



*Tracking The Soul:
Self-Exploration
in the Woods
Alicia M. Rodríguez, M.A.*

“Communion comes in the present, when you embrace something fully and with sensitivity. And there’s an opportunity to really know....That forest out there is in essence, non other than myself. This animal I am tracking is my own trail. A trail to a deeper knowledge of self. More intimacy with self. That to me is what tracking is all about...all self exploration...How can you do anything else?”

Paul Rezendes, November 6, 1993
<http://www.paulrezendes.com>

“I was stalking at two in the morning and I made the shift...for two hours there was no inner, no outer, no thoughts, just oneness...This connection of oneness...not like it’s some theory or concept, it’s just like it is.”

Mark S., October 10, 1993

“... a most wonderful moment in tracking...It was a beautiful day and...I was near the top of the tree... the ducks flew right by me, about twenty feet away, and it was not only beautiful but it was accompanied by a sort of wonder and sense of oneness. There’s a sort of meditative state that sometimes comes from being in the woods or tracking and that was present on that Friday.”

John M., October 10, 1993

These quotes serve as an introduction to those men I joined on tracking expeditions Fall of 1993 in Western Massachusetts. I find that it is difficult to put into words the sense of wonder experienced in Nature, the sense of being part of something larger than oneself, that is found in the woods, the animals, the plant life and their interconnectedness. These men have many years experience with these feelings and so it seemed appropriate to defer to their descriptions of those moments.

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As part of my Master's Program I was asked to shadow someone who was involved in activities completely outside of my personal or professional experience. We were to create, "A Portrait of a Knower". I chose trackers as my knower(s) because I knew nothing about the art of tracking. However, I do know how I feel when I am outdoors, in the woods, with Nature; Nature as teacher, Nature as refuge, Nature as giver and receiver of life and death and Nature as reality. Trackers spend much of their time in an environment where every sound is important, where their ability to use physical evidence in partnership with their intuition and senses is a way of life. Where stories are told, not in words in books but in the embedded tracks in the dirt, the scratched bark of the tree and the smells of the riverbanks and tree stumps. This is a foreign language to me and one I felt I wanted to learn about.

I would like to address several common concepts and insights all three trackers shared with me. First, all the trackers spoke of something they call the "quality of attention". When I asked John how to "see" the details of the path and yet remain attuned to the surrounding environment he explained the method. Tom Brown, a well known tracker calls this "splatter vision", which John describes as "...making your field of vision very wide angle, seeing up and down as much as you can and let things go a little bit out focus...trying to pick up movement."

Paul Rezendes, www.paulrezendes.com, extends this line of thought into how we live and asks us to inquire into the quality of attention we bring to our own lives. He views this keen awareness as an embracing of what is present, an aliveness that exists completely in the moment, sensitive to everything around you. It is an attention that brings one into union with the environment, with the people, with whatever your surroundings are. It reveals a way of knowing that is at once alive and dynamic and yet still and silent. Intimacy with what is there demands a quality of attention that allows you to ingest the world around you and to take it in as if it were you and you were it. Paul refers to the deer in the forest. He describes how you will see the deer, upon hearing a loud crack, "...you might see that sound ripple right through the animal's flesh...as the animal takes in the sound, just as if it were part of the animal...That's a tremendous amount of sensitivity. And that's what I'm talking about, sensitivity. To be sensitive is to be present, to be alive, to embrace fully." This is to be in communion with all things, this is what it is to be fully alive and present.

Nature invites us to share in this intimate dance of life, death and rebirth. The autumn leaves, still moist, will die and provide nourishment to the earth which will then bear its fruit in the spring. This is the cycle of life with which trackers are so familiar. But most of us will walk in the woods never aware that this cycle occurs even as we tread on those leaves, lost in our thoughts, "sleepwalking".

However, the tracker must be fully awake, intellectually and sensitively, in order to gather information on the animal he is tracking. For instance, we were asked to point out any unnatural branching in the trees. One could see that some hemlock trees were flat on top and that their interior foliage had been depleted, leaving only a few leaves at the end of the branches. The bark of these trees had been gnawed and sliced by knife-like teeth. We discovered quills and scat underneath these trees. This physical evidence pointed to the presence of porcupine in the area.

