

# Sauna Exists, Therefore I Am

---

## Gifting Rituals of the Finnish Sauna

KAARINA KAILO

*Cet article présente les pratiques du don et leur vision dans le monde, celles qui ont défini l'ancienne culture du sauna en Finlande, encore présente aujourd'hui. En comparant les traditions des sweathouses des Premières nations et les saunas des Finnois au Canada et en Finlande, elle a reconnu le paradigme du don qui est l'élément central des rites tout au long des cycles de vie semblables à ceux des anciens habitants de Finlande.*

The sauna is the sanctified sweatbox in which the primordial memory of the culture is most tangibly preserved.

—Charles Wilkins “The Practice of Paradise” (68)

The purpose of this article is to discuss and update the results of my academic and field research on the Finnish sauna and nature philosophy undertaken for several decades. I wrote on the gifting practices of the Finnish sauna in the first book that came out of this research (Warkentin, Kailo, and Halonen). Since then, I have joined the International Network of Feminists for a Gift Economy, learning a great deal more about the various theories of the Gift, especially the feminist gift economy theorized by Genevieve Vaughan (*For-Giving*; “Epistemology and Gender”; *Women and the Gift Economy*; *The Gift in the Heart of Language*). What I have learned about Canadian and U.S. First Nations gifting practices has allowed me to revisit Finnish sauna studies and to think “outside of the box”—not taking the patriarchal exchange logic and Western science for granted. Feminist and First Nations perspectives allow scholars to radically revisit the more mainstream scholarship that also applies to sauna studies.

To quote Abenaki Indian scholar Joseph Bruchac: Giving in a sacred way has always been a central part of American Indian cultures. It may be a means of giving thanks, of bringing the people together, of gaining honor, of distributing material goods so that all may survive, of teaching. It maintains the balance that is needed to hold a nation together and to keep an individual in the right relationship within him or herself and with the community—a community that is not just composed of humans, but also of animals, plants, even the stones. For all things are alive.

Bruchac points out that it is not the gift, but the gestures of giving and receiving that count. This is, of course, a very different sort of giving and receiving from that practiced in Western mainstream culture where the giver is often calling attention to his or her generosity, and the gift is often followed by effusive thanks from the receiver. The strengthening of community is much more important in the American Indian practice, a gifting more akin to prayer than self-aggrandizement and acquisition.<sup>1</sup>

Gifting practices are part of a great variety of communal rituals often including sweat lodge ceremonies. If the sauna was forbidden in many parts of central Europe in the middle ages, there have also been efforts to weaken, discourage or destroy indigenous rituals, particularly the potlatch. The key thing to understand about gifting—for all of its different contexts—is that it placed generosity and circular sharing, not of an individual alone but of communities and clans—at the heart of the social ethic.

Barbara Alice Mann, Ohio Bear Clan Seneca, and Professor at the University of Toledo well clarifies the difference

between structural and merely personal, individual gifting stating that it was not personally instigated but a systemic obligation of communal living (Mann, 232-233). In the context of the sauna, gifting was no doubt part of the Finnish “original instructions,” i.e., the shared rules that one had to respect in order not to anger the spirits, and to ensure luck and *onni* (Finnish for happiness). Finns, like Indigenous peoples in general were shamanistic and animistic prior to the imposition of Christian patriarchy in the eleventh century.

While working at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University, in Montreal, I did research on the sweat lodge practices and healing circles of Native Canadian groups from the Cree to the Abenaki, Ojibway, Montagnais and Mi'kmaq Nations.<sup>2</sup> The First Nations women often reminded me that the only way to avoid the pitfalls of cultural appropriation and the tendency to project ideas of exotic otherness onto Indigenous groups was to be grounded in one's own culture—to feel pride about one's own far-reaching cultural roots and institutions. This is

---

**Gifting rituals of the sauna culture are more than an ethnic curiosity. Today, when many people are looking for less consumerist and ecophobic ways to live in the wake of the civilizational and ecological crises, the sauna as a spiritual matrix of healthy, connected living is worth knowing—and reintroducing.**

---

The insightful theories of the network Genevieve Vaughan initiated in 2001 on the gift form the creative and provocative matrix of the multi- and interdisciplinary scholarship that the members from around the world produce together and individually. Vaughan has, among other theorists of the gift, helped me theorize and recognize more deeply the gifting practices that are the core of the most ancient Finnish—and likely, Finno-Ugrian—rituals with their ecological, bioliterate, and socially sustainable impact. Not having come across any studies of the immaterial gifts that are passed on from generation to generation in the context of bathing cultures, understood explicitly as part of a gift-oriented worldview, I decided to apply this method and paradigm to my own culture. Vaughan's writings analyze the patriarchal “manhood agenda” and “masculation” (*For-giving* 55) exposing how the exchange economy exists as a parasite on the gift economy, appropriating women's labours of love and misrepresenting Indigenous peoples' gift-oriented worldview:

The many oppressions that permeate our world can be understood in terms of the oppression of gift giving by exchange. In fact, there is an ancient and ongoing struggle between the gift economy and the exchange economy, which until now the exchange economy has won. Some of its weapons have been: discrediting and dismissing the gift economy, making it invisible while taking from it, creating scarcity where abundance should have been, forcing some groups to give while others take, hiding the nefarious taking while enhancing and over-valuing the successful takers, etc. (*The Gift in the Heart of Language* 48).

also reflected in my choice to focus on Finnish healing and sauna philosophies while recognizing that very many cultures from North and South America to Asia and Scandinavia, Russia and Greece as well as Rome have known bathing customs and sweating practices.

In the current climate of racist and fascist ethnonationalism, I look for cultural af-finn-ities in terms of ecosocially sustainable spiritual gifts, and in no way seek to glorify the Finns. The sauna has been a great equalizer of which one can give one apt example: farm “masters” and their labourers would bathe together and many riddles and proverbs reveal that in the sweats all distinctions of class or clan were cancelled. In the sweats, we are all One.

