

Divine Madness

The future shaman sometimes takes the risk of being mistaken for a "madman"...but his "madness" fulfils a mystic function; it reveals certain aspects of reality to him that are inaccessible to other mortals, and it is only after having experienced and entered into these hidden dimensions of reality that the "madman" becomes a shaman."

Mircea Eliade¹ found that a psychotic episode has served as the initiatory crisis marking, for some shamans, a call to the healing profession. For example, the Siberian shaman Kyzalov entered a state of "madness" lasting for seven years which resulted in his initiation as a shaman. He reported that during those years he had been beaten up several times, taken to many strange places including the top of a sacred mountain, chopped into pieces and boiled in a kettle, met the spirits of sickness, and acquired the drum and garment of a dead shaman. Being "tormented" by spirits, babbling confused words, displaying curious eating habits, singing continuously, and dancing wildly are other common elements in initiatory crises; in our society today these experiences would be considered evidence of a psychotic disorder and could possibly result in hospitalization. Yet when Kyzalov recuperated, he reported that, "the shamans declared, 'You are the sort of man who may become a shaman; you should become a shaman. You must begin to shamanize.'"²

All mental and physical illnesses, accidents, and other ordeals, by creating psychospiritual crises, open the door to the shamanic world of spirits and nonordinary reality. In contemporary society, psychotic states of consciousness retain their power to awaken shamanic tendencies and talents. It proved to be so in my case, and for others whom I have met, worked with as a therapist and written about. My psychotic episode took place in a non-shamanic cultural and psychological context, but it bears a distinct relationship to a shaman's initiation: 1) it contained thematic and imagistic parallels to the initiatory crises of professional shaman; 2) it served as my calling to the mental health profession just as the shaman's crisis calls him/her to the role of healer; 3) it was integrated with the aid of traditional shamans and their practices.

Since I live in a contemporary Western society which does not recognize the social role of an ecstatic healer who cavorts with spirits, my psychotic episode did not initiate me as a shaman. I have devised the term "shamanistic initiatory crisis" to describe my experience. As anthropologist Ruth-Inge Heinz noted, "The term 'shamanistic' is used for shaman-like activities, e.g., activities which may be carried out by somebody other than a shaman, while the term 'shamanic' indicates that these activities are carried out by somebody who actually is a shaman."³ Therefore, shamanistic is the appropriate term.

My psychotic crisis occurred 18 years ago. After coming to the conclusion that, at 23 years of age, I was spending all of my time learning about other people, and did not know my own self, I dropped out of the doctoral program in social anthropology at Harvard University. I gave away all of my possessions, from bed to books, that would not fit into my backpack. I started travelling--hitchhiking across the country, up into Canada and down into Mexico, even to Hawaii. In Palo Alto, six months later...

I awoke just after midnight. Although I had slept for only two hours, I felt rested

-- in fact, I was full of energy and eager to get back to writing in my journal. But first a quick trip to the bathroom. While there, I stopped in front of the mirror and gazed at my reflection. Suddenly I noticed that my right hand was glowing, giving off a white light. My thumb was touching my forefinger in the ancient mudra position of the meditating Buddha. Immediately the meaning of this sign was clear to me: I had been Buddha in a previous life. Then another thought came: Buddha had been reincarnated as Jesus Christ. Therefore, I had also been Jesus Christ. Now, in this moment, the luminous image in the mirror was awakening me to my true purpose: to once again bring the human race out of its decline. My journal writing was actually the creation a "new Bible", a Holy Book which would unite all people around the common tenants of a single belief system. Instead of unifying just one social group, as Buddha and Christ had, my mission was to write a book that would create a new worldwide society free of conflict and full of loving relationships.

I had been trained well. Undergraduate studies in ancient civilizations at the University of Chicago and a masters degree in social anthropology at Harvard had give me a comprehensive and scientific understanding of the way societies function and change. This knowledge, added to the wisdom inherited from my previous incarnations, prepared me for my sacred mission.

