

## **Impressions from South Africa**

As many of you know from my last writing, I recently journeyed to South Africa. I have been home a week now, here are some lasting impressions.

In the morning light, a wild giraffe, attracted to our singing and our welcoming invitations, comes toward us, looks intently and actually bows, legs splayed, forehead to the ground. It then lifts its head, again looks intently and walks slowly away with graceful dignity, a behavior never seen before by our experienced guide.

Here in the Cradle of Mankind, the vibrant earth simultaneously ancient and fresh has an unusual potency. Connecting to the ground, one feels a rare, living quality. From atop an outcropping of rock, actually the ground of an ancient civilization, we see lions running and elephants grazing. Again, as if attracted to our singing and our prayers, one elephant walks directly toward us, ears flapping gently, unhurried, steady steps.

And the white lions of Timbavati... According to the shamans (sangomas) of South Africa these are mystical Beings who have important messages for humanity. Credo Mutwa, the greatest living sangoma in Africa, claims that they carry messages from the stars for humanity's survival. They seem to appear and disappear through different eras of history. Currently, there are stories throughout our planet of the recent appearance of "white" animals- alligators, hummingbirds, dolphins, and donkeys. Again, according to indigenous wisdom traditions from various cultures, these are messengers from the animal kingdom. Can we sense these messages? Also, is it possible that the earth itself speaks to us, if we can learn to listen?

All of this is new to me. As a scientifically trained westerner, I like to go very slowly, approaching as Buddha taught, empirically, mindfully with an open heart/mind. I do know that our bodies are our direct connection to nature. I know that we can open our bodies to inner messages and experience a permeability to the world around us. The wisdom of our bodies is inseparable from the wisdom of nature. We are an expression of the natural world. How tragic that through disconnected thinking, we often alienate ourselves into a narcissistic, mechanistic universe. Setting aside my beliefs, I open to the world.

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The dawn air on the South African plain tastes like a nourishing meal. Singing birds dance amongst the trees as the prey animals wander, feeling the relief of surviving another night. Each evening the dusk air is filled with the awakening sounds of lions and other nocturnal predators- a poignancy and aliveness radiates. Mandela, the large, dignified male white lion named for Nelson Mandela was rescued from a "canned hunting" farm where so called "hunters" pay as much as \$165,000 to put a white lion's head on the wall. He shows us

his huge teeth. His roar, a low, earth-shaking rumble alerts the world to his kingly presence. He, along with the other white lions are part of the White Lion Trust that is attempting to save these great animals from the powerful, insatiable greed of the hunting industry. A bit further north 10,000 elephants (25,000 internationally) were slaughtered this year for tusks and many, many rhinoceros left for dead so that their horns could be sold as a potency supplement. We humans have abandoned our stewardship of the animal realm.

We visit two underprivileged South African schools. Due primarily to HIV-Aids, the orphan rate is 70% and households are often parented by 8-year-old children. Amazingly, the vitality of the self-described "learners and educators" is infectious. Such smiles, such voices, as we share songs and dances together. The educators move with such exuberance that we are caught up in a dance just saying "hello". High-fiving the children as we ask for their names fills me with longing for an exchange- can our children be exposed to this natural, spontaneous élan and can the children here receive the nourishment and material support that our culture can offer?

In both the animals and the people I sensed a distinct dignity and vitality. These qualities were palpable. When reflecting on the lions, I would also add the quality of courage. The courage to be the "king". The courage, dignity and vitality that it takes to be a true king creates the revered "heart of the lion". This quality speaks to me as I sit here writing right now.

As I am adjusting to my life back home filled with emails, electronics and new opportunities, I also long for these days when the natural world was omnipresent. Here in my rural home, I am committed more than ever to sense the offerings of nature, especially at dawn and dusk. What about people living in urban environments? Even in the city, this rhythm of the earth, moon and sun can be sensed. More challenging but always present. This is why the great meditation traditions encourage us to settle down at these times. Can we sense these movements? Are we *a part of* or apart from this resonance with Life?

Honing this capacity for bodily listening seems essential to me. In this way no matter where I am the natural world speaks to me. Listening with consistency takes commitment. The reward is immeasurable. South Africa awakened something vital in me and I am excited to experience where this will lead.