Sauna practices have existed across Europe, particularly in the North and have remained strong in Finland due to the Finns' isolated location in the European periphery. Similar if not identical bathing customs existed across Central Europe but they were in the end banned as lascivious and sinful enclaves of bodily pleasure. The Finns have retained much of this culture longer, although the gifting practices associated also with pre-patriarchal life have all but disappeared or have at least changed. Spirits may no longer be thanked, but most saunas have commercially produced or self-crafted spirit artefacts (*sauna tonnttu*) as protectors of bathers. I feel that the gifting rituals of the sauna culture are more than an ethnic curiosity. Today, when many people are looking for less consumerist and ecophobic ways to live in the wake of the civilizational and ecological crises, the sauna as a spiritual matrix of healthy, connected living is worth knowing—and reintroducing. The more I studied the pre-Christian aspects of the Finnish sauna culture, the more affinities I found

between the Native Canadian sweat lodge practices and beliefs and pre-Christian Finnish sauna customs.

The core of the sweat rituals consists in recognizing the importance of the gift, which manifests as thanks given to ancestors, the elements, nature itself, and the spirit world. They all contribute to the bathers' health, healing and balance on an individual and collective level. Rejecting this worldview of interdependence and interspecies feedback with its goal of creating balanced lifeways, has greatly contributed to the civilizational and ecological crises. The exchange logic of ego-oriented lifeways has resulted in the loss of biodiversity and the abuse of animals, and finally, humans are cutting the very branches of the world tree that they are sitting on. In the past, people understood that we are deeply interconnected with each other and the surrounding nature. The individual and collective life cycle and annual rituals celebrated in the sauna served to renew our bonds with the cosmos and what we now call mechanistically as "ecosystem" or "environment." When springs, from which water was to be brought to sacred events, were deemed holy and inhabited by protective spirits, they were not subject to the same short-sighted polluting actions as in today's materialistic world. You would not think of commodifying sacred groves or lakes, or making a bottled water business out of the best spring water. The spirits would have become so angry that it would threaten collective survival and wellness. How right the "superstitious" ancestors were, who believed in such "naïve" magic! The Finns, like Canada's First Nations, had their own mythic original instructions on how to deal with spirits of nature, of the sauna and of everyday phenomena. One did not thank the elements for their gifts because of childishness but because the turn taking gifting between humans, other species and Mother Earth ensured that "resources" were neither depleted, nor overused or Goddess forbid, destroyed in the name of profit.

### **Sauna as a Site of Periodic Renewal**

To make ecological sense of the material collected and analyzed, I will refer briefly to the affinities between the North American Native culture of "sweats" and the animistic, shamanistic context of the primal Finnish sauna.<sup>3</sup> For many First Nations, as for the Finns, the sweat lodge/sauna has been—and in some cases continues to be—a site of periodic spiritual, cosmic and social renewal and purification. The sauna is a holistic way of exorcising negative thoughts, "energies," memories, experiences and illnesses both collectively and individually. In the old days, psychosocial imbalance was referred to as "loss of soul"; today we may have relabelled a similar phenomenon as burnout, stress or the crises of eurocentric, Western values

in the age of globalization. Sauna and sweat lodge not only share a physical similarity in structure; in the past they shared the symbolic meaning (being built as reflections of female anatomy and the feminine principle). Their sacred elements heal not only physical illnesses but, most importantly, a disturbed, unbalanced, traumatized, homesick or s/existentially damaged sense of self. Echoing the meaning of the sauna for expatriate Finns, the sweat lodge has been reintroduced in Canada and the U.S. as a healing response to the history of cultural oppression. If the potlatch and the sweat lodge were banned by the colonizers among other barbaric acts by the settler newcomers, today the sweat healing rituals are strong elements of cultural First Nations self-identity and also a matrix of cultural empowerment. The gifting practices were never fully given up despite the efforts and some successes of patriarchy to infiltrate capitalism into First Nations lives. The sweat lodge is something First Nations people can take pride in and it is an empowering site for the education of the children who have suffered from violence, substance abuse and teen suicides following the long history of collective abuse by mainstream society. It is also a symbol of hope and rebirth following the disintegration of many First Nations communities.

Of course, there is a great difference between Finns in Canada and Native Canadians. The latter are struggling to retain and recover their culture on their own lands while the Finns are among the very groups—immigrants coming from the outside to occupy the aboriginal territories—that have collectively helped displace the original inhabitants. Yet, it is well-known that the Finns and First Nations people got along well, the latter calling the former the sweating Finns (Hunnisett). Although many Canadian Finns have adopted and integrated many aspects of the mainstream society's urban consumer culture, myths of the Finns as "bush folks" persists. Kal Nikkila is quoted as noting that: "the most enduring feature of Finnish camp life—the sustaining feature—is not physical but psychological, the extraordinary passion of the Finns for the outdoors, for the woods and waters. In the broadest sense, that's what camp is to them ... 'a way of getting close to the bush and the lakes'" (qtd. in Wilkins 142). The forest is also an important source of the various magic substances needed for sauna healing and rituals (wood, herbs, special tree branches, spring water etcetera).

While in Canada, I organized together with Raija Warkentin a sauna writing competition as a research method to collect data and experiences of the Finnish Canadian sauna.<sup>4</sup> "Sauna Exists, Therefore I Am" is the title of one of the sauna writing competition entries by Pertti Raty (182). This phrase epitomizes the romanticizing, often nostalgic attitude many Finns have towards the sauna culture and

philosophy. If one had to describe the defining features of Finnish ethnic identity, I would link them, likewise, with the emotional, psychological, cultural, physical, spiritual, religious, institutional, private and collective cultural idioms to do with sweats and renewal. Although my studies of the sauna have been multidisciplinary, looking at all cultural idioms and aspects of ethnic and personal health, healing and renewal, I focus now on the gifting aspects of the sauna rituals mostly in their woman-friendly variants. This is another missing theme.

those to whom they were attracted to themselves. If many Finns have come to the world in the warm atmosphere of the sauna, many have also literally kicked the bucket there—the sauna has been the sacred place where the dead were given their last rites, washed and purified. The sauna, then, like the sweat lodge, is where *eros* and *thanatos*, life and death instincts and realities coalesce. To an extent it is a microcosm of the sociocosmic macrocosm. It reflects the central aspects of a nation's ecosocial contract and also, most significantly, it is a site where the negative,

---

**In the past, people understood that we are deeply interconnected with each other and the surrounding nature. The individual and collective life cycle and annual rituals celebrated in the sauna served to renew our bonds with the cosmos and what we now call mechanistically as “ecosystem” or “environment.”**

---

Despite great variety across time and space, the degree of tradition-bound culture or assimilation, First Nations and Finnish sweat rituals were and continue in many cases to be events the purpose of which was/is to renew the mutually respectful “social and cosmic contract” between humans, animals and the entire animate universe. The sweat baths were according to many scholars “world renewal ceremonies” during which the participants sought oneness with the universe and renewed “original instructions” of proper, balanced living. All the senses are activated in this “sensorium (Kailo, “Beyond the Clinical Couch”) where smell, touch, sensation and auditory pleasures (crackling fire and hissing *löyly*) are more important than the privileged Western Sight.

