

The Dreamwork Summit 2018™

Dreaming Awake: Shamanic dreaming in the 21st century

Manda Scott

Susan: Greetings, we're here with shamanic dreaming teacher and bestselling author, Manda Scott. Manda's *Boudica: Dreaming* series, written over a six-year-period of intensive shamanic dreaming, reveals how connecting with indigenous gods could help us navigate our lives and bring us to a place of integrity and authenticity. A former veterinary surgeon specializing in racehorses, Manda has taught shamanic dreaming, healing and psychopomping for 15 years. Welcome, Manda.

Manda: Thank you, Susan, it's an honor to be here.

Susan: Tell us about those six years. I can't even imagine. That's amazing. What I understand is that you came about the writing of the book through the dreaming. Is that correct?

Manda: Yes, it is. I started off life, as you said, as, what we call, a veterinary surgeon, what for you would be a veterinarian, and I simultaneously started training in what I would now call shamanic practice. I would say that, from my point of view, people in the West are not shamans because we don't live in a shamanic culture, but we can learn the tools of shamanic practice and learn to apply them in the 21st century or, in those days, the 20th century. I had made a commitment, I started writing because I wanted to be doing something other than veterinary medicine, and I had made a commitment in ceremony that I was going to write about Irish shamanic past in Britain which ended largely in the Boudican era. The time never arose. It was always going to be at a point when I was a good enough writer which was always going to be at least three more books away. Really, it just felt like such a huge project. I was still working, and I was writing part-time, and I didn't have time to do the research.

To keep it very short, I had a dog called a lurcher which in Britain, everybody knows what a lurcher is. I discovered, at my biography I used to say, Manda Scott lives in Suffolk with two lurchers and too many cats, which I thought was funny. My American publishers thought that a lurcher was a kind of homeless man which wasn't the case at all. A lurcher is a kind of dog which is an old poaching dog. They're very fast. They're a cross between a greyhound and a collie, a herding dog. She put up a hare and she caught it, which she did, it wasn't too surprising, but she brought it back to me and it had been lactating which meant that all of the young were going to die too. Hares are sacred to the old gods of Britain, and I was really shocked.

I thought if something had to die to make me realize that I was walking along with my brain in neutral, really not paying attention because I saw her go and I just didn't stop her, and I had been thinking about the next book which was going to be another crime novel. I had started writing crime novels because I didn't really have to do very much research and they were easy to write. I went off and did a vision quest which basically was sit under a tree that was, at that point, sacred to me, with no food and no water until I got the answer to the question, and the question was: What do you want me to do? The answer came very quickly, to write these books, and I really didn't want to. I was a vet. I wasn't an archaeologist or a historian or an anthropologist or any of those things, and I didn't think that I knew enough. I negotiated a deal which is not, I noted, would not recommend that my students try and negotiate with the gods, but I was young, and I didn't know any better. I made a deal in the end that I would go and do some research, and if I thought there was enough to write about, I would write about it. If there wasn't, I would come back to the tree and we'd have another chat.

I went home and phoned a friend like you do, the only person I knew who wrote historical novels, and she said two things, "You can't do this. Your publishers won't let you because they've already branded you as a contemporary crime novelist, and they don't like changing the brand. Anyway, if there was enough to write about Boudica, I would already have done it." But once you've made a promise to the gods on a vision quest, you can't go back on it, so I did the research anyway. By the end of a month, I had enough to write six books easily. I could have written a dozen. I had no idea why people hadn't done it before. Nobody, at that point, had ever written the Boudican story from the British point of view, from the indigenous point of view. It had always been from the Roman point of view. There was so much material. So that's how it arose mostly.

Susan: Wow, that's a powerful story. Tell us how it evolved. Your dog brought you this hare but then when you started to write, give us a little example of how the shamanic dreaming informed your writing.

