

Writing a Memoir

The Perfection

BY SHARON BUTALA

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sweeps of sky and grass-covered hills and not much else. Mirages wavering on the horizon, the weather a living breathing presence that you could see coming for hours before it arrived.

The odd thing here is that when the Desert Fathers went out into the desert, they found what seems to me a life-denying set of beliefs: celibacy, hatred of the body, the refusal of women and their influence in their lives, and so on—while I, in stark contrast, wandering alone year after year in my semi-arid desert, found my womanhood.

Living as we did, in the midst of Nature, seeing the wild animals and the semi-domesticated ones in their roles and their cycles in the animal kingdom, I began to see how what I was (am) as a woman, a female, is to a large extent, dictated by Nature. *That was the ground of my new understanding* and it didn't come in a blinding flash the day I arrived, but slowly over several years of living in the midst of the overpowering presence of Nature.

The *certainty* of Nature was another, its quality of timelessness, the phases of the moon, unavoidable now in my new life, and the nightly and seasonal turning of the stars. Through them, I began to understand something about the eternal round of being, something that up to that point had never entered my head. But also, through the great wonder of the timeless beauty of these elements, I began to have dreams of breathtaking beauty and profundity, or perhaps they were visions; I began to slip into a part of creation nearly everyone says doesn't exist,

As many of you who have read my book, *The Perfection of the Morning* will know, at 36, I left a busy, well-peopled life in the city to start a new life on an isolated ranch in an area where I knew nobody but my new husband and where I quickly found I didn't fit in. I said in the book that it was like moving to a different country where the customs were different, where even the language was different, and where I could not find a place for myself. As a consequence, I spent many years mostly alone. Even when I was with other people, I felt alone. And I was alone in a spare and stark landscape—great

because they are so afraid of it, I guess: they say you are crazy, or lying, or ate pickles before you went to bed, or as with my mother, are light-headed from fasting. The following is probably the most astonishing dream of my life. I recounted it in *The Perfection of the Morning*:

I had been here five long years when I dreamt this dream: it was night, but so clear and bright it was almost as light out as during the day. I was standing inside the door of the back porch of the old ranch house. In the dream the door was divided in the center into an upper and a lower part which opened separately. I was looking out the open top half at the sky watching in awe and wonder a gigantic eagle as it soared over the ranch. It was so big that with its wings outspread it covered the entire yard, which is about twenty fenced acres. It had a slender, stylized body and wings and it was a smooth, delicate pale grey. Its beauty was entrancing....

In front of me, on the rectangle of cement at the door, stood an owl which was at least six feet tall. It was also a creature of stunning beauty, a pale brown with deep turquoise fan-shaped, regularly spaced markings on its breast. The eagle soared above us and as I watched it, the owl watched me and repeatedly bumped its body against the door in front of me, which was not latched, as if it was trying to get into the porch with me. It wasn't threatening and I wasn't afraid. I simply glanced at it and kept it out while I watched the eagle. (65-66)

If marital breakdown can alter one's spiritual and actual life forever, I am filled with grateful astonishment to find that so can a single dream. This dream was far too powerful, far too simply amazing to forget or ignore. I felt I had had it for a reason, that it meant much more than some little story about a mythical owl and a mythical eagle, I became convinced that I had to understand it. I knew it had come from my own psyche, but I felt something more important than that had happened, that perhaps there was a power which I could not conceptualize that had given me the dream, and given it to me for a purpose. It was my responsibility to find out what that purpose was.

Thus began my long search through the great books of analysis, psychology, mythology, and the spiritual life, to understand and be directed by the greatest dream of my

of the Morning

life. I learned about Jung's "collective unconscious," about spiritual ideas from all around the world from Joseph Campbell, I learned about the structure of the psyche from Jung and Freud and Hillman and many others. A whole new world of knowledge and understanding about life opened gradually before me.

You may ask what it meant. I can only say, as I'm sure you know, that such dreams have many meanings at many different levels, and that they continue to unfold in meaning over the years as one gains in wisdom. In mythology of course, the eagle is masculine and solar, the owl feminine and lunar. Athena was often depicted with an owl, while all the many symbolic ways in which the eagle is used are well-known. So, on one level, the dream was telling me that I must embrace my femininity and stop "following the eagle," that is, accepting the male interpretation of the world, that I must discover my femininity which was equal in beauty to the masculine symbol. Or perhaps more accurately I should say that I must discover my Self within my womanhood, and not by following accepted ideas, all developed by men out of their understanding of the world.

