

An excerpt from

TAMED BY A BEAR: COMING HOME TO NATURE-SPIRIT-SELF

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Sparkling waves rolled up the gentle slope and melted away beneath an undulating line of bubbly sand. One wave. Then another. Two more. Another.

I tried to enjoy their steady calm. It was eighty degrees in Santa Monica on a cloudless day in February. The breeze was slight, just right. In the distance surfers raced to catch each fresh inviting swell. Two dolphins pursued a small motorboat, leaping in unison, gliding below, then leaping again. I sat in the sand with my jeans and sleeves rolled up to bare sun-starved winter skin to this deliciously warm air. Swimsuits of every shape and size paraded past, legs and arms and bellies swaying between me and the blue waves.

I should have been happy. I was living the last, and most elusive, of my big dreams. Five months earlier my first book had been published—a memoir showing my

deepening connection with nature—and I was having the time of my life doing readings in cities across the country and crashing for the night in the homes of friends. Here in Los Angeles, a last-minute scramble for a place to stay had landed me in a stately Mediterranean house of cool wooden floors and smooth white archways, its windows thrown open to mourning doves cooing at dawn among the eaves and palm trees waving high over birds-of-paradise in the garden below. And now—a perfect day with a perfectly hot sun, made for lolling on the beach.

The trouble was, I couldn't enjoy it. Even worse, I didn't exactly know why. It wasn't the readings. Last night's bookstore event had gone well as usual, a magic taking hold as people listened. Tomorrow I would read at a hip new literary series in a Hollywood bar, a once-a-month soiree where emerging writers tried out edgy or heartwarming lines in front of an enthusiastic crowd. No, the readings felt wonderful. Then what was it?

There was, of course, the realization I'd had that morning. Lying in bed, with doves murmuring inches from the window, I'd felt a weight descend: trips like this just weren't worth it—certainly not in terms of book sales, and maybe not by any kind of reckoning. I was late to this truth; others had been saying it for years.

But did that really explain it—this feeling of something nibbling away at my middle, and going on nibbling, oblivious to my squirming? It was a gnawing that left me restless, edgy, irritable—what writers of an earlier age called the fantods, though I didn't know this word at the time. I just knew something was out of place, not quite adding up. I felt awful. And I hated it.

From my spot on the sun-drenched sand, I called a friend who used to live in LA. We'd walked this beach together many times, and I wanted her to know I was thinking of her, and of all those blustery days we'd watched the sea roll gray and green under a dense and foggy sky.

"You wouldn't believe how gorgeous it is today!" I said. "Wish you were here." Then I told her about the edgy feeling eating away at my middle, the sense that all was not well.

"It sounds like at this point you were expecting something more," she said quietly.

I hung up the phone feeling even more discontent.

2

Back home in Boulder, I repacked myself into layers of long johns and turtlenecks and braced for March snows. Nestled against the eastern face of the Rockies, Boulder gets its biggest dumps of snow in March and April, which lends some credence to the saying that snow in Boulder never lasts. If a blizzard arrives in December—but it usually doesn't—the snow will indeed stick to sidewalks and driveways, slicking them with black ice for the rest of the winter. I've taken more than one tumble on that invisible glaze. But if snow arrives in March and April—and it often does, a foot-deep layer of wet heavy white accumulating in an afternoon or a night—the warming sun of spring will melt it to nothing in a day or so. Native plants along the Front Range have evolved great tricks for outwitting the spring blizzards. My favorite, the pasqueflower, grows a layer of furry hairs on the outside of its stem and three huge lavender petals to keep the snow a millimeter or two away from delicate flesh.

But after six years in Boulder, I wasn't yet native, and I dreaded the spring snows.

Plus there were those sliding book stats. Say what people would about book tours, they did keep the Amazon numbers in a more rarefied range. Every book trip, every public talk bumped the sales number up, where it would hover for a few days as if trying to make up its mind. Such a fragile thing, that graph of rising numbers, shooting upward like a fledging bird on delicate wings, suddenly freed to the sky, fluttering, joyous! My heart would stop. Maybe this time momentum would catch the bird and hold it aloft. But so far it hadn't happened. The line would turn downward again, and with it my heart.

