

## A CORRESPONDENCE WITH ROBERT WOLFF

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I wanted to publish two emails from my correspondence with robert wolff (author of Original Wisdom, Rain of Ashes, A Book of Dreams etc.) who died in 2015 at the age of 90+. Although towards the end of his life he had trouble with his eyesight, he still managed to send out newsletters and reply to personal emails in his wonderfully attentive way. The amazing Original Wisdom (and his emails) became my primary source of inspiration for all things 'nature' during that time and helped me to set the path along a homeschooling life for my two daughters, which in turn set the tone for the life I now lead. robert's writings (wildwolff.com) went offline after he died, so I wanted to make some of his words available online here after being inspired by seeing his writing archived by Clinton Callahan here.

Louisa Archer <louisa.archer@gmail.com>

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26th Feb 2008

Dear robert,

first may I thank you for spending the time to read this email, I am really honoured. I have been very inspired by your writing, especially Original Wisdom, which I first read about a year ago and ever since have referred back to it constantly. I am afraid that I have scribbled and underlined practically every page and it has, over time, become a collection of my thoughts layered upon yours.

Although I find this hard to put into words and I have put-off writing to you for a very long time now, as I have thought to myself – "how can I possibly communicate what is really burning in my heart?" therefore, I will try to be brief and not take up too much of your time.

Do you think it is possible for anyone to experience what you experienced in the jungle without the security and strength of a tribe/extended family around them? I deeply and passionately want to make the connection to All-That-Is and understand that I need to make a shift in my thinking; to put aside the ceaseless thoughts of the modern mind, return to the wonderment of a pre-literate, unconditioned child, but I feel that perhaps I am so entrenched in my western style life, that this transformation maybe too hard to achieve. Despite this, I have attempted to make my thoughts and actions 'quiet' and love unconditionally the people around me, as a 'tribe' would do. This has given me such strength and protection, but I am not sure that this can replace the real love and support of a 'family' such as you experienced.

I live a very rural life – in the French Alps (I am English) without television or radio, in a small wooden chalet with my husband and two daughters. I have, for a long time now strived to live a more 'primitive' and isolated life and I feel that to return to 'original wisdom' is the key to reaching All-That-Is.

I have read many books on 'spiritual quests', quantum physics and ESP etc., but since reading yours, I have turned away from the written word and spent many hours outside sitting in nature (as I always did as a child). I have stripped away the 'learning' that I thought I needed to do and have been conditioned to do and tried to experience without feeling the need to learn. I have read about enlightenment in books, but have never had the feeling that anyone (of the western thinkers) has had the experience you have had. I don't want to read their words anymore. I need to feel this thing without using words.

Recently I have been sitting out above my chalet, overlooking the whole snow-peaked valley, amongst trees, around dusk. I am not sure what to do, so I have just been sitting for hours, waiting. The darkness makes you see and feel things in a different way, encloses you somehow; makes you part of the whole. Sometimes the feeling takes me by surprise, as I realise I have been sitting almost like a tree; motionless, feeling a slight wind on my skin and viewing everything remotely from above. I could never achieve this stillness or depth indoors.

Do you think that it was your exhaustion, or lack of water that shifted your mind into this profound state of seeing? In your book, you make the transformation seem well – easy; the hardest thing seemed to be stripping away that western mind-set after days of walking and observing. But do you feel it was that monotony that eventually quietened and 'tricked' your rational mind, or the physical hardship, which caused you to open up your senses? Shamans (well, the western people who say they practise shamanism) say that the mind needs drumming, dancing, or drugs to achieve this state of knowing – they make it sound far from easy, and even then it seems as if it is a fleeting experience, to say the least.

Anyway, please don't feel that you need to answer these questions at all. I am just so happy that I have been able to contact you and let you know how my life has been enriched profoundly through your book. I will continue to sit outside and wait quietly for this way of being, which I now know is possible and absolutely is the way we should ALL experience life – connected to All-That-Is: with no exceptions.

I wish you all the best,  
and thank you,  
louisa

27th Feb 2008

Dear Louisa, thank you for appreciating Original Wisdom. I am fortunate that the publisher continues to keep it on its list — "big" publishers would have dropped it long ago, I have never been able to do what a writer is supposed to do: market, promote the book which of course means promoting myself. The book continues to find its own path, from one reader to another.