For First Nations, the sweats are connected with the wheel of life, and for the Finns, the sauna has been the sacred site where rites of birth, puberty, marriage, and death were consecrated. The new-born baby was welcomed into the world in the sauna, often that is where they were also read their cultural and individual words of origin: “*Nosta luontosi lovesta, haon alta haltijasi*” (“Raise your nature, go into your being”). Boys and girls were not initially socialized to strict gender roles but encouraged, in shamanic ways, to find their own specific path and calling. Raising one's nature was tapping into one's unique soul path. The narrow gender scripts were introduced in more recent, patriarchal eras (Kailo, *Bear Religion*).

Young Finns and Karelians would carry out various types of magic rites in the sauna and even sought to raise their erotic powers through intricate rituals of “imitative magic.” Feeding the unsuspecting object of amorous desire such substances as sweat or blood, the bathers tried to bind

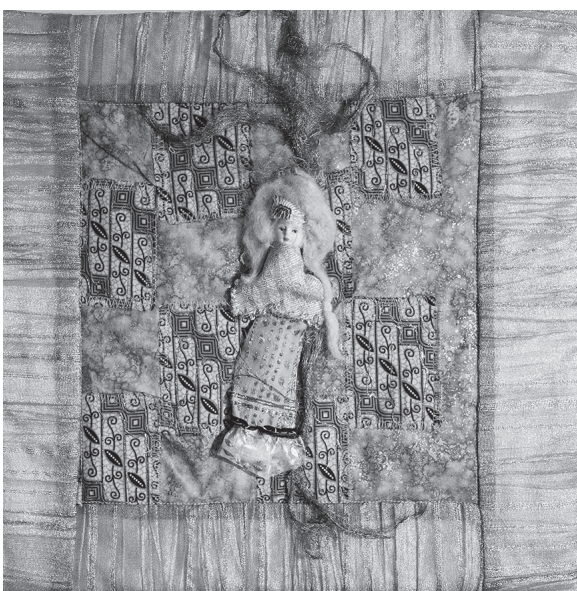
limiting impact of gender acculturation, strict morality and rules and hierarchical orderings can also be relaxed, even dismantled to some extent. It is also where the gifts of knowledge were transmitted from one generation to another. Today, the Church has taken on this role through confirmation, wedding and funerals.

It is my conviction, based on many studies and my own participation in First Nations rituals and everyday life that there are also no dogmatic or monolithic definitions attached to the life-respecting sweat culture and ecophilosophy. While I think it wiser to focus on the Finnish sweats, I recognize the many affinities we have with Indigenous rituals of world renewal and the respect for the culture's “original instructions.” These consist in individual and group responsibilities. The Finnish sweats allow for cultural focalization and symbolization around commonly shared and valued cultural idioms, but each individual, family or social unit invokes and evokes the traditional “sacred” elements and idioms in its own meaning-enhancing way. As part of the shamanic continuum, the sauna's defining feature was the spiritual autonomy that marks the traditional Circumpolar, formerly animistic worldview. This contrasts with the more hierarchical, expert-driven Western context where religious authorities control, regulate and define spiritual life to a much greater extent. The gift-oriented archaic worldview of which there are still remnants defies the “religious” systems precisely because of the great autonomy it bestows implicitly on individuals and their self-defined truth. Sauna participants have direct, unmediated contact with spirits or what we might call the psychospiritual continuity of being; they are “masters” of their own spiritual universe.





Kaarina Kailo, "Ilmatar/Veen Emo, Goddess of Air/Water, and Climate Change," 2010, mixed-media quilt panel, 40x40cm.  
Photo: Alpo and Arja Huhmarniemi.



Kaarina Kailo, "The Golden Woman, Tree of Life," 2016, mixed-media quilt panel, 33 x 34 cm.  
Photo: Alpo and Arja Huhmarniemi.

Finns still tend to experience the sweats as holistic, full-bodied and sensuous events. This is so even though there are symptoms of alienation from nature and, particularly among academics, an increasingly mechanical, splintered, dissociated and clinical attitude towards health and wellness. Among the Finns living in Canada, many who sent sauna stories to the writing competition compared the sauna and the sweat lodge. It struck me how little awareness there was, however, regarding the gifting philosophy that has been so central to the Finns, still in

the agricultural era (most poems, charms, incantations, laments and shamanic chants related to the sauna were collected in the nineteenth century).<sup>5</sup>

In the context of my broader research dealing with folk memory and the sauna, it became clear to me that there is an unexamined, intriguing link between the cognates sauna, bear's den, the moon, menstruation, and the origins of the most distant Finnish/Finno-Ugric sauna rituals (Kailo, "From the Unbearable Bond"). I explore Mother worship together with the Bear Religion, and, at the same time, the deepest roots of the sweating "shrines" in my forthcoming book.

