



FIRE SEASON 2000 — Spiritual Help for the Burning West: Calling to the Helping Spirits and the Spirits of Weather

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This is both an account of events and a story. It is a story of humans reaching out to the world of spirits for help for the Earth and beings of the Earth. This is a story of human and spirit compassion, of intense need and help ultimately received. It is a story that raises the questions: "What really happened here? Did we experience a miracle?" So, in our wonderment, it is a story of "miraculous ambiguity," of events that offer us great teachings. It all goes something like this.

The spring and summer of 2000 were extremely challenging for the land and inhabitants of the Rocky Mountain and intermontane Great Basin West. An "open" winter had provided little snowpack for summer water needs and the region experienced a drought, severe enough to drive the forest and rangeland fire danger ratings well into high and extreme levels, even early in the season. Lack of moisture from snow, along with sparse spring rains, served ample warning for the potential of calamitous forest and range fires, but at that point, little could be done to avert the hardships and dangers of drought. Additionally, decades of human development of mountain and valley ecosystems, along with conscientious (though misguided) fire suppression policies, played significant roles in the story that would soon unfold.

The drama began in New Mexico. Seeking to avert a possible drought-induced fire disaster, on May 4, 2000 a blaze was deliberately set in the Bandelier

National Monument environs in an effort to destroy years of accumulated undergrowth, thus rendering the area safer from wildfires that could develop as the current drought season progressed. Thanks to prevailing fire suppression policies, brush had built up in sufficient quantity and density to create a likelihood of severe, uncontrollable forest fires if ignited at the wrong time — which is exactly what happened. This "controlled burn," a standard procedure to reduce underbrush and hence the overall fire hazard, quickly flared out of control and swept through at least 33,000 acres of wild lands and human communities, destroying forests and 260 homes in the town of Los Alamos. These fires also came very close to environmentally sensitive nuclear weapons laboratories in Los Alamos, approaching within 300 yards of a plutonium facility and threatening a hazardous waste site in the White Rock vicinity. Sacred ground and ruins on the adjacent Santa Clara pueblo lands lay directly in the path of the approaching firestorm as well. (Please note the words, "came very close," "stopped short of," and "threatened." The entire situation was eminently disastrous, with grim prospects for high winds to catalyze the fires further. Evacuations were in progress, firefighters had to retreat repeatedly from the front lines, and yet, somehow, the worst did not happen).

On May 11, after the fires had been raging for about a week, I received an e-mail communication from Larry Kessler, who wrote the excellent article on "weather work" involving the Hawaiian *Awaiku* spirits.¹ Larry's e-mail began like this:

Dear Nan,

Here is a test. I was just watching the news and heard about the fire in New Mexico that is destroying Los Alamos. According to the news, the fire is huge and out of control due to the high winds. The weather service experts expect the winds to continue.

Larry then went on to relate that he had just contacted his helping spirits, the *Awaiku*, and asked them to stop the winds in New Mexico. He watched as they performed a ritual for the spirit of the wind, asking him to "hold back his breath for the next 24 hours." They also made an offering to the spirit of the fire. Larry concluded his e-mail by saying we would have to wait to see what happened.

I, too, had concerns about the situation, having lived in the region as a young adult, and I knew that this conflagration was not the only major fire burning at the time in New Mexico. I remember thinking that "surely by this point, many are engaged in working and praying, directly and indirectly, for help." It looked like a miracle would be required to pull back from the brink of possible destruction of radioactive sites and sacred grounds.

Sandra Ingerman writes in her new book, *Medicine for the Earth*,² of her efforts to reach out for spiritual help, essentially asking for a miracle to help protect the area from such a catastrophe. She also addressed the Spirit of Wind as she performed a ceremony "to ask the winds to calm down and the fire to abate." At the time, no rain was in the forecast and a severe wind advisory was in effect.

On May 12, an Associated Press bulletin announced that the "blowtorch winds and searing heat" had broken, allowing firefighters at least to prevail over the worst of the burn. Also, the formerly high temperatures had lowered and the humidity levels had increased significantly, contributing to a dramatic easing of the emergency status. Ingerman notes that although the rest of the state experienced high winds, the winds around this fire did die down

and in fact, the next day, managed to shift their direction and blow back over already burned land!

