

From "Playing Around" by Richard Neville, Hutchinson 1991

Chapter 3 Nausea Rising, or is it a spiritual emergency? P38- 44

"Go off into the forest and get into a calm, meditative state," he said. "Try and identify with another being, a nonhuman being. It could be a bird, animal, insect or even an element Like the wind." About twenty of us leant against the eucalypts or sat on logs near a campfire, listening to Jimi Gaia. "When you return" he continued "we ask you to make a mask of the being you've chosen to represent – or maybe they've chosen to represent you - and to speak for the being at the Council of All Beings."

I whispered to Petra, "Declan's on the loose – don't choose to be a whitebait."

Jimi continued, "Until that time we ask you to all remain in silence."

The group scattered into the banksias and tea trees, and I headed for a rocky outcrop, fending off intimations of derision. Jimi had spent so many years working for the rainforests that he actually regarded himself as one of its species, a tropical seed in a human husk. Long before Matt Stoker had set up a stage in the jungles of Borneo and unleashed his jetload of superstars, Jimi was blowing up bulldozers and lashing himself to trees in defiance of chainsaws. These days, his mission embraced the entire spectrum of non-human entities, and his techniques were psycho-spiritual. My inner critic, a sneering lingo, intruded: *Rumpus Room* goes bush.

A woman in a blue cape had reached the pinnacle before me. It was Rana, dancing with a sapling, identifiable by the whiplash of her plait. So I weaved to a ridge dotted with grevillia and gums.

Assuming the Pose of an Adept, I tried to empty my mind. We had come to this council intrigued by its aims and wanting to shake of the blues of the standoff with Dando. The group included a disproportionate number of Germans. Over billy tea, one of them had recounted how he had watched the NATO planes criss-cross the skies over his Hamburg home. When he asked his parents what would happen in a nuclear accident, they replied: "The main thing is – we'll all die together."

The sun broke through the clouds, reminding me of the ozone rift. Less crops, more cancer; so I chose the sun as my 'being'.

When I returned to the camp, the others were embroiled in mask-making: cutting up pieces of cardboard and wielding crayons as though it was a grown-up kindergarten. Silence prevailed, and I was oddly disappointed to see another resplendent sun in the making.

With masks attached, we sat in silence around the campfire, the sap frothing and hissing, the smoke pungent with eucalyptus. The skies rang with a conference of bellbirds. In this fairy tale I was surrounded by a tiger, a fly, a kookaburra, a tree fern, an ant, a cloud, a spider, a mushroom, a swan ... Declan was crouched on all fours in the nude. Jutting from his spine was a triangle of black cardboard. Even so, the atmosphere was churchlike. A trance took hold.

"I speak today on behalf of the rainforests of the world, " intoned a voice from a lifelike filigree of twigs and leaves, "and all of the species of plants and animals that I nourish and house." It was our master of ceremonies, uncannily convincing. "Humans evolved for hundreds of millions of years in my moist green womb, before emerging a scant five million years ago, blinking into the light." My light, my light.

"Humans are not the crown of creation nor the source of all value. They are but one strand in the fabric of life. They did not create life. Nor was life created solely for the benefit of those who now threaten to destroy us all."

A performance? No, a possession. Jimi first turned into a rainforest in the Seventies, during a bitter loggers' siege. His 'ecological self' awoke when he put his life on the line. The initial stance of "I am protecting the rainforest" became "I am the rainforest protecting myself". Since then it had evolved into "I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking".

But what kind of thinking? Is it really possible to become a rainforest? To think like a rainforest? The tone was somber, deep.

"The belated rush by humans to *conserve* is too late to stop the wrecking of the biological fabric from which we, and all life, have evolved. Even if efforts at conservation increased a hundredfold." The mask surveyed the circle; the words sank in. "All that can save humans now is a profound spiritual shock beyond anything that has ever happened in their written history."

Homo sapiens in current form was fleeting, said the rainforest, a flash after four billion years of gestation. Now humans urgently needed to experience their actual self, stretching back through eons. To feel and know that their blood has a similar composition to that of sea water, hundreds of millions of years ago, and that they can be regarded as a piece of sea surrounded by a membrane, in order to climb onto land. "Yes, the ocean flows in their veins, and they don't even know it." The voice was urgent, like a rising squall.

"Humans must understand this – not scientifically, not poetically, but absorb it as their actual identity. The true nature of humans is none other than the nature of planet Earth."

The masks erupted: "We hear you Forest. "

"And now I wish to speak with alarm about what is happening to the skies. The fierce rays are sapping my strength."

Much to my own surprise, the pause was taken up by my own voice: "Forgive me, Rainforest, the protective curtain between us is torn. I am the light, the power, the giver of life. I love your planet, but things are getting out of balance and I can't control my own strength. Please, all you beings on Earth, watch what you send to the heavens. Don't make me lose control – "

As I stopped, with an unexpected lump in my throat, there was a reassuring chorus: "We hear you, Sun."

"I speak for the tree fern," said a gentle voice. It was Petra. "Please wake up to the delicacy of the balance in the bush. My life depends on many other species, just as their life depends upon me."