Manda: We probably ought to look at what I consider to be shamanic dreaming. I use the term to denote the different ways that we can access the other realities, and the two that I use are drumming journeys which is the standard 20th century, 21st century Western shamanic drumming, and dreaming which is both sleep dreaming and awake dreaming. At that point I was largely what I would now call the fire dreamer. I lit a fire every night. I lived in this little cottage in Suffolk which happened to be, more or less, where the Boudican tribes were. I would light the fire in the evening, and I would sit with the fire, and I would ask the questions of the fire. Largely, what do you want of me? Which is the base question that you ask always.

But more specifically, often, aspects of character or location or plot or just how to work things through and forward, and listen to what the fire said or experience what the fire said. So, as with any other formal shamanic practice, we're shifting out of this reality into whatever alternate reality we try to access, and I was moving into a reality of a version of our indigenous past that felt real to me. I had done huge amounts of research in between the vision quest and starting the writing. I was lucky to live near Cambridge University which has a copyright library which contains a copy of pretty much, at that point, everything that has ever been written, and their Archaeology Department and their Anthropology Department and their History Department were astonishingly well-stocked. There are more books on Roman military history than there are on veterinary anesthesia by several orders of magnitude, and I had read most of it. I had a good basis on which to start and then the question was filling in the gaps because Tacitus is pretty much our primary source on the Boudican revolt, but he was writing very specifically from a Roman point of view for a Roman audience. He wasn't writing an accurate anthropological or historical event sequence. He was writing to make points, and political points often.

So, reading Tacitus, reading other people's interpretation of Tacitus, reading where the gaps were, finding out how much people make up. I went to various anthropological and archaeological conferences and listened to people who, as far as I could tell, were one step away from making it up as they went along, that we view things through the lens of our own experience to such an extent that everything that we say and do is colored by that. I was really struck by the extent to which the straight, white male, imperialist viewpoint was still current in both of these disciplines. I think it is less so now. We're talking 20 years ago, and I think it has been a real revolution, but their interpretation of events was absolutely through that public-school view of the world. Even then, they would argue.

There was a particular piece of jewelry that I went to talk about. Three different people identified it, depending on what they thought it was. It was a necklace piece, and it was hollow, and they'd found there was a pigment. It was either a necklace worn by a pro-Roman woman in which she had mixed her make-up, because only pro-Roman women wore make-up, or it was a necklace worn by an anti-Roman man in which he had mixed some kind of wood-based war paint, and somebody else threw in something completely spurious. When you're faced with that kind of thing, it is not possible that both of these are true, then from a fictional writer's point of view, you can do what you like really, frankly. I had a lot of scope to do that sort of thing. I had that as background and then with that as a scaffolding on which to stand, then I could move into the fire and ask the fire where to take it. Does that make sense?

Susan: Yes, yes, fascinating, and how did you transform during these six years or during the writing of these books?

Manda: Oh, totally. My concept of what dreaming was deepened beyond all expressing it partly because of the actual process of the writing but also partly, my dog is groaning in the background because he has heard this before, because I started teaching pretty much as soon as the first book came out. I was going on the country. I had a rule when I wrote the first book which is that, every acts of dreaming that I wrote about, I had to either have done myself or seen done. It had to be a firsthand experience, obviously in a different context. I'm in 20th century and now 21st century, and I'm not in 1st century Britain with the Romanization. But I didn't write anything that I didn't know could happen now so that I could go around the country and say, "This is who we were. This is who we could be."

I genuinely believe, part of my original dreaming was that if I can do this right, it will change the world, and it changed my world. I still teach my students, you have to listen very carefully to what the gods say because they don't use language lightly. I was going on, the first book was published, saying exactly that. This is who we were. This is who we could be. By about three weeks in, I was getting people coming back, and I was recognizing them in the queues for people to have a book signed. I go, "I signed a book for you weeks ago." They went, "Yup. We've been away, and we've read it, and we still don't understand how to do the dreaming." "But it's all there. I wrote it, the manual. It's all in there." If you're not interested in dreaming, you just want to read it as a novel, that's fine, but it's there. They weren't understanding, so I went back and did several, several conversations over everything. Because I had been teaching anesthesia but I didn't see myself as a shamanic teacher at all and yet it seemed that this was where I was going.

