, to a degree, to hear the voice of metaphor. So any story is only as good as those who listen – hence, why mysticism and spirit were for the most part dead in the modern, and why small but resilient whispers of metaphor, difference, and identity are arising within the postmodern (Fekete, 1987; Griffin, 1988). Story, metaphor and meaning that transform human lives are only heard and appreciated when the social context can sustain the qualities of being supportive, loving, kind, and open to change (Ferrucci, 1982; Fox, 1990).

So story happens in community, around the fire, in the kitchen, at work, or even over email. Many spaces. One common denominator. People sharing their lives. I am interested in the “meta” of metaphor. In my painting, it was a revelation to make every stroke of colour or texture suggestive. I paint abstracts of impressions from dreams and visions. The less that is suggested, the better. When I try to control the process, the painting looks overdone, stilted, and its meaning is hidden. When my spirit is allowed freedom to be and rest, the painting takes on images that were not in my conscious awareness. People look at my work, and suggest what they see. Somehow my awareness-becoming also resonates with their visual impressions, complimenting the interpretation of the work.

■ Metaphor as therapeutic process

Likewise, metaphorical meaning tends to be suggestive, bold, tentative and complementary. For example, in therapy the use of Ericksonian approaches to story and metaphor often resonate powerfully with client and therapist, because both are enfolded in multiple layers of meaning that are suggestive, open and expansive (O’Hanlon, 1987; Zeig, 1980). Therapy in this sense is a transpersonal space or theatre of action, change and transformation (Bragdon, 1990; Rossi & Ryan, 1985; Wilber, 1998). In my experience of both client therapy and counsellor education-as-therapy, metaphorical meanings shared can sometimes open up powerful and transformative sacred space, like a circle of interaction, where people can display their lives freely, and learn new lessons in relative safety.

These are ancient and modern processes. It should not surprise us that therapy today emerges from a deep spring of human inspiration that is, at first instance, an Indigenous form of wisdom, in which we moderns partake (Bosnak, 1996; Cowan, 1992, 1994; Dilts & MacDonald, 1997). This theme is echoed and affirmed through many voices, including the psychoanalysis of Freud, the collective unconscious of Jung, the psychosynthesis of Assagioli, and the many approaches of transpersonal psychology (Cortright, 1997).

All these fields struggle with one central concern – how to approach human suffering and offer some path of healing or change. When human spirits embodied are subjected to the violence of discursive and diminishing agendas that seek control-over and power-to-dominate, and when spirits-enriched-with-meaning are registered like cattle and made to answer to dictates of authority, even the most horrendous acts of violence can become normalised over generations. Spirits can lose their sense of being. This is why many of us are still asleep. We have not yet begun to live as fully as we can and should.

■ The metaphors of Shieldwolf and shadow

The story that follows comes from personal anguish, but also came from a profound impulse to change and to heal. After the loss of several dear friends, who were also soul-mates, the story emerged from sadness, grief and loss. At the heart was a search for meaning and identity.

The name “Shieldwolf” comes from the Teutonic meaning of “Randolph”. The shieldwolf is the member of the wolf pack who scouts ahead on the path to make sure the coast is clear, and comes back to the pack to lead them forward. Long before the formal meaning of my name came to my awareness, there was a strong sense of Wolf Spirit as totem. The totem, in my experience, acts as protector, teacher and guide.

The “shadow” metaphor came to me during a pilgrimage of 1987 to the places where St Francis of Assisi lived out his fascinating and revolutionary life (Boff, 1984). An elderly Sister drew a picture for me of Francis and the wolf of Gubbio. The story suggests that a rather nasty wolf had been harassing the town and accosting the children, and continually escaped capture by the men of the area. Francis heard about the troubles, and called out to the wolf, whom he instantly befriended. He told the wolf that, in exchange for protection by the people of Gubbio who would provide food and lodging, he was to protect the town and its people and to behave himself for the rest of his days. The wolf raised his paw and shook Francis’ hand in agreement. Under the picture drawn for me, the Sister wrote a cryptic phrase, “Randy, befriend your shadows, as they are never as fearsome as they first appear”. The meaning of her words struck a haunting chord in my soul, and it took me another 15 years to unravel a sense of identity as gay, Indigenous and spirited. But the journey towards acknowledgement and integration happened mostly during the years after writing this story. From a socio-critical analysis then, Shieldwolf stands as a metaphor of how people must confront domination, control, violence and oppression by taking up a personal “pathwork”. It is not helpful to continue intergenerational cycles of loss, grief, mourning, and trauma. These have enormous consequences and costs for everyone. We are all connected, after all.