What happened here? Did the many prayers and ceremonies evoke a miracle? Did the Spirits of Weather and other helping spirits take pity on this crisis and heed the calls for help? For more perspective, let us look at another account and story, one that is a little later in the season and farther north.

On Wednesday, August 16, 2000, the governor of Montana declared the entire state a disaster area, and issued yet another evacuation order for the residents of the Bitterroot Valley. At this point, more than one million acres of forest and range land in the western U.S. had burned. On this date, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, eighty-six wildfires were burning in thirteen western states. As many as twenty-five of the largest fires were in Montana at the time, and the fires had consumed at least 457,000 acres by that date — 265,000 acres in the Bitterroot Valley alone. Similarly, more than 550,000 acres of Idaho wild lands had gone up in smoke. The state university systems of both Montana and Idaho extended their fall registration enrollment dates so that students could continue to fight fires. Severe fire danger also extended up to Alaska's Kenai Peninsula and Kodiak Island region. In Montana, major wildfires broke out in July and were severe enough in the prevailing drought conditions to prompt almost immediate state of emergency declarations for many regions. These were rapidly followed by the statewide "disaster area" pronouncement only a few weeks later.

I anxiously tracked this situation, as Montana used to be my home and loved ones still live there. Though concerned and sympathetic for the many hardships for all involved, I did not feel motivated or clear enough to attempt any spiritual intervention or healing work for this episode of fire crisis. However, on August 27 I returned home to find an urgent telephone message from Margi in Washington, relaying a call for spiritual help from a friend of hers who worked for the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services. Margi was a participant in one of the Foundation's Three Year Programs and her friend was also involved in shamanic work and had read our

journal article entitled "Shamanism and the Spirits of Weather."³ Her friend had hopes of turning things around by "rounding up" spiritual help. She told us that the crisis, already extreme, was possibly about to get much worse for many, many people and other inhabitants of the burning and nearly burning region. Upon hearing this heartfelt plea for help, I felt deeply motivated to go to work and add my efforts to those of others.

Our drumming circle met the next day and we journeyed to our helping spirits to receive their perspective on the nature of this crisis, and if indicated, to ask for help and work to restore harmony. Our entire group experienced dynamic journeys with strong synchronicities. Initially, we all went to our helping spirits in the Upper or Lower Worlds, and all of us were taken to the Middle World region for which we were working. We all learned that the fires were needed to restore balance in many ways, and

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that the fires were calling out to the weather spirits for the badly needed moisture to return. The conditions to start the fires had occurred, and now we needed the conditions for them to end. It was time for us to add our voices to those others, the voices of the suffering ones: the plants, animals (two and four legged), and the injured and displaced ones. It was time to honor the fires and ask the Spirits of Weather to take pity and bring the moisture back to the land in ways that the land could best receive it. So we worked, each in our own way, in partnership with our helping spirits. Repeatedly, we were asked to work for balance to be restored and to understand that the fires were part of that, too. Nearly all of us were told that the rains and snow would come soon. I was advised to journey and work again the next day. During that experience, my Teacher asked me to

help spread the word to many others. I was told to tell them that though the moisture was coming, adding their voices would be very helpful and to be sure to continue to petition for the land, plants, animals, and suffering ones.

Meanwhile, as I later discovered, Margi had contacted her circle of shamanic practitioners a few days earlier and so other people were already working. On August 29, an e-mail went out to that group stating that the spiritual work was done and that the CBS evening news had reported a remarkable shift in the flow of the jet stream for the *La Niña* pattern. It was hoped that the northern states would experience a cooling, moist trend.