I thought I would do a couple of courses and the interest would dry up. I would teach them what they needed to know, and they'd go off and work with somebody else and that would be it. Two months ago, I completed the first cycle with people who have now been with me for 14 years, and we've finally made our way around the first iteration of the Medicine Wheel. It was one of the most profoundly moving and life-changing weeks of my life. We did a week and we went off on retreat, and I absolutely didn't see that coming 14 years ago when I first started. The thing about, even when I was doing veterinary med and there was a rule of see one, do one, teach one, and the whole thing was if you can't teach it, you don't really know it. Having to structure things that I fairly grasped, into a coherent form so that I can teach it, has been a really extraordinary way of deepening my own practice and keeping me in line. There are times when I probably would have given up, at least would have considered giving up and

walking away, but if I'm teaching it, I absolutely can't so, yeah, it has been completely life-changing.

Susan: It sounds it. For our listeners, what can you share in terms of some simple steps to just drop in a little bit to this process?

Manda: Stay safe would be the first thing. One of the things that has become clear to me over the years is shamanic practice for me is first form of spirituality. It's the form that humanity came to, for tens if not hundreds of thousands of years before we took ourselves out of context, from the beginning of the Agricultural Era which is probably about 10,000 years ago. For 90%, if not 99% of human evolution, we understood how to connect with the gods of the land. We understood how to connect with the spirits of the land. We understood how to access the other realities. Our lives were lived on the basis of the learning that we gained from that, but nobody has ever suggested to me that it was a safe process particularly. I'm probably paranoid, but I think staying safe is the first thing. Treat everything that you do with absolute respect. This is also a very, very powerful, extraordinarily most enhancing system which means therefore that we be careful and that we not treat it as something we can deepen to and use for our own end. This primary question is always, what do you want of me, not, I would like this, how are you going to get it for me? How are you going to make it happen? Because if it's not that powerful then we fundamentally are wasting our time, and why would we bother?

The second thing is that for me this is a practice of evidence-based spirituality. When I was a veterinary surgeon, I used to practice evidence-based medicine, and now I practice evidence-based spirituality. If it doesn't work, don't do it, so test everything. If it's going to work, it will work. If it's not going to work, you're probably wasting your time. Treat it with respect, test everything and hold out your primary question, what do you want of me? Once you have found a way of connecting to something that feels authentic and that will help you to live in a way that is your most authentic way of being with absolute integrity then listen to that, whenever it says whatever it says and even if it says things that you either weren't expecting or didn't particularly want to hear. For instance, at the point when I was quietly encouraged to stop drinking alcohol, I really didn't want to hear that, but I've never been asked to do something that didn't, in the long run, turn out to be life-enhancing. It's just that I didn't always recognize it to be that at the time.

Susan: For somebody starting out and trying this, how do we gauge knowing if it's a spiritual moment, if it is authentic?

Manda: I would learn with someone that you trust is the first thing, because it is very hard. I think this is particularly in Western practice. In indigenous tribes,

authenticity is easier to come by. We live in a world where lack of authenticity is pretty much the hallmark of our culture and it can be very hard. It's a continuous work, I would say. I don't think it necessarily gets easier. So, practice is the first thing, question everything. I think that there are levels of self-honesty that only come with time and practice and being aware that our tendency to project is huge, and there's nothing we can do about that except look at it and have compassion for the parts of ourselves that need to make stuff happen and then let them go, to the best of our ability. So I think practice and finding someone that you trust who can be an authentic mirror for you and who will have the decency and the honesty to point out that some things might be projections.

