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Article abstract

An encounter with cheetah on the plains of Botswana is described and used to consider the experience of being-in-the-(natural)-world. The importance of contact with nature is discussed alongside some of the issues we face both personally and globally.

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Three Cheetah, One Guide, and the Setting Sun: Magic on McKenzies Koppie

Martin Milton

It was Africa that helped deepen my awareness of, and respect for, the ineffable experience of being-in-the-(natural)-world, but a meeting in Botswana that transformed me.

It was autumn, not that I could tell. Apparently, the intense heat of summer was over. But it was still hot. There were heart-shaped leaves on the mopane trees, food for the impala and other buck, and while it was not 'wet,' water was plentiful enough for the animals to be spread out over the vast terrain. We sat there in the back of the open vehicle, high up, afforded as clear a view as possible of this breathtaking landscape. There was no wind, although warm air seemed to waft by. I felt it on the back of my neck and my nose captured the smell of earth, of trees, and of the sweet fragrance of straw-laden elephant dung.

Four of us were out with Bashi, our guide for the week, and while we sat, absorbed by the boundless, primeval plains, he was pondering how we might traverse a particularly treacherous looking mud patch at the bottom of a deep *donga* – a ditch or gully, the walls of which were steep. The last thing we wanted, as the sun went down, was to be literally stuck in the mud.

While we pondered this immediate difficulty, Bashi looked up and suddenly asked, "Do you see the cheetah there?" Now, of course we didn't because "there" was over a kilometre away. We all looked, but couldn't focus on anything vaguely cheetah-like. We looked again, and stared harder this time. As my eyes strained, I felt panic, this was it. We were as close as we could get and I was not going to be able to focus on them, see them, not even a glimpse.

I looked back at Bashi and he was pointing to a spot halfway up a hill. I tried to focus again. I could see a mound scattered with bushes, where the earth was decidedly cheetah coloured; there were yellows, oranges, and browns, but the rocks broke up the colours so I could see no recognisable body shapes. We all tried valiantly, and as Bashi continued to point, the panic turned a little and we started excitedly getting a glimpse of what might be a cheetah. It was as though we could will ourselves to see what we had silently been hoping for.

Lo and behold, Bashi was right, there they were, not one cheetah, but three, an alliance of brothers, who had stopped halfway up McKenzies Koppie. They were on the shady side of the hill, which also limited our chances of focussing on them. I am not sure if it was simply being in the presence of beauty, or if it was something more primal, a prey species being in the presence of a predator, but my response was visceral, I could feel my heart beating, hear the

blood racing through my ears, and it was felt by us all, as our voices dropped simultaneously.

Bashi must have realised what an approach would entail, so he put it to us, "Shall we go through this?" and of course, the four citified Europeans, none of whom had ever driven a 4x4 across the rocky, pot-holed African bush, all said "Yes" with enthusiastic delight. And then we were off, Bashi taking us fast down the side of the ditch, my stomach churning as we manoeuvred through the mud, sliding left and right before, with the engine racing, we scaled the other side. Within seconds we were headed, it felt like speeding, towards the koppie. My heart in my mouth, excited but half expecting to be disappointed. Would they stay there? Those cheetah? Would they wait for us? Or would they disappear as easily as they arrived?

My nervousness was well founded. The cheetah appeared skittish, and so was I. "They are on the move" Bashi told us matter-of-factly and my stomach plummeted. Why wouldn't they move on though? I wondered, as this noisy, human-filled, smelly vehicle headed straight towards them.

But I should have known better. Bashi, someone who is supremely attuned to the savannah and its other inhabitants, kept driving, our hair blowing in the warm wind, emotions waxing and waning with every jump forward and need to change direction. I remember the bugs hitting our glasses as he drove. On approaching the cheetah, Bashi knew exactly what to do. "*Pole, Pole*" he said softly, indicating it was time to go *slowly, slowly* and with verbal encouragement - to us or the cheetah I was not sure - we inched our way towards them. I willed them, and my own body, to slow down. Everything changed and it felt as though we were suspended in time. The brothers responded to this slower, more respectful approach.