"I speak for all the insects," croaked a stranger. "The dragonfly, the sandfly and even the humble housefly. We have our place, too. You don't have to kill us – just flick us away. When you spray us with insecticides, you poison the earth. So, by killing us you are killing yourselves."

"I am the being within the rock" - a Germanic growl – "not yet formed. I view with amused detachment the ways of people. If they annihilate themselves, that doesn't matter very much, but if they annihilate the Earth, that's a problem, because from deep within my womb, new life can come."

"I am the cloud that loves to resemble all things. But no longer a mushroom."

"And yet I am a mushroom: wild, despised, the lowest of plants, a fungus. And my medicine can heal."

As each being spoke, sobriety escalated. The voices discarded their human identities. She who spoke for the kookaburra was no longer "an architect", the wind was no longer "a model", the wombat was no longer Rana. Everyday assumptions changed. No one questioned the right of the rock to have feelings. Gone was that seemingly crucial distinction between 'life' and 'lifeless'. Were we mad?

"I speak for the kingdom of Ant" - a German ant – "and I'm pissed off. Why are you all so serious? I am more simple, working all day. What's the problem about dying? I live off destruction. I'm happy with it. As an ant I'm quite busy. This planet is a big playground. We all have to die. Take it easy. Stop complaining ..."

A startled reply: "That's all very well for you, Ant, you can live underground, but for us tigers of Bengal, we live in the jungle, and it's disappearing. Before, humans never used to come near us, but now they're all over the place. Just the other day, my best friend was killed by a human, and just because he had eaten one of them. What else what could he do? We're starving."

When all the beings had spoken, the rainforest called for a volunteer, someone to take off the mask and sit inside the circle, to be human and answer the criticisms. No one stirred.

I was a bit sick of my mask. It wasn't as elegant as the rest; the string was broken and I was tired of holding the cardboard over my face, squinting through slits. Anyway, it was time to remind these normally speechless entities about Van Gogh, Wordsworth and Notre Dame. So I sat in the circle and was sorry in no time. My accusers were angelic, gifted, deeply wronged and yet forgiving.

"And you're always so depressed," the ant droned on, "even with all your wantonness and power."

"But humans do try to have fun with chainsaws and four-wheel drives," another moaned, "so expensive and damaging..."

"And all that anger inside you," said a serene lioness, "you just take it out on everyone else."

"It was fatal to let you think you have dominion over us," said the shark, "it just turned you into efficient killers, much worse than us." Declan was warming up. "You kill a hundred million sharks every year. You cut off our fins and then chuck our wounded bodies back in the water, half alive, a feast for our brothers and sisters – "

"What good are you to the world?" My voice was weak.

"We are the waste managers of the oceans," he said, "cleaning it up, keeping the balance. Which is more than humans manage on Earth."

"You do try to eat us."

"Hardly ever. Not nearly as often as you devour sharks, and shoot us and gaff us. Nothing will stop you, not even now that our flesh is poisoned with mercury – you murder us in schools, and carve us up for the market. Ignorance. Sharks have a more exalted role to play in the tangles web of life than you realize. A metaphor of your own soul. We are here to remind you of the prehistoric forces within. In truth, sharks are you. And you are us. We are your darker side. Until you accept that – then you go on living a lie."

And so on. Fortunately, the rainforest intervened. "It's a pretty sad looking human," he said. "But I do believe that among your species there are some who genuinely wish to represent our interests. Before closing this Council of All Beings, I'd like us to consider what sort of gifts we can offer those humans who wish to work on our behalf, what kind of powers we can give them."

"You're going to need tenacity," he continued, "because you don't yet realize the scale of the changes ahead. As a rainforest that has existed for millions of years, I give you tenacity."

"We tigers would like to offer you our example of loving ourselves. We are beautiful and great. We can walk proudly and fear no one. We offer you courage."

"Spirit of Wind would like to offer you power – its free. If you were to use me, which you may do any time, you would never need destroy the Earth. I also offer you my playfulness."

"Shark offers you the symbol of your darker self – accept it as a gift, acknowledge it, and you will transcend it."

As the sun set, the Council of All Beings drew to a close. We farewelled the adopted spirits and hurled the masks into the fire, so releasing their spirits. Few of us could roam the camp site without worrying about the insects we crushed. Rana went so far as to "make a deal" with the mosquitoes. "You may suck my blood with impunity," she told them, rolling up her sleeves and baring her skinny legs, "as long as you don't sting my face."

.... Jimi chuckled, and I moved over to Petra who was sitting on a rock, letting the ants zigzag across her shins. We didn't talk much, just resonated with the bush, nursing mugs of black tea from a billy. It was

such a small thing, this shift in perspective, but it had profound implications. More than all the books about the future, the speeches, the politics, the statistics, this expanded feeling was what mattered most of all. Infinite compassion – what a goal! If we could truly identify with Mother Nature, moving nimbly across the Earth, as future primitives, filled with respect for all things great and small, then there was still a chance...

... Rana drifted over to the rock to collect our mugs, ecstatic, her cloak swirling and her limbs mottled pink. "The mosquitoes didn't touch my face," she announced, scratching her shins. Of course – they'd been too busy feasting on the rest of her.

Through the wattle, we saw filtered fragments of flesh, topped by a fin. For Declan, the Council of All Beings was still in session, reminding us all of our darker side.

