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An Honored Guest in the iMfolozi, and the Possibility of Homecoming

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In 1990 Robert Romanyshyn joined me and a small group of five psychologists in the iMfolozi basin in KwaZulu Natal. Our two rangers were experts in wilderness craft, and they had rifles that could drop an elephant if needed. We walked no more than a few miles by day and camped around a small fire by night. We slept in sleeping bags on ground sheets under the night sky. No tents, and we carried everything we needed in backpacks. We took turns through the night keeping a small fire going, brewing coffee for the next night watch, and making ourselves and our shadows dancing in the trees visible to any dangerous game animals in our immediate vicinity. This was lion country--home to "the big five"¹--and the largest herd of rhino in Africa.

Something that I talked about one evening, but have never written, is what had happened in that place a few years earlier (1986). My group was lead by Dr. Ian Player, his legendary Zulu guide, Magqubu² Ntombela. Mr. Ntombela was a traditional healer as well as a guide, born in the vicinity of the iMfolozi around 1900. For him, every hill, rocky outcrop or living thing had stories to tell. The boundary between the living and the dead was more like a permeable veil than a clear divide. Player had lived much of his life in the iMfolozi since he became a Park Ranger there in 1952. Ntombela had worked there since 1914.

That first night we made camp under a grove of acacia trees. It was the dry season, so the river was mostly a wide area of dry sand with ankle deep stretches of clear water and a few deeper water holes (to be avoided!). The river flowed gently towards us from the south, then turned east before curving around a high ridge about a kilometer off to our left.

I awoke around midnight to the sound of a traditional Zulu community celebration on the ridge along the river. I was surprised to realize that we had camped so close to the edge of the Park, and felt vaguely disappointed that we were not as deep in the wilderness basin as I had thought we were. But I enjoyed the syncopated drum rhythms, singing, occasional shouts, and laughter, cattle bells, floating across to me and my companions, sleeping under the stars around the fire. I lay awake looking at the southern stars and listening to the celebrations, imagining perhaps

a wedding, or the successful birth of a child, or perhaps, the presence of



an honored guest. I propped myself up on an elbow, but could not see any lights on the ridge, silhouetted against the star lit sky. One of my companions was sitting night watch on a log near the perimeter of firelight, tin cup of coffee in hand. I listened to the festivities for perhaps ten minutes before I rolled over, pulled my sleeping bag over my head to soften the noise, and peacefully drifted back to sleep.



At breakfast the following morning I happened to mention the festivities I had heard and received a rather odd look from Player. He translated into Zulu for Ntombela, who looked intensely interested and asked a few questions. Back and forth we went in translation through Player. Finally Ntombela said that I had been given a gift.



Player then explained that we were many miles from the edge of the Park and that nobody had lived on that ridge for a hundred years. Nobody else had heard anything.

The village had been where Ntombela's father had lived, and where spears were forged for King Cetshwayo's Zulu army of 20,000 men that had killed over a thousand British soldiers at Isandlawana not far away on January 22, 1879. Ntombela's father had fought in that battle. The basin in which we camped had been King Shaka's personal hunting grounds. We were as deep in Zulu history as one could be.

I have no idea how to account for that experience. The usual suspects seem possible but silly. Until our conversation that morning, the experience was so matter-of-fact that it had not seemed particularly interesting or significant. Although the sounds were some way off, they were as clear as the cow bells I had heard, and obviously came from that ridge to our east. We were too deep in the park to hear anything from outside it. I had assumed that my companion drinking coffee was enjoying the sounds just as I was. But no-one had heard anything at all, apart from the occasional sounds of the African night.

Player and Ntombela had no doubt that I had been present in some sense to the village celebrations that had taken place a hundred or more years ago. It is the only such experience that I have knowingly had.

I think we should resist calling it an experience of the

"supernatural." The term supernatural assumes that there is a natural world which is objective and governed by the laws of natural science--the science of nature so defined. Anything experienced that cannot be accounted for in these terms is then termed "super"-natural, meaning "above" or "beyond" the natural (Abram, 1996, p. 8). The term assumes terms of reference and explanation that preclude both understanding and explanation.

Jung's (1952) term synchronicity is helpful, but we must be careful to understand that it does not *explain* anything either. For Jung, the term marks out an area of experience that is at once psychic and material, and where these terms are meaningfully rather than causally linked. Synchronicity describes a realm of experience and its material concurrence. As such it opens the door to further reflection and enquiry. It is the first term in a conversation, not an explanatory term that brings conversation to an end. Following Jung's thinking regarding synchronicity, we are encouraged to ask the right question. This is not the question of whether the experience was "real" or a dream. nor is it primarily a question of explanation. The premises of those questions preclude answers. We need, instead, to ask the question of what such an experience might mean to the experiencing person.