Experiences during the past few days had also been designed as exercises to develop my skills. The previous day, while reading Suzuki's Manual of Zen Buddhism, I had solved the riddle of Zen teachings and become "enlightened." I was now freed from dependence on society's rigid norms and narrow perceptions of reality. I had acquired the intellectual freedom and creativity of an enlightened being. In addition, I had unravelled the mysterious process by which the Zen Master creates the enlightenment experience in others. Thus, I deemed myself fully prepared to design a cultural revolution in which everyone would become enlightened.

I was ready now. My life's mission had been communicated to me during this single glance in the bathroom mirror. I headed for the table where my journal, now to be a "Holy Book," lay open. Over the next five days and nights, I worked with only short breaks for meals and naps. I found I could contact the "spirits" of eminent thinkers in the social sciences and humanities to help me with the task of writing the new "Bible." As I reflected on their relevance for my work, I would "become" these people of wisdom, and "think their thoughts with them." I had discussions with contemporary people including R. D. Laing, Margaret Mead, Claude Levi-Straus, Bob Dylan and Abby Hoffman. People who were no longer living also communicated with me: Durkheim, Locke, Hobbes, Rosseau, Mead, Voltaire, Adam Smith, Jefferson, Freud, Jung, and, of course, Buddha and Christ. In my book were listed brief summaries of the "messages" I had obtained from each of them. At times during the writing, the clarity of my thoughts and the beauty of my vision for the future brought tears to my eyes. Initially I assumed a penname "The Scholar" to allude to the erudite origins of this project, and I soon realized that "The Scholar" was my new reincarnated identity.

After five days of writing, the book was finished. Its 47 pages contained a combination of parables, poems and instructions on how to organize the new society. I originally planned to leave five copies in front of Cody's bookstore in Berkeley, California. In 1971, Cody's was the center of a communication vortex of hippies and freaks, who would be first to herald my new Bible and circulate it to others. However,

when the 10 copies were made and bound in spiral notebooks, I mailed eight to friends and family, wanting those closest to me to be the first ones enlightened. Some expressed real interest. Others were casual. Some did not respond. No one reported becoming immediately enlightened; no one expressed a desire to join my mission to change the world. Nevertheless, I was sure that the revolution I was to lead would materialize.

Over the next five months of waiting, I was so preoccupied with my mission that I didn't work to earn money. I "crashed" at many friends' homes. They were compassionate and generous in supporting me, both financially and psychologically. None of them ever treated me as though they thought I were crazy. They gave me food and shelter and let me read their books. They listened to my new ideas and talked to me about religion and life.

My sense of being the reincarnation of Buddha and Christ slowly dissipated over the next two months. I don't remember a specific moment when I broke through this delusion. I just thought about myself less and less as the Supreme Being while I worked on revising the book. Although I began to realize that it was not to be a new "Bible," I still believed that there were many brilliant and novel ideas and syntheses of previous thought. I would publish it as a best-selling book.

In early spring of the the next year, I went to live by myself in my parent's summer cottage in Cape Cod. I continued working on my book; however, my health rapidly deteriorated. It began with headaches and insomnia; my head felt as though it would burst with pain after an hour of reading and many nights I could not sleep. I felt miserable and depressed. Then I had a recurrence of an illness I had suffered 10 years earlier, Crohn's disease, a serious condition affecting the intestines producing internal bleeding. I forced myself to keep reading, taking aspirin and other medication for the headaches.

At the same time that it was becoming physically difficult for me to read, it was also becoming more imperative. In giving up my grandiose identity as the Supreme Being, I now turned my attention to becoming a renowned author. My research led me to many books on religion and social change, and I began to see that my ideas were not so original. While reading Roszak's *The Making of a Counterculture*, I realized that my "vision for a new society" was nothing more than a stock "60's" Utopian plan that had led to the founding of numerous communes.

These realizations further lowered my low self-esteem by making me aware of the folly of my actions during the height of my crisis. I was embarrassed at the thought of having sent a semi-incoherent "Holy Book" to all my closest friends and family. Now I questioned whether I had anything worthwhile to say in the book, which had been my *raison d'etre* for the previous several months. I felt totally lost and confused. I was still quite sick physically with Crohns' symptoms, headaches, and insomnia. I was even considering the possibility of committing suicide with medications. The image of my skeleton spontaneously appeared to me on several sleepless nights.

