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The Power of the Celtic Woman

SHARON BLACKIE

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1

# Reclaiming Our Stories



The ford at dawn, Donegal, Ireland

‘Oh what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love when it was made a personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the rising and setting of the sun, and cut off from the magic connection of the solstice and equinox. This is what is the matter with us. We are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the tree of Life, and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilised vase on the table.’

D.H. Lawrence<sup>1</sup>

It's not quite dawn in this green, fertile valley; there's just the faintest glimmer of pink in the sky to the east. The moon is waxing, gibbous, its light silvering the river which winds through the land, soft like the curves of a woman's body as she stretches out to dip her toes in the sea. A grey heron breaks the silence, shrieking from the banks as I make my way across the narrow bridge, walk slowly up the rising lane. At the crossroads, three hares are sitting quite still in the middle of the road; they scatter when they become aware of me, tails flashing white in the moonlight then vanishing into the dark.

Up I go along the stony, uneven track to the high bog, face to the Seven Sister mountains, silhouetted now against a gradually lightening sky. I wind back along a tiny path to cut home across the fields, but first I have to navigate the ford: a shallow pool in a sheltered hollow through which a deep and fast-flowing stream can be crossed. The ford froths blood-red at the edges with iron precipitates, and I creep down to it carefully, half expecting to catch a glimpse of the *bean nighe*, the Washer at the Ford – the old woman of legend who scrubs clean the bloody clothes of slain warriors. After all, this morning is Samhain,<sup>2</sup> the old seasonal Gaelic festival which marks the beginning of winter. And on this night, my ancestors believed, the passage between this world and the Otherworld is open.

Behind the ford is a single, clearly defined hill, a green breast rising from the soft contours of the land. It is crowned with

heather, wiry and dormant now, spreading across its crest like a wide brown nipple. We call it a fairy hill, for these are the places which lead to the Otherworld – the beautiful, perilous dwelling-place of the fairy folk: the Aos Sí,<sup>3</sup> the people of the mounds. Once upon a time, inside a hill like this, Celtic women were transformed into the wisest creatures in the land.

In the Otherworld, wisdom is largely possessed by women, since they are the ones who hold the Cup. The Queen of the Aos Sí decided one day to bestow that gift on human women too, and so she sent out an invitation to all the women of the land, asking them to come to her great hall beneath the hill on a certain date, and at a certain time. The news was carried on the winds and the waves, by the birds and the fish; even the leaves of the trees whispered of it. Soon, women from all over the country began to set out on their journey. Some travelled alone, some came together; and when the appointed day dawned, the doors to the Otherworld opened.

The women streamed inside the hill – and gasped to find themselves in a beautiful hall which was draped with bright cloths woven from nettles and dyed with the blood of shellfish and the sap of plants. Soft animal skins covered the floors and seats, and a feast was laid out on tables of wood and stone, set on plates of pearly shell. A soft green light pervaded the vast hall. When everyone was inside and the watchers saw no more coracles on the water, no more women climbing up the slope of the hill, the doors to the outside world were closed.

Into the hall then came the Queen, bearing herself with kindly dignity, her face shining with a strange but lovely light. She carried a large golden Cup in her hand, bright with unusual marks and carvings; eight fairy women followed behind, each carrying a golden flagon of sparkling liquid which they used to continually fill the Cup. The Queen passed through the hall, offering a drink from the Cup to each of the women who was present. The Cup held the distilled wisdom of the world through all the ages past, and as each woman drank she suddenly grew wise, and understood

## Reclaiming Our Stories

many things she had never known before. Some were able to see much, some were able to see little – but every one of them benefitted. And then the women feasted, and the next morning they went back out into the world again, filled with the wisdom and knowledge of the Otherworld.<sup>4</sup>

Here in Ireland, the Otherworld is as real as any other. This is a landscape steeped in stories, and those stories stalk us still. They have seeped into the bones of this land, and the land offers them back to us; it breathes them into the wind and bleeds them out into streams and rivers. They will not be refused.

