

The Healing Wisdom of Africa

November 2, 2006 by [lifeshifting](#)

I'm still recovering from yesterday's post. There is something a bit unnerving about the fact that inevitably when I write something about my clients or friends in this blog, the theme that emerges somehow manages to stick to me personally for a fairly long while after I've hit "publish". Is this just the universe's way of making sure that I get my own point? Ummmm.

So I'm still buzzing with yesterday's post. The idea of stillness. Of repose. Of hanging out in the breeze. So easy to write about but so difficult, in our speed/activity addicted culture, to do. No pun intended. Yesterday, after writing about this transitional moment in the process of Life-Shifting, I decided to take a dose of my own medicine and take a break. God forbid, in the middle of the day no less! Being in south Florida for a week helps in this endeavor, as you might imagine, as I stole off about 1pm and took a stroll on the beach. The weather had cleared and the air had become still. The waves were lapping gently against the sand and the sky was a broad-brush streak of uniform blue. Florida as the adverts proclaim it. At least for a moment.

As I strolled the beach, trying to hold myself to a leisurely pace, getting re-acquainted with the feeling of not going anywhere (totally against the psychological grain of a New Yorker!), I felt myself finally grow quiet inside, calm. I could feel my breath slacken and my heart rate slow. It was gloriously peaceful. Suddenly, I had the urge to dive into the azure sea. Rolling onto my back, and closing my eyes, I just floated there, still. For a long moment, I felt a sense of ease and grace, even gratitude, for the pleasure of being able to take this break in the middle of a work day.

Soon enough, too soon, I started to feel an energy of constriction creeping up my spine, into my chest, throat, and jaw. It was a very strange physical sensation and my first emotional reaction to it was fear. The fight/flight response gradually subsided, only to be replaced by an overwhelming need to cry. Strange as it sounds, basking in this moment of essence—and delight—I was overcome with grief. I just felt a deep longing, a missing, a heartbreak. I could feel the tears come even as I resisted them. For a long moment, perhaps a few moments, I don't really remember keeping track of time at this point, I let the tears come. I lay on my back in the sea, feeling my briny tears flow down my cheeks, washing away into the vast Atlantic. The experience was very womb-like, being held by the warm, salt water; it was almost as if the ocean mother herself coaxed me into letting go, releasing pent-up, coagulated emotions of loss, of hurt, of pain. This rush of emotion wasn't really even *about* anything—it was more like feeling sad about **everything**.

Suddenly, as quickly as they had arrived, these feelings dissipated. My tears dissolved back into the ocean from which they had originated and I felt a sense of peace return. But this time, it was richer, deeper, ecstatic. A feeling of oneness, belonging—at home in the sea.

Looking back on this rich if awkward moment, I realize that I was living out Life-Shifting writ large. I had given myself, even if only in a small way, permission to be still, to stop my striving, and to allow whatever wanted to come up, to come. And it was sadness. Not endless sadness (which is what we most fear), but deep sadness. Perhaps, in light of yesterday's post, this is why we all so resist stopping, being still, being empty. Because the tears might just come...and fill the ocean with our grief.

Upon reflection, I wasn't really surprised about this experience. It was a catalyst, a reminder of a profound teaching that I had received many years ago from a wise African shaman from Burkina Faso. His name is [Malidoma Some](#), and he has written many books in which he shares the wisdom of the tribal cultures of Africa. One of his teachings is about the importance of sadness, of grieving, of truly feeling, at a deep emotional level, the truth of the impermanence of life. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to experience this wisdom first hand.

A few years ago, a good friend of mine invited Malidoma to join a group of us on a community retreat in Lake Tahoe. Malidoma happened to be living in nearby Santa Cruz at the time, and my friend had been participating in his shamanic training program for a couple of years at that point. Graciously, Malidoma accepted our invitation to come and lead us in a West African ritual experience. There were about 14 of us on this retreat and we were all very eager to be introduced to *the healing wisdom of Africa*.

The morning of the ritual, we all gathered in the living room of one of the homes we had rented for the retreat. It was a cozy space, with a wall of glass looking out at the lake, a huge fireplace, and an array of sofas and pillows on which we could all casually drape. Malidoma came into our circle and sat to one side, stiffly, on a hard-back chair. For a long time, he did not say a word. There was a palpable energy of anticipation in the room, as we were enchanted by the presence of having a "real" African shaman in our midst. We were totally psyched up and enthusiastic about whatever ritual he would "perform" for us.

Looking back, Malidoma must have felt a bit like a circus animal, with his rapt child-like audience looking on, holding its breath, watching and waiting for the entertainment to begin. But, truth be told, we were the circus animals that day, and Malidoma himself was watching us keenly. As we grew more and more uncomfortable, even impatient, he just sat quietly, waiting. An energy seemed to enter the room. Call it spirit, a life force, a power. Who knows. We all felt it. A presence in the silence.

The air started to feel thick, and for a moment it felt like I was breathing soup. Moisture enveloped the space. Suddenly, my good friend, Patricia, just started to choke up. It began as a soft whine from deep within her chest and grew and grew until she was sobbing uncontrollably. Her grief was heavy and deep; it sounded like her heart was breaking. Maybe it was. We all felt it and it touched us deeply. Slowly, more and more of us joined her, the women at first, but not long after, even the men were wailing. I too, succumbed, caught up in a tidal wave of grief, I felt the tears come, and come, and come again.

Soon, the entire group was awash in tears...and then laughter...and then both. Pain and joy. Two sides of the same coin. We cried until we laughed. We laughed until we cried. Malidoma sat. Still. Watching. We did all the performing...and all the learning.

This excursion into African community practice, as Malidoma, pointed out to us later, was called a grief ritual. It is a regular, every-day occurrence in West African tribal life, and it is what all Westerners crave. Throughout the ensuing hour or longer that we all just cried and laughed and held each other and cried some more (are you still with me here, or have you checked out in disbelief? look now—at your resistance to this stuff!) Malidoma just sat still. His faced was filled with compassion and his energy exuded safety and patience. He was just there for us, like a father. He held the space for us to grieve, to release, to be cleansed. It was what we needed to do, only we, of course, had no idea.

Why is experiencing the pull of sadness so difficult for us westerners? When you think about it, grief is the ultimate taboo. If I had told you that Malidoma led us into some ecstatic orgy of naked lust and debauchery, you probably would have LOVED this post...but since I am writing about a ritual that was simply about a bunch of uptight, white folks spending a morning on a lake crying their hearts out...most of you are probably not impressed. Maybe even a bit critical, or at the very least, disbelieving. But why?

Why can't we cry? Why did I have to go out in the ocean in order to get in touch with the deep sadness that lies within me? This is the curse of our relentless high-productivity-addicted culture—and a crucial step in any process of self-renewal. Thanks to Malidoma and the healing wisdom of Africa, among other indigenous peoples, we still have teachers on the planet with real, useful knowledge of the human species...and its need to release and grieve the deeply heart wrenching losses that are an inevitable aspect of life.

So today—join me on this excursion into the depths of your humanity. I encourage you to reach beyond the border of your own resistance, to reach beyond the borders of our myopic and denial-addicted culture, reach deep into your heart and feel the pull of grief that wants to break you open.

Read Malidoma Some. Have a good cry. Let your heart break. It is the way in...and the way out.

Time for a swim...and a good laugh.