

From *Moose Medicine*, Part I, Chapter 3 BUFFALO RIBS

*I had an experience I can't prove.. but everything I know...tells me it was real. I was part of something wonderful, something that changed me forever; a vision of the Universe that tells us how tiny, and insignificant, and rare, and precious we all are. A vision that tells us we belong to something greater than ourselves. That we are not, that not one of us is, alone.*

*Carl Sagan*

I was looking for moose, live moose. I longed for the precious medicine they had so freely proffered to my soul at other times. That day I had problems I hoped they could solve for me—or at least, I wanted the comfort of their presence while I worked through the difficulties on my own. I needed to know how to make my life feel worthwhile and worth living. I wanted to find something to call 'beautiful' again. I keened to forget my aloneness- my 'single woman' status and be seen by the moose kingdom as a kindred soul with no labels. However, you never know what you might find instead when you go out seeking a specific experience. That overcast day in early autumn, I was to realize John Lennon's ironic statement "Life is what happens while you're planning something else."

For several hours I sloshed through the river bottoms, hoping to hear the splash or tread of a moose's wide hooves, the "woof" of a protective mother, the scraping of bulls' antler paddles against sturdy trees. Hours passed with no luck. Discouraged, I decided to let my shoes drip dry by hiking up to a plateau above the willows I'd been combing. Climbing slowly, I began to relax my expectation and found a trail with a panoramic view of the winding river and shallow ponds below. Realizing that the only way to enjoy my time was to just give in to the day the it was unfolding. I accepted that my 'medicine'- my teaching- that morning was to not find Moose. Perhaps instead I could let nature teach me whatever it had to offer, even if only by spending a few pleasant hours viewing the quiet openness around me. As I strolled along towards the edge of a meadow leading to the vast expanse of valley, I remembered the importance of giving appreciation and not always expecting to receive. With that, I let out a long breath and gazed down at the earth to thank it for its blessings. And there, right before me, down a steep slope, lay a series of old, whitened bones. There were long narrow rib shafts, a triangle-shaped shoulder bone, and bits of long, dark, curled hair from the remains of a hide. What animal met its end up this trying hill?

In my mind's eye, in a type of past vision, I saw a single bison. Separated from the herd, the terrified buffalo was being chased up the hill by a persistent pack of wolves. He was heavy, and getting tired, exhausted beyond survival. I saw his final fall and heart-wrenching demise. I pondered the life of this creature that, more than any other, for centuries had given its life for the nurturance of animal as well as human predators, even for the gratefulness of The People. I saw his wildness and imagined a keen sense of belonging with his relations; I pictured his sure and deep imprints still recorded at the river's edge and in the mud bogs and hot springs dotting southwest Montana.

I stooped to pick up one of the whitened rib bones at my feet. It spoke to me, saying, "I belong here, I need to stay here, but take me with you in spirit. Do you recall, do you see, how we still give to you even long past our death, even past the old ways of

sustenance? Remember.” I held it for a long time, turning it over in my hands to absorb the medicine in it, and then returned it to its resting place. The rib reminded me to give thanks for all living things that support us and the earth’s dependent networks. I felt the essence of the original Adam—as “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”—and in the moment better understood Adam and Eve and God and even the serpent, all winding their own ways through our lives.

Choosing another way to return to my vehicle, I slid down the ridge. Tiny wildflowers under my feet dotted each moss-covered rock, and in the distance, I saw a herd of bison leisurely making their way across the valley. They were related, effortlessly, to one another. In seeing their life lumbering along, and though my own dreams of having family and children had lost the meat off their bones, everything around me was still pulsing. Death was offering its decay to create a fertile soul in my life.

Years earlier, when my dreams and I were young and had not yet been bleached by the relentless passing of seasons, my new husband and I were ensconced in college on the eastern slopes of Rocky Mountain National Park. That afternoon, between his books and the glare of his study lamp, my husband looked over at me and asked, “Why don’t we take a drive up into the park?” A quick nod from me, and soon the ice of early spring tugged at our economy-line tires as we wound up the roads, still empty before the tourist season.

“Are the herds down this far yet?” I asked the ranger at the park entrance, hoping that melting snows would allow us a glimpse of elk.

“Oh, no,” he laughed, his lips showing a slight curl of disdain. “It’s far too early. We’ve had no sightings.”

The sun was strong and our cares light, so I was content to enjoy the scenic beauty of fir-lined slopes and crystalline snow. As we rounded a corner, though, I was suddenly seized by a certain knowing. “Stop!” I told my husband.

“Why?” he asked, incredulous. “There’s nothing special here.”

“Yes there is! Right there, over the second ridge. I think there’s a whole herd of elk behind it.”

We couldn’t even see over that second ridge, let alone the first, but he obligingly pulled off the road anyway. We strained to see or smell some sign of the dusty brown four-leggeds. “Nothing,” he reiterated.

“Yes,” I said. “Come with me, quickly. Quiet!” I was soon tramping into the hushed woods. A mile later, when we dropped over the second ridge, we saw them—at least two hundred elk clumped in large, circular groupings, moving closer up the slope to us. He sprinted downwind to come up from the back of the herd. As I waited in a grove of trees, the herd came trotting up at a strong pace, the ground shaking from their hooves. Their urine-soaked musk offended my nostrils, and at the same time I keenly felt, in my body, their sense of family and kinship, complete with grandparents and children and community. How I longed to run with them!

I almost got my chance. The herd veered and were upon me before they or I realized it. Then I saw it; not three feet in front of me, from left to right, ran a faint dusty trail,

apparently one of their known paths. I had chosen to “hide” right beside it. As they thundered past, all I could do was lean in amazement against a small tree I hoped might protect. Several of the elk didn’t even seem to see me; others did not notice until they were almost past. One calf startled and slowed down when it saw me, his eyes round and ears intent. The force of the herd bumped him off the path toward me within touching distance, though my hands stayed at my sides. His mother veered toward me, too, nickering a rebuke to her innocent one. The baby reluctantly trotted back into the motion of the herd and rejoined the communal passing.

Long after the last straggler passed by, I remained where I was, wordless and breathless, still leaning against the tree whose slow pulse helped mine to slow, too. My mouth remained open a long time.

I didn’t know then how my own longing for family would never be quite fulfilled or how short the time would be for running with my own herd. I also didn’t know how much that one moment of belonging would shelter me in the days to come, feeding my spirit and seeing me through child loss. It would also have to see me through divorce, poverty, and despair. Still, finding the herd was an event that lodged so deep in my soul that it continues to nurture me to this day. How I “knew” that a herd was “just over the ridge” is still a mystery. When the Earth takes you in, somehow you know that no matter how your life turns out, you’re going to be all right.

A felt sense of a confident connection pervaded me both that day early on in my marriage and later as a single woman when I found the buffalo bones. The elk encounter introduced me to nature as a source of natural belonging; the buffalo confirmed it. With pre-cognition about the elk, I was drawing close to the heartbeat of the wilds. With the memory of the buffalo’s life and last moments, I was bringing forth a wild knowledge born long ago and running it into a thankfulness for the present stream of days. It is always a privilege to be connected with something larger than the small self, the self-contained life. It is always good when the world teaches and inspires you by its ineffable knowing.

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