Before there was the Word, there was the land, and it was made and watched over by women. Stories from almost every culture around the world tell us that once upon a time it was so. For many native tribes throughout America, Grandmother Spider continually spins the world into being. For the Andean peoples of South America, Pachamama is the World Mother; she sustains all life on Earth. In Scotland and Ireland, the Cailleach – the Old Woman – made, shaped and protects the land and the wild things on it. In these and other Celtic nations, Danu<sup>5</sup> gave birth to all the other gods and was mother to the people who followed. Women: the creators of life, the bearers of the Cup of knowledge and wisdom, personifying the moral and spiritual authority of this fertile green and blue Earth.

Do you remember those days?

Me neither. Other indigenous cultures around the world may still respect and revere the feminine, but we Western women lost control of our stories a long time ago. The story which I was given to carry as a very young child, the story which both defined me and instructed me about the place I occupied in this world, accorded no such significance to women. In this story, woman was an afterthought, created from a man's body for the sole purpose of pleasing him. In this story, the first woman was the cause of all humanity's sufferings: she brought death to the world, not life. She had the audacity to talk to a serpent. Wanting the

## If Women Rose Rooted

knowledge and wisdom which had been denied her by a jealous father-god, she dared to eat the fruit of a tree. Even worse, she shared the fruit of knowledge and wisdom with her man. So that angry and implacable god cast her and her male companion out of paradise, and decreed that women should be subordinate to men for ever afterwards.

The stories we tell about the creation of the Earth and the origins of humankind show us how our culture views the world, our place in it, and our relationships with the other living things which inhabit it. And the key consequence of this particular creation myth is a belief, prevalent now for centuries in the West, that women are naturally disobedient temptresses who must be kept firmly in their place. We are weak-willed, easily persuaded to think or do evil, faithless, untrustworthy, mendacious, and motivated purely by self-interest. The story of Eve in the Book of Genesis is the underpinning for countless measures which have limited the actions, rights and status of women. No matter what women might achieve in the world, the fundamental message of the sacred texts of the world's largest religious grouping, which for 2,000 years have supplied the foundational beliefs of our Western culture, is that men should not trust women, and that women should trust neither themselves nor each other.

When I was a child, this cultural story about who we are as women made me feel small, insignificant, empty. As I grew older, it made me angry. Angry, because it justifies a world in which men still have almost all the real power over the cultural narrative – the stories we tell ourselves about the world, about who and what we are, where we came from and where we're going – as well as the way we behave as a result of it. Angry, because it justifies the centuries-old violence against women which threatens even in this 'enlightened' twenty-first century to spiral out of control. That violence was endemic in my own family. My mother, as a tiny child, picked up a poker from the fireplace and held it up to her father to stop him beating my grandmother. A couple



## Reclaiming Our Stories

of decades later, at just about three years old, I took hold of my own father by the kneecaps and pushed him, step by astonished step, out of the room to stop him hitting my mother.

Yes, I come from a line of strong and brave women – but I grew up feeling that the world was not a safe place for us. And even though most of the men I've known during my life – the men I've loved, the men who have been my friends – find this situation just as abhorrent as I do, the story is replayed over and over again at a cultural level. In the United Kingdom, where I grew up, one woman in four experiences domestic violence at some point in her life, and one woman in four experiences sexual assault as an adult. Worldwide, the figures are higher: around one in three.<sup>6</sup> Political scientist Mary Kaldor has reported that in the 'new wars' waged over resources, ethnicity and faith, 80 per cent of casualties are women and children. Rape and pillage, says Kaldor, are the *modus operandi*.<sup>7</sup> Today, sexual abuse, abductions, forced slavery and forced prostitution are commonplace, even – especially – in the heart of the fine capital cities of Europe and America of which our culture is so proud. And that's not to mention the daily harassment in public places, the deeply ingrained everyday sexism that so many of us are conditioned just to take for granted.<sup>8</sup> This is a world in which the cultural narrative informs us that women don't matter as much as men, and so it is okay for men to do these things to them.

