

Art of Living: Inspiration to enhance your life-force, vitality and health

Dr. Eline Kieft, 17 October 2019, Monaco

A talk that will help you reconnect with what is meaningful to you, and to let go of that which no longer serves, such as stress and worries. Learning from various cultural philosophies, we will address creativity and the imagination, dance/movement, and nature-based practices. Everyone welcome."

Art of Living [adapted from (Kieft, 2016)]

In a nutshell, "Art of Living" is neither an art, nor a profession, but more a practice of applied philosophy, in which one's views, actions and mode of life are in harmony with each other (Nehamas, 2000: 8). This goes back to Socrates (who died 400 BC) but was also contemplated by philosophers such as Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault (Epictetus and Lebell, 1995, Nehamas, 2000).

Art of Living is an attitude of practical wisdom that reflects on "What constitutes a good life?" or "How should I live?" Such questions go back at least all the way to our ancient Greek roots, but likely much, much further. Where Socrates and Plato claimed that there is one single, universal type of life best for all people (Nehamas, 2000: 9), I join more recent philosophers in acknowledging that the answers to these questions are highly personal, and therefore cannot be taught or imitated.

There are however guidelines to help discover our relationship to and understanding of concepts such as quality of life, authenticity and ethics, values, control, autonomy, morality. It requires skill to take care of oneself and one's environment sustainably, and this is never a finished product, but always a work in progress.

Although I mentioned the Greek roots of Art of Living, most traditions worldwide recognise the need for harmony, balance and 'right action'. The Navahos for example, call it 'the Way of Beauty' (Gold, 1994). All of these emphasise alignment and integration of Body, Heart, Mind and Spirit, and aspire to a balanced 'gestalt', 'haltung', or attitude, that sustains and nourishes not only ourselves but, as they say, "all of our relations" as well, within the human and non-human worlds.

Essential topics for my personal art of living

nature, silence

stories, symbols, creative writing and poetry

painting, making collages

dance, movement, working with archetypes

mindfulness meditation other spiritual activities

lucid dreaming

gratitude

> What are they for you?

Shamanism and tending the soul [all the below taken from (Kieft, 2019 (in print))

The umbrella term 'shamanism' generally indicates nature-based practices from all over the world, which are not usually considered a religion in themselves, but rather as a set of tools that can be recognized in many cultural traditions and are applicable in many different circumstances (Eliade, 1972 [1951]). The term may refer to social phenomena, healing techniques, ideologies, worldviews and ways of life. Based in a strong relationship with nature and recognition of mutual exchange, these tools include mediation between the profane and the sacred, the human and spirit worlds. Strength and knowledge can be accessed by using altered states of consciousness for the purpose of maintaining or restoring individual and community health and balance – and sometimes for divinatory purposes (Glass-Coffin, 2010, Morris, 2006). Other elements include working with spirit guides, such as power animals or plants, and also practices such as magical flight, lucid dreaming, shape-shifting, out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and a variety of healing tools.

Having grown up in a Dutch protestant and positivist milieu that supported the concept of a male transcendent god, learning about nature-based traditions provided a validation of personal experiences beyond the cultural and religious values of my immediate cultural environment. With a framework for perceiving spirit as immanent, such worldviews provided a structure to connect with the mysteries of life through dance, nature, and the elements – offering an invaluable possibility of a direct experience of, and relationship with the sacred. It was a relief to come home to a form of prayer, celebration and worship that allowed me to dance barefoot in the grass.

Life force, vitality and health in shamanic paradigm

There are two major causes of illness in shamanic work, one is soul loss, which I will talk about today, the other is intrusion.¹ In the first, something essential is absent, in the second something that shouldn't be there is. Intrusion is remedied by a treatment called 'extraction'. So what is soul and how can it get lost? Soul is very closely related to life force or vitality. For shamans, is the 'luminous energy field', that part of us 'that continues beyond death and into eternity and into infinity. We could literally say that our soul has a body, much more than saying that our body has a soul' (Villoldo, 2018). Some compare soul to the acorn's natural imprint to become an oak tree, the human blueprint appears to have an innate drive to wholeness. This individuation process happens naturally, whether or not we are aware of it. However, we can aim to provide the healthiest soil and the most nourishing circumstances for our 'tree of life' to grow and for our soul to develop.

This vital soul essence however, can, and most likely will, be impacted and reduced by life's experiences. In shamanic paradigms this phenomenon is called 'soul loss', which is seen as one of the two major causes of illness in shamanic diagnostics in which the patient lacks something that is essential for their vitality and wellbeing (Harner, 1980, Ingerman, 1991). This absence can lead to conditions such as tiredness, inertia, depression and illness, and therefore, these parts of soul need to be retrieved to secure or regain full health. Soul loss is often triggered by experiences that we perceive as shocking, although they do not necessarily have to be traumatic. These can cause part of the soul to be separated from the person 'in order to survive the experience' (Ingerman 1991: 11).ⁱⁱ In the West, even average, untraumatized adults will have had plenty of such moments. It may be a fleeing of the soul to protect that vital essence in a threatening situation, or a conscious or unconscious decision or 'energetic command' in which we send this essence away, in the face of something (seemingly) more valuable. Clarissa Pinkola Estés calls this making 'a bargain without knowing' (Pinkola Estés, 2008 [1992]). Sometimes those precious parts disappear almost unnoticed; sometimes they literally leave with a soul-tearing pain. However it happens, it happens to most of us, and not just once but many times. The psyche keeps striving to function normally without these essential parts, which will lead to survival strategies or unconscious perceptual bias. We can fill in the blanks based on our personal history and development that in order to be loved, we [.....]; in order to receive attention, we [.....]; in order to succeed, we [.....], and so on. These strategies might have been or seemed effective in the original circumstance, but may simultaneously twist our essential nature into a parody or shadow of our true potential.

