

LISTENING TO STONES

Learning in Leroy Little Bear's laboratory:
Dialogue in the world outside.

By DON HILL



Leroy Little Bear in Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park. Among the hoodoos and valleys are “pathways that facilitate communication.”

I

IT IS A BRILLIANT WAY TO LEARN. STUDENTS OF Socrates used to gather around the great man and exchange heady ideas that arose out of provocative questions—what we know now as the Socratic dialogue method of education. You might think the Greek philosopher and his followers hung out in academic institutions constructed of marble, but they didn't. The world outside was their classroom. They went on long walks.

In the spring, I went on a daylong hike with Leroy Little Bear, the renowned Blackfoot elder and educator emeritus at the University of Lethbridge. He simply describes himself as “a prairie boy,” with few hints that his impressive credentials include former director of native studies at Harvard University.

Little Bear's treatise on Blackfoot physics—the nature of “place” and how it affects the way we think—had intrigued me for over a decade, and I looked for an opportunity to speak with him on my national radio program on the CBC. A first meeting, years before our walk, was hastily arranged and recorded at a hotel parking lot in the quiet of my vintage Mercedes; a chat, I discovered much later, Little Bear enjoyed in part because of his affection for well-built automobiles and speed. “Good thing photo radar isn't bundled with demerit points,” he'd grinned.

His academic training and ancestral lineage give Little Bear a unique perspective on “modern” life. A leader at gatherings of Western-trained scientists and Native American elders, he has facilitated formal sessions “to explore [these] different visions of reality.” His friend, the late physicist David Bohm, shared a mutual concern that the mindset of empirical science, for all its accomplishments, remained essentially oblivious to other ways of knowing. This method of investigation, while powerful and extremely useful, nevertheless, according to Bohm, “is the devil that got us into the present crisis”—our use of scientific information without wisdom.

A remarkable storyteller and teacher, Little Bear believes there is an unspoken language that makes it possible to bridge every worldview, a language that can be learned through dialogue—the willingness to set aside preconceived ideas and listen not only with your mind but with your heart. And if the way forward begins with a commitment to genuine dialogue, Little Bear teaches that the exchange of conversation must not only occur between human beings but also between all the creatures and plants and spirits that connect us to and with the earth.

SOUTHERN ALBERTA IS DOTTED WITH SPECIAL places, many held sacred by Native North Americans on both sides of the border; quite a few are still used for ceremonies of every sort and divination. We decided to visit Writing-on-Stone, a

provincial park since the late 1950s and much later a designated Archaeological Heritage Site to protect the substantial number of petroglyphs in the park—rock engravings that date back hundreds if not thousands of years, etched into the sandstone hoodoos that hug both sides of the Milk River. Writing-on-Stone is particularly auspicious for dialogue, Little Bear tells me, because “there are pathways [here] that facilitate communication.”

“The stories are that our people used to come and get visions in this area,” Little Bear says of the unspeakably beautiful landscape, which includes the Sweetgrass Hills nearby and Chief Mountain. Visions were extremely important to the Blackfoot. “They were used to forecast certain things, such as buffalo hunts, whether they should go on the warpath,” Little Bear says. They provided information outside of the ordinary, which could be key to the welfare of the tribe. Many of these supernatural visions are inscribed upon the sandstone cliffs and hoodoos. Tribal elders tell Little Bear that these “aren't human writings”; by implication, it was not human beings that formulated the petroglyphs. “Spirits did the writing on the stones,” Little Bear says without a blink. For the Western-trained mind, this is a preposterous notion, but I remind myself of David Bohm's proposal about dialogue before saying as much. And who knows, I think; perhaps “spirit” is infused within the wind that continuously shapes the sandstone hoodoos.

Little Bear believes there is an unspoken language that makes it possible to bridge every worldview.

“The wind never stops blowing around here. It is forever bringing the news, so to speak,” Little Bear says, impressed as I am by the power of wind to form this place.

He guides me. From our perch atop a hoodoo, we peer out over the Milk River, brown now with the spring runoff, the waves of pinnacles along either shore heightened by a dramatic sweep of light. The sun is direct and hot and hints of summer. The sound of insects, a symphony of cicada-like rhythms and birdsong complement our conversation.

