

SHAMANIC PRACTICE

Moments of Grace and Transformation Tending Joplin, Missouri

Tom Cowan, PhD



*Pat Tuholske and Finn in New Orleans
after Hurricane Katrina.*

On Sunday May 22, 2011, a mile-wide, EF5 tornado struck the town of Joplin, Missouri in the late afternoon. The monster storm blew through the city of 50,000 leaving behind what the Red Cross would call a "6-mile-by-1-mile footprint" of death, destruction, and mayhem. Within hours the whole world heard of the disaster, and also within hours, people of all walks of life responded with rescue efforts. Anonymous citizens sent money, professional relief organizations arrived, and private individuals volunteered to do whatever was needed. The challenge was staggering: help and support survivors, heal the wounded, locate and bury the dead, and eventually rebuild. By one estimate 18,000 vehicles and 8,000 homes were destroyed.

Among the volunteers who went to Joplin were two members of the Society for Shamanic Practitioners. Pat Tuholske drove from her home near St. Louis. Adele McDowell flew in from Connecticut. The two women are not newcomers

to disaster rescue work. Both went to the Gulf Coast after hurricane Katrina — McDowell to Gulfport, Mississippi, and Tuholske to New Orleans.

For several years many people in the shamanic communities have been reflecting on the unique ways that shamanic practitioners can respond to the world's traumas and disasters. We have shared ideas, sought advice from helping spirits, and experimented, both individually and in teams, with "response efforts" to disasters as they are reported from around the world. Inspired by organizations such as Doctors without Borders, we have imagined a world in which shaman practitioners can bring "shamanism without borders" to places devastated by natural, industrial, or military violence. When shamanic practitioners such as Tuholske and McDowell respond to such disasters, we see dramatic, inspiring examples of what shamanism without borders might and can be.

Pat Tuholske and her dog Finn are a canine rescue team. Adele McDowell is disaster mental health volunteer with the Red Cross. Both women were keenly aware that they arrived at these places of severe trauma not only with their specific rescue skills but with shamanic practices, visions, and awareness that offer comfort and support to endure the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering they encountered.

"No words can accurately describe being in a disaster zone of such magnitude," says McDowell. "Knee deep in debris and rubble, the work was hot, laborious, and tedious. The temperature was over one hundred. The air quality was compromised." Tuholske remembers "the smell of rotting food and decay, the eerie sounds of smoke detectors going off, intact kitchens with Sunday dinner sitting on countertops, bathtubs and closets piled with pillows and mattresses where people huddled to escape the storm."

Being first responders Tuholske and Finn arrived 16 hours after the tornado. The first 48 hours they worked around the clock, the priority being to find survivors. During this time they had to be self-sufficient, since they could not rely on finding food, water, and rescue gear at the site. Nor places to sleep. "We slept in our vehicles whenever we needed a



After the tornado, the streets of Joplin were littered with debris.

break," Tuholske explained.

Tuholske works primarily with fire fighters. "I have ancestral help in this," she recounted. "My grandfather was a fireman, and my father was a strong volunteer so they watch over me, protect me, and help me remain calm and focused." The first day she needed their help. "I spent much of the first day praying. Everywhere there was Fomorian (Irish gods of disruption) chaos, the sounds of heavy equipment, jackhammers, thunder clashes, lightning strikes, and five inches of relentless rain. We knew anyone trapped under the rubble of The Home Depot, which was totally destroyed, would more than likely succumb to hypothermia or drown." Amidst such chaos, Tuholske tuned into the environment. "I watch for birds, other animals, and elementals to give me a sign. I am acutely aware of the wind, water, and landscape. Working a search dog, I pay close attention to the wind as the scent of the missing rides the air."

Adele McDowell, arriving later, was assigned to the Red Cross shelter where

she was occasionally sent out to assess certain critical areas and help transition local psychologists and other mental

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health workers, some of them coming from over an hour away." I talked to peo-

ple—survivors, volunteers, workers. In the shelter I walked and talked, held babies, comforted kids, fetched extra blankets, made beds, gave out Tootsie Rolls—any little act that could open a door to conversation. I also assisted first responders and volunteers [although she and Tuholske never met while there], helped security officers with inflammatory situations, assessed unstable clients."

In many ways McDowell did what shamanic healers always do. "I held the space," she recalls, "and the energies. I worked to unwind trauma in any way that I could." McDowell found no separation between the physical activities she performed for people and spiritual work. "I live my life in concert with Spirit," she says, "so that awareness, that consciousness, is always there. It is who I am and how I live and work." She found, perhaps not surprisingly, that "many volunteers and survivors also operate with a sense of Spirit. "We could talk about grace, yes grace, and energies. Well, after all, I was in the Bible belt!"

