Walking with Magqubu

Adult Reflections on Boyhood Memories

BY DOUG WILLIAMSON

Introduction
In the fall of 1961, six slightly uncouth 16- to 17-year-old boys, including the author, went on a wilderness trail (walking trek) in Kwazulu/Natal. For the author, the trail was a seminal experience. In this article I try to describe the experience, then go on to discuss the physical, psychological, social, existential, and spiritual influences that are likely to have been at work in the context of the whole experience.

The Location
The trail was in the iMfolozi Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The climate in this part of the country is subtropical, and annual rainfall totals about 690 mm (27 inches), with rain falling most months of the year. The iMfolozi Game Reserve has an area of around 560 km² (216 miles²). The landscape is hilly, rugged, and intersected by river valleys. It supports a rich diversity of plant and animal life.

In the 1940s the area was ravaged by the veterinary holocaust that was unleashed on game reserves in Natal (Gush 2000; Player 1997) in an ill-considered campaign to eradicate the tsetse fly by exterminating wildlife. When we visited the area in 1961, it must still have been recovering from the effects of the extermination campaign.

Boyhood Memories
Those of us going on the trail were 16- to 17-year-old boys from St John’s College in Johannesburg, where Ian Player (founder of The Wilderness Leadership School, The WILD Foundation, and the World Wilderness Congress) had also been at school. Like the other boys, I hitchhiked on my own from Johannesburg to Mtubatuba in northern KwaZulu-Natal, something we thought nothing of in those days, but is now scarcely imaginable. In Mtubatuba we met up with Ian Player, who had kindly undertaken to drive us to iMfolozi, although “trailists” were normally expected to make their own way to the reserve. I remember Ian, who was then in his mid-30s, as quiet, serious, and unassuming. This meant that, although one intuitively respected him, one was not intimidated by him.

On arrival at iMfolozi, he introduced us to Hugh Dent, a lean, bearded, mild-mannered man, and to Magqubu Ntombela, a short and stocky Zulu man, with a calm, self-possessed look on his face. He was to be “the eyes and ears of the trail party” (Player 1997, p. 197), while Hugh Dent would be the interpreter, both in the
Hugh explained how the trail was organized. It was a pleasant surprise to learn that we would not have to carry our backpacks. While we were on the trail our gear, food, and tents and other gear would be carried by donkeys to the campsite selected for that night. This sounded like a splendid arrangement to me, but my clandestine hopes of a comfortable jaunt were not fulfilled.

The trip gave us quite a hard time. Of course we did stop to look at things, have a drink, or a lunch break, but most of the day we were walking steadily through the hilly and sometimes rocky country. The weather was quite hot and such was our thirst that, at one point, we did not hesitate to drink from a muddy pool, on one side of which a rhino had left skid marks as it slid down a little bank into the water.

On the trail, Hugh would stop us from time to time to point out or explain some feature of interest. He was a refined and sensitive person who had studied portrait painting in London and lectured in art at the Durban Poly-Tech College, and it was my impression that he was sometimes rather startled by the questions and responses that we delivered in our uninhibited boarding school vocabulary. Such as when he was explaining to us the significance of a rhino dung *midden*. He started by saying: “This is where the rhino comes along to have a...umm...err...", at which point we made a couple of quite robust suggestions. He politely ignored these and finally settled on: “This is where the rhino comes along to have a bog.”

Magqubu was always in the lead. We learned that his eyesight was quite uncanny. When he pointed to something in the distance, say a group of rhinos, we would usually struggle to locate it, or sometimes even be unable to do so without the help of Hugh’s binoculars.

We also learned about his amazing stamina. Despite the fact that he was more than 60 years old, we struggled to keep up with him. On both the nights we slept out, it started getting dark when we were still quite far from our camp for that night. In the most nonchalant way imaginable, Magqubu just started running. After a long day of walking this seemed a bit much and it elicited much moaning and cursing from us youngsters, but we would not otherwise have made it to the camp before dark.

The overnight camps were perfect—arriving at dusk to find everything ready for us, settling into the camp, sitting on the ground around the campfire, having a simple supper, chatting, being entertained by Magqubu’s miming of rhinos mating and other animal behaviors, and finally, deep and well-earned sleep on the ground in small tents.

My memory that they gave us a bit of a tough time is confirmed by a note that Hugh Dent made on the Game Count Record Sheet that he filled in for this trail. He gave this sheet to my co-trailist Geoff Robinson, who recently passed it on to me, still in good condition. On it there is a note about the route of the trail which reads: “S.W. Section—Big Circle!”

A colleague who knows IMfolozi well regards the information on Hugh’s Record Sheet as an important historical document because it documented that the populations of different antelope species have changed radically over time. Species that were rare in 1961 are now common, species that were common in 1961 are now rare or absent, probably because of habitat change.

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Adult Reflections

It is 45 years since our wilderness trail in iMfolozi with Magqubu Ntombela and Hugh Dent, and it is my most vivid memory of that time. Having visited the Kruger National Park several times before going on this trail, it was not my first bushveld experience, but it was my first experience of seeing wildlife on foot rather than from a car. Following this iMfolozi experience, although I was not conscious it was happening, I was clearly drawn to wild and remote places.

