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Journeying Home: Toward a Feminist Perspective on Pilgrimage

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The archetypal feminine has earthy, creative, visceral, emotional and spiritual connotations suggestive of women's quest for home. I wish to explore the meaning of home within the landscapes of the sacred geography of the soul, invoking the sacredness of place, the meaning of place, and the emotion of place. Findings from a seven-year autoethnographical study of women journeying home to islands in the Thousand Islands, a border region located on the St. Lawrence River between Ontario Canada and upstate New York, demonstrate that these themes figure deeply in the life decisions made by the women studied. 'The River' is experienced as a sacred place with great meaning and emotion for the women who call it home. The annual journey 'home' to the River takes priority and centrality in their lives while they are physically elsewhere, at work, raising families, getting by. The deep calling of the land and the water, the earthy and watery depths of meaning, family, history, creation, and eternity are felt more readily than expressed. For they say that once one has drunk of the River, one will always hold it in one's heart. While this visceral lifeline is completed by the annual physical journey home, it also suggests that home is carried within: that the sacred geography of the soul is both inner and outer landscape, its quest both inner and outer pilgrimage.

Key Words: : Feminist perspective, pilgrimage, gendered nature, women's quest for home, sacred geography, soul, Thousand Islands, St. Lawrence River, women.

Introduction

This work began as an autoethnographical study into the lives of 47 women who live on islands in the St. Lawrence River, in the Thousand Islands border region between Canada and the United States. I had co-owned an island there for five years and identify as a River Woman myself. After leaving the River to begin a new life and family, I applied for a grant to interview River Women about their lives. I spent seven years doing interviews and participant observation. Most years, the fieldwork involved three weeks in the summer months and one week in the winter.

Autoethnography asks that we as researchers situate ourselves in relation to our topics of study (Jones *et al.*, 2013). 'Truth claims' or 'authoritativeness of voice' are seen to have greater credibility when one can write oneself into the story rather than be situated as an outside observer. I performed the research, reflection,

analysis and writing as a River Woman, from the inside out. This was a grand pilgrimage for me, a pilgrimage within a pilgrimage as it were, a journey home to my own ensoulment of and by the River.

Who Are the River Women?

The picturesque and historically rich area known as the 'Thousand Islands' combines privately owned islands with state owned and operated parks. Some families own their own small islands while others live on larger, more densely populated islands or on the waterfront of the mainland (to protect my participants, I will not be providing any more specific details about the location of their communities).

Life on an island on the St. Lawrence River is experienced differently by people depending on their material situation, whether or not they live there year-round, their reasons for being on the River, and the amount of social support they receive within the community. The term 'River Women' is reserved for those women who have developed a degree of self-sufficiency such that they are able to live on their own on an island on the River. Despite their diversity, their lives hold in common a closeness to the River, to the wind and the weather, on which their lives often

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Figure 1 : The River, My Soul

Original pastel image of 'the river', used with permission of the artist - Margaret Harman

depend. They have all made choices to live there year-round or to return annually, on pilgrimage, home to the River, their 'hearts' home.' This paper explores some of the meanings of this sacred journey home.

Journeying Home as Pilgrimage: Seasonal Migration to a Sacred Landscape

Demographers like to study human migration, but generally within the constraints of 'settling' in a new geographic location. Nigerian sociologist Alamveabee Idyorough (2008) argues that the three main reasons for human migration are 'food, sex and security'. Migration is a timeless way in which humans have looked for more of what they feel they need in order to survive and thrive. Yet, for Nicaraguan poet priest Ernesto Cardenal (1977:45), 'We have always wanted something beyond what we wanted.' What, we might ask, is that 'beyond'? For some, it is a call: a call to be close to or one with, in spatial proximity to, a sacred place. What makes it sacred is often caught up with ancestry, peoplehood, family, history. For those who act on this calling, no more reason is required.

Seasonal migration sometimes allows for this 'beyond', without entailing a full, physical, permanent resettlement. Seasonal migration can refer to animal behaviour or to the behaviour of some human travellers who head North during the summer months to places like Colorado or Alaska and spend their winters in Florida, Arizona or Mexico. They are often called Snowbirds.

