

The Idea of the Journey in Women's Spiritual Writing

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Abstract

Currently there is a re-storying of self in the pilgrimage writing, eco-spiritual writing, travel writing and spiritual memoir of a number of contemporary female authors including Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980); Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985); Jean Shinoda Bolen's *Crossing to Avalon* (1994); Jane Goodall's *Reason For Hope* (1999); Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* (2012) and Tenzin Palmo's astonishing spiritual story in *Cave in the Snow* (Mackenzie, 1998). In these remarkable works the authors often travel alone to untouched landscapes of ecological and spiritual "otherness" and there discover more authentic understandings of self/Self, free of disguise. Their journeys frequently involve walking along the boundary lines of the rational and non-rational, the known and unknown, as well as the paradoxical human-divine aspects of Self/self. In this sort of reworking of identity, new frontiers of gender, religion and theology are navigated, questioned and explored. This essay investigates the way in which the journey is fashioned in these writings, interposing insights from feminist theorists and methodologies for understanding women's sacred journeys, in order to appreciate the ways in which women experience self and other, and spiritual meaning. Their journeys are perhaps examples of what Irigaray is referring to when she declares: "We are not yet women born" (1986: 7).

Introduction

The idea of the journey is integral to spiritual writing. While the journey in this genre may involve travel writing, pilgrimage writing, or journey-episodes through everyday and ordinary life, when one undertakes a spiritual sojourn, there is the notion of an inner journey that operates simultaneously. In spiritual writing this internal spiritual journeying functions whether the author is imprisoned, as in Aung San Sui Ki's *The Voice of Hope* (1997) and *Freedom from Fear* (1991); in a monastic system such as Tibetan Buddhist Tenzin Palmo in *Cave in the Snow* (1998); on a pilgrimage like Jean Shinoda Bolen's *Crossing to Avalon* (1994); travelling across the desert as in Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980); or immersed in everyday and ordinary secular life, such as in the spiritual journeys of two ex-nuns: Karen Armstrong's *Spiral Staircase* (2005) and Monica Baldwin's *I leap Over the Wall* (1957). O'Reilly (2002) describes these internal voyages of discovery describes as "something of a non-linear map of consciousness" (xvii-xviii). For the spiritual memoirist, the writing process is also part of the journey as the pilgrim-narrator maps multi-layered, multi-dimensional, transcendental inroads to Self, Enlightenment, God/Goddess with language.

This essay will explore the way the journey is fashioned in a number of texts including the travel and pilgrimage writing of Patricia Hampl's *Virgin Time* (1992), Jean Shinoda Bolen's *Crossing to Avalon* (1994) and Sue Monk-Kidd's *Travelling with Pomegranates* (2009). It will also examine the profound connections to the natural world in the eco-spiritual writing of Jane Goodall's *Reason For Hope* (1999); Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980); Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985) and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* (2012). In addition, Tenzin Palmo's astonishing spiritual story in

Cave in the Snow (Mackenzie 1998) will be investigated. These accounts of spiritual journeys will be interposed with insights from feminist theorists and methodologies for understanding women's sacred journeys, in order to appreciate the ways in which women experience self and other through spiritual meaning.

Spiritual Themes in Travel Writing

Travel is a way of shifting one's context to that of "the other." To stand in the perspective of "otherness" requires fluid boundaries and flexibility of feeling and thought. The too self-assured traveller or tourist can "misinterpret foreign landscapes and cultural topographies," such as found in the "orientalism" and "cultural smugness" of a whole range of colonial literature (Porter 1991: 288). Contemporarily, however, as poet and critic Susan Bassnet (2006) discerns, we are witnessing the demise of a world-view that separates self and other. Bassnet states that masses are in movement around the world with the result that "theories of race and cultural background, once used as a means of dividing peoples are starting to dissolve" (236). This view is noted by a number of theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000). In his "liquid modernity theory," Bauman depicts a cultural condition where innovation becomes an essential part of life, work and thought. He explains how the rigid frameworks of convention are being disempowered in favour of a more liquid, fluid and flowing relationship to life. He describes this as "the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement" (2000: 14).

