

Wild Spirit

By Oceana del Fuego

My annual trip to Yellowstone National Park took on a whole new flavor this September. Last spring I asked the spirit world what I could do to assist the bison in Yellowstone. I was told to drum in the park with the notion of honoring bison and its energy or power. During the months leading up to our trip I took a moment each morning while I was drumming to honor the spirit of bison. I had no idea the incredible experiences that would follow.

Our first day in the park we did a short hike to begin acclimating to the altitude and connecting with the land. Yellowstone is pure, wild and untamed. It's something you can feel as well as see. During our hike we not only heard the high whistle of a bugling male elk, but we also saw him bugling and approaching nearby female elk. At the conclusion of our hike we went to Old Faithful for an ice cream. We have seen Old Faithful many times and rarely go there, preferring the proverbial road less traveled. But on that day ice cream called and to Old Faithful we went. As always while in Yellowstone we were constantly watching for wildlife, especially bison because they do frequent the Old Faithful area. We got our cones and sat with about 200 other visitors watching Old Faithful in all her magnificence as she shot steaming, hot water 150 feet into the air. When she was finished, the crowd dispersed - back to the trails and gift shops. There was a handful of people hanging around as we finished our cones. Since we had a huge bench to ourselves I lay back with my hands behind my head to look at the sky. No sooner had my head touched down than Bill, looking over my head, said, "There's a bison right there.". Thinking he was kidding, I responded "No, there's not", in my best what-do-you-take-me-for-a-fool tone. He said, "Yes. There is." At that same moment I noticed a woman behind Bill focusing her camera in my direction. In a moment of brilliance I realized she wasn't taking a picture of me! Sure enough, there was a huge male bison, about 1500 lbs worth a mere 15 feet

from us. He literally took my breath away with his magnificence. We sat watching him in silence as he grazed his way toward us.

Bison are sometimes underestimated by tourists despite numerous warnings, because they often move slowly and have a rather stoic presence. The truth is they can run 30 mph and can move very quickly from a dead stop. Our philosophy is to not approach wildlife, but if an animal approaches us, as this one was, we remain still and quiet and observe respectfully.

This bison chewed his way toward us and stopped there for about 10 minutes. We were definitely in his energy field since we could both feel his energy and power. The question of course, is "Where did he come from?" They do move quickly, but he was literally not there one second and there the next. Bill, who is very analytical and *the* skeptic explained it the best. "He came out of the geyser." he said. And truly he either came out of the geyser or out of thin air. What a magnificent creature and what an incredible gift from the spirit world. I also took this as a reminder to drum on his behalf.

I drummed that evening just inside the west entrance to the park, well off the road and trails. I had pictured myself easily sliding into a shamanic state of consciousness and reveling in this drumming and the power of the animal. Well not only was I cold, judging by the tone of my drum, I was not alone. But I drummed anyway. My intention was to honor the spirit of bison and to affirm that bison are welcome on this land. I had been thrilled to see "Bison Belong" stickers in shop windows in neighboring communities. This was my way of expressing that same sentiment. Bison belong. Bison spirit showed me the life cycle of bison - breeding in the fall, the cold, cold, winter, the births of the calves in the spring, the herds protection of the young, and the feeding in the summer. Bison also expressed to me how in a herd each individual does what is best for the herd. Just as each individual animal is a living thing, the herd is a living thing as well. Bison assured me that all of the dead bison from the winter's slaughter had passed to the other side. Then the spirits of the forest animals - squirrel, otter, deer, bear, bison and elk -

surrounded me, as they often do in the woods. I thought this was the conclusion of my time with bison spirit for now, but there was to be more.

Our last day in Yellowstone we were blessed with glorious sunshine. Bill and I headed for Soda Butte Creek, a beautiful creek through a forest that opens into a huge meadow. My husband, an avid fly fisherman since long before it was hip, set off down the creek with his rod in hand. I found a luscious spot right next to the water, on a small beach with an upturned tree providing shelter from the wind. I was in my element and immediately began taking pictures. There are an endless number of things to do beside a creek - meditate, journey, rattle and sing and record the sound of running water. I am gathering quite a collection of running water sounds from different rivers and streams. No sooner had I hunkered down to start my activities than Bill appeared carrying a huge bison bone. As a bone lover I immediately recognized it as an upper leg bone, probably a front leg. Bones fascinate me because they hold the energetic essence of the spirit that lived in the body just as a shell holds the sound of the sea. What a blessing to once again commune with the spirit of bison. Federal law prohibits the removal of any artifacts from the park, which is a real necessity for the maintenance of a pure, unspoiled place. If there has ever been anything I wanted to bring home from Yellowstone it was that bison bone. So I pondered, How can I bring the wonder of this bone home with me while leaving the actual bone there. The answer? I had some crystals in my pocket that I liked the feel of. I washed them in the pure, cold water of Soda Butte Creek and then rested them on the bone to dry in the sun. Then when the crystals were dry and back in my pocket, I played my rattle against the bone with the running water in the background and taped it. I didn't practice. I just pressed the record button and experimented with rhythms, sounds and speeds. Now, when I listen to that tape I am literally transported back to the edge of Soda Butte Creek on a sunny fall day. I see the fish jumping. And, by the way, there had been no fish jumping until I started rattling. I can feel the sun on my skin and the hard, solid bison bone in my hand.

Before leaving I connected with the spirit of the land in that place. The spirit showed himself as a little pixie. He asked me to do a soul retrieval for the land. This puzzled me because it was truly an unspoiled place. What I learned during the course of the soul retrieval journey was that the building of the road had been extremely traumatic for the land there and a piece of its spirit had gone away. I coaxed the soul part to come back by explaining one of the paradoxes of wilderness. In order to save wild lands they must be accessible to people. People care about saving something they are familiar with. So the road actually was necessary and a good thing. The land's spirit agreed to come back and it was rewarding to blow it back into the land and feel that I was giving something back to the land that had given me so much.

Oceana distributes a quarterly newsletter covering various subjects related to wellness and practices shamanism, bodywork and counseling in Issaquah. She also leads many groups and workshops. To reach Oceana or to be added to her mailing list call 425 - 391-8554.

This article was published in the New Times in January, 1998.
Copyright 1998. All Rights Reserved.