So many of us today accept this state of affairs as just the way the world is. We're conditioned to accept it. We get on with our lives and treat it as old news. It's okay, we tell ourselves: during the last century, feminism was born and so equality is happening and everything is getting better now. And among liberal thinkers in the UK, feminist writer and activist Beatrix Campbell suggests,<sup>9</sup> the optimistic belief that men and women are on a cultural journey toward equality still prevails. But Campbell argues that not only has this progress stopped, in some cases it has actually been reversed. Even though awareness of the issues which women face is high, even though lip-service is paid to women's rights,

new inequalities are emerging in our culture all the time. We are living, she writes, in an era of ‘neopatriarchy’ in which violence has proliferated, body anxiety and self-hatred have flourished, rape is committed with impunity, sex trafficking thrives and the struggle for equal pay is effectively at an end. It’s hard to disagree with Campbell that a new revolution is needed; the only question is what form it should take.

As I grew older still, I grew angry about other things, too: things that might seem on the surface to have nothing to do with the story of Eve, or the disempowerment of women – but which in fact are profoundly related. The same kinds of acts that are perpetrated against us, against our daughters and our mothers, are perpetrated against the planet: the Earth which gives us life; the Earth with which women have for so long been identified. Our patriarchal, warmongering, growth-and-domination-based culture has caused runaway climate change, the mass extinction of species, and the ongoing destruction of wild and natural landscapes in the unstoppable pursuit of progress.

At six years old, knowing nothing but somehow understanding everything, I sobbed as hazy black-and-white TV news footage showed a bird futilely flapping its wings, slowly drowning in a thick soupy layer of black crude oil which coated the surface of the sea. Another bird landed next to it, sank below the surface, re-emerged for a final few flaps, then drifted into the growing mass of dead bodies lining up along the southwest coast of England. I was watching one of the first major acute man-made environmental disasters, caused by the wreckage of the oil supertanker *SS Torrey Canyon* – 32 million gallons of crude oil dumped into the ocean, and around 15,000 sea birds killed. The sea burst into huge sheets of flames as napalm was dropped in an effort to burn off the oil. I thought the world was ending. ‘It was just an unfortunate accident,’ people said at the time – but how often have we done it since?

Then there was MAD: Mutually Assured Destruction. You

couldn't make it up. You didn't have to; I grew up in the shadow of it, at the height of the Cold War. Russia and America, each side armed heavily in preparation for an all-out nuclear world war. Each with a nuclear 'deterrent' that was supposed to preclude an attack by the other, because such an attack would lead to immediate retaliation and the annihilation of the attacker's country as well as the attacked. The United Nations website says it all: 'Nuclear weapons are the most dangerous weapons on earth. One can destroy a whole city, potentially killing millions, and jeopardizing the natural environment and lives of future generations through its long-term catastrophic effects.'<sup>10</sup>

We all firmly believed it was going to happen, one day; the government even published leaflets to advise us what to do when it did. 'Protect and Survive' appeared in the UK in 1980 after a resurgence of the Cold War and, with nice little line-drawings, helpfully showed how to build your own fallout room, advising that you stock it with tinned food and a radio. It even showed how an improvised toilet could be built from a chair. You might want to do this now, was the implicit message, because when the bomb hits, it'll be too late. 'Protect and Survive' stimulated Raymond Briggs to write *When the Wind Blows*, a poignant and oddly shocking graphic novel which shows a nuclear attack on Britain by the Soviet Union from the viewpoint of a retired couple. 'Further instructions' do not come by radio, as 'Protect and Survive' blithely promised that they would; the book ends on a bleak note, as Jim and Hilda Bloggs cover themselves in paper bags, praying in their fallout shelter as death approaches and the room slowly darkens around them.

