

GOOD MORNING, BEAR, I'M COMING

by Marilyn Hagar

When I was a little girl, I had a very intimate relationship with bears. In my little-girl mind, their presence was everywhere. Though I never saw them, I never knew when they might appear. Like Goldilocks, I might just stumble into the wrong place and there I would be, face to face with a bear who, I was certain, had only one intention, which was to devour me.

If I lived in an Earth-based culture in another time, I know I would have been taught to see Bear as my spirit guide. But my culture teaches that the concrete physical world is all that matters. Against all odds I found my way, through art, writing, movement, dreams, transpersonal psychology and real-life experience, to the richness and depth of my imaginal world. Allowing this layer of human experience to come alive in me has awakened deep awe about the nature of existence, and has helped me to see that my life has meaning and purpose beyond my wildest imaginings.

Bear has accompanied me on this journey, lurking in the shadows, waiting to step out and teach me everything that I long to know. For most of my life I ran from these teachings. As the saying goes, however, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." I never once imagined that my teacher would come from the animal world, but in the last several years I have had several close encounters with bears. Through these encounters my childhood fear has found its way into a much larger picture—one where Bear stands

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at the center of my universe as Great Mother, giver of life and bringer of death. She embodies the great ferocity of wild nature, life and death cycle endlessly on the great wheel of existence. Finally, in my middle-age passage, I am coming to understand in my body that life holds within it the possibility of death, and that death holds within it the possibility of life. Accepting this fact has brought deep surrender, and a gratitude for life that I had not known before.

The marker of my earliest fear of Bear came when I was three years old. I had a dream that a bear dressed in bib overalls arrived at my house on a red motor-scooter. I watched him walk up to my front door, then I ran and hid in the entryway closet. Looking up, I saw a large bunch of green bananas hanging from

the ceiling above me. They had been left there to ripen. I heard the front door open. I woke up crying hysterically. When my mother came to comfort me, I was inconsolable. She tried to tell me, as all mothers do, that it was only a dream. To this day I remember how angry I was because she did not believe that my dream was real.

I marvel now at this young one who held so fast to her truth. She knew so much that I have since forgotten and then spent my life relearning. The veil between my conscious and my unconscious reality was thin at age three. The voice of my soul was more audible. I see this dream now as a "big dream"—a dream that set out my soul's work for a lifetime. Like the dream image



*Bear Mother. Oil painting by Suzanne deVeuve (Sojourn Cover artist, summer 98, Issue 7)
Website: <http://www.deveuve-kelly.com>*

of the green bananas hanging above me to ripen, my life would be the ripening of the realization that “the bear” or “my death” is coming to get me. The fullness of my life would rest on the degree to which I could accept that fact and live into it.

As I grew older, Bear’s threatening presence remained firmly embedded in my consciousness. My childhood fear would burst out in all its wild irrationality whenever I ventured out into the wilderness. God only knows what kept me going out there! Now I’d guess that my love of that much wildness came in equal proportion to my fear. I guess that love pulled me forward at the same time that fear held me back.

There was little reality behind all that fear. I never actually saw a bear until I was an adult, and then only caught brief glimpses of two bears in national parks. Then a couple of years ago, I bravely decided to go on a hike by myself one hot summer day. I took my lunch and lots of water, and planned to eat and rest at an old homestead cabin before I started my four-mile return. My trail guide had told me that I would come down the hill into an apple orchard, and just beyond it I would find the old house. I walked down the narrow little trail through lush green grass. There was the orchard, and sure enough there was the little house just beyond. I was hot and tired and ready for a rest.

As I walked underneath the branches of an old apple tree thinking about lunch, I heard a rustling sound above me. It wasn’t a large rustle. My mind was thinking “squirrel” as I turned to look up over my shoulder. Imagine my surprise when I saw a bear’s head about six feet from mine! I knew I was supposed to stop and then slowly back away, but stopping that close did not make sense, and since I had just walked underneath the bear I did not want to retrace my steps. I did manage to move slowly, stepping sideways toward the old house. The trail ended there. I remember having the thought, “If I die here, at least it will be a beautiful place to die.”

I tried to get into the house. but the doors and windows were boarded up. I sat down on the porch to decide what to do next. I could see the bear in the tree, happily munching on little green apples. I decided to cut across the meadow in front of me and climb the hill back up to the trail. As soon as I was out of sight of the bear I moved fast—so fast in the 105-degree heat that I realized I would die of heat stroke if I didn’t slow my pace. I sat down right on the trail facing the direction of the bear. I was sure he was coming after me, though he had made no move to get down out of the tree. I sat there thinking, “All right, Bear. If you are coming, you are coming. I guess if you want to eat me, you will!” The bear never came.

In the days that followed, I replayed that encounter over and over in my mind. In one of these flashbacks, when I watched myself trying to get into the house, I was struck with the memory of my old dream. There was the house, the bear, and me. This time I was outside, trying to get in. I took from this new juxtaposition that now, at fifty, I belonged outside with the bear. No more hiding in the closet.

The most important thing I learned that day was how disinterested the bear was in me. Something in me relaxed with that knowing, and a huge portion of my irrational fear dropped away. Facing my worst fear made me

stronger; I found myself feeling more free and increasingly involved in the outdoors.

