

INTERVIEW WITH LAURENS VAN DER POST, JULY 14, 1993

The following interview took place at the London residence of Laurens Van Der Post . I had written a long letter December 3, 1992 requesting an interview which I include below.

My name is Richard Nathan. I am writing you the letter I have wanted to send for a long time. After many beginnings, I have decided to write extemporaneously. But first I began reading the new epilogue to the illustrated *Lost World of the Kalahari*. The “primordial”, felt from the “blood” rings out. And I say to myself, ‘express my internal reaction in my own words, not his words’. I have read all of your books. At least all I could get my hands on. The one that had the most effect upon me was *A Mantis Carol*. I was living in a mixed Central American, black, and white neighbourhood in Washington, D.C. at the time. One day on my apartment building doorstep I found a dying praying mantis. I do not remember ever having seen one before. I took him inside and fed him crushed vitamins mixed with a little pin-pricked blood of mine, following the example of a little American boy I knew, son of one of my teachers, who claimed that in such a way he had brought back to life a dead little bird he had found on the little road leading down to his villa in the Italian village where I now live.

I would sit and the praying mantis and I would stare at each other. I would say, ‘mantissss’, ‘mantissss’, like a mantra. The praying mantis eventually died, and I kept the body, with those big eyes still it seemed staring at me. To this day I still look at him, or even from a distance, and the word, softly and slowly spoken, ‘mantissss’, brings me a great calm within -a feeling that, thinking about it, is the most primordial bringing together of body and psyche, integration of the central nervous system with the flesh of the body. I do not remember if this is your reflection or mine, that the arrival of that Bushman in New York City, where my mother was born and near which I was born, is in a sense the arrival of a great healing of the body psyche split at a primordial level.

I am an Organismic psychotherapist. Which means that I am working towards the integration of body and psyche, and specifically in my work, the embodiment of primordial being. Your work has been indispensable to me. The assumption that we each have a Bushman in us has been an inspiration to me. Which parallels the hypothesis that the North American has within him an American Indian, as Jung suggested. The pain I feel as you describe the demise of Bushman culture and of the Bushman himself makes me even reluctant , like a strange travesty of history, to seek in the European and European -American a primordial core that could be likened to what came so naturally to the Bushman. And yet, what option do we have, if only to give meaning, as you say, to the fact of the existence into this age of these unarmoured vulnerable beings? As if it is not a hopeless task to live from an embodied primordial core. The question remains, and this brings me to the principal reason for my writing you. Is simply narrating the story of the Bushman and passionately espousing the cause of peoples like the Bushman, attempting to create whole primordial regions, enough? Is an appeal to the conscious psyche, when the organism itself is fragmented, armoured, and thus split from the conscious psyche in epidemic proportions, enough? And so I work with the body as well as the psyche. When the Bushman says he can feel in his body the presence of an animal, the coming of a

change of weather, what spoor to follow, in what direction, can this capacity for resonance with the natural world be translated more specifically in to terms that ground the psyche in the body? Is it not time, as the Bushman is disappearing as he once was, to accept the challenge implicit in his passing as an Amfortas wound to our European split condition, to take up the challenge that many, including Jung stated would be too much for him to do, that is, articulate what is the actual condition of the disembodied organism, and what is an embodied organism? I could speak in much more specific terms about what I have in mind. The question is very complex, the answers even more so, if one like me, working clinically is not to get caught up in therapist centred technique, but rather learn to resonate from my organism with the organism and soul before me, one to one, each client a separate individual with a different family and cultural history. I have had to dive deeply into embryology and the history of embryology to get some sense of the process of transmission from generation to generation of disembodiedness, and by extension, how the embodied soul comes about. I have been working on a manuscript for fifteen years, tentatively entitled "Psychosis of the Soul", which works with the double entendre of the word psychosis, in its modern sense of profound splittedness, and in its original sense of "animation, principle of life, I give soul or life to (Oxford Universal Dictionary on Historical Principles). Through embryology, I have been deeply drawn into contemplation of the frog, by a strange circuitous path which I would explain if you would find time to meet with me for an hour or two. I am a cultural historian as well, with an ear to anomalies. In the past ten years I have been inundated from every imaginable direction by living toy, dream, literary, printed, and verbalized frog imagos, which have had an effect upon me similar to that of the Mantis. I have observed that each major Jungian, Jung himself, and most recently yourself, make references to the frog. An entire chapter in one of the drafts of my manuscript is devoted to Aristophanes, so that when I read your words about Aristophane's The Frog's in A Walk with a White Bushman, I was very heartened that my hunch, in embryological developmental terms, about the frog in each of us that I feel as a precursor to the emergence from my endodermal involuntary core of primordial being into my mesoderm and ectoderm, that you would not find what I have to say too far out. I would like to finish this letter by observing the extraordinary similarity between your work, and that of the American author and adventurer Frank Waters. Born at about the same time, exposed from the beginning to a gradually vanishing primordial culture, chosen by circumstances to heroically defend the underlying increasingly alienated background of being. In Water's case the American Indian for whom he has been an honoured friend and spokesman in over twenty books, as representative to Washington in the cause of the Hopi and the Taos Pueblo Indians, if not others, by word and deed. Both of you are spiritual fathers to me. I could go on and on about the similarities, both in objective fact of life and manner of expression. I am in the process of writing also to Frank Waters to ask to meet with him. I am mystified that neither of you ever mention the other, and yet I find virtually impossible that you do not know each other's work.

