

## LETTER FROM THE WILD

What is it that draws us so powerfully towards an experience of soul and of transcendence when we immerse ourselves in wilderness ? I have always been struck how even the most seemingly superficial and materialistic of people are touched somewhere deep and acknowledge an unfamiliar awe. For those of us who have been aware of our spiritual quest, this awe quickly grows to a vast swell that obliterates the memory of the details of our personal lives and relativizes the significance of our personal identity and existence. I have only known deep meditation as an equally effective method for releasing self-importance; not only the self-importance of an individual but also that of the human species itself. All our arrogance, our obsessions with future goals, our fixated emotions and opinions gradually dissolve. All that remains is awareness of a vast process of nature, stars and galaxies, of animals, rivers, mountains and trees and of us humans as but small filaments in this web of life and energy. Humbling, yes .... but also healing and uplifting and peaceful and utterly beautiful. We go back to our lives refreshed, invigorated and transformed, grateful for this glimpse of a vast and ancient natural world which resonates within the deep layers of our unconscious.

I was 20 years old when I first lay on my back on some rock in the African bush and looked at the starry night above and felt overcome by awe and a sense of my own smallness. This I believe was my first step on the spiritual path. One that would lead to many other steps and shape my life. Before long I hungered for this experience in the bush and sought it again and again. And I found it through various wilderness experiences until I went to live in Holland, one of the most highly populated countries in the world with no wilderness left to speak of. This was an extremely painful loss to me. In some ways my long sojourn in Europe from the age of 27 onwards has felt like exile, although in other ways it allowed me to make a journey of a different kind with other also meaningful connections, insights and experiences. Now as I have turned sixty the two worlds are coming together. I am deeply grateful for having had the opportunity to return to the African wilderness and learn once again what it means to be a human animal surrounded by other animal beings in a world that is vastly older than our cities and land schemes.

To be on foot in an untouched African wilderness is an experience that is not easily recounted. As I walk further away from 'civilisation' all the known signposts and inner maps gradually dissolve and a new state of awareness grows. My human ego seems so insignificant and of little interest against the sun-lit vistas of bush and river or the immense skies at night. It could be tempting to 'space out', enter an altered state of consciousness but I cannot afford to drift out of an alert awareness of the 'here and now'. I have to leave dreaming for the time of sleep, for on our walks I have to be present to what the day might bring in terms of encounters with large animals and the potential danger inherent in these. And at night when on night watch I have to be vigilant to the sounds and noises of the bush and constantly checking with my torch whether any large form is moving towards us.

We were like a small band, a small community of tribal people living together for 12 days in the Wilderness area of the Imfolozi game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. During the day we walked, carrying our backpacks, stopping regularly to

discuss whatever we encountered on our walk or to rest and view animals who had not yet become aware of our presence because the wind was blowing our scent away from them. Not infrequently we had to make hurried retreats since we had inadvertently come too close to an animal that might become aggressive out of fear. That was the first lesson : respect an animal's space. Never forget that we humans are the predators that have been aggressively intent on killing the animal species that we could encounter now. They fear us with good reason and attack might be the best defense from their perspective.

It was sobering and painful to realise how a large animal such as a rhino could panic on catching our scent and hearing our voices. Rhino's have bad eyesight and depend on their excellent hearing and sense of smell. One evening we watched a rhino grazing peacefully on the opposite bank of the river. It was like a vision of Eden. Then the wind changed briefly and the rhino caught our scent but not long enough to be able to place where we were. The poor animal became terribly afraid and ran around in circles, crashing wildly in the undergrowth. Finally it could place our position and disappeared rapidly to a place of safety away from us. Of course if there is no such exit possible, real danger could occur for us humans and our leader Paul warned time and again that that was a situation we needed to anticipate and avoid. Yet, of course it is not always possible to anticipate everything and on one occasion we certainly came far too close to a bull elephant. In fact coming round a corner we almost walked into it. It was a mere 15 meters away from Paul and with great emotion he said later that if it had come towards us he would have had to shoot it. And my impression was that for him to shoot an animal was similar to committing murder. He would have done so because he was obliged to keep us safe, but it would have been a dark and deeply painful deed. He told us a story of a trail guide who had chosen to be gored by a rhino in his thigh rather than shoot. This was, however, after he knew that the trailists were safe, because that consideration overrides all others.

Lesson two was about this love for the animals and the willingness to meet them as equal beings worthy of respect. Who are we humans to think we have the right to lord it over other species, and to subjugate, kill and displace without any feeling other than the triumph of domination? Who are we to make animals into objects rather than subjects that like us live in a world given to us all?

