

OUT OF AFRICA - Making Peace with your Ancestors

A couple of weeks ago I was in a beautiful rural area of South Africa near a town situated amongst rolling hills called Hazy View.

I was driving when I noticed a sign indicating there was a traditional tribal Shangaan village that was open to tourists and started turning to go in. This had not been on the itinerary for the day and my mother, hating unexpected changes asked testily,

“What are you doing?”

“We’re going to see this village,” I replied cheerily.

“But this is a tourist site ... and anyway we’ve seen one of these before,” she protested.

“I know ... but I am a tourist, and I have never been into one. And besides, I’m driving,” I bantered back.

Both her and my father rolled their eyes in mock exasperation and we parked and walked over to the thatched reception area and shop selling the usual African curios. There was not another soul in sight and the guide played along with us being tourists and started his tour by blowing a kudu horn and then escorting us to the village. It was a typical spring morning in the African veld. The air was still and warm. Cicadas sang, crickets chirped, and doves cooed as background noise in the still bushveld. The old chief welcomed us with a big smile and dressed up in his leopard skin and ostrich feather headdress. The guide informed us about the traditional way of life, pointing out the ancestral hut where the chief’s mother is buried in the skin of a black ox that was slaughtered for her burial. On the grass thatched roof were the bleached white bones of the skull bones of the ox to indicate that this is a holy site. The chief informed us that when he has problems he goes into this hut to consult with his mother’s spirit for wisdom.

At the conclusion of the tour of the village I asked the guide whether the village had a Sangoma (a traditional healer), and asked whether he would ‘throw the bones,’ for us. Throwing the bones is a form of divination. The bones are a collection of specific bones that the sangoma has had to collect himself by hunting specific animals in his rites of initiation. Typically, there are also some shells and sometimes even to my amusement, since the impingement of Western culture, plastic dice.

Our tour-guide went off to ask permission from the Sangoma and came back to tell us that he would see us. We found the Sangoma seated on the ground under an open thatched construction in front of his hut. Laid out in front of him were skins of animals, various plants, bulbs and herbs and traditional remedies. He started by giving us information about the different herbs. It was the usual tourist information talk. I was far more interested in who he really was and asked him how he had become the Sangoma of this village. In a quiet, slow voice he responded through the interpreter that he had not wanted to be the Sangoma but that when he was 15 he had had a dream of a serval cat and this was interpreted by the last Sangoma to be the sign that he was destined to be his successor. He had protested but then he had another dream that clearly indicated there was no mistake.

I asked why he did not want to be the Sangoma and he replied again, quietly and humbly, “Because I was afraid of the initiation rights and drinking blood and eating the entrails of the goat. And, he added, “It is “heavy” work,” meaning that it is a burden to his soul to encounter so much suffering all day long. Satisfied, I asked him for his services of divination and he assented with a slight incline of his head. Carefully and mindfully he picked up the skin bag of bones, shook them and strew them out in front of him. Clearly, he was in an altered state of consciousness as he carefully chose different beautifully beaded divination sticks to point to the various configurations of bones as they had fallen. As he started talking any sense of us doing this as a bit of a lark dissipated. He had authority despite his quiet, humble manner.

“The bones greet you,” he started talking to my mother through the interpreter. “You are getting old, and you have the cough of old people... this is normal.... the spirits say that you worry too much... this is not to be worried about.” I glanced at my mom. She was gazing intently at the Sangoma, her complexion pallid. Clearly, this was no longer a joke to her either. The s

Sangoma paused, examining the bones with his divination stick and went on, “Also you are woman of many

talents that you have not used in this life-time --- except maybe for one.” He paused and as if to comfort her, added, “It does not matter.” I felt the silence in the air intensify as if the trees themselves were listening. After another long pause he added definitively, “It is time for you to put your mind right with your ancestors, then you will get better.” My mother was silent. He asked if she had questions. She shook her head mutely.

I glanced at my father enquiringly. He nodded and I indicated to the Sangoma that he should throw the bones for my father as well. Again, the Sangoma, deep in trance, rattled and then threw the bones. The air was pregnant with the silent expectancy of his words as he divined the bones before him. “The bones greet you,” he started out, “They tell you that there is someone on your mother’s side ... a woman who has the gift” He paused as if puzzled and then questioningly said, “of reading the palms?” My mother and I looked at each other simultaneously and glanced at my father because this was so unexpected and so close to what we believed to be accurate. It was clearly disturbing to him as well that the Sangoma could give him this information. We all knew about his great aunts on his father’s side who were spiritualists and read palms and channeled, but not on his mother’s side. We all, however, knew not to interrupt the Sangoma and waited for him to go on. “Something went very wrong and the line for passing the gift has been interrupted. It can be healed and someone, maybe your children maybe this one ...,” he indicated to me, “has this gift, but the line must be healed.... you have not done the work to heal this you must make it right with the ancestors.... and then maybe you will live two more years.” He stopped and asked if there were questions. My father apologetically said that the women who read the palms were on his father’s side. The Sangoma picked up his divination stick and with an edge in his voice pointed out a pattern of bones and said, “No, the bones are clear, this is on the mother’s side.” My father fell silent. We were all feeling the meaning and import of what had been said. Clearly, although the Sangoma had no information about my father’s metastasized prostate cancer, he knew as surely as his medical doctors did what his condition was and how it could be helped.

