

# Shamanic Life in a High School Kitchen

By Cynthia Nado

**When we consider our relationship** with food in the United States, we now see two generations that have lost the knowledge of how to seasonally grow, keep a garden, and preserve the food to feed their families for a year. Our relationship with plants has changed to the extent that there is no need to work to grow our own food, as the supermarket is the destination now and not the garden. Plants are viewed primarily as decorative and certainly not medicinal.

This is a time in our world, unlike any our ancestors ever faced, when corporate food factories feed huge numbers of people and animals. The food produced is made with many different non-food items to ensure a lengthy shelf life and a healthy profit. Fast foods or pre-prepared foods are often the only choices due to lack of gardening skills, space to garden or knowing how to be self-sufficient. In a way, corporate mass food production has helped to separate and sterilize us from the earth and from ourselves.

Extensive internet searching informed me that in indigenous cultures shamans do not usually cook but are fed by their communities. Their 'cooking' is in preparing medicines.

In present day western culture, cookbooks with a shamanic orientation often make reference to working with energy, intention, respect, and thanks to all things to start tuning us back to ourselves, to create a shift in thinking and feeling and in improved health.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is a way of helping us to begin to remember another time that had deeper, more direct connections.

Mark Perkins of onenessjourneys.com says, "Being a shamanic practitioner and the family cook, I strive to ensure that I am in the proper frame of mind allowing me to infuse the food with aloha (love/positive energy). I do this via a zen-like technique where I focus all of my intention on the task at hand in the preparation of the meal. This includes actually preparing the food all the way down to selecting the appropriate plates, glasses and position of

the family at the table. Each of these steps helps to ensure that the plants and animals who sacrificed for the meal are honored and the recipients of the meal can absorb as much of the energy as possible. Another important part of the meal is the blessing. In our family, each member thanks the plants and animals for the gift of life. Should we have guests, we do a more formal blessing helping the guest to understand our ways. We will also tailor the blessing to fit the views and practices of the guest."<sup>2</sup>

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## The Cook's Dream

When I cook I dream.  
I dream into the food  
under my hands all  
the possibilities of  
what can be.

Cooking dreams into food  
so that all who eat may dream  
their own dreams into being.

Cynthia Nado

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In my shamanic apprenticeship with teacher, Cecile Carson, I chose a project to look at how I worked with food both as a shamanic practitioner and as a chef in a high school kitchen. While I knew at some level I had been working with the food in a shamanic way, this project helped me to identify particular aspects and methods I utilized unconsciously and to see exactly what I was doing in the kitchen.

The background for this project began in 1990 when I developed a part-time catering business. My menus and cooking had always been spirit-led, so I was used to paying attention to the 'quiet voices' I heard while planning a menu when I felt part of me connecting to something that I called 'the other side.' When this happened, ideas would start flowing. At some point in creating various dishes, I would recognize food combinations not my own, yet not unfamiliar. There was a resonance in the making of each dish: choos-

ing ingredients, deciding how to assemble elements and cook the dish, weighing and balancing textures, and checking the acidity or sweetness of each menu item to another until an all around good menu was created. When I reflected on the whole menu, sometimes I could tell exactly who had been helping me by how it felt when doing the cooking, by the music I chose to listen to during the preparation, by sensing the voice, or by identifying the historical aspect of a recipe: rural upstate New York, New England seacoast, Mediterranean, Scottish or French. For example, using white acorns in morning pancakes in Native American style. There have been times when I had no idea who was present in non-ordinary assistance; I just felt grateful for the help.

Studying shamanism showed me that these were the voices of my Ancestors and that they were teaching me their knowledge.

I started cooking in city high school kitchens four years ago. I love working in the kitchen's complex environment with its enormous amounts of food, supportive staff, frenzied pace and most especially, the ebb and flow of energies spiraling in and around me as I created appealing, delicious dishes for students and teachers. Unexpectedly, and now daily, this is where some of my shamanic work began to take form as I connected through the meat and vegetables directly to the spirits of those animals and plants.

My first high school kitchen was near the shore of Lake Ontario in upstate New York. In this school were two separate dining areas: the teachers' eating area and the students' cafeteria. When I started working here, most of the teachers brown-bagged their lunches and very few came down to purchase a lunch. At that time, the most popular choice of food for the students was the breaded chicken patty: ground-up chicken carcass breaded with added flavor and coloring.

As the new chef, I learned that no one has input to the menus; ownership of that belongs to the food corporation who won the bid to provide food service to the city school district. Menus are based on a theory that daily amounts of red or white meat in addition to vegetables, grains, and fruits are needed to provide adequate nutrition to students. Therefore large quantities of meat crossed my stainless steel table. Over time, as I worked with the bodies of chickens, packages of ground beef, and numerous boxes of sliced bacon along with other forms and shapes of chicken or beef, I became conscious of a communication of sorts happening between the meat under my hands and me. At first it felt like a pulse, but then I began to hear a quiet, kind voice beyond me, and I wanted to understand what that was about. As I usually work alone in my job, I decided to journey to this voice, and this is when things began to get very interesting.