The exploration of new paradigms and other ways of understanding self are indeed evident in contemporary women's spiritual writing such as Patricia Hampl's *Virgin*

Time (1992), Jean Shinoda Bolen's *Crossings to Avalon* (1994) and Sue Monk Kidd's *Travelling with Pomegranates* (2009). These authors look at new cultural, theological and spiritual perspectives through travel. Fundamental to their works is the positioning of the author in landscapes of significant spiritual "otherness." This entails not only a geographical relocation but a theological one as well, which includes the spiritual significance of place as well as recurring allusions to historical holy persons and intertextual religious references.

Sometimes, however, while the author may relocate to a place that is "other" and may intend to move into new and more authentic spiritual understandings of self, this sort of venture does not always return immediate answers, or the kinds of encounters one was expecting. In *Virgin Time* (1992), for example, Hampl wants to have a living experience of the holy when she travels to the compelling landscape of St Francis and St Clare of Assisi in Italy. She hikes with other pilgrims and tourists across the Umbrian hills, intending to connect with the living spiritual truths embedded in the landscape. Her text is strewn with religious and historical allusions to the miracles and lives of Assisi's saints, as well as intertextual references to the *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich and, among others, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work of Christian mysticism. But for Hampl, "The contemplative life [remains] crazy ... maybe nonexistent ... in this landscape of truffles and flowering fennel" (33). Her time in Assisi is "a series of drifting days in a tourist town" (85), and when another pilgrimage is proposed, Hampl groans: "no more pilgrimages. I just take a billion notes. It's like eating too much" (189). While this ironic tone and cynicism is evidenced throughout much of the text, at the conclusion of *Virgin Time*, the reader is left with an image of a few moments of

spiritual depth that almost seems to counterbalance it. When the travel-worn Hampl returns home and finally does decide to go on yet another retreat at a small Cistercian women's monastery in the simple silence and solitude of "beautiful nowhere" (189), she does access some sort of spiritual depth. She reflects, "Prayer only looks like an act of language, fundamentally it is a position, a placement of oneself. Focus" (217).

Virgin Time (Hampl 1992) is frequently defined as a spiritual memoir. Certainly theological themes are central throughout. But in placing this work, I would tend to agree with Hampl's own view that this text is "more a contemporary *Canterbury Tales*" (Patterson 2008: 27). While it is a yearning for mystical experience that motivates Hampl's journey, except for the Cistercian-monastery vignette at the conclusion of *Virgin Time*, there is little sense of an inner spiritual journey.

This philosophical more objective approach to writing the spiritual is also discernable in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978), frequently defined as a contemporary spiritual classic—one critic describes *The Snow Leopard* as "a powerful spiritual memoir" (Flanagan 2002). Matthiessen walks two hundred and fifty miles with his friend G.S. over remote, high-altitude territory in the Himalayas to the village of Shey (1978: 13), within the intense religious context of the Tibetan Plateau. His writing includes lucid insights into Buddhist philosophy, and simple, though Zen-like descriptions of the "roaring wind, the dark blue sky" and "the glory of sunrise" (75). He also refers to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* throughout. Yet despite these allusions to the spiritual, Matthiessen scarcely touches on the internal territory of self. While Matthiessen's distant philosophical Zen tone may appear reminiscent of the Zen

masters, one may also observe that at the centre of his writing there is an unwritten text of the heart. This remote quality in Matthiessen's text is not interrupted by his wife's recent death to cancer and his extended separation from his eight-year-old son. It is only disrupted at the conclusion of this work when the Sherpa Tukten—"that disreputable little catlike man" (47) that most others were afraid of—incomprehensibly thrusts Matthiessen a life-saving stave only minutes before he is attacked by a horrifying mastiff. This encounter unsettles the even tone of Matthiessen's writing and prompts him to search for understandings about this experience within the non-rational, supra-rational, spiritual aspects of being.