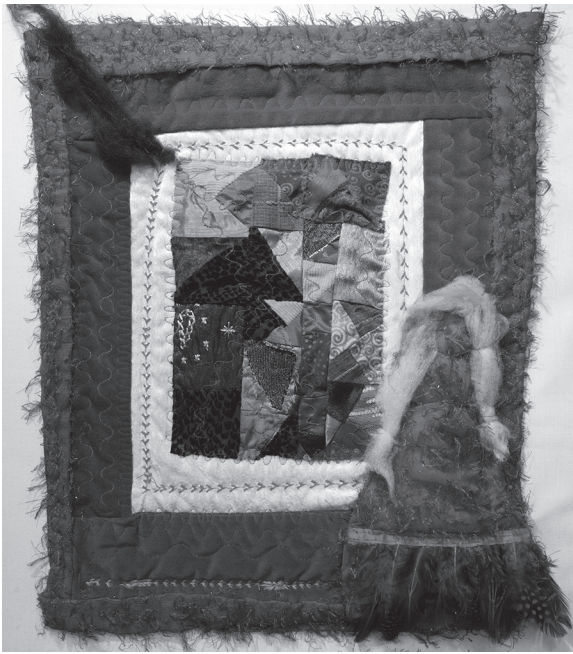
At the heart of fertility rituals is the importance of communally nurturing the creative, procreative, life-producing fires of existence—the great placenta of being. The sweats are the centre of a cyclically based, organic, life-oriented culture that celebrated life and fertility rather than expressing a mechanistic worldview and the obsession with death, violence and a linear sense of history and "progress". The sweats are to a great extent the ritual spaces for the celebration of rebirth and renewal. These are the aspects also of the archaic saunas that celebrate rather than pathologize and denigrate femininity. Women, snakes and bears are connected with the moon world and the worldview of renewal, celebration of fertility and life for obvious reasons: all embody the mystery of the return of life after the eclipse, the menstrual blood and the bear's winter hibernation. The snake sheds its skin periodically and is reborn the same way that women renew their procreative powers after the menstrual purification, after shedding the lining of their uterus.

### The Four Basic Elements, Water, Air, Fire, Earth

As two scholars, Gaston Bachelard and Gilbert Durand have demonstrated, and as Indigenous healers and traditional cultures have long known, water, air, fire and earth are the basic "hormones" of well-being, they are the primal nourishing elements of human balance and wellness. As such, they are also the key aspects of the Finnish, and the Finnish-Canadian sauna culture. As *vihtas* are synecdoches of Nature and symbols of the forest, they might have been included under this heading as well (earth).

The entries to the sauna competition include numerous references to the importance of the above cultural idioms to do with renewal, a cyclical sense of time, spiritual wellness and balance. One might summarize the renewal-related key aspects as the recurrent references to water, air, fire, earth, snow, ice, and the sacredness of the sauna as a site for meditation, stillness, reflection, oneness, presence, connection, and healing. The following





Kaarina Kailo, "Kylyn akka, Guardian Spirit of Sauna Baths," 2011, mixed-media quilt panel, 60 x 56 cm.  
Photo: Vuokko Isaksson.



Kaarina Kailo, "Auteretar, Spirit of Löyly," 2011, mixed-media quilt panel, 40 x 40 cm.  
Photo: Vuokko Isaksson.

provides an example of the holistic, spiritual experiences many Finnish Canadians enjoy in the bosom of nature:

After the heat, we jump into the waiting lake. Imagine countless summer nights when floating on your back, watching stars, drunk with the heat of the sauna and

the cool of the lake. You can count on some stargazer to call out: "Look, it's Queen Cassiopeia!" or "There's the dog star!" On moonlit nights we sit steaming on the dock watching with gratitude as the moon rises from the sky. (Kaattari 180)

As the Finnish "wheel of life," the sauna celebrates the primal elements and they are all present in the sauna; earth through the *vibta* or cedar/birch whisk, the sizzling fire wood (air through the *löyly* which descends upon the bathers as a kind of meady spirit; fire as the burning wood in the stove and water as the Finnish incense *par excellence* transforming its substance through contact with the heated rocks—also another synecdoche of nature.. The following sauna charm contains references to both a female and a male spirit of *löyly* although the female presence has been to a great extent erased:

Welcome! O Vapour, welcome! Warmth, welcome to him that welcometh. Vapour is Auterinen's son, is Auteretar's child. Enter the steam, O God, to heat it, father of the world, to bring about a state of health, and to establish peace; excess of vapour mitigate, O send away excess of heat through a hole by an auger bored, through a drill-made aperture. (Abercromby 173)

Traditionally, the ancient Finns, like First Nations peoples, worshipped the four elements, air, water, fire, earth in the sauna; the sauna was built also in the image of the tree of life, as a microcosm of the three levels of the universe: the upper realm, the sky world, the middle realm, the earth, and the underworld of the dead. All of its core symbolism replicated the cycles of growth, interconnection and symbiosis with the end goal of altered states, deeper consciousness and rejuvenation. If the first temples of humanity were menstruation huts, as two menstruation scholars (see Voskuil; Edgar) suggest, it is sobering for women to reconsider the way their sacred bodily processes have been appropriated and turned into something impure. I have learned from Mohawk women that women did not need sweats in the past; after all, they purify themselves through the menses monthly while men imitated women and had to cut themselves in the sweat lodge to experience a similar bodily purification.

With regard to the gender-symmetrical symbolism of the sweats, for the Ojibway nation, the pit in the sweat lodge, echoing the Finns' *kiuas* (stove), was the womb of the earth with the red hot glowing rocks in it being rather than representing the grandfathers or grandmothers. The water thrown on the rocks greeted by sweetgrass or other

herbs (tobacco, cedar etc.) transmits the prayers or thanks of the participants to the upper realm, to the ancestors, bringing about at the same time a transformation of the primal elements of creation—masculine and feminine forces; water and air, earth and rocks, hot and cold. According to Jordan Paper, in his discussion of the Native (Midewiwin or Ojibway) sweat lodge:

The fire in which the rocks are heated, burning to the east of the lodge, represents Grandfather Sun, the most potent power of the male Sky. As the female rocks become red-hot in the fire, they are transformed into Grandfathers, the male sacred persons. When they enter the lodge's pit, Earth's vagina, under the canopy of the dark night, the female Sky, cosmogony is recapitulated. As the glowing red Grandfathers are sprinkled with water, the fluid of life, hissing steam shoots forth, surrounding the act of cosmic coition with hot vapour. The lodge dome becomes a womb in which grows the seed of new life. Both the cosmos and the participants are recreated. (87)

Many superstitions are connected with the sauna rituals. The ancient Finns believed that fire like the Bear ancestor originated in heaven, and therefore was sacred: a reason to see the sauna as sacred. No dirt could be thrown into fire. The sauna was a place for the worship of the dead, a place where diseases and evils of the body were driven out, and even a place where unhappy love affairs might be settled. For Allan Konya "the pile of stones on top of the sauna stove is a relic of an altar used in pagan times and the throwing of water over the stones was a form of sacrificial ceremony to supernatural beings. The Finnish word *löyly* (the vapour which rises from the stones) originally signified spirit or even life and the word corresponding to *löyly* in languages related to Finnish is *lil*, which means soul (5). Tom Johnston and Tim Miller note in their *Sauna Book* the symbolism of the four elements that are ceremonially combined in Cherokee sweat lodges as a representation of cosmic integrity: With the use of the sweat lodge, there was generally a strong ritual element in its construction and use. The sweat lodge brought together the four elements—earth, air, water and fire—thus helping the bather be purified and in harmony with the universe. To the Cherokee, for example, there was strong solar symbolism in the sweat lodge. The heat in the lodge was actually the sun's heat (wood was burned to heat the stones for the bath; wood exists only because the sun shines on trees and makes them grow), and the vapour produced by sprinkling water on the stones gave sun power to the bathers, power that enveloped them and was inhaled by them. The burning of fragrant herbs on the hot stones further increased the sun power present (21).

