

*A Step Back Excerpt: Blue Mountains, Australia, 1998*

The following day we hiked through the area where a mist of "blue haze" hangs over the surrounding mountains, created from the secretion of oil from the eucalyptus tree. The canyon is several miles wide, lined with sheer cliffs and flooded with eucalyptus, gum, and pine trees. Although it didn't compare with the mind-numbing dimensions of the Grand Canyon, the beauty of the area, highlighted by this "blue haze," produced an intense, mystical appearance and feel. As we trekked through this alluring slice of nature, I saw the Grand Canyon's mirror once again rising before me with its scrutinizing gaze. Edel's spirit walked with us along the dusty path that twisted through the tall, majestic trees, and much like her this place was filled with passion and zest; it all, this place, nature, the people, Edel, became an intoxicating affirmation of life and I again felt "alive" within nature's grip.

As we weaved along a path filled with the arousing smell of eucalyptus and pine trees, the cobalt fog consumed me, much like Edel did the night before. Her words lingered, and like knives they continued to stab at this blue blanket covering my brain. With each step deeper into the canyon of mist exuded from these valleys of trees, I felt the world pressing upon my soul; its presence was no longer subtle as it was in New Zealand, for now this "awareness" had form. Indeed, it was thrusting its responsibility upon my being, and I knew that with awareness comes responsibility. I actually felt this notion of the universe—almost as if it was a force. Can we feel the laws of nature, the laws of the universe, as a physical force within our souls?

We reached a small clearing high above the valley floor below where the blue mist hung just above the green trees covering this massive gorge. I knew that this haze was the breath of life emitted from the endless forest below, and only the interconnectedness of these millions of trees together created this life. For me, it was the genesis of a new world, one in which the mountaintops are filled with the ecstasy of the scintillating discovery of "awareness," but also the penetrating valleys of "responsibility." It was the Dragon and Tiger, for together these masses of similar trees exuded this beautiful highlight to the entire canyon, it was a piece of their collective soul. And as if I was among the heavens looking down, I saw my place within this collective, within this ringing discovery of the existence of the soul.

Deep within the blackness, the void I once felt inside my physical container of rolling cells, I now felt a barking echo of something else. It was the same feeling I had lying in the boat in Fiji during the storm as I looked to the heavens for faith, and it was the same feeling I had as the dolphins circled my dangling bones in the salty sea. What I perceived to be an emptiness was actually the crux of my being, a misunderstood force within the skin of flesh. I stopped at a fallen tree, I gazed over its splintered edges where it was torn from its roots in the ground, and I saw its ringed core beneath the skin of bark. As I touched its softened inner core, which was slowly disintegrating into the soil below my feet, I breathed in the cycle of life within myself. Was I a part of this cycle? Did I, do we, hold this

much value among the perfection of nature – that we actually give back even in death? Because I knew then that built into the inspiring cycle of nature is a pervasive current of selflessness.

Is our purpose here to learn from this nature, to be selfless in giving back to the collective? Yet do we merely destroy – for what have you built if, no matter the consequence, that final product fails to include this intricately woven ribbon of selflessness? Yes, because within every cell of nature, and even its demise – when it no longer exists as a living organism, it feeds and nourishes the collective. From this are we to learn the most basic of lessons?

What we, as human beings, possess beyond this mechanism within nature is the ability to think and communicate; indeed, to carry on conversations with those generations of the future, even after our veins no longer carry our atoms of life. Yet, what are those conversations, those thoughts, those writings, those indelible fingerprints of our existence, without this "ribbon of selflessness" woven into them? To stare upon Nature without this basic understanding, to continue to destroy the world in which we are designed to create, is merely to bless our primitive souls within the murky waters of our primal ignorance. Shall this become our hardened destiny within the soft folds of time departed and the earmarked creases of space?

This subtle awakening to "I am" required much more than just being; actually, to just exist was in conflict with this newfound "awareness." It was an existence bound within the "murky waters of primal ignorance." So, to feel that responsibility in my breast was an acknowledgement of this awkward light suddenly flicking within, and in this responsibility I felt Nature's presence within me, for I felt alive, I had discovered my soul. And ironically, to discover the soul is to exist outside the folds of time and creases of space. However, beyond this basic beginning, I was lost within an obsidian darkness, for what my responsibility was to myself, to others, to this world, I didn't know; I only now felt it as a revelation of Edel's profound words and passion. Truly, she exposed us to so much during our conversation, not so much about the brief history of Australia and her recent struggles, but about passion and, like Mary Matthews, what it means to persevere in spirit through those struggles. It was her will to live life through the expression of passion; it was a precious gift, a symbol of the freedom of the human spirit. This simple conversation has miraculously led me to the discovery of my very essence, my immortal self, my soul.