By taking the journey, we change. It is as simple as one foot in front of the other. So the person in the story searches, makes mistakes, becomes afflicted with wounds that almost destroy her body and spirit. She is oppressed with all the weight of the world. She is left for nothing. He or she is lost (the narrative voice can be any gender, although was written from a male voice). But slowly, over time, the person awakens to a new reality. Governmental wars over colonisation enacted in the past, even if 12 generations past, are still playing out in spiritual and transcendental ways in current generations. These and other social realities are the undercurrents of the story, because personal

identity crisis occurs due to social pressures and how individuals internalise these pressures.

Once I met an Aboriginal Australian man, but he was so troubled. He could not address his drug addiction because he could not face his inner pain. He could not face his pain in part because it was not directly his – within him were the spirits of the men who had gunned down his great grandparents and aunts and uncles, only three or four generations past. He embodied these spirits, and the spirit of the “White mainstream” of Australian masculinity taught him well to resist his feelings and to deny his intuitions. These were some of the identity crises that he carried, and that are implied in the story by how it leads us through “the dark night of the soul” (John of the Cross, 1964).

For whatever reason, people may awaken to the enormity of the pain caused by events of the past. Distant or near does not matter, because in the Oneness there is not linear time nor geographic space. All is One, and this means that we are our Ancestors, and our Ancestors dream us while we dream them. We have not yet begun to live in spiritual community as beings in bodies, in part because our societies are constructed by means of separating us from each other. We have fences, boundaries, litigation, rights and the cult of the individual, but do we have sharing, love, or shared smiles while walking through town?

■ An Indigenous aesthetic

We have also not yet awakened to the depth and power of the Indigenous aesthetic, which far predates the postmodern impulse to a community of difference. But has it been killed out or bred out of us yet? I do not think so. A respected Chief, Frank Meuse of Bear River Nova Scotia, once said to me that he waits while people climb the ladder of materialism and success in today’s society, because when they reach the top, usually they have alienated themselves from everyone they met on the way up. In such a situation, all they can do is fall, because people occupy the ladder below them and will not get off. Chief Frank says he waits, so that he can be there to catch them when they fall, or at least help them and comfort them after their fall. He told me that the Native spirit is big enough to carry all the burdens of the world, plus be there in the end when the confused person comes looking for answers. Mainstream society can come, he says, because the Native spirit will be there in Native bodies who are awake, aware, and listening to the signs of the times. While the Spirit is alive in the people, each person must be broken enough or humble enough to take up their own path. This demands a spiritual discipline, and all disciplines suggest some kind of giving and commitment.

I cannot suggest what exactly an Indigenous aesthetic might be, because I am sure it is different for each person. But there appears to be some

commonalities and these may have inspired the writing of this special issue exploring Indigenous humanities. For me, acknowledging who I am is the first step, and was not easy for various reasons. So it is difficult to separate my sense of Indigenous from other aspects of reclaiming my own spirituality, sexuality and sense of commitment to relationship and community. Because the aesthetic is holistic, it is about coming home, coming out, sharing our stories, and all these express the courage to be.

It is not surprising that these echo the themes of post-World War II humanistic and existential voices, who suggested that power, love and justice come from a wellspring of heart and resilience in the face of suffering (Rogers, 1961; Tillich, 1954, 1962). These themes come forward consistently in my work in healing-oriented counselling, teaching, and research. These themes call me back to a place of transformation, where regardless how far away from Nova Scotia my body seems to be, my Indigenous sensibility gives me grounding, unites me with Spirit, and breaks down the barriers of distance, difference and discontent.

Shieldwolf and the shadow are metaphors for strength, wisdom and resilience; and for trauma, sadness and powerlessness. But they are metaphors for much more, and for anything the reader or listener feels they may be. They can be encoded with meaning as rich and varied as each person’s soul. And they can assist with healing and transformation at such a time as each person opens their heart, and says, “I am ready. Let it be. Let it happen”.