## The Ecosocial Significance of Sauna and Sweat Lodge

The gifting practices in the context of sweats are not a naïve consequence of humanizing other species. In a literary study of the *Gift*, Lewis Hyde notes that the first-fruits ceremony and its equivalents are important ways of establishing a gift relationship between humans and Nature (38). Hyde has analyzed the notion of an Indigenous "return gift," called among the Maori a "nourishing *hau*," as interspecies feedback.

The way he describes the role of gifting helps the Westerner or assimilated Native understand why the give-back rituals are not just about dealing with primitive fears of revenge by Nature or mere rituals to ease one's conscience about killing game. He explains that without the gestures of giving back, humans would act through greed or arrogance of will to destroy the cycle of human/animal interdependency and interconnectedness. This insight is central for understanding traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), and how its relationship with Nature can help change the abusive anthropocentric attitudes and the exchange economy that have contributed to the current ecocrises and loss of diversity. There are numerous definitions of TEK, but basically the use of the term "traditional ecological knowledge" has become established, among others, through the work of the International Conservation Union (IUCN) working group by that name. Unlike Western abstract science, traditional ecological knowledge has also been defined as a knowledge-practice-belief complex (Berkes). The working definition refers to it as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment" (Native Science Commission).

Dennis Martinez, Enrique Salmon, and Melissa Nelson elaborate on Indigenous human/animal relations that differ drastically from those of modern Europeans: "There was a time, the Elders say, the oral tradition says, when animals and human beings could talk to one another" (90). Martinez et al. clarify that such a view is metaphorical and symbolic, but it guides, nonetheless, how traditional Indigenous Peoples have related to the animal and plant world. According to Martinez et al., after the near total decimation of most fur-bearing animals, Indians came back to their traditional respect for all relatives in the natural world, aided in this return to sanity by TEK.

I believe that this return Gift is an ethos of deep ecological responsibility, which is required not just between different species but among people and genders. We now live in a masculated world where the Gifts of people classified as

“Nature people,” “underdeveloped people,” or wo/men as a class of the subaltern/exploited labour force, are not recognized.

Vaughan reveals how the gifts of Nature and of Motherers are exploited under capitalism:

In capitalism, the exchange value of the commodity contains the value of the gifts of housework, surplus labor and free natural resources, which are not monetized until the final exchange of the commodity

that guarantees that the basic needs of all are met without the necessity of reciprocity. All living beings, from babies to the sick and elderly, are not in similar positions to give back, so the ideology is one of meeting all needs without regard for an equivalent return from the recipient of care and gifting. When children are “carried,” they learn to carry others in turn (Vaughan, *For-Giving* 61). The theories of both Hyde and Vaughan (*For-Giving*), as well as of Indigenous peoples, contain elements of Traditional Ecological Knowledge since they recognize a similar

---

**In sustainable communities, past and present, livelihood was seen as dependent on the recognition of balance among all living entities. Interdependence was the core relational value of the human, as opposed to the western focus on autonomy and independence, which are anathema to interdependence.**

---

with the consumer. Gifts are concealed by labelling the labour they require “low cost,” “or non-existent, non-labour” (“mere activity” or even “leisure”). Many gifts and services are unquantifiable. All the gifts are hidden behind the binary face-to-face transaction of exchange—yours or mine—and the binary understanding of the transaction itself – gift or exchange. (But its a steal!) ...In fact, the ways we presently understand knowledge and market exchange are similar in that both use binary category judgements that hide gifts. (*The Gift in the Heart of Language* 111)

Vaughan’s formulation of the bonds-creating language of altercentric gifting emphasizes that it has a profoundly social character (*The Gift in the Heart of Language*).

Although Hyde’s application of the Gift to literary works and Indigenous cultures is most insightful and rich, he does not pay sufficient attention to gender, which is so central for undoing the ills of patriarchy. Hence, his “interspecies feedback” does not go far enough in providing ecological solutions. In both the matriarchal, Indigenous and ecofeminist research, it has been shown that in sustainable communities, past and present, livelihood was seen as dependent on the recognition of balance among all living entities. Interdependence was the core relational value of the human, as opposed to the western focus on autonomy and independence, which are anathema to interdependence. Nobody is independent, as we all are or have been dependent on our motherers and on Nature. The collective rituals in which a giver circulates gifts serve to instill and transmit the values of the gift. A gives to B, B gives to C, and so on, in a circle of multiple survival

bond-creation rather than an egocentric worldview (Kailo *Finnish Goddess Mythology*).

From the rich archives of Finnish folklore and folk poems, we learn that the Finns greeted and thanked all the elements and beings that created the sauna as a material site and spiritual entity. Even today, many bathers enter the smoke sauna through a low door that forces one to be humble before the sauna spirits and to bow before the *väki* forces, the mysterious energies that are the property of water, air, earth and fire (cf. *Orenda or mana*). In many charms, incantations and folk poems, the Finns pay respect to the stove’s fire and the other elements explicitly noting their gifts. They have also, according to our original instructions, been encouraged to leave *löyly*, heat, for the elves and other protective beings of the sauna, who are sometimes also given their share of food and drink (Kailo *Finnish Goddess Mythology*). One must not bathe too late, past midnight, for this was to ensure that the spirits would have their turn to bathe. In our summer cottage (an extended family site), we were told that the darkest corner of the sauna belonged to the ancestors. As children, we tried to avoid having to sit in the “skeleton place” which is how we interpreted the ancestor cult—a particular feature of Finno-Ugric worldview.

