

## *Nature as Muse: INTRODUCTION*

All peoples of the Earth once lived close to the land. Their lives depended on a land-based economy that required an awareness and knowledge of the complex web of relationships connecting them with the natural world and as a result, many of our early human ancestors held *all* life to be sacred. These ancestors lived according to their own world wide web, an information system developed through experience and observation, through trial and error. This understanding and dependence fostered a deep reverence and respect for animate and inanimate, human, and non-human life. In a roundabout way, let me explain how I came to write this series of essays.

Like most European-Americans I grew up disconnected and dispirited from my ancestral roots. I was born in Verdun, France and have lived most of my life in the Pacific Northwest. My ancestral heritage is French, Irish, Scottish, English, and African American. My mother, Lucette Henriette Langard Sabayon was born in Houécourt, department Vosges in eastern France. She was one of 14 children raised on a farm in northeastern France. My French ancestors come from the region in Northeastern France, which was home to the Celtic tribe, the Leuci who inhabited the modern regions known as Alsace-Lorraine. My parents granted me and my siblings the liberty to wander outdoors from an exceedingly early age. I am certain that their own childhoods influenced their parenting decisions. My father was raised on a cattle ranch in the wilderness of western Montana. His paternal grandmother, my great-grandmother, Stella Nora Morris Little was African American. My growing-up years were religiously barren but spiritually rich in the best kind of way.

In 2005, as part of my doctoral studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies, I turned my attention to my ancestral roots beginning with a closer exploration of my maternal lineage. As the time came to narrow my topic of study, I had wanted to focus my research on pre-Christian France. Because I was living in the U.S. and had lost much of the French language that I knew during my childhood, this choice was impractical. Instead, inspired by a dream, one of those BIG dreams that we sometimes experience, my paternal ancestry became an important focus. Let me tell you about this dream.

In the dream I was preparing for an interview in which I would talk about growing up in Montana and garter snakes. In this dream there were some people who had “apple” snakes in their kitchen, bright green snakes. The interviewer asked if I would be willing to hold a snake. I

told him a Native American story that honored the snake and brought blessing. I don't remember all of the details of what transpired but in the dream, the reason I'd been successful in my life was because I had honored the snake. (I can't say for certain what this meant.)

The "apple" snakes in the people's house were in the ceiling of their kitchen. They had scheduled someone to come the following day to remove them. The interviewer said to me that it would be best if I could hold a snake, apparently for a photo. I responded by saying that I preferred to hold garter snakes because I was familiar with them. (My siblings and I spent many happy hours hunting for and playing with garter snakes as kids.) He said, you can hold one of the apple snakes but I told him I didn't know anything about them, for example, were they poisonous? If I didn't want to hold one of the "apple" snakes I would have to find and catch a garter snake. On the day of the interview, I saw myself standing on a tall bluff above dense forests with my arms raised above my head, holding a large, grey snake with red and black head with silver shimmer. I woke up very suddenly and sat at the edge of my bed feeling both startled and very sleepy. In the moment I lost the words and the details about the information that I had been recounting about the snake in my dream.

Over the years, I've reflected on this dream and its possible interpretation. Because I've a habit of keeping a journal, including notes on dreams, I can look back and see the progression of insights and meanings gleaned from this dream. At the time of the dream, I couldn't understand why I had dreamt of Montana nor what the connection was with any future success. Several weeks after having had the dream I saw an image of the Minoan snake goddess, a figure of a woman with arms upraised and holding a snake in either hand. But this meant little to me other than perhaps, my dream was saying, honor the feminine principle and you will have success.

Eventually, inspired in part by this dream, I chose to focus my dissertation on the Pacific Northwest, specifically the stories of three women associated with a small town in western Montana, including my paternal grandmother, Gail Peters Little. This decision set me on a path of discovery with many surprises, including the revelation that my grandmother's maternal lineage was Irish and Scottish, a fact that not even she was aware of. Had I not chosen to write about Gail's story I may never have discovered my Irish/Scottish ancestry.

I finished my doctorate in 2013 and moved on with life. In 2014 I visited my daughter in Knoxville, Tennessee where she was attending graduate school. We rented a car for the weekend to do some sightseeing. Traveling through eastern Tennessee and into western North Carolina,

the names of the towns began to sound familiar. Memories about the women in Gail’s motherline and associations with this region of the United States surfaced like the flicker of fish in water. As soon as I had access to my computer I pulled up old notes from my doctoral research and found that Gail’s mother, Winnie Jane Garland had been born in Washington County, Tennessee (TN) and her mother, Carrie Rena Leonard was born in Johnson City, Washington County, TN. We had indeed driven through the region where they were from. I returned to Knoxville the following year and lived there for three months where I had the opportunity to spend many hours in the genealogical research library.