The following spring I had another dream: I was driving up a winding country road in a strange bicycle/car-type vehicle. I was hundreds of miles into the wilderness, and I was alone. There were steep drop-offs to my left. The road narrowed to a little path and then began to crumble off the edge of the cliff. I really wanted to see what was just around the bend, so I decided to explore further on foot. I was looking for a good viewpoint so I could really see. As I approached the edge of the cliff, I saw a large dark spot. It began moving. I realized instantly that it was a bear and that it was charging me! I suddenly had a stick in my hand, and I fought the bear off. It retreated and charged, retreated and charged, over and over again. I knew that I must stand my ground. I was miles from everywhere, and no one knew where I was. If I died there, I would just vanish off the face of the earth. No one would ever know what happened to me. No one would ever know my truth. I must stand and fight—and I did!

Amazingly, when I awakened from this dream, I was not frightened. I felt really strong. Shortly after that, the image of the bear began to appear in my painting. It wasn’t a conscious thing. I would just sense a big, dark presence, and when I would paint it in it would be a huge bear with sharp teeth and long claws. In one painting the bear arrived behind several figures that were being bitten by snakes. Incredible peace came over me when the giant bear embraced them all. In another the

bear was ripping my chest wide open. I painted a body floating near the bear’s mouth. I thought that the bear was eating the person, but as I continued painting, I realized that the bear was spitting the person out. The painting was very satisfying, vibrant and alive. I began to realize that Bear was helping me to understand and accept the great fierceness of life, the fierceness that both creates and destroys, and in that wild process holds and contains it all.

That next summer, I had a whole month of vacation, and my primary desire was to be outside for as much of it as possible. Three separate trips took shape, and I was to visit Bear in each one of them.

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spend more time with my son, who is a backcountry ranger, I decided that I would hike into the backcountry by myself and meet him there. This involved carrying all my own gear and spending a day and a night by myself. Since I had never backpacked solo before, this was a big event! It was even bigger because there are bears in the park. I don't know where my courage came from, but I had enough to get myself out there. My bravery was short-lived, however, and I was on the trail only a few minutes before I began seriously questioning my sanity. "How did I get out here? My pack is so heavy! How did I ever think I could do this? I can't do this. I'll never make it." I was lost inside myself.

Only twenty-five minutes into my hike, I heard the bear before I saw it. It was about fifteen feet in front of me, just at the edge of the trail. I heard the crashing of the brush and then I saw the big black back. It ran downhill and to the side of the trail. I didn't exactly run, but I was moving quickly forward, my back to the bear! I laughed, as if I were saying to myself, "If I don't see the bear, it doesn't exist." Denial is a scary thing in the physical world. Suddenly I heard a big, deep hiss. I knew I had to turn and look. The bear had climbed up a tree. It was clinging to the trunk looking at me as if I were the scariest creature on Earth. The feeling was indeed mutual! I managed to slow down, look for cubs and get out of sight. The bear did not follow me.

I made it to the place where I was to camp for the night. There I faced my second-worst fear when a strange man appeared and set up camp right near me. He refused to acknowledge my presence, which didn't seem right since he chose to place himself so close to me. Late in the day as he walked by my camp I stared him down, making him acknowledge me. In an animal way, that felt better. I went to bed as soon as it began to get dark. I left all my clothes on, zipped myself into my mummy bag, curled into fetal position and prayed for sleep. I awoke with a terrible nightmare of a snarling jackal just outside my tent. I was beating it off with a broom and screaming "Get out of here!" at the top of my lungs, waking myself up. It was 2:00 a.m. I didn't sleep again until first light.

When I got up, the man was gone. I packed up

and set out to meet my son along the trail. We had planned that he would be hiking toward me. I was more than a little jumpy. Every little sound made my heart stop. Somewhere in all that fear, I remembered that I would sing when I was frightened as a child. The song that came was to the bear. "Good morning, bear. I'm coming. Let me walk in peace. Lend me your spirit. Protect me on my path. Good morning, bear. I'm coming. Let me walk in peace." I sang really loud when the fear was big. I got more and more calm. I made verses for the birds and the squirrels and one for the mountain lions (just in case). But the bear got most of my singing, and

just when I began to feel I might belong in the forest with all the other creatures, I met my son.

I couldn't help but wonder how my dream world, my painting process and my real-life encounter with the bear were related. Had standing my ground with the bear in my dream been preparation for my solo backpacking trip?

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Was it time for Bear and me to come to some new relation? As I turned the corner in mid-life and looked death closer in the face, was it time to meet the bear face to face? All these questions are well and good. They may even be important to my mind to ask and to answer. But I sense that the most important thing that happened was my participation in that wild moment. My presence there facing Bear and Bear's presence there facing me was the healing moment that fed my soul, shattering the walls that culture had built around me and leaving me free to sense the wild universe of which I am a part. It was a startling chance to come home to the world in which I belong.