I knew full well that watching numbers was futile. Knowing it only made the gnawing inside grow sharper, more determined.

And what about the next stage of my life? I'd had the feeling that this book would lead somewhere new—exactly where, I had no idea, but it would likely be a place to settle in and make a contribution. My friend had been right; I was expecting something more to open up. And I was eager for that next assignment. In each new city I checked out nature centers and environmental departments in universities and amount of winter sunshine. Tim was self-employed too, so we could move wherever we wanted. We could turn on a dime.

But the days, and then weeks and months, were creeping by with no appealing prospects on the horizon. One tenure-track position in religious studies opened up in a city known for its sunshine. The job description sounded as if it had been written for me, which is saying something, considering my specialty in the field is rather new and vanishingly small. I thought about it; I gave a lecture at that university. But did I really want academic work anyway—another decade or two of begging students to focus their research questions and reformat their reference lists? In the end I didn't even apply.

I kept thinking about the book readings—how an audience might begin as disparate, mildly curious individuals but almost always ended as something else, something more like a community. How, as listeners opened to a story, their eyes wide as children's, a silence would steal across the room and settle quietly like a blanket around their shoulders. How my own heart softened and opened each time I watched it happen. How each reading, each talk, reminded me that all of us—animals, trees, rocks, galaxies

—are in it together on this journey. Each reading took me to that still and loving center where we're all connected and we're all whole. I wanted more of *that*.

So I kept on setting dates for book events, sending out bios and photos for publicity, making travel plans, and calling faraway friends. And kept on being dogged by the sinking realization that not only did we not have the money to support this habit—and it was using a frightful amount of energy, both mine and the Earth's—but also that in the long run it would never, ever be worth it.

3

As February slid into March and snow glistened outside the window, my inner crisis deepened. I felt stymied, all forward motion grinding to a halt. I might have been seventeen again, waiting for my real life to begin. Almost forty years later, with all those decades of living behind me, how could I possibly be staring again at the same impasse?

“I don’t know where I belong!” I wailed to Tim, my longtime love. The book had gathered up seemingly unrelated pieces of experience and fitted them into one place. Writing it had required all of me—a demand that was both joyous and satisfying to fulfill. At last I’d found my real work! And now I wanted more of it. Or at least more of what “being a writer” had to give. The fact that most of the time I didn’t actually feel like writing seemed beside the point; I barely registered it.

More troubling by far was what the plunging book numbers seemed to suggest about the future. What if the “something more” I wanted from writing never did materialize? What did that say about all the beliefs I held dear—of the Universe as a friendly, welcoming place, ready to make room for each person’s gifts? Ready to make room—more to the point—for mine?

A chasm was opening in front of me.

I sat around the house feeling unglued. Reading, my go-to solace, held no pleasure. For the first time in decades I found it difficult to concentrate on a book. I got hooked on phone games instead, losing hours at a time to Solitaire or Words with

Friends. Desperate to fill more time, I downloaded Angry Birds and spent several days nonstop lobbing tiny bird bombs into impenetrable fortresses.

Finally I had to agree with the small part of me that whispered, “This is madness.” With Tim as my witness—so I’d be less tempted to change my mind—I deleted the app and all its data from my phone.

And then, in mid-March, I started my next four sessions with the shaman.

4

Chris was a woman of near sixty, born and raised in the Midwest, who in her early forties, with two decades of a business career behind her, had been called to work with what she called Spirit Helpers. Because the friend who had recommended Chris to me was a down-to-earth and gutsy woman, and especially because this same friend had been a Rhodes Scholar, I figured Chris couldn't be too much of a slouch.

On the phone with Chris for the first time, months before, I'd heard a calm and thoughtful voice, warm and reassuring but no-nonsense. At the time I'd just finished writing the book, and I needed clarity about what was to happen next—all the questions I'd let slide during the writing process. Plus I was dreading the upcoming months of waiting until the book would finally emerge. An edge had crept into my voice—impatient, self-justifying; I can hear it now in the recordings of those sessions, though at the time I was anything but aware of it.

