

Drum on

Banging drums, stamping her feet and chanting,
Helen Kirwan-Taylor signs up for some shamanic healing

At some point in all our lives we hit a brick wall. We can cruise along pretty well until something happens: we lose our job, our partner leaves us or, as in the case of a stressed banker at Kleinwort Benson, someone we know dies at his desk. Then we all desperately want to know what to do.

It's usually at this point we turn up at a psychotherapist's office and start ruminating about all the things in our lives that conspired to make us so miserable. We wallow and then we pay £100 for the privilege of having been listened to.

I was a big proponent of the wallowing school until I realised that, for all my self-indulgence, I was no closer to finding inner peace. In fact, I was getting angrier. I had some rudimentary cures up my sleeves (including the number of a doctor who can prescribe antidepressants if need be), but it was a patch-up job every time.

Then I accidentally stumbled upon shamanism. Shamanism is oddly fashionable at the moment: a book called *The Horse Boy*, by Rupert Isaacson, is about the healing power of a Mongolian shaman who helped Isaacson's son's autism. *The Subtle Knife*, the second part of the Phillip Pullman trilogy which is in production, has a shamanic healer as a hero.

For most of my adult life, I have avoided the woo-woo school of bells, chanting and yoga. My attempts at meditation always make me anxious as I can never find the perfect 'beach' or 'mountain' setting (I frantically change screensavers in my head). I had, until recently, never once considered my spiritual life. Shamans were out there with New Agers who pray to light rays, clutching crystals and chanting.

Shamans were first noted about 30,000 years ago when a small group of hunter gatherers crossed the Bering Strait to the Americas. The word comes from Siberia. Shamans are healers, storytellers. They brought with them a body of knowledge - teachings, healing practices and rites of passage. Shamanism is not a religion based on belief but rather a spiritual experience. Shamanism (drumming, chanting, hands-on healing, meditation, rituals, often using herbs) forms an integral

part of modern-day therapy that works on feeling rather than thought.

And so I opened *Blind Faith: the Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine* by Richard Sloan, Professor of Behavioural Medicine at Columbia University Medical Center. Scientists have located what they call the 'god spot', or more specifically, the parietal lobes. At the top of the brain, this large bit of tissue is responsible for sensory input. Scientists now know it's the part responsible for the out-of-body experiences many believers (and shamans) achieve in deep prayer (it lights up under MRI). Whether we are hard-wired to believe in a god is less the issue than the increasing proof of the benefits of stimulating the 'god spot'.

Dr Andrew Newberg, co-author of *How God Changes Your Brain*, looked at the powerful health benefits. After conducting over 100 brain scans on people in all sorts of contemplative states, Newberg, co-founder of The University of Pennsylvania's Center for Spirituality and the Mind, found that prayer makes permanent positive changes to the brain. Prayer alters our state of consciousness, not easily achieved in a Harley Street office, as I have discovered.

'The god brain transcends everything, and it regulates the aggressive and fearful impulses of the monkey brain,' writes the great American shaman and psychologist Alberto Villoldo, whose recent workshop in London was sold out months in advance. 'For the god brain, time is fluid, running backwards and forwards as in dreams. It is about erasing negative imprints

and downloading a new karma so you don't have to work through the next job, or the next spouse or the next city,' says Villoldo.

Jo Bowlby, my teacher, is his student. In jeans and a cashmere sweater, she looks like a Sloane, but her calmness is remarkable. A former literary agent who started a business with the actor Adam Faith, she qualified in 2006 and started her practice in 2007 (her patients range from celebrities to ex-SAS

officers). 'I had psychotherapy but it was hopeless,' she says. 'I spent more time dodging the subject than delving into it. Psychotherapy kept me in my story.' By which she means that we in the West believe our past experience defines us. If we think we are a victim (because of some past abuse), many of us behave in a way that reinforces that view. The more we talk

about feeling weak, the more we believe it. The road to enlightenment and inner peace is achieved with the minimal involvement of the brain. 'Thoughts,' says Bowlby, 'are illusory. They keep us tied to our story. The first thing I ask my patients is, "What would you do without your story?"'

Shamans do not believe in linear time: they believe in journeying (forwards or backwards, like Doctor Who). This sounded idiotic until I read that physicists are increasingly questioning our realms of consciousness. They're beginning to think we're more transcendental than we realise.

Drumming, which I experienced for the first time when I did the Hoffman Process, a residential therapy course (we used our shoes on pieces of paper), which I thought was ridiculous, turns out to be the most powerful tool. After a few minutes, you enter a trance close to hypnosis. Shamans also practise soul retrieval using energy healing and drums. One friend described the process as 'waking up from the dead'. She stopped having night-

mares and gave up drinking almost immediately. Scientists found that those who would benefit most from shamanistic healing are 'schizotypal personalities'. They are characterised by a 'pervasive pattern of social and interpersonal deficits marked by acute discomfort with, and reduced capacity for, close relationships as well as eccentricities of behaviour'. Neurotics in other words.

One hour of Bowlby's hands-on healing and I felt as if I'd been on a month's holiday. I still believe in the life of the mind (I'm still journeying forwards in time), but I accept that what I don't understand - as long as it works - is fine by me.

As for my family? My husband welcomes any journey that might result in a nicer me (if I can prove there are multiple dimensions he says he'll come with me). My boys have offered to join me next time I take off my Tod's loafers to drum off a bad mood. And they can't wait to see what happens when I retrieve my soul. ■



'The god brain regulates the aggressive impulses of the monkey brain'

How to be your own shaman

- When stressed, move into nature. Walk. We need to feel grounded to the earth.
- When bad thoughts spoil your fun, ask them, 'Who invited you?'
- When animals move from a near fight to a normal state, they shake all over. Next time you're angry, try shaking it off physically.
- Stomping to the count of four (with the emphasis on one) in heavy shoes reduces anxiety and anger quickly.