

Living with Bears

by Richard Wagamese



The old ones say that humility is the foundation of everything. Nothing can exist without it. Humility is the ability to see yourself as an essential part of something larger. It is the act of living without grandiosity. Humility, in the Ojibway world, means “like the earth.” The planet is the **epitome** of a humble being, with everything allowed the same opportunity to grow, to become. Without the spirit of humility there can be no unity, only discord. Humility lets us work together to achieve equality. Humility teaches that there are no greater or lesser beings or things. There is only the whole. There is only the great, grand clamour of our voices, our spirits, raised together in song.

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The bears start coming down from the high ground in late summer, when the mountain-ash berries, rosehips, saskatoon berries, blackberries and wild raspberries are ripe and fat. We see them on the roadside or lumbering along the hillocks, and as the days pass they become a fixture in our yard. We don't find it troubling. When you reside in bear country, you make a soul compact to coexist with them. You learn to be watchful on your morning walks and to make sure your property isn't bear-attractive. You learn bear time. After all, this is their land. They were here first. If anyone respects that statement, it's an **Indian**.

When you're out in the wild—or what's left of the wild in the Western world—there is a palpable sense of the unseen. You get the feeling you're being watched from the trees. That can be eerie at first, but once you're used to it, it's rather comforting. This is the original condition of things. Long before our world became the technologically driven, noisy, overpopulated place it is now, many beings found respite in wild places, and people felt a natural connection to the land.

We can opt for the convenience of machinery today, using quads and ATVs and dirt bikes to get us deep into the back country, but nothing connects you to the land as

easily as walking. Hiking in the acute silence up here in the mountains, you always sense the possibility of bears. For me, that's magical. Walking on the land also keeps you alert to things you would ordinarily miss. You hear things you are usually too busy to register, experience yourself as a true part of nature. Alone in the wild, you become keenly aware of who and what you are.

- 5 So I'm not troubled by the presence of bears. What does trouble me, though, is news of bears losing their lives after run-ins with those who occupy their territory. Some people think of bears as garbage-raiding pests or as vile predators intent on snatching the cat, the dog or the children. I'm not afraid of bears, but I am respectful of them. At our place, we keep our garbage out of harm's way until it's dump day and we can dispose of it. We're careful with our barbecue. Bears are prowlers and foragers, and we need to understand that.

My people say that the bears are protectors. In our Ojibway clan system, the Bear Clan is responsible for security and law. As totems, bears symbolize strength, fortitude, justice and wisdom. When my people see a bear in the bush, they always stop and look at it before moving away. In the Ojibway world, a bear is a spirit being, a special teacher. I've learned over the years to hold them in the same regard.

This morning as I wrote, Molly the dog growled. I looked out to the end of our driveway and saw a juvenile male bear reared up on his hind legs chewing on leaves and berries. He was a marvellous specimen. His coat was thick and unmatted, and he had the beginnings of the rounded shape that comes from good feeding in preparation for the long hibernation to come. We watched him until he finally trotted through the yard, across the gravel road and off into the trees. He was one bear in a country of them. I knew he would find a place to hunker down as the morning traffic increased and the high August heat built up. In the cool of evening, he'd emerge again to forage in the berry bushes that surround us. That's just how it is.

Every day now, the oceans are becoming more acidic. Polar ice is melting. Droughts, floods, earthquakes and wildfires are increasingly commonplace. Bees are disappearing, and there are fewer salmon in the spawning grounds. These are only some of the rapid changes happening all around us. Just as our human lives are affected by these changes, so are the lives of the animals that share our planet.

Bears are a grounding tool for me. Whenever I see one, I am reminded that the old wisdom has something significant to impart about how I negotiate my way in the world. I belong to a web of life that needs all its parts to sustain itself. The ancient teachings are not a romantic throwback to a vanished lifestyle but a resonant reminder of our contemporary responsibilities.

- 10 Bears are protectors, my people say, and this presence reminds us that the natural world urgently needs our protection. That is the bear's particular gift to each of us.

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