Chris practiced a straightforward kind of conversation with spirit. She said that each person is watched over by their own Spirit Helper, often an animal or other being, who loves and supports a person throughout their life and who provides a face—a point of contact, a relationship—for connecting with spirit. Chris called Helpers “ambassadors of the Living Spirit”; they are always ready to share advice and wisdom from a source beyond human knowing if only a person gets up the courage to ask for it. Chris, who had been tuning her ear to Helpers for twenty years, was practiced in hearing each person's

Helper, and on the phone she acted as a translator, listening quietly for a few moments and then passing along what she'd heard.

From the start, more than a year earlier, I had loved those phone sessions. I took to them like a duckling to water, wading onto the surface and bobbing happily. In each session I felt deeply listened to, the desires of my heart known and addressed, often without my having to articulate them. Every suggestion for the next steps to take arrived in down-to-earth language, with words that often carried the ring of my own vocabulary. Each session gave me the sense that help is available for this murky thing called life. I felt deeply nourished.

My Helper, whom Chris identified as Bear, got down to business right away. I was given affirmation for the path I was taking as well as suggestions for how to walk in it more effectively. Bear did hint ever so gently that when it came to listening to spirit I had a great deal more to learn—that even though I'd just written a whole book about spirit in nature, I had barely scratched the surface. “If one believes that help from a source outside human knowing is not possible, it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Bear said one day, an impersonal generality that gives me a chuckle because now I can hear the clue that Bear was offering—politely, obliquely—about *my* beliefs and *my* next step. But at the time I was tone-deaf to his nuances.

I did have to agree with Bear's point, however. For no matter how much my heart was feasting on the sessions, my mind was drumming it in to me, with the *rat-a-tat* of a woodpecker at a tree, that this Helper business was likely all a crock. Communicating directly with anything unseen is not possible, it said, and to think otherwise suggests some serious misperceptions of reality.

It's not that I didn't believe that something greater than human wisdom exists. I liked to hint now and then, as people do, about "the Universe," a word satisfyingly vague, not like *God* or *spirit* or any of the old words belonging to religions we had left behind or now regarded—often for good reason—with mistrust.

But to speak directly with that Universe? Let alone in a conversational, friendly way? Not possible. What happened in those sessions offended every rational notion I held dear.

For one thing, there was that word *shamanism*. It was the term Chris used to describe her path, but it made me wince. I was aware how contentious it is, how it triggers pain for every Native person I have ever met or whose writings I have read. *Shaman* is a Tungus word—from the northern Indigenous peoples of Siberia—to name the person who keeps the human community safe and healthy by communicating with all those who are not human, such as the animals or the land or the deceased. Decades ago, white anthropologists took the word and applied it to any Indigenous nature-based healer and spirit worker they found anywhere in the world. So when a white person calls themselves a shaman, using that Indigenous term, what Indians usually hear is that the white person is trying to steal or at least copy Indigenous wisdom, Indigenous sacred traditions, Indigenous ways. It's the whole of colonialism summed up in a single word.

"Why wouldn't people just call themselves healers? Or ministers? Or soul-doctors—something like that?" an Indian friend of mine asked, staring sharply at me, when I brought it up with her. "Why do you have to use an Indigenous word?" It was a good question.

Then there was that translating business. Chris said she heard a spirit-being talking with her, giving her things to say, but how did she know it wasn't her own voice? I didn't for a moment think she was *trying* to make it up—she had far too much integrity for that—but neither did I think it was possible to hear across the great divide between the visible and the invisible, at least not without the message getting considerably skewed by the messenger. Maybe spirit does flow like pure water, but doesn't every pitcher change the water's shape? A person's own physiology, their personality, their social context, their history—it all bends what they hear, doesn't it?

Not to mention how easy it is to fool ourselves. Perception is such a shifty character! A shape-shifting octopus, now rough-skinned and blotchy on the mottled reef, now lifting off in a burst of inky darkness and smooth writhing limbs. We thought we knew what we were seeing, but the reality wasn't what we saw. I'd long ago heard the parable of the snake from centuries-old Vedanta. A man walking along a road at dusk sees a snake and runs in great fear. But the next day at noon, coming to the same point in the road, he sees it was not a snake at all but only a coil of rope. Snake or rope? It can be devilishly hard to tell. "Now we see through a glass, darkly," wrote the apostle Paul to the ancient Corinthians, which pretty much summed up my own view on the matter. I may have yearned for reality to be different, but the truth was—as my industrious woodpecker of a mind never ceased to remind me—that knowledge beyond the world of the five senses is impossible, and even here in this tactile world so much depends on your perspective, your point of view.