I hesitated. Obviously, it was my turn and yet I felt a reluctance for my parents to hear what the Sangoma might say to me. It also seemed unequal to exclude myself from what had now become a more meaningful event than we had anticipated. I nodded to the interpreter - the Sangoma was not looking at me. The interpreter said something and the intense man in front of me gathered up the bones strewn on the skins, put them in the bag and rattled them, deep in an inner space and realm inaccessible to us sitting before him. He threw the bones. He gazed at them a long time and then slowly chose a divination stick. It seemed as if time itself stood still. Finally, he said, “This is very complicated...” and indicated with the divination stick lines between different bones without speaking. “It is very difficult I can tell you one thing. You live like a man. If you were a black man, you would be sitting here (indicating his spot on the skin) and I would be sitting there (indicating the log I was sitting on.) That is all. It is blocked. The spirits will not speak through me to you. I will try one more time.” He gathered up the bones carefully, rattled them reverently and threw them down again, immediately shaking his head. “Maybe you are the one to heal the line. You have wisdom from God ... I am not allowed to give you information or receive knowledge of you...maybe if you ask a question?” He paused.

My mind was empty - I could not think of a question. Slowly he gathered up the bones. “I will try for the last time. “Again, deep in trance he threw the bones.... “No,” he said emphatically and pointed to a large conch shell. “This one is closed. It lands closed every time. The word has been spoken. I have less spiritual power and authority than you and I may not speak to you.” I sat there stunned, vaguely aware of my parents looking at me and at him. I did not know how to end this. The Sangoma had gone into what seemed like a posture of silent submission with his head down. It seemed to me that something was required of me but I did not know what, just as I had not known a question to ask. I had been thrust into an unexpected position. Paying him, saying thank you and leaving, as would have been usual, now seemed completely inappropriate.

I was not feeling wise, and as I recognized this I realized what a negation of the gift I had just been given, this thought was. I breathed deeply, allowed his words in, and stepped into the knowing of his words saying, “I give you my blessing on your work. You have great gifts that you will use to benefit all people.” He inclined his head down once, in agreement and acceptance, never looking at me, as is the African way of respect to someone of greater authority than yourself. I stood up. I felt tall and regal and black - like a black

queen. The interpreter did not look at me. My parents did not look at me.

We all walked in silence along the little dust path through the trees, and as we walked back, in my mind's eye I could see myself, a small middle aged woman, greying, my neck and eyes getting crepey with fine wrinkles, my smile lines deeply pronounced, my back stooping a little from the encroaching osteoporosis and over this image as if walking as a superimposed ghost was the tall, elegant, regal black queen. It seemed she had a staff as tall as herself, a heavy golden headdress and bare feet. We arrived back to the tourist centre which was still empty and silent, and the impression faded.

We got into the car to leave and the silence continued as we mulled over what we had been told. Finally, several miles down the road my father spoke, "What do you think he meant about making peace with the ancestors?" I glanced at him. He wasn't being mocking or joking. He was quietly and deeply reflective. I had been thinking about what this meant too and scanning my mind for the Western equivalent way of saying this, hoping this extraordinary event would lead to more in-depth conversation with my parents.

Carefully, because I am so aware of how easily my father can take things personally, feel slighted or stupid, feel shame and inadequacy and then get defensively superior and intellectually bullying, I explained what I understood about intergenerational family suffering. I talked about how the messages, roles, rules and beliefs of a family are handed down from generation to generation until someone pauses to re-evaluate, introspect and see the effects of these beliefs and ways of connecting that cause pain and shame that is mindlessly and unconsciously passed on from the ancestors and then on to the children. I speculated that our ancestors are then still tied to the present and cannot be free and nor can we, or our children until there is healing and awareness.

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“What do you mean?” I could sense I was beginning to get too esoteric, making too big a leap without going through the steps needed to understand what I was saying, and triggering that defensive rational intellect!