There are other sounds in this place, subtle and sometimes indistinct, to the point that I wonder if I'm hearing things. As the ever-present breeze blows, the hoodoos can behave like a musical instrument. The wind plays on the rock formations, says Little Bear. “These hoodoos, all the different crevices, cracks and so on... you definitely begin to experience the different frequencies. It's almost as if the wind is making music.”

We pause to listen. “The wind is an important part of our ecological picture,” he says. Wind is understood in Blackfoot as *sopo*, “which really means something,” Little Bear says. “We don't call it wind, but something that actually goes through everything.” Picture the wind animating the trees, he says. I think of Tibetan prayer flags flapping with every gust, the “wind horses” that are said to broadcast stories to those that



“All these hoodoos are really listening close to us,” says Little Bear. This extraordinary claim squares with geophysical science.

can hear. It reminds me of another story.

Contemporary neuroscience affirms that specific tonal frequencies can affect the human central nervous system, triggering a kind of “coloured hearing.” This is an example of synesthesia, wherein certain sounds induce visualizations infused with rich colour and vibrant shapes. Of course, not everyone experiences this phenomenon of a literal crossing of the senses. But for the so-called “sensitives” in any given population there is scientific evidence of a change in their biochemistry. Exposure to a pure source of frequency, such as what I was beginning to associate with Writing-on-Stone, might well put some people into a reverie—a non-ordinary state of awareness. This fact of Western medicine is merely squaring with what Leroy Little Bear calls “native science.”

“It is a very different type of science,” he says, emphasizing the word, discriminating from Western empirical “science” which is completely concerned with measurement. If you see the wind as “being your friend or enemy even,” the sentient nature of it proposes a different relationship implicitly understood by the Blackfoot.

“The wind is there with you,” says Little Bear. “And you are there with the wind. Whereas it is quite a different notion if we [say], ‘I’m going to study the wind.’” The very thought of examining a stiff breeze as a stationary object, let alone “to study these rocks right here as just inanimate beings,” doesn’t make sense to the Blackfoot way of knowing.

“Right now,” Little Bear says with a grin, “all these hoodoos

are really listening close to us.”

This extraordinary claim squares with geophysical science and would not seem strange to any geologist familiar with the temporal properties of “tidelite” minerals, which serve as a kind of playback system for the memories of the earth. Joe Davis, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an installation artist who creates biological “genesthetic artforms,” theorizes that every shadow cast by a passing cloud imprints itself, however slightly, upon the rock. The day may come, he says, when a powerful microscope or some such instrument might detect and analyze stone-age impressions subtly recorded over time.

“Think of their age,” Little Bear marvels, the primordial history of the rock and the hoodoos at Writing-on-Stone self-evident. “The stuff they must know!” Yet the “teaching rocks” are somewhat careful about sharing their counsel. When I first visited Writing-on-Stone as a young man in the 1970s, I sensed there was a whole lot going on here that I could not get my head around. “Like a stranger, they will not sit down and tell you everything immediately,” Little Bear says. “Only when the rocks begin to know you will they tell you their story.”

Little Bear has had a long association with Writing-on-Stone, but he can’t recall the first time he was here. It’s second nature to return again and again to this place. He fondly remembers Alva Bair, the volunteer caretaker of the Milk River, who for decades lobbied to protect the “rock art” that adorns the valley despite the powerful people in Edmonton who pretty much downplayed its

LISTENING TO STONES



Place is more important than the carvings themselves, because it gives rise to the phenomena represented by the petroglyphs.

significance. Academic hearts went a-flutter in the 1980s when a cluster of perfectly fossilized dinosaur eggs was found in the valley. Soon after, the provincial government began to take the place more seriously; archaeology had spoken.

From a Blackfoot perspective, the eggs proposed a perplexing question. “We asked the elders about these dinosaurs,” Little Bear recalls. “White man’s science said they used to have the run of the earth.” Obviously, this was no longer the case. Why did they disappear? “The elders thought about it for awhile,” says Little Bear. “The answer they came back with [was] ‘maybe they forgot or stopped doing their renewal ceremonies.’”

A bewildering explanation, I think, and Little Bear admits he too was initially puzzled by the elders’ response with a question within a question. He realized later that context was necessary to understand the frame of reference that illuminates what they meant by a “renewal ceremony.” “This will take a few moments to explain,” he gently warns.