I will come to England to meet with you, if you can find time in what I know is an overly crowded schedule. This is very important to me. In any case I thank you for your work.

Sir Laurens responded to my letter on December 22, 1992.

Thank you very much for your absorbing letter and I deeply regret that I cannot answer it in detail. But I would like to add that should you ever come to England I shall be happy to see

you. The best address is as above (his home in London), and do write to me in good time should you be coming and I shall do my best.

Meanwhile thank you again and the best of all Christmas wishes for you in the future.

Sir Laurens Van der Post

(I had come on July 13 as originally proposed and found his apartment empty. He was taking his wife to the dentist for a toothache)

We met on July 14, 1993. Sir Laurens led me to his top floor studio overlooking Chelsea. He began by asking about me..... About me?

R: *I wouldn't know where to begin. I was really relieved when I got this toothache. I was telling my wife this morning.*

L: *Your wife is with you?*

R: *My wife is from southern Venezuela.*

L: *Yes?*

R: *Are you familiar with Venezuela?*

L: *Of course I know... I've never been to Central or South America at all. I've never gotten further South than the United States. I've never even been to Mexico.*

R: *No?*

L: *It's never come into my care. Except for what I have read of course. But you go on please.*

R: *Oh well. I was telling her I was relieved that I was having difficulty talking because I had so much to talk to you about and I felt completely paralyzed where to begin.*

L: *Let's talk about the first thing that comes into your head. Pause*

R: *The first thing that comes into my head... I have just given a lecture at the Italian Congress of Psychosomatic Medicine in Florence.*

L: *Yes?*

R: *The legend of the Os Sacrum, and why it is considered sacred. I was talking about the story of Isis and Osiris and the fact that early in Egyptian prehistory they were considered to be united as one in the womb of their mother. And they split. They became Isis and Osiris. The rest of their lives Isis is seeking Osiris and I had given a lecture about how the splitting of Isis and Osiris somehow is never resolved. And in fact the splitting of the male from the female ends up with ever more splitting of the male. Osiris is hacked to pieces.*

L: *How fascinating!*

R: *I was giving a lecture about how the sacrum and backbone of Osiris in Egyptian prehistory comes to be called the Djed. Becomes the basis of a religion. The back half becomes dominant in Egyptian history. I was proposing that the origin of monotheism from a secular perspective comes from the original splitting of Isis and Osiris into male and female and then the coming to dominance of the*

male, then the coming to dominance of the back half of the male, then the eventual drying up of the spine completely, the head projecting internal sensation of animation, which would originally have been Isis, as Osiris the male God. I was inspired originally by your comments that early in Egyptian prehistory... actually, this is the question I want to ask you. How early in Egyptian history did the Bushman pass through on the way South?