Ensoulment

Ensoulment means to endow animate and inanimate creatures with spirit. This includes land and water, mountains and rivers, as well as all living creatures. In the quest for home, it might be argued that home is the sacred landscape through which we have been mutually ensouled. How have the River and River Women been mutually ensouled? What is the powerful draw of a body of water, such that women will come home, year after year, to be close to its healing powers?

These ties can be described as umbilical in nature. Landscapes and Riverscapes are neither inner nor outer but both. For Linda Hogan (1995:95):

Many of us in this time have lost the inner substance of our lives and have forgotten to give praise and remember the sacredness of all life. But in spite of this forgetting, there is still a part of us that is deep and intimate with the world. We remember it by feel. We experience it as a murmur in the night, a longing and restlessness we can't name, a yearning that tugs at us. For it is only recently, in earth time, that the severing of the connections between people and land have taken place. Something in our human blood is still searching for it, still listening, still remembering. Nicaraguan poet priest Ernesto Cardenal [mentioned above] wrote, 'We have always wanted something beyond what we wanted.' I have always loved those words, how they speak to the longing place inside us that seeks to be whole and connected with the earth. This, too, is a place of beginning, the source of our living.

The archetypal feminine has earthy, creative, visceral, emotional and spiritual connotations suggestive of women's quest for home. I wish to explore the meaning of home within the landscapes of the sacred geography of the soul, invoking the sacredness of place, the meaning of place, and the emotion of place. A feminist perspective on pilgrimage is lived through and informed by an earth-based spirituality.

In earth religions the world over, water has always been associated with the feminine, and with the feminine qualities such as the bringing forth of life, the strength to hold a community together, and the power to heal. This is the strong sense of the feminine which is embodied in the River Women, and in many ways describes the essence of the healing energy sought and enjoyed by the women who make the islands their hearts' home. For it is here that nearly everyone interviewed said that they would be, if money were no object (only one said she would rather be sailing the Caribbean). It is here that they have all made major life choices and decisions to ensure that as much time as possible can be spent. It is here that they had their childhoods and raised their own children. And it is here that they would rather get sick and eventually die.

There have been losses. Every woman I met has lost a friend or a family member to the River. The strength that it took to continue to stay, while being made so vulnerable as to lose a child, a spouse, or a parent to

drowning, was something that I wondered at. To understand its healing power, however, we must first understand the utter reverence in which the River is held.

Spirituality

Most of the women defined their relationship with the River as a spiritual one. For one woman, 'It's my centre. It's my creative and spiritual centre, definitely. It's a lifeblood for me.' Another remarked:

I feel as much in church or close to God right here. He's wherever you are, as far as I'm concerned. So I don't have a great desire that some people may have to sustain their faith through a church structure.

For a third,

The River is pantheistic. Nature is God, and every day you wake here you see God. When I wake in Manhattan or if I'm somewhere else and I can't see where the sun's coming up or which direction the wind's coming from, I'm a little lost, you know, spiritually, like where am I? And here I can be more in touch with that because you see the universe forming, you look at the clouds, the stars at night, and you see how tiny you are, and when you're in a city you don't get that, or when you immerse yourself in water to clean yourself, it's rejuvenating to the soul, because there's not all this material stuff, it's just the elements, the wind and air and the water and the fire, it's all there, and that's why I love the River, because I'm more balanced, I see my position in the universe, because I can feel it. It's hard to in my heated home, or with the air conditioning on.

Rituals

One sure way to tell the sacredness of an object or an experience is to witness the kinds of rituals that go along with it. How is it possible that water can have so much meaning? Perhaps the most sacred event is an annual community gathering at the beach where the song, 'We Shall Gather by the River' is reverently sung. It is also sung at celebrations of birth, weddings, and funerals, indicating its essential role as a witness to life's passages.

Once I was given a little vial of River water on a chain to take home with me. My friend said that she had given it to me so that all I ever needed to do was to think of the River and I would be back there. It is true. There is something timeless and eternal about the

feeling of the River. And many have observed that, once one has had a sip of River water it remains in one's blood forever. The same friend made sure that I had a little sip of River water during both of my pregnancies, so that my children would be sure to be born as little 'River Rats.' One woman noted that:

a lot of families bring their babies up and go through a sort of a baptism ritual, just for fun, in the River water, or take River water home if they're expecting, so they'll have it.