It also might be interpreted as a dream about the struggle in the Christian world between spirit, represented by the eagle soaring in the sky, and the flesh, as symbolized by the owl which, in mythology, is connected with the earth and therefore with the flesh. (In the dream the owl was standing on the ground, right beside me, trying to get in.) As I've said, in some ways all that this might mean continues to engage me because I feel sure there's much more to be said about the role of the flesh in spiritual life. It was a profound and enigmatic dream, but the connection—woman-earth-flesh-female spirituality—continues to draw me.

Perhaps it was about attainability too. The owl was right there, I could touch it, while the eagle was far away, well beyond my reach, perhaps unreachable. This might be about trying to be something you're not—about me, not having a classical education, or the life experiences (including extensive travel) of the great writers of the last century. But I do have a whole, new, fresh, and different world to write out of, and in, whatever way it requires me to do. It is, has been, my task to find out what that is. The wonder of the dream, its amazing beauty, the power of its symbols, however—its ineffability—I cannot explain. Nor the realm to which my mind had gone to find this

dream—What was it? Where was I? How did I get there?

I did indeed begin to apply the meaning of the dream to my work as a writer. I began to understand that I could be a writer only if I pursued my own vision, not the vision of other writers who were, after all, mostly male: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Goethe, Mann, Melville, Milton, and so on.

The imperative for me is to understand the world for myself and now couched in the terms of my newly-discovered-at-the-most-profound-level femininity. The dream had indeed begun to act as a directive, and the wonder and power of it, its very extreme otherworldliness, gave me the courage to try to understand and to follow its teaching.

In fact, my novel *Luna* came directly out of that dream. It was my exploration of the meaning of womanhood. It is a commonplace nowadays that women have no history; that the history we are taught in school is male history even when it's about women, since nearly all of it has been interpreted by men, and told from their point of view. If I wanted to answer the question, "What is a woman?" both for my book and for my own understanding, I would have to search elsewhere than in history textbooks for an answer. It seemed to me that around 1980, despite the women's movement, what a woman might be was not clear at all. We had, all of us, been raised in patriarchal cultures and much of what we appear to be, and think we are, is the result of acculturation, and is not necessarily innate. Most of us had bought into our culture's explanation of who and what we are, and didn't know ourselves what our essential nature, our inherent role might be. How was I to find out what was innate and given?

As a prelude to this, I should tell you that earlier on in my career as a writer, I'd been lucky enough to find Carolyn Heilbrun's book, *Writing a Woman's Life*. I was asked to be on a panel in Winnipeg on something about women. I wrote a short presentation called "The Pace at Which Things Grow." In order to do this, I'd taken down from my shelf all the books about the writing on the Canadian Great Plains or the prairies. These books were

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Diana Dean, "Self-Portrait," 36" x 48", Oil on Canvas, 1998.

all written by men, or in the case of anthologies, all edited by men. By the time I'd finished them I discovered that I didn't understand the prairies despite having lived there my whole life, I was writing the wrong way, I was saying the wrong things, that really, I couldn't write, and should just give it up. Then I found *Writing a Woman's Life*, and it gave me the insight and the courage to ignore all these male pronouncements and to keep on doing what I was doing.

Formal history having failed me, I turned to mythologies around the world and to the roles women played in ancient cultures, mostly on the evidence found by archaeologists. *Luna* is in fact, a modern version of the Greek women's mysteries, the Eleusinian Mysteries. That was the only coherent story I could find, that made sense still for modern women of the western world.

I asked myself, what is basic and constant in the lives of women through all time? The only thing I could be sure of was, motherhood—the giving birth to human life. The great quandary, the great implacable, impossibility with which the women's movement has barely begun to deal. So I had to grapple with motherhood in the book, and with different possibilities for women from Rhea, a symbol for The Great Mother in her wisdom, her witchcraft, you might say, and who had crossed over the boundary of "normal" life; to Diana, who expressed a different facet of

womanhood—woman as hunter of the world, as alive to the world as any man; to Selena, trying to make sense of herself within a world defined by and bounded on every side by the patriarchy. The fourth woman was Phoebe (all are names of moon goddesses) and she was meant to represent the suffering of women, and especially, the silence of women. Out of this dream came my novel, *Luna*.