A vivid image is in my mind. Paul and Jabulani, our second guide, stand in front of a buffalo coming up from the riverbed and moving towards our lunch and siesta resting place. Jabulani speaks to the buffalo, addressing it as 'Brother' and asks it politely to go back. Paul stands in front of the buffalo, left hand holding the gun, the right hand raised in a greeting. The buffalo does not panic and obligingly turns round to find another way up the riverbank. Such a meeting could so easily have become a crisis if there had been tension, fear and overreactions on either side. Buffaloes are notoriously dangerous animals when aggressive.

Paul says that he believes that animals have a perception of people's feelings and emotions. Fear, anger, disrespect, greed will be sensed and influence the interaction that takes place between human and animal. This makes sense to me – experience with horses and with dogs shows this to be true so why not with wild animals as well. Therefore Paul says we need to constantly work on ourselves so that we can approach an animal cleanly and openly, without fear or aggression and with respect. In that lies our safety more than in carrying guns and a willingness to kill. In sixteen years as a trailguide Paul has never had to shoot an animal while on trail. He favours the idea of going on trail without a gun, though that would not be permissible for a guide in the

Imfolozi while leading a party of trailists. But it is an experience that trainee trail guides may have to go through in their training in order to learn the skill of right relationship with the animals.

Lesson number three was for me about my relationship with my little band of fellow trailists, our little tribe that camped out in the open without tents and ate and slept around a small fire within the dark night. Each one of us trailists had night watch for an hour and 15 minutes each night. That was a relative concept since we had left our wrist watches behind, and we had to estimate the time of waking the next person. Our watch period would shift each night so that we all experienced early, mid-night and early morning watches in turn.

That first night my night watch was at some mid-night hour. I was afraid and could not sleep beforehand. In my imagination animals were creeping up on us from all directions, particularly lions, hyena and black rhino. But when I assumed the responsibility of being the watch person my perceptions changed completely. I knew that the safety of my fellow group members depended on me and that I would do what I could to keep them safe. I would stoke the fire and show myself to the night in order that hyena's and lions would know that there was an awake human who could rouse others. Neither lions nor hyena would risk coming close to a band of humans unless they were all asleep and unable to fight. As Paul emphasized lions feel towards us as we feel towards them: dangerous predator that could kill us. Luckily we are not of food interest to lions, although they might not refuse the opportunity if they stumbled upon a helpless human in the dark.

The other duty of night watch was to shine the torch around the periphery of the camp at regular intervals to see whether rhino, elephant, buffalo, crocodile, leopard, lion or hyena were coming too close and if so, to immediately wake Paul. He would then deal with the danger while Jabulani would bring us to safety.

At my first night watch as I stoked the fire and shone my torch and looked at the stars and listened for sounds, I began to feel intense and peaceful at the same time. I felt that this was the experience of our forebears, human beings watching out for each other during the nights and other times of potential danger. Small bands of hunter-gatherers had crossed this same terrain and had been watchful of the same animals. The signs of their existence were still there; we had picked up flaked stone tools on a few occasions. Our ancestors could survive and grow because of this mutual support. We are beings that require community - that is our safety. In this too there is a lesson for modern humans.

When I handed over my watch to the next person I could fall asleep very easily, feeling secure that I was watched over by my brother. For the rest of the journey sleep was no longer a problem. In fact I was amazed that I who normally have trouble with insomnia could drift off to sleep so easily and effortlessly.

The connection with our human forebears stayed with me and it seemed to me that this too is part of the attraction that the wilds hold for us. We go there to meet not only our connectedness with the animals but also our ancestors. For most of humanity's existence we lived the life of hunter/gatherers. This experience is still stored in our deep unconscious and to return to it is experienced as a 'coming home'. And Africa is 'home' to all of humanity. It is from here that the small bands of humans spread across the world and multiplied. It is here that our far ancestors walked and hunted and sang and danced and told stories about the animals and the stars. It is here that they loved and gave birth and died. To me it is very poignant and meaningful to think of the long unbroken blood line that links me to those people

from the past. Too often we think about being human as relating to the habits of the agriculturalists and city dwellers of the past 5000 years, forgetting that there were 2 000.000 years before that of toolmaking and hunting and gathering, living in small bands roaming the plains on which the game could be found. While here in the wilderness of Imfolozi that past does not seem so far away any more.

