

“Many runes the cold has taught me,
Many lays the rain has brought me,
Other songs the winds have sung me....” The Kalevala

Back when I worked in Search and Rescue we did a lot of night training for the dogs. That involved one of us going out into deep woods, finding a good hiding place and sitting silently – sometimes for hours- while the K9s and their handlers used their skills to find you. You couldn’t have any lights, use your phone or make any noise, the point was for the dogs to air scent you with no other clues and make the find on scent alone. That meant being absolutely still and invisible.

It also trained you to be comfortable sitting in the middle of nowhere in pitch black with nothing but your patience and thoughts. For my part I enjoyed it, I found it meditative and loved the idea of blending into the forest so completely that I began to have an idea what it felt like to actually belong out there. Sometimes there were stars through the canopy, sometimes the full moon. Noises are magnified at night- squirrels sound like bears, branches rubbing together or owls sound like a distant voice calling for help. Everything blurs and things aren’t always what they seem. Even so, I never felt fear out there in the dark – the chaos and madness of the modern world does not hold sway out there. There is no confusion, noise, antagonism, stress – the natural world goes about its business without apology or imposition.

I think what I loved about it the most (and I still hike at night because of this) is it was the closest I ever came to feeling like I wasn’t an intruder. I would sit with my back against a big pine and let the story of the earth go on around me. I felt wrapped in darkness as if it were a favorite blanket I had loved once and thought lost. My eyes adjusted to the black until I could actually see faint details- individual trees, the silhouette of birds overhead, fireflies. My hearing sharpened to all the sounds- rustling in the leaves, the coyote far away, faint running water. My sense of smell too – the musk of a fox, a hint of rain, the disintegrating leaves around me. I could feel myself dissolving, shifting from a visitor to a participant.

Years later I came across the word *Útiseta*, from the spiritual traditions of the Nordic North, literally meaning “to sit outside” but it is known better as a meditative practice that takes place in nature and involves the “dissolving” of the self into nature. In this sense what we seek is the feeling that we belong out there, that we are not impostors. That we realize how far we have drifted from our ancestral connections and long to work our way back to them. I have no illusions about how difficult and often short life was for my ancestors, but I do believe they had a relationship to the natural world around them that we should aspire to, maybe re-imagine that connection knowing what we know now. Why else do we feel touched and blessed when we encounter an animal that doesn’t flee right away, or see the light change through the trees, feel mist on our skin or the roll of thunder booming through our bones. We long not only for some relationship we have lost but also for the kind of life that allows us to be out in the wild more to bear witness to such things. To make the connection, however fleeting.

My experiences at night took away my familiar senses and altered them so that they took in the world around me on another level. Without lights and gadgets I became just another animal in the woods and it was like coming home after too long away. I doubt that trees ever feel like their thoughts are too loud or that glacial erratics worry if they will ever go somewhere else. In the daylight I hold on to the lessons

of the night and make my presence as symbiotic as possible. It is much harder to “dissolve” during the daylight but definitely something worth working on- turning away from all the distractions, stripping thoughts down to the senses, rooting in geological time. This tapestry has been woven over billions of years and it is mind boggling in its intricacy – we are the ones who ripped ourselves out of it and have been lost ever since. I for one, intend to weave myself back in somehow, using the best colors and threads.

Weaving those threads into a map to find my way home.

"For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth." — Henry Beston