

Who is Calling me to Establish a Relationship? A Journey into the Wilds of Africa

'Who is calling me to establish a relationship? Is that not the question of today? To answer it we have to realize the pain and agony of the primeval forest, to know it as our own.'

So writes Rix Weaver, an Australian Jungian Analyst, some 20 years ago, in an intriguing book called *'A Testament to the Wilderness'*. This book is a collection of chapters written by diverse authors, from analysts, to anthropologists to environmentalists, who all attended the 3rd World Wilderness Congress at Findhorn, Scotland in 1983.

I find it very moving to read this work which so much echoes the writings of Ecopsychologists today. These themes seem to have dropped out of the dialogue within our current psychotherapy world, which has become so consumed with human to human relationships and the workings of the inner world, at a time when our human relationship to the other-than-human world is so very neglected and at worst abusive.

From its inception in South Africa in 1977, the World Wilderness Congress has been influenced by Jungian ideas, due to the close friendship between its founder, environmentalist Ian Player, and Laurens van der Post. It has met every 3 years since, in different part of the world, and in November 2001 it returned to its South African origins. It was heartening to meet such a large group of environmentally concerned people who recognize the interconnectedness of external and internal environments; who acknowledge that what humans are doing to nature must impact on our psyches in all kinds of ways; and who see that having access to wild places is crucial for our physical *and* mental health. These wild places are fast disappearing. What does this mean for our inner wilderness, whatever we may conceive this to be?

An optional part of the Congress was to go on a 'Wilderness Trail' beforehand. So I flew to Durban, South Africa, to join with 6 other people for an adventure into the Umfolozi Game Reserve, an area about the size of the Isle of Wight. We were led by two guides from the Wilderness Leadership School, which has a very specific ethos. Participants are invited to exit from their busy (usually Western) lives for an experience in nature. The list of things 'to leave behind' included watches, money, mobile phones, deodorants, intoxicants, and extra food. Everything we needed for 5 days we had to carry into the bush. We took no tents and we wore clothes to blend in with the environment. We walked at the pace of the slowest person, in silence, for only a few hours each day, with our guides at the front and the rest of us in line. If we saw something, we were asked to pass a finger click down the line rather than shout. Then we might stop and talk in whispers, looking at animals, insects, dung or footprints. During those five days we saw elephants strolling across the river, black and white rhino with young, a black mamba and a spitting cobra slithering over the guides' feet, hyena, scorpions hidden in our bags at night, a lion, giraffe, zebra, iguana lizards 3 feet long curled up in trees, eyes of crocodiles lurking in the river, tree frogs with great frothy balls of eggs, huge multi-coloured grasshoppers...

and the list goes on. Needless to say, we had to stay within a few yards of the group at all times.

When we stopped to camp, we were careful to leave behind no trace of our visit. Our fire was built on a bed of sand and soil, which was scattered afterwards, so that no burned patch was left. Toilet paper was also in short supply! We had to experiment using sticks, leaves or smooth pebbles, using 'Doug' the trowel to bury our shit. All other waste we took away with us.

Our group was quite diverse. Two people were rainforest activists from Australia, one person ran wilderness tours in Svalbard (near the North Pole), one was an environmental lawyer from Scotland, myself a Jungian analyst, and one was a single mother from a township in Durban who had never been in the bush.

At night we had to keep watch alone for an hour and a half. Each person kept a small fire burning, checking frequently with a torch to spot any unwelcome animal visitors. Most of us were pretty frightened about this task; it felt like a huge responsibility for the group, let alone for our lives. But, if you could relax enough, it was a welcome time to spend alone, listening to the sometimes deafening noises of frogs, cicadas, and a cacophony of strange sounds, which could only be identified with the help of the guides in the morning. For example, a lion made the sound of great long sighs (I think I was expecting the roar of Metro Goldwyn Mayer), whereas the leopard sounded like someone sawing wood!

On the first night, as we divided up the time, Lihle from Durban said she was simply terrified at the idea of night watch, so she took the dawn slot. Miraculously she felt fine about doing her turn in the dark the following night: she had realized that in fact this place was safer than being on the street in her township.

Lihle was not the only person to be going through some transformational experiences. I found the experience very testing, even though it *was* very beautiful, and profoundly moving, to be so far away from so-called civilization. To be in such unknown territory, with very interrupted nights and no distractions, entirely dependent on our guide, made me feel disoriented and often frustratingly helpless. One manifestation of this was around food, as our guide was in charge of meal preparation and the times of eating. One day I compared notes with Ruth, from Australia, as we walked on through the bush ravenously hungry, with no sign of lunch appearing. We giggled hysterically as we planned food hoarding, taking extra food from breakfast in case we got hungry.

