

Black Lion: Alive in the wilderness

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WE CAME ACROSS HIM SUDDENLY. AS WE EMERGED FROM THE REEDS, there he was on the riverbank: a fully grown male lion, hardly three metres away. His pitch-black mane was matted with the blood of his last kill; flies hovered over his sinewy body, their buzzing thick in the afternoon heat.

For a moment I thought he was dead, because of the pungent scent of blood and the flies. But his position told me that he was sleeping. As I looked more closely I saw that his eyes were twitching, his nostrils expanding and contracting with each drawn breath. My blood ran cold. He was very much alive, and just one paw slash away. And I was all that stood between him and the eight trailists in my care.

I swore softly under my breath as I loaded my .458 Brno. At the click of the bolt as it took the round into the chamber, his eyes flew open. He leapt up, growling, his blazing eyes scorching mine. I sensed my backup guide retreating slowly to a safe place with the trailists, heard the growls and rustling of another lion as it emerged from the reeds behind us and ran across the river. The lion stood before me, snarling and twitching his tail, and slapping at the ground with his massive front paws. The thunderous rumble of his growling reverberated through my stomach, turning my insides to liquid. My knees were shaking so hard I could barely stand, but still I stood, my firearm pointed at him, my finger resting on the trigger, ready to shoot.

I knew any mistake could kill me, that he was ten times stronger than I was, that even if I fired the gun as he leapt it might fire wide, or jam. But I also knew that, from the depths of my heart, I did not want to shoot him. My deepest intention was to leave him unharmed, and my best chance of walking away unharmed myself was to communicate this intention. And so I spoke, softly, more in my mind than aloud.

‘Calm down, my brother. I know you are powerful. I did not mean to disturb you. Let us go on our way and we will leave you in peace ...’

As I spoke, the intention behind the words seemed to reach him, and gradually he began to calm down, while still keeping his gaze on me. But when I took a step backwards, he growled again and slapped the earth, his hot pungent breath thick in my nostrils. I kept inching backwards, kept talking to him, kept my eyes on his. Slowly his growls softened to a rumble. Slowly, his mane lowered. He dropped his shoulders and sank to the ground. A deep silence overcame everything, no

birds were calling, the wind was still, the baboons that had been barking up on the hills had gone quiet.

When I had backed a good distance away, I turned around and walked back to the group, who were sitting under a splendid thorn some seventy metres from the lion. I gestured to my backup guide – a young woman whom I was mentoring called Bonangiphiwe Mbanjwa – to keep watch, then lay on a bed of leaves, absorbing what had happened. My body trembled with the power of this encounter: the memory of his burning eyes, the reverberations of his growling. I felt my soul leap within me, enlivened by the lion's courage and wisdom, by the sense that I'd been touched by something mysterious and divine. My body sang with the knowledge that the lion was sleeping seventy metres away. My heart quietened as I listened to the sweet piercing song of the gorgeous bushshrike, from the depths of a nearby magic guarri bush, until the sound carried me into sleep.

It is this encounter that gave me the wilderness name Black Lion. One of the trailists called me this, remarking on how the lion and I had mirrored each other – the lion with his heavy black mane, me with the abundant black beard that I had at that time. I embraced this name not out of arrogance nor believing I had 'faced down' a lion. I took it on as a reminder always to embrace the wild lion inside me; to instil in myself the power of sharing, as the lions share their kills with the pride, and with the hyenas and vultures that follow; to instil in myself the power to fiercely protect what I love, as the lioness protects her cubs; to instil humility and deep respect for the creatures who share this earth; and to remind myself that life is precarious, each moment a gift to be savoured. I am not a lion whisperer. I am an ordinary wilderness guide who has simply grasped some small part of the great wisdom of wild animals and the wilderness, and learnt a little about how to share this with other humans. As a guide, I share wild paths with wild creatures, I swim in the waters of wild rivers, where animals drink and wallow with freedom. I embrace both the scorching sun and the tumultuous midnight thunderstorms.

My wilderness stories do not come from me. They have been told by rivers and streams, by the lonely buffalo and the woodland dove, by fluttering butterflies and singing frogs and the slow creeping chameleon, by fragile flowers blooming in a decaying stump in the heart of the wilderness. These elements have birthed me, and I am one with them. I breathe the same air as the lion roaring for the moonrise, as the dung beetle foraging underfoot.

Walking in the wilderness has enriched my life beyond the telling of it. Every encounter with wild creatures has brought symbolic messages to me, teachings that I could never have found in a textbook. It has been my life's path to rekindle the wildness in all of us, to bring people into the

presence of wildness and help open their souls to its beauty, wisdom and infinite power to heal. I am the black lion who helps people discover the wild animal within.

I am the black lion who roars for peace and harmony on Great Mother Earth.

I am the black lion, alive in the wilderness.