Tuholske also found moments of grace and spirit among the people she met. "In disaster work you frequently see priests or chaplains," she explains. "Sometimes a fire chief will lead a morning prayer to start off the day." Like McDowell, she found this kind of recognition of the sacred to be an important element in rescue efforts. "I always honor others' spiritual paths and apply what they say to my own belief system. Everyone has their own way of praying, all prayers lead to the center, and rescue workers honor that in each other." McDowell confirms this. "Team work makes me more present, in the now, and I don't need to be the final authority on anything. Disaster, alas, is a great equalizer."

"My first day in the shelter I walked around and thanked God as I knew I was in the right place for me." McDowell continued to find moments of grace and spirit in the least likely places. "One day out of the blue, this hard-hat construction worker talks to me about 'losing it' with a grandmother whose house was blown away. He pointed to the place of her former home in the demolished street, and then began talking to me about 'unity consciousness'! So uncharacteristic of what I would expect from a construction worker! And so fabulous! I felt so blessed after our exchange."

McDowell also did direct spiritual-energetic healing when she could. "I did some energetic clearing," she says, "whenever the situation presented itself.

Some people were open to hands-on healing work. I did a great deal of soul healing with Red Cross volunteers in the shelter like I did in Gulfport after Katrina."

dead." One day she went to a deserted beach to do ritual for the dead. "I called in everyone who had died along the coast: souls who were lost, in trouble, traumatized, or couldn't find the light. I

kept saying 'Rest in Peace, Rest in Peace' over and over. The force of the energy was so strong I was knocked off my feet. I got up, stood strong, raised my arms and continued my litany of 'Rest in Peace.' Again my knees buckled and my body swayed, and I was on the ground. But I was told that my work was finished for the day."

Tuholske also was struck by the strong presence of the dead in New Orleans. She says, "Several thousand people died in the hurricane. I felt a stronger sense of ghosts and spirits there than in Joplin. It could be stronger because belief in the spirit world is such a vital part of the New Orleans culture. It smelled worse from the number of dead bodies."

McDowell relates: "On my last day in Joplin I had

a chance to do shamanic work in a car alone. It was very rare for me to ever be alone there. So I began to chant, and I chanted and chanted; it seemed to want to go on and on. I was literally sucker-punched in the gut with the extent of the trauma after the tornado. This was eye-opening for me, a kind of revelatory experience as I was shown images of how so many people were out of body, many still numb and in disbelief, and how almost everyone was literally shaken in all

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Searching for survivors.

McDowell had to grab the chances to do shamanic work whenever she could in Joplin. "I frequently did clearing and healing work at night while in bed. Remember I was sleeping in a shelter with a lot of people. But it was sometimes the only chance I had. There were times when I really wanted to do shamanic ritual but the time and space shifted and I couldn't." She remembers her work in the Gulfport area where, as she puts it, "I was bombarded with the

possible ways. I cleared wave after wave of trauma throughout the area and as I did the tears flowed and flowed." McDowell continued this work for about 25 minutes. "And then some Red Cross worker knocked on my window and I popped out of trance!"

Pat Tuholske was fortunate to have driven to Joplin in her own truck with the rescue gear that she describes in Celtic terms. "My truck is empowered as my Soul Sanctuary and contains, among other things, a bell as my Silver Branch (of power) and a small deer antler to amplify my relationship with the Fianna (Irish heroes). My uniform symbolizes my Cloak of Power, along with Finn's leash which is our connecting cord." It isn't surprising that her dog is named after the legendary leader of the Fianna, Finn McCool. She goes on, "My rescue pack is my Crane Bag (Irish medicine bundle) containing small shamanic tools, oils, and a wolf talisman, a Spirit Wheel medallion attached with a carabiner, plus all my necessary search gear. I also wear star earrings to light the way and a pendant of my power animal."

Tuholske felt that she did ritual work "quietly all day." She says, "I honored the directions, and blessed the spirit of the storm and the powers that brought the great change. I prayed St. Patrick's Deer's Cry to honor the elements. I sat quietly with Finn and reaffirmed our connection and pledge to help the missing and lost." Being part of a search team, Tuholske recognizes the similarity with shamanic searching. "Hunting for a missing person is a natural extension of my shamanic work. Having tracked many souls in the Otherworld with my power animal, my journeys are mirrored in this dimension as I walk with Finn's nose leading the way. He is the physical manifestation of my spiritual allies. We communicate at a deep level and work as one."

Both women were impressed with and grateful for the spirit of hospitality that is so evident in disaster areas. Cracker Barrel, the restaurant chain, pro-

vided food at the shelter in a local junior high school were Adele McDowell was moved to from the first Red Cross shelter at Missouri Southern State University. Pat Tuholske remembers some anonymous person picking up the tab for eight rescue personnel who had din-



Adele McDowell resting at the Red Cross shelter in Joplin, MO..