One could argue that texts such as Hampl's and Mathiessen's are better located in a strand of pilgrimage or travel writing. They barely navigate the subtle, subconscious internal realms within self. O'Reilly et al (2002) claims that the ecology and topography of the inner journey and the reality of this inner world are no less real than any other place we encounter out there in the world-at-large. He explains, "The tissue of what we call consciousness is composed of layers of relationships with many aspects of the world, ourselves and others" (xvii - xviii). It was these vast inner realms of self/Self that medieval mystics such as St Hildegard of Bingen and St Teresa of Avilla explored. This internal spiritual journeying process is also central to some contemporary texts such as Tenzin Palmo's journey in *Cave in the Snow* (1998). This subtle internal journeying process implies the potential for complete human metamorphosis:

The transformation does not take place in the head, it takes place in the heart.

When the heart changes, then naturally the thinking [that] emanates from the heart will change too. But it's not merely changing the individual's intellectual patterns

you have to go much deeper... you have to change at a very deep level (Palmo 2006: 16).

Frameworks for the Spiritual Journey

Numerous theories and methodologies attempt to explain this journey to the spiritual heart of Self/God. In Joseph Campbell's model of the "hero's journey," he controversially claims there is a constantly recurring three-stage motif for this journey. He terms this "the hero's journey," which he says may be discerned in all the world's great mythologies and legends, including the stories of the Buddha, Moses and Christ. In Campbell's model, the mythological hero first receives "a call" and passes over a threshold to enter something like Dante's dark wood midway on the journey of life. The hero must then travel through many trials, before undergoing a supreme ordeal, and receiving some sort of apotheosis. In the final stage, the hero returns to the world to restore life in some way (2008: 1-16).

However, a number of feminist theorists reject Campbell's model. Charlene Spretnak (1982) says that, unlike men, women do not have the luxury of undertaking extended spiritual journeys such as these because, as mothers and caretakers fully immersed in the business of everyday and ordinary life, they don't have time (396). American academics, Ruth Ray and Susan McFadden (2001) also reject Campbell's model. They also believe its stages represent a distinctly gendered view of development, and add that this model is possibly classed and raced as well (210). Spretnak (1982) describes a feminine approach to spirituality as being circular (396)ⁱ where one returns again and again to the same themes and challenges but with an expanded understanding and

relationship to them. This steady, spiralling form of spiritual progressⁱⁱ is also central to an understanding of Karen Armstrong's spiritual journey in *The Spiral Staircase* (2005).

Ray and McFadden (2001) also propose an alternative, more natural, flowing relational model for the spiritual journey based on the concept of growth through connection and relationship (210). They use the metaphors of "the web" and "the quilt" to foreground the notion of the everyday and ordinary "relational webs" that are integral to the process of spiritual development for women. This model assesses spiritual development in terms of how one's "relationship towards others grows and changes, in terms of understanding, connection and empathy" (203). The notion of becoming more aware of what a caring, ethical relationship entails is something McPhillips (2003) asserts postmodernity is concerned with.ⁱⁱⁱ She says, "Postmodernity is concerned with describing a new ethics centred largely on right relations between Self and Other" (4). This highlighting of the virtues and care of the other is analogous to the transformational path of spiritual progress documented by female medieval mystics with their emphasis on the virtues, particularly charity and humility.

Andrew Harvey explores transformation and an exploration of an inner reality in the final section of *A Journey in Ladakh* (1983). Like Matthiessen, Harvey also traverses the high, holy ground of Tibet in the 1970s. Yet while Harvey begins by describing this place as "a pass into another awareness of reality" (14), it is only in the final section of the book that he goes "beyond his clever Oxford questioning mind" (213) and moves into this perspective of "other." This transformation is achieved when Harvey immerses himself in the enthralling, mystical reality of the Rinpoche. Harvey says, "You... merge

with him, you melt into him.... You become your highest self, which is He” (235). The Rinpoche, akin to Palmo’s explanation of a heart-based transformation (2006:16), describes the extraordinary state of the union of head of heart:

This is not merely a perfection of mind ... of the ruthless, nihilistic intellect. That perfection must be there, must be attained. But not at the expense of the heart, a perfection of love ... a unity of all opposites and paradoxes, that is a mystery of the deepest and most abiding joy... the unity of Mind and Spirit, of Wisdom and Compassion” (Harvey 1983: 164-165).