Gail is the middle name that my parents gave me at birth. The name is used for girls or boys and “is a variant of Gale (Irish, Gaelic, Old English) and means ‘foreigner; cheerful, happy.’”<sup>1</sup> Gael, another version of this name, means “speaker of Gaelic” and refers to “one of the Celtic peoples of Scotland or Ireland.”<sup>2</sup> I recall that as a small child, Gail and I shared a mutual affinity, sometimes characteristic of grandmother–grandchild relationships. This kinship is central to my childhood memories of time spent with her and is reflected in old photographs of Gail and me. Over the course of researching and writing my dissertation, which included phone interviews with Gail, I discovered that we shared a good many things—a love of nature and farming, a lifelong struggle with migraines, a preference for alternative medicine, the choice to have homebirths, and a joy in mundane tasks, such as hanging laundry outdoors. Perhaps more importantly, I discovered the reason behind my attraction to Celtic culture. As far back as I can remember, I’ve always wanted to visit Ireland. I finally did in 2019 and write about my adventures in my essay on storytelling and ancestral veneration.

I’m learning to reclaim my own ancestral knowledge buried within the stories, myths, culture and traditions of the peoples of France and the British Isles. During pre-Christian times my ancestors lived in close connection with the land and nature. One of the things that made it possible for people to live close to the land was equal access. This shared access to the land and its resources meant that people could provide for themselves and their families. They shared the land in common and access to land meant self-determination. “The commons is the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air,

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<sup>1</sup>Think Baby Names, “Gail Meaning and Name Origin,” para. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Think Baby Names, “Gael Meaning and Name Origin,” para. 1.

water, and a habitable earth. These resources are held in common, not owned privately.”(<https://en.wikipedia.org/>)Their culture and worldview were built on their relationship with the land. Land enclosure and privatization upended everything. People migrated looking for new ways to survive. Leaving their homelands created a disconnect with the places that had shaped their lives for generations. It created a deep disconnect that led to a loss of memory, ancestral veneration, and relationships with the natural world. People have forgotten who they were and where they came from. The rituals of our everyday lives have been lost. We have become spiritually bankrupt because we don’t remember what was sacred to us. We no longer know how to live in connection with one another and with the Earth.

(See [http://www.andywightman.com/docs/secur\\_comm8.pdf](http://www.andywightman.com/docs/secur_comm8.pdf), “The first two parts of this paper provide a brief historical account of the loss of most of Scotland’s common land and a review of the extent to which such land still survives.” See also, writings by Silvia Federici)

The inhabitants of Scotland and Ireland served as the prototype for English colonization. The people of these islands suffered similar atrocities as the indigenous peoples of the Americas. This violence and exploitation extended to Europe in the form of European witch hunts, a lengthy surge of violence against women.

As a woman I am familiar with the “colonization” of woman’s bodies and souls by the patriarchy in Europe as well as other parts of the world. (There are many worthwhile books about this history but if I had to recommend but one it would be *Caliban and the Witch* by Silvia Federici.) As a European-American woman I am learning to decolonize my mind, my body and my spirit. As a person of Irish and Scottish descent I am learning to decolonize my past through understanding the history of these people and my family. Some of my paternal ancestors came to North America as indentured servants. They were Quakers and weavers and makers of lace who brought their skills and traditions with them. One of the consequences (and perhaps a primary goal) of colonization is the destruction of a people’s relationship with place, with the land, the language, and the traditions associated with that land.

As a descendant of European immigrants I am learning to decolonize my ancestral history. Not only were my ancestors displaced but they were “displacers” having come to America and taken the land from the indigenous people. Some of my English ancestors were one of the first families who settled Tennessee, displacing the peoples from that place. Some of my Irish and Scottish ancestors were early settlers in North Carolina, displacing the peoples from

that place. Acknowledging the unsettling history of North America is part of the decolonization process. Recognizing that the land was stolen and the way of life of the native peoples was irrevocably changed is important is critical to the healing process. Human migrations are not anything new; they have taken place since the beginning of our existence although the motivations and consequences have varied. It is important for European-Americans to understand what they lost when they left their places of origin, and also the impact their emigration had on the already settled lands that they came to inhabit.

I am indigenous to this Earth and I reclaim my connection with the land, the elements, the soil, the plants and animals of the places that I inhabit on this planet. I refute the limits that colonization has placed and continues to place on my relationships with the Earth. These limitations are used against us in so many ways and it has become a web of confusion for the colonized and the colonizers. One of the limitations is the construction of the myth that European-Americans can't belong to the land that we now inhabit because it isn't "ours". Yet, we are encouraged, even required to exploit its resources. We are bound to live "on it" but not "in relationship to it" and as a result are denied a sense of place. European-Americans are a displaced people who have lost their connection to the Earth. A first step for us is to acknowledge the history of colonization and the genocide and oppression that is part of that history and that continues to this day against the indigenous peoples of this land. A subsequent step is to recognize that we are indigenous to this planet and to reclaim our connection to the Earth as it is our home.