I don't know whether my experience with the Sng'oi was unique. I do know that most other books I have read about aborigines describe these "little people" in somewhat the same words as I do. Most westerners who have visited other ancient tribes did so with enormous preparations, expeditions, bearers, interpreters, etc. Circumstances allowed me to go without much preparation, by myself, or, now and

then, with one other person. Once I brought my family — the children of course immediately played with the aborigine children and had no language problems. But I saw something my wife did not see. To her these people were pitiful, desperately poor, dirty little people. They were not dirty, I know, they bathed at least once a day in the river, but the rags they wore (for company) were so ancient that they looked dirt-colored.

No, I don't think I was exhausted when I finally "got it." When I suddenly really saw that leaf, felt myself part of all the wildness around me, what happened was — and even then I was quite aware — that I gave up trying. I gave up thinking I should do this or that.

In your email you write "I deeply and passionately want to make the connection to All-That-Is." In my experience, it is the deeply wanting that stands in the way.

You mention "I want to see, I want to know, I want to reach deep inside the hearts of others; connect with them and connect to my deepest self in the process."

No, I could not "want" to get deep in the heart of someone else. That is an invasion of privacy. I can only be open myself. I cannot want someone else to be open. I find it very difficult to be open in our western culture. By being open and cannot stop hearing, or perceiving (not exactly "hearing") people's thoughts, which is mostly chatter, noise, random and often chaotic. Very painful to be in a crowd. That is why I live alone, Not practical, nor very human, but it is my way of trying to live as the aborigines lived, but in a very inhuman civilization. I get exhausted in town, in large stores. It is all "too much." Here I can be open, animals and plants are often clear and not at all chaotic, as civilized people are. In our man-made world people do not realize (we are brainwashed to suppress) that their inner life, their thoughts, feelings, judgments, are helter skelter, running together, and not focused. Or focused on an idée fixe.

Hawai'i, away from the tourist spots, is a good place to be. There are still people who, when they are fishing they are fishing. When they are eating, they eat.

I now think that being open also lets us "know." From what I have experienced of indigenous people, not primitive, but also not locked in our frantic civilization, have this knowing also. I think of it as a human ability, or perhaps even a life form ability, that we suppress in our civilization. From birth we told to distinguish "things," concentrate on differences. And so we forget, or not allowed, to feel and think in "wholes." Westerners and westernized indigenous people have great difficulty grasping wholes.

Probably, what I am saying is that what you so desperately want is not allowed in our western, man-made culture. It is part of our nature that we are not allowed to develop. That is also why I believe very strongly that being open, knowing, and the talents we used to have, are still in us, and can be remembered, as it were, if we step aside — move out of that civilized conditioning, Not easy, but possible. I have a hunch that it will take a collapse of this civilization to get at least some of the survivors to rediscover these ancient talents. That is what my book *Rain of Ashes* is about.

Of course it is impossible to describe in words something that has no words. Being-One-With is from before we had words, before our compulsive need to name. We think being aware means being aware of this leaf and that flower and the weather and colors. Not so. Awareness, to me, is being-one-with. Being. The moment I describe in the book was a sudden awareness of not just the drop on the leaf, but the whole everything. Using words to describe that is, by definition, impossible, because we have this convention that a word means one thing (and very often more than one).

Many people have asked me whether “knowing” can be taught. I don’t know. I know it can be learned. We in the west put the emphasis on teaching — as my guide stressed, the emphasis must be on learning.

(Note: anthropologists have told me that Ameer was not a “shaman,” which has a very specific meaning in anthropology: someone who goes to the spirit world to recover a stolen soul.—he was not that, of course. That chapter is misnamed!).

The second half of my life has been learning, actually mostly unlearning. I call it “stepping aside.” I still know how to live in this modern world; I have to. But I have learned to step aside, and be in what I think of as an older kind of being. Without naming, without words, without judging. Without seeing separate things, but seeing a vibrant, living whole.

Yes, how we approach animals, particularly wild ones, requires gentleness, and also an emptiness of thinking, most of all not “wanting.” Animals (and of course people) sense intention. Our intention should be acceptance: you are you and I am I. Apparently that is very difficult for many westerners to feel because we feel superior. There is a great difference between knowing we are different, and thinking we are better. The same is probably true for wanting to show loving kindness.

Running away tells any animal that we are afraid; Animals see tension in our stance, in our eyes perhaps, in what our hands and feet are doing (we might not even be aware of that). Somehow we, all of us, have to learn again what any young child knows, to just be. No expectation. Aware yes, very much aware. But no feeling, naming, judging, wanting...

From your writing it is obvious that you do feel the being-one-with. There is no need to put it into words. Your children know what you feel, I am certain. That will help them knowing that being-one-with is a perfectly acceptable, even good, way of being. And you will find it easier to step aside and be in that space again.

