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SENDER

Alex Laird

RECIPIENT

Ernest Mancoba, Wonga Mancoba

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København

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This letter would appear to be a reply to one from Ernest and Wonga Mancoba about their "homecoming" to South Africa.

TRANSCRIPTION

(Transcription: W.Sze)
[sender: Alexandra Laird]
[to: Ernest and Wonga]
[date: 11 Feb 1995]

Dear Ernest and Wonga

I was immensely touched that you should write such a long letter, and one which was so rich and vivid in its description of your return to South Africa. Thank you for it - a real gift to have. It reads rather as Wordsworth describes the writing of poetry- something like 'spontaneous thoughts... recollected in tranquility'.

The whole experience sounds a strengthening one, confirming your hopes in some measure, Ernest, and a powerful realisation of your imaginative, dreaming 'Africa', Wonga. I loved your description of the Greek myth taking bloody form in the sacrifice of the cow. It sounds as though you saw Christianity in a new light, that it is compatible with tradition if only the essential, celebratory and mystical aspects of Christianity were taught, rather than the insistence on 'how lowly and sinful we humans are, with constant need for forgiveness' - reinforcing the sense that we humans are tragic victims struggling hopelessly towards a state of grace (I heard on the radio today an especially gloomy, funereal Sunday church service!), then maybe the church here could offer some wisdom. Sadly, it has lost its way, in Britain at least.

Certainly the concept of compassion and loving thy neighbour as oneself is a key to Christianity. But, yes - as in umuntu, this concept is also shared by many other traditions. Malidoma Some is another shamanic figure for the West, chosen by his tribe, the Dagara in W Africa, to 'be friends with the stranger/enemy'. Like you, he sees his position as "a two way passage of information, as both a bridge and a conduit. By agreeing to move between both worlds, I seek to bring about some kind of balance." All this to help bring about transformation in the West's - and so the indigenous cultures' - sickness of the soul (I included some information re him and

Mosaic in my letter to you chez Elza) He says "it is time for Africans to clear their throats and enter boldly into the concert of spiritual and magical exchange" and "Alienation is one of the many faces of modernity. The cure is communication and community- a new sense of togetherness. By opening to each other, we diminish the pressure of being alone and exiled".

So, there are others from Africa - and many other indigenous cultures like the Kogi in South America, who are bringing their wisdom to us, who have forgotten our own, which we once had. And that wisdom seems to be solidly founded on community and compassion. It is very exciting to find that the younger people are coming along, committed to the same integration you embody.

The question is, how can we here teach and pass on this wisdom? I still find it extraordinary that we have no 'holders of wisdom' on how to live, what are the stages in life, how to pass from one to the other. And it is not as if the West doesn't have this wisdom already. Psychoanalysis has told us a great deal about the effects of suffering, how human beings affect each other emotionally and why it is important to express what we feel. But it lays too great an emphasis on the negative. The positive is just as important, if not more so. We need to recall the power of imagination - and imagery - to heal, the experience of music, art, laughter, and so many other good experience that move us. And we do have our myths and fairytales, plus the living and breathing traditions of cultures whose myths nourish them, which can teach us. Trouble is, no-one is teaching us how to use these enriching experiences!

But psychologists, writers and story-tellers are coming together in a rediscovery of this wisdom, and beginning to share it. And now there's the Internet, linking anyone with a computer and a modem around the world, in any culture, to share information instantly - albeit through words. That's another community ... though a rather individualistic, isolated one, perhaps.

I'm beginning to realise that we need to find ways, both new and old, of sharing this wisdom, of teaching it, as your mother had teachers and taught you. Since teaching is all about doing, about example, then our way of life itself must express and reinforce that teaching. So we in the West need to use existing ways, like art, of being-doing-communicating

wisdom, but perhaps in a more active, conscious way. I feel quite cross that it has taken 40 years (in April!) for me to discover that vital truths about living already existed in myths and tales, in current traditions, and in psychology, and that no-one teaches this as a matter of course! It should be taught as part of everyone's growing up. But how

Oh ... I'm pouring out my thoughts, when I really meant to comment on your letter! It's exciting to hear that you may be returning to Cape Town in April. Yes, perhaps we could meet during the summer. I am off to Ghana, Burkina Faso (for the film festival) and then, I hope, Mali on Sunday 19th March for 3 weeks - so back mid-March.

A very heartening thing happened a couple of weeks ago - I finally met Peter Murray of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park when he was here in London. He was asking whether we'd be interested in making a film about a workshop of Zimbabwean sculptors, which is taking place in April in Zimbabwe and then transferring to Yorkshire to work there, in the art college nearby. This itself is a beautiful old stone building with a courtyard, I believe, and they will work for the first time with a wide range of English stone and other materials. The artists will be meeting other, more experienced African sculptors and some British/European artists may drop in - all part of Robert Loder's workshops. These are apparently the most exciting experiences, not just for younger African artists to meet other, older artists, but for the wonderful cross-fertilization that goes on - and musical extravaganzas, as you can imagine! Inspiration flows freely Peter was, as we all were, wondering whether you would be interested in being there to meet the sculptors - certainly it would enrich the whole workshop for them if you visited them at work. I think it's taking place around August/September, around the same time as your exhibition, probably. Anyway, I liked him and Anna Kindersley, who is co-ordinating the workshop, and who organised the Senegalese workshop last year.

Now it's midnight - and time for my bed ... so I must say goodnight, and send you both much love and a hug and hope to see you either here, or in Denmark, or wherever. Do send my love to Mikael and Bertel too.

[signed: Much love Alex xx]

ALEXANDRA LAIRD

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Ernest and Wonga Mancoba
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DK-1260 Kobenhavn K

11th February 1995

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Alexxx