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ner at one of the few restaurants that was still open. She noticed that, unlike in New Orleans, there was very little if any looting. She only heard of one incident. In New Orleans after Katrina, Tuholske remembers encountering a lot of looting.

Adele McDowell was struck by how "disaster brings out people looking for redemption. I saw broken people coming and looking for ways to become whole again." She relates the story of Bruce (not his real name) from Colorado who bought a plane ticket, flew to Kansas City, rented a car, and drove to Joplin to volunteer.

"It was something he had to do," McDowell explains. "He would leave the

shelter early each morning and work all day clearing debris and rubble, returning at sundown for dinner, shower, and sleep. For twelve hours a day, he was knee-deep in the pieces of people's lives, families who were complete strangers to him, whose lives were in complete tatters. He worked for a week and then had to go home. We met before he left, and as we talked, tears began to flow from his eyes. He told me bits about his life, his personal struggles. Our conversation settled into deeper emotional territory and the tears continued. He had experienced a huge visceral punch to his personal reality and he wondered how his family would really understand what he had experienced. Finally he concluded, 'You know what? Nothing matters. What matters only is compassion and forgiveness.' I couldn't agree more."

Both women relied on their own strong interior lives, based on shamanism, that allowed them to withstand the discomfort and pain that they experienced all around them. And to be able to recognize the moments of grace and transformation that occurred not only in people like Bruce but in countless indi-

viduals they met in their rounds of work.

Tuholske explains, "I have a keen interest in survival—who survives and who doesn't. Is it a soul choice? A god choice?" Ultimately she con-

cludes about her work that "it is an honor and a privilege to serve in this way. It is a deep soul calling to help the lost and missing in any disaster, no matter how large or small. It is a responsibility and a gift."

Tuholske remembers a local veterinarian who had lost his house in a flood a month earlier, then his home and office in the tornado. "He was homeless and working out of the back of a trailer, volunteering to care for two of the search dogs on our team that had hurt their paws. I watched him 'dog whispering' with one of them for several minutes, then he kissed him on the ear. He was a true healer. Later after we got home, Finn was hospitalized with bacte-

rial pneumonia. I was stunned by the prognosis and the costs involved and desperate. So I called the vet back in Joplin for advice, and he volunteered to cover up to \$1000 of Finn's hospitalization."

When all is said and done, shamanic

bring havoc to the normal patterns of life. They return with greater wisdom and understanding of the universe and human beings' place in it. They return with greater understanding of the role of shamans.

McDowell says, "Disaster work is a

and let go of our illusions."

Back home in Connecticut after three weeks in Joplin, Adele McDowell remarks that her "heart is full of memories and some indelible connections. One morning, the song that kept coming to me was *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. May all of Joplin's dreams come true." In similar fashion and sentiment, after six days of rescue work, Tuholske and Finn were back home on the other side of Missouri. She notes, "Sometimes life is difficult to understand, but the world forever turns to greet another sunrise, the darkness passes, and the human spirit lives on."

When all is said and done, shamanic practitioners who respond to disasters and traumas around the world are not simply healing individual people, animals, or spirits, nor are they simply tending the overall crisis, even though they do both.

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practitioners who respond to disasters and traumas around the world are not simply healing individual people, animals, or spirits, nor are they simply tending the overall crisis, even though they do both. Equally important, the crises tend, heal, and change them. Whether they confront the work physically at the site of the disaster, as Adele McDowell and Pat Tuholske did, or whether they respond remotely from a distance, shamanic practitioners are not the same after encountering the strong forces and powers that can rampage and

tremendous way to release the ego. I get stretched. I evolve from one disaster to another, gaining greater flexibility in my attitudes. Disaster brings out the best instincts in many to be of service, generous of heart, accepting of what is. There is little room for judging in disaster, plenty of room for acceptance and allowing." Tuholske adds, "Natural disasters teach us that Nature is the ruling force, and we humans only borrow the space we make home. Nature is neither personal nor selective. It simply IS. It will indeed teach us to accept change

Adele Ryan McDowell, PhD, is a transpersonal psychologist, teacher, and shaman. She is the author of *Balancing Act: Reflections Meditations, and Coping Strategies for Today's Fast-Paced Whirl*. Her next book, *Help, It's Dark in Here* will be released in 2012. You can learn more at <http://theheraldedpenguin.com>.

Pat Tuholske facilitates retreats at Elemental Earthcamp, her 500-acre encampment in the Ozark Mountain foothills. She also handcrafts Willow Rain Herbal Goods. You can learn more at <http://willowrainherbalgoods.com> and <http://elementalearthcamp.com>. Her column, "Nature Wisdom," can be read in the environmental magazine *The Healthy Planet*.

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