Two months after moving to Cape Cod to be alone, I was walking near the bay, ruminating about the events of the last six months and feeling depressed. Suddenly I heard a voice speaking to me. I was startled. The voice distinctly said, "Become a healer." At that time, lost in self-recriminations about the past, I did not think of myself as even having a future! However, this voice--the only one I've ever heard emanating from outside of myself--set a whole new train of events in motion. Although the voice

was not accompanied by the ecstatic emotion of my first rebirth as The Scholar, it initiated my path toward a new lifestyle and profession.

I decided to leave Cape Cod and go to my parents' home in New Jersey to recuperate. There I took classes in yoga and participated in encounter groups. Then I joined a program at a personal growth center and trained in a multitude of healing practices. These included gestalt therapy, transactional analysis, primal therapy, bioenergetics, massage and psychodrama. Eventually I became a group leader and member of the training staff at the Forest Hospital Growth Center outside of Chicago.

Although I had many opportunities during my personal group and individual therapy sessions to explore the experiences surrounding my crisis, at no time did I bring them up. I avoided looking at the events that had led me into the vocation of being a psychologist, including the hearing of a disembodied voice telling me to "Become a healer." I simply did not talk or think about these early events in my career.

Entering a doctoral clinical psychology program three years after this experience, and then later working as a psychologist with psychotic patients at Camarillo State Hospital and at UCLA, I learned that my crisis was a psychotic episode. Taking LSD four days before the episode began had probably triggered its onset. It was not an "LSD Psychosis" or what the current nomenclature terms a "Hallucinogen Delusional Disorder" because the extraordinary events started days after the LSD was out of my system. The LSD had initiated a train of mental events which were amplified over the next four days by intensive reading of books on Zen, introverted journal writing, social withdrawal and little sleep. These preoccupations and behaviors culminated four days later in the events in front of the mirror and my life did not return to normal until six months later. Although transient visual and auditory hallucinations occurred my episode fits the diagnostic criteria for "Delusional Disorder, Grandiose Type" due to my preoccupation with having a special identity, extraordinary abilities and a mission to save the world.

Although this level of understanding sheds some light on what happened, nothing in my training as a psychologist encouraged me to explore my psychotic episode further. From the medical model psychiatric perspective, psychosis brings no potential for transformation, only the risk of recurrence. The new "Bible" and all my copious notes sat in a sealed box that moved with me from one living abode to another but was never opened--physically, mentally or spiritually.

Some seven years after this episode, during my psychology internship at Camarillo State Hospital in California, I entered into Jungian analysis. Soon after starting therapy, I had a dream in which a large red book appeared. My analyst, Dr. Margaret Johnson, asked for my associations about the book. Memories of my "Holy Book" leaped into my consciousness. Sensing my discomfort, she questioned me further. I had not discussed my psychotic episode with anyone in seven years, and my heart raced at the prospect of sharing my story with someone in my own profession. Recognizing therapy as a sacred place where one can safely tell secrets, I blurted out the details of my experience--being a reincarnation of Buddha and Christ whose mission was to save the world by writing the new "Bible". At the end of our discussion she said, "Well, I don't think that's craziness. Sounds like something important was happening to you on a deep level." She invited me to bring the book to the next session. The sealed box would soon be reopened--physically and mentally.

While the next two sessions focused on this phase of my life, my lingering

discomfort with its aspects of grandiosity and inflated identity kept me from delving very deeply into the experience. However, I realized that my book and the events that had surrounded its writing could be analyzed like a dream, examining personal and universal symbols. True to my "scholar" nature, I began research on psychotic episodes and their parallels to various myths. I turned to writing case studies on the "MYths in Mental Illness" which were published in a professional journal. REF My Jungian analysis and scholarly work provided me with a "dictionary" of symbols for interpreting my own experience.

However, the spiritual potential inherent in my experience lay dormant until contact with shamanic teachers enabled me to connect with that dimension. Upon finishing my doctorate in psychology in 1980, I became an Assistant Research Psychologist in the Clinical Research Center for Schizophrenia at UCLA. At the same time, I became a staff member of The Ojai Foundation, a new educational retreat center north of Los Angeles. In this semi-wilderness location, the first structure we erected on the land was a teepee. A sweat lodge was soon added. This hospitable and appropriate setting for training in shamanic practices was created by medical anthropologist Joan Halifax, an author and expert on shamanism. Daily life included chanting; drumming was a frequent activity. Pipe ceremonies marked special events and frequently were held at sunrise. The New Year's Celebrations were ceremonies modelled after the Peyote Ceremony with a water drum and singing stick passed around the circle throughout the night.

