

Power Animals
Totem Animals, Animal Spirit Allies

In shamanic traditions it is known that everyone has a power animal, and that these are spirit beings there to help the individual, taking the form of an animal to do that. Their realm is non-ordinary reality and they are as if your personal guide and protector.

The word "animal" is derived from the Latin word "anima," meaning soul or breath of life. The wild in "wild animal" comes from the Anglo-Saxon "wilde," referring to living free within Nature and not under human control. Implied within this is the idea of the breath of the divine within the animal expression of Nature.

Animal-Speak: The Spiritual and Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small by Ted Andrews

The connectedness between humans and the animal world is very basic in shamanism, with the shaman utilizing his knowledge and methods to participate in the power of that world. Through his guardian spirit or power animal, the shaman connects with the power of the animal world, the mammals, birds, fish, and other beings. The shaman has to have a particular guardian in order to do his work, and his guardian helps him in certain special ways.

The Way of the Shaman by Michael Harner

A power animal comes to you specifically because of what it can teach you – its ‘medicine’.

A power animal’s medicine represents their archetypal energy and this can be called up when necessary in various life situations. Our power animal’s medicine can provide us with what we need to be more fully in our power, more conscious, more aware and healed. This is particularly the case regarding the healing required for one’s sacred wound and what we can offer others.

During shamanic practices your power animal can be your guide in the other realms. This can be by working beside you or with you both in the one form, with you shapeshifting into your power animal.

A person may have several power animals and they may change over their lifetime. Sometimes a power animal comes for a specific time and purpose and leaves when that is over. Groups can have power animals, people can share power animals, and for each person the power animal may express itself a bit differently.

Your power animal connects you with the whole genus of the animal, not an individual animal, and so it is referred to, for example, as snake rather than a snake. It is said that a power animal chooses you, not the other way around. There are several ways this can happen.

How to Meet your Power Animal

You can do a Drum Journey into the Lower Realm to connect and consult with your power animal. And you can hold the space and drum for others when they need to do this as well.

Your power animal may come to you in a variety of ways. It is generally accepted that if 'it' shows itself three times within your journey to meet 'it' then that is the sign that it has 'arrived'. However, it is always more important to listen to your inner knowing than rely on a count of viewings.

For drum journey instructions on how to connect with your Power Animal see Opening Gathering Shamanism handout.

Other Ways to Determine your Power Animal

Begin the process of discovering your animal totems by examining the animals you have been most interested in and the times of your life that interest was piqued. Use the following questionnaire to help you determine which animals are probably totems to you in your life.

- 1. Which animal or bird has always fascinated you? (We are drawn to that which most resonates with us. Those animals which fascinate us have something to teach us.)*
- 2. When you visit the zoo, which animal do you wish to visit the most or first? (As a child, this is especially important. Children are more naturally open and thus are able to more easily recognize the animal that will be important to them.)*
- 3. What animal(s) do you see most frequently when you are out in nature? Have you had encounters with animals in the wild? (The animals we encounter, in the city environment or in the wild, have significance for us. We can learn from them, even if only about survival within that environment.)*
- 4. Of all the animals in the world, which are you most interested in now? (Our interests in animals change. Yes, we usually have one or two that are lifetime, power animals, but others become prominent when there is something important or specific to teach us.)*
- 5. What animal most frightens you? (That which we fear the most is often something we must learn to come to terms with. When we do that, it then becomes a power. Some shamans believe that fears will take the shape of animals, and only when we confront them without fear do their powers/medicine work for us instead of against us. Such an animal becomes a shadow totem.)*
- 6. Have you ever been bitten or attacked by an animal? (Historically, if a shaman survived an attack, it was believed that the animal was the shaman's spirit totem and the attack was the totem's way of testing the shaman's ability to handle the power.)*
- 7. Do you have dreams with animals in them or are there animal dreams you have never forgotten? (This is especially important if the dreams are recurring or if at least the animal image in the dream is a recurring one. Children often dream of animals, and attention should be given to these*

animals. They will often reflect specific spirit totems of the child.)

