



CONSCIOUSNESS – THE QUEST FOR LIFE’S JOURNEY

James Lovelock knew, indigenous people around the world know, many farmers, gardeners and land people know that the earth is a living breathing consciousness upon which we get to hold a temporary ticket.

My first experience of meeting Native Americans was preceded by a decision to learn more about their culture as a mark of respect. I had encouraged a friend who had spent a great deal of time with them to follow through on a dream of taking a group of Australians to experience a Spiritual Gathering on a first Nation reservation near Bellingham in Washington State. This was a special gathering of grandmothers and elders to teach some of the old ways and to provide an alternative model to counteract a burgeoning culture of unemployment, low self esteem, drugs and alcohol abuse. I was concerned that it would be presumptuous of a woman of Anglo heritage to attend without preparation. I set about to do some research and reading and was thoroughly beguiled by the stories of Rolling Thunder, Crazy Horse, White Buffalo Calf Woman and others.

Feeling somewhat more informed and aware, this led me to find a well regarded teacher in Australia who guided me on the first part of a traditional vision quest. After making prayer flags, doing sweat lodge, fasting and other preparations I was to spend one night, two days on my own on a mountain in silent contemplation – just me, Mother Earth, the elements and the ancestors.

From what I understand this is part of Lakota tradition which is undertaken over a number of years. So it was beginners stuff really. Traditionally they went alone wrapped only in a buffalo skin for warmth and go without water, food, fire and certainly no watch, mobile phone or other modern conveniences. This is with the intention of connecting with Great Spirit and the ancestors for vision for a good life.

I prepared as much as I was able and set out with guide and companion up the mountain. And I have to admit with respect to my age, level of fitness and health I did take a bottle of water and a box of matches. I did wish I had a buffalo skin though because I am sure it would have proved to be much warmer than my drizabone. As it turned out, I later heard that it was the coldest, wettest and windiest day in April for more than 50 years in that mountain area.

Perception is a strange thing but it felt a long way up that mountain. Perhaps it wasn't so far in distance but it felt like a long journey in consciousness. People who are familiar with the land can read the signs and this is particularly true of indigenous people. I watched a brown snake slide by glistening silver in the warmth of the midday sun and I was reminded that this was no frivolous undertaking. There are real and actual dangers of being in the bush. I proceeded with a mixture of reverence, awe and solemnity suitable for the occasion.

Finally reaching a clearing my guide suggested that I gather sufficient wood to keep me warm overnight because once the circle was set, I was not to walk beyond the perimeter. There was discipline and integrity involved here. We silently set the prayer flags to designate the four

directions, as well as mother Earth and father Sky. Final prayers were said and as my guide and companion departed I silently entered the circle and survey my space in nature for the next two days.

I walked the perimeter. There was one particularly large tree to the eastern side, a few dispersed saplings, a huge stockpile of wood that I had gathered near the tree, some debris to the northern side where more wood that could be collected if necessary, although a little inaccessible with a few brambles and fallen logs. There was a copious and gloriously rich red brown beige yellow tan ground cover of gum leaves. In the distance to the south grew a dense pine plantation.

Wishing I had a sketch pad, I recalled my mission. I had entering this clear space free of the distractions of everyday life to quest for vision.

Nothing particularly eventful had transpired, other than some rather ominous dark clouds overlaying those big white fluffy ones against the blue sky to one side. The warmth of the sun diminished. I set to making a fire as the light grew dimmer. Feeling fairly satisfied with my efforts, I warmed my hands wishing I had a nail file and cloth to wipe my hands clean.

Ahh, insight!

So much wishing and not much getting; I became acutely aware of the conventional filters through which we experience life and the concomitant advertising that supports our antiseptic clean benches and bodies. I remembered an old statistic about garbage collectors and teachers having the healthiest immune systems. I wondered if..... God, what was all this drivel going on in my mind, wasn't I meant to be centred, equanimous and still minded? Oh is that tautology? Oh, SHUT UP. How was I ever going to experience any messages from Great Spirit if I couldn't turn off my mind?

While I was *trying very hard* not to want or expect anything the wind had come up a little gustier, the light faded and I started to get cold. I had better jog up and down on the spot to get warm and build up the fire. So it was on a dark and moonless night on Burrawye Mountain that I faced the elements. I had huddled my back against the huge tree as the rain set in. Did I say it was the wettest, windiest.....