Another unexpected experience was to feel as if I was thrown back in time. This African bush was very green, not at all the arid, red savannah I was expecting. The lush, rolling landscape could almost have been the Ashdown forest. When I saw an elephant feeding by the river I felt, for an instant, as if I were in pre-historic Britain spying a mammoth. Living so closely with a group, spending all our time together, and sitting round the fire at night, sleeping under the stars, is how humans have spent about 99% of their existence. Of course, my small group would have been family not strangers, and I would have been

well versed in knowing the sights and sounds of my environment from birth, so perhaps my fears might have been different. Nevertheless, I felt like I was tapping into our ancestral way of life more closely than I had ever done before. How very different it was to my London life which is divided up into 50-minute slots in a room in a large human constructed city environment.

I realized in these five days that my skin was my only boundary in this great outdoors. We had nowhere to hide from each other, or from the earth and sky. Paradoxically this wide open space creates an immense intimacy, both between the humans and with the other-than-human-world. This communion with nature was at once both exposing and cradling. If I could feel safe enough to let go, and trust that I would be held by something so vast and unknowable, then a real sense of oneness with all around me, the earth and universe beyond, flooded through me. I am reminded of all those times throughout my life when I have felt connected to something divine through nature.

I began to reflect on our need for 'rooms', the nature of dwelling places. They are not simply shelter from weather, and protection from animals, but places in which to hide from the vastness of space, which can at times feel too psychically exposing. Yet do we lack a connection with that 'greater whole' if we do not expose ourselves enough?

Comparing notes with my companions, I realized what a very different experience they were having. Ruth was feeling very disturbed by us humans lurking in the bush spotting animals. She felt like a hunter-tourist, preying like a consumer on the animals. She was all too aware of the fence surrounding our area of 'wilderness', and that it was mostly well-off whites who had access to this luxury of nature. Our man from the Arctic was loving every moment of being in such a radically different environment, and his spotting-animals-skill was clearly much better exercised than the rest of us. I had difficulty seeing things even when they were pointed out. Lihle from Durban was having the time of her life, so very many new things to see, feeling released from the cage of monotony in her life. She had been unemployed for many years and felt utterly hopeless about her future. It was so very refreshing to see things through her eyes, as she had such incredible appreciation for everything.

However, on the fourth day, I was to have an entirely new experience. We were in quite an open camp at this point, on a hillock with few trees obscuring a view down towards a river. Unusually, our guide had said that it was safe to go alone to the river, which was about 100 yards away. Here it was possible to sit beside a cliff edge and watch animals from afar, coming to the waters edge to drink.

I was feeling elated after my first good night's sleep, having been allotted the dawn watch. So, before breakfast, I went for a wander to the river and sat writing a little, as I watched the peaceful water go by. My friends from Australia, Ruth and John, were admiring the view from the camp and had seen me go off.

The next thing I knew, there was a shout and the sound of very heavy feet pounding behind me. As I swung around, I saw a male lion (yes, with a mane and everything) about 30 feet behind me, leaping away at high speed. I stood watching this spectacular and powerful animal as he galloped towards and along the river's edge. At this stage I felt no fear, as the lion was so clearly running away, and I thought he had disturbed the group. However, when Keith, the group leader, beckoned me over, I discovered that the lion had in fact been stalking ME. Luckily Ruth and John had watched this scenario unfold, and had alerted Keith, who had come immediately, cocking his gun just in case. But all he had needed to do was to give a good shout and the lion had bolted.

Was the lion stalking me to eat, I wondered? Keith said that the lion had certainly spotted me. He was walking slowly through the grass with his head high, very curious to see what this figure was. It was not certain he would have attacked me, only if he was hungry. Despite feeling gratitude for this lucky escape, I felt curiously sad that I had missed the opportunity to face this creature full on. I played over in my mind what I might have done had no-one seen this coming. Would I have had the nerve to have stood my ground? And just in case you ever need the information, what you need to do is stand up and make yourself look as big as possible, making a sound from the core of your being, to try and scare the lion away. Apparently the one thing you must never do is to run away from a wild animal. If you do, you will surely be dinner.