“The native paradigm consists of several key things,” Little Bear begins. “One of them is constant motion or constant flux. The second part is everything consists of energy waves. In the native world, the energy waves are really the spirit. And it is the energy waves that know,” he says, with a strong emphasis on the last word. “It is not you that knows. You know things because you are made up of energy waves or a combination thereof.”

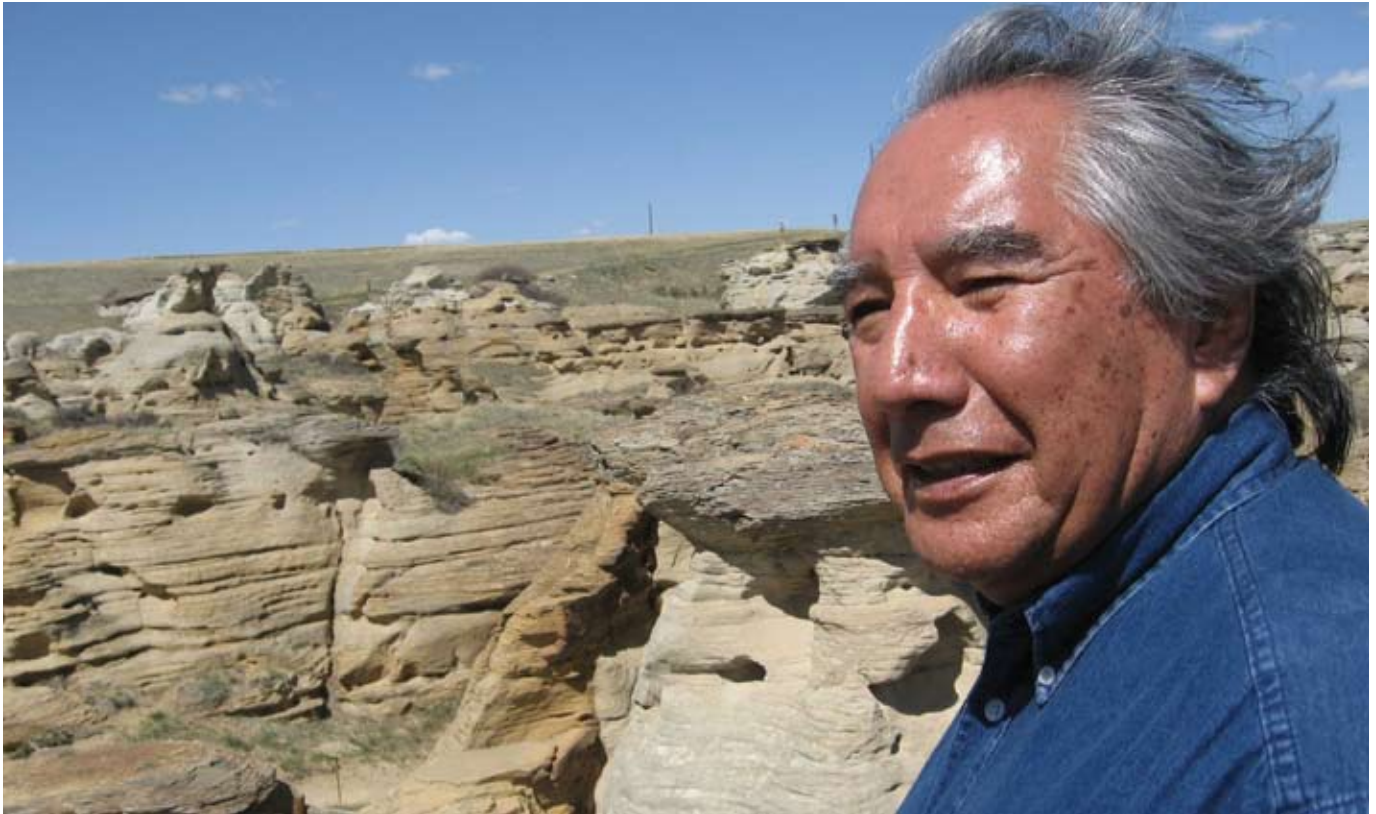
I am reminded of Vedanta, a religious school of thought native to India. I tell Little Bear that according to their elders, “mind is located outside of body.” If that is so, then it may not be