I thought about the story of Rolling Thunder who could command the elements and called upon that energy to stop the rain in my circle, naively thinking if he could, then surely that faculty would be accessible to me. I thought about my daughter and friend back at home who had set up vigil overnight with a 24 hour candle in honour of my quest. I thought about my guide and friends back at the homestead. I thought about the absolutely awesome power of nature as the wind howled, tree branches crashed and the rain drove down upon my face. I thought about the absolute arrogance of humankind which thought (largely still thinks) it could conquer and plunder nature with immunity. I thought a lot about the deception of mass consciousness in which we all engage; that we can work against the forces of nature, shifting water courses, digging up and burying toxic waste, logging the old forest lungs of the planet, destroying habitat, depleting precious resources for the mere sake of fulfilling an artificially induced need to consume that leaves us craving for something we think a new wide screen television will provide. I had often thought about my own role in this, every time I have used a polystyrene cup or plastic bags, or failed to act or speak out about our life destroying actions. Writing this now, this journey was way before our current acute

awareness of climate change and peak oil but I already knew - and I believe we all do if we are really honest. The arrows of cause and effect are pretty obvious to those who care to look.

With these troubling thoughts I eventually drifted off to sleep. I recalled thinking as I slipped away that weirdly, I didn't know whether it was 7pm, 11pm or 1am. Lying with my back to the tree I faced the fire, warm on one side freezing on the other but as long as I didn't move to let in any air, it was bearable.

Some time later I woke to a wet pitch blackness surrounding me. The fire had died. My body was icy cold. Another version of a dark night of the soul but if I was to survive in the physical I *had* to get warm. The stockpile of firewood that had seemed so abundant in the light of day had dwindled to a few spindly branches. The rain had abated but not stopped. I stirred to the imperative of finding firewood in the darkness. Standing up I walked a few paces and found myself completely disoriented. I stumbled over something. With no fire as a reference point I literally could not see my hand in front of my face. I don't know how long it took me but I crawled on my hands and knees, feeling for the warmth of the embers or the solidity of the tree. Neither. They had disappeared into the ethers of my rising panic. I breathed and breathed again, shaking with cold and fear.

Some people might say that it is not such a bit deal being out in the bush overnight. In fact I was an able and experienced camper having travelled with a minimum of resources and a reasonably well developed ability to improvise. Further I was not afraid of the dark. I am just not that scaredy kind of a person. But this, this was something else – a spiritual test of nerves, a surrender, an alignment with the nature.

Eventually I felt warmth under my hand and I had found the fire pit. I lay with hand to head allowing the wave of relief flow through my body. Leaf by leaf I coaxed the fire until the leaves glowed and sprung to light. I put on some twigs and built it up with the few remaining logs. With the renewed glow of the fire I ventured out to the northern perimeter to forage for more wood. At one point I went to pull up a length of timber. As I began to dislodge it I got the instant inner message to let it drop. I did so as if bitten. My senses were pretty alert by this time.

With fear abated but adrenalin still high I felt my way back and forth scrambling over brambles, dragging *too long* pieces of wood that I could edge into the fire in increments. The roaring fire and the stock pile grown sufficiently for me to retire to my tree spot. I was no longer cold. After a draught of water, I lay down positioning my arm near the stockpile such that I could just throw another branch on when it started to die down. As I watched the fire I apologised to the small creatures, slaters and spiders that were unable to get of the burning timber.

So the night passed in this way, waking momentarily at some sign that the fire was dying down to hoof another log on without moving anything but my arm. On one such waking I was aware that the flames were still quite high, it was something else that had disturbed my slumber. I opened my eyes to see it just centimetres from my face. In the light of the fire, head raised as if ready to strike, looking directly me was a snake. This beautiful shimmering creature, perfectly still with silvery serpent's head and soft ribbed underbelly was framed by the brightness of the flames. It was *one of those between the world moments*, where the seconds fell in slow motion as if from the stars. I stared back unable and unwilling to move. My mind perfectly still; there was *nothing* I could do to change the moment. The intimacy was too compelling. I acknowledged this amazing

creature, surrendered to the moment, closed my eyes and without moving a muscle went back to sleep.

The rain had stopped, the clouds cleared and the next time I woke it was to pre dawn diamond studded clear sky. My mind was equally clear and still. I felt simultaneously connected and free, as if I had passed some spiritual transformation test. Had I been graced by the presence of the Rainbow Serpent? This is one of the deepest laws and oldest of Australian first nation creation stories. Sleeping deeply in the belly of the earth, Rainbow Serpent is associated with water courses and the health and protection of land and people; and a source of all life.

Deep in the awe of nature I was clear on my vision quest for life - to live in harmony with all sentient life and the very earth itself.

I smiled, breathed in life and reached out to hoof another log on the fire.

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