It was the dream that launched me on this path which I am still pursuing. The dream—a mere dream—enriched my life; it gave me purpose and direction, and ultimately, a measure of wisdom about being a person in this world, which I wouldn't have had if I hadn't had it. Dreaming is another way of gaining knowledge about the world: the world of dreams is also a part of creation.

But on another level, the dream might also have been predictive; about the enormous role the power and beauty of Nature was to begin to play in my life. I had begun to go for walks, by myself, on the unbroken prairie. These walks became a large part of every day and this went on for many years, during which time strange things began to happen to me out on the prairie, insights occurred to me, visions happened, ideas about the meaning of Nature began to take hold of me....

There is a second version of how *The Perfection of the Morning* began. This version is as true as the first one. For quite a long time whenever I was in a city I'd been searching through the sections in bookstores labelled, "The Environment," or "Nature," looking for books that would extend my understanding of my own increasingly bizarre or bewildering or moving experiences in Nature, books that would explain them to me. Although I picked up tidbits of information here and there from them, for the most part, I was destined to be disappointed. And this was how, finally, I forced myself to simply go ahead and begin. On the morning that I began, here is what happened:

When I was ready, I sat down at my desk and typed *The Perfection of the Morning*, then waited in that state of suspension of writers like me, of held breath, obliviousness to one's surroundings, the moment fraught with tension and with prayer, a kind of intense concentration not on some particular but on emptying oneself so that the right words might have room to form. And then, as so far has always happened, ideas began to flow, to shape themselves into words, sentences, paragraphs, as I typed.

A strange thing began to happen. I began to have a powerful sense of that same field where we had found the scraper, hovering all around me at the far range of my vision. I could see without looking its green-tinted grassy hills and plains, the multihued rocks, the greasewood, sage, badger, and wild rose bushes growing in the clefts of its hills. But it was more than that; it felt as it feels when I am there—I

felt enveloped in that aura or presence, which on good days is as if I have entered the sway of another consciousness, as if I am not alone but watched over by a presence much bigger than I am. It was as though that presence or landscape had incarnated and come to me as I sat in my office far from it. (108-109)

I had no idea what this extraordinary experience meant, why it had happened, where the vision had come from. But I took it as a blessing of sorts, an encouragement to go ahead. Now, seven or more years later, I think I have a glimmer of understanding about its source.

I'd been keeping a journal since about 1978 about 14 or 15 years when I began *The Perfection of the Morning* for the second time. In order to fill in all the gaps, in order to make something of a narrative out of all that I had learned, I had to re-read all those journals. I had to read them also in order to set in chronological order what had happened to me that led me to think this and think that about Nature. I had to tell my personal story, which I did not want to do but, as a writer I give myself pretty wholly to my projects, I've pretty much defeated my internal censor, and so I didn't fight much with myself over what should go in and what I couldn't bring myself to put in.

Somewhere along the way, as I studied my journals looking for more precise facts about what had happened and in what order, I realized that I was writing the story of one woman's spiritual journey, since my paying attention to Nature had grown out of my psychic turmoil and lack of resources—psychiatrists, like-minded friends, gurus—to resolve in other ways what was happening to me. For a great many of my readers, that is what this book is about: it is the story of a spiritual journey. It has begun to be that to me, chiefly, too.

My first and hardest struggle was to find the voice, and if you're a writer, you know that voice is essential to a work—using the right one and sticking to it. I wanted to use an authentic voice, but at the same time, aware I was trying to write literature, it was clear to me that my everyday colloquial voice wouldn't do.

As a western-Canadian woman, writing in the early nineties, what models existed? I couldn't find any. I confess to still not having read Emily Carr, despite my having for years intended to. Susanna Moodie didn't seem particularly appropriate. I just couldn't find anybody else that held any appeal for me, except Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and I knew it was hopeless for me to think of trying to sound like her. She's an original, and there's no such thing as copying her. And I'm not brilliant nor witty as she is. The whole voice seemed wrong for me.

But I did turn to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* for ideas on how to hold my narrative together. If you remember her frog, I realized that one of the possibilities, or devices, for holding together a long narrative, is to come back over and over again to a particular image, or icon.

Her frog is used in that way, and so I found myself using the image of Peter asleep on the prairie in the same way and for the same purpose as Annie Dillard uses her frog.