If they look like that from the outside, but because it is evidence-based, we can begin to test things even when we're working for ourselves. By the time we start working with other people then the testing is inevitable. If we're dreaming, if we're night dreaming, we can ask questions in our night dreams and see what pans out in the day because for me the point of shamanic practice is that we find ways of asking for help for this world. It's not that we're finding ways, spacing out to it and to other realities in order to escape from this world. We're looking for ways to help enhance this world. Provided we've started with the basic question of, what do you want of me, and provided we heard an answer that isn't necessarily our projection, then my absolute baseline test is, are things getting better? We have to be quite clear of what we think better is and on what scale we're working because personal better and national better and international better and global better are all on a different scale, but we can begin to test things out. If they aren't working, then we do something different.

Susan: Can you give an example from your writing practice, of testing things out?

Manda: That's an interesting question. Did I test things out in writing? The writing of the *Boudica* books was not a linear process. Probably the best is at the start, so I made the commitment to do what I was going to do, and I made the agreement with the gods that I would check out for a month because I was going to run out of money, I had been working part-time, and I was going to have to go back, full-time. I had a certain amount of money left. I had three months of money left, in fact. I got to the end of the first month and there was definitely enough material. In the middle of that month, I went to a crime writing conference. I was on the panel and somebody asked, as people do, "What are you writing now?" Purely, really, in order to annoy my editor with whom I had fallen out very badly, I said that I had started to write the *Boudica* books, because she wanted me to write another crime novel.

I went home and I continued to work on it because fundamentally that's what I'd have been told to do, and I trusted and felt that there was authenticity in the sense of the vision quest, but I was running out of money and I was going to go

back to the day job, and writing the *Boudica* books was not a process that was compatible with having a day job as well. It was taking all of my time to do the research and do the dreaming and do the writing. I was within ten days of running out of money when I went to another writing conference. There, a woman came up to me and said that she had been in the audience at the first conference, and she had heard me say that I was writing the *Boudica* books. She was an editor for a different publisher, and she wanted to know if I had any material. By then I had three chapters and a 23-page synopsis which is unheard of. If you talk to any writer, a synopsis is usually a paragraph, and everybody knows a little book is not going to fit that paragraph by the time you get to the end of it, but it's a starting point for everybody. She ended up being my new editor. They offered full world rights and the money came in pretty much at the point when all the money that I had in the world had just run out. I was able to give up the day job at the end of that year and focus on the writing. I think for me that was the confirmation that I needed that it had been an authentic experience on the vision quest and hadn't been me projecting my hopes and/or fears for my writing future. Does that answer the question that you asked of?

Susan: Yes, yes, wonderful validation, wonderful, so is there a difference between connecting with the gods, the guides and the spirits of our land?

Manda: I think there is. I feel the differences may be semantic. I think they're important and I teach that they are different. Anything can be a guide. God and spirits are different. Okay, so we're moving into the world of belief systems, and I'm a little wary of belief systems because by definition, they're hard to test. My belief system at the moment, as it stands, and it may change by tomorrow, this is my truth for today, is that anything that exists in the other world that hasn't got a physical body in this reality can become a guide. It's not necessarily wise to take on any guide because a lot of things have their own agendas, and anything in the other reality has spirit form. Gods, very specifically for me, are entities that are created by human intent, so there may be, for instance, a spirit of a tree or a river or a rock or a mountain, and humans give it intention which is the focus of attention. When we learn to focus our attention on a single point, it becomes an intention. Human intention, for me, is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. It's just that we tend not to be terribly good at how we focus it these days, but we can become very good at how we focus it. If you give an energetic entity enough focused attention, it gains an energetic potential. For me this is the creation. This is how humanity creates a god, and this is why gods are so often formed after human images. They become other than human because they're not bound by the physical laws of three dimension and space and time that we are. But they still end up being intimately linked to the place and the ethos and the textures of the intent of those who created them.

