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The Old Way

As a species, we love nature. It could not have been otherwise. For our minds and bodies came of age hundreds of thousands of years ago on the African savannahs, where certain patterns of interaction with nature contributed to our survival and psychological well-being.

Back then, for example, we sought out bodies of water, hunted, dug deep for roots, walked the land when our predators did not, and situated ourselves with landscape that could offer prospect and refuge. There were hundreds of such interaction patterns with nature. These patterns are with us still. They comprise part of our essential selves. But in our current technological world, they can be difficult to see, and they can sometimes take perverse forms. If we go to a zoo, for example, we can sometimes see a child, or even adult, throwing food or a pebble at an animal, such as a lion, leopard, or great ape—even when the signage says not to. The person is trying to get the animal's attention. Why? Perhaps it is because for the entire history of our species we have not only been aware of wild animals, but we have been aware that they have been aware of us, and the desire for that form of interaction persists in modern times. But how would we know that to be true? How would we know how people interacted with nature so long ago?

One answer is to draw on accounts from the 1950s of indigenous African people, the Bushmen, before they had virtually any contact with the West. The Bushmen had lived sustainably in the African landscape for about 35,000 years, with a lifestyle that presumably changed little during that time. Thus, to understand them then, in the 1950s, is to gain access, in a way that bones and fossils cannot offer, to aspects of who we were at an earlier time in our evolutionary history.

In 1950, the Marshall family set out into the Kalahari Desert to find and live with the Bushmen. It was hard going in their vehicles. Their tires punctured, springs broke, and grass seeds clogged the radiators, causing them to overheat, boil over, and waste precious water. The trucks sometimes sank up to their axles into the soft sand. But they eventually reached a waterhole in a spot called /Gam that had in years past been used by Bushmen. The waterhole had been usurped by an absentee Tswana rancher who grazed about twenty head of cattle in the area. The cattle were managed by a Tswana family. While the Marshalls were camping in /Gam, two Bushmen walked into their camp. They were heading deeper into the Kalahari and agreed to guide them further. Through this means, the Marshalls eventually made contact with the Ju/wasi—one of the five groups of Bushmen that inhabited the Kalahari. Between 1950 and 1955, the Marshalls made three expeditions into this area and spent a total of two years living with the Bushmen. The Marshall family consisted of the father (Laurence), mother (Lorna), son (John), and daughter (Elizabeth). The daughter at the time of the first visit was 19 years old. Based on her two years of living with the Ju/wasi, she wrote an initial book, *The Harmless People* (Thomas 1959), and a more recent one, *The Old Way* (Thomas 2006). After 1955, Laurence, Lorna, and John Marshall lived many more years with the Bushmen, and Lorna Marshall (1976) wrote *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*.

Based on the Marshall family's experiences and writings, I would like to draw out six broad interaction patterns that help us understand the Ju/wasi relationship with nature. As I mentioned above, I think these forms of interaction comprise part of our essential selves; and I will come back to them later (chapter 9) to help frame an account of how humans can flourish with technological nature.

Using Bodies, Vigorously

To sustain their life, the Ju/wasi had to exert themselves physically. Food gathering, for example, took effort. On occasions, according to Thomas (2006), the men and women would visit a mangetti grove and each carry home from fifty to one hundred pounds of nuts. Thomas describes one day foraging with women that included six miles of walking to where edible roots grew. Each woman found and dug for her own roots. The

roots lay several feet deep, often weighed between five and fifteen pounds, and would take as long as fifteen minutes to dig. The women spent the rest of the daylight digging roots. Near sunset, they began the long walk home. Some of the women were nursing their babies, and carried them, too. Other women had young children who could walk but eventually tired, and needed to be carried. Thus many of the women carried their roots and child, as much as eighty pounds. The women themselves weighed about ninety pounds. Thomas estimates that Ju/wa women walked about 1,500 miles a year.

Hunting was physically difficult, as well. Giraffes, elands, kudus, wildebeests, gemsboks, and hartebeests were the animals of choice. Bow and poison arrow were the usual means. The hunters, always men, would head out in the direction they thought promising. Upon finding a heard of wildebeests, the hunters would stalk close, and then let fly with poison arrows. An arrow itself did not kill; it was simply the means to get the poison into the animal's bloodstream. The wildebeests would bolt. At first, the victim would not feel sick. After a day, as the poison did its work, the animal would weaken. "All this time, the hunters would be following, stopping in the late afternoon to make a fire and wait for morning, picking up the trail the next day" (Thomas 2006, p. 100). After two or three days, the hunters might find the animal "dead, or standing alone in some bushes, trying to hide, or lying down, too weak to stand" (ibid.). If the latter, they would kill the animal with their spears. They skinned and butchered the animal, and each carried heavy loads of meat home. The hunters often traveled very far; the conditions could be very harsh. Marshall (1976) writes that during the hottest parts of the year, the temperature of the surface sands reached 140 degrees Fahrenheit. During the middle parts of such days, the hunters would "seek shade, scrape out a shallow hollow, urinate in it, lie down on the moistened place, and dust a light layer of sand over themselves. They wait like this till the day cools, minimizing dehydration and saving their feet" (ibid., p. 68). Another method of hunting the eland was equally demanding. The mature bull eland, in particular, with large amounts of body mass, could be overcome on especially scorching days by a runner who kept at him mile after mile. The runner could not match the eland for speed, for the eland sprints at 35 miles an hour. But eventually, after many hours of being chased in the heat, the eland overheats and can run no