The Ojai Foundation was host to many traditional shamans and Native American medicine people who held retreats where they shared ceremonial healing techniques. During the next few years, I attended programs by Wallace Black Elk and Grace Spotted Eagle, Prem Das, Sun Bear and Wabun, Hyemeyohsts Storm, Oh Shinnah, Grandfather Semu Huaute, Rolling Thunder, Harley Swiftdeer, Thomas Banyacya, Evelyn Eaton, Adam Fortunate Eagle, and Elie Hien. Their extended visits after the retreats enabled those of us living on the land to get to know them more intimately and to participate in private ceremonies, prayer sessions and sweats.

In the altered states of consciousness induced by these shamanistic practices, I re-experienced, for the first time since my psychotic episode, a feeling of oneness with the universe. Once again, I was communicating with divine spirits, and comprehending the meaning of life itself. Instead of repressing these ecstatic experiences which had brought painful memories, I was now learning to trust them again. Such experiences are a major component of shamanic life: "Shamans do not differ from other members of the collectivity by their quest for the sacred--which is normal and universal human behavior--but by their capacity for ecstatic experience" (p. 107, emphasis added).

Shamanistic practices enabled me to reclaim a culturally-disapproved and repressed dimension of my being that psychosis had revealed: my capacity for ecstasis--the union with higher forces and understanding. However, these teachers and my daily shamanistic practices taught me how to exercise voluntary control over entry into and out of ecstatic states. I also learned how to keep them contained within appropriate social contexts.

During these years, I learned about power animals and discovered some of my own, including the owl, the coyote and the lizard. Times of solitude and spiritual reflection in wilderness settings taught me how to follow my inner voices. These vision

quests helped me to draw guidance from the wilderness within. For instance, a dream in which my file cabinets appeared covered with beads and feathers made me aware that these tools for academic work are my power objects. One morning bicycling to work, I came across a dead barn owl. This connection with my first power animal reminded me of my dream. I spent nearly an hour intently working to sever its wings and claws using a sharp stone tool. Now that beaded owl claw hangs over the file cabinets in my office. I learned to communicate with trees by being in their presence, listening to their spirit voices. I made a connection with the spirit of the ocean as I stood kneedeep in the water feeling the power of the waves tugging at my legs. These spirit teachers along with more traditional teachers, helped me create a personal mythology based upon my inner life.

Parallels Between Psychosis and Shamanic Initiation

The key themes in shamanic initiation are ascent into the upper world, descent into the lower world, dismemberment and rebirth.⁴ These four themes were present in my experience. First, I ascended into a kind of heaven where I felt myself to be chosen for a mission to change the world and "became" the gods Christ and Buddha. Then I descended into a hellish realm which represented my dismemberment--constant headaches, insomnia, intense abdominal cramps and internal bleeding--during which I envisioned my death. At the end of my experience I felt reborn through an audible call to become a healer. Thus, the story of my psychotic episode follows the classic four-part thematic structure characteristic of shamanic initiatory crises.

Many images that appeared in my experience also parallel the symbolism of shamanic initiations. Shamans frequently have experiences, as I had, of becoming enlightened and being enveloped in light. Referring to "the disciple's 'lighting' or 'enlightenment,'" Eliade writes: "the experience of inner light that determines the career of the Iglulik shaman is familiar to a number of higher mysticisms."⁴ He mentions the Upanishads, yoga, the Tibetan Book of the Dead and Christian mysticism. Another common initiatory motif which was part of my crisis is discussed at length by Eliade in his book in a section on "Contemplating one's own skeleton." Lastly, the theme of rebirth also occurs in many traditions. Joseph Campbell wrote: "The inward journey of the mythological hero, the shaman, the mystic and the schizophrenic are in principle the same; and when the return or remission occurs, it is experienced as a rebirth."⁵

Of course a key difference between my psychotic episode and the shaman's initiatory crisis is the way it is viewed by our respective societies. From the contemporary Western perspective, it would be considered a mental illness. However, in shamanic societies, such experiences often mark an individual as an ecstatic healer. Another difference relates to the type of divine figures encountered. The shaman encounters animal spirit guides; I met Christ and Buddha. When contacting spirits of the dead, I did not communicate with dead shamans, but the "spirits" of numerous people, leading figures from the Western cultural tradition--both dead and alive. My preoccupation with writing a book to change the world is also not a shamanic theme. However, it is somewhat parallel to the shaman's quest to acquire power objects, songs and drums which can be used to heal others.