I was hugely relieved that this magnificent animal, a member of an endangered species, had not been shot on my behalf. After all, it was me who had entered his living room. Lions in this area are quite rare. Keith sees one in approximately every 20 trails. So this left me with plenty to ponder on, in my psychotherapist kind of a way, as we walked that day. Was this a marvelous piece of synchronicity? Did it hold some kind of meaning that the lion had visited me, as in a dream? Or was it the all time joke for the therapist, specializing in the area of eating problems, who nearly got eaten?! This became all the more vivid, later that morning, when we stumbled upon lion dung and a ball of matted hair from a lion's stomach, which we took in turns to feel and smell. "Could have been you MJ" my fellow walkers joked.

Joking aside, these reflections are the beginnings of a process known to those in the field of 'Wilderness Therapy'. There are now many initiatives, mainly in the USA and South Africa, taking small groups of people into the wilds for a variety of experiences and reasons. Some are more like Outward Bound, with an inner dimension. Some are for specific clients groups; for example, 'adventure therapy' for anorexics, designed to help them regain body awareness. Some are more like the Native American 'Vision Quests', where part of the journey involves a period of time, usually 1-4 days, fasting alone, when one seeks a vision.

At the Congress, during a series of sessions titled 'Wilderness of Mind and Spirit', I discovered many people involved in running different kinds of projects, and they all reported how very potent this wilderness work was. One such person, an experienced

psychotherapist working in a Family Therapy Centre in a township of Johannesburg, told me,

“Don’t imagine that taking people out into the wilds is a miracle cure. It certainly is not. But it is a very powerful tool which needs to be well prepared for and well integrated afterwards, as part of an ongoing therapy programme, if it is to be offered to people in distress.”

Another inspired project was working with gang members. They are let off prison sentences in order to participate in a 9 month programme which in part involves going out on trail and doing men’s rites of passage. Older members of the community have been employed as mentors for the young men.

There was fervent debate during these sessions as to how this kind of work should be conducted. There were concerns voiced that some of the Projects lacked the necessary before and after trail support, especially for fragile participants. But there was overall agreement that such work often facilitated an extraordinary personal healing as well as a shift in perspective about our human to other-than-human relationship.

What is happening here? One of the therapists I met there confirmed my thoughts that these initiatives are springing out of a culture in great trauma, where one-to-one therapy in a room is not necessarily enough. These trails offer physical involvement, a relationship to living, other-than-human, beings (especially effective when people have been on the receiving end of violence and torture), and an experience of being in nature for people living in extremely poor and ugly man-made environments, who have no access to green spaces.

Perhaps the potency of these experiences goes deeper still, and is relevant for any of us. Many people would say that a ‘peak experience’ in life, an experience of an incredible sense of well-being, is brought about through being in nature. These experiences are often silent and private, and in many ways I think we take for granted the healing power of nature. It is hard to articulate how this process happens without declining into clichés. We might loosely describe this as a feeling of one’s everyday boundaries dissolving, a powerful feeling of oneness with the world. Jung describes it well in *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. He writes:

‘At times I feel like I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and I am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons.....here everything has its history and mine; here is space for the spaceless kingdom of the world’s and the psyche’s hinterland’ (Jung, 1963 P252-3)

Could it be that from very early on in our lives, time spent in nature is one of the most precious places we have to connect with ‘God’, or whatever we might conceive of as the larger whole within which we dwell? Is this especially important to consider, in the growing absence of spiritual traditions, which have traditionally performed that function?

Some people also remark on the synchronicity that happens in the wild, as if certain creatures are drawn to certain people. Our guide told us how he saw snakes on every trail, and on one occasion when he surprised a snake, it reared up to six foot high. Other guides rarely see snakes. Most indigenous cultures have no problem with acknowledging that we humans are a small part of a whole living system, where the animals, plants, trees, water, all have spirits. It is our Western culture that has decided that only humans can ascribe meaning to events.

So, to return to Rix Weaver's question, who is calling me to establish a relationship?

While our focus on the human transference relationship is necessary, have we lost sight of our relationship to the environment which sustains us? Can we be healthy while it is not? Surely Winnicott's 'facilitating environment' means more than the humans around us? Did not the kind of landscape we inhabited, the animals we related to, contribute to our early experience? I acknowledge it is difficult in an urban environment, surrounded by four walls, to get a sense of our relationship to the other-than-human-world in the here and now. I suspect this is part of our problem. But if we are ever going to climb out of our ever increasing consumption of the world around us, as if all but us humans were devoid of a soul, do we not need to start *listening* to who is calling? And are we not, as psychotherapists, meant to be rather good at this?

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