

Original Wisdom: Stories of An Ancient Way of Knowing by robert wolff

One or two generations ago most of us made our own choices how to relate to our immediate environment. Certainly influenced by the group we belonged to: family, village, tribe, customs. And until four or five generations ago cultures were the way a tribe had worked out, over time, how to survive in a unique environment. Cultures were a way to deal with finding food, how to hunt, what to hunt, how to find edible plants and fruit, and how to be sure that the useful plants and trees would survive so that we would survive. And all cultures are a way we manage to live together more or less harmoniously (usually 'more').

Our modern world is surprisingly different. Somehow we have accepted the idea that survival is no longer dependent on how we relate to our natural environment. Instead we have been made to believe that a few clever or powerful people can and should make those decisions for us. And over the past very few centuries these powerful people have created enormously complicated systems based on supposedly scientific theories of government. And this took place at the same time that science and technology made it possible to make and use ever more energy to drive a civilization that allows a few of us to live lives of luxury and ease unknown in the entire history of humankind. The great majority of us, however, are swept aside in this tsunami of what we call progress. So-called progress that is rooted in divorce from nature. Nature has become scenery and resource. We change nature to make it what we want it to look like. Here in Hawai'i we move huge amounts of sand around to make beaches for tourists, we move full grown coconut trees hundreds of miles to make the scenery look what visitors expect it to look like. What you see is what you get (wysiwyg), but what you get is not real, it's manmade to look like nature.

Not long ago I watched Jane Goodall in one of those documentaries on the internet. She spoke of her years of patiently studying Chimpanzees in the wild, in their own world. An inspiring speaker. Similarities between human and chimpanzee behavior. Chimps kiss, they care for each other. They have distinct social positions and roles. Their young need to learn the ways of survival; chimpanzee females usually have only one child every five years. Chimpanzees know how to make and use tools, and what's more, they learn from each other. They know themselves to be individuals.

That struck me. I feed a tribe of wild chickens here a little extra to what they find themselves. Once I was angry at one hen who had killed the tiny chick of another hen — all chickens reacted to my anger. Chickens obviously have no sense of being individual. Cats, from my recent observations, know very well they are individuals. During the absence of my neighbors I feed their ten cats. They were feral cats before all but one of the males were 'fixed'. I have a favorite, and she obviously likes me. All of them know me as the 'food giver'. Now they all swarm around my feet when I get there. The all black one with green eyes literally winds herself around one of my legs. The other day the unfixed

male was particularly obnoxious, pushing other cats away from the food on the lanai. I reached out my hand in his direction, he stepped back. All of the other cats noticed my hand, but none reacted. They knew the hand was not meant for them.

Chimpanzees are amazingly like humans — or, we are amazingly like chimpanzees. Perhaps because animals cannot talk (meaning sounding like us) we think we are so far removed from the great apes that we are like an entirely different kind of being. There are still people who cannot accept that we belong to the animals, and trees, and plants. Don't we too belong to the earth?

Back to Jane Goodall, who observed, at times lived with chimpanzees, in different situations, at different times, different locations. A formidable dedication. I have known two women who studied, observed, a single species for years and years. One learned about macaques, the other about a rare rice bird. Such study/observation must include learning to communicate. Communicate is a lot more than just words and/or pictures.

I have learned much from animals. But first I had to learn how to observe, how to relate to animals who did not know me. One way I think about that is that animals are sensitive to intention. Natural people, who live close to, and know themselves part of nature, similarly know an animal's and other humans' intention. Sensing, knowing, the intention of a person or animal you encounter is of course important for survival.

If my intention is to get to know that animal (or person for that matter) the first thing is to stand still. Do not react, reach out or retreat. Don't raise the voice. If making a sound it should be soft, slow, soothing.

Sensing intention includes how close I can come to the other. Not too close. Strange as that may seem, it is very easy to feel just the right distance away if one pays attention.

Always open hand, palm up, or sideways so that the other can see the palm. This is true for people as well as animals. If I reach out a hand not visibly open that probably will be felt as a threat.

Don't touch another on the head until after you know that other very, very well. Maybe westerners are used to that, but there are (were) countless human cultures that consider a touch on the head, even stroking soft baby hair, to be a sign of domination. That must be an instinct, even in humans. Safer not to do it.

With dogs and cats I've learned to always reach out my open hand to give them a sniff; their ability to distinguish scent is much more acute than ours. And my intention has to be real, peaceful. If I reach out a hand and I am either afraid or planning to trick the dog, s/he will sniff that. Guaranteed. The dog may snarl, step back. At that point the macho reaction is to get mad at the dog, take a stick and beat her/him. That may be relating, but it is not communicating. In many human cultures it is insulting to touch another's head from above. It's patronizing. There are people who think dogs and cats like to be petted on the head. If you pay attention you will notice that they almost immediately move their heads so that your hand rubs them behind the ears, under the back of the jawbone. Try it on people. We prefer to be stroked on the neck and under the ears. Tibetans believe that the soft place on a baby's head that closes soon after birth and is the very top of our heads, is where the soul leaves the body when we die. Putting a hand over that unique spot is unthinkable.