I followed my Teacher's recommendation and sent out a blanket e-mail to members of the FSS East Coast Three Year Program and other people I thought might be willing to help. I relayed information given me about the great 1910 fires of Montana,

Idaho, and Washington, and how the present fires were being compared to those in terms of devastation. Apparently, those fires were quelled by unseasonably cold weather and early snows in late August. There

was speculation about whether this was not at least partially due to the likelihood that there were more Native American elders alive then who understood how to work with the spirits and forces of nature, who knew when "enough was enough" and thus worked to help bring an end to the burning. In that e-mail, I attempted to tell what our drumming group had learned about the fires and their important role in the general ecosystem of the West, and that now responding to the call for help was necessary, to join in with our requests for spiritual help to restore balance and harmony. Knowing that we rarely have the advantage of the overall perspective that our compassionate helping spirits do, I suggested we ask simply for whatever conditions of weather would be appropriate to bring more balance and harmony to the land now. Because we felt it would be unwise to ask for specific kinds of weather, we decided to leave that up to the greater perspective and wisdom of the

spirits. For example, what if we asked the Spirit of Wind to stop, and it did? Perhaps then it would be unavailable to bring in the needed weather fronts. What if we asked for as much rain as possible, without regard to the vulnerability of newly exposed, burned ground?

As I sent out the e-mail, reports were already coming in from friends and relatives in Montana of significant rain and the first mountain snows. To be sure, first snows are not abnormal for the high peaks at summer's end, but they were nonetheless especially noteworthy this year due to the extreme lack of moisture all season long. They were particularly noteworthy to all the people who were involved in that first wave of shamanic spiritual work, and those on the fire lines. It felt beautiful to be a part of so many humans working together for healing. I think Cecile spoke for all of us when she wrote how moving it was for her to be able to participate in this community effort, to join with those who had prayed and worked all along for this to happen. There was no need to decide exactly what had brought the moisture — only to express gratitude that it was there and hopefully more would be arriving soon.

Some people shared their journeys with me. The teachings from these journeys felt solid and profound in their meanings for us all in our contemporary world. Again, we learned from these journeys that the fires were part of the natural balance. They also served to attract our attention, not only to this situation, but to the greater problems and dilemmas we face today. The journeys underscored the need for our combined efforts in making our spiritual work more effective. Additionally, we need to remember to work with all of nature to restore balance and harmony to the Earth.

Pat shared these teachings from her journeys:

I was taken to the Spirit of Fire. It was very large and imposing. This spirit told me that these fires are a natural part of the world, but that due to our overuse of the land and resources, and lack of respect for the spirits, the fires this year have been particularly strong — kind of to catch our attention. The spirit told me that the trees and the animals understand this process much better than we ever will.

The Spirit of Fire showed me that before the White Man came to this land, when there were fires, the animals had places to run, and to migrate. The animals know that when fire occurs, they need to move on to find grazing land, but today this is not possible for the animals, and they, too, through their suffering, are showing humans that balance needs to be restored.

On another journey, this time to the Spirits of Weather, Pat was taken to a Thunder Being who showed her *"how all of nature works together to create balance. The Earth is unbalanced, and needs help, and not only are the fires meant to attract our attention, but also to restore balance to the land."*

In his journey David was shown that:

The weather spirits cannot just create conditions necessary for particular weather easily. There are many factors involved, but in order to rain, certain conditions must be present. The spirits need us to create a bridge between NOR and OR, so that their power can come through and do work. The more people (and plants and animals, etc.) who ask for help and who give help, the easier it is for the spirits to create the conditions required. When things are out of balance, it is even harder to go against the flow and create beneficial conditions. Much help is then needed. It is not a case of waiting to be asked before they will give us something, but of them needing the energy and connection to OR that we can provide.

Herb and a circle of about twenty people in Wisconsin conducted a beautiful and powerful ceremony over the span of at least two days for the Montana-Idaho-Wyoming region. Again, humans joined in spiritual work for relief of pain and suffering, calling to the spirits and elements to bring healing. Another drumming circle in Vermont met on August 24, asking for the "highest healing good to come to Montana regarding the weather" and petitioned for the fires to end.

In other journeys across the continent, the animal spirits showed up to help with incredible generosity and sobering messages for humans.

Salmon Spirit helped Margi to experience and understand something of the taste of waters tainted with oil and what it feels like to be gasping for air in mud-choked creeks and rivers. Margi writes: "I am abashed before the generosity of spirits who have so much right to be angry, and still show such mercy to us."