necessary to crowd the human brain with rote information; we might instead cultivate a deeper understanding of the nature of awareness. “David Bohm talked about this,” Little Bear recalls of his physicist friend. “He called it the implicate order,” the concept of an external universe marked by waves of energy and information constantly in motion. “Chaos—you can call it that,” Little Bear acknowledges. “But it’s culture, our worldviews that put order into what seemingly looks like flux and [is] forever changing.” Culture frames a way to make sense of the seemingly nonsensical, which Bohm describes as the explicate, the very stuff of human experience. And the limit of the imagination is what cultures propose at any given moment. This model of thinking is consistent with the Blackfoot ontology.

“Talking about these energy waves,” Little Bear continues, “it’s almost as though you act simply as a conduit, like a radio, picking up these energy waves that are always there and flowing through you and happening at the same time. It just depends where you’re tuned.”

As a career broadcaster, the very thought of tuning in to the galactic flow of information pulsing throughout the cosmos makes sense. I look around and imagine the hoodoos as transmission towers, and Little Bear homes in on this vision. He tells me to think of the human brain as a station on the radio dial; parked in one spot, it is deaf to all the other stations, he says; the animals, rocks, trees, simultaneously broadcasting across the whole spectrum of sentience.

“That’s the reason why our people go on a vision quest,” Little



“Spirits did the writing,” Little Bear says of petroglyphs. Spirit is infused within the wind that shapes the sandstone hoodoos.

Bear declares with the authority of personal experience. “That is why I call on the bears. That’s why I call on the eagle. I call on the rocks, the plants and so on to tell us knowledge that we would not otherwise pick up—the knowledge that is beyond our frequency range.”

I have a hunch that special places, such as Writing-on-Stone, might function and act like an amplifier. “To give you more juice,” I say, an antenna to extend the range of human perception.

“Very much so,” Little Bear agrees. “That’s the reason why there’s certain locations, whether they be medicine wheels or locations like Milk River, Chief Mountain and the Sweetgrass Hills; they’re all connected. It seems that’s where all these energies come together. It’s not that it can’t happen elsewhere. But there are certain places that act as amplifiers of energy waves that flow through you and me and everyone else.”

We navigate through the gaps between the hoodoos, taking a serpentine route, scrambling over outcrops of sandstone here and there. The heat of the day makes it feel like summer, although spring has only just begun in these parts.

Little Bear recalls the story about the elders’ comment concerning the disappearance of the dinosaurs. “In a state of flux, in a state of constant motion, things never remain the same. Things are forever changing. If we stopped and thought about it, we live in a very narrow spectrum of ideal conditions. So in the native world, we try to renew those conditions that are ideal for our existence. The drumming, the singing, the

dancing is part of the renewal.”

We trudge on. The heat and wind make the ground dry and creaky under our footsteps. The sound of the crevices between the hoodoos is tight, but not claustrophobic. A counterintuitive turn puts us up on a ledge, although Little Bear quickly spots an exit. “We can get down there,” he says, as I snap a photograph. We then slowly snake toward the stretches of sandstone surfaces, which serve as a canvas for carved petroglyphs, the “rock art” along the Milk River.

I need to talk a bit more about the Blackfoot concept of renewal to understand it better, and I say as much. “I always thought about sleep as renewal,” Little Bear obliges. “I have always told students, maybe because you’ve done it so often, you don’t think about it. But next time you go to sleep and wake up, consciously think about it. Every time we wake up, we go through a renewal of self.”

Dreams exist. And they are embodied in many of the petroglyphs.

I tell Little Bear about radio documentaries I made that spoke to the reality of dreams of every sort. I learned that dreams not only inform, but form the way many creative people think in consensus reality.

SOME OF THE WORLD’S MOST ENDURING WAYS of knowing have staked their beliefs on a foundation of dreams cloaked in mysticism. Those that have dared to venture outside the canons of religious faith and scientific convention have

Some of the most enduring ways of knowing have a foundation of dreams cloaked in mysticism. [People who] venture outside the canons of religious faith and scientific convention often return with fantastic stories to tell.

often returned with fantastic visions and stories to tell.