Relating to unknown animals or people requires honesty. Patience. Consideration. Why

not call it compassion. A loving curiosity, a wanting to firmly get across that my true intention is that I mean no harm. I don't want to do to another what I don't want another to do to me. Human or animal, no difference. The only way to learn from another is when we trust each other.

Here there are wild chickens, ducks, cats, dogs, frogs, lizards, and many kinds of insects of course. Many of them have learned to watch the staff I walk with, it is maybe five feet long, just a relatively straight piece of a thin tree, but it serves many purposes. It helps me test the ground which is lava here, and so, very uneven. Mostly thinly covered with green, here and there sounding hollow (a lava bubble). Occasionally a pocket of real soil. And the staff extends my reach. I've never raised it against an animal, but they are aware of it. When I put it aside they walk over my feet. As soon as I pick up the staff, they eat with one eye on the staff, move a little away from my feet.

All this 'body language' is communication. Children growing up in parts of the world where encountering a wild animal is not unusual, learn early to read intention and how to communicate their own intention clearly. We have mostly forgotten that. My observation is that we, so-called civilized people, have strangely forgotten how to observe. Not forgotten perhaps, but we see only what we expect to see. Someone who comes here regularly sees only fruit, I think, and he sees the animals and talks to them, not expecting to be answered. To me these few acres are a marvel of nature's chaos. There are neighborhoods, a dense little forest here, open rocky green over there. Perhaps I know all the trees, and have a sense of how happy or healthy they are. Over there an exceptionally aggressive plant is taking over a probably dead car. For a while I looked for feathers. That was too easy, so now pick up only feathers that are two-colored. Some are brown on one side along the spine and black on the other side. The rare feathers are black on the bottom and white on the top, or the reverse. I have never found a feather with more than two colors. I am lucky to have seen two plumeria flowers that had six petals — all others have five.

And the ducks. Three black ducks. They don't really live here; I don't know where they live. Sometimes they stay the night, but often they are somewhere else. In the morning I hear and then see them flying in. Always in a V or in a diagonal line. They are powerful flyers, they take off in a few feet, and gain height in seconds. They fly fast, always counter clock-wise it seems. They land either in the pond or on land. From Wikipedia I learned they are called American Black Ducks. They are slightly larger than a big rooster, but they must have very strong wing muscles. They have one green feather under their wings that only shows when you see them in a certain light. Then you also see that they are not really black, but a beautiful brown with a darker pattern but even from a foot away it's black. These three are almost always together. Two females, one male. When I feed them — when there are no chickens around and the ducks make their presence known — one stands guard while the others shovel in the mixture of chicken scratch and a few pieces of dry cat food. Somehow the two always leave a goodly portion for the male who has stood guard. They are shy, I cannot get too close to them. They eat differently than chickens. Chickens walk when eating, they pick at one grain then walk step, pickm walk. It is no use to give chickens a little heap of food. Ducks have a flat beak and eat standing still literally shoving in a good mouthful of grains at a time. They prefer a heap of food in a dish with sides. Chickens are much more aggressive, they will try to pick at the heap meant for the ducks. The ducks are threatening, they easily keep the chickens away. Feeding them together just does not work, so I try to feed them when the other species is not around. Not easy. Chickens roam far and wide, and somehow they seem to know that someone else is getting food.

One more observation. A hen with a brood of perhaps a dozen or so little chicks, follows. The chicks move here and there, the mama follows. Many indigenous cultures I know do the same, mama follows the children. We, westerners, think children are empty heads we have to fill with our ideas, needs, knowledge, manners, morals. Now I understand that a mother, or father following children (to protect, to be sure) allows the children to learn. What I learn from experience becomes part of how I survive. What someone teaches me from a book is not an experience. As most of us who read, I spent the first many years of my life memorizing so-called facts and information and often un-understood demands. I was fortunate that I grew up in two cultures, among people who expected me to learn what I needed to survive by myself, knowing they stood behind me. Not telling me what to do, yet keeping an eye on me. I knew at a very young age that there was always a lap to sit on, a shoulder to cry on, if I needed it. They respected me as they respected all children.

It always astonishes me to see a mother who cannot see how each of her children had a unique 'personality' (or whatever it can be called) from the first day of life. Now, forty and more years later I see that what or who each of my sons is now was there when he was a baby. I respect their uniqueness and have never felt a need to tell them what to do — who to be.

In our civilized societies I notice that few adults respect a child. Or, other adults for that matter. We who loudly proclaim freedom, are in truth slaves to all the millions, billions, of rules and regulations that border our lives.