■ Shieldwolf and the shadow: The story

I have gone through whole deserts, climbed huge mountain chains, walked through fire and burned off all my clothing. I have talked to strange and hidden entities in deep and dark forests, walked for endless miles along meandering rivers of green, and stopped to hear the sound of feet that came over distant glens, and then, they called me back.

At whose voice I asked, “Who goes there? Say your name if you will”. What I heard gave me pause. A lone wolf let out a harrowing cry, and before me the moon, full and rising, came over the horizon just then, filling the stream with a pale yellow hue, covering the trees about the edges of my consciousness with a vibrancy and expectation.

And I looked toward the sound of his cry. And saw stretching out before me a lengthening shadow unlike any I have ever seen before or since. It seemed to have a life all its own. It became detached from my solid form and danced toward the forest edge where shrubs guarded the way into a sacred grove.

I hastened to walk toward its retreat into the wood, but fear gripped my bones until I fell headlong into the slippery earth lining the stream. I did fall, smashing my head on the rough hewn stones. The last sound that

I remember was the howl of the Shieldwolf crying to the moon rising.

A short time later, I awoke and was bleeding still. The blood did not seem to clot, and when I inspected the wound in the clear reflection of the water, trickles of red fell into the still pool forming circles of expanding ringlets, never ending, reaching outward until the slow and steady current of the stream carried them away. In my dizziness I felt my life flowing freely before my eyes, like the stream, and I became a dark black bird rising above the valley's edge, seeing everything expand, even through these narrow but all-seeing eyes.

The beginnings were clear. As if far off, I could see where I began my journey twenty-eight years ago. The end of my time on this planet was just beyond my vision. But that which lay in between, I could remember and would yet walk – an ever changing path of jagged corners around convoluted streams and high mountain ranges down steep and terrible precipices to lonely, uninhabited valleys and still, silent places.

I remembered my shadow. The memory caused in me some alarm.

So I looked toward the sacred grove where last I saw his retreat. Flying there, the trees passed beneath my wings. A mound of earthen design came into view. It lay in a semi-circle toward the moon, which was now at its zenith in the Southern sky. At its two arms the mound sloped toward the grassy earth, its highest point at its back where these arms met. Inside there was nothing save flat grassy earth, and how did I know? It was here where this world's realm meets and embraces all that is.

The grove was bright in the light of night's clarity. I flew toward the trees lining the grove and perched not far above, so that the great round moon was on my back, the circle's inner sanctuary was facing me.

I sat there for what seemed ages, all through the night, until the sky's darkness began to fade. The time between times was nearing. As the pale light of the Eastern sky began to shift and grow, I saw my wounded body break through the trees. There, inside the sacred mound, was my shadow, standing tall and defiant. Its voice bellowed like thunder, "Stop where you stand!" My body froze in its tracks and trembled visibly, arms shaking at my sides.

Perched like the Raven, I heard and watched ... In a small frail voice, dried and as crisp as the body which held so little blood, there came out of my bandaged head these tentative sounding words, "I came to find you, you are mine. Why do you defy me?"

And my form fell to his knees. Despair blanketed the grove like a heavy mantle. For long moments there was no sound, the air stood still to stop the sound of feet, the stream's distant voice receded until no life blood flowed in the world. Everything became cold. Even the moon's strong light paled, grew dim, and a darkness covered the earth like hopelessness and cloud shadow.

Shieldwolf came from behind my huddled and weary form. He crept close in stealth, and with his keen nose he sniffed the air for his game. His legs were strong as Hemlock, his body hard as Oak, slick as Birch. His eyes shone forth in the darkness such that any creature who beheld their beauty would be transfixed, frozen as steel, and unable to resist being consumed by his beautiful and fierce teeth of silver, his warm breath like steam rising from hot mineral springs.

He crept up to my feet as I saw him from high above, he smelled and thought for a moment, what to do?

He backed off, as if to ward off danger. But he turned slightly, and walked around to my face, now with eyes closed as if in death.

Shieldwolf licked my face and panted. I started.

Frightened by my quick movement he ran a few feet away toward the sacred mound. And stood there, watching me. My form shifted, I looked into his eyes, and came back to myself. Off, toward the Eastern sunrise, a Raven flew. I had only to know because I saw her shadow across the trees. And I thanked her silently for her gift of sight.

