

Preface

Nature speaks in whispers to me, when my mind and heart are still.

I can see into my animal friends, I can hear their gentle words. I can read their intentions and speak with them deeply.

I start by listening, like they do. I open my inner ears and eyes. I ask my mind to rest — I can't hear animals as well with my thoughts in the way. In stillness, my mind and heart become attuned, so I can sense their dance, their body tone, their language. I let my head be quiet and then, when in rhythm and in touch, I can understand. I find my knowing.

They are our animal Zen masters — certainly they are mine. We humans regard ourselves as thinking animals that feel, but we are in fact feeling animals that think. Animals are never lost like we so often are, away in the future or lost in the past, in our locked minds. They don't suffer like we do. They experience pain but have no 'second arrow', as the Buddha would say. Once the pain stops, they don't hold on, they let go. They don't anticipate and anguish over the ideas of threat, they

don't live within rigid maps they've made that preclude their possibility for discovery, experience and joy. They live in the real world of the present moment, following their breath, their senses and listening through their feet to Mother Earth.

We, too often, have lost atrophying muscles from lack of use, these senses so diminished. We need to relearn our ancient dances, those songs of the land, the trees and the birds. We need to learn from our animal Zen masters how again to feel the wind in our hair, the rain on our face, Mother Earth beneath our feet.

Let them take us back home — to our language before we could speak, before our ideas took ownership of our mind and heart. When we aren't rushing forward to something, but could just stop and be present. When we needed few things and contentment was the norm. When community, family, service and co-operation were the necessities of life.

Relax, smile, breathe and let the energy of mindfulness, compassion and kindness prevail.

I feel this bond particularly with wolves. Learning the language of wolves was a profound and moving experience for me, unsurprising given the long and intimate relationship we humans have had with these magnificent creatures. Our connection was forged over millennia, galvanised under the stars thousands of years ago on the plains of Eurasia, when together we faced the ancient cold and competition of huge mammals. Our shared bond and subtle communication brought us together, in ways not replicated with any other species, even primates. That age-old bond sings out like a chorus of howls within me.

Prologue

Close Encounter of the Wolf Kind

The four adult wolves rested together on the shaggy grass, their magnificent silver coats stroked and lifting slightly in the breeze. Furry comrades at ease amid the gentle sounds and fragrances of the moment. We watched from outside the ring fence of the enclosure. The professor opened the gate and I followed him inside.

The wolves watched us, their posture still lazy but their attention now snapped out of reverie. They knew the professor well, as a part of their pack. *But who is this newcomer?*

‘Relax,’ the professor said. ‘Just be yourself.’

In the wild, there would be no quarter given to such an intruder. Any wolf, and certainly a human, would be at high risk entering the core territory of another pack.

Just months before this, a PhD student conducting research among these wolves had had her arm seriously damaged by one of these wolves, but she'd made what could have been a fatal mistake and entered the enclosure with an injury. Experience had shown the team that this was risky as the wolves respond to weakness, and it was not allowed. I was healthy and strong. Nevertheless, in my own observations, watching safely from the other side of the enclosure fence, I had seen a couple of instances in which, when something went wrong in the group, the pack could briefly turn on a single wolf. A family spat, but not one any human would want to get caught up in. So I knew that any interactions with wolves could turn in a split second.

This wasn't a game. Luckily, I was with someone who these wolves knew very well. Dr Erich Klinghammer, a visionary ethologist and world expert in wolf behaviour, was a professor at Purdue University and the founder of Wolf Park, the research facility in Indiana, in the United States, where I had arrived a few days before. He was relaxed, and so I relaxed. I trusted him and I knew if he had any concerns about my ability to handle what was about to happen, he'd have me out of there straight away. I didn't want that to happen, though.

A couple of the wolves stood up and sauntered over to me, envoys to sniff out this interloper. They snuffled around my feet and up my legs, and soon they were joined by the dominant wolf of the group. The four adults in this enclosure were just part of one of the two main packs of wolves living at Wolf Park. Their full pack comprised 10 adults and, at that time, six pups, but they'd been separated for the purpose of meeting me. This male now approaching me was Imbo, the dominant wolf of the whole pack. He was a big boy, weighing around 50 kilos,