

Walking Into Sacred Spaces of the Wild

by Eleanor O’Hanlon

On foot among the great elephant herds and lion prides of the Okavango Delta wilderness, I was given a profound awakening to the flowing wholeness of the living Earth.

In the rainless October days, the sage bushes dry to crisp stalks of yellow light and their scents grow denser in the heat. By mid-afternoon, the grasses are a tawny blaze and the lions have lain down to sleep in their thickets of shade.

My guides, South African Alan McSmith and his Bayei friend Sam Matabele, walk ahead of me in single file, along aromatic trails of sage and bush jasmine. The elephants have left dung balls smelling of grassy sweetness, like new-mown hay, and fresh lion tracks run between them on the grey sand. We follow the weighty pressure marks of their paws and the damp urine patches that stain the sand. Sam scans the ground with outstretched hand as he walks, then runs the hand along his body, sensing the quality of the air the lions have stirred along the trail. “I feel the lions inside, I feel them in my body,” he tells me later.

He pauses in a clearing, ten meters or so from some leadwood trees, and points into the thicket. The black tassel of a tail flicks into the light. Round tawny ears appear and the lioness lifts her head from her paws and directs her amber gaze to us through the dry crackle of the grasses. Her mate, a dark outline behind, stirs sleepily and growls.

His low throbbing builds to a roar that vibrates through the clearing. It is one of the most extraordinary sounds I have ever heard—elemental, implacable like thunder. I feel it pressing on soft vital places, permeating the cavity of my chest, reaching into the spaces between my heart and lungs. Yet I know instinctively this is no threat: the lion is sounding a vital assertion of their presence in the burning afternoon. ‘The hollow space inside the chest’ the river bushmen of the Okavango call the lion, for they know them through this resonance inside.

Alan and Sam stand quietly beside me. They share the stillness born of long experience in the bush; neither would think of carrying a weapon here. Our stillness is a wordless message to

the lions that we mean them no disturbance and no harm. Without speaking we walk respectfully away.

The Okavango is a watery Eden, an oasis soaking the dry heart of the Kalahari Desert that has become a vital refuge for some of Africa’s most vulnerable wild creatures. Fifty years ago, there were some half a million lions in Africa. Today, scarcely twenty thousand remain, with only three thousand breeding males. Thanks to the rigorous conservation ethics of the Botswana government, which places a total ban on hunting of any kind, northern Botswana and the Okavango wetlands are among the lions’ last true wild spaces, an oasis of abundant life where elephants also live at peace, free from the terrible fear and grief inflicted on them almost everywhere else in Africa by rampant criminal poaching for their tusks.



The great egret lifting from the reeds

Gliding in the *mokoro*, the dugout canoe of the Bayei people, through the water channels that wind among reed and papyrus, past palm-fringed islands, among shallow pools and lagoons where water lilies open their yellow hearts to the sun, I feel I have entered a dream that is more vital and more vivid than the ordinary waking world. Every glance is fed by freshness: the great egret lifting from the reeds; the fish eagle balanced on a branch; the African jacana that steps lightly across the water lily leaves. Groups of red lechwe browse along the banks as wading elephants waft their ears and lift trunks laden with water into dripping mouths.

The water between the lilies is shot with green-gold light, and when I cup my hands and drink, I taste the forgotten purity of water from the foundations of the world. When the explorer David Livingstone came here after crossing the Kalahari in 1849, he marvelled at the miraculous purity of this desert water “so clear, cold and soft... that the idea of melting snow was suggested to our minds.” *Where does the water come from?* he asked the Bayei people. *From a land of many rivers*, they said, *so many that no one can tell their number.*

This ‘land of many rivers’ is high in the mountains of Angola, among remote source lakes and springs that flood each year during the heavy winter rains. At the driest time of year in the



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Kalahari, the flood waters pour from the mountains through a network of tributary branches, merge and flow for a thousand miles as the Kubango/Okavango river, before fanning out in myriad water channels across the sand.

