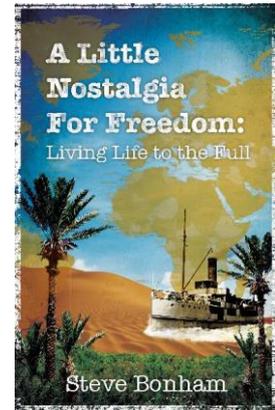


Travel with Companions

**'Be wild, be strong, be experimental, travel with companions
and take the first step. These are the rules of the road.'**

Jenny, I said, nothing could be so wrong,
As to climb down this hill, and head home again,
Was it really there, could you hear it breathing,
Across the holy water, a glimpse of Avalon

Looking Back on England, Steve Bonham



What have we lost as we play with our increasingly shiny new toys, and scheme our schemes on silver aeroplanes in a world that hums with electronic connection, when for the price of a dollar anyone can know anything about anyone? What have we lost? We have, I am told, lost our privacy, our individualism: Big Brother and his nasty little niece Miss Celebrity Culture is everywhere.

But it is the oddest thing – with everything from the size of our underwear to the probable date of our death out there to be known by the curious and mildly insane – with no barriers to access, we are lonely. When we chat to friends we have known all our lives via the internet we are more available than we could ever have been. And yet many of us feel disconnected. We live in communities where our neighbours are often strangers to us. In towns that are not where we were born.

So what have we lost?

A sense of belonging?

Of being born into a tribe?

Is this why one of the popular websites is about helping people trace their ancestors?

I wonder if one of the qualities experienced by people who live in more traditional communities is that a richer array of relationships is available. Sometimes it seems in the age of the 'nuclear and disintegrating family', relationships with relatives are more distant, less involving, same sex friendship groups are weaker more superficial, we have lost a sense of interdependency.

Certainly the globalised society has broken many of the bonds of our tribal heritage. In some ways this may be no bad thing. For every tribe there is a population not in it, people who are 'not us' and therefore we may treat as objects. But in fracturing these bonds many of us feel disconnected. It seems for many people their destiny is to end up somewhere adrift.

Now people have always moved, in fact it is part of our restless instinct to do so. But for the vast majority, this was a mass movement in which a 'sub tribe' regenerated itself in a strange land. The Irish in Boston; Chinese, and Jewish communities all over the world; my dear friend Charlie, marching up and down in full woollen Scots regalia blowing on bagpipes under the pitiless sun of Queensland, Australia. Even today, the somewhat desperate cliques of British expats clinging together in exotic places to take tea and play golf.

What is different I believe is, as the merciless global mixing bowl goes about its business more and more people are not sure of their tribe or the community they belong to, and as a result, hang on to some symbolic remnant – the sports team of another nation – like a vestigial tail, a reminder more of something lost than something current and shaping.

This need to belong to a tribe and define our lives in relation to it is even found in the global digital world of the internet. Up in cyberspace tribal connections are built which are defined by shared vocabulary and develop their own rituals and protocols with the capability of excluding the outsider. Even anarchists, those who most reject the ties of belonging, are drawn to acknowledge their tribalism. The anarchist writer Hakim Bey, has written about the ability of cyberspace to allow the creation of Temporary Autonomous Zones, short lived communities which the CIA and other special forces of decadent capitalism cannot immediately shut down.

And perhaps our current obsession with social media such as Facebook and Twitter is simply a reflection of a deep need within us to connect and share; to share: opinions, feelings, objects, thoughts. Evolutionary Psychologists such as Robin Dunbar have argued that language itself is less about functional problem solving and more about building communities through the chatter and gossip, enabling a sense of cohesion and identity to develop. In fact Robin Dunbar argues that it was the 'connecting / reassuring function of language that enabled human groups to evolve to 150 person tribes from the much smaller groupings of other primates which are held together by *physical* grooming, a much more time consuming activity. It is a rather wonderful thing to think of, that the vast majority of our on and off line chatter is basically the metaphorical search for bugs, twigs and mucky skin that reassures and enables us all.