Shieldwolf's eyes held me fast, assessing me, looking as if into the pits of my very soul. He saw the seething cauldron of my inner transformation, and the demon hosts that danced and flew around its boiling, molten liquid making grotesque acclamations and feeding off each other's shame and fear. It came to me then, in the mirror of Shieldwolf's eyes, that this cauldron of transformation awaited this sacred ritual we would now begin.

These demons drew back in horror at my realisation, seething and jeering at me, clawing and eating away the edges of my sanity. I fought with them, but so quickly began to lose the fight that something in me snapped, the tension was too great! I looked around, all was red and fire. I saw nothing. I was blind. But I heard the waters of the deep cauldron speak to me an urgent word, "We await the ritual of rebirthing, begin now, before it be too late".

I shifted again, and assumed lotus position. I let my bloody hands rest on my knees, open, in supplication. I knew this wolf was no stranger to me, and he held me still, in his wisdom and cunning.

A singular voice came from somewhere, at first I thought it fell from storm clouds raising arms of war around the darkened moon. Then I realised it came from a closer place, I forced my weary mind to hear. And like a rush of wind through sultry reeds beside the stream, I realised, it was my own throat that issued these words from some deep pit of darkness I never knew existed within me: "Come close to me".

And Shieldwolf walked closer, he knew the ritual which we were now beginning.

This ritual was the reason why he was given to my protection as a child in the wood of Hatchet Lake, where I wandered in his lonely ways, seeking what was too great for me to grasp in those formative days. The

whole story of our lives together, of the intervening years of silence, came to this one night of dark and frightening revelation. This was the end for us.

There would be no more of life or love, truth or beauty in this world's realm, for death is the cost of transformation. Every kernel of truth and irrelevancy would here be shed in the cauldron of Shieldwolf's eyes.

As he drew close to me I felt another shift of my body, but I stayed, resisting the urge to move.

An axe fell from somewhere high, fell fast and rang in my ears. It sank deep into my head but did not harm me, and I remembered in a flash – the hospital room where a nurse was sowing 14 stitches in my bloody scalp. And I remembered – crawling on the ground toward the unfinished steps of the house in Hatchet Lake, "Help me, I'm bleeding". And instantly I saw a cut of cedar, standing upright, three feet high; its roots still pulling into the earth, round about. A green emerald handed axe was stuck in its centre, ringlets of hundreds of years expanded outward like ripples on the water. Mother Earth groaned and heaved a sigh of pain. It was then I noticed that moist bubbling foam issued forth from the sides of the axe while the life-blood of the ancient spirit was spilled out.

I came back to myself. Shieldwolf. He was drawing near. I could reach out and soothe his neck and back, but my arms were like lava, heavy and flowing with a weird energy that fell as thickening blood from the tips of my fingers. I felt a wave of nausea begin to rise in my stomach, and knew this ritual must begin very soon. My strength was waning dangerously, I was losing the sight, and could no longer see in clear lines.

His wolverine eyes were drawing back behind a gray distance. The moment was ripe. I opened my mouth. Inwardly I said, "Come to me".

He came close.

A breath issued forth from my mouth, my last breath in this world's realm. His lips touched mine, he accepted my offering.

It was done.

Through his eyes my form slumped down, my head rested precarious on his face. I was dead. But I could still see through eyes wide as ripe dandelions and clear as precious emeralds. He covered my mouth with his large jaw and pushed a breath like fire and ice deep into my lungs. Then he was gone, and I fell sidelong, lying like a knot on the damp earth.

There was nothing more I could do, but my dreams rose up within to show me my defiant shadow sat huddled in a corner of the circled mound, his arms and feet severed. He could not move. He looked with horror at his appendages lying in front of him, torn and jagged, as if my friend the wolf had bitten them through, until they fell where they now lay, helpless.

But alas, my shadow was crying, tears of black like liquid coal streamed down his cheeks and onto the grass. I never imagined a shadow could cry. A

deep, abiding pity filled me, and something like compassion chased away my fear. I no longer feared my shadow. I looked closer, could it be? I strained my eyes to see, there, on the earthen mound, his tears seemed to disappear and reappear again. Where his tears fell on the grass of the sacred grove I realised a slow germination was taking place. A transformation. A rebirth.

Before me there rose up little green things, from out of the grass, becoming taller, growing steady. But all the while, my shadow kept his crying vigil, unable to see, too introspective to hear the music of his own genesis.

