

Healer of the Living, Escort to the Dead: A Day in the Life of a Modern Shamanic Practitioner

By: Hannah Chenoweth

A crowded Irish pub in the early '90s: Suzanne Connolly zeroes in on a young man with a tiny gold barrel around his neck. "I can tell you the history of that necklace," she says, abetted with a bit of liquid courage. It might sound like the start of a mystical, perhaps *Twilight*-esque love story, but for Connolly it was instead a growing, undeniable realization of her intuitive abilities. The young law student had a penchant for reading energy, a fact she discovered when she rubbed jewelry and in turn received flashing images of the previous owners in her mind's eye. However, her special talents were reserved as a parlor game for flirting with "blokes" and largely mystifying to even herself, she explains in her rolling Irish brogue.

As Connolly chats the guy up ("as you tend to do in your 20s at the university disco"), she gets the green light to read his necklace. As soon as she grasps the cool barrel, she feels a sudden *whoa!* She sees the previous wearers, three soldier ancestors, dying in the grass from gunshot wounds in various battles. "I said, okay, this is probably not good luck for you to wear!" Connolly recalls. "The human body registers war as murder, not as you know, dying valiantly defending the country: it just registers as murder."

This kind of profound observation so casually peppered into her anecdotes is a frequent occurrence throughout our conversation. I'm lucky enough to catch Connolly while she's visiting New York for the week from L.A., offering up her friend's Park Slope apartment to meet. On a warm September night, I rap on the door, eager and a tad nervous that she can somehow read my mind. However, the reason for her raving online reviews is immediately clear as she greets me with a warm smile and friendly chatter that puts me at ease. Her down-to-earth nature is discernible right off the bat.

There is nothing at all woo-woo about Connolly, who is dressed casually with wavy shoulder-length blonde hair and wide blue eyes. She is genuine and talkative, answering my questions with a quick and thoughtful wit. There's an interesting duality to her: while her abilities are nothing short of amazing, she's both highly knowledgeable in her field and fascinated as anyone else by it all. As a modern-day shamanic practitioner, Connolly has agreed to clue me in on how she blends both ancient knowledge and cutting-edge techniques to help clients heal.

A Different Kind of 9-to-5

Although signs of Connolly's intuitive abilities appeared at an early age, she tried her best to ignore them while blazing her own path, propelled by scholarly ambitions. Born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1971, she initially shut out startling messages from the spirit world—including the appearance of a dead friend at the foot of her bed—as she flitted between Dublin, London, and New York as a young woman earning multiple degrees in law and journalism.

Now a full-time shamanic practitioner, Connolly ruminates on her younger days with the sage hindsight of someone who's received world-class training from the best in the field, including Sandra Ingerman and Betsy Bergstrom. Able to read the energy of everything from people to objects, she attempts to describe the unique way she "sees." "You see through your pineal gland and your third eye, or at least I do. Not all shamanic practitioners read energy or are intuitive or empathic," she says. "But for those who are, the pineal gland receives and transmits energy in the visual cortex. That's the process for me."

Although she didn't always function this way, first reading people with her hands, she can now see energy both inside and outside the body, allowing her to read a wide range of clients struggling with various ailments: depression, abuse, addiction, the basic human quest for clarity.

And of course, there are the majority of us who happen to be possessed—but we'll get to that later. Her unique gift to view remotely means her clients don't need to be present, and dipping into other dimensions tends to dramatically dilate her pupils, crowding out her blue irises. She sees the energy transmitted in her mind's eye, getting impressions, moments and details.

Connolly can read everything from a bottle of wine to the brain, which, according to her, "looks like a slimy mass of gray worms with a wet sheen." She recalls with humor her naiveté in one of her very earliest readings on a volunteer, a woman who looked as healthy and normal as can be—until a glimpse at her brain showed that it was strangely steely, like metal. As it turns out, the woman had a titanium plate in her forehead, and a young Connolly was relieved to discover she wasn't in the presence of an alien! Geniuses tend to have one or two little worms sticking up out of the brain, by the way, she informs me. Ditto with mentally ill folks.

