

To Walk in Beauty

By Kavita Byrd

In the beginning of all things,
wisdom and knowledge were with the animals;
for Tirawa, the One Above, did not speak directly
to man. He sent certain animals to tell men that he showed
himself through the beasts, and that from them,
and from the stars and the sun and the moon,
man should learn. Tirawa spoke to man through his works.

- Chief Letakots-Lesa, Pawnee Tribe, c. 1904[1]

Living in harmony with the rhythms and interrelationships of the Natural World is essential for all those seeking to fully participate in the unfoldment of our planet, our culture...and our Selves. Attunement to these rhythms and interrelationships confers upon us a true sense of *belonging*...where *being alive* becomes a unique melody sung within the polyphonic Choir of Life.

However, living in accord with Nature presents great challenges. We live in a culture that esteems the Intellect...that no longer listens to the wisdom spoken through the animals and plants...and through the stars and the sun and the moon. And – even if we did want to listen - many of us live in immense cities so very far removed from the animals and plants who give their lives to nourish us...cities whose bright lights outshine the stars in the night sky. As a result, many of us embrace perspectives, lifestyles and belief systems that lack a harmonic resonance with Nature's Song. And this lack of harmonic resonance can be the source of physical, psychological and spiritual dis-ease.

*Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner – what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.*

~ Rainer Maria Rilke[2]

The link between disharmony and dis-ease is clearly recognized in Navajo healing ceremonies - known as *hataals* ('sings') - which seek to heal individuals by resolving their underlying source of disharmony. During the *hataal*, sacred song, chant and dance play prominent roles in the efforts of the *hataali* (sacred singer) to restore the afflicted individual to a state of *hozho* (translation: 'to walk in beauty') - where life is lived in harmonic resonance with *all that is*.

As revealed in their communal healing dances, the Kung People of the Kalahari also rely upon vocalization and movement to restore/maintain their harmonious relationship with Nature. During the healing dance, the intense singing and rhythmic clapping of the Kung women 'boils' the *num* (life energy) of their men as they dance around a central fire. The men then direct this

boiling *num* toward a truly holistic form of healing:

“For the Kung, healing is more than curing, more than the application of medicine. Healing seeks to establish health and growth on physical, psychological, social, and spiritual levels; it involves work on the individual, the group, and the surrounding environment and cosmos”.[3]

During his experience of a night long Kung dance, Laurens van der Post felt the *num*-inspired voices and movements of the Kung reach out beyond the fire to establish a harmonic rapport with the wild animals in the surrounding darkness. Gradually, the voices of the animals – the lions, ostriches, night plovers, owls,...and cicadas – began to join in with the voices of the Kung...creating:

“such an atmosphere of oneness and belonging between all that ... I felt that I, who had come so far from so remote a world, was no longer a stranger, standing alone and isolated, but someone who had found sanctuary in an ancient temple participating for the first time in an act of natural Communion with one the greatest congregations of life ever gathered.”[4]

The ability to establish this degree of harmonic rapport also resides within many traditional herding cultures...where it provides a heightened awareness of the wellbeing of their domestic animals – and allows them to use sound to alleviate disharmony within them. This ability is exquisitely represented in the film, *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, in which Mongolian herders use song and music to restore harmony to a female camel who – disoriented by the trauma of giving birth – initially rejects her newborn colt. Upon hearing the song and music, the camel’s innate mothering ability is reawakened...and she tenderly invites her colt to suckle. ‘Mothering songs’ for domestic species – e.g. sheep, goats, cows – are also part of the rich heritage of the traditional herding cultures of Tuva and Peru[5].

Listening To The Songs Of Nature

The capacity of traditional cultures to use sound to maintain/restore a harmonious relationship with the Natural World is grounded in their ability to *listen*...to ‘tune in’ to the sounds of the world around them. For the herder-hunters of the Siberian regions of Tuva and Sakha, living creatures – as well as inanimate objects and landscapes – manifest their Life force through sound; the herder-hunters move into resonance with this Life force through sound mimesis – where their voices spontaneously reproduce and interact with:

“the ambient sounds of the natural world: the calls of wild and domestic animals; the reverberant echo of cliffs and jazz-like syncopated rhythms of stream water bubbling over stones; the multiphonic howling of wind blowing across open steppe.”[6]

According to musicologist Louis Sarno, the Bayaka People of Central Africa share this amazing ability to ‘tune in’:

“It’s well known that wives will know if the men have been successful on a hunting trip just from the change in the bird calls in the forest. When walking through dense rain forest, one can sometimes not see 10 feet in any direction. But, by tuning in to sounds of water, wind and birds, a Bayaka can easily find his or her way.”[7]

