

# Remembering My Roots

by S. Brenda Small

*L'auteure raconte comment elle a grandi à la Baie James et elle explique comment elle reste en contact avec ses*

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*racines septentrionales malgré sa vie dans le sud du Canada.*

In early spring I often hear Canada geese flying overhead on their north-bound flight. The sound is unmistakable. It is the same sound that I heard as a young girl growing up near the shores of James Bay.

Over the rooftops of Riverdale in downtown Toronto, the Canada geese are heading towards James Bay where my father and brother will hunt the geese later this fall. The geese are reminders of my childhood and a way of life that remains an integral part of my identity. For me, the rhythm of the seasons is measured by the flight of the Canada geese. When the geese start flying north I know that the ice is melting and that break up will come soon to Moose River.

This sense of time is my link to the land and the traditional life of my ancestors. I know that springtime hunting leads to the first splash of the canoe on the water and the summer activities of fishing and camping up the river. In the fall, the flight of the geese southward tells me that it is time to get ready for the winter. It means that my father will soon prepare to go trapping in the bush and that the ice will come to him

before the city has its first snowfall.

For many years I have lived in cities far removed from the traditional life of my people. Mostly for reasons having to do with education and employment, I have lived with other people's rhythms and expectations.

When I moved to Toronto five years ago in pursuit of a legal education it became increasingly important for me to

rely on my own cultural framework. The personal conflict and systemic difficulties I encountered through my legal studies could only be addressed by a strong psychological connection to my northern roots and identity. The sense of alienation that I experienced in the privileged law school environment was tolerable as long as I was able to live my life with these personal connections.

Memories of my early upbringing in a northern Cree community sustained me through many difficult periods. Whenever I felt compromised by this particular educational experience I recalled the resilience and courage of my family and knew that as arduous as this journey would become I belonged to a triumphant people.

I remembered the dignity in my grandmother's face, the hard working hands of my grandfather, my father's harvest of the land and my mother's central role in making us feel loved, secure, and worthy of more. I was reminded of the strength and hard work that it took to make our lives better.

While my community coped with the intrusiveness of the government and tried to combat the ravages of alcoholism and poverty, we managed to succeed in maintaining the cohe-

siveness of the extended family.

Our community was intimately connected to the land and to one another in ways that could not be undermined by the meddling of others. We were living with one another in an interdependent relationship that combined the principles of reciprocity and respect. I can remember the natural ease with which we went through our days and the elements of certainty in our lives.

We went about our lives, working, hunting, fishing, and taking care of ourselves in a way that required us to observe tradition and custom. There was a profound sense of authority about these observances and the manner in which we lived with the natural world. We relied on the stories that the old people told us and we never questioned the lessons to be learned from these examples. When my grandfather lowered his voice to reveal the truth in the form of a story we listened intently and not one word of English was uttered in the discussion of these points.

Despite my physical surroundings, I was determined that living in a large city would not discourage me from keeping this legacy in my life. My first step was to recognize that this was an internal thing but that it could be reinforced by the choices I would make in the city.

I began to look for the things that told me about the natural rhythms of the world in spite of the fact that I lived in the largest city in Canada. Each time I noticed the way that the birds came to rest on the trees in my neighbours' yard, I was attempting to observe the customs of my people hundreds of miles away from the sources of these teachings.

It was my responsibility to try to live my life in such a way that I could integrate who I was and where I came from with my present circumstances.

I took a proactive approach in cre-

ating a space for this to happen. I found a place in the city where I was near trees and wide open spaces. I decided that I would live only within a certain area of the city and make my community there.

While many urban people create communities out of neighbourhoods, I was interested in more than that because I wanted to experience the city in the way that Native peoples experience time and space. I learned

though I did not grow up on the trapline this reference to the use and harvesting of the land has not escaped my memory. In keeping with this custom I am required to take care of the land and house that I am living in so that the next person who lives here will witness how I have maintained this responsibility.

My neighbour, who is a white woman from a small town in southern Ontario, has become my friend

and is now a part of my extended family. She grew up in a private girls school and has had a vastly different upbringing. As a white Canadian woman she has had little exposure to the historical and political treatment of Native people in this country. For the first time in her life she has been able to talk about this and engage in a process that brings her to new and challenging places in

her own people's legacy.