Wherever we find ourselves, we must strive to reconcile our place within the natural world through honoring and respecting the land, plants, animals and peoples. Reconciliation, to reconcile—to put to rights and bring together—our histories, our relationships in order to heal and build a future that honors all of life. My ancestors included both perpetrators and victims of colonization. They were English, Irish, Scots, French and African-American. In small ways I am in the process of reclaiming what was lost and for me I find reconciliation through nature, art and spirituality. I am crossing thresholds –past, present and future.

Indigenous knowledge, indigenous ways of knowing along with women's traditional knowledge, women's ways of knowing share many similarities and in my studies I came to understand that these ways of knowing can be characterized as relational, contextual, intuitive, connected, earth-based, embodied and sacred. I have a doctorate but not just any-old doctorate. It

isn't one guaranteed to grant me a tenured position in an elite academy. Instead, my education granted me the opportunity to see the world in a new way through the lens of the "other". It provided opportunities that enabled me to develop an alternative worldview, one that included indigenous histories and women's histories. It recognized and honored heretical ways of knowing and the different knowledge systems that were suppressed and condemned by the hegemonic agencies of modernism, industrialism and capitalism.

Migrations of peoples necessitate that roots be torn up, carried along to new lands, drug behind us like tattered robes. If enough soil clings to these roots and they are watered and nurtured along the way, then there is a chance for them to take root in the new lands. Many factors influence this process including the degree of trauma suffered by the uprooted, the presence of others who share the same cultural traditions, the characteristics of the new land. If given a choice, migrating people will choose to settle on lands that are similar to those that they left and communities develop around shared traditions. The more time that passes and the greater the mobility of people, the greater the loss of ancestral culture and traditions.

Like so many European-Americans I struggle with a lack of rootedness in the land as well as a barren knowledge of our ancestral ways. I longed for a greater understanding of the pre-Christian cultural traditions of my ancestors. I wanted to know more about their connections with nature and place. I wanted to know what the earth-based traditions of my ancestors were before Christianity was the dominant religion in Europe.

Around 2014 I was introduced to Dr. Dominique Pauvert, French ethnomythologist and expert on the European bear culture. Shortly after, I discovered the work of Dr. Roslyn M. Frank, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Iowa, specializing in Basque Studies, Cognitive Linguistics, European ethnography and a host of other studies. (<https://spanish-portuguese.uiowa.edu/people/roslyn-m-frank>) She has written extensively about the European bear culture that she describes as, "...a complex cosmogony of significant antiquity, one that holds that humans descended from bears, in short an ursine story of origins that places bears at the center of the creation process."<sup>3</sup> (Many of her articles can be found at <https://www.academia.edu/> .)

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<sup>3</sup> Frank, Roslyn M. (June 2008) "Recovering European Ritual Bear Hunts: A Comparative Study of Basque and Sardinian Ursine Carnival Performances," 14. *Insula-3*, pp. 41-97. Cagliari, Sardinia.

This was the kind of information that I was looking for in terms of learning about the pre-Christian people of Europe, and particularly France since that is the place of my birth and I was thrilled to discover these cultural and spiritual traditions of Europe. All cultural traditions hold a creation story unique to their culture, a story that describes their origins. I believe that for North Americans who are not native to these lands rediscovering our origin stories is important. As displaced Europeans interested in their ancestral roots, the European bear mythology serves as an important link to rediscovering our spiritual and cultural heritage.

As I learned about the ursine cosmology and the stories surrounding it I began to ask myself some questions. What does it mean for us today? Does it have practical implications for our spiritual practices and if so, how? In a personal communication, Dr. Pauvert wrote, “This journey of the souls during the whole year is the original and fundamental basis of ancient (and originally prehistoric) European (or Eurasian) religious tradition.” In this calendric journey he identifies various times of the year significant in the ursine cosmology that I will write more about later. This journey of the souls is the journey of the bear through the seasons. As the “natural world frames the myth of the bear”<sup>4</sup> so does the myth of the bear frame my essays. My understanding of the ursine mythology and journey of the bear through the year provides the framework for my nature as muse essays.

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<sup>4</sup> Shepard, Paul and Barry Sanders. (1985) *The Sacred Paw: The Bear in Nature, Myth, and Literature*. Viking Penguin, New York, 56.