One, who had a job as a nurse in town to which she would travel by boat, shared her rituals:

I worked full-time in an intensive care unit, so my first child was two, one and two, and I would wake in the morning and go in the River and take my bath and get all clean and put on my nurse uniform and then I would take this bathrobe to put over it so I wouldn't get dirty in the boat ride, and then I'd wake him up and put him in the boat, and we had traditionally toast or hard boiled eggs, and I'd wake him up maybe around the Thousand Islands Bridge and we'd crack the eggs in the boat, and the dock master down there was so sweet, he saved me a spot right in the front of the dock because he knew I was coming in to work, and then I would take my bathrobe off so I would be clean...I was in this little kicker boat, it was really greasy, the handle and you're pull starting it and you're handling oil and gas tanks and stuff, and then I would go to work until 3:00, 3:30, high stress job. And then I would get out and battle the waves and the tourists before coming home and going in the River to get cleansed.

Note the importance of the ritual of removing her uniform and bathing in the River, to somehow cleanse the residue of the city and the job and everything that it represented. Once the ceremonial cleansing had been performed, she was home. Many others shared with me that as soon as they arrived on the River they would bathe in its healing waters. In the following story told by the same woman, the cleansing in the River became a rite of forgiveness:

I also had this frightening experience on the River with two friends. This woman spent the winter here, and I came in the spring and lived with her on the other side of the island, and it was in the fall, it was late October, and we had cruised to Canada to get some beer, and we were coming around and she let go of the engine for a minute and the engine turned and we all flew out of the boat, with long johns on and heavy parkas, but the boat continued to go around, and it was coming at my friend from Montana, and I'm looking at her going under,

and this boat coming, and luckily another couple was behind us in another boat and she took that boat and he jumped into the empty boat and took control, just in the nick of time. So we got in the boat and we were scared and freezing and my friend from Montana's reaction was, 'I'm ready to leave now', but the friend I was living with had a different reaction, which was startling to me at the time, but I understand it now. She took off all her clothes and she went in the River. I said, 'What are you doing? Are you crazy?.' She said, 'No, it's like a baptism, I need to forgive the River.' But now I see that she was frightened and she needed to heal, with her fears.

There are special rites of passage that are not held in as much importance elsewhere as they are on the River. Learning to swim, as much for safety as for ritualistic purposes, is an early first task for River babies. This is followed by learning how to drive a boat, first with adult accompaniment and then the big important day when she is allowed to drive alone. Finally, getting one's own boat is the most important ticket to independence, not unlike getting one's first car is to mainlanders. And very significantly, everyone remembered all three of these events in their lives, while memories of other childhood happenings have faded with time.

The River is sought as a final resting place, as well. Before she passed on, one woman told me that 'instructions are already left about the ashes to go right out there, mixed with the ashes of 'the one' [third husband], whose ashes are already out there. In other words, I want to be here forever.'

About her husband, she said,

He died here, on the island. Thank goodness. And didn't have to be planted somewhere that you'd have to go and visit, and put flowers on and all that. Right there. So I can look out there any time, I know he's out there.

Healing

All of the women I interviewed knew intimately the healing qualities of the River. However, they struggled to put it into words.

For one, whose husband had had a heart attack and died on the island, the healing power of the River was profound:

Everything awful that's ever happened to me has happened on the island, thank God. Every healing in the world that I'll ever need is right

here. You can get through anything if you've got that [River] to look at. It's there. The water is there, the animals are here, the woods are here. I don't think that such a thing resides elsewhere. It wouldn't be there, because it's too regimented. What it comes down to is I hate cities and I love this kind of life. And I consider myself the most lucky person in the world, because I got it, and can keep it as far as I know. I hate to spend even a minute away from the island.