I believe it is our tribal ancestry which necessarily draws us to function best in groups of people we trust and feel connection with. The word that describes this best for me is 'companionship'. The root of the word comes from the latin *com* meaning *with* and *panis* meaning *bread*; simply those we share bread with, with all the mutuality and trust that that implies. And yet it seems to me, highlighted by our compulsive search of the wireless desert, we live increasingly in societies in which companionship is under pressure. Is it because we have been disconnected from our tribal nature? And through this, the way we relate

to others seems to have shifted from a deep awareness of the collective whole to something that is brittle and transient.

Of the many things the search for nostalgia helped me see, one of the things that has haunted and intrigued me most was the realization that companionship was at the heart of our human experience. That it was more than a soothing analgesic to the vicissitudes of our individual journeys. Over the time that followed since then I have come to see that it is both the reward for our fitting in and the means to sustain our adventurousness, our rebellious, audacious journey.

Companions as I realized back in Hong Kong are part of the warp and weft of almost every culture and celebrated in its stories and tales, from the *Band of Brothers*, *Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* etc. In them all is woven a cloak which can keep out the bitterest blast and shade us from the most relentless glare. Every guru from Jesus, Buddha to Freud and Elvis was sustained and enabled by the love and friendship of those around them. Though in all they must face a defining moment on their own, it is through their friends and companions they have been sustained and nurtured for this moment.

And every Don Quixote has a Sancho Panzo.

And so it is with us, to grow and flourish the conversations and attention from others in whom we feel we have trust, rapport and a sense of shared identity, will really matter. Instinctively, we understand the basic human need to be heard. If we are not heard we don't feel whole. But it is more than that, it is through conversations that most times we think and decide. It is in the ebb and flow of the dialogue of the common man and woman that ideas are born and nurtured, dreams are shaped into reality, a wild notion becomes a life changing opportunity.

And I believe this has always been the way; since the beginning, since the first non-verbal moment when we looked at each other and recognized our common cause.

Some while after the Hong Kong trip I found myself sitting under a big African night sky around a campfire in Northern Namibia spending some time with the bushmen of the Jo/'Hoansi San, tribe. I was with Walter Peiffer a gentle bearded German Namibian.

'In the old days,' he said, staring into the fire as if he could see in it back to the days before the bushmen were the victims of generations of genocidal attacks and their culture despised, fractured and almost destroyed. 'In the old days, one person trying to dominate a group such as this was really resisted. Anyone who did try to dominate and dictate what was said, was first challenged, secondly ignored or ostracised, and thirdly, in the *old days*, if someone simply persisted in being domineering, killed!'

The haunting image I have is of people around the campfire not just sharing the stories that tell them who they are, what they should believe and how things should happen but also planning, problem solving, decision making, making sense of the world together. Thinking together and understanding together. In the flickering firelight, voices from faces shining with reflected light and etched in shadows, offer ideas, views, bits of history which meet in the smoke to become a whole. Through this the path of the antelope, the source of fresh water or a whole cosmology a richer picture of how the universe is, may be conjured.

Often in these conversations there is a pause after one person has spoken. A pause not to think of an argument against but to consider carefully what has just been said. And implicitly this act of conversation is also an act of communion.

Communion in being part of something bigger than yourself.

Communion in being in an intimate relationship with those around you.

If 'Being Wild' implies an intimacy with the animate and inanimate environment, a deep rapport with the rock, the soil, the scudding cloud, the bird on the branch of the tree; then we also have within us the need and ability to be intimately connected with other people. This is not just the physical intimacy of lovers or a parent and a child, but an emotional and spiritual identification with another. It's a surprisingly practical quality of being human.