Women’s Eco-Spiritual Travel Writing

Much present-day women’s eco-spiritual, travel writing explores an inner sense of this spiritual “mystery” through a powerful-feeling connection to the earth and the natural world, as well as travel. One may discern, these stories include moments of deep “abiding joy” as well as also being heroic. Susan Bassnett (2006) claims that currently there is a “re-storying of self in women’s travel writing” (226–239). She observes that travel is only a relatively recent phenomenon for women,^{iv} and comments on the strong, original voices of late-twentieth-century female travel-writers. Bassnett remarks that in current trends, where there is an adjustment of perspectives to a multi-focal worldview, the role of women is immense (237). Resolute, original female voices such as Bassnett refers to may be discerned in the travel writing of anthropologist Jane Goodall’s *Reason For Hope* (1999); Australian travel writer Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks* (1980); American travel writer Gretel Ehrlich’s collection of twelve essays in *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985), and Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild: From Lost to Found Along the Hill Crest Trail* (2012). These women are pioneers and their unique works are examples of an emerging

gendered form of spiritual, environmental literature, where female authors are re-storying their understanding of self/Self^v and their relationship to the world.

Each of these women immerses themselves in immense landscapes of a natural yet profound otherness. Here, alone, they discover, navigate and map vast new territories of self/Self within. Fulfilling a childhood dream, Goodall (1999) travels to the pristine forests of Gombe to research chimpanzees and experiences a natural, yet mystical connection with this unbounded terrain. In *Solace of Open Spaces* (1985) Gretel Ehrlich journeys to Wyoming in the remote reaches of the West and spends a number of years in this place “of torrential beauty” (53). The earth is “arid,” but ironically it is also “engorged with detail, every movement on it chillingly sharp” (7). Not only does the “absolute indifference” (4) of this landscape “steady” (4) Ehrlich, but at times “she feels numb in all this vividness” (51). In *Tracks* (1980), the twenty-seven-year-old Robyn Davidson finds a similar authenticity of self when she spends nine months travelling 2,700 kilometres with four camels and Diggity, her dog. She finds “the immensity of where she has been” is both nurturing, as she “crouche[s] on the rocks, weeping, feeling their substance with [her] hands” (153), as well as transformative. Cheryl Strayed (2012) undertakes a similar life-changing odyssey when she plunges into the Mojave Desert for three months, and hikes 1,100 miles alone along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), carrying only basic supplies and Adrienne Rich’s *The Dream of A Common Language*.

Each of these writers undergoes a remarkable rebirthing and re-storying of self in these places. Davidson explains: “I liked myself this way. It was such a relief to be free of

disguises and prettiness.... above all, that horrible, false, debilitating attractiveness that women hide behind” (1980: 196). This same sort of rewriting of self is evident in Ehrlich’s journey in Wyoming, where communication is pared back “to the skin and bones of a thought” (1985: 6). Here, Ehrlich also discovers a peeled back, unpretentious understanding of her own self within. Strayed (2012) finds a similar sort of realism while hiking the PCT. This epic journey, initiated by her mother’s death to cancer and her own self-destructive course after this (57), is also one of conversion. Indeed Strayed’s book is subtitled thus: “A Journey from Lost to Found.” Despite her “monster” pack rubbing her skin raw (67), and the relentless blisters from her hiking boots, as she walks this trail Strayed witnesses her “old life unspooling behind her” and a fresh new life being revealed (95).