I was twenty-one when *When the Wind Blows* was published; I'm fifty-four now and in spite of all the fine work to achieve nuclear disarmament in the past couple of decades, nothing fundamental has changed. 'Although nuclear weapons have only been used twice in warfare – in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 – about 22,000 reportedly remain in our world today,' declares the United Nations, in the enormous section of

its website devoted to Weapons of Mass Destruction: not merely nuclear weapons, but chemical and biological too. So many ways not only to kill each other, but to destroy non-human life on this planet in the process. I grew up with the knowledge that there were men ready to do just that. *Dr. Strangelove* might have been funny, but it was no joke. Still, we were just women, and we were supposed to trust their judgement. 'The men know best,' said a school friend's mother after I told her I was joining the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament because if we didn't do something about it, they were going to destroy the world. *The men know best?* I didn't know what to say.

Women might have been complicit – we had been well-trained for centuries, after all; a little bit of burning at the stake, incarceration in nunneries and lunatic asylums if we didn't do what we were told, and the constant threat of rape and violence: all of them do wonders for compliance – but the men were the ones with their fingers on the buttons. The men were the ones in charge. As a teenager I wanted that to change, but I couldn't imagine how. I couldn't even picture a world in which it might be different: a world in which women were respected and in which we got to create the cultural narrative too; a world in which men and women lived together in a balanced and sustainable way, respecting the planet which gave us life and the other creatures which share it with us. So, as so many of us do, I just knuckled down and 'got on with my life', going to university, signing up for a PhD, preparing to enter the system.

A year into my PhD, just after I'd read *When the Wind Blows*, I went with a friend to visit her aunt, an elderly retired lecturer in history. Over tea in her Hampstead flat I talked about Briggs's book, bemoaning a Western civilisation in which the men had all the power, and women had never been able to influence the way the world was. I lamented the complete lack of stories from my own country which might offer us examples of, or even just inspiration for, women who were respected and could lead. She

shook her head, levered herself slowly out of an ancient, dusty armchair and sifted through her bookshelves until she found the thick paperback she was looking for. ‘Read this,’ she said, putting it into my hands. ‘It wasn’t always so. It doesn’t have to be so. Women could be leaders once, in this country; there were strong women, who influenced the way things were. It was long ago, but that doesn’t mean it can’t happen again. You’re young; read about those women, and then decide what you are going to do to change things.’ The book she gave me was called *The Eagle and the Raven*, and it was a historical novel by a writer called Pauline Gedge.<sup>11</sup> It was in good part about Boudica: the woman who fought the Roman patriarchy in the first century AD, and almost won. I left, devoured the book in a single weekend, and then tracked down everything else I could find about her in the library. There was virtually nothing; most of the history section seemed to contain books about men.

Boudica<sup>12</sup> was a member of the Iceni, who occupied an area of England roughly equivalent to modern-day Norfolk. They were one of many tribes of Celtic-speaking people who lived in Britain from the Iron Age through to the coming of the Romans and the subsequent invasion of the Saxons.<sup>13</sup> ‘In stature she was very tall, in appearance most terrifying, in the glance of her eye most fierce, and her voice was harsh,’ Roman consul and historian Cassius Dio said of her. ‘A great mass of the tawniest hair fell to her hips; around her neck was a large golden necklace; and she wore a tunic of divers colours over which a thick mantle was fastened with a brooch.’<sup>14</sup> Following the Roman invasion, Boudica’s husband Prasutagus had ruled the Iceni as a nominally independent ally of Rome. When he died, his will – in which, contrary to protocol, he left his kingdom jointly to his daughters and the Roman Emperor – was ignored. His lands and property were confiscated; his nobles were taken into slavery. And, according to Tacitus, Boudica was flogged and her daughters were raped.

While the Roman governor Gaius Suetonius Paulinus was away leading a campaign against the island of Mona (modern

Anglesey) – a refuge for British rebels and a stronghold of the druids – the Iceni conspired with their neighbours the Trinovantes and others to revolt. Boudica was chosen as their leader, for, as Tacitus said in the *Annals*, ‘the Britons make no distinction of sex when they choose their leaders.’ Boudica and her people destroyed Camulodunum (modern Colchester), Londinium and Verulamium (St Albans). Suetonius returned and regrouped his forces in the West Midlands; before the battle against him began, Boudica spoke to her troops from her chariot, with her daughters beside her. If the men wanted to live in slavery, then that was their choice, she declared: but she, a woman, was resolved to win or die.