For another,

I think I naturally seek water to calm me and soothe me and to be here and looking at the water I can live in the moment. I don't feel pulled and hassled, and I just watch the ebb and the flow and just watch the rhythm of it, I just feel like that's life, it just keeps flowing and goes on and on, and it changes every day, the River is never the same. The other night under the full moon, it was like the most beautiful moon I ever saw, but I've seen many full moons here . . . Life is so dynamic and changing, and the River represents that to me, and not having to worry about anything, that we're taken care of. The River still flows, that's not controlled, it's just there.

A third woman spoke of the healing qualities of the River:

There's nothing like this River. Peace and serenity. I don't care if I'm ever out on the River, if I'm just by it and can just hear it lapping, I think that's one of the greatest sounds, and it's just like when I hear this it's washing away anything that I'm concerned with. And of course you have to throw in the loons calling and the geese and the ducks, that goes along with it.

Journeying Home

The River provides an anchor in a world that is otherwise so unpredictable. Women come from as far away as Florida and Texas to be here in the summer. One described the predictability of the River:

I'm not sure it's unique, because I've discovered that other people have their home places like this, and it's usually some kind of a summer home situation where there's been a lot of continuity, and its family, and it's the continuity of the family getting together time after time after time and the things changing but not changing. There's only one thing I can say that's different about the River that's different from some lake summer place or some

seaside summer place and that is the fact that it's a river. A river goes from some place to another, which means that it's always flowing and always moving, and maybe that's it, I don't know. It's different and yet it's the same, all the time. You look at this water just flowing by and it's effortless and yet it's forever, and it's always new.

Most would agree that it's their 'heart's home.' For one that meant:

It's where I want to be. It's where I want to go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning. It's where I want to be when I'm sad. It's where I want to be when I'm happy.

While this visceral lifeline is completed by the annual physical journey home, it also suggests that home is carried within: that the sacred geography of the soul is both inner and outer landscape, its quest both inner and outer pilgrimage.

We have always wanted something beyond what we wanted ~ Ernesto Cardenal

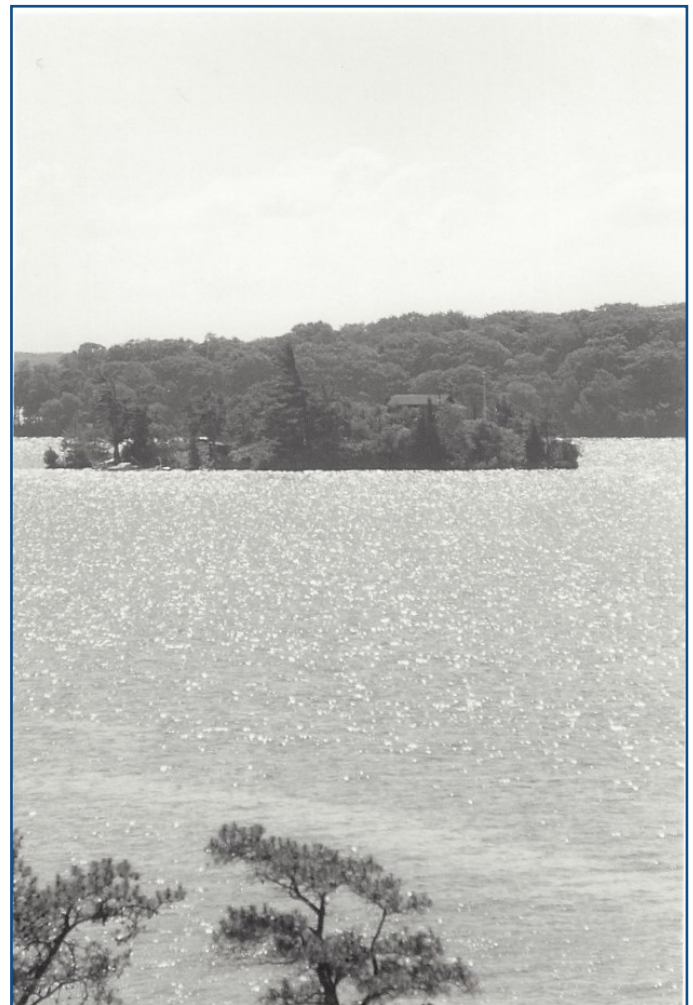


Photo by Author

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