"So how do you shut it all out?" I ask. While she's firm about "tuning out" being an absolute necessity, for both ethical reasons and her own sanity, she ponders the actual process. After a minute of thought, she lights up.

"Intention to switch it on and off," she says definitively. "Incidentally, intention is one of the most potent forces in the universe."

Possession as a Natural Occurrence

Initially, Connolly herself remained skeptical of what she was seeing. She recalls watching a 20-foot dragon hang in the air at a depossession at one of Bergstrom's workshops, and thinking, "Okay, I'm 97 percent convinced." What nudged her to acceptance, and ultimately her shamanic calling, was a client who relayed detailed information about Connolly's own past while giving voice to a spirit.

"It was a little bit freaky, I thought whoa, that shit's real," she says. She reiterates her bafflement by comparing it to a moment in *The Matrix* where a character "pulls a thing out of her belly" and booms, "That shit's really real!"

Now that we've established the reality, albeit extraordinary, of her work, I inquire into one of Connolly's specialties that remains fairly underreported even with the resurgence of interest in shamanism: compassionate depossession. For most, the word 'possession' conjures up shrieking scenes from *The Exorcist* and the likes of similarly dramatized horror flicks. But according to Connolly, all of us are possessed—usually by at least four spirits, sometimes far more. This can include dead people, animals or other spirits who may have their own agenda. In fact, she's yet to meet a person who *didn't* benefit from the life-giving and energy-enhancing process of compassionate depossession, which helps her clients to function at their highest level. Just like all of the services Connolly offers, from soul retrieval to medical intuitive readings, compassionate depossession centers on the same mission: to clear blocks that impede energy and flow.

While compassionate depossession is the act of removing spirits from the body, her work isn't over once that happens. She then works as a psychopomp (a Greek word that means "leader of the souls"), guiding souls back into the Light. Before I have the chance to bring up the concept of a fiery and unforgiving underworld, Connolly answers for me: "There's no such thing as hell. But there *are* hidden worlds within our own, the Lower World, Middle World and Upper World, other dimensions. There are also Dark Side beings that I frequently work with. Yet I've never met a Dark Side being who hasn't returned to the light. They realize that their identity is from the Light, that they belong to it and that they want to go back."

When I inquire into the depossession process (primarily to dispel the disturbing images *The Exorcist* burned into my own mental library), Connolly provides an illuminating example: a fairly agile guy who was unable to do a certain spinal stretch, whose wife had died in an alcoholic

stupor. A quick reading informed Connolly that his wife's spirit was actually attached to his body—which she says is quite common. She guided the client in expressing his love and adoration for his wife, a love so palpable it was glowing out of his heart chakra and strong enough to travel through the attaching cord to wake her up. From there, Connolly was left with the task of informing the woman that she'd left her body.

The one way you definitely don't approach a spirit, she says, is by suddenly springing it on to them ("Hey, you're dead!"), which can understandably be terrifying and cause adverse results. So how *do* you break that sort of news to a dead stranger? She repeatedly stresses that the nature of her work *works* because it's compassionate, which is a major difference from fear-based exorcisms (Interestingly enough, Connolly notes that her grandfather Michael was present for many exorcisms as part of his altar boy duties). Over the next 30 minutes (longer than the process typically takes, she notes), Connolly bantered with the spirit, who at first resisted the idea of leaving the husband she adored. To guide her into the Light, Connolly helped her literally see the light by explaining that she's taking her husband's life force.

"Since all beings need a life force, she was feeding from her husband instead of feeding from the source," Connolly explains. "I have to let the spirit know that their body is dead, but they're still here. They're having a conversation with me, so clearly they are here: it's just a different thing. I reassure them that it's okay and that the Light is a good place for them."

Ultimately, it was Connolly's proposal that the woman would help her husband by going into her angelic form that won her over. In fact, she even came back within 45 minutes to assist Connolly in further energy work on her husband. For the client, the change was immediate—he was able to do the stretch with ease directly after the session.

"My point in this story," Connolly says, "is that compassionate depossession can clear blocks, sometimes immediately, that you didn't even know you had."