This whole interconnecting river complex, from the mountain sources to the Kalahari sands, is one of the earth's most extensive and pristine. The annual flood-pulses of renewal, followed by the slow evaporation and withdrawal of the waters, are like the beating of a great heart, Alan says, as he helps me unfold the patterns of connection being woven through termite mounds and elephant dung, hippo trails and ancient leadwood trees. The termites are the master builders and decomposers of the Okavango; their tall nest mounds, elegantly engineered with a vast network of underground channels, form the foundations for the delta's network of islands.

These termite mounds make a good vantage point to look on the elephant family groups feeding on the flood plains. There are tiny calves with wobbly trunks, still pink behind the ears, that fit between their mother's legs. The adults pluck the grasses with delicate coiling motions of the trunk, lift and chew, great ears slowly fanning, their unhurried rhythms deeply peaceful to observe.

Female elephants—mothers, aunts, sisters—live in close unison their entire lives, with the young ones loved, sheltered, and educated by their side. Young elephants develop slowly through childhood and adolescence, and they learn by teaching and example within these constant, loving relationships, for, like us, elephants do most of their cognitive and emotional development after birth. The matriarch, usually the oldest, is the emotional centre of the family, the one who carries the wisdom and the deep memories that help her make vital decisions for her family's well-being and survival.

When they reach adolescence, young males leave the family of their birth and join the male community. Males mature more

slowly than females, and the presence of strong male elders and mentors is essential for adolescents. When they first enter *musth*, the sexual state, their testosterone levels rise sharply, and like confused teenage boys in puberty, they struggle with the effects of their powerful new hormone surges. Their continued need for emotional security meets a rising assertiveness and desire for dominance. The older males help them to temper their growing power; they give them firm boundaries and educate them in the ways of courtesy, clear communication, and mutual respect within the male hierarchy.

These bonds between male elephants can be astonishingly tactile and affectionate. In Namibia a few years ago, I saw two young male desert elephants break off a bout of sparring to make a ritual greeting to a much larger and older male. They caressed his forehead, his jaw, and the top of his head with their trunks, then leaned into him to lay their trunks across his shoulders.

It was one of the most tender and devoted greetings I have ever witnessed among wild creatures. Although I heard no sounds, there were probably silent rumbles of affection passing between them as well, for elephants speak to each other in ways we humans cannot hear. They can listen, communicate, and respond to each other over great distances by using a range of frequencies below our hearing, deeper than our ability to perceive vibration as sound: 'silent thunder,' in the words of Katie Payne, who was the first scientist to divine the silent thrumming of elephants' voices in the air through the resonance she felt inside her own body while standing near them in a zoo.

Only the largest of animals—blue whales and fin whales in the oceans and elephants on land—have voices that drop to the level of infrasound and travel on long-distance sound channels through air, earth, and water. The other long-distance, low-frequency sounds rise from the elemental actions of the earth, from earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, rolling thunder and great



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ocean storms, like the voices of the elephants and the whales, resonate with these vast earthly powers of making and renewal.

Late one afternoon, we spot a solitary elephant feeding at the edge of the flood plain—a male, we assume at first, for they spend more time alone. We sit down at the base of a *kigelia* or sausage tree and wait for him to pass. After walking among elephants for many years, guiding and training others to be guides themselves, Alan discovered that the simple act of sitting on the ground helps us humans to root ourselves and be with them in a more peaceful way.

As the elephant approaches, we see it is an elderly female, not a male. She stops to examine us through the branches, touching her forehead with her trunk, a thoughtful gesture among elephants. Then, mind apparently made up, she heads in our direction and strides only three paces past on silent, padded feet.

Age has hollowed the haunting contours of her face and sunk her temples and her hips towards the bone. Grandmother and great-grandmother, carrying the experience of sixty or seventy years, she is on the last set of teeth that accompany elephants into their old age and death. There is something deeply touching in the weight of age she bears: elephants have a profound awareness of individual loss and death and they gather in silent elephantine contemplation around the bones of their dead companions, running trunk tips with great delicacy over the jaw, the skull, the tusks—if these have not been ripped from the body by poachers.

“I said to her inwardly, *don’t go*,” Alan tells me later. And perhaps this grandmother heard his call, for she halts and stands for a few moments at the edge of the grove, one great foot tilted towards us. It seems to me that she is listening to us inwardly, sensing our being and intentions. And what I feel from her then is a wave of understanding and acceptance, as though she has given us her blessing.

