

TRACES CHARLES RUSSELL

In the spring of 1994, in the rain forest along the Khutzeymateen Inlet of British Columbia, I sat on a moss-covered Sitka spruce log as a female Grizzly bear walked down the log towards me¹. I knew if I did not move, she would keep coming. I had decided to let her come as close as she wanted.

Occasional slivers of sunlight penetrated the high spruce canopy. I was in a moss and jade world that, until that moment, I had only fantasized sharing with a Grizzly bear. This bear and I were not strangers. For five years I had been guiding bear watchers into the Khutzeymateen and, being uncommonly friendly, she had been one of the main attractions. Now, looking into her eyes, it seemed she wanted to push the frontiers of her experience with humans, just as I wanted to embark on something new with bears.

As she made her way down the log, she moved with a swaying nonchalance. I am certain she was trying to set me at ease. I tried to accomplish the same thing in reverse by talking to her in the calmest voice I could muster. There was an uncertain look on the bear's face, and a similar look must have been on my own.

Finally, she sat down beside me. After a time, she moved her paw along the log towards my hand and touched it very gently. [...] Even as it happened, I knew I was experiencing something that would likely change the course of my life. If I could build on this moment, correctly and ambitiously, the significance of what had just happened might have the power to change the relationship between humankind and bears. I know how that must sound—like advanced megalomania— but I still believe it is true. So much of the reputation of bears, and people's fear-dominated, love-hate relationship with them, is based on the belief that the experience I enjoyed is not possible. If I could prove that it was not a fluke, not an anomaly particular to this time and this bear, a huge shift in perception might flow from it. People might learn to live with bears in a way that would not lead to collision, violence, and the ongoing destruction of a threatened species.

I also knew in that moment that I could not back away. What was happening was something my life had been moving towards for decades, and from which I must not swerve. I had to follow where it led.

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1 Charles Russell 2002, "Grizzly Heart – Living without fear among the Brown Bears of Kamchatka", Random House of Canada, Toronto pp.1-2