Once a rhino surprised itself and us by walking almost into our camp at night. Once an elephant was uncomfortably close as we listened to the loud breaking of branches as it was feeding. Once lions were around us and occasionally let us know of their presence with a booming roar. We saw them cross the river the next morning, just below our camp. Once hyenas hassled us through many hours of the night and had to be chased away frequently by poor Paul, who did not get much sleep that night. It was noticeable that hyenas were not asked politely to leave, but instead a boundary had to be set quite strongly with some show of aggression. They always ran off, but would return to try and get closer again. Curiosity or hope of a tasty snack? Or both? But all together nothing of real danger happened during those nights. We were lucky.

All this might give the impression that we were constantly dealing with dangerous animals, but this was not so – long stretches of time were deeply peaceful and filled with serene beauty. Views of sunsets over the river and sunrises over the river, of birds and trees and skies. Dozing in the midday heat. Talking to our fellow trailists, eating the good food that was cooked on the campfire, telling stories, washing in the river. Even our watching of a pride of 18 lions was peaceful. We were at a safe distance high above them and they did not know we were there. We could watch them sleeping and rolling on their back and playing and yawning without intruding on their rest. Undoubtedly they did the same to us at night since their night vision is extremely good and we would be highly visible because of our fire.

There was one incident which was a powerful, though not a dangerous, event for us. Sitting in our camp near the river at dusk we heard an extreme commotion just round the bend of the river near us. Baboons fighting we concluded, but this was soon proved wrong. In the darkening light a group of wild dogs ran past us on the river bed. Wild dogs are an endangered species so this was lucky, but Paul now also realised what the noise had been about. The dogs had been chasing an antelope and caught and killed it just a few hundred metres away from us. In ten minutes they had devoured most of the animal and now they were on their way home to the safety of their lair before the dark set in. Once they were gone and the dark did set in, the next round of visitors arrived. Hyenas came over the river to go to the carcass and finish off the scraps and bones. After that they turned their attention to us and this was the night I referred to above when we were hassled by inquisitive hyena. Next morning I went to look for the carcass and there was nothing to be found any more. Many footprints in the sand but not a scrap of hair or bone was left. The night before we had given a moments silence in acknowledgement of this antelope who had begun that day full of life not realising that this was to be its last. Now again I felt a poignancy that nothing remained to show that a life had been lived.

Our journey was organised by the Wilderness Leadership School which has its headquarters just outside Durban. It has an impressive record of conducting trails for over 50 years and with more than 40.000 trailists without any serious injury to

trailists. Unfortunately, however, there have been a few fatalities among trail guides in this period. This is a risk that the guides accept. Paul was clear that he might be killed while he would face an animal in order to allow us to find safety, and made us all aware of what to do in such a circumstance. Yet even so, the number of deaths is low and as a trailist I felt safe in the knowledge that the guides knew what they were doing and the safety rules were clear. School children (17 years or older) come regularly on trail and there are programmes for disadvantaged youth. To manage a group of noisy unruly youngsters the guidelines have to be clear and firm, and I have been impressed at how successful the outreach to various communities is. The vast majority of trails is only five days long but this is still long enough to make a lasting impression on young minds. And not only on young minds. Politicians, stressed out businessmen, HIV/Aids counsellors, environmental activists, psychotherapists and many others have come to learn from the experience of being in wilderness. There is a strong commitment to conservation and environmental activism and also a strong belief in the healing power of wilderness for stressed-out city dwellers, alienated crime oriented youth and others. There is even a programme that brings ex-paramilitaries from Northern Island to reconcile with each other through participating in the experience of being out on trail in the wilderness.

Now there is also a concerted effort to involve local communities. With us on our trail were three young Zulu, two men and one woman, who were being trained to become trail guides. Their training reminded us of S.A.S. training, very tough but also compassionate and fair and very inspiring. Their enthusiasm was strong and their love for the wilderness obvious. It was good to see them learning and to think of them as the future leaders of the trails.

The transition to our lives in the modern world is not easy. The first few days we are tired, disoriented, reluctant to enter again into the known routines. As I close my eyes and turn inward I still see vistas of bush and river and sky, still see young rhino bulls play fighting, still hear the strange whoop of hyena at night. I long to go back. But I also feel deep gratitude for this replenishing, this finding of a belonging, this wider perspective on Life. I wish to advocate the need to find and respect the wild nature within us, to not fear it as dangerous instinctual loss of control, but to embrace its wisdom and its rhythms.

And I would like to add my voice to those who are speaking out on behalf of the few remaining wilderness areas on this planet. I wish to testify that these are indeed our home, and that we would all become exiles were we to lose them

what the stars say

the stars take your heart  
for the stars are not a little hungry for you  
the stars exchange your heart for a star's heart  
the stars take your heart and feed you a star's heart  
then you will never be hungry again

(verse one of a Bushman poem translated by Antjie Krog, 2004)