more. “Then the hunter, with the last of his strength, can catch up and grab him by the tail, then kill him with a spear if he brought one, or he can push the eland over and lie on his neck to keep him from struggling and clamp his hands over the eland’s nose and mouth to stop his laboring breath” (Thomas 2006, p. 32).

Periodicity in the Satisfaction of Physical Needs and of Nature

The Ju/wasi experienced wide variation in a scarce landscape. After a successful hunt, for example, there could be large quantities of meat for several days. Other times there would be very little. Marshall writes: “The intense craving for meat, the uncertainty and anxiety that attend the hunt, the deep excitement of the kill, and finally, the eating and the satisfaction engage powerful emotions in the people” (as quoted in Thomas 2006, p. 102). Water was usually scarce. When hunters set out, “they would drink prodigious amounts of water, until their stomachs were bulging, and would do this again on returning, and in between would choose water over food if the two sources were not together” (Thomas 2006, p. 95). The Ju/wasi lived in a desert with few waterholes. Still, when the rains came, there would be brief times when the desert pans filled with water and the children would swim. There were times of activity, of hunting and foraging, of course; but these were balanced by times of leisure around camp: storytelling around a fire while food is being cooked; beading with ostrich eggshells; playing music on their hunting bows. The Ju/wa lives were responsive to sunrise and sunset, the migration of animals, when berries would be sweet, roots ready for digging and mangetti nuts ready for harvesting, clouds forming, seasons changing, heat and cold, predators resting.

Freedom of Movement

The Ju/wasi were a nomadic people. This does not mean that they moved camp every day. Far from it. But movement often solved the problems they faced. “When, for instance, a certain kind of biting maggot infested the shelters of one Ju/wa group, those people moved. They didn’t go far, but they moved” (Thomas 2006, p. 161). When waterholes dried up, food supplies dwindled, or tempers flared, they moved. Their entire

cultural system “was based upon the ability to relocate” (ibid.). How did they move so easily? Thomas writes:

We had tents, cots, sleeping bags, folding chairs and tables, maps, a compass, cameras, film, recording equipment, reference books, notebooks, pens, ink, pencils, disinfectants, antivenin kits for snakebites, brandy, cases of canned foods, boxes of dry foods, dishes, cooking pots, frying pans, knives, forks, spoons, cigarettes, matches, spare tires, auto parts, inner tubes, tire patches, jacks, toolboxes, winches, motor oil, drums of gasoline, drums of water, bars of yellow soap, towels, washcloths, toothpaste, toothbrushes, coats, sweaters, pants, boots, sneakers, shirts, underwear, socks, reading glasses, safety pins, scissors, a sewing kit, binoculars, bullets, a rifle.

The Ju/wasi had sticks, skins, eggshells, grass. (p. 62)

Environmental Checks and Balances

Thomas (2006) suggests that the Bushmen of the Kalahari represent “the most successful culture that our kind has ever known, if . . . stability and longevity are measures” (p. 6). Thirty-five thousand years is a long time for a people to inhabit an area. Perhaps part of their success lay in their limited technological prowess. They had digging sticks, bows and arrows, and spears. Digging sticks were also used to balance a load, as a lever and cane, to knock nuts from a tree, and even on occasion to fend off an attacking predator. There was not much else in terms of their tool use. Thus their practices were strongly shaped and checked by a highly demanding environment.

A compelling example is of family size. Most couples had from one to four living children. Yet they had no mechanical or medical methods of birth control. How were these limits achieved? In part they were achieved physiologically: “The strenuous work and absence of body fat prevented hunter-gatherer women from menstruating at an early age, and after the burden of lactation was added to their bodies, they did not menstruate nearly as often as do the women of agricultural and industrial societies. They certainly did not menstruate monthly” (Thomas 2006, p. 192). Once with child, a woman would breastfeed for about four years. Thomas writes that if “Ju/wa children of the Old Way were less than three or four years apart, both children would be undernourished and both could die” (ibid., p. 196). Even if it was possible to keep both young children nourished, their nomadic lifestyle allowed for a mother to carry

her belongings and one child; but to carry two young children would be physically impossible. Thus, when necessary, and it was not often, limits were also achieved by the mother practicing infanticide. As Thomas writes: “Although lactation, strenuous work, and a low-fat diet almost always prevented conception, on very rare occasions a woman conceived anyway, even though she had a nursing baby under the age of three or four, and when this happened she might have to dispose of the new baby at birth. . . . The act was called //kao, which means ‘throw down,’ ‘hurt,’ or ‘go from’” (ibid.). It was a sad time for the mother, and for the group. But everyone recognized that there was no choice.

