

What Happens Up the Mountain Doesn't Always Stay Up the Mountain

A few years ago, I went up a mountain in the Pyrenees with a tent, nine bottles of water and almost no food. I wasn't being naïve or irresponsible, I simply wanted to commune with the wild in the raw.

It's a custom that has become quite fashionable these days in certain circles, even though it is as old as the hills. It wasn't the first time I'd done something like this, so I welcomed the experience. I kind of had an idea of what I was in for, in the way that if you've ever fallen madly in love, you know what it will feel like, even though every time it is completely different. This kind of experience wasn't about challenging myself – no, it was about quietening down, going inward and listening. No special skill required, which is just as well because I didn't have any, other than the ability to enjoy my own company. It didn't feel strange or alarming to be spending four nights on the mountain with only two apples, a handful of nuts, no phone and no watch, and those nine bottles of water.

Anyway, I needed the time out. I had a lot to get off my chest and I figured in the mountains I could cry my heart out. Up there alone on my first night, though, after the sun had gone down I heard a strange sound. It made my heart pound in a way that was nearly as

frightening as the sound itself. That unearthly whisper on the other side of the canvas – well, my brain couldn't make sense of it. The guide who'd walked me up here had called the mountain 'Hartza Mendi', or 'Bear Mountain' in English. He'd spoken of the Lord of the Forest, a strange creature, the lovechild of Basque myth and the Pyrenean wilds. But I hadn't actually expected to hear its voice, if that's what 'it' was. It had come out of the dark, from nowhere. It was urgent and somehow... sentient. It was punctuated by pregnant silences that made me hold my breath as a wave of fear flooded my body. What do you do when you're in a blind panic? Me, I reached for a charm that was stashed in the tent pocket and I began to rock back and forth. Under my breath I muttered in a small, scared voice: 'I come in peace!' For once I was far too frightened to feel silly or self-conscious, my usual default setting.

Outside my tiny tent – weird, discombobulated voice aside – the mountain fell silent. No more gusts of wind, and whatever night creatures lived here and in the thick, now menacing, woods beside me were holding their breath. I'd heard no footsteps, no crackling of bushes, and anyway I'd been rooted to this spot on the flat top of this peak, like a landing strip for an alien craft, high in the mountains since noon. A mare and her foal had trotted up earlier to check me out or welcome me or show their concern for this strange woman 'stranded' in their territory, I wasn't sure which, but the only sign of human life I'd detected until now was the tinkle of a shepherd's bell in the valley down past the waterfalls and the emerald forest I'd walked through to get here.

A long minute or two after it began the voice stopped. Just like that. The mountain exhaled, the night sounds – noticeable only in their absence – started up again. Over the next four days and nights up here, I thought about my strange encounter and tried to make sense of it. Had some presence that made no sense to the rational side of my brain given me exactly what I'd hoped and prayed for before I walked up that mountain? I'd wanted – I'd *yearned* with my whole being – to hear nature's voice. Is that what I'd heard? Was it some kind of spirit? The Lord of the Forest? Who knows?

I've told this story to people and I know what most of them think: 'It was a bird, obviously. Or your imagination, silly New-Age deluded hippie.' Only, I could swear it wasn't. My proof? None, I had none. Only a deep conviction that what I heard that night wasn't a human or animal or bird but something quite mysterious and spirit-like. At any rate, after that experience, it was hard for me to just go for a walk or look at a tree or stare at the sky without hoping for an epiphany or some transcendent experience that would give me the feeling that the land was speaking to me in a way that went beyond the ordinary. I wanted to invoke *something* – for some life force to make its presence known to me – and the wanting of it felt like a kind of lovesickness.

Had I been a die-hard conservationist or scientist or maybe grown up on a farm, I'd have likely laughed myself silly at such notions. But those things hadn't been a part of my life. Instead, what I'd had was Hinduism and atheism by osmosis and then ordinary-growing-up

secularism but with a yen for magical things. Call me sentimental but I wanted something more than to walk through an alluring landscape and admire its beauty. I wanted somehow to be more *porous*. I didn't want to be burdened by needing to know the name of every bird, creature, tree and petal. No, I wanted something else, something a bit Other and a bit mystical even – the seeking of it was what truly excited me.