Shamanistic Crisis as a Calling to a Mental Health Profession

Psychologist Jean Achterberg has pointed out that crises and illnesses bestow upon the shaman the wisdom to serve the community as a healer. She then goes on to observe that ,

Such events can occur and have occurred in the lives of health professionals in the modern world and have led to vocational choice. Being disabled, or having a serious disease, or being in recovery from an addiction, or even having a child with a significant handicap has been the wounding or the initiation for many in the health care field.⁶

Etymologically, "vocation" stems from an earlier meaning: the hearing of a divine voice summoning one to a religious career. My vocation as a mental health professional followed an audible summoning to the healing profession in the midst of my psychotic episode. During my years of teaching graduate psychology students, giving workshops, and receiving correspondence from readers of my articles, I've learned that many mental health professionals have been "called" to their profession by a psychotic or depressive episode.

My psychotic experience has continued to guide me in my profession. I believe that my crisis awakened certain healing abilities that contribute to my work with psychotic patients. For example, it is relatively easy and rewarding for me to empathically enter the delusional reality of psychotic patients. Most mental health professionals seem to find an "abyss of difference" (as Jaspers, one of the fathers of modern psychopathology, described it) between the "normal" and the psychotic mind. Through my psychotic experience, I became aware that psychotic patients have needs beyond pharmacologically-based treatments. At Camarillo State Hospital, I developed the first holistic health program for schizophrenic patients. It incorporated jogging, meditation, stress management and art therapy along with a weekly "Growth and Schizophrenia" group therapy program. These therapy sessions helped them to develop a positive attitude toward their illness and improve their self-esteem by pointing out parallels between their experiences and those of shamans, mystics, and artists. My clinical work has also involved harnessing the creativity of psychotic patients by having them write and draw about their experiences. Several of these writings have been published and the art works displayed. More recently my concerns led me to develop and publish articles on sex and AIDS education programs for patients with serious mental illnesses.

Had I been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder, hospitalized and medicated, I'm sure that a positive integration of my experience would have been much more difficult to attain. With this in mind, I published an article detailing operational diagnostic criteria for distinguishing mental disorders from spiritual emergencies: crises which carry the capacity for self-renewal.

Shamanistic Practices and the Integration of Psychotic Episodes

In 1967, psychologist Julian Silverman noted the similarities between the crises involved in psychosis and those in shamanic initiations. He also lamented the lack of a supportive social milieu in contemporary Western culture as compared with traditional

shamanic societies where the social role of the shaman legitimates free access to altered states of consciousness. "For the schizophrenic, the absence of such culturally acceptable and appropriate [access] only has the effect of intensifying his suffering over and above the original anxieties...for the crisis solutions of the schizophrenic are totally invalid ones in the eyes of the great majority of his peers."⁷

Becoming a shaman to help integrate psychotic experiences is no longer a viable option for most individuals in contemporary mainstream Western society. There is little cultural support for such a role in which accessing altered states of consciousness is acceptable. However, in the two decades since Silverman pointed out this lack, the option of utilizing shamanism to integrate psychotic crises has been revived by the neo-shamanic movement. Joan Townsend points out the practical training that this movement provides: "While one could 'learn' shamanism one's own by extensive research and experimentation, it is not a very practical alternative. The experience of participating in a shamanic group, even if only for a few days, provides an orientation and a qualitatively different experience so important for a true knowing." REF Today individuals can receive support during their crises and validation afterwards through participation in the extensive range of training opportunities available at place like The Ojai Foundation and programs such as Michale Harner's.