Psychology recognises similar symptoms/diagnosis, called for 'dissociation' or 'fragmentation' either during 'normal phases of intensified conflict, development, or complex activation', or in 'pathological cases in which the personality is disempowered or poorly adapted to outer reality' (Roberts, 1999). Philip Cushman's for example describes feelings of disconnection, loneliness, emptiness, fragmentation, isolation and estrangement, often resulting in symptoms such as low self-esteem, confusion of values, absence of meaning, eating disorders, substance abuse and chronic consumerism as expressions of inner emptiness (Cushman, 1990).

Shamanism and dance offer ways to retrieve the soul. This process can lead to an increase in physical and psychical energy, a greater sense of aliveness and vibrancy and a feeling of coming home to oneself. In general, people feel more empowered and better able to make decisions and take action in their lives: 'It's as if you've cleaned out a room for a guest, opened the windows, let in the light and the fresh air, and now you are ready to invite more of *yourself* in' (Darling Khan and Darling Khan, 2009). So does Art of Living, which is connected to both.

Dance

Like everyone, even though I'm relatively untraumatized, I still lost quite a few soul parts through my life. Dance has always (consciously and unconsciously) been a way to reconnect with and retrieve soul parts,

allowing me to catch up with myself, slow down, take stock and re-align. When I start moving, I fold into liminality, a heightened awareness that feels like a stepping into, while already being in. It allows me to drop into fuller presence, focusing my entire being 'on opening, calling, connecting and remembering' (Kieft, 2014). The mere act of moving opens me to spirit. I appreciate that this is not the case for everyone, nor that dancing is necessary for soul retrieval, but for me it is as immediate as a direct ticket to Source on a fast train. I might not even be aware of something missing, but its spontaneous return is like finding a piece of the puzzle, which renders me more whole, more empowered and more in tune.

I have danced soul pieces back in sunlit bluebell fields, on raging cliff tops, in stone circles and sandy hollows, on dance floors, in Neolithic burial mounds and the surf of the ocean, on windswept moors, in magical forests, and even in a 700-year-old ruin in Coventry. Sometimes these retrievals were one-off events in which a part returned with lightning clarity, sometimes it was a longer dialogue of negotiating, patiently letting go of what no longer served, adapting habits and patterns to create a more conducive environment for a specific soul part to return.

Health Discussion

The insights of my personal journey of discovery can be extrapolated to a wider, perhaps more inclusive, understanding of health and wellbeing. Combining shamanic explanatory models and ways of knowing with the potency of dance allows us to readdress the spectrum of what health and healing constitute, of what conditions might need healing, what treatments could be applied, and to look at how circumstances can be created that are supportive and conducive of good health. I would like to draw attention to the following aspects of health and healing, which I will further unpack below:

- 1) health is an ongoing *process* of integration and balance that includes physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing and personal growth;
- 2) healing requires regular and active attention and does not only occur when ill;
- 3) healing is part of the social fabric of life and cannot be addressed at an individual level alone;
- 4) healing can be encouraged through a ritual context and an awareness of liminality within the everyday;
- 5) meaningful narratives and stories are essential to health.

Now that population, demography and disease patterns are changing, and technology and advance screening allow for earlier diagnosis, a state of *complete* health is hardly attainable. Most of us deal with (multiple) chronic conditions at some point in our lives. In addition to interventions on a mechanical physical level, health and healing definitions shifted to include the *ability* to adapt, self-manage and develop healthy coping strategies (Huber et al., 2011).

In shamanic work, as well as in complementary medicine, health and healing are indeed seen as an ongoing process of integrating, maintaining and/or restoring balance between body, heart, mind and spirit, including personal growth. Healing in this sense is similar to Jung's description of 'individuation' as 'the process by which a person becomes a psychological "in-dividual," that is, a separate, indivisible unity or "whole"' (Jung, 1971 [1959]). This implies that, regardless of the presence or absence of physical or mental symptoms, a healing (i.e. balancing) process is always occurring.

What would happen if we actively, consciously and regularly adjusting tasks and priorities to sustain health? This often only occurs when we fall ill or burn out. What would happen if we take a more active stance in our own health, instead of relying on expert advice, pills or surgery only in response to emerging symptoms? As we have seen in the previous section, becoming our own active healers requires ongoing attention and dedication, perhaps even a daily practice.

Healing does not only refer to integration of various elements *within* an individual, but also to the integration of different parts of life such as art, community, relationship and nature (Halprin, 2003). Bringing together the power of symbols, stories, imagination and the transformative properties of improvised, ritualized dance and shamanic healing modalities has helped me to create 'an internal narrative of restoration and healing, built from imagery which reiterated messages of wholeness and integration' (Samuel, 2010). The meaning and necessity of such individual journeys for health, wellbeing, and self-confidence cannot be underestimated, and soul retrieval is an essential ingredient to enhance coherence and our ability to cope with the many aspects of a demanding, fast and often multi-faceted life in contemporary western culture.

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ⁱ The other cause for illness is the harmful intrusion of external energies or forces into the system. This can be (but not always is) a consequence of soul loss, when the system is not as complete, whole and strong as it could be. Intrusion is remedied by a treatment called 'extraction'.

ⁱⁱ In many cultures there are other causes of soul loss, for example soul parts can be 'stolen' by a third party, as a result of not observing the right moral conduct, overstepping a taboo or not honouring the spirit worlds.