“Well... “ I was thinking fast, “I wonder what it is like for a soul, freed of the beliefs that it learned in life, to view their children who are still caught up in the beliefs they gave them and the suffering these beliefs cause them in life. I believe that their great love and sadness would keep them from moving on to other dimensions of consciousness. I wonder if, out of love they would still feel bound to remain and help in some way. This was a reframe he could accept - “helping” his parents instead of “blaming,” them would be a more acceptable rationale for the doing the hard, inner work of self reflection. Talking about the family as ultimately loving instead of abusive fit with his self image and the image of the family as ideal, that has always prevented any introspection into the dysfunction. The idea of communication with the dead was a belief with which he had grown up. He had told us many stories about attending seances as a boy with his spiritualist aunts, whom he adored, and although his adult mind would reject any such notion, he was not arguing with me now.

We lapsed into silence again. Gradually the sightseeing and game viewing distracted us out of our inner worlds and into the external world. However, the die had indeed been cast. That night back at the chalet we were sitting watching the evening news on television when I happened to glance over at my mother. Tears were streaming down her face. Concerned I asked, “Mom? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she replied defiantly wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand. I got up and went over to sit by her, “No, Mom, I’m not buying that, what’s going on?”

“Really, it’s nothing,” her tone was getting defensive. My mother views any emotion as a display of weakness and vulnerability - one of those beliefs that have caused harm and suffering to herself and her children - and passed down to her from her tough, wagon trekking, frontier breaking ancestors.

“Goddamnit, Mom, I will turn off the bloody television and you will tell me what is going on!” I am the only one who has the implicit permission to speak to mother in this way and who can break through her defenses with a little bullying, which she knows is my great love for her and my deep understanding of her resistance to feeling weak and vulnerable. What she calls sappiness or useless sentimentality does not work on my mother. Being vulnerable has been met with so much punishment in her life. Her face crumpled and the tears streamed down her cheeks. I took her in my arms.

“The Sangoma is right,” she sobbed. I have wasted my whole life and all my talents. I have done nothing with my life. I’ve always made the wrong choices. There is so much I would have liked to have done... and he is right, I am dying – he is the only one who has spoken the truth.”

“Well, I can understand you feeling a lot of grief if you think you have done nothing with your life.” I was struggling internally. I have always recognized my mother’s innate intelligence and keen mind, her piercing perceptions about life and people, her creativity and the well of untapped potential. As a child I would see her start things and then give up because it cost too much money, because she didn’t have time,

because it was ultimately meaningless to achieve anything in life, and any number of other excuses. Really, she was always just afraid of my father's criticism and disapproval, afraid of spending his hard-earned money - and limited her entire life to "keeping the peace," as she had done with her violent alcoholic father and as her mother before her had done. Her life had been ruled to a very large extent by Self-limiting fears. I realized I agreed with her and yet it seemed cruel to agree with her. I was groping through all the options of how to respond to this nihilistic existential place of hopelessness inside of her. Added to that my father was sitting right there and so anything I said needed to be with this in mind.

"Mom, I know you gave up on all your dreams and desires, but I want you to know that your love for me and the way you brought me up has given me a life of endless opportunity and adventure, education and options. To me your life has meaning, even if you can't feel it for yourself right now." "Even that stupid cookbook I wrote was a waste of time," she went on completely ignoring what I said, "None of you kids or grandkids will ever cook like that. Everyone does "fusion" cooking these days. It is just antiquated and worthless." Now she was really getting into some high drama, determined to prove to me that her feelings were fully justified and that she was indeed a worthless failure who had accomplished nothing in her life.

"Now that is just bullshit," I retorted. "You know perfectly well that your daughters and granddaughters all cook like you do and use that cookbook all the time. You gave us the love of cooking creatively and you taught us that the only food that is truly nutritious is food cooked with love. And that is what you gave us, love and presence. And it seems to me there can be no greater achievement in life.

"Cooking and knitting isn't exactly achieving anything in life," she went on deliberately dismissing what I said again.

"You are really feeling worthless and angry at yourself, Mom." She nodded mutely, crying unconsolably, leading to a renewed bout of coughing, which gave her the excuse she needed to extricate herself from the very uncomfortable place of getting attention and empathy. The coughing went on and on and I listened to her in the bathroom with a knot in my stomach. It was clear to me that this cough was not allergies, nasal drip, the result of her blood pressure medication or acid reflux or any of the other stupid diagnoses the doctors had made. My mother was looking frail, her eyes sunken into dark sockets, losing weight and too tired to walk a hundred yards with me.

My father sat mutely and anxiously by and watched this, clearly wanting to jump in and argue with her about her feelings and at the same time relieved that I was there to "deal with my mother." We looked at each other with understanding and helplessness.

"I'm so mad at myself," he said, "I forgot to bring something to read." Clearly, he was searching for a way to escape his own anxiety and go to bed and read. "Do you have anything?"

"Well, nothing light or fun I'm afraid," and went to fetch a couple of books from my bedroom. One was Jan Phillip's latest book about mind, body spirit connection and the other called "Inner Christianity," by Jan Phillip's book was summarily dismissed. The other one looked a little more scholarly and more in keeping with my Dad's self image and he took it with him to bed. We all went off to bed with a heavy feeling of sadness.