Sadly, this time around the Romans won the battle, and it was said that Boudica poisoned herself after the defeat. More was lost, of course, than just a battle. The Romans remained, and the people were weakened. There were no more tribal queens: the Romans considered female power to be a sign of barbarism. The Anglo-Saxons came, the country converted rapidly to Christianity, and the patriarchy took firm hold. And yet, and yet . . . Boudica may have lost, but still she fought, and still she led. A woman from my culture, out of my history. I allowed myself to develop a fantasy. What if women rose again? Not in battle, but what if we could reclaim, somehow, that power and respect which women had lost? What if we could somehow dismantle this planet-destroying patriarchy, and recreate a world in which we lived in balance?

It was a lovely fantasy, but I was young, powerless and poor. I slipped back, as we all do, into the needs and strictures of my own life. I slipped quietly into the system, settled for safety and security. It was a long time before I thought again about Boudica, and the lost power of Celtic women.

The world which men have made isn’t working. Something needs to change. To change the world, we women need first to change ourselves – and then we need to change the stories we tell about who we are. The stories we’ve been living by for the past few

## Reclaiming Our Stories

centuries – the stories of male superiority, of progress and growth and domination – don't serve women and they certainly don't serve the planet. Stories matter, you see. They're not just entertainment – stories matter because humans are narrative creatures. It's not simply that we like to tell stories, and to listen to them: it's that narrative is hard-wired into us. It's a function of our biology, and the way our brains have evolved over time. We make sense of the world and fashion our identities through the sharing and passing on of stories. And so the stories that we tell ourselves about the world and our place in it, and the stories that are told to us by others about the world and our place in it, shape not just our own lives, but the world around us. The cultural narrative *is* the culture.

If the foundation stories of our culture show women as weak and inferior, then however much we may rail against it, we will be treated as if we are weak and inferior. Our voices will have no traction. But if the mythology and history of our culture includes women who are wise, women who are powerful and strong, it opens up a space for women to live up to those stories: to become wise, and powerful and strong. To be taken seriously, and to have our voices heard.

While the stories of Eve, Pandora<sup>15</sup> and other 'fallen women' may be the stories that have been foisted upon us for the best part of 2,000 years, they aren't the only myths we have inherited, those of us who have Celtic roots. Refusing to confine itself in the whalebone corsets of national borders, the 'Celtic fringe' – made up of specific regions of the countries which stretch along the western oceanic coastline of Europe – binds together richly diverse populations with a strong thread of collective cultural identity. That thread isn't founded on tribalism or nationalism, and nor is it about genetics. These entanglements emerge from shared history, mythology and common belief systems; they arise out of a common landscape and environment which brought about a highly distinctive pan-Celtic culture that is rooted in intense feelings of belonging to place.

And so, rising high up on the heather-covered moorlands of Cornwall, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man and Brittany, seeping through our bogs, flowing down our streams and into our rivers and out onto the sandy strands of the rock-strewn Atlantic seaboard, are the old Celtic myths and stories. Our own stories, no one else's. Stories steeped in sea brine, black and crusty with peat; stories that lie buried beneath our feet, which spring directly out of our own distinctive native landscapes, and which informed the lives of our own ancestors. These are the stories we will visit in this book.

For women particularly, to have a Celtic identity or ancestry is to inherit a history, literature and mythology in which we are portrayed not only as deeply connected to the natural world, but as playing a unique and critical role in the wellbeing of the Earth and survival of its inhabitants. Celtic myths for sure have their fair share of male heroism and adventure, but the major pre-occupation of their heroes is with service to and stewardship of the land. And once upon a time women were the guardians of the natural world, the heart of the land. The Celtic woman who appears in these old tales is active in a different way from their heroes and warriors: she is the one who determines who is fit to rule, she is the guardian and protector of the land, the bearer of wisdom, the root of spiritual and moral authority for the tribe. Celtic creation stories tell us that the land was shaped by a woman; Celtic history offers us examples of women who were the inspirational leaders of their tribes. These are the stories of our own heritage, the stories of the real as well as the mythical women who went before us. What if we could reclaim those stories, and become those women again?