And then there was the biggest bugaboo of all: How could I trust anyone who claimed to speak words from God? After decades of studying religion, I was aware that

recorded history, at least in the parts of the world I knew best, might well be written as a single ginormous argument between people on one side—individuals, groups, nations—saying, “God told us this!” and on the other side, “No! God told us *that!*” All the murder, rape, and pillage committed in the name of the divine, the forced conversions and slavery imposed through supposedly divine orders—it all took place side by side with kindness to strangers, sharing with the poor, and humbleness of heart, virtues also supposedly recommended by that same divine. So how could I possibly believe anyone’s claims to hear the “real” God? Like most modern people, I was sensitive to any whiff of “God said this,” and I regarded all such claims with a big dose of skepticism. To be perfectly honest, I discounted them all. Every last one. New Agers who claimed to hear Spirit Guides or Helpers were, to my mind, even less trustworthy. For no person, as far as I knew, could really hear God. There was no Extendable Ear reaching to heaven.

All of which left me living a huge contradiction, as even I had to admit. During book readings I was talking with audiences about how wonderful life could become if only we listened to animals, trees, and Earth more deeply, and in between trips I would sign up for more sessions of listening, through Chris, to my animal Spirit Helper. Yet, though Bear said during those sessions that I had a facility for hearing the Helpers, and though Bear recommended that I allow my connection with spirit to deepen and flourish, for without that connection a person walks crooked through life—a hitch in their step—and though Bear said plainly that one of my contributions in life would have to do with listening to wisdom from another realm and offering it to others, I didn’t have confidence in any of what I heard. I couldn’t bring myself to believe it was real.

Though I was enjoying the sessions with Chris immensely, I was having a hard time taking them at all seriously.

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On the phone with Chris in mid-March I tried to put my dilemma into words—loss of direction, too much snow—but before I could get very far, she suggested a shift. Up to this point in the sessions Chris had acted as translator and interpreter, and I would listen while she passed along what she received from Bear. Today, instead, she would stand by, taking notes, while I listened directly to Bear. She called it “going on a Journey” with one’s Helper. “Want to give it a try?” she asked.

I closed my eyes and immediately sensed a bear—good-humored and warmhearted—rubbing paws together gleefully and chuckling at me. The sensation was so unexpected, and so welcoming, that I decided to play along. What harm could come of seeing where this fantasy led? There was a sense of sympathy too, as if this bear, though amused at the situation, was also commiserating in a kindly way.

I spoke aloud what I was sensing from Bear so that Chris could hear. Why did it feel so strange to voice what I was experiencing? It took me a moment to remember that though I had grown up in a praying family and a praying church, I’d always shrunk from speaking prayers aloud. This Journey was the closest thing to prayer I had experienced in years, and narrating it aloud made my skin crawl with self-consciousness.

I swallowed hard and kept going. Some images appeared of a locomotive rolling through lush green land—images that Chris and I spent a few moments looking at together, noting but not analyzing. Then a picture of a wide-open blue sky with the thought, “It’s okay right now not to read books; just stare into space if you like.” A

feeling that all would be well if I continued to let my mind empty and allowed it to stay that way “because that’s one route to appreciating spaciousness.” Not to worry about how I would make a living in the future; it would not be a problem. And then a strong sense of something like this: that the end of the story had not been written yet, and I shouldn’t jump to conclusions. That if I could calm my impatience, the story would go a lot smoother.

Soon the session was over.

6

There is a danger in describing how this path unfolded for me. One person's experience recorded in detail can leave the impression that there is a pattern, a usual way for things to happen. Nothing could be further from the truth. One person might slip easily into meditative Journeys while another spends years practicing, yet each is walking in the center of their own road, discovering what is theirs alone to discover. The Universe helps people toward clarity through many different means. There is no formula, no right way. Each traveler is held by the same loving hands, guided by the best wisdom toward their own particular destination. For some travelers the path may include meditative or shamanic Journeys; for others it may not.