During the remainder of that month, I was to see seven more bears. There was a close encounter with a mother bear and a cub when I was hiking with a friend in Northern California. Here, I had a chance to respond more peacefully, doing all the things I wished I had done the week before. We backed away to give them room, and they left quickly. The other bears I saw from a safe distance in Glacier National Park when I was traveling with my eighty-two-year-old parents.

I had taken my parents on vacation the summer before, but I was surprised at the toll one year had taken on them. It was harder for them in every way. The big energy of the mountains seemed too much for their spirits. Where just a few years before they would have been swooning at the rugged, awesome beauty of the landscape, they now preferred to sit around the fire in the big old lobbies of our hotels, watching the world go by. Sitting in a dining room overlooking a deep blue lake surrounded by dense green forest, with snow-capped peaks rising abruptly behind it, my mother saw a large, dead tree framed by the window in the foreground. "Look at that old dead tree," she said. "I wonder what killed it. I guess it is just there to remind you that old mother nature can come along and take a whap at you whenever she pleases." One day into Glacier, I could see that my experience there was going to push me to my edge, that I would look through eyes much older than mine, and that I would learn something about the far end of life and what lies beyond it.

I was afraid to hike alone in grizzly country, so I signed up for a ranger-led hike into the backcountry. It was on this hike that I was initiated into the

ways of hiking with the big bears. Contrary to my girl-scout training, which told me to be a quiet hiker I was now instructed to make lots of noise, even to shout out, "Yo, bear! Hello, bear!" every hundred yards or so. I did not see any bears on that hike, or on others that I braved by myself later on—yet I always hiked with attention to the possibility of confronting them, and communicated my presence in their forest. I screamed and yelled and whooped and hollered. My song to the bears in Olympic National Park came back to me, and I sang it over and over again to the grizzlies. My younger son, who was working in Montana for the summer, sent chills up my spine when he said on the telephone, "Mom, you just can't believe how it feels to be hiking here, and know that in the next instant you could be dead! It's very exhilarating." I admired his spirit, but I thought this was something that only a twenty-one-year-old cushioned by a feeling of invincibility might enjoy. I was shocked to find myself enjoying it as well.

I returned home from my travels exhausted by the intensity of my adventures. It took a few days of quiet to let my feelings and impressions really sink in. The first part of me to return was my sadness. My child heart broke open, and I mourned for the parents that I used to know. I mourned for their failing strength and for the child in me that would die when they die. I found myself singing my bear song on my morning walks in the forest. I was surprised to feel my sadness that there were not bears there to hear. My normally satisfying life felt bland and unexciting. I began asking all the big questions: Why am I here? What is my life about? What is really important to me?

The morning I was to return to work, I awakened to a dream in which I came face to face with a huge black horse the size of a dinosaur. Its head was a big black skeleton. I gazed deeply into the eye sockets where there were no eyes. I faced this monster, stared right back at him and made him back away. On my morning walk I sang my bear song. It was my prayer. I was singing to the bear and, I realized, I was singing to my own death. I opened my mouth to sing again when a voice took charge of mine. I spoke out loud: "Marilyn, you are here to walk into the mouth of the bear. You will do this over and over again in your life. Sometimes the bear just spits you out. Sometimes he chews you up and then spits you out. In the end you will be devoured."

My sobs rose up from deep within, but as I cried I felt a deep sense of peace rise in me as well. It wrapped around me like the softness of my favorite blanket when I was a tiny child. I felt the dark presence, the arms reaching out. I let myself be held. Like Goldilocks fleeing from the house of the three bears, my youthful

innocence had been running away from the acceptance of my own mortality. Living in exile from the great circle of wild nature, which held both my life and my death, I was lost and alone. Held now in the arms of the Great Bear, embraced by the Great Mother energy, I was home at last. Listening to her song, my body relaxed for the first time in a long, long time.

The bear that emerged in my next painting is embracing suffering humanity in her arms. The full moon shines over her right shoulder. She carries an expression of complete acceptance, a face full of compassion. The compassion is not passive or gentle, but fierce and alive. The roar that I imagine coming from deep inside of her is bigger than life or death. She is the voice of wild nature, the voice that encompasses it all.

Life has a way of bringing us full circle. In middle age, I

find myself again in a very intimate relationship with Bear. She is never very far from me. She teaches me about the great cycles that flow through my life. She tells me when to enter into my cave for winter, and when to burst through the snowy door in early spring. She shows me how to protect what I give birth to. She tells me when the berries are ripe and where to find them. She shows me how to romp and play. She teaches me how to go after what I want and need. She lets me know whom to trust and whom to stare down. She helps me to trust my solitary nature. And yes, her ferocity—it is in me now, and I pray each day that I will use it wisely. I am learning that the more I can surrender to the cycle of death and rebirth that her life embodies, the richer my life becomes.

Not long after my series of real-life encounters with the bears, my mother heard me telling the story to my sons. I was saying that before these adventures I had only seen two bears in my whole life. "No, Marilyn," she interrupted. "That is not right. You had seen three bears. Remember?" I looked at her confused, searching my memory. "Remember when you were three, the one in the overalls," she said, "the one you saw from the closet?" The fifty-year-old me laughed out loud. But inside me, the little girl of three crawled up into her mother's lap, comforted at last!

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