Cognitive archaeology is a scientific discipline that investigates how special places, particularly those designated as “sacred” throughout antiquity, might serve as an access point between consensus reality and non-ordinary states of awareness. Jean Clottes, in his official capacity as general inspector for archaeology at the French Ministry of Culture, once told me how “rock art” found inside paleolithic caves and outdoors all over the world, marks what I’ll call a “surface tension” between mystical dreams and earthly truth. “A human can access the power of the supernatural world” via these extraordinary places, he said. “But the supernatural world can access the human also.”

Leroy gestures with the sweep of the valley. “If you go through and look at the pictographs, you’ll see what our people said: that it is the spirits that actually make the pictographs. This goes back to the notion that a dream is not a one-way thing. It goes both ways.”

We get turned around a bit again, wending our way through another tight passage leading to a blind alley—a dead end, or a jumping-off point. Doubling back, we discover some thoughtful person has put in a rock stairway. “Follow the path laid out for you,” I chuckle quietly, which prompts another teaching from Little Bear.

“My dad never pretended to be a medicine man, but he had a dream one day that he was having a problem with coughing. In his dream, he was looking around and asked somebody for medicine to help his cough. I don’t know who it was, he said, but it was an old man. Next to a building, a shed, the old man said there was some growth there. And he told my dad, this is what you’re looking for.”

“When he woke up, my dad went to look.” Little Bear describes how his father found the plant in a spot similar to where the old man was referring to. “He made a brew, and it was good medicine. So, in other words, yes, these places—these dream places—are very important in terms of getting instructions.”

Our conversation turned to the preservation of “rock art” on the Western plains. There are other spots, notably in Saskatchewan, which have attracted calls for museum-style enclosures to shelter the sites from the elements. One Cree elder was asked for his advice on how best to care for the petroglyphs and pictographs painted with red ochre. “Let them fade away,” he said.

Leroy Little Bear agrees.

In Navajo country, in what is now the US southwest, there is a tradition of ritual sand paintings, which are typically beautiful in composition. After a ceremony, they’re destroyed—which horrifies “many non-Indians who participate in the ceremonies who want them to be saved,” Little Bear says. The explanation

the Navajo give for their practice of creative destruction is “the spirit of that thing was for now—for here. It’s not meant to be forever.”

“It teaches you to be present,” I suggest. “Not take it for granted.”

“Yes, it is the now,” Leroy concurs, then focuses his attention on the petroglyphs nearby. “When the dreams occur, when these things came into existence, they were for that moment.”

For years, I had it totally wrong about special places such as Writing-on-Stone. I was completely taken in by the “rock art” images, revering them as if they were the only thing worthy of consideration. It took me awhile to realize that they were objects, and that it was the place that was more important because it created the conditions that gave rise to the phenomena represented by the petroglyphs. Little Bear, who is listening intently, appears to brighten when I add: “The artifacts were the outcome of an experience; they weren’t the experience itself.”

We walk through a thicket and further downstream, Little Bear keeping a sharp eye out for wood ticks and petroglyphs high and out of reach from ground level. Images are everywhere. I speculate that some were made during the winter, by getting up on a snowbank or perhaps on a ladder of some sort. When Little Bear reminds me that “the elders say the spirits made them,” I think I’ve detected the beginning of a scolding frown. But if there is any tension between us, it doesn’t last for more than a moment.

It is time to go home. We climb back up and over another ridge and are somewhat silent on the return trip, taking pleasure in being in a world within a world. This place does work its magic on you. Turning a final corner, yet another gorgeous view. I could sit up here for a long time, listening to the crickets and the wind telling stories; the river, too. The water is very much like the wind, Little Bear says.

“It reminds us—not only because of its fluidity, but [because of] its more singular nature, trickling down, the river flowing through—that water flowing past these rocks is making the connection between upstream and downstream. It’s almost like [it’s] keeping those rocks, as it flows past, informed as to what’s going on. These rocks are knowledgeable of what’s upstream and what’s downstream as the water is giving them the information.”

Thinking less now as a casual observer, I fancy myself more as a participant in a living laboratory. “I must have rocks in my head,” I say, and Leroy shares in the laugh. I sense that we both have found a place to be at ease with each other, at that place where dialogue is meant to occur. ■

Don Hill is a “thought leader” in the Banff Centre’s Leadership Development Program.

Copyright of Alberta Views is the property of Alberta Views and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.