The moon was black now behind a thick cloud covering, and rain was threatening to fall. But all that dared touch these green growing stems were his tears, and that was enough to confer on them the strength which looks through death.

But in his despair and terrible fear of discovery, my shadow remained powerless and dismembered. He continued to cry. The agony rose from his chest, choking him, I wanted to move to him, to help, to speak just one word. But I lay there on the earth. We remained separate, confined in our prisons. I dead and he dying. He was all I had remaining. And yet, he couldn't see. And it was his seeing which mattered more to me than anything. To pierce the heart of the flower. To reach in, to touch and be touched within the sound of Isness. Still, he couldn't. And I could not.

He didn't notice. All around him time expanded, and small buds began to appear ... There bloomed Roses crimson, and pale white Lilies among fragile purple Orchids.

The sight of fear and despair living so close to the beautiful freedom of a garden of flowers – it was too much for my flouting soul to bear, and I felt the earth shake like the crushing of bone against bone. The very foundations of this world's realm shifted uncontrollably and would never be the same again.

I awoke ever slowly.

The sun was just about to rise. I realised that the time between times would end very abruptly and very soon, and my last chance to complete this ritual would pass forever. I forced my weary body to crawl around, oh, it seemed so slow, my every movement sent shards of pain shattering through my brain. Every nerve ending begged me to stop, to lie still, but I knew my time was short and the road to my recovery all too long.

He was only a few feet away, still crying. His eyes so swollen from his tears, he could not see my approach. His ears were so plugged by his infection of sadness that he never heard my scraping body on the earth between us.

I reached out finally, and touched his severed parts. They were cold as ice, strange, I thought, my shadow should be warm. But then I realised, these appendages had been lying there for decades, almost three long decades. Of course, they would be cold and almost like stones in their abject condition.

I took them into my hands, I was yet lying on my stomach, too weak to rise any higher. In my hands they rested, and seemed to glow an eerie black light like the stone of hematite coming to life. Their heaviness shifted and evaporated until there was nothing left in my hands, there was only this sweaty residue making the veins in my palms look like massive crossroads and endless, untrodden ways.

A subtle strength came to me then, coming not from my heart or soul, but from the extremities of my being. As if my fingers and toes were sucking in a new life blood to replace that which was lost, as if the edges of my sanity were returning to me after a long sojourn in the desert of dreamless sleep. I felt the urge to rise, but this time I was actually able to do it in fact. I rose to my knees and knelt close to my crying shadow, still totally unaware of my presence.

In one movement I lifted him up with both arms in a singular and heartfelt embrace, I took the stubs of his arms and held him like long lost kin, and I cried in joy.

He was now mine to hold, not to command, but to freely embrace as a lover holds their beloved. He never realised what was happening, so deep and wounded he was. But I stayed there, in the time between times, until this world's realm passed away.

Was it centuries? Was it ten by ten by ten of years? I held him, and realised that I could never, never let him go from me again. We stayed there, in the garden of flowers, and seasons came and went all around us. But in our sacred mound, time expanded to the break of day as one moment stretched to the edge of infinity.

His sorrow abated somewhat, only after what seemed many lives and deaths and cycles and seasons. But in spite of our rebirthing again and again, my sorrowful shadow never really disappeared.

Later ...

In my age, in the time toward my ending days, I discovered these simple truths which have eluded me until now. In my need I found my source of wisdom. In my weakness was my strength. I had walked the pilgrim's way of solitude, sacrifice and service. But I had failed to abide my own frailty. I had failed to embrace my humanity. And in so, my life-quest had not yet begun.

It then came to me that sadness itself is a boon from God, why and how could that be so?

On the day of my awakening, I arose from the sacred mound and walked from the hallowed grove with the confidence of a man who knew his totem. From that time on my life unfolded as it should. I did not walk away alone, however, but with my befriended shadow mysteriously and silently following me ever onward. I had never to fear his departure again.

We walked out of that sacred mound transformed in our reconciliation, but I wonder somehow if we ever

really left, if perhaps the rest of my life was a memory or vision from that place where we first embraced. Yes, it is true at least, that my life in the land of the living began that night's end when the day had not yet begun.

And to Shieldwolf these words I now transcribe in memory of his wisdom and breath of rebirth, "Never fear the embrace of your shadows, they are not as fearsome as first they may appear".

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