My family has a British Colonial history. The British soldiers at Isandlwana were probably wearing Brooke family wool. I was in the heart of the Zulu ancestral home, a Colonial heir and a depth psychologist, guided by a Zulu healer who was heir to a long line of warriors. I remembered how I had lain awake wondering if there had been the arrival of an honored guest. I felt mildly embarrassed at the inflated thought that I might be the honored guest welcomed into that village full of joyful veteran Isandlwana warriors. But I did like to imagine that I was the one being honored with the gift of Zulu hospitality.

I wondered whether Magqubu Ntombela might have wanted me to visit that village that night. He knew that I was interested in the dreams of suffering people, just as he was. It did seem that we shared more that night than we manifestly did by day. We could not speak each other's language, and, as an English speaking white South African under Apartheid, I might as well have been a foreigner.

Except for this: I feel more at home in the African bush than I feel at home anywhere. My life feels complete. Since I am not alone in this experience, let me change "I" to "we". We have no more long term goals there, no commitments, or mortgage to keep up. We have dropped, even though only for a few days, into a world that is not anthropocentric

but centered in being, a presence magnificently indifferent to our anxious human concerns. Within this place all is forgiven, but nothing can be taken for granted either. One is merely part of the food chain; in common with other large animals, we are mostly eaten by the tiny things, such as ticks.

Many people who have not spent time in the African wilderness imagine that one would be always on edge. In fact one is simply alert and attentive to what one is doing and to one's surroundings. One cannot live like this, of course, and the Zulu villagers who had lived on that ridge would not have lived their goal directed lives (including planning how to beat the mighty British) continuously in this kind of presence either. We need not value this capacity for presence more than the meaningfully engaged and productive way of being in the world. However, we can affirm the possibility of presence that is granted to us as a celebratory gift, and which is there to sustain us as the ground upon which our everyday lives are figured.

As such a gift, the natural world, with its biodiversity, also makes its ethical claim upon us. Each living thing brings its own kind of intelligence into the world, reflecting both our living communion with it and our human difference (Abram, 2010). If we are moved spiritually when we drop into the iMfolozi basin, as nearly all of us are, we are claimed by that place to bear ethical witness both to it and to all such places--even, perhaps, in our back yards. We are called to return the gift with our commitments. Jung (1938/54, p. 95-96; 1961/67, p. 284) describes human consciousness as a capacity to bring the world into being as sacred presence. This is the heart of the individuation process, and is as much about the presencing of the living world as about us as persons (Brooke, 1991).

The experience of that night has remained as a continuing background play of active imagination over the years. I did feel honored, and felt stirring the deep river of our common humanity and shared African landscape. On the other hand, I also have to acknowledge that my experience in iMfolozi comes back to me always with a sense of nostalgia and longing. The experience of the world's primal presence in that place is so powerful partly because it is marked off from the profane world of everyday life as a sacred space and a place of homecoming. It marks, therefore, its relative absence in our everyday lives, so that this play of presence (then) and reverie (now) is threaded with this nostalgic mood. As Romanyshyn (2002) says, "The paradox of reverie, its bittersweet quality of melancholy, is that it takes me home by awakening me to my sense of

homelessness" (p. 134).

This play of homecoming and homelessness may be the burden of being human, but perhaps not. The native Americans, for instance, were deeply at home in the world, nourished and held by the maternal earth. They were bewildered by the Europeans, who had little or no sense of their sacred and ecological place in a landscape that was alien to them, and which the Puritans regarded as the devil's domain (Romanyshyn, 1987). At least it can be said that the paradox of homecoming and homelessness is painfully sharpened with our western metaphysics and in our technological age (Mugerauer, 2008; Romanyshyn, 1989).

The village celebrations which came to me that night gather a certain kind of presence, which also tends to be rather lost into latency in our individualistic, productive, capitalist lives. The village celebrations remind one of a social, communal sensibility in which the community is not, as Jung tended to think, a threat to individual consciousness and the individuation process (Brooke, 2008). It is, rather, a sense of one's place in the social world, in which the personal is gathered and nurtured in a communal network of personal relations. We in the west typically think of humanist ethics as emerging out of the Judeo-Christian tradition and strengthening during the Enlightenment. However, there is an African humanism that has its own indigenous roots (Coetzee and Roux, 1998; Shutte, 1993). It is a humanism in which the fundamental structure and meaning of being human and ethics are understood as mutually implicated. There is a Zulu proverb which says, "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*"³ Translated: "A person is a person through other persons." It is a position that is at the heart of the notion of *ubuntu*, which is the sense of community and ethical embeddedness intrinsic to the development of one's own humanity. We become fully human and find ourselves as persons only to the extent that we live with a sense of ethical responsibility towards an expanding community of others, both living and dead, and to the wider world at large. Being human is both a given and a task, and *ubuntu* is thus both given with the structure of being human and a spiritual calling for personal and ethical maturity.

To be welcomed into that village of warriors and their families, who had beaten off and then been conquered by the invading colonial army a hundred years earlier, was an extraordinary gift. It remains, for me, a guiding image of being human and the possibility of homecoming.

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