Animal-Speak: The Spiritual and Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small by Ted Andrews

Honouring your Power Animal

Another strong belief about power animals is the need to maintain your relationship with them. This can be done through a variety of ways and basically is about honouring their nature and holding a place for them in your daily life.

Gather pictures, statues etc of your power animal for your altar, and also have reminders of your power animal around your home, office etc on display - to keep you engaged with it's essence. Wear jewellery and clothes that represent your power animal. Work for the actual animal's survival in the wild eg donate your time or money to organizations that do that work. Learn as much as you can about your power animal.

It is believed that without this sort of attention a power animal will leave you. You can call it back, and you can seek a new one too.

Am I imagining all this?

Most people equate the imagination with unreality. Nothing could be further from the truth. The imagination is a power of the mind to create and work with images. It is this ability which can open us to other realms, assist us in healing, help us to discover lost knowledge and to open to higher vision and even prophecy.

Through creative imagination we begin to see the spiritual energies surrounding and interplaying with the physical world. What we consider imagination is a reality in some form on levels beyond the normal sensory world. Through creative imagination, we create a new kind of awareness, a new kind of experience in color and form. This triggers higher forms of inspiration and intuition, giving us a higher understanding of the conditions of our lives and the spiritual energies affecting it. Images are the tools to link with the spiritually creative world. It is what helps you to identify your spirit totems and awaken their energies in your life.

Animal-Speak: The Spiritual and Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small by Ted Andrews

Imagination is more important than knowledge.
Albert Einstein

Imagination is the language of the soul

Invoking your Power Animal

You can call your power animal whenever you need or want to. You may require the essence of an animal that isn't your power animal at a time and you can call them to you as well. Each animal will speak to you specifically and metaphorically, and it is with practice and increased connection that the wisdom offered will be understood.

Many shamans work with their power animals in their healing practices as the power animal is able to do certain things in the other realms that the person cannot. It may be necessary to establish boundaries with your power animal, and this is seen as part of defining your relationship.

Dancing Your Power Animal

Dancing your power animal will not only maintain your connection it will also gift you with a deeper relationship. There are many ways to do this, both privately and with a group. As always, creating a safe, sacred space and clear intentions will determine the experience and outcome of such a process. Moving as the animal does, making the sounds they do and opening to the way they use their senses are all part of dancing your power animal.

Many people in societies all over the world have dances that honor animals. Costumes, elaborate or simple, are used to help awaken in the individual the experience of the animal's energies. Dancing to the animals is a way of honoring them and activating their energies dramatically within your life. One of the most common forms of sacred dance was the imitation of Nature and life within it. Individuals would perform the dance of an animal to align themselves with its power and to awaken it within their life. It is a powerful tool to use in conjunction with the shapeshifting exercise described later in this chapter. Through dance we can shift our energy to that of a pattern similar to our animal totem.

To understand how this works, you must understand the human body. It is a complex, bio-chemical, electro-magnetic energy system. Every time a muscle is used there is an electrical stimulus. The study of the electrical impulses associated with muscular movement is part of the study of kinesiology. When we move or dance in imitation of animals, we help adjust our own body's electrical frequency to one similar to that of the animal. We create resonance.

For this to be most effective, you must perform a close study of the animal. Learn about the way it moves and the way it stands. How does it hold its head? How does it place its feet when it walks? Practice pantomiming those same postures and movements. These movements will be at the heart of the dance. They do not have to be long or extended. Several minutes is all that is necessary to invite the animal's energy into your life, if done appropriately.

Animal-Speak: The Spiritual and Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small by Ted Andrews

Calling the Beasts

Now try an exercise in which you will have a chance to get in touch with one or more of your unknown past or present guardian spirits. You probably had at least one in the past, or otherwise you would not have survived childhood's hazards and illnesses. Even if it has long since left you, the exercise should awaken your hidden memories of it. This exercise is a simple, ancient shamanic technique. One name for it is "Calling the Beasts." There are different names for it in different cultures. It is a way whereby the people of the community, through dance, evoke or get in touch with their animal aspects.

Keep in mind that a single guardian spirit can appear either in animal or human form, although most likely you will see or feel the animal aspect of your guardian spirit.