*L: I do remember, yes. I'm not an expert on it. What I know is only what a man named Abbe de Breville told me, who is an archaeologist and who did a great deal of work on prehistoric painting starting with the paintings in the Mediterranean, engravings in the Mediterranean world in the Dordogne, and the engraving in the Iberian Peninsula, in the Sahara, and ultimately the greatest work of all, the Bushman work in southern Africa. And he clearly stated that in the hieroglyphic records of the Second Dynasty in Egypt there is a description of somebody who can only be the Bushman¹. Of course, the anatomical characteristics of this person are the characteristics which only the Bushman possesses to this day and no other race in the world possesses. Therefore it is the phenomenon of steatopygia, the behind which sticks out². But above all the phenomenon of a penis which is always heavy, semierect, which is how the **old Bushman** always describes himself. This is a badge of their uniqueness, of their honour, that they are born people who are just like that. That's what Khoi Khoi means³. But also the women have a kind of anatomical apron which is called the couvert Egyptien to this day. These things are described there in the work of Abbe de Breville. That's why I record them. Then there is the evidence that the Abbe de Breville finds even more impressive in the painting, the prehistoric painting of that period, which seems to indicate that the man who painted particularly in southern Africa, where we have thousands of rock paintings, the greatest rock art painting in the world, thousands and thousands of these paintings... from which I come to the conclusion that there is a common ancestor, that the Bushman once was in the Mediterranean and north African world and then gradually, God knows why... changes of climate or whatever cause, gradually he vanished and was only to be found in southern Africa.*

R: The recorded history of the sense of internal animation is more often described in terms of its progressive loss than it is in terms of its possession in the West.

L: Yes.

R: That is why I began with this story of Isis and Osiris.

L: Yes.

R: I am claiming that approximately at the time that the uterus in Egyptian culture for one reason or another is stressed, and is provoking a splitting of the embryonic organism in epidemic proportions described by the story of Isis and Osiris and coinciding with the disappearance South of the Bushman.

L: I'm not a scholar... somewhere there is this definite reference, the hieroglyphic records of the Second Dynasty in which the Bushman is described and it may be well worth your while to trace back where it is.

R: I'm not much of a scholar myself.

¹ Henri Breville, 1877-1961, has written more than 32 books on the subject.

² Elsewhere LVP describes the capacities of the Bushman to store in the rump as the camel in the hump.

³ "It refers to the semierect penis of the San people and got that name because when they were asked why they were like that they replied Khoi Khoi: it is just so". From letter received 26 January 1995 from Jane Bedford, niece and personal assistant to LVP.

L: *That's the point. Some Egyptologist ought to be able to tell you. I mean, if you went to your equivalent in the United States of the British Museum and spoke to an Egyptologist there...*

R: *Erich Neumann would have been a good person to talk to...*

L: *Or if you come back this way to the British Museum, here, after all perhaps the best Egyptological department in the world, and you could question them about this. I've never followed it up because I've accepted it as fact, because some scientist somewhere along called the apron of the female organism of the Bushwoman "Egyptien", you see, and so it oughtn't to be difficult to trace. And then you get the story. We know of the vast changes that set in climatically in north Africa. In the early Roman days North Africa was the granary of Europe... all the description you get in the Homeric Sagas... the Aenead... the description we get of Carthage, it's difficult to believe that the Sahara existed yet. A completely different world, extremely civilized... After all, the so called Egyptian period lasted for over four thousand years. It is a considerable period. There is nothing to touch it. As a part of my education I read the work of a French scholar who too believed that the person referred to in the hieroglyphic records was the Bushman. He knew the Bushman, as he had been to Africa. The Bushman was in touch with Egyptian civilization.*

R: *I'm sad that the Bushman civilization has... what has happened to the Bushman culture?*

L: *It doesn't exist, you see, really. I mean that even the Bushman I knew in the central desert of the Kalahari, he still existed as a cultural entity but that no longer exists, the culture exists as a memory, rag and tatter fragments of the Bushman, but the real Bushman culture wasn't the culture that the anthropologists study now in the Kalahari desert - that already is a fragmentation. The real culture was in southern Africa, the well watered fertile part of southern Africa, Rhodesia where the rock painting countries are. It was already gone you see. The only clues that one has to what it was, and they are considerable, are in the paintings, the most remarkable evidence... I call it a Stone Age civilization.*

R: *Have you seen them recently? The paintings?*

L: *Yes. Yes, of course.*

R: *You've just been back to Africa?*

L: *Yes, but I've known since my childhood, I've seen them, yes, I have seen them, but then also I think the dearest evidence of what it was like we have in these stories, and we've only got a fragment of these stories. They give us an idea of what an extraordinary thing it was, and then the Abbe de Breville's discovery of the rock painting called THE WHITE LADY on a rock in south west Africa, some people say... I don't go in for this because it couldn't help me at all... people feel that there is evidence of Phoenician contact in some of that... And we know that one of the Pharaohs of Egypt fitted out a Phoenician expedition down the Red Sea which sailed around the southern most point of Africa. They were the first people on record to round the Cape of Good Hope two thousand years before Christ. That is the best I can do.*

Long pause in silence.