As a travel writer, I had had experiences that opened my eyes and I was infinitely grateful for the world that revealed itself to me. Gul, my young blue-eyed hostess from the Kalash tribe deep in the remote valleys in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, had shared with me the ways of her people, their reverence for the gods of the river and the sun, and for their spirit ancestors. In Cape York in Queensland, I'd met two sisters who'd led me to a waterfall and told me a dreamtime creation story involving supernatural beings: they'd brought the earth's physical features into being, the sisters said. These encounters, and others, showed me as plain as day that for many indigenous people around the world all of nature was alive, imbued with spirit and a powerful ally if treated with respect. To some people I knew closer to home this idea made perfect sense. No big deal at all, but an obvious thing. But to many this was absurd. I never got why the words of people who live close to the land and treat her like kin – people who nurture an inner relationship with the earth – were rarely listened to or heeded beyond alternative circles. It's not like we couldn't use the input.

Still, despite those encounters abroad, back in the UK and sensitive to the mood of the day and the things I'd

read and the voices I heard, I worried that I didn't love nature in the right way, that I didn't bring my gaze to bear upon Her in the *approved* way. What made me feel even more of a fraud was that half the time I didn't even think in terms of the word 'nature'. More often I'd be thinking of a specific place, some amazing, sigh-inducing landscape or a cool, twisty tree, or a small creature or squawky bird I spotted while on a walk in the countryside or in some meadow or park in my neighbourhood. And even if there were those who'd be empathetic, who would hear me? I often felt too conventional for the pagans, too esoteric for the hardcore wildlife tribe, not deep enough for the deep ecologists, not logical enough for the scientists, not 'listy' enough for the birder types, not enough of a 'green thumb' for the gardeners. All in all, I felt invisible, ignored by the cliques, and that I was becoming ill and needy with the desire to be heard by them. I struggled with the pain of being overlooked and of falling through the cracks. But I was also sick of it all, sick of the anxiety. This was no way to live, I realised, if I wanted to hang on to my sanity. It was time to just do the thing that I secretly longed to do: to actively seek to enter a world that co-exists with the visible one, a world of signs and portents; and to experience this land, my home Britain, as the indigenous people who I'd met in the far-flung places of my travels had experienced theirs, and to let the rest go.

The possibilities were too tempting to ignore. For what might happen if I embarked on such an adventure? What might unfold if I were to step outside of the box and wander and flirt with the land in a spirit of playful experimentation?

What was I seeking, anyway? A more intimate way of relating to the earth? For the land to guide me and see into me and speak to me? For magic to unfold before my eyes? For the gods to leave giant Post-It notes for me in the sky? Whatever I was reaching for, I craved communion. I hungered for it. I'd always loved to roam, but now I wanted to roam with a juicier intent.

Still, I was no land-whisperer, no expert natural navigator, no shaman. I wasn't rooted in a single cultural tradition. I was just a woman striking out on her own. How would I set forth? What was the plan?

This idea of throwing logic and order to the wind and letting my spirit and the land be my compass was all well and good, but I had to start somewhere. Where would I begin? Where would I go? This wasn't a 'from one side of the country to the other' kind of thing. Then again, maybe I would leave it to serendipity and the mysterious dictates of magic. For if I was going to do this, I'd need to enter fully into the spirit of my endeavour. Anything less would be a tepid charade, an exercise for my mind and not my heart. And I wanted what my heart wanted. I wanted to travel lightly too, with some levity.

At the outset, I held on to one thing: I had another intimate experience of Otherness – my own. I was British by birth, Indian by descent, Canadian by upbringing, South African via my parents' birthplace. I was always going to be an outsider, so this journey would be just one more facet of my outsider-ness. The wound of living in the margins was something I carried

so deep inside me, was so much a part of me that I barely spoke about it. It was there though, everpresent. So in seeking the wild unseen, in a way I would be attempting to make contact with friends and allies. That's how I saw it, anyway. So what really did it matter what people thought? I had nothing to lose and everything to gain.