Immediately after finishing high school at the end of 1961 the quest began—in January 1962 hitchhiking to Tanganyika, to climb Kilimanjaro; in July 1962 joining a two-week walking expedition in the Richtersveld—a spectacular arid mountain wilderness in a bend of the Gariep/Orange River near to where it enters the Atlantic. In December 1962 and January 1963, I was traveling around East Africa visiting parks, including Serengeti, Ngorongoro, Queen Elizabeth National Park, and climbing Mount Kenya.

And so the travels continued for my entire university career and early professional life as a lawyer. In addition to substantial trips, there were many weekends spent camping and walking in the bush or along the then unspoiled coast of northern Zululand or hiking and climbing in the mountains.

Throughout this period my interest in natural history was growing and being deepened by reading widely about its multiple aspects. The culmination of all this was a decision to abandon my professional career as a lawyer and to embark on a career in conservation. This involved going back to college and eventually getting a doctorate in zoology, based on a field study of the red lechwe on the western edge of the Linyanti Swamp in northern Botswana. At the time, the area was uninhabited because of the presence of the tsetse fly and was wonderfully remote and rich in wildlife.

Having been so influenced by wild places makes me wonder, “what about them so engages and moves me?” Thinking about this has led me to infer that multiple influences contribute to what one experiences in wild places—only some of which can be touched on here. They include the physical characteristics of the area, specifically: “Natural character, remoteness and the absence of overt human influence are the main attributes of wild land” (Scottish National Heritage 2003).

Influences that affected us psychologically on our iMfolozi trail included the challenge of meeting the physical demands of the experience and the satisfaction of doing so; the danger of a close encounter with a black rhino, a leopard, or a really dangerous snake, such as a black mamba; and the uncertainty about how such an encounter would work out. There were also social influences.
arising from the composition of our group, our isolation from the mundane world, and the challenges and experiences we shared. We ended up with increased understanding of ourselves and each other.

Another influence was what, for want of a better word, one might think of as the existential component of the experience—the fact that one literally entered into a different world. One could describe this world simply as a game reserve, set aside by people to conserve wild species of animals and plants. But this is more or less the perspective of a human-dominated world in which humans enter as spectators or tourists. A richer perspective is that of human as a participant in a more-than-human world.

Those of us raised in an urban setting have to work to become aware of and comprehend these autonomous intelligences, but in cultures closer to the land there are individuals, hunters, and shamans, for instance, who are deeply informed about and involved with them. That Magqubu was such an individual is clear from Ian Player’s descriptions of his uncanny ability to sense the proximity of unseen animals and anticipate their behavior (Player 1997).

In shamanistic societies, the shaman is primarily a mediator between the human community and the more-than-human world in which it is embedded, and only secondarily a medicinal practitioner.

His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations—songs, cries, gestures—of the larger, more-than-human field. Magic...is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives—from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself—is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own.

(Abram 1997, pp. 6–10)

The shaman is deeply immersed in this world and is capable of, for instance, “feeling the flight of a raven or a falcon as if you are it” (Taylor 2005, p. 161).

At this level of engagement one enters the realm of spirituality, but it is not necessarily an incorporeal or supernatural spirituality. From his interactions with traditional shamans in Asia, David Abram infers “that the spirits of an indigenous culture are primarily those modes of intelligence or awareness that do not possess a human form” (1997, p. 13). In other words, the spirits are the living nonhuman members of the more-than-human world in which human communities are embedded.

In similar fashion, my own perception of human spirituality is that it is a manifestation of the animate and material more-than-human world out of which we emerged, an attribute of embodied human intelligence (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), rather than of a disembodied, incorporeal mind or spirit, caged within the body. It is primarily concerned with the values one lives by, how one relates to others, including nonhuman others, and the way in which one finds meaning and purpose in life. In this sense, a spiritual experience is one that ultimately catalyzes a change in one’s values and opens new pathways to meaning and purpose.

So, as I now understand it, the IMfolozi wilderness trail all those years ago was a spiritual experience, as well as an adventure, a social interaction, and an ecological education.

The way this experience worked for me was not through visions or dreams, but by engaging me with the natural, more-than-human world and by initiating the growth of an intense delight in it and an enduring

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commitment to contribute whatever I can to the struggle against its destruction. **IJW**

**REFERENCES**


DOUG WILLIAMSON was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa, matriculating from St John’s College in 1961 and graduating from the law school of Witwatersrand University in 1966. After a brief stint of legal practice he decided to abandon the law and make a commitment to working in conservation. Having acquired appropriate academic credentials for a career in conservation, he spent a decade in Botswana, implementing research projects on the behavioural ecology of red lechwe and the ranging behaviour and habitat needs of gemsbok, springbok and wildebeest in the Kalahari, serving as the officer-in-charge of research in the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, and managing a combined cattle and game ranch in the Tuli Block. Then, after three years in the late Professor Peter Jewell’s research group in Cambridge University, he spent five years managing the King Khalid Wildlife Research Centre near Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. Thereafter he spent three years as a freelance consultant before working for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) for ten years, firstly as a Wildlife Expert on a combined range improvement and wildlife management project in Syria, then as Forestry Officer responsible for Wildlife and Protected Area Management in the FAO’s headquarters in Rome. In the course of all this experience he was exposed to problems and issues at scales ranging from the molecular (DNA analyses for taxonomic purposes) to vast ecosystems (wildebeest migration in the Kalahari) and from utterly practical problems to the most abstract policy considerations. Having reached the mandatory retirement age of the FAO, he is now once more working as a freelance consultant.

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