The sense of blessing remains in the days and nights that follow. In the tent at night, I hear the lions roaring and feel them again inside the hollow of my chest. As the night voices of the bush, birds, insects, frogs, and toads braid together into a great river of

exuberant sound—intricate, overflowing, and whole, like the many branches of the great Okavango itself—listening brings a deepening stillness, an inner spaciousness through which the great sound river can braid and flow freely within the expansion of the heart.

Walking out in the clear light of dawn beneath the towering *kigelia* trees laced with red flowers, I feel the pulsating rhythms of the Okavango mounting through the soles of my feet, each step a fresh encounter with the living ground.

“Have you noticed that the animals don’t move away from us any more?” Alan remarks. I look around and realize it’s true: even the watchful impala haven’t stirred when we walked past. We are no longer such strangers here. Step by step, we have been walking out of the everyday human mind, with its anxious turmoil and repetitive thought patterns and distraction, into a state of wakeful stillness. Every moment given in silent attention to the life of the bush becomes a merging with this deeper state of being.

That evening, we walk a few minutes out from our campsite to a clay pan where Alan wants to draw a map of his beloved Okavango on the ground. We have just stepped onto a termite mound to get some height and scan around when four elephants appear out of a thicket. They see us immediately and rumble long and deep. Without a moment’s visible hesitation, they walk directly towards our termite mound.

One is a mother with two young ones at her side, who are maybe four and eight years old. Her companion is a larger male, and he is courting this lovely young female. Although not obviously in *musth*—his temple glands are not streaming openly—his penis is extended and semi-erect, and he touches her with his trunk in a gentle enquiry, a tentative caress. Approaching the base of our termite mound, they pause for a moment, and then step forward to stand before us side by side, with the female in the centre and the male at her side, towering so close to me I could reach out a hand and touch him on the trunk.

I have no thoughts in that moment. There are no maps for this meeting, which has emerged beyond our expectation or seeking. My mind is set utterly aside as the elephants enfold us with the



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immediacy of their presence. Their bodies are the smell of the bush made majestic flesh. In their eyes is knowledge, beyond human words, borne through the generations of their ancestors who have walked through the earth's deep time, shaping and making and renewing as they walked.

Before they walk away from us again, I bow my head: I bow to the immense depth of the life that they have allowed me to feel. As a silent prayer of thanks that we have been allowed to meet at this sharp and urgent edge of time: humans and elephants, male and female, adults and young, standing in peace together on the ground of Africa.

“Be still and know that I am God.” These words meet Alan’s eyes the next morning when he randomly opens his small bible, before we break camp and leave the place of meeting with the elephants. They are the opening lines of Psalm 46. In the original Hebrew, the word translated as ‘God’ is Elohim, which is one of the names the early mystics of the Middle East gave to the immensity of that mystery through which the whole of creation is born and continually renewed.

The name Elohim was not meant to denote a patriarchal deity or a separate entity. It is an opening into meditation on unity: no-thing and all, spaciousness within and without, the still source of the breath of life. The lines of the psalm rise from that state of deep contemplation, and they carry the simplicity that lies at the core of all traditions—the knowledge, in the wordless stillness at the

heart of my being, that I am one with the essence and unity of life. To be present and rooted in that wholeness frees us from the bitterness of mental divisions and the compulsive destruction we inflict on the rest of life. The light of true Being radiates through us unimpeded, and it touches all creation with its grace.

I have come to know that many animals, both wild and tame, recognize what we humans carry within us in potential. They come to us now in wordless presence to help us to awaken from the conflagration and destruction that are growing darker with each day, offering us the field of connectivity where we may meet and know each other again within the wholeness of the unity of life.

Eleanor O’Hanlon an award-winning writer and conservationist with a passion for re-connecting with the inner, spiritual dimension of our relationship with animals and the natural world, has carried out field research for international conservation groups. Her book *Eyes of the Wild: Journeys of Transformation with the Animal Powers* was awarded the 2015 Nautilus Gold Book Award for Nature. www.eyesofthewild.org

For more information about Okavango and the dedicated people who are working to get international protection for the whole river system, read more at www.intotheokavango.org

left Alan McSmith, right Sam Matabele and Eleanor O’Hanlon