Had there been a choice, had the mother the technological means to nourish and physically carry two babies at the same time, and had many mothers the same means, the Ju/wa group size would have grown rapidly. But then the desert’s food and water supply would have been insufficient and a large social calamity would have eventually ensued. Even at their current size, there were some age gaps: “a group might have knee children and babies, but then no other children younger than their teens. This, too, could suggest a time of hunger, when the children who would have filled that gap had died of starvation as babies” (Thomas 2006, p. 195).

Encountering the Wild

The Kalahari Desert might have initially looked wild to the Marshall family, if by wild we mean strange and unknown. But it was not wild in this way to the Ju/wasi. Thomas (2006) believes that most if not all of the land of Nyae Nyae was known to the Ju/wasi, an area covering about six thousand square miles, and that all of the existing watering holes were known: seven holes the Ju/wasi considered permanent and eight semipermanent, which could go dry during drought years. And, of course, the Ju/wasi were psychologically comfortable in their landscape. It was their home.

But still the Ju/wasi encountered wildness in other forms. The most obvious was with predators, especially leopards, hyenas, and lions. “One night in Nyae Nyae, a leopard crept up behind a man who was sitting with his wife at their fire. The leopard seized the man from behind, at the nape of the neck. His wife leaped to her feet, snatched up her digging

stick, and whacked the leopard so hard on the head that he let go of his victim. . . . Despite their preference for primates, leopards are easily discouraged” (Thomas 2006, p. 139). Hyenas occasionally could come into a camp and take bites out of sleeping people—that is their style, to get mouthfuls of flesh and not to kill first and then eat second. Lions could catch and take down what they wanted. “No other creatures of the savannah sleep as deeply or as soundly as lions, but after all, lions are the main reason for not sleeping soundly” (ibid., p. 148). Lions are also curious about their surroundings. Sometimes at night they walked into Ju/wa camps and poked around. Thomas writes of the following encounter:

I remember one night in particular. . . . I soon heard a man’s strong voice in a stern, commanding tone telling someone to leave immediately. The Ju/wasi never took that tone with one another. I came out of the tent to see what was happening, and behind some of the shelters I saw four very large lions, each three times the size of a person. . . . The speaker was ≠Toma. Without taking his eyes off the lions, he repeated his command while reaching one hand back to grasp a flaming branch that someone behind him was handing to him. He slowly raised it shoulder-high and shook it. Sparks showered down around him. “Old lions,” he was saying firmly and clearly, “you can’t be here. If you come nearer we will hurt you. So go now! Go!” . . . The lions watched ≠Toma for a moment longer, then gracefully they turned and vanished into the night. (pp. 150–151)

Wildness can also refer to states that are vast, free, and self-organizing. That is a description of nature, unencumbered and unmediated by technological artifice. In this sense of the term, the Ju/wasi encountered wildness on a daily basis. Wildness did not just exist in facing off with a lion while brandishing a burning branch. It was encountered in the periodicity described above: chasing down a bull eland in 120 degree heat; experiencing the migration of birds, the changing of the seasons, heat and cold. It was the freedom to move, and the strength to do so, and the land to do it in.

Cohabiting with Nature

Both the lions and the Ju/wasi lived by the watering holes. Lions are dangerous predators. But very rarely did lions attack the Ju/wa people. Why? Thomas (2006) offers an explanation that fills out a conception of what it means for a people to cohabitate with nature.

Part of the Old Way, according to Thomas (2006), entails avoiding conflict whenever possible. Hyenas and lions, for example, visited the watering holes at different times of the night, thus avoiding one another and avoiding conflict. The Ju/wasi followed the same principle. In the description above, when Thomas joined the women on a daylong foraging trip, she further writes that she had been up early to join that group only to discover that they were taking their leisure. She initially did not understand. She had initially thought, if there is work to do, get started on it early. That was not what happened. “So at the Ju/wa camp, we sit around not doing much of anything until almost midmorning when the sun is at forty-two degrees” (Thomas 2006, p. 112). Later she understands: Walk the veld when the predators rest. That meant being active during the hottest part of each day. The Ju/wasi were not at the top of the food chain. During the night, the Ju/wasi took precautions. They slept in a light grass shelter, a *tshu*, which Thomas believes discouraged lions from attacking, for lions like to attack from the side or behind, after having a good view of their prey. The *tshu* limits the lion’s natural inclinations. Also at night, almost always someone in the group was awake, perhaps getting warm by a fire or sipping water from an ostrich eggshell. The presence of fire and the alertness of a person may also have discouraged the lions.

