

## **M. Ann Phillips - 'Nervous Breakdown' as Shamanic Initiation: Awakening from 'Madness' and Becoming Who You Are**

Shamanism is one of the oldest forms of traditional medicine. Shamanism is a healing art and spiritual practice that has connected peoples to the earth and their natural environments since Paleolithic times. In traditional cultures around the world, traditional healers/shaman play an important role in society akin to that of a medical doctor-cum-priest in the Western world. The term 'shaman' originally described the healers of the Tungusic culture of Siberia who healing abilities were acquired through their roles as intermediaries between the world of humans and the world of Spirit. Traditionally those called to become shaman were born with an ability to connect with energies beyond those of the everyday world. In order to become a shaman, these individuals underwent a shamanic initiation and were put through a rigorous training that allowed them to understand what it is they were seeing or perceiving and how to negotiate within the realms of spirit. I argued that an isolated 'psychotic episode' as sometimes seen in a 'nervous breakdown' is an indication of a traditional medicine or shamanic calling. Living in a culture without elders to recognize our gifts, talents and abilities, potential shaman must carve their own path. 'Modern' Medicine and Western Science has pathologized people who, in traditional cultures and at other times, would have been recognized as the material from which shaman were drawn. Psychiatrists have labeled these 'uninitiated healers' as psychotics and madmen. I integrated theoretical research with personal experience and suggest that many who undergo a 'nervous breakdown' do not need to be medicated, but need the assistance and guidance of a trained shaman to bring them back from realms unknown and to teach them to use and control the gifts that their 'breakdown'/'breakthrough' has revealed.