In the morning after an hour of awful coughing my mother emerged dressed and determined to be "just fine." At breakfast as we ate large slices of sweet papaya, my father commented, intensely, "These books that reduce everything to symbols just annoy me. These people write as if they know what they are talking about and it is all just subjective hypothesis with not a shred of evidence to support any of it." Clearly he was referring to his bedtime reading on esoteric Christianity. The authoritative and hostile tone of his voice was my cue to not say anything. This was not the opening line of a discussion or dialogue - it was a criticism and authoritative declaration.

"Hmmm," I said, "You are right. The subjective world of symbol and myth hasn't got much to do with empirical evidence.

My father and I move in a careful dance around each other. He didn't reply, unsure as to whether I was agreeing or disagreeing. My mother nervously jumped up and started clearing away the dishes so that we could "get going," in order to avoid any possible unpleasantness that might arise. The subject was put on the

back burner and we started off for the game-park. Soon all our attention was absorbed into the endless stretches of wild bush of the lowveld and the usual well-worn routine of counting animal, bird and plant species began. The warmth lulled us into a false sense of peace and drowsiness.

My mother was quiet and self absorbed, every now and again complaining about having to drink her doctor-prescribed quota of water. We soon needed a cup of tea and a restroom and stopped at Skukuza - the oldest camp in the Kruger National Park. My mother reminisced and was pleased to find the ambiance of this beloved spot much the same as when she was a young woman. It evoked for her poems of her childhood somehow linked to the land, the dust and the atmosphere and to the way in which she views her marriage and life with my father.

“Ag ja, my kind,” she sighed in her mother tongue of Afrikaans when my father went off to the restroom, “Die osse stap aan deur die stowwe, geduldig, gedienstig, gedweë; die jukke, al drukkend hul skowwe - hul dra dit getroos en tevree.

She was quoting a famous South African poet, Jan Celliers, and the lines in English mean, “The oxen labour on through the dust, patient, obedient and subservient, The yokes, ever heavy on their shoulders, they bear without complaint.”

Clearly, she was still taking stock of her life, and I understood and she knew I understood she was identified with the yoked oxen, that my father was the one driving her sitting atop the wagon with a whip. She could not have used a more powerful and accurate description of her marriage. We both fell silent considering the weight and sadness of the image.

“Mom, I feel so sad for you. You’ve had so many disappointments in life and you have had to put up with so much.”

“Ja,” she sighed heavily, “Shh... here come’s your father,” she diverted her attention to unscrewing the plastic top of the water bottle and drinking as if to quench an unslakable thirst. But even the water tasted bitter to her.

“Come on, I’ll find you some lions,” I switched into the happy, adventure seeking persona they love.

“Ja, that’s what you think,” my mother retorted. “There are no lions in Africa - National Geographic gets them from the zoo to make those documentaries.”

“No today you are with me and we will find the lion!” I knew my lines - this was an old standing joke in the family. The only animal my mother is really interested in seeing in the game-park is lion and somehow if my mother is with us, we never see lion. My mother is a “cat person,” but they alluded her in the wild.

Three minutes later, I stopped abruptly.

“What?!” they both asked.

“There you are,” I announced proudly.

“Where, where?”

I pointed to the beautiful lioness lying 20 feet away under a large acacia tree. As we watched, her ears perked up as she stared intently into the bush. Then she gradually, carefully and very slowly moved into a crouching position moving her legs in slow motion towards the prey. Two warthogs were rooting a several yards away in a dense thicket. From the silent, slow crouching stalk she suddenly bolted into a full charge and there was an awful piggy squealing and shrieking. And then silence in the bushveld again as she suffocated the warthog in her huge jaws.

tSrangely on this trip we had 5 sightings of lion - a record. It seemed both satisfying and exciting and terribly sad. We all knew implicitly that this was the last time my mother would be in this beloved stretch of Africa and to me it was as if she was given a parting gift of some of the most magnificent game viewing we had ever had. Everywhere we went, we knew, this is your last view, this is goodbye. I remembered sadly as children when we would be leaving, my father would say, “This is the last five miles, look carefully, your last chance to see an elephant/lion/hyena ... or whatever was the current favorite.” Usually right by the gate we would see something, and then we would be out of the park and a feeling of gloom would descend on us. Usually it didn’t last long because he would soon have us looking for the next attraction and anticipating the next part of the adventure. Somehow this time I could not shake the gloom and desolation. On the last day as

we drove over the Long Tom Pass we were all silent and sad. We had packed up early, fed the little feral cat that had visited the chalet all week for scraps, taken the last photos of the signs on the golf course that said, "Beware of Hippos," and driven out of the municipal boundaries of Hazy View.