

In the early days it was incorrectly assumed that familiars were spirit creatures that Witches kept incarcerated in special jars, only releasing them during the casting of charms. Although a familiar spirit is seen by some as one of the basic, yet essential, tools of true magick, like the athame, wand, staff, censor, chalice and the cauldron, the fact remains that a familiar spirit is really nothing more than a physical animal that participates in ritual or ceremony because it is drawn to, enjoys the energies being radiated, and understands the process and feels compelled to assist.

No matter how hard one may try, it is impossible to force an animal to aid in magickal workings by simply labelling it as a familiar. Animals destined for the role communicate freely with the spirit world, and by nature alone, transmute one's magickal intent into spiritual reality. They understand the sanctified Otherworld space created once the magickal Circle is cast, and will act, by pure instinct, as your emissary, herald, guardian and spiritual mentor while in that space.

Shapeshifting into the recognisable forms of animals for specific purposes was, and still is, an important aspect of animal-based magick. Many of the traditional rituals initiated by the ancient native people of America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Asia, etc. incorporated shapeshifting practices into their rituals by the

physical appearance into an animal or bird during the dark hours of night.

Legends of 'animal-people' soaked in blood lust, terror and demonic possession, are common in all cultures, and appear to be just as real as dragons, centaurs, fauns and mermaids. In fact, these creatures are alive and well, not just in legend, and until we, as humans, can accept them and see them as physical beings, they will remain in the world of fantasy – that other in-between world of unreality that we wrongly label as imagination.

Shapeshifting is a practice that fuses the individual with the spirit of an animal that is believed to have the ability to enhance any given healing ritual or ceremony. By examining the movements and behavioural patterns of the animals, and by watching them with our mind's eye while in meditation, we can learn the symbolic and magickal language of their ways – their sacred powers and medicines. Once we become familiar with these workings, we can, through dance and theatrical movement, effectively imitate them and become one with their spirits. This dramatisation, which essentially changes the mental perception of our body and physical structure, translates the animal's message or power into the physical, concretizing the intent for performing the ritual in the first place.

By demonstrating our willingness to look at our physical form as a representational image of the spiritual essence we are invoking as a teacher or

learn how. It is said that we, as children of Mother Earth, are capable of communing with the forces of nature, to speak readily to spirits and deity, as well as plants, minerals, animals, birds, fish, reptiles and insects, listening to what they have to say and learning their medicine. The teachings say that everything is sacred and that nature speaks to those who listen.

The animals each have a lesson to teach and we can make it our mission to learn each one and use the power to manifest the qualities of these animals into our own lives. It is said that in order to better achieve any magickal goal or spiritual mission it may be necessary to call upon the power of an appropriate spirit animal on the astral plane to show us what must be done, the correct way to approach the goal, and the best attitude to adopt.

When the power of an animal is invoked in any magickal working, we are asking for the animal to share its medicine secrets, its key to what makes it spiritually unique. We are asking it to inform us of the best way to tackle the situation, or the reason for magickally seeking the solution in the first place. It is for this reason that the invocation is made with reverence, gentleness and pure intent. By quietening the mind, ceasing the inner chatter and listening with an intuitive ear, the miraculous can be found, and the desired outcome will occur.

The sacred silence and unconditional respect for the timidity of the animal spirit is the key, the link to the receiving of Spirit and its magickal assistance. By slipping into a meditatively-induced, altered state and requesting the wisdom of the animal spirit world, you will inevitably meet your power ally which will demonstrate, through symbolic imagery, the approach, the execution and the outcome of the ritual or sacred ceremony.

Before commencing any working, though, it is obvious that the animal best suited to the task must first be determined. Remember that all animals have a powerful spirit, and an equally important message to impart, and that no animal is greater or weaker than the next. The snail's spirit, for example, is no less powerful than that of the lion, and the spirit of the elephant should not

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donning of animal skins, feathers, teeth, bones, skulls and representational body paint (made from blood, mud and clay), while mimicking and translating the movements and actions of the animals into ritualistic dance, often enhanced by hallucinogenic drugs, smoke and fire, and repetitive rhythm.

Today, the term shapeshifting automatically brings to mind Hollywood-influenced images of creatures that are human in form during the daylight hours, but capable of changing their

facilitator of knowledge, we are expressing our desire to drop our ego and inhibitions and walk as one with Spirit. When we do this freely, life-force stops and listens and the animal speaks.

The knowledge recorded in traditional shamanic teachings from all over the world that animal spirits can be called upon to assist in almost every aspect of our lives is a realisation that opens a floodgate of wisdom and potential to those willing to