It's like playing music together. Playing around the clubs with my old chum Tim we would have a repertoire of over a hundred songs and tunes. Rarely did we ever bother with a 'set list' or running order, or if we did we would soon ignore it. You see, we just knew what to play next based upon an inarticulate but powerful sense of where we were and where the audience was. Often we didn't tell each other or the audience what we would play next we just started: on time, together. Sometimes half way through a tune Tim would change rhythm, or tempo and I would just know. All of this was a rough and crude version of what any half decent jazz band can do. Or any great football team. Or theatre company. Or family. It is how Bushmen hunt, how they survive in a difficult and extreme environment, or as Werner says, how they decide.

Without this collective inner harmony, it seems to me that groups of people can only at best function in a self-conscious, rather forced and rather clunky way. Which I suspect is how many of us do, much of the time.

Intimacy goes way beyond 'belonging', it is tapping into the essence of who we are, and may be that is why it can become a rare and vulnerable thing. But it is the well-spring from which companionship draws life. What hurts one of us, hurts all of us. And this seems a natural not learned thing. Neuroscientists, have proposed the existence of 'mirror neurons' in the brain that 'fire' when something is observed happening to someone else. So we see someone bang his or her head and say 'ouch' or one gets too close to the fire and we wince. And the closer we are to the person we are observing the stronger the effect is. This reaction is unconsciously prompted.

So from the bushmen tracking in the first light of dawn, the Oryx, the Kudu and the Porcupine through the millennia, this intimate shared consciousness has woven people together, has continued to shape who we are: collaborative, connected, concerned. A large part of us is essentially collaborative, as more and more research in evolutionary psychology seems to reveal¹. This collaboration provides us with a set of social behaviours which can easily be overlooked in the picture of the individual free-agent acting only out of self-interest. We sometimes underestimate our capacity for self-sacrifice, working for the greater good and the simple love of working with our fellows.

In my lifetime I have seen groups of people face tear gas, beatings and bullets from Rumania to Cairo and Damascus in the hope of something better for everyone. Collaboration is a clear and present feature of Confucian thinking but is also a powerful if less celebrated feature of western behaviour. All this must be rooted in our ancestry, in the stalking of the game and the irrigation of the fields we have evolved to look after each other. Without it we could not have survived.

This is a fantastic ability through which we can build on the wisdom of others. And in such conversations we, without awareness, tap into the wisdom and insight of our ancestors. The freedom to evolve, to renew ourselves or even to survive may be a hard one, even an impossible one unless we travel with companions. Knulp depended time and again on his friends to sustain him in the life he had chosen, friends who nourished and encouraged him even though they were perplexed and confused about the choices he had made.

The alchemy we need in our search for freedom.

The question is, who do we identify with and feel we belong to? Or would it be better to say, who should we focus on belonging *with*? As Nick 'the Desert' noted, many of our friends do not wish to come with us on our journey. We can love and respect them for this but we must not let them tie us to living in the past. We can keep and cherish them but also seek companions who can help us evolve.

I have been lucky in my life with some of my friends. And now I think about what the quality of those relationships is and has been. Yes there is rapport, that wonderful, special instinctive understanding between people who are not kith or kin but whose lives have become enmeshed through shared stories and a kind of sublime chemistry. Yes there is rapport but there is also synergy. The best companions are distinguished by important differences and who, arising from these differences, are not afraid to confront, clash and conflict with another. Those I cherish do not seek to control me but to challenge my path so that I evolve well. This is a tough love that is distinguished by its rarity and its

¹ E.g, HBR, Scientific American

bravery. It is a special friend who will risk the regard of another for their love for them.

The best of companions are not wholly like us, they may only travel with us part of the way, they may be on parallel journeys themselves and we should give them the space to be so. I have been in the desert with companions and I have been in the desert with accidental fellow travellers. With the former I emerged encouraged and renewed, with the latter I merely survived.

A Little Nostalgia For Freedom is available to purchase or download on Amazon.