This close attunement to Nature has gifted the Bayaka with songs that are an extension of the music of the rain forest. And the Bayaka weave these songs into nearly every event of their

lives – be it mushroom gathering or a hunting party’s departure, a wedding or a funeral. The call-and-response structure of these songs – which reflects the dynamism of their relationship with Nature – creates “an aural environment of beauty that harmonizes [them] naturally with the sounds of forest birds, crickets and cicadas...”[8]

In the late 1800’s, Me-dee-kes - a member of the Tsimshian Tribe of British Columbia – told a missionary that the songs of his people were also gifts bestowed upon them as a result of their ability to listen:

“...mostly we got them from things around us. We would get a song from the whistling of the trees when the wind was blowing, from the rippling of the stream upon the mountain sides or from the roaring, dashing waves on the great salt seashore, from the great storm or tempest or from the singing of birds and the voices of different kinds of animals. There is song in everything.”[9]

How Song Facilitates Harmonic Resonance

The capacity of these songs to establish a harmonic rapport with Nature is firmly grounded in both ancient mythology and modern science. According to the Vedas of ancient India (and many other mythologies), all existence came from sound and through sound; thus, the world is harmonic vibration...*Nada Brahma: God-Sound*[10]. Science also affirms that the universe began with sound: *the Big Bang*...and all existence resulting from that ‘bang’ is harmonic vibration. The planets share a harmonic relationship as they orbit the sun – and similar harmonic relationships can be found in the structure of the atom[11]. Each atom carries its own unique vibratory signature; each sings its own quantum song.

All greater complexities of Life – both animate and inanimate – therefore have a resonant vibrational frequency based largely upon their atomic composition. However, our body’s overall vibrational frequency is more than simply a composite of the resonant frequencies of our organs, bones and tissues. For optimal wellbeing, our body’s frequency must be ‘fine-tuned’ moment-to-moment by Nature’s rhythms – by the time of day, the season, the phase of the moon – as well as by the vibrations of the sounds in the world around us.

The interrelationships between Nature’s rhythms, the vibratory nature of sound, and their impact upon our *beings*, are beautifully expressed in classical Indian music. The inspired composers of this music recognized that the rhythms of Nature fine-tune us in a manner similar to the way that a musical instrument’s vibrating string influences the vibrational frequencies of other surrounding objects. They therefore transposed the *Nada Brahma* underlying Life’s rhythms and interrelationships into the audible range – and created specific *ragas* (melodic patterns) for specific times of day, seasons...even specific positions of the planets and stars. According to Sufi musician/mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan, “every note of Indian music corresponds with a certain planet; every note has a certain color; every note denotes a certain pitch of the animal world, a certain pitch of nature”[12]. And each of these notes quickens our body - moving the vibrations of our cells, tissues and organs into harmonic resonance not only with the music...but with the *Nada Brahma* underlying Life itself.

A Temple Inside Our Hearing

The ability to hear the normally inaudible *Nada Brahma* underlying the rhythms and sounds of Nature is not restricted to inspired Indian musicians or the people of traditional cultures; Rainer

Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* suggest that this capacity is the birthright of every being: all we really need to do is to *listen*...to create what he called 'a temple deep inside our hearing'[13]. A temple where the vibrations of Nature will be received as divine gift...a temple so filled with silence that *Nada Brahma* can resound.

While the creation of such a temple requires dedication, we can begin to build it by simply going for walks in nature sanctuaries, parks...even a vacant lot. Not *trying* to hear anything...just gratefully receiving whatever sounds may be offered. And feeling the vibration of those sounds reverberate through our entire body.

How deeply the cry of a bird can move us...

Any cry that is cried out whole.

~ from *Sonnet to Orpheus XXVI* by RM Rilke[14]

Over time, as we receive the sounds bestowed upon us as we walk, we may come to know the song of the robin, of the crow, of the chickadee, of the great blue heron...a unique *beingness* reverberant within each unique song. And we will discover that the songs we hear change as we pass through forest into open field...or onto sea shore. And that some songs fall silent as the day progresses...or as the seasons turn...while others vibrantly proclaim a new arrival. And that the song of the wind rushing through fresh green leaves is so very different than when it rushes through the yellow leaves of Autumn...or through bare branches with no leaves at all.

Each step into Nature brings a subtle change in the songs we hear...offering to bring our beings into harmonic resonance with each moment of our existence.

As the *temple deep inside our hearing* expands, we may find that - even when our mind is preoccupied with the busy-ness of the day - our *being* is increasingly aware of the sounds around us. Perhaps as we rush out to our car in the morning - or leave the office at the end of a stressful day - the song of a Northern Flicker, or the authentic word of a coworker, will reverberate through us...and invite us to tune back in to the miracle of the present moment of our existence.