R: *This is my favourite quote of yours. "Love is the primordial tracker on the faded spoor of his lost self".*

L: *I'm glad, because that's what it is, I think. That mountain, you see, (pointing to a photo in his study) it must have about twenty thousand rock paintings on it, you know, that's a place I camped in the desert quite a lot.*

R: *Is that the mountain you found, that you were taken to that you describe in the **Lost World of the Kalahari**, in which none of the movie cameras would work?*

L: *Those were the mountains I discovered in the Kalahari. No, no. It's got a German name. Spitz Korper. It divides two great deserts, the Namib and the Kalahari. But I meant... that alone has a story, God knows a story of how many paintings. It's amazing. But to me the staggering thing is people always said to me in Africa, you're just romanticizing, and I said **look, this is how they speak, this is how they thought, you cannot deny that they thought and spoke like that. This is what I base it on. On his own words. What the man spoke. What the bushman spoke.***

R: *You spoke some Bushman?*

L: *Yes, but then my Bushman disappeared altogether, and there are no people who speak it anymore.*

R: *There are no Bushman who speak Bushman?*

L: *Just remnants. There are people who speak Kalahari Bushman, it's unrelated, it's generically related to what was generally spoken but there is nobody who speaks... there's no... I have tried in my view of the Bushman to not confine it as the anthropologists do to just what they know about the Kalahari Bushman... they are very precious people the Kalahari Bushman, but they are only a fragment of a vast Bushman culture that existed all over Southern Africa. There was nobody else there except them and the Hottentots.*

R: *I have the feeling that the contribution to well-being in the West that you have made has to do with making an internal connection to a more or less lost part of the...I'll speak for myself... of the European... of an almost completely obliterated internal, what I would call primordial core, and that there is a connection between the obliteration of the Bushman and the almost complete loss of what you often describe as having **not** lost when you were still seven or eight years old but you were afraid you would lose it and you made a great effort to not lose it. Is that right?*

L: ***That's right!**(his emphasis) You see there is no doubt that the psychologists in depth are very aware of the fact of this immense psychic loss that there's been... the gulf... the European is definitely psychically lost.*

R: *But is it just a psychic loss, or is it even a bigger loss that there's a numbing out of the organism?*

L: *I think, myself, I can't accept the psychic and the organic... I think what is lost is something which is expressed both by the psyche and by the organic, the body. What is that thing? We can't express it totally. To go back. People always say to me, which comes first, the hen or the egg? It's a silly question. In creation appeared something that pre-supposed both the egg and the hen. There is something that becomes matter, is manifested in matter, as a hen and an egg. They are indivisible, the two things.*

R: *The word that you use the most in all of your books is **unfolding**.*

L: *Yes, that's it.*

R: *I'm really inspired when you talk about this unfolding, something Jung would talk about, a background Unus Mundus, which is a little abstract for me, which the theoretical physicist David Bohm, who must be about your age, describes as an unfolding from a background universe, I don't*

know if you know David Bohm, he's also president of the Krishnamurti Society of Britain (and has since passed away).

L: Yes. All that one knows ultimately, really, about creation is that pattern of creation to a certain extent which one expresses and that one is part of... this unfolding pattern. And everything in life is. To me it's fantastic, how what I felt instinctively is very important as measured by my books... the moment people encounter the story of the Bushman in full, it doesn't matter whether they are Japanese or Chinese or Russian, its an instant feeling they do have... by God... there's something we've lost. They feel that, you know, this is part of themselves which has been lost.

R: Whenever I connect to the part of myself I have lost, I have a feeling of having a frog aspect to my being.

L: A frog.

R: A frog aspect to my being.