Another very interesting discovery concerned tiny, perfectly round holes near the roots of trees. We didn't know what had been digging here or why these holes were so perfectly round. We discovered that there is a mushroom, mycelium, (sometimes called false truffle) which flourishes under the earth and creates a network which connects all the roots of the trees. Paul was

fascinated with this mushroom and it's role in connecting and nourishing the forest around us. We visualized this vast underground network which served to take as well as give nourishment to what was below and above the earth.

Tracking may have been a primary means of communication much like the oral tradition of storytelling. Storytelling demanded that the storyteller become one with the story in order to convey not only the events of the story, but the emotions, the tragedies, the humor and the personality of the characters in a way which made that story come alive. Tracking incorporates a similar sensitivity and I find it analogous to storytelling. As we would come upon the tracks a story would unfold about the animal who created the tracks. Was the animal feeding, looking for a mate, digging for tidbits under the topsoil or was it running or fighting? The story to be told at that moment was in the tracks we were reading at that moment. I asked John how he responded to tracking in an area he was unfamiliar with, such as the Florida everglades, and how he used his knowledge of tracking to gather information to create a story. He responded, "I look for things that I thought might be sign to me and tried to piece together the puzzle...You should look around and gather up all the information and see what the clues are so you can get an answer."

When you track an animal, you are seeking the truth about that animal, to unravel the "puzzle" or story. You have to follow the tracks without projecting what the animal will be doing at the end of the journey. It is the story in the present moment, moment by moment, which is to be valued. Having an expectation about what the ending will be removes us from being present with the story as it unfolds for us in the way it needs to unfold, without judgment or rationalization.

John told me a story of going out tracking with the hope of seeing mountain lion. So when he came upon a set of tracks, he measured and evaluated the tracks and pronounced them mountain lion tracks. "I wanted it to be mountain lion", he told me. But it turned out to be a large coyote. We discussed how we set up expectations in our lives and pronounce these as truths because these are the results we want to be real. In this way, there is no real "quality of attention" because we have separated ourselves from the moment of what is real. John added, "Another thing about tracking, it forces you to be in the moment. And that's why it can be like walking meditation. If you give that track your full attention, you're no longer worrying about anything else...or thinking of anything else...it takes you out of all your thoughts and brings you into your senses." Tracking brings us into our body where we have access to a way of knowing that is fundamental to us as humans but which we do not access in our everyday environment. Physical, sensational knowing is unbiased and non-judgmental and as such, it is a way of accessing pure knowledge.

Can we encounter the present as we search for the truth without forcing an outcome? It occurs to me that we live our lives bypassing what is happening at any given moment in exchange for an ending we want to have occur. As we lose each moment, we lose time and eventually we find ourselves at the end of our story never having lived the moments that formed our stories. This is the epitome of alienation of self. What I found in the woods with the trackers was just the opposite. It was being in communion with what was there and in this way having access to what was there deep inside of me as well. Paul explained it this way, "Communion comes in the present, when you embrace something fully and with sensitivity. And there's an opportunity to really know." In our culture there is a tendency to overcome or conquer our world. In contrast, the Native American culture seeks to create a harmonious existence with the elements and

wildlife. Their relationship to their environment is then more mellifluous than ours because of this attitude.

Mark and John were telling me the story of tracking bobcat with Paul Rezendes. They had found what they believed was one set of bobcat tracks. Indeed, it was two bobcats, one stepping exactly into the first one's tracks. Mark made the point that "The more you go out there and see, the more there is to learn. So on the one hand I say I know nothing, absolutely nothing, and have an empty cup so I can learn more. On the other hand there is a place you can tap into where you know everything."

Paul spoke of the "voice of the forest" and how it speaks to us in many different ways. He spoke of "allowing Nature to reveal herself" to us. I think the key word here is "allowing", not coming into the woods with expectations, but becoming an "empty cup" so that we can see what is already there. Trackers must have this attitude if they are to see the subtle physical signs detectable only to someone who is open to seeing them. It was fascinating to learn how a buck would leave his scent under a tree and break a branch in a very specific way so it just barely hung over the spot he had marked. I would never have seen this if it had not been pointed out to us and explained.