It is important to consider that the sweats facilitate the emergence of a different state of awareness and consciousness—that of the third eye, the multisensorial sense of being where the privileged organ of knowing—sight—is displaced as other modalities of knowing get activated.<sup>6</sup> I call this our sauna sensorium (Kailo, “Beyond the Clinical Couch”).



The sweat lodge and the sauna as the ritual space for cyclically recurring events and landmarks in collective and individual lives bears a link with the bear religion, with menstruating women, and with the moon, because all are linked with ways to measure cyclical rather than linear time, and with a ritual marriage of male and female, human and animal categories.

All these symbols or representations of the eclipse and return of fertility, growth, and life may well have been the matrix of life-oriented (animistic) cultures at their matrilineal and most earth-friendly stage.<sup>7</sup> It is quite possible, on the basis of the fragmented knowledge of early times that the sauna, the bear's den, menstrual blood, the moon and women are precisely that magic chain of cyclical connections that patriarchy has sought to sever and eclipse in order to establish its own linear temporal system and the boundaries that serve its ideology. Historically, women and bears have both been linked by blood mysteries for both shed their blood in a context whereby the cycles of life were renewed ritually or physiologically. The bear was not only seen as the mediator between the upper, middle, and lower worlds, the shaman-forebear who was a kin and mediator between human and animal realms but enacted the drama of rebirth every spring after having survived the whole winter in the den by sucking its paws.<sup>8</sup> Other key concepts often referred to in the Finnish ritual context are the vital substances blood, mead and sweat and the attribute "meady" which characterizes almost anything in its sacred manifestation.<sup>9</sup> Even today the best *löyly* in the sauna is described as "meady" and "moist," echoing the honey-loving bear's den, and the honey saunas that have made a commercial comeback in recent decades. The meadiness as the rich sensuous abundance of beehives is part of the maternal symbolism that has been replaced by clinical technosymbols in modern times. Today, the focus on the sauna is to a great extent commercial, with design and automated devices like sprinklers replacing the cult of ancestors and the participatory gifting rituals of the past. Whereas bathers would throw *löyly* on the rocks as offerings to ancestors, the sprinklers may now regulate the "steam"—personal rituals have thus been replaced by mechanical technosolutions. Women also used to be at the core of the ceremonial life and had key roles as midwives; they were also the first shamans (Tedlock, *Woman in a Shaman's Body*, 2005, 63).

The sauna/sweat lodge and the bear's lair, then, most likely shared in being the spiritual-sensual *temenos* in the image of cultural motherhood and the fertile power of the earth. The importance to women of this is that this pivot of eco- and woman-friendly imagery in the hypothetical past "symbolic order" does not relegate woman outside of signifying systems but celebrates her power at its primal

core—at the primal scene of totemic self-renewal. In fact, throughout the world, bear goddesses for example were worshipped or honoured as providers of game and creators of life. This is where the Finnish culture of the sauna and the complementary, harmony-oriented gendered cosmos of the sweat lodge differs. The history of the Finnish sauna reflects the piece-meal overwriting and transformation of the pagan past and herstory, caused by the patriarchal propensity to silence the representations of female spirituality and sexuality. I was amazed to discover the number of female spirits and *haltias* linked with health, healing, and the sauna that have remained unfocused in our collective sauna culture. I found them in the vast collections of the Magic Songs of the Finns among other archival sources.<sup>10</sup> While much has been made of the link between the word *löyly* and spirituality rather than the mechanistic "vapour" or "steam" to which the concept has degenerated in the secular culture, little has been done to bring forth such central healing figures linked with renewal and pain-relief as Auteretar, Helka, Udutar, Kiputyttö, Kirsti, Kivutar, Kunnotar, Meletar, Sinetär, Sinervätär, Suonetar, Vuotar, and finally the only well-known one: the Finnish Virgin Mary who has come to incorporate a great number of pre-Christian goddesses or *haltias*. Although guardian spirits of woods, water, air and land are most common in the Finnish mythological landscape, there are some references to *haltias* of fire, further linked with the sauna culture.<sup>11</sup> The fact that there are only a few references to such spirit beings linked with sacred fire, no doubt derives from the negative association Christian missionaries attached to the body, femininity, fire, passion, sexuality. In fact, Finnish women used the sauna for magic rituals where they sought to enhance their sexual attractiveness and to guide their own futures beyond patriarchal control. No doubt for the same misogynous reasons, many of the female beings linked with the sauna foreground the Great Mother's death and illness wielding side. Thus we have a wealth of goddesses of pain and female beings responsible for giving birth to diseases of all kinds from Kivutar to Tuonetar and Louhi.

In most sauna research we only hear of a male god, Jumala or Ukko, entering the sauna. As in society, female divinity is erased to the benefit of a patriarchal spiritual system. Many films, books and sauna studies depict the woman's role as that of a subordinate helper or assistant; the one preparing the sauna, scrubbing the participants and serving the bathers. Even in its secular form, the sauna culture has been taken over to a great extent by a culture privileging men—a cultural process of "masculation," what Genevieve Vaughan (*For-Giving*) identifies also as the exchange economy and logic. The sauna has been commodified and the technoculture has replaced

the ecological rituals. Even today, we—many of us—still pour water on the rocks expressing our hopes at the same time, or throw a message to ancestors or deceased relatives and friends. The gift is nothing less than the embodiment and spiritual expression of the system of interpersonal and interspecies ecosocial relations. Its erasure by the exchange economy promotes a process whereby we become brutally anthropocentric and ego-centered, isolated individuals, letting ecosocial ties disintegrate. I conclude with Vaughan's words: "In order to reject patriarchal thinking we must be able to distinguish between it and something else: an alternative" (*For-Giving* 23). Gifting, the gift imaginary and the Gift economy are to me this alter-native. They express a worldview and maternal form of epistemology that radically changes how we perceive life and how we live so that the world is renewed in its most ecologically resilient and life-oriented, egalitarian and sustainable way. The sauna and the sweat lodge have many meanings—most importantly, they are the originary temples, bear dens, and womb-like spaces where minds are altered and hearts are made meady and soft.

