

# Nature & 2021

Okavango Delta, Botswana. Even the trees seem wilder here. The moon is high and we all opt for a glass of wine at the fire. There is no better place to celebrate the day's meaningful encounters so I pull the canvas chairs closer, and stoking the flames with some small pieces of leadwood, the warm glow of the embers creates a cozy translucent cocoon around the campfire and forest behind us. Even the giant fig trees, towering over the tented lounge and the mercury moonlit floodplain beyond, seem to be leaning in and listening. It's a beautiful scene, and peering into the flames we sit in a mellow, comfortable and contented silence. Soon, the stories begin.

## TEKST ALAN MC SMITH

This is my office, or a part of it anyway. I've lived and worked as a wilderness and wildlife guide for over three decades, and the sights, smells, impressions and energy of wild Africa have settled so deep within that wilderness is no longer a place, it's a way of life. And of all the impressions, and there are countless that can emerge, one seems to stand out: that there is something more to the experience than spellbinding outer landscapes. The beautiful panoramas and natural splendour are one thing, but there is a soul song here, a melody that awakens a



profound dance of the inner landscapes too. In fact, I cannot be sure where my job ends and my personal space begins, or where the boundary of my office and my home actually is. Or if it even exists at all. My life is a declaration to share both, and to respectfully suggest that the human experience cries out for harmony with nature, and that our natural world should not be a thing apart, but a living comfort that feeds our souls.

This now more than ever before. Because is it not true to say that our world is currently being fundamentally transformed by both social and ecological forces that can no longer be ignored? The global pandemic we all face has realigned the fabrics of our societies in inconceivable ways and we are all personally and professionally navigating through a stormy sea of changing tides. I believe that it is during these traverses that a re-examination of how, who and why we are with ourselves, our society, and our environment will naturally occur.

For when uncertainty is the only constant, the human condition yearns for a simple solace: stillness. A safe harbour, a sense of calmness. Call it what you may, but this desire for stillness allows us an opportunity to download, to unwind. To create a little distance between the thoughts of our past and the projections of our future and to be more attentive to what is in the moment. It is in this redemptive space we can restore our own self, and from where original thoughts, deeds and energies consciously emerge.

Perhaps it fair to suggest that in this desire for stillness, we have gotten little lost along the way. We assume that accessories, possessions or arrangements in our lives would do it for us, that “stuff” around us would provide peace of mind. I am certainly not suggesting that we should *not* enjoy our successes or fruits of hard work whatsoever, but perhaps modern society as a whole could reflect on the balance between these two components: the desire to acquire wealth and accessories, versus the desire to be able to step back in the moment and acquire stillness.

For me, this is where nature comes in. The wilderness experience and regular quality time in nature, on her terms that is, slows our life down. It restores and awakens within us meaningful levels of awareness and perception. It slows everything down. By paying conscious attention to the environment around us we can be both humbled and inspired by the intricacies of life, those that are restorative in nature, awakening our potential to integrate more social and ecological responsibility in what we aspire to acquire.

But with the pace of modern society, we are swamped by information and stimulation around us. We may mistake this instant availability for comfort or solace, or perhaps efficiency. With little respite from omnipresent social media and the volumes of mass information that we absorb, perhaps we need to become more consciously aware of the effect this has on us. We invariably then live either in the past (memory), or the future (imagination). Nature can create some distance between what we think, and what we think we think. Stillness is not about what has happened in our past, or what could happen in the future. It's in the moment.



I'm not for one second suggesting you need to travel to Africa to experience this. Or do you need to drop out of society and become a recluse, or that these moments can only be confined to your leisure or holiday time. They are around us all day, every day: walking barefoot on a beach, chirping birds, the feel of sunshine on your face on a cold morning, sailing, listening to giggling kids, a forest trail, the scent of rain, or gazing into the eyes of your loved one. For a moment please pause from reading, close your eyes and think of a time when you were in such a space ... how did it make you feel? Return to the campfire of your mind and spend some time there for a while ...

Is this not the most primitive, normal, natural and regenerative instinct we have? The capacity to sink down into stillness and silence, the universal dialect of attention and becoming empowered with the ancient art of perception. To rethink life. To tune into the space around you, the requirements of others and your own life energies and priorities. Natural, self-inspired and inspiring leadership is about a quiet interpretation of these, and how to translate them into meaningful personal and professional encounters. But first, its about coming close to your own self as I don't believe its possible to have a meaningful connection with others around you, without first having a meaningful connection with yourself. Transformation is first an internal process and only once you become more visible to yourself, can you become more visible to others. I believe that this process is so deeply rooted in our DNA it perhaps defines us as being human.

If this resonates with you then it could be said that the conservation of our natural world is not just about landscapes and resources. It is about this fundamental inspirational reconnection with our spiritual home, one that solitude and stillness provides. It is about a repaired connection with the basic laws of ecology that are pertinent to mankind on this planet: firstly, how perceptive am I when interacting with my own self, others and the natural world? And secondly, what is the level of positive impact that my thoughts, words and deeds regenerate?

Around the campfire we are in silence and we listen to each other's stories.



## ALAN MCSMITH



Alan McSmith is a wilderness guide and conservationist based in South Africa. His natural habitat is remote African wilderness, camping on a river and preferably close to elephant herds. His work acclaims the significance of nature in our lives, and the urgency of conserving and regenerating our natural heritage. He facilitates meaningful wilderness experiences and transformational leadership encounters, and is also an accomplished motivational speaker.

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