In my case, though I had an aptitude for Journeys, I stumbled on this speaking-aloud business. I could understand what Chris meant when she said that it tended to help the mind stay focused on what was happening in the Journey. I could even appreciate that recording a Journey, as she recommended, would help jog the memory later about its nuances. But speaking aloud? It just felt strange.

Nevertheless, two days later when for the first time in my life I fumbled on my own toward that inner connection with Bear, I did it with cell phone in hand, narrating what I experienced into a phone app—modern technology applied to an old, old kind of meditation.

Just after six that morning I climbed out of bed and wrapped myself in a blanket to ward off the night's chill. The world was dark and still. Tim wouldn't be up for a while

yet, and Bodhi, our blue heeler mix, was still curled up in his favorite spot on the sofa. I turned on the phone recorder and tried to bring my mind into a still center.

Immediately images of the locomotive returned. *Click-e-ta, click-e-ta, click-e-ta.* A train moving along the tracks, steady, humming. I described what I saw and heard into the phone. There was a feeling of confidence in the train's momentum, as if I were suddenly a passenger on that train, traveling swiftly forward. How I wished for such a feeling in real life! What would it take for me to travel that smoothly? Then a thought, like a very gentle voice in my ear. I spoke it into the phone: "Notice how putting yourself there imaginatively already makes you feel more put together. More hearty. More here." It was true; the sturdy rhythm beneath my imaginary feet was helping my physical voice grow a little stronger. "Try starting here. Every day," the gentle presence suggested.

Just then, more than three miles from our house, a train approaching town laid on its horn. Though all our windows were shut tight against the wintry dawn, the sound of the horn slipped inside the house and into my quiet time with Bear. The phone mic even picked it up. "Is there more about being on a train?" I asked, wanting to understand the image more fully.

The train blared again. *Whooooo. Whoooo-hoooo.*

I waited for more insight. Then waited a little more. I had no idea where to go from here. Finally it dawned on me: this not-knowing point in the conversation was exactly how I felt in outer life. As soon as I spoke that thought, a new suggestion arose: that just as I was learning to trust that some little piece of a picture would show up in the Journey, this would be good to practice in outer life as well.

The train bellowed once, then again. A double exclamation point.

As the train receded and finally grew silent, different images appeared. I caught a glimpse of jigsaw pieces—familiar from years I’d spent putting puzzles together in childhood. What was it about puzzle pieces? Bear responded immediately: “They come in from different corners. You sometimes have to search a while for the right one, the one that fits. But when it fits, it *really* fits. There’s no making it fit. It’s *made* to fit.”

That’s when I lost it, sobbing quietly into the phone. How fervently I longed for such a fit, how afraid I’d become that it would never be possible!

Bear’s thoughts continued. “There will be no sense of having to trim the corners. It is a smooth and perfect fit because it was cut that way.” And then a piece of advice: “Reside in the feeling that you know so well from hundreds of hours of putting puzzles together—a piece slipping into place with the ease of water flowing downhill. Look for *that*.” Bear explained: “Don’t get sidetracked by the pieces that almost fit. Look instead for the one that slides rightfully into place. You will know it when you feel it.”

My voice was growing lighter, almost playful, with each passing minute. Finally I glimpsed an image of a large puzzle completely put together and heard the Helper say, “Take comfort from knowing that this piece fits into a larger picture. There is an intention behind it.”

This was followed by a feeling of completion, except for one parting image, a bear standing up with one forearm placed quietly across the heart: a greeting, a pledge. “Remember the heart connection. Come here often.”

I thanked Bear, turned off the recorder, and glanced at the clock. In only twenty minutes my life had changed.

Something big had just happened, though I couldn't grasp exactly what. This much I knew: I'd experienced an unseen partner in this conversation. All those years I'd spent praying as a young person, sending out pleas to a huge and empty sky, but now, at last, I had heard someone speaking back. The words felt familiar yet unfamiliar as well. They were not mine, yet I felt their truthfulness in my body, in my heart. I heard their message in the silence of my mind and then heard it punctuated in the "real" world. In a twist I couldn't have engineered, a train sounded its horn across town at the very moment I was experiencing the sensation of being a railway passenger.

Something more than I could fathom or control was going on here.