In this book, I'll share with you the story of how I reclaimed my native myths and traditions, for the stories of women today need to be told. We begin with the stories which tell of our sufferings, of the age-old violence that has been committed against us and against the planet. But the journey doesn't end there. Once our



## Reclaiming Our Stories

old stories have been told, we need to find and claim the new stories which will inspire us to move forward. It took me a long time to find my own guiding stories: stories which not only captured my imagination, but which reminded me that there are other ways of belonging to the world than those that were handed down to me. Each of us travels that road for ourselves, each of our journeys is unique, and all of our learnings and insights are valuable. For all my railing against the patriarchy, my own journey wasn't one which made men the enemy; it was a journey in which men and women could become allies, and the stories which guided me arose from a culture in which both men and women were valued for the different things they brought to the world. My journey was a pilgrimage: in making it, I discovered how it might be possible to become an authentic, rooted woman in these challenging times. During the long, winding course of it, I learned how to find my place in the world, and then take responsibility for it. I learned how to uncover and then employ the unique gift which I could offer.

Several decades ago, American mythologist Joseph Campbell developed his well-known and tremendously influential outline of the 'Hero's Journey'.<sup>16</sup> The basic plot of all the world's great stories, Campbell declared, involves a Hero who happens to be a person of exceptional gifts, which may or may not be recognised by his society. He and/or the world in which he lives suffers from a symbolic deficiency (in a fairy tale, for example, it may be something as simple as the lack of a specific golden ring); the Hero must set out on a great adventure to win the missing treasure and bring it back to the world. Campbell argued that there are three key phases of these symbolic journeys, beginning with the phase of separation, or departure, in which the Hero hears the 'Call to Adventure' and sets out. In the second phase, 'the trials and victories of initiation', the Hero passes along a 'Road of Trials' and is tested. During the third phase, 'the return and reintegration with society', the Hero brings back his gift to the world and so saves it, or himself, or another. Campbell believed that those three

phases and the sub-stages which he outlined within them are common not only to the structure of the myths themselves, but also to the structure of our own individual journeys through our lives.

This model may well explain the features which many myths and fairy tales from around the world have in common, and may also, as many Jungian psychotherapists who followed Campbell have suggested, offer up a template for a real-life Hero's Journey and a metaphor for personal spiritual and psychological growth. But it has little to offer women. It does not reflect the full reality of women's lives, either inner or outer. In it, women appear either as the Temptress, there to test the Hero and lead him off-course (there goes poor Eve again . . .); or in the guise of the Great Goddess, who represents the 'unconditional love' which must be won by the Hero to give him the courage to go on with his quest. In other words, at their very best, women can be no more than the destination: we represent the static, essential qualities that the active, all-conquering Hero is searching for. Maureen Murdock, one of his female students, reported that Campbell told her: 'Women don't need to make the journey. In the whole mythological journey, the woman is there. All she has to do is realize that she's the place that people are trying to get to.'<sup>17</sup>

I respectfully disagree. Women absolutely do need to make the journey; we do not, however, need to make the same journey which the Hero makes. Our journey is different; our stories are all our own. It's more than time we told our own stories, outlined our journeys for ourselves. We don't need Heroes to tell us who to be.