It was agonising for a few minutes - watching, waiting, and feeling the suspense. I held my breath, smelt the warm air and hoped against hope that we would not scare them away. Would they let us see them properly? I pleaded silently that they would. "Just stay as you are, gorgeous. Just stay as you are." Were they going to melt away? Oh, I hoped not.

We moved forward a little, they moved a bit, I held my breath ... but phew! They stopped again. My focus was narrowing, the wider landscape blurring, the cheetah becoming crisper and clearer. I was becoming completely absorbed in the moment.

Merger

You have to wonder whether Bashi had a personal connection with the brothers as they allowed us - actually they almost invited us - to follow. There were looks exchanged, between them and Bashi, as we continued to take it in turns to inch up the hill.

The cheetah were elegance personified, lithe, limber, and almost fluid as they walked. They

would move a few metres, then stop, look around, look at us, making eye contact on occasion. As this happened I smiled. I couldn't not smile, it was involuntary, my heart swelled with joy. But I was not relaxed, my breath became shallow, all my energy focussed on this meeting. They could easily have moved on at pace or changed direction and headed downhill again. But they didn't, they made sure we were with them as they climbed the hill.

We followed them up the steep sides of the koppie in this stop-start fashion, foot by foot, inch by inch, until we arrived at the most perfect spot, looking out over the breathtaking panorama. Like the cheetah, we now had an eagle-eye view over this vast landscape, looking out over the plains below. The sun was reaching that perfect spot above the horizon, which it does so beautifully on the African savannah, turning everything that delicious, warm gold. It turned us golden too - both inside and out.

At the top the cheetah spread themselves out, clearly making themselves at home. One big boy scent marking the remains of an old acacia tree, another sniffing the ground, spraying his mark and scratching the earth. Once comfortable they spread out and lay down looking out into the distance, calm but focussed.

As we sat, we couldn't help but delight in the way that the cheetah were. I couldn't have stopped smiling even if that thought had crossed my mind. I was thrilled, excited, and delighted in equal measure. But as time passed, I became calmer and more content. I felt an attachment to the cheetah as we sat and watched. They stayed close, absorbing the light, transforming, almost burning up. Their beautiful yellow coats seeming to glow, actually vibrate, which is how I started to feel too, as if there was some kind of extraordinary natural energy that comes from a merging of location, animal, and light ... it was a privilege to witness this. Or maybe it's more accurate to say a privilege to be a *part* of it rather, because I too felt different, almost borderless, permeable. As well as feeling the warm air around me it felt as if everything blew through me. Likewise, I was sure that the golden light was infusing my insides, a warm glow taking up residence in my chest. I couldn't have told you where I ended and everything else started. The cheetah's eyes caught mine, and at that moment of intense privilege my heart sped up again, it felt as if I became just another animal at home on the hill. Time receded again, and I neither cared what the watch would say, nor would I have been able to tell whether we were there for 15 minutes or 50. I suppose it was more like 15 – the sun was going down after all, but that's a post-hoc rationalization. It felt like an infinity at the time.

As darkness set in, we reluctantly accepted that Bashi needed to get us home. We had to get back down this precarious, rocky hill and make our way to camp. This time the drive was meditative, there wasn't much talk, and there wasn't a lot of comment to make anyway. The utterances that did manifest were short statements, triggering simple nods, "uh hums," and the odd comment in response. We were moved, so affected that we didn't seem to want to revert

to the verbal, intellectualizing people that we often are. Not straight away anyway. At one point I did comment that “I could have cried” and my husband concurred. The four of us were all equally, and profoundly, affected by this meeting on the mountain.

Since then...

This encounter with the McKenzies Koppie band of brothers has remained one of the most intense moments I have ever experienced. It has come back to me consciously at the oddest moments, when walking on English common land, at night on a Kenyan beach, and in my dreams, too. It has come to the fore as a clear memory, and at other times as a physical yearning, turning and almost expecting the brothers to be there. This encounter has confirmed for me that we are far more than mere observers of nature; never just objective outsiders, nor just participants in everything we do either, but rather a *part of* everything there is. And with this has come an increased sense of wonder and a willingness to let myself be affected by nature in all its forms - whether that be African wildlife, the sight of rabbits on Wimbledon Common, or a resting fox in our back garden.