There's a particularly interesting story linked to this over an Edwardian explorer who was a woman called Alexandra David-Neel who was half French, half English, who went out in Victorian times, who went out to Tibet. She had learned Buddhism, and she wanted to learn some of the more esoteric aspects of Tibetan Buddhism at the time. One of the things that she learned was how to create a thought form, and she decided to create this thought form of a happy monk. Essentially, she created an energetic spirit form of a happy monk, and she was able to focus her intent powerfully enough that this happy monk grew to the point where other people in her party could see it. The problem was that shortly after it started to become visible, it ceased to be happy and began to terrorize the group effectively. Nobody in the group knew how to ask it to leave. They had to divert quite a long way from their intended route to go and find the abbot of a particular monastery who was the only person that anybody could think of who would have the ability to ask this monk form to depart, which he dearly did.

For me that was a very useful and interesting and highly specific and quite well-documented incidence of human intention, not necessarily particularly well applied but still, a single person's intention creating an energetic being essentially out of nothing but pure will power. If you translate that and imagine what several thousand years of intention could do to, let's say, a crocodile god or a cat god or any other form of deity that you choose to imagine then they can garner quite a lot of energetic power. My experience of the gods of this land is that the old gods of this land are still here and they're still perfectly accessible and they're still quite happy to work with us. My suggestion to my students is that we're always very careful because we can't necessarily know the agenda of any god, guide or spirit that we meet. In shamanic terms, it seems to me that when we do basic lower world and upper world journeys, we are essentially in a slightly protected bubble in which, provided we follow basic safety rules, nothing bad can happen.

As soon as we step out of our own lower world and our own upper world, into the infinity of all other possible realities then all bets are off as far as safety goes. So the key is that we don't step out of the safe zones until or unless we have a guide who may be a spirit or a god but is most likely, I don't let my students connect with anything that isn't a bird or a mammal of this reality in the early instances because these are least likely to have any agenda of their own other than the best and highest good of the person involved, that we don't step out of our own lower or upper world until we have a connection with something that we would trust with our life and our sanity. Once we have that connection then if that something says, "What you're doing this time is dangerous. You need to turn around and go home now at this moment," then we'll do it without asking questions. In this reality or the other realities, I've had one of my guides tell me in actual plain English that I heard, to pull my car off the road and stop.

Fortunately, I did exactly what I was told because something came around the corner at great speed that would have mashed my tiny car in two fragments and he would have been hosing me off the road. We have to get to the point where we are prepared to trust to that extent before we head off out into the other realities. The analogy that I would use is that we need to be able to read the signs that say, "Beware, there are bears ahead," and not get into the kind of, oh, it's okay, I like bears, bears are my power animal, nice, happy, fluffy bears, I love bears. This is not to say that all bears are in any way likely to eat people. This is metaphoric spirit bears. It doesn't necessarily mean that whatever is out there is evil. It just means that people can quite often be lunch if they don't know how to get out of the way or if they don't have the ability to recognize and deal with the things that populate the rest of the world and the rest of the many, many worlds. Self-evidently, not everything out there is blissful and peaceful and fluffy and rabbit and sweetness and light. Does that make sense? Or else I've just been talking for a very long time.

Susan: Yes, very.

Manda: I'm sorry if I didn't answer the question that you asked.

Susan: You did answer it and very, very well. I've never heard anybody distinguish this so clearly, and I really appreciate your answer. I want to backtrack just a little bit because I know that you've spoken about this a lot throughout this entire session. At the beginning, I mentioned that you teach psychopomping. Can you explain to our listeners who don't know what that is, what it is?