I have known truly free humans: we would call them 'primitive'. As all First People they lived far away from roads, it required walking through jungle to reach them. I did not know a word of their language, but there was usually at least one person in the small groups of nomads who understood some words of the language of the country. But our communication was as much through touch, smiles, laughter, and something inside that I have no word for. They were the most joyful people I have known. They sang little songs all day long, smiled easily — not by showing teeth (a sign of aggression) but with their eyes, eyebrows, faces. They were generous. I suspect they could not lie. If they did not want a confrontation they became invisible — exactly as many animals can seemingly 'disappear'.

The People, as of course they called themselves, had no written language, but curious about the little scribbles I made in a tiny booklet I once happened to have with me. I usually went alone, sometimes with a friend, but never an 'expedition'. I did not have a camera, or a recording device. Nothing but the clothes I wore, and often a modest gift of something edible. So, one day, they asked could I teach them to read those scribbles. The whole group of nine: children, women, men, an old woman, stood around as I wrote A with a stick in the dirt. The letter A, the sound AH. Then adding another letter, saying the word. Ba in their language is something like mister, adult male. Wa is female adult. They got it immediately. I don't know how long I drew letters and we all sang the sounds; many hours perhaps. The next day everybody had remembered every single letter and its sound. Where can we find that writing, they wanted to know. I had to admit there wasn't any. They laughed. What fun, we learned something that is totally useless! A little later the old woman came to me, tugged my elbow until I bent down to hear her. We did not have much language between us, but we understood each other. And you, she whispered, you do that all day long? I tried to explain 'going to work'. Oh yes, she knew about work, some of them had observed a place where people lived (a plantation). Those poor people, shaking her head. They have to get up before it is light, and then they are herded to some trees, they spend the whole day making cuts in one tree and then the next tree, all the

same (a rubber plantation), then they eat something, and sleep. She spat on the ground. What a life that must be! Come, she said, holding my hand, I'll show you something you can learn (something useful, she implied). Not the words she said, of course, but that is how I understood the meaning of her words and gesture.

We walked a little way into the tangle of trees, vines, mosses and rotten leaves on the ground, roots here and there that she elegantly stepped over or around. See this vine? See those ants running up and down the vine? Then she pointed to two ants, one on the down-line, the other going up. Ants talk, she said with conviction. What are those ants doing, she asked, her face wide open, questioning? I had no idea... You don't even know what ants do? No, I had to admit I had never thought about it. She shook her head, held my hand firmer. Come. We went to where the ants went in and out of a hole in a tree. That's where they live, she said. Then she pointed up the tree, see there? What she pointed at looked like a bump on a tree. Look more, she said. Then I saw butterflies, or moths, maybe large insects flying in and out rather frantically. Eventually she made me understand that the bump on the tree was something that grew from or on the tree, that it was food for ants and the insects that flew busily back and forth. What ants do is looking for food, she said triumphantly, and you do not even know that! Isn't that what you do? Looking for food. Yes, of course that is what we do, we just have made it extremely complicated, difficult, and competitive. How to explain agriculture, food as an industry, a world of shipping food across the globe, factories to make food. Come, she took my hand again, we sit. NO, not there! Don't you see those crawling things, they sting! We found a downed tree to sit on that she pronounced safe and pleasant. Tell me where you find food, she said as she nestled close to me. I could not think of anything to say. We sat a while like that, quietly, listening to the many busy noises of animals seeking food. She looked at me sideways, slyly, the ants don't 'work' she said. They do what they want to do. Like us, she said proudly. We like to walk and find food, everywhere, as she spread her arms to include all the riches of the Wild. A bit later, I know, she added softly, you cannot explain. Never mind. Are you senang? A word that means comfortable, content. I told her, honestly, that I was very senang sitting there with her. Then we just sit, she said.

I cannot forget those people.

After we, my family, left SE Asia to come to Hawai'i, where I live now, I was sick and doctors could not diagnose what it might be. They tried for almost a year. I knew what made me sick but I could not explain that to the doctors or to my colleagues at the university, as I had been unable to explain my life here to that old woman — and why do I call her 'old', She was probably only a few years older than my forty, she got around her world like a nimble child. She was tiny, wrinkled, and thin as they all were. She laughed as freely as the others; a twinkle in her eyes... I cannot forget those people, they're in my dreams, my life.

For the past twenty or thirty years I have tried to tell my fellows in civilization that our way of seeing the world is crooked, unnatural, what we do to Mother Earth endangers not only indigenous people all over the world, but also tigers, polar bears; a hundred species of plants and animals erased every day.

Now I must admit that I cannot bridge the two worlds, even though they are just human ways of living. The same species. Very different thinking, different seeing, knowing, different realities.

It seems so obvious that our modern way is unsustainable. How could we forget the

marvel of nature, Mother Earth. How can we be blind to the reality behind the machines, laws, stores, gadgets that we think we need to 'find food'. Have we forgotten to trust that the knowledge of how to joyfully live simply is still within us. Stand still, stop running, just BE.

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