*Kaarina Kailo is Docent of North American Studies and former professor of Women's Studies at Oulu University, Finland. She also held women's studies positions at Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Canada. Her expertise includes ecofeminism, indigenous studies, gift economies/imaginaries, the ecosocial impact of neoliberal globalization, ecomythology, and spirituality. Her anthologies and books include Wo/men and Bears: The Gifts of Nature, Culture, Gender; Introduction to Ecopsychology; and finally, Finnish Goddess Mythology and the Golden Woman, Climate Change, Earth-Based Indigenous Knowledge and the Gift. She is active in Finnish politics, a municipal councilor, a senior rights activist and textile artist focused on Finno-Ugric deities.*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>As Bruchac clarifies: "One of the very common practices of virtually every American Indian nation is some form of what is called *otuban* in Lakota and in English 'a Giveaway.' Even today, if you go to a gathering such as a powwow, a traditional wedding, a naming ceremony, a burial, a Giveaway may be part of the event. It consists of first spreading out a large blanket on the ground. Whoever is holding the event, usually the host family or organizer of the event, places various items, often ones that are handmade, such as woven or skin pouches, beaded key chains, articles of jewellery, on that blanket. Then everyone is invited to come and take one thing from the blanket. Elders come up first, then veterans, women, little children, older children, and finally men. As James David Audlin (*Distant Eagle*)

points out in his book *Circle of Life*, it is not the central participants in the event who are given these gifts, but everyone attending. And the proper way to choose what you accept as a gift is to quietly let the spirit guide you. 'Make your choice quickly and step back so that others can come forward.' Further, you do not call attention to what you've been given or show displeasure if someone seems to have gotten something better than you."

<sup>2</sup>I focused particularly on women's issues, to do with the effects of sexual violence and alternative healing practices relating to sexual trauma. I carried out collaborative research projects together with Cree women on the benefits of the sweats and developed at the same time a deep interest in understanding the life-oriented (animistic), shamanistic, pre-Christian roots of the Finnish sauna culture, as well. Asked many times by the Crees what the Finnish sauna culture for its part could offer regarding healing practices and rituals, I felt embarrassed for not better knowing the ritual, symbolic and more spiritual history of the sauna. Research into the deep roots of Finnish culture therefore became an integral part of my more general research and interest in anti-racism work and action.

<sup>3</sup>I also found that despite differences of status and privilege, Finns and Native people have a long history of getting along particularly well in Canada and the U.S. Both identify strongly with the woods culture, the bush, nature, and with the healing power of sweating out one's "evil spirits"—one's psychological, emotional and physical toxins.

<sup>4</sup>Between 1995 and 1999, I carried out collaborative research on the sauna with Dr. Raija Warkentin. I came up with the idea of using a Finnish-Canadian writing competition as a method of collecting information about the expatriate sauna traditions. In 1999, we suggested to the Thunder Bay Finnish-Canadian Historical Society that together we announce a Canada-wide writing competition on the sauna. My research findings on Finnish sauna philosophy, then, derive in part from the results of this competition, during which we collected a wealth of fictive, autobiographical, automythographical, and historical material on the sauna beliefs of Finnish Canadians. We received a total of 119 entries by early January 1999. In addition to that, I carried out interviews throughout the Finnish-Canadian immigrant communities from Toronto to Sudbury, Sault Saint Marie and Thunder Bay, focusing mostly on Ontario but including interviews also from Montreal. The competition resulted in 3762 pages of text by, in all, 472 participants. The respondents were from all over Finland, all social classes, and all age groups. The eldest were born at the end of 1890s, the youngest at the end of the 1970s. Most of them were 60 to 80 years of age. A good two thirds of the participants were women. The responses vary from one-page comments to

sauna reminiscences as long as 200 pages in the form of autobiographies. The writings do not focus merely on the role of the sauna as a health institution. The call for proposals for the competition referred to a broader set of themes. Themes mentioned included magic, beliefs, heating the sauna, modes of washing. I did not limit my analysis of the sauna as a cultural phenomenon among Finns only to the results of the writing competition in Canada. After having researched the Finnish Folklore texts to do with sauna culture, and having analyzed various types of sauna materials from books to theses and collected texts in the Finnish Literary Society archives, I have deepened this research. Now it includes the ancient bear religion and modern matriarchal studies, both of which offer intriguing new perspectives on the roots of the sauna-oriented worldview of high age. I will publish the results in a forthcoming book.

<sup>5</sup>Rasanen does sum up many of the features held sacred by most expatriate Finns: the quasi-religious aspects of the sauna combining hygiene and “highs.”

<sup>6</sup>I know that there are great many types of First Nations sweats and I recognize that they are best described by Indigenous people themselves; furthermore, there are aspects of the sweats that must not be revealed or discussed which is why I also limit myself to general comments.

<sup>7</sup>The primal or eros-related powers of women and bears were venerated because ancient societies were based on a time-reckoning and value system rooted in the eternally returning cycles of nature, the rhythmic dance of life and death. Thus the social imaginary was based on the cycles of the moon, menstruation and bear’s hibernation—all paradigms of renewal, or the eclipse and return of fertile forces.

<sup>8</sup>According to Duane Voskuil: “Moon,” “month,” “mother,” “mouth,” “menstruation,” “measurement” “math,” “matter,” “mammarys,” and even “man” which is still pronounced more like “moon” in some dialects, are linguistic cognates testifying to a common source. Humans first defined themselves as “moon people,” as creatures who saw in the moon a basic metaphor defining who they were. The linkage of these words presents the metaphorical link between human physiology and cosmogony. If menstrual blood and birth are linked, then when menstrual blood and birth are linked, cosmic birth and origin are linked. Birth, an exclusively female function, gives life to us and the cosmos (8).

<sup>9</sup>According to Lotte Tarkka, “In the hunting incantations, the keepers or spirits of the forest are most often addressed as women, in affectionate terms: as ‘honeyed mistress of the forest’” (258).

<sup>10</sup>The Magic Songs were edited and published by Dr. Lönnrot in 1880, under the title of *Suomen Kansan mui-*

*naisia loitsurunoja*, “Bygone Magic Songs of the Finns.” He did not collect them all himself; some were taken down in the last century, and a very few perhaps even earlier. They were found chiefly in the east and north of Finland, especially in those localities where the peasants belong to the Orthodox Church. I refer to the translation of the songs by John Abercromby.

<sup>11</sup>See my most recent book on Finnish *halties* for an elaboration of the Finnish gender-balanced pantheon (Kailo, *Goddess Mythology*).