Even if we lack access to a natural space, Nature offers us a myriad of opportunities to attune to her vibrations. A single birdfeeder transforms a backyard into a temple of sound. A single flowering plant can orchestrate a symphony of bees...or hummingbirds. In fact, opening to Nature's rhythms within an urban or suburban environment offers a wonderful opportunity to allow the collapse of the perspective that humans - and things 'man-made' - are somehow separate from Nature's creations. For we too are the children of Nature...and thus perhaps all that humans have created is truly Nature-made...

The Polyphonic Choir Of Life

As we are ever more finely tuned to Nature's vibrations, we become like the 'listener' in Wallace Stevens' remarkable poem, *The Snow Man*:

...who...nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

~ from *The Snow Man* by Wallace Stevens[15]

Nothing...but polyphonic vibration. An infinity of unique melodies. And - as suggested in the

ancient Japanese Buddhist text, *Shoji jisso-gi*[16] – when all things sing their unique melody, their voices harmonize as the voice of the Buddha. Or – in the words of Siddhartha: the great *Om*[17]. The Song of Life...*Nada Brahma*.

This experience of hearing *Nada Brahma* – the song that created and sustains existence – releases us from the tyranny of the Intellect. And our bodies and our senses celebrate this freedom: we begin to see new wavelengths of light...we become more sensitive to the vibratory signatures of fragrances and aromas...and...

then reason slides...and sense is One
and all are joined...and all are come.
~ from *All* by JK Salmon[18]

All are come. Including each one of us. We feel Nature's now irresistible invitation to offer our voice within *her* polyphonic choir. And – free from any intellectually defined ideals of 'what singing should sound like' – we simply open our mouths...and sing out "a different movement of air / air moving around nothing / A breathing in a god / A wind"[19]. We sing out the song of our Selves. The song of our humanity. The song of *all that is*.

Notes

[1] *Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. I, Part 1*. Joseph Campbell. 1988. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York.p.8.

[2] *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*. Stephen Mitchell, ed. 1989. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York. p.144.

[3] *Boiling Energy: Community Healing Among the Kalahari Kung*. Richard Katz. 1982. Harvard University Press, Cambridge. p.34.

[4] *The Return of the Goddess*. Edward C. Whitmont. 1982. Crossroad Publishing Co., New York. p.52.

[5] For examples: see recommended music.

[6] Liner Notes from *Tuva, Among the Spirits: Sound, Music, and Nature in Sakha and Tuva*. 1999. Smithsonian Folkways.

[7] *A music that is older than the pyramids: the Bayaka summon the forest spirits in enthralling song*. Rich Heffren. 2005. National Catholic Reporter.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_28_41/ai_n13784079-

- see also: Liner Notes from *Bayaka: The Extraordinary Music of the Babenzele Pygmies and their Forest Home*. 1996. Ellipsis Arts;

[8] - *A music that is older than the pyramids: the Bayaka summon the forest spirits in enthralling song*. Rich Heffren. 2005. National Catholic Reporter.

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- see also: Liner Notes from *Bayaka: The Extraordinary Music of the Babenzele Pygmies and their Forest Home*. 1996. Ellipsis Arts

[9] *First People, First Voices*. Penny Petrone, ed. 1982. University of Toronto Press. p.125.

[10] *The Mysticism of Sound and Music: The Sufi Teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan*. International Headquarters of the Sufi Movement. 1996. Shambala Publications, Boston.

[11] *The World Is Sound – Nada Brahma*. Joachim-Ernst Berendt. 1991. Destiny Books, Rochester.

[12] *The Mysticism of Sound and Music: The Sufi Teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan*. International Headquarters of the Sufi Movement. 1996. Shambala Publications, Boston. p.61.

- [13] *The Sonnets To Orpheus*. Rainer Maria Rilke. Stephen Mitchell, trans. 1985. Simon & Schuster, Inc. p.19.
- [14] *The Sonnets To Orpheus*. Rainer Maria Rilke. Stephen Mitchell, trans. 1985. Simon & Schuster, Inc. p.123.
- [15] *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*. Stephen Mitchell, ed. 1989. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York. p.148
- [16] *The World Is Sound – Nada Brahma*. Joachim-Ernst Berendt. 1991. Destiny Books, Rochester. p.155
- [17] *Siddhartha*. Herman Hesse. Hilda Rosner, trans. 1951. New Directions Publishing Corp. p.110.
- [18] *Paint Fume Poems*. JK Salmon. 2008. p.28.
- [19] *Sonnet III, Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Robert Bly, trans. 1981. Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York. p.199.