In the journey I was shown where the meat comes from in today's contemporary culture and how in the processing of meat, a basic tenet of civility for acknowledging and respecting sacrifice is ignored. Spirit had me consider whether there is someone in the factory to bless the animals as they are being guided down the death chute and hung on the hook, or someone to say "Thank you for the gift you give us." I was clearly shown that no one is there for that. People who do the slaughtering do whatever work is available in their area in order to survive, and an animal's life is primarily a means to get the money they need. So I decided at that moment if there is no one on a factory farm blessing the animals or recognizing their sacrifice, I am a link in this chain of events and can give that recognition and begin doing my small part.

I began to change how I worked with the meats, beginning with a daily ritual blessing of the kitchen space and giving thanks to the spirits of all the animals coming onto my countertop. I softly sang and spoke to them as I prepped and cooked, listening to them and connecting to their spirits.

My journeys, the majority of which were middle world journeys, took me to many places, including the factory farms. In a particular journey that seemed to repeat itself many times, my power animal and I are flying through the middle world toward a huge factory farm. We see a dark cloud covering the farm, and as we fly toward this cloud it begins to blow away. The animals stop milling around frantically and look up, while a soft, gentle song begins singing to them and the air starts to smell sweeter. They calm down and relax as we circle them, infusing the farm and its occupants with the scent of sweet grass, song and calmness. At times my power animal also leads me to smaller farms and into slaughterhouses where we do psychopomp work and soul retrievals. In the midst of all these journeys I am standing in the background, focused, softly singing and chanting, holding space with love as the work is done.

In the slaughterhouses there are very large groupings of the spirits of slaughtered animals drifting around the hooks that held their bodies, and my power animal has a certain whistle that draws them together. As they come close to us, they are directed to move toward the light that has opened up above us. There are a series of whoosh-whoosh sounds as they change from a darkened being to a light being and disappear into the light above.

The soul retrievals are done individually. My power animal goes to the animals that are tightly packed together and milling around right before the slaughter and touches a foot to their forehead. The detached soul part immediately comes into the animal being touched. This happens so quickly that many, many animals can be helped within a short time. The change from helpless despair to a feeling of calm and contentment affects even those animals in the vicinity not receiving the soul retrievals.

After some time of being very focused on working with the spirits of animals, I became aware of the spirits of the plants nudging me. The potatoes seemed to be a cheery group of vegetables; they loved being washed, scrubbed and checked over for spots. They had a contagious song that always got me tapping my foot as I worked with them. Their joy expanded with the baking, their happiness enveloping the students and teachers on baked potato days. Generally, cauliflower, broccoli, carrots, peas and green beans are not popular items with the students. But as I tuned into the songs of these spirits, blessing and thanking them, they showed me ways to make them more appealing. The overall goal of the food service corporation is to have the students choose a vegetable as an item on their lunch tray, because the corporation needs to meet or exceed standard state meal regulations. While I basically follow the recipes given to me by the food service corporation, the spirit of each vegetable informs my power animal and me as to which seasoning, herb or spice to use with them and how much, so they will have more vitality. This vitality seems to

glow from the foods nestled in the steam table, and when I am out there checking food levels and ready to refresh quantities, I watch students walk in and check out the choices for lunch. As they look over the items I can see the change in them as the energy grabs them and they select the item with a sense of excitement. Even so, I still see a lot of students walk up to the steam table or the pizza station without even looking at the food

In writing about the spiritual aspects of cooking, Bob Makransky of Guatemala maintains that food contains 'light fiber energy' just as important to our sustenance as vitamins and proteins, although not measurable by chemical analysis. Analogous to physical nutrients being diminished by processing or overcooking, he feels the light fiber content of food can be diminished by *disrespect*. He equates the light fibers to good feelings;

by the way we take it in to eat it. He says. "While it is true that the original light fiber energy in food can be vitiated by disrespect anywhere along the line – in handling, processing, cooking, or eating – it is also true that light fiber energy, being more flexible than vitamins or proteins, can be restored to food by respecting it and treating it as sacred—by ritualizing the activities connected with it."<sup>5</sup>



and order the same item day after day for the entire year.

A 1960's alumnus of the high school of my present kitchen remembers looking around the cafeteria as a student and seeing it filled with many different kinds of lunches that were homemade and carried to school.<sup>3</sup> This was a reflection of the wide variety of neighborhood cultures surrounding the high school and a time when families were still vitally connected to their food traditions.

What changes in the last half century!