Undertake this exercise in a quiet, half-darkened room free of any furniture that might interfere with your movements. It will help if you have two good rattles (see Appendix A on drums and rattles). Do not hesitate, however, to try this exercise without waiting to acquire rattles. There are two phases in the exercise: (1) the starting dance, and (2) dancing your animal. In both dances you steadily and loudly shake a rattle in each hand, and your dancing is in time with the rattles. In all the dancing you keep your eyes half-closed. This allows you to cut down on light, and at the same time enables you to know where you are in the room.

The Starting Dance

1. Standing still and erect, face east and shake one rattle very rapidly and strongly four times. This is the signal that you are starting, ending, or making an important transition in serious shamanic work. Think of the rising sun, that ultimately brings power to all living things. (A total time of about 20 seconds.)

2. Still facing east, start shaking one rattle at a steady rate of about 150 times per minute, standing in place. Do this about half a minute to each of the cardinal directions (rotating either clockwise or counterclockwise, depending on what seems better for you). Meanwhile, think of your plant and animal relatives in all the four directions who are ready to help you. Now face east again and shake the rattle above your head at the same rate for half a minute. Think of the sun, moon, stars, and the entire universe above. Next shake the rattle toward the ground in the same way. Think of the Earth, our home. (A total time of about 3 minutes.)

3. Still facing east, take both rattles in your hands and start shaking them at the same rate as in Step 2, simultaneously dancing as if you were jogging in place to the tempo of the rattles. In this starting dance, you are giving proof of your own sincerity to the power animals, wherever they may be, by making a self-sacrifice of your own energy to them in the form of dance. This dancing is a way of praying, and of evoking the sympathy of the guardian animal spirits. In shamanism it can truly be said that you dance to raise your spirits. (A total time of about 5 minutes.)

4. *Stop dancing, and repeat Step 1. This signals you are about to make a significant transition to dancing your animal. Dancing Your Animal*

5. *Start shaking your rattles loudly and slowly about 60 times per minute, moving your feet in the same tempo. Move slowly and in a free form around the room, trying to pick up the feeling of having some kind of mammal, bird, fish, reptile, or combination of these. Once you pick up the sense of some such animal, concentrate on it, and slowly move your body in accordance with being that animal. You are now touching the Shamanic State of Consciousness (SSC). Be open to experiencing the emotions of that animal, and don't hesitate to make cries or noises of it, if you experience the desire. By keeping your eyes half-closed you may also see the nonordinary environment in which the animal is moving, and perhaps even see the animal as well. Being and seeing the animal commonly happen simultaneously in the SSC. (The time for this tends to average about 5 minutes.)*

6. *Without pausing, shift into a faster rate of rattle-shaking and movement, about 100 shakes per minute. Continue everything else as in Step 5. (The time for this tends to average about 4 minutes.)*

7. *Without stopping, increase your rattle-shaking to approximately 180 times per minute, continuing your dancing as before, but at a still faster rate. (The time for this usually is about 4 minutes.)*

8. *Stop dancing, and mentally welcome the animal to stay in your body. As you do this, shake the rattles rapidly four times, drawing them toward your chest. (Time about 10 seconds.)*

9. *Repeat Step 1. This is the signal that the work is ended.*

For a more powerful transition into the SSC when doing the above exercise, I recommend that a drum be used in addition to the rattles. For this, you will need someone to act as your assistant to beat the drum exactly in tempo with your shaking of the rattles (for information on drums, see Appendix A). Your assistant should stand at the side of the room and not attempt to participate in any of the movements while drumming. When the drummer becomes experienced with the steps of the exercise, you may find it possible to do the animal dancing without the rattles, thereby freeing your consciousness more from ordinary reality.

Typically, Westerners "dancing their animals" discover themselves to be such creatures as Crane, Tiger, Fox, Eagle, Bear, Deer, Porpoise, and even Dragon (for there are no "mythical" animals in the SSC; Dragon is as real as the others). One thing that usually becomes clear to the dancers is that underneath our ordinary human cultural consciousness is a near-universal emotional connection with wild animal alter egos.