Manda: Yes, so, part of shamanic teaching is that at the point of death, a person's, what we will loosely call, soul, for want of a better word, makes a transition from the lands of life to the lands of death, however we may see them. One of the interesting things about our culture is that it's quite easy to get lost on the route from one to the other. In all of the indigenous cultures, there was always somebody or many people who helped the departing person to move from this reality to whatever comes next in a way that was clean and clear and swift, and that is the role of the psychopomp. Put at its most basic is that we understand enough of how to get from here to there, that we are able to help those who might otherwise be quite badly lost to make the transition. This is one of the few bits, it's one of the bits where we can actually do a degree of evidence-based checking. In one of the early points when I was teaching this, I had a student come along who, we'll change all the names, so let's say Great Uncle Albert in Australia had recently died and Great Uncle Albert was a black sheep of the family and basically nobody else really knew he existed. He drunk himself to death and his particular addiction was, let's say, Cointreau, a very specific and not very common high alcoholic drink. This student's niece had just been hospitalized, having drunk herself into a coma on Cointreau.

One of the main teachings of learning psychopomping is that those who are deceased, particularly if they have had addictions with which they have not come to terms during life, are quite likely to endeavor to fulfill those addictions through the living. The niece didn't even know that Great Uncle Albert existed as far as anybody was aware, and she also didn't know that my student was doing shamanic work or what shamanic work was. We did the psychopomping and the student invited Great Uncle Albert to head on his way because what he was doing wasn't helping him particularly nor was it helping her. Quite often, it's simply a case of explaining to the dead that they are dead. One of my teachers said that in the indigenous tribes, they would ask the dead person to walk in the ash of the fire and then point to the fact that there were not footprints as evidence that they were dead. Once people understand that they're dead, they're often more prepared to move on. Anyway, my student duly went home and emails the group a few days later to say that the great niece was out of the hospital and hadn't drunk anything since and still remains quite clear. It may be that you end up hospitalized and you get a bit of a shock and you decide you're not going to go back to drinking again, but it was as close as I think that we're going to get to any kind of evidence-based check that what we're doing is useful. The bottom line is, for me, is if it works then I'm not that bothered about how it works. I just want to know that it does work. I was fairly happy with the outcome of that one. So psychopomping is learning how to help the dead move from here to there in a way that's clean and helps them and also helps the living.

Susan: Well, Manda, this has been so fascinating, but we're coming to the end of our session. Before we go, could you please tell our listeners how they can find out more about you and your books?

Manda: Yes, I have two websites. The books are on mandascott.co.uk, so that's just my name all together, all lower case, and you can explore. My partner makes websites, I think it's a lovely website, please come and visit, and you can join up to a newsletter and we can tell you everything that's going on. There's a free short story which I wrote recently which took me back to the Boudican era which was one of the most I've had in quite a long time. Then if you're interested in the dreaming, there's dreamingawake.co.uk which lists the courses and tells more about my views of the dreaming and what it is and how we might do it. That, again, has been taken over by two of my wonderful students, so I don't have to do the anymore. There's a newsletter there as well.

Susan: Thank you, thank you for that, Manda, and I would also like to remind listeners that if you'd like to have the recording of this special session with Manda and the full recordings of all *The Dreamwork Summit* interviews for your own home library, you can find it at thedreamworksummit.com/upgrade. That's thedreamworksummit.com/upgrade. Before we part was, Manda, is there one last thought about shamanic dreaming that you'd like to leave our listeners with?

Manda: Just do it, yeah, find somebody good, find a group that you can work with. For me, it's the most inspiring spiritual path that I have ever encountered, and it is genuinely life-changing. The Earth needs us. I think the more people who can sit down with clean, clear intent and ask, what do you want of me, from the things out there that might know the answers, the more likely we are to move to a world where we can reframe who we are and how we view ourselves as humanity and how we define success and all of the things that we so badly need to reframe in our lives. I just encourage you to get out there and do it, do it safely, do it cleanly, do it so that it feels real to you.

Susan: Thank you so much, Manda, this has really been a special session, and thank you to all of our listeners today as well.

Manda: Thank you. It has been an honor. Thank you very much.

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