Photograph by Cynthia Nado

i.e., when we feel good, we literally glow, and when a food plant or animal feels good, it glows. When killed for food, the glow remains if the killing was done with a sense of connectedness and gratitude, rather than mechanically.<sup>4</sup>

Makransky points out that in the way we process food in America today, nutrients are stripped out of it and there is little nourishment for the spirit left in it. Further, what small amount remains to tend our spirit is completely destroyed

About seven weeks later, one of the kitchen staff in charge of the teachers' cafeteria began coming to me during lunch to say she was running out of food because many more teachers had started coming in to eat and buy lunches. Soon after that, kitchen staff working on the student lunch lines reported more students eating vegetables and choosing the main entrees cooked by me.

Another part of my daily ritual is my approach to processed foods. Processed foods are offered daily at the school for both breakfast and lunch, and working with them has made me keenly aware

of the tiny percentage of real food and the disproportionate amount of non-food. One day I wondered if the real foods could become more powerful and healthier than the filler non-foods by spiritually addressing only the real foods with chants and songs to restore their energies. I feel this is time well spent even if I cannot yet report on a specific outcome with this ritual.

At one point during this time, we received a series of large shipments of government surplus raw chicken. This was tricky to work with because of the huge amount of meat and lack of space, so the challenge was how to safely navigate from the raw chicken to the completely cooked product. As I stood there, ready to start opening the boxes of chicken, I suddenly felt zapped by a lightning bolt of energy. Spirit of Chicken spoke to my power animal and we took off. Energized might not be a strong enough word as I flew about the kitchen following the spirit's directions: season the flour using this amount of spice, that amount of herb seasoning, lay out the parts on trays in a specific way, and bake for a certain amount of time. Now remember, I was cooking chicken among employees who had been cooking chicken all their lives and who grew up watching their mammas and grandmas make it, too. So there was some performance pressure to produce a quality product. But I had no time to be concerned with that and apparently didn't need to, for soon the delicious smell of robustly seasoned chicken filled the kitchen. Everyone had gathered around as I pulled tray after tray from the ovens, the staff selected pieces to be sampled and then declared them to be very, very good. Of course the real test was with the students and teachers. Less than halfway through the first lunch, students rushed out of the cafeteria to tell administration, teachers, and fellow students to get to the cafeteria

quickly for some chicken, as it was the best they'd ever had at school. My power animal and the Spirit of Chicken were very pleased with the change from apathy to delight among the students and teachers that day.

I began my second year by transferring to a different city high school kitchen and continuing my work with the animal and plant spirits. This kitchen has been a completely different experience. The staff was disorganized, headstrong, and unprofessional. After the first year in this kitchen I wondered if I was meant to stay on, the year being filled with an endless parade of frustrating experiences. Even with an excellent, professional kitchen manager to work with, there was no wonderful transformation like the previous kitchen experience. As I journeyed on this issue to ask for guidance, the response was quite clear, "Do not leave, stay put!" After the summer break, I returned feeling hopeful, filled with the energy of my power animals, and ready to carry on with the work. Gradually I have noticed small positive shifts in attitudes, emotions, work attendance and improved teamwork occurring among the staff, though very little change with those members afflicted with addiction and possession. Connections between some staff members have been changing from disrespect to respectful and more cooperative as the work continues with the spirits of the plants and animals. Notably, a number of students who eat only at the cafeteria are starting to eat foods that previously they had no interest in.

Having felt prompted to return to the same school and continue doing the work of Spirit, I recognize through my work at both schools that the spirits of the animals and plants are always eager to be helpful in providing health and vitality to the humans in these environments when invited to do so. It's also

clear to me that I have been changed by doing this daily spirit work. By inviting the presence of the sacred into a workday environment, I have deepened my awareness of our interdependence with all of life on many levels and have seen how we are fed and nurtured beyond the physiologic nutrition present in food. I've also seen the interplay of the sacrifice of animals and plants with the gratitude of staff, and I feel very much a part of the myriad connections and relationships present in a commercial kitchen. I'm not entirely sure if the work of listening to spirit has been the reason, but the present kitchen has been ranked number one in the city school district for two consecutive years, causing the administration to create workshops to try to bring the other kitchens up to the same level of performance.

## References:

- 1 McCaw, David, [www.theshamanskitchen.com](http://www.theshamanskitchen.com).
- 2 Perkins, Mark, personal communication.
- 3 Fomin, Elizabeth, personal communication.
- 4 Makransky, Bob, personal communication.
- 5 Makransky, Bob, "Spiritual Cookery," *Magical Living*, Dear Brutus Press, 2001.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cynthia Nado is a chef, artist, medical illustrator, and photographer. She has studied shamanism with Cecile Carson, taking an Introductory Workshop, a Two Year Shamanic Intensive, a One Year Healing Intensive, and a One Year Shamanic Apprenticeship. She has also taken workshops with Tom Cowan, Myron Eshowsky and Betsy Bergstrom.

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Opposite: Caption, Photo by Deborah Byron