We have shared the space of an old house as though it were a tract of land in the bush. With our joint effort in the vegetable and herb garden in the back yard we are able to harvest the land in the tradition of our separate though similar customs. The overlap in the rhythm of her life and mine surprises those who do not believe that strangers in big cities can create extended families. But to my friends she is a valuable added member to our circle. The introductions have already been made in my stories and references about her. I am convinced that this is another way that I have been able to practise the teaching of my family and community.

Once in a while friends and family from James Bay will come to Toronto in the course of their respective working lives. I am happy to see them and to hear first hand about the way things are back home.

I have heard about the expansion

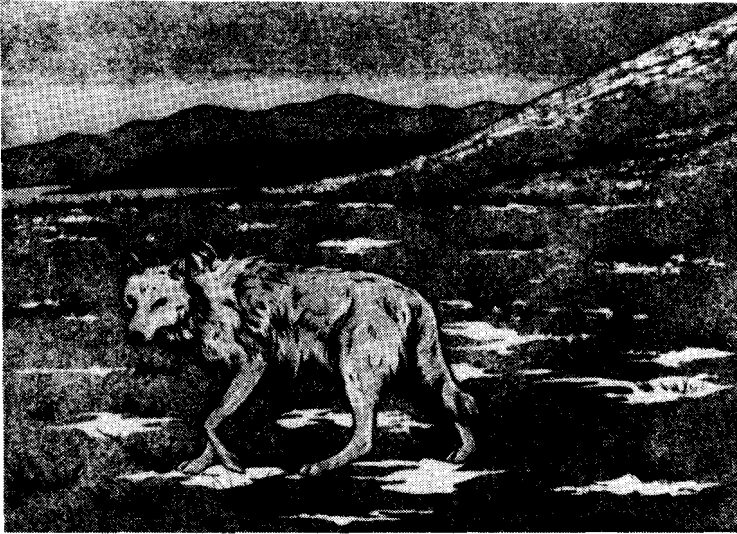
plans of Hydro Quebec from a friend who lives near the Great Whale River in northern Quebec. In his efforts to educate white Canadians about the impacts of massive hydroelectric development in the traditional territory of the Cree in northern Quebec, he always makes time to include me in his visits south. In spite of the vast distances in our lives, my friend is able to bring me to Great Whale through our language and his stories.

When I was a child I was allowed to play for hours along the shores of the river, collecting stones, pieces of driftwood, and leaves from the willows. Whenever I am feeling a need to be more connected to this part of myself, I make my way to the water. At Lake Ontario I am humbled by its power in the same way I have always known the power of the wind and the water that surrounded the island where I grew up. In my apartment today, pieces of rock and wood gathered at Lake Superior keep me in touch with Old Woman Bay. The aromatic tamarack birds that rest on my window sill are traditional Cree decoys from James Bay. The sweetgrass gathered on the outskirts of Sault Ste. Marie with my Ojibway friends is a gift from the Creator for ceremony. These pieces of earth nurture one's spirit in a quiet and wonderful way every day.

At the lake, with the wind against my face and the sound of the waves hitting the shore my senses are always heightened. On hearing, feeling, and seeing the energy of the water, the warm south wind returns against my face. I feel the clay beneath my feet again as I sink into the muddy shore. When I turn to my left I can see my grandmother at the top of the riverbank telling me that it's time to come home.

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*Frances Oles is a Yukon sculptor from Haines Junction.*



Frances Oles, "Twilight Wolf," Etching, Courtesy Ward Collection  
Photo: Yukon Government

rather fortuitously about the archeological history of the area and about its spiritual significance to Native people. I considered myself to be a visiting guest of these original people and that I was privileged to be in their territory for a while. Living near the Don River I imagined a time when several Native communities travelled the region by canoe and the initial period of settlement in what was to become Upper Canada. I was struck by the magnificence of the river in its early time and prayed for its recovery now. It wasn't difficult for me to imagine the land and water this way because the earth is still alive, as are the spirits of the past.

My father has told me about the ways in which families on the trapline would share an area of land in a mutually beneficial and respectful manner. Families recognized that each had responsibilities in relation to the geographical area because of the use and harvesting of such resources. Al-