Kate of Colorado shares a journey where Mountain Lion, Badger, and Bear appeared, poignantly showing her how they have suffered from the heat of the fires and the loss of home, habitat, and young. Yet they have suffered far more grievously from human greed and ignorance of our relatedness. Mountain Lion speaks of the fires in this way: *"This is something we know, something we expect, something our ancestors learned to survive. It is you we cannot adapt to, you who murder us in ways we have not learned to fight against."* The animals showed her how we have surrounded them and trapped them on these "small islands in the sea of White men." The tragedy of the fire is that we are sitting where they would go next, where "we are waiting for them, ready to kill them if they inconvenience us." Finally, after working with the Spirits of Wind, Kate looked eastward and saw an unburned prairie and *"a great black Buffalo with a turquoise heart streak is running. He snorts and paws the ground, and mighty herds of buffalo flow out like a river over the ground. And I get it: The Earth is Ghost Dancing."*

On a lighter note, Nancy from the Bitterroot Valley of Montana, one of the hardest hit places where many good people lost their homes, writes:

I am glad you and your friends helped ask the spirits to stop the fire. Everybody here was doing the same thing. Jim and I made a vow to dance, naked, in the first promising rain — we did and the gods laughed so hard they cried and the rain continued.

People from all over the country were working spiritually at this potent time. That was intensely moving and the weather did shift; to many of us, miraculously so. There must have been people praying and working spiritually all along. Thus, no one can point and say that this or that person or group "carried the day." All we know is that many people were moved in their hearts to take time and effort to reach out to, and work with, the helping spirits for the desperately needed help, healing, and restoration of balance. Throughout all of it, we had thousands of humans who expended their energy and risked their limbs and lives to deal with the fires in concrete, Ordinary Reality ways. We owe them much gratitude as well.

The rain and cool temperatures and snows did come. On August 31, Margi's friend from the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services, who had initially put out the call for shamanic help, e-mailed many of us:

I am in tears. I am so grateful for your powerful, lifesaving work. Words cannot communicate it, but maybe circumstances can begin to . . .

When I requested help last week, the brightest minds in the business were predicting a 60% chance of a catastrophic event of unprecedented proportions where we could have lost up to four to five million acres in a matter of days. (We've lost under a million thus far the entire year.) The predictions from a variety of experts were that it was a distinct possibility that wind storms with no rain would create firestorms unlike anything we had ever seen and that more than one community would be overrun at the same time. I was busy planning for the possibility of a triage on a community level basis. If you remember from the days of watching M.A.S.H., this means you can't save everyone, so you figure out who you'll save and who you can't.

Today at ground zero in Ravalli County it's not only raining, but it's raining the kind of gentle, continuous rain that will actually put the fires out.

We are not completely out of danger yet — the experts say it will take two significant rain events over the next couple of weeks to end this ferocious fire season, so please keep up your work.

In yesterday morning's briefing, our meteorologist took extra time to discuss the significant weather shift that he termed no less than miraculous, which brought a weather system from the tropics — warm weather loaded with moisture.

Thank you to you and all the spirits that are helping, healing, empowering, and protecting us. We bless you.

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Over the next weeks many of us kept up our work with our helping spirits and the Spirits of Weather and Fire. We gladly watched as the rains and first snows arrived, and shortly after, firefighters left in droves. The moisture continued to bless the land, so much so that ski resorts enjoyed their earliest opening dates of the season.

The last e-mail communication from Margi's friend stated, "The level of assistance we received boggles my mind. The two sets of steady, gentle, widespread rain were precisely what was needed. It's humbling to be a small part of something so powerful."

This statement eloquently speaks for any of us who attempt to join forces with the helping, compassionate spirits with healing intent. We really are all in this together. Along with the inspired teachings and blessings comes the challenge of the sacred mystery — that which cannot be constrained by the limitations of our rational minds, thus nourishing and humbling our sense of self.

In a postscript, as of March 2001, the Northwest region had experienced another dry winter. Montana is currently at 45% of "normal" snowpack levels. This alone does not bode well for the upcoming 2001 fire season, and yet, the spring snows and rains could overcome this seeming deficit. It is surprising, because the snow season started so early and abundantly in the fall. As usual, we are only looking at a small part of this overall picture or puzzle. It is most interesting that the strong earthquake in Seattle in late February 2001 apparently would have caused a great deal more damage and perhaps even loss of life due to mud and land slides, if not for the unusually dry winter conditions!

Notes

1. Kessler 2000
2. Ingberman 2000
3. Moss and Corbin 1999

References Cited

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