In my case, by pursuing shamanistic practices I changed my self-perception about this very significant episode in my life. I felt reassured after Cheyenne Medicine Chief Hyemeyohsts Storm informed me that the medicine wheel teachings of his people allowed them to distinguish a temporary psychosis, which is brought on by spirits to communicate "teachings," from a chronic mental illness. I like to think that in an earlier era my shamanistic initiatory crisis would have marked me as a shaman-elect and I would have been apprenticed to a master shaman to learn to control these abilities.

While presenting my views in various workshops and classes I have led, I encountered many others who were drawn to shamanistic practices by episodes of mental breakdown/breakthrough. In one workshop, "Psychosis: Mysticism, Shamanism or Pathology?" my co-leader, Joan Halifax, explained how her inspiration for establishing The Ojai Foundation was an outgrowth of her own descent into psychosis. Shamanism had provided a map to guide her back to wholeness. She created an educational center where people would be welcomed into a healing community. Guided by authentic shamans, novices learned self-control over entry into and exit from ecstatic states of consciousness. During a retreat in Ojai, Lakota shaman Wallace Black Elk shared how his initiatory visions led to his hospitalization by those who did not understand the spiritual dimension of his experience.

Today shamanistic techniques are increasingly being employed in counseling, psychotherapy and medical treatments. During his years of work treating psychotic patients, Jungian analyst John Perry found that a primary function of an acute psychotic episode is to enable the individual "to learn to perceive symbolic meanings as they pertain to the living of one's psychic life, and thus to keep connected with the ever-enriching wellsprings of the emotions which nourish that life."⁸ In integrating my shamanistic initiatory crisis, I found the literature on shamanism and neo-shamanism provided archetypal and experiential parallels to those psychotic experiences. Awareness of such correspondences allowed me to translate my culturally discordant psychotic experiences into a personally meaningful mythology. Contact with shamans and

shamanistic practices provided my training in self-control of ecstatic states and journeying to spirit worlds. Shamanistic practices, pursued with the guidance of knowledgeable therapists or trustworthy traditional teachers, are an ideal way to extract a symbolically rich personal mythology from a psychotic crisis.

FOOTNOTES

1. Eliade, Mircea. *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*. New York: Harper and Row, 1960. Page 80-81.
2. Halifax, Joan. *Shamanic Voices*. New York: Dutton, 1979. Additional examples of psychotic-like experiences associated with shamanic initiatory crises can be found in Kalweit, H. When insanity is a blessing: The message of shamanism. In: *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*. Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1989.
3. Heinz, Ruth-Inge. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Shamanism II*. Berkeley, CA:, 1984. p. vi.
4. Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972. (quote is on page 107).
5. Campbell, Joseph *Myths To Live By*. New York. Bantam Books, 1972. p. 237.
6. Achterberg, Jeanne. "The Wounded Healer". *Shaman's Drum*, Vol. 11, 1987-8. p.20.
7. Silverman, Julian. "Shamans and Acute Schizophrenia". *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 69, 1967. p. 28-29. Current diagnostic nomenclature reserves the category of schizophrenia for chronic and severe psychotic disorders. However, Silverman's thesis applies to several of the less severe types of psychotic experiences. See Lukoff, David. "The Diagnosis of Mystical Experiences With Psychotic Features". *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1985.
8. Perry, John. *The Far Side of Madness*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974. p. 1
9. Joan Townsend "Neo-Shamanism and the Modern Mystical Movement" in *Shaman's Path*, edited by Gary Doore (1988), Boston: Shambala Publications. p. 82.
10. Michael Harner "Our Shamanic Heritage" *Noetic Sciences Review*, p. 12.
11. See Michael Harner "Shamanic Counseling", Stanislav Grof "The Shamanic Journey: Observations from Holotropic Therapy", "The Inner Life of the Healer: The Importance of Shamanism for Modern Medicine", Frank Lawlis "Shamanic Approaches in a Hospital Pain Clinic" and Lewis Mehl "Modern Shamanism: Integration of Biomedicine with Traditional World Views" in *Shaman's Path*, edited by Gary Doore (1988), Boston: Shambala Publications.
13. Feinstein, David and Krippner, Stanley *Personal Mythology: The Psychology of Evolving Self* Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1988.

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