Both Mark and Paul referred to being empty or void of what we think we know so that we could indeed know what there was to know in the woods. By diminishing the role of the intellect we could equally depend on the role our senses play in bringing about knowledge. In the woods, both physical sign and sensitivity bring the trackers the information they are seeking about the animals. John mentioned "Another thing about tracking is that it's not just a visual thing. We use other senses. And one of the big ones is smell...And frequently you'll become aware of their (animal) presence or of the presence of their sign by way of olfactory first." When we joined Paul for tracking beaver and otter he pointed out how the animals leave "scent mounds" and how this is a way of marking their territory. One could determine the presence of beaver or otter depending on the strength of the scent. This was further demonstration of the trackers need to make use of all his senses combined with his intellectual knowledge of physical sign.

Paul spoke about the "quality of attention" one brings to tracking and how the knowledge of physical sign combined with "sense-itivity" is part of a heightened quality of attention. But he claims we still do not "know" by merely labeling that which we think we know. Before we undertook our tracking journey he asked us, "...we look at these pines and say, oh, red pine and those are white pine. And because we have labeled them, it gives us a sense that we know them... It may be a false sense of security or a false knowing. I mean, is there real intimacy...have we looked at the bark, where it's dry or wet, seen the difference...the smells, the fact that you can make tea out of the white pine needles? Have you ever tasted it? Do you know all its relations?"

We are accustomed to creating labels, categories and definitions to validate our images and experiences, and therefore we can pronounce that we "know" these things. Perhaps we can get away with this in the business world where a linear mode of thinking is accepted and encouraged. But in the woods, the intellect alone gets you nowhere. The experience of the woods demands a deeper intimacy, a different way of knowing which uses our senses instead of our dictionaries. Validation of the experience is not required, only being present as we read the tracks is necessary.

It occurs to me that the quality of attention also refers to a difference between looking and seeing. One is a superficial action and one is an action which involves us in a deeper way. If indeed we were to actually “see” what was around us we might place a higher value on our lives, each other and the earth. We might then experience the sense of oneness with all things, the intimacy and communion described by these men. Consider how this would affect our world, if we actually believed, not as a concept, but as a reality, that we were part of one whole.

St. Thomas in his writings said: “The kingdom of the father is spread upon the earth and men do not see it.” Why not? Maybe because we are much too interested in the outcome of our stories. Maybe because we sleepwalk too often and don’t live with the conscious awareness needed to see the “kingdom of the father”. Maybe because our cups are too full with our intellects, our gadgets and our busy lifestyles. Maybe because we’ve trained ourselves to deny physical sensations, genuine feelings and unsubstantiated intuitions because they were not valued in our culture.

These men have formed an analogy between their experience in Nature as trackers and their spiritual beliefs as human beings. They have seen in the plants, in the animals and in the environment the manifestation of their own life cycles and spiritual journeys. I think this is why they track. They seek in Nature the sense of interconnectedness of all things, a place to belong and to thrive without judgment or bias. Perhaps this brings them closer to “God” and to themselves.

I’m left with many questions. I thank those involved with this project (those mentioned and not mentioned here) for allowing me to inquire deeply into our ways of knowing and the affect access to these ways may have on me and on others. I am challenged to live in a powerful way, present to everything and living authentically in a world which might not embrace me as I would embrace it. I look forward to the journey.

November 26, 1993

Alicia M. Rodriguez, M.A.

You can find information about Paul Rezendes and his tracking and nature programs in the northeast United States at his web site:
www.paulrezendes.com

[The Wild Within: Adventures in Nature and Animal Teachings](#)

by Paul Rezendes, Bill McKibben

"I've tracked the fox for several hours now. Reading her signs, I feel in my body her excitement and wild bounding in search of the vole, her curiosity at the grouse roost. Her tracks reveal her life to me. The experience of tracking her is a book with its own language: tracking has made me intimate with her in a way that is closer than words."

-from *THE WILD WITHIN*