Although nearly everyone can benefit from this type of work, Connolly explains that she works on a "worst-first" basis. This means she addresses the most pressing issue that client is facing right away—and every case is different. If clients have more difficult trauma to work through, and the spirits in question are benign and minimal, then depossession might not necessarily be the priority. For those who do undergo the work, the results include feeling lighter, cleaner, more spacious inside the body, and mentally and emotionally calmer. Unwanted invasive thoughts, from suicidal ideation to post-partum depression, can disappear immediately. A consideration for some clients is even to lower the levels of medication they take after the process (after consulting a doctor), as they can feel overmedicated. Ultimately, Connolly's website describes compassionate depossession as "a gracious act of love" that benefits both the living and the physically departed, who are grateful for help into the Light.

A Tunnel to Answers

Although shamanism is considered one of humanity's most ancient spiritual practices, one aspect of Connolly's work is unmistakably *un*-ancient, as she conducts the majority of her services via the Internet. A typical day begins when her young son wakes, which could be as early as 5 a.m. She alternates taking care of her toddler with her filmmaker husband until daycare starts at 10 a.m. Then she settles into answering emails and following up with clients. She takes two clients per day in two-hour sessions each through Skype, Facetime or Google Hangouts.

Doing her work over the Internet is actually easier, she explains, due to the labor-intensive nature of working with many layers of energy. Congestion can cause drowsiness or a heavy feeling, which can impede her work and make it more difficult to get through. However, these sluggish symptoms lessen online, allowing Connolly to "charge through the work" without slowing down. She also stresses that it's essential to note she doesn't do her work alone—and really couldn't.

Helping Spirits, mostly Archangels Michael and Raphael (though others are called in when opening sacred space), assist in all her work. “A shamanic practitioner is only as good as their relationship with their Helping Spirits,” she says.

Early on, the first divine assistance came to Connolly in the form of a tunnel that hovered right above her right ear, answering any question she had with vivid images in her mind’s eye. “Now I sound completely crazy, as if everything I have told you isn’t crazy enough,” she says with a wry smile.

This strange tunnel phenomenon began occurring during this very same stage of being a continent hopping 20-something reading jewelry in pubs while for the most part trying to ignore other messages. Sometimes she would hear angels singing and playing violin from the tunnel. As she opened up more and more psychically, these instances became more frequent: she’d know what a boyfriend got her for Christmas, or relay each detail of her roommate’s dream without being told. “When you get the mind out of the way, it gets easier,” she says.

The less she resisted, the more the natural ability to read energy developed on its own, and she accepted a job working part-time in a Dublin healing center in the late ‘90s. However, it was too much, too fast, and Connolly quickly burnt out. She won the green card lottery and set off for New York in 2001, working as a journalist while studying for the Bar exams. However, she bounced back from the burnout, and studied with some of the most prestigious names in her field, traveling all the way to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to study with Ingerman, and Oregon and Connecticut for Bergstrom’s training.

Non-ordinary Realities

With the ability to see those who have passed on, Connolly’s long-standing belief in life after death is confirmed. Connolly explains she’s shifted from her childhood religiousness to a deep sense of spirituality instead. Reflecting on the spirits who approached her as a young woman, she can now see it was a call for help to get into the Light. According to Connolly, people with this work in their soul contract can have an “energy signature” of psychopomp, which naturally attracts spirits to them.

Inquiring how the average person can psychically open, she explained that the ‘clairs’ (clairsentience, clairaudience, clairvoyance, etc.) open naturally as the individual grows spiritually. This helps to “raise the light quotient of the energy system,” which means it raises the frequency of the energy of the individual. There are plenty of ways to do so: meditation, prayer, diet, building relationships with Helping Spirits, practice and “opening the self up to non-ordinary reality in many guises.”

Just from our brief conversation, I certainly know my mind has opened up to a non-ordinary reality. Earlier on, Connolly assured me that she’s not reading me as we speak; not only is she off-duty, but it’s unethical to do so. But as we sit outside on the balcony, she says, “I *am* conscious that you’re getting attacked by mosquitoes,” with a knowing smile. Although I’m completely entranced by our conversation, my arm *is* already dotted with blotchy swells—though I’d willingly get bit 10 more times for a longer glimpse at the world through her extraordinary eyes.