Campbell's Hero's Journey, along with later adaptations of it by a variety of Jungian therapists and other writers, is entirely focused on an individual's spiritual growth and personal transformation – the process which Jung called 'individuation'. But the journey we need to make today is one which rips us out of the confined spaces of our own heads and plants us firmly back in the world where we belong, rooted and ready to rise. Yes, if we

want genuinely to contribute to the world, if we want to change it, we need to do some work on ourselves first. We need to understand our dysfunctional ways of being, to confront the beliefs and values we have subscribed to which caused both women and the planet to be in this mess in the first place. We need then to discover our own authentic values and ways of being in the world, to wake up to our own creative power as women, conceive our own individual vision for what we might offer to an ailing Earth. But this work on ourselves is not an end in itself, and neither is it work we should do in isolation. We are not separate from this Earth; we are a part of it, whether we fully feel it in our bodies yet or not.

The Heroine's Journey we'll follow through this book is a journey to understanding how deeply enmeshed we are in the web of life on this planet. It is a journey which leads us firmly back to our own sense of belonging to this Earth – but after that, it is a journey which requires us to step into our own power and take back our ancient, native role as its guardians and protectors. The Heroine's Journey we need to make today is, above all, an Eco-Heroine's Journey.

It's an idea that has come of age. A growing number of contemporary women's movements are focusing on a new and strongly felt desire to actively re-root ourselves in the land and in our communities, to take responsibility for shaping the future, to bring back awareness of and respect for deep feminine values in a world dominated by the masculine. It's a revolution of belonging, and it goes far beyond simple environmentalism.

More and more, women are taking the lead in the environmental movement. Nobel Prize-winner Wangari Maathai launched the Green Belt Movement,<sup>18</sup> which has planted millions of trees in Kenya and transformed women into powerful advocates for their rights, good governance and democracy, and natural resource protection. London barrister Polly Higgins founded the growing global Eradicating Ecocide movement.<sup>19</sup> Vandana Shiva<sup>20</sup> is India's

best-known ecofeminist, environmental and anti-globalisation activist, promoting the idea that a more sustainable and productive approach to agriculture could be achieved through reinstating systems of farming that are more centred on women.

Even more radically, Canada's Idle No More movement<sup>21</sup> took the world by storm in 2013, when what began as a simple resistance campaign against a pending bill in Saskatchewan, spilled across the border to the United States and spread its influence across the world. The movement – which inspired solidarity actions around the globe – was founded by four women, three of whom were from Canada's Indigenous nations. Idle No More's vision 'revolves around Indigenous Ways of Knowing rooted in Indigenous Sovereignty to protect water, land, and all creation for future generations'. It is a vision that is deeply rooted in the old ways of being, the old Indigenous mythologies which reveal an inextricable bond between the living world and the feminine. 'It's time for our people to rise up and take back our role as caretakers and stewards of the land,' a spokeswoman for the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations proclaims on the Idle No More website.

In our own Western societies we are seeing more calls for a return to native wisdom, but we cannot live by the worldviews of other cultures, which are rooted in lands and histories that have little relationship to our own. And yet, so often we try to: we look for our spiritual practices to the East – to Taoism, for example, and to Buddhism; we look to the West for guidance on how to live in harmony with the land – to indigenous stories and traditions from the Americas. But fine as all of those traditions are, we don't need to look to the myths of other cultures for role models, or for guidance on how to live more authentically, in balance and harmony with the planet on which we depend. We have our own guiding stories, and they are deeply rooted in the heart of our own native landscapes. We draw them out of the wells and the waters; beachcombing, we lift them out of the sand. We dive for

## Reclaiming Our Stories

them to the bottom of deep lakes, we disinter them from the bogs, we follow their tracks through the shadowy glades of the enchanted forest. Those stories not only ground us: they show us what we might once have been, we women, and what we might become again if we choose. ‘The world will be saved by the Western women,’ the Dalai Lama once said.<sup>22</sup> And, if we stand with our powerful and inspiring native sisters from around the planet, together we all might just have a chance.

If women remember that once upon a time we sang with the tongues of seals and flew with the wings of swans, that we forged our own paths through the dark forest while creating a community of its many inhabitants, then we will rise up rooted, like trees.

And if we rise up rooted, like trees . . . well then, women might indeed save not only ourselves, but the world.

If you have enjoyed this sample chapter from *If Women Rose Rooted*, you can buy the book from September and all good retailers.



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