Keep in mind that no matter how successful you were in dancing your animal, that in itself is not proof that you still have its power. You may only be dancing a memory. A successful experience does suggest, however, that you may have at least had such a guardian spirit in the past, if not now. The dancing itself, however, is no proof in itself, one way or another.

Incidentally, no matter how fierce a guardian animal spirit may seem, its possessor is in no danger because the power animal is absolutely harmless. It is only a source of power; it has no aggressive intentions. It only comes to you because you need help.

If one wishes to maintain shamanic practice, one has to change into one's animal regularly to keep the animal contented enough to stay. This involves exercising the animal through dance, singing songs of the animal, and recognizing "big" dreams as messages from the guardian, the power animal. Dancing your animal is an important method for keeping it content and thus making it reluctant to leave you. The guardian animal spirit resident in the mind-body of a person wants to have the enjoyment of once again existing in material form. It is a trade-off, for the person gets the power of the whole genus or species of animals represented by that guardian spirit. Just as a human may want to experience nonordinary reality by becoming a shaman, so too a guardian spirit may wish to experience ordinary reality by entering the body of a living human.

Even with the best of care, as I learned from the Jivaro years ago, guardian spirits usually stay with you only a few years and then depart. So, in the course of a long, powerful life, you will have a number of them one after another, whether you know it or not.

The Way of the Shaman by Michael Harner

Shapeshifting

Shapeshifting is natural to all of humanity. It involves more than just transforming oneself into a beast. Every day, on some level, we shift our energies to meet the daily trials, responsibilities, and obligations of life. We learn early on in our lives when to smile, when to be serious, how to appear apologetic, or how to express a wide variety of personas according to need.

Shapeshifting is not just transforming into a beast, as often described in ancient myths and tales. Most of the tales of Shapeshifting were either symbolic or reflected a time in human evolution when we were not so grounded in the physical. Shapeshifting is a matter of controlling and shifting your own energies to fit the needs of the moment—being able to draw upon those qualities and energies necessary.

Anyone who can discipline himself or herself to achieve a goal is a shapeshifter. If you can adapt to change, pleasant or otherwise, you are a shapeshifter. If you can turn a foul mood into a pleasant one, then you are a shapeshifter. If you can adjust your behaviors to relate to a wide variety of people and life conditions, then you are a shapeshifter.

It is this kind of Shapeshifting that we all can develop to a high degree. We can learn to adjust our energies to that which is similar to a particular animal totem and manifest it beneficially within our life. When we can do this, then we begin to realize that there truly is a magic to the world.

Today, most magic takes place within the mind at a different level of perception. It doesn't make it

any less real or useful in our outer lives. When we can accept that, then we are on the way to becoming a true magician. With practice you can strengthen the imaginative faculty and learn to consciously control and shapeshift it along any lines you desire. And when we change the imaginings, we change the world. We can learn to shapeshift the imagination so that for all intents and purposes, we become the shape.

Animal-Speak: The Spiritual and Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small by Ted Andrews

Signs and Symptoms of Power Animal Loss

One reason a person may become ill is that his or her power animal has gone away and a new one has not come in to replace it. Signs that a person has lost his or her power are chronic health problems, always being ill with a cold or the flu or some other complaint of illness. Chronic depression or suicidal tendencies is another cue that a person may be suffering from a loss of power. Chronic misfortune is yet another cue—perhaps a person falls down the stairs, is then in a car accident, and then has a fire in his or her house. I think we all know someone who has had such a string of bad fortune that it causes us to wonder what is happening. A string of misfortune like this is another indication to me that a client has lost power.

The role of a power animal is to keep a person protected from harm. The power animal also keeps one healthy and well balanced. Most of us don't work regularly with our animals; they might become bored and leave us after a number of years. Usually a new animal will replace the one that left; also, most of us have many animals around us at one time working in our behalf. But a problem occurs when a person loses a power animal, and no replacement appears.

The Way of the Shaman, by Michael Harner.

Times when it may be helpful to invoke a Power Animal:

For a particular experience that lay ahead, eg a journey to another place, a new job, a new study; for menarche, childbirth and menopause rites of passage; for healing particular 'wounds'.