The lions also played a part. They were not particularly interested in eating people. Thomas (2006) offers several reasons. For one, lions preferred larger prey. Not that they would pass up smaller prey if needed, but it was not their first choice. Second, “lions are very intelligent, as are all cats, and also profoundly good observers, and can be open to suggestion, unless they are already excited with their minds made up” (ibid., p. 161). Thus that night when the lions were in the Ju/wa camp, they were at least as curious as they were focused on hunting, and thus could be persuaded to change their plans when challenged with firebrands. Third, and finally, and perhaps most important of all and least often thought about:

Like most other mammals, young lions do as their parents do, preying upon what their parents prey upon, learning techniques and patterns of behavior from their elders. Man-eating is a learned behavior, and if lions of the past didn’t start it, their descendants would have a good chance not to be thinking about it and therefore not to pick it up. So if the lions of Nyae Nyae did not hunt people, perhaps it was because their parents hadn’t done so. (Ibid., p. 162)

In comparison to the lions of Nyae Nyae in the 1950s, the lions on the African savannahs today are dangerous. The traditional life of the Bushmen is gone; there are no more hunter-gatherers with whom the lions live. The lions lost that cultural knowledge. Then they had to figure out how to deal at best with tourists in game parks, and at worst with people who sought their land and their deaths.

Thomas (2006) emphasizes that cultural guidelines in the animal world can be fragile, “especially those of the Old Way” (p. 167). A final example is worth noting. In the past, there was a bird, the honeyguide, that did pretty much what its name implies. It would locate a beehive, and then locate an animal or person who could help open it. “The bird would fly conspicuously from tree to tree, waiting for the helper to catch up before moving on. At the bee tree, the bird would wait while the honey hunter did the hard work, breaking open the hive, swatting bees, and getting stung. When the melee was over . . . the honeyguide would fly down and eat the larval bees” (ibid.). But now, in current times, people no longer understand what the honeyguides want; and the honeyguides “of today have no memory of the ancient partnership between their kind and ours. . . . So the whole honey-hunting partnership has collapsed and vanished” (ibid.).

That is what I mean by saying that in the Old Way the Ju/wasi cohabited with nature. It means not only coexistence—though that is a profound idea in itself—but that in the same motion people affiliate with the natural world and the natural world affiliates with us.

Conclusion

What is stunning and sad about Thomas’s (2006) book *The Old Way* is that a book like hers may never be able to be written again: a book that offers a firsthand account of an indigenous people with a 35,000-year history of living sustainably in a landscape, and who had had virtually no previous contact with Western people. There are no indigenous people left like that in the world; and individuals—like Elizabeth Marshall Thomas—who once had lived with such indigenous people, and known them well, are now all dead, or unfortunately soon will be.

Why should we care about the Old Way? In part, the answer is that our minds and bodies are products of these earlier times, and to an extent

largely unrecognized today, the interaction patterns with nature laid down in our ancestral heritage are with us still.

Granted, we as modern people no longer run down a bull eland in 120 degree heat. But we run for fun, we jog, we step onto our treadmills, or we walk. We still hunt. The National Rifle Association is a powerful lobby. We enjoy gardening, and harvesting what the earth brings forth. We forage a bit, perhaps for some huckleberries on a hot summer's day. Some might say we forage at the supermarket. We like to eat meat. We enjoy the seasons turning, the migration of birds. We enjoy the freedom of traveling, moving about. There used to be an airline advertisement on television that ended with the statement: "You're now free to move about the country." That is how the Ju/wasi felt. Though our technology limits the impact of environmental forces, we are still checked by them. Hurricanes can flood our cities; AIDS ravages our people; and children died of starvation today, and yesterday, and will tomorrow. We no longer stare down a lion under the night sky with a burning branch. But vestiges of our desire to be in contact with wild animals, even dangerous predators, remain. We visit zoos for this reason.

Shepard (1998) says: "In a society committed to goals of development and progress, looking back is seen as regressive. Insofar as the past is seen as limiting, the modern temper has never been sympathetic to genetic or essentialist excursions into the complex processes of becoming and being human in the sense of prior biological or psychological constraints" (p. 1). Yet he goes on to argue that both genetic and essentialist accounts "are crucial for the definition ourselves: the human genome is the blueprint that frames our choices of ways of life, of healthy or sick cultures" (pp. 154–155).

We should care about the Old Way because it points not just to our past but—in integration with our technological selves—to our future, or at least the future that we should seek.