I was lucky growing up where and when I did. My parents were good people, good European intellectuals. My father Jewish, my mother Mennonite, both almost entirely away from any kind of religion. They loved me conditionally. My mother would say, “if you do this or that I won’t love you,” or, “if you do that I will love you.” I never quite knew where I stood. The people I saw the most of were the servants (I still can hardly stand to write or think that word). They loved me unconditionally. Westerners don’t know what that means. It does not mean “love” but accepting me as a fellow being. They knew me, as I knew them, I knew their hearts, their temperament, their

character even. Some were nice, some were mean. But we knew each other and knew we lived together. I never had any uncertainty about that they would accept me, or be with me. They had no particular expectations for me. They knew that I had healing hands. From the time I was eight or nine they would bring animals to me who were sick or damaged, and I could sometimes touch them and make them better. I learned early on that you don't say to someone with a pet monkey that the poor thing is dying! So, they told me not to say that. But they did not make a big drama out of that, they just told me that death was not a nice thing to say, and I learned not to say that any more., My mother would have said she was disappointed in me, or I did something wrong with a look of disapproval. Very different.

All of that helped me when I met the aborigines to just see them as they were. I probably saw they were "poor" but I also saw that that was a meaningless concept. They did not use money, they did not need money. Of course I saw that they did not wear much in the way of clothing (and usually only for my sake) but I knew (I smelled) that they were not dirty, they were clean. I was able to see something deeper than the outside, or judging them by my standards.

In the book i write that "I fell in love with them." I regret that expression. It was the best I could think of at the time, now almost 20 years ago. Since then I have read many books of other people who met aboriginal people. And, amazingly, they describe people in Africa, South America, the Arctic, the same way — people who were free, totally aware of being-one-with their environment, and joyful.

This is my favorite, because it expressed what I felt also:

Peter Matthiessen, *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, © 1972

..."Shy, they await in a half-circle, much less tall than their bows. "Tsifiaqua!" they murmur, and our people say, "Tsifiaqua mtana," and then the hunters say, "Mt-aa-na!" for warm emphasis, smiling wholeheartedly. (Tsifiaqua is "afternoon" as in "good afternoon," and mtana is "nice" as in "nice day." and tsifiaqua m-taa-na, as the hunters say it, may mean, "Oh beautiful day!" I am smiling wholeheartedly too, and so is Enderlein; my smile seems to travel right around my head. The encounter in the sunny wood is much too simple, too beautiful to be real, yet it is more real than anything i have known in a long time. I feel a warm flood of relief, as if I had been away all my life and had come home again —I want to embrace them all."

(Matthiessen traveled with a friend, Enderlein, and bearers of course: an expedition)

That feeling of coming home, is what I felt. A deep inside feeling of recognition, a resonance, to use a modern word, with something basically human. That is how we were 10,000 years ago, before we learned to think of ourselves as not only different but better than all other creation. Before we were so sure of our own top of the heap superiority. Before we thought we owned the planet to do with as we wish. Today it is obvious how that has worked — we are well on the way to destroy the planet, eradicate all life we have no use for, and very possibly extinguish ourselves. Not very smart.

That recognition of a basic humanity is also why I think that "knowing" and feeling-one-with are inside us. It is not a new skill we need to learn. It is still inside us, all we have to do is step aside and have that ancient self come up. It is like remembering

how to ride a bike after 30 years not riding one. Or remembering how to swim after half a life time not swimming.

The original title of the book was

HOPE LIES IN OUR ABILITY TO BRING BACK TO AWARENESS WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN.

The new publishers did not like that long and cumbersome title, and a committee came up with Original Wisdom, etc. The book is not only about aborigines. When people ask me what the most “important” chapter of the book is, I always say the chapter of the deaf mute who invented a rice mill, which worked. The villagers were proud of him as a genius, but they did not use his invention. To westerners that is strange. Whatever we invent “therefore we must make” and since we live in a capitalist world, we then have to sell, and in order to do that we must create a need for our invention. To me that seems utterly upside down thinking. But, that is our so-called civilization, getting daily less civil.

Most of these thoughts are on my web site, in books and essays published on the internet, and two other books published in paper. I am sure you have discovered that.

Again, thank you for your wonderful email. So far I have been able to answer everyone who wrote...

Let go, step aside, you may be surprised what is in you

robert

(I do get carried away, even after cutting our half of what I wrote at first!)

You can read the archive of robert's newsletters online here  
and a podcast 'What it is to be Human' from future primitives here.  
and another interview from the Rob Call Show here.

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