## References

- Abercromby, John. *Pre- and Proto-historic Finns. Both Eastern and Western. With the Magic Songs of the West Finns*. London, 1898.
- Audlin (Distant Eagle), James David. *Circle of Life: Traditional Teachings of Native American Elders*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publishing, 2000.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, Boston, 1969.
- Berkes, Fikret. *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management*, London: Taylor & Francis, 1999.
- Bruchac, Joseph. “Sacred Giving, Sacred Receiving.” *Parabola: The Search for Meaning*. 20 June 2016. Web. 19 Nov. 2019.
- Durand, Gilbert. *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*. [1960]. Tr. Margaret Sankey and Judith Hatten. Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1999.
- Edgar, Robin. *Red Moon Rising. Menstrual Symbolism in the Total Lunar Eclipse*. N.P. Verdun, Quebec, 1995.
- Hunnisett, Stanley Frank. “From Pohjanmaa to the Shores of Gitchee Gumees: Finns and Indians in the Northern Lake Superior Region.” Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Iowa, 1988.
- Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift. Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. [1979]. New York: Vintage Books 1983. Print.
- Johnson, Tom and Tim Miller. *The Sauna Book*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Kaattari, Joanne. “Sauna and the Smell of Summer.” *Sweating with the Finns: Sauna Stories from North America*. Eds. Raija Warkentin, Kaarina Kailo & Jorma Halonen. Thunder Bay: Lakehead University, Centre for Northern Studies No. 14 (2005): 180-182.
- Kailo, Kaarina. *Bear Religion and Mother Worship—On the Archaic Origins of the Sauna and the Sweat Lodge*, forthcoming 2020.
- Kailo, Kaarina. “Archaic Aspects of the Sauna and the Sweat Lodge: The Gift of Bare Being.” *Sweating with the Finns: Sauna Stories from North America*. Eds. Raija Warkentin, Kaarina Kailo & Jorma Halonen. Thunder



- Bay: Lakehead University, Centre for Northern Studies No. 14 (2005): 45-76.
- Kailo, Kaarina. "Beyond the Clinical Couch and the Patriarchal Gaze. Healing Abuse in the Finnish Sauna and Through Holistic Sweats." *Simone de Beauvoir Institute Review/Revue de l'Institut Simone de Beauvoir* 17 (1997): 89-115. Print.
- Kailo, Kaarina. *Finnish Goddess Mythology and the Golden Woman. Climate Change, Earth-based Indigenous knowledge and the Gift*. Myyttikehrä, Jääli: Juvenes, 2018/19. Print.
- Kailo, Kaarina. "From the Unbearable Bond Between Women and Bears to the Gift Imaginary: Ancient Bear Ceremonials Revisited." *Women and Bears. The Gifts of Nature, Culture and Gender Revisited*. Ed. Kaarina Kailo. Toronto: Inanna Publication & Education Inc., 2008. 59-119. Print.
- Konya, Allan. *Finnish Sauna*. London: Architectural Press, 1987. Print.
- Mann, Barbara Alice. *Gantowisas—Iroquoian Women*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000. Print.
- Martinez, Dennis, Enrique Salmon, and Melissa K. Nelson. "Restoring Indigenous History and Culture to Nature." *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future*. Rochester: Vermont, Bear & Co. 2008. 88-116.
- Native Science Commission. Nativescience.org. Web. 3 January 2019.
- Paper, Jordan. "'Sweat Lodge': A Northern Native American Ritual for Communal Shamanic Trance." *Temenos* 26 (1990): 85-94.
- Raty, Pertti T. "Sauna Exists, Therefore I Am." *Sweating with the Finns: Sauna Stories from North America*. Eds. Raija Warkentin, Kaarina Kailo and Jorma Halonen. Thunder Bay: Lakehead University, Centre for Northern Studies, No. 14 (2005): 182-193.
- Shephard, Paul and Barry Sanders. *The Sacred Paw. The Bear in Nature, Myth and Literature*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.
- Tarkka, Lotte. "Other Worlds: Symbolism, Dialogue and Gender in Karelian Oral Poetry." *Songs Beyond the Kalevala*. Eds. Anna-Leena Siikala and Sinikka Vakimo. Helsinki: SKS, 1994. 250-301.
- Tedlock, Barbara. *Woman in a Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine*. New York: Ransom House, 2005.
- Vaughan, Genevieve. *For-Giving. A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*. Austin, Texas: Plainview Press, 1997. Print.
- Vaughan, Genevieve. "Epistemology and Gender: Knowledge as Gratitude." *Homo Donans*. Web. 2006.
- Vaughan, Genevieve. *The Gift in the Heart of Language: the Maternal Source of Meaning*. Milan: Mimesis International, 2015. Print.
- Vaughan, Genevieve, ed. *Women and the Gift Economy: A Radically Different Worldview is Possible*. Toronto: Inanna Publications & Education Inc., 2007. Print.
- Voskuil, Duane. "From Genetic Cosmology to Genital Cosmetics Origin Theories of the Righting Rites of Male Circumcision." Paper presented at the Third International Symposium on Circumcision. University of Maryland, Washington, May 24, 1994.
- Warkentin, Raija, Kaarina Kailo and Jorma Halonen, eds. *Sweating with the Finns: Sauna Stories from North America*. Thunder Bay: Lakehead University, Centre for Northern Studies, No. 14 (2005).
- Wilkins, Charles. "The Practice of Paradise." *Sweating with the Finns: Sauna Stories from North America*. Eds. Raija Warkentin, Kaarina Kailo and Jorma Halonen. Thunder Bay: Lakehead University, Centre for Northern Studies, No. 14 (2005): 138-146.

## JOANNA M. WESTON

### Letter to a Stranger

I saw you bending  
 over the street artist's work  
 and wanted to ask  
 if you recognized the portrait  
 wanted to tell you  
 about the book I had  
 been looking at in the bookstore  
 wanted to have coffee with you  
 across the street  
 finger the beads at your wrist  
 ask where you had bought them  
 or were they a gift

I would like to spend  
 an evening with you  
 perhaps go to a concert  
 nothing too serious  
 but to share the sounds  
 and events of your life

*Joanna M. Weston has multiple spiders, a herd of deer, and two derelict hen-houses. Her middle-reader, Frame and The McGuire, was published in 2015, and her poetry collection, A Bedroom of Searchlights, was published in 2016. Other books are listed on her blog: <http://www.1960willowtree.wordpress.com>.*