I left out certain visions I'd had, because I was embarrassed to tell them, I thought people would just think I was crazy or lying, and I was very concerned that I would lose credibility by revealing them and the whole book would be discredited. This was one of my major tests in choosing what to put in and what to leave out, or else in how to tell something: how crazy did it sound?

Another problem I had, and any writer of memoirs would have it, was that I had plenty of anger, plenty of reason to be angry with my in-laws and neighbours and with the local society of women, and I had to make a decision about whether I was going to use this book as a weapon to get even with them. I decided that another test of what to put in and what to leave out would be whether I was telling my own story, or somebody else's. I fell back on the old cliché (which up to then I'd really hated) that if you can't say anything good about somebody, don't say anything at all. And that was how I handled my problems with other people. I just left them out.

Of course, the true criteria for what to put in and what to leave out is what is this book about? By this I mean, what are its themes? What am I trying to say? What—to start with—narrative thread am I laying out here, and what is needed to make it whole, fill in all the details, build to a climax, produce a solution of sorts?

The next serious question is what is the purpose of writing down this narrative—its deeper purpose—so that



Diana Dean, "Sofia," 55" x 55", Oil on Canvas, 1998.

knowing the answer to that question, I can shape each story in the narrative so that it leads logically and emotionally and psychologically to the conclusion or epiphany or lesson or understanding, or to a clearer future? So at all times I had to hold in my mind both the real meaning of my narrative and the conclusion itself of the narrative—the latter to the extent that I could, bearing in mind that I was learning as I went along, and knew a good deal more about my own life when I finished than I had when I began.

But here is the rub: I was making decisions all the time, on every page, about what to put in and what to leave out, and the very act of doing this, over and over again, with no matter what purity of heart and determination to tell the truth, was a choosing and shaping of what the truth was.

I stuck to the chronology in my journals. I was scrupulous about sticking to the order of events, about relating them as they were recorded in my journals and as I remembered them happening. But I had to build a narrative that led from understanding to understanding, and even in my journals it wasn't possible to make a clear delineation of the way or the order that the understandings had struck me. Sometimes they came like the proverbial anvil falling out of the sky, but more often I'd had inklings for a long time and they grew gradually into fulfillment. So sometimes I had to make things seem as if they were a lot clearer than they actually were.

I wasn't so sure, when I was done, what the truth about my spiritual journey might be and whether or not I'd actually managed to tell it. This was not because of any evil intent of mine, but simply because it is the nature of life, even one's own, to be open to interpretation.

But nonetheless, there's a way in which all nonfiction is fiction: the backward search through happenstance, trivia, the flotsam and jetsam of life to search out a pattern, themes, a meaning is by its nature an imposition of order onto what was chaotic. It's an attempt to give a linearity to events, many psychic, which had no linearity, which, if anything, were a spiral, or had more the hectic quality of a dream. What is true are thoughts, dreams, visions. What may or may not be true are the order and timing of events, the perception and linking of them. If it's true on the one hand that everything is what it seems to be, and I constantly remind myself of this, on the other, there is a way in which it's also true that nothing is. I begin to think like the Bushmen, as Laurens van der Post reports them as believing, that in the beginning a dream was dreaming us, and like Clifton Fadiman who said that the older he gets the more his life seems to him to have been, rather than a series of actual events, one long, interesting dream. In writing what the world will call autobiography, I am torn between the facts and history and the truth of the imagination,

and it is to the latter, finally, in terms of my personal history, that I lean. (Preface)

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JULIA VAN GORDER

Restitution

I read a letter to the editor
 in the Vancouver Sun
 from a grandmother,
 Donna Whitta in Crawford Bay,
 saying she has given it all up—
 a big wooden house
 in the suburbs, a gas-gulping car
 and holidays abroad on planes
 that suck up six gallons a mile.
 Good for you, Donna.

She won't eat strawberries
 in January delivered by diesel truck,
 coffee from Brazil nor bananas
 airlifted from Ecuador.
 She's given up power-driven,
 labour-saving devices, furniture
 made of teak and mahogany
 from ancient Asian forests.
 "You only need one chair,
 locally made, to sit on."
 Right on, Donna.

She realized she has borrowed
 Millions of dollars
 from her children and grandchildren
 limiting their lives.
 She is grievously sorry.
 So am I.

Julia van Gorder's poetry appears earlier in this volume.