*L: And why not? I can understand that. You see, you talk about frogs. I'm haunted, myself, not really by the frogs, by the sounds of the frogs. Frog music. To me that's a very ancient language that's been spoken. I don't know if you've read Aristophanes's play *The Frogs*. You see. Let's just talk. Dionysus is sent to the underworld, to Hades, to find somebody who could talk for the ancient spirit of Greece, and you have this debate in the underworld between Euripides and Aeschylus as to who should come forth. Now, in the end, for various reasons, Aeschylus comes back. I just want to tell you that some years ago, about ten to twelve years ago, I went to open a new reserve, a vast area of Africa which had been brought into conservation. And the rains had just fallen and when I had to do the opening there was a message whether I would give a very important lecture, a very important series of memorial lectures in South Africa the following year.*

R: On Jan Smuts.

L: You know the story?

R: I've read everything you've written.

*L: Then you know the story. I would not have written that story if it had not been for the frogs. I was already saying no to it. On my way back that night, while avoiding a rampaging Giraffe, we had this extraordinary accident, the car jammed and the engine stopped. And we had nothing but the frogs. "There were five distinct kinds of voices of frogs taking part in this chorus and their chorale was rising to a tremendous crescendo. It was a hymn of thanksgiving. It was as if the frogs were thanking God for creation, thanking creation for life, thanking creation for frogs, thanking and rethanking in the night for us, and all living things. Every single frog was singing, and I thought immediately that for the first time now, I knew why Aristophanes had fastened on the frogs for that great play he wrote, about the crisis that was facing the Greece he loved". (**Walk With A White Bushman, p.289**) Now what is interesting is that then I came straight back to London and I read *The Frogs*. The frogs were getting **me** to bring back a spirit from the dead. (RWN Thus, I say, they have this power to speak to the lost self.)The frogs were speaking still in Africa. They conveyed the same to me as they conveyed to Aristophanes.*

R: That's my feeling.

L: And you see, to me, that's objective. I'm glad you know that story. And they go on doing that, the frogs, its amazing. And you know of the frogs in fairytales and all that sort of thing.

- R: *Are you familiar with the Naxi people in the Yunnan province of China? A tribe who worship the frog?*
- L: *Yes, I've heard of them.*
- R: *They are very interesting. Well, I don't want to keep you.*
- L: *I love talking to you. Its just a question of time.*
- R: *Well, I have a flight.*
- L: *I think I've told you all I can really help you with. You must really look at these Egyptian records. Because I think that particularly with Isis and Osiris in your imagination you ought to follow it through and see what's stated about it. Unfortunately, its not my trail, you see. I in a sense don't need any more historical evidence because, for me, I'm certain the Bushman were here at the beginning, he survives in folk tales, this little man which has the power.*
- R: *Well, that's my feeling, that the underlying core has a lot to do with the Bushman. And I admire your defending the small, which is another thing I wanted to say, because I am so interested in raising consciousness about the condition that embryos are having to live in, and that in a manner of speaking the condition of the modern westerner is being transmitted organismically unconsciously from generation to generation before birth. I had to study the frog and embryology to understand that. I could leave you something I have written. I don't feel like getting into it. There are medical reasons to be interested in the frog.*
- L: *Of course.*
- R: *There is actually the wall that contains the core of the organism formed in the very beginning of the intra-uterine period by an embryonic kidney that is identical to the kidney of the mature frog called the mesonephros. That was told to me by a child psychiatrist in Luzern when I asked her what embryonic organ can most defend the embryo from a nervous wounded maternal organism. She said, go study this frog kidney. I've been into it now for fifteen years.*
- L: *I do think that somebody who might be helpful to you, he is retired now, he is a man who worked with Jung, who started by doing biological research, a doctor and a surgeon, a life long collaborator of Jung and Pauli the physicist and wrote a very interesting book about healing in Greece called **Incubation**.*
- R: *What is his name?*
- L: *I may be able to give you a copy. You can have it.*
- R: *I can have it?*
- L: ***Healing Dream and Ritual** (by C.A. Meier). Take it and read it. If you're interested you might try and go see him in Zurich. He's still alive. And write to him and go talk to him about these things because he could help you and nobody else could. And also they had a tremendous connection with Egypt and all these sorts of things.*
- R: *All this I have told you is only one part of a manuscript.*

Sir Laurens is called away by his ailing wife and the interview ends.