The great silence and torrential beauty of these wild places are of the greatest import. The “silence is tremendous,” says Strayed (2012: 83). Cradled in the immaculate wilderness, these women are able to heal, renew, transform and thrive. Goodall writes how one day the world of the forests of Gombe seems “hung with diamonds, sparkling on every leaf, every blade of grass,” and she “crouch[es] low to avoid destroying a jewelled spider’s web that stretched, exquisite and fragile, across the trail” (1999: 173). One sunrise, Davidson finds that some moments are like “pivots around which [her] existence turns.” Another time, “camping in a dustbowl” in the desert “under a few straggly trees,” Davidson, having suddenly thrown her clothes off to join the camels rolling in the dirt, has “the most honest hour of unselfconscious fun” she has ever had. This, she writes, does more for her “aesthetic senses than the Taj Mahal” (1980: 196). Likewise, in the landscape of Wyoming Ehrlich finds “the air between people is

charged... [and] nights become hallucinatory dreams, prescient” (1985: 7). In the wilderness, Strayed feels “more alive than ever;” the wilderness has “a clarity” that also includes her (2012: 143); and it seems “to contain everything” (145).

Strangely, these untouched, natural landscapes are ironically both fantastical as well as utterly familiar. Strayed writes how one sunset, “the light [is] made indistinct, melting into a thousand shades of yellow, pink, orange and purple over waves of green land” (2012: 233), yet she also tells of the strange intimacy of the trail: “the way the pinon pines and monkey flowers... the shallow streams... felt familiar and known though I’d never passed them before” (119). Being in the spotless grandeur of these wilderness places allows the authors to begin anew. For Ehrlich, Wyoming is “a clean slate” (1985: 4); and for Strayed, being “amidst the undesecrated beauty of the wilderness” allows her to feel undesecrated as well (2012: 142).

Instrumental to the conversion process is that each of these women is by themselves. This aloneness is pivotal in facilitating a type of metamorphic cocooning process. Marion Woodman (1985) emphasises the importance of aloneness, particularly in today’s world. She claims, “Very little in our extroverted society supports introverted withdrawal, but it is essential if we are to find ourselves” (21). Strayed explains, “Alone had always felt like an actual place to me, as if it weren’t a state of being, but rather a room where I could retreat to be who I really was” (2012: 119).

Solitary, in her forest chrysalis, Goodall ponders moral and spiritual questions, and her concern for the environment. She discovers “many windows through which we can look

at the world around us” (1999: 174), such as those the “mystics and holy men [sic]” gazed through, who saw “not with their minds only, but with their hearts and souls too” (175). Similarly Davidson (1980), in her austere shelter of the mythical desert between Central Australia and the Indian Ocean is transformed and re-stories herself. Ehrlich, (1985), mostly unaccompanied, is cradled in the vivid wilderness of Wyoming, while Strayed (2012), alone on the vast PCT trail feels “fierce and humble and gathered up inside” (234). The transformational, healing journeys of these solitary women in their majestic wildernesses involve not just difficult external journeys, but also deepening journeys that require rigorous re-writings of self/Self on a conscious, sub-conscious and soul level.

Their rebirthing journeys are conceivably characteristic of the journeys Sylvia Brinton Perera (1981), and others, imply in their assertions that the primal depths of the woman’s story are still to be written. Perera believes the myth of “The Descent of Inanna,” the Sumerian queen of heaven and earth, is important for modern women because it recounts a connection to the Goddess in her primal reality (9). She says this initiation is essential for modern women in the Western world because so much of the power and passion of the feminine has been dormant in the underworld—in exile for five thousand years (8). Gimbutas (1991) likewise highlights the importance of reclaiming the power of the original feminine.^{vi} Irigaray (1986) declares, “We are not yet women born” (7).^{vii} We need a God ... our subject, our noun, our verb, our predicate” (11).

The Mother

The idea of a feminine face of the Divine is something many theorists, theologians and writers have investigated. Reader (1993) says the “otherness” of the earth nurtures like a mother, a Divine Mother Earth Reader, and he comments on the tremendous healing potential for humanity implied by this (224). Depictions of a nurturing, earth-based sacred feminine dimension to nature have been evidenced over millennia. Gimbutas’ (1991) extensive research into a pictorial script for the Old European Great Goddess is a celebration of a blossoming earth-based reality of the Divine, as are Jantzen’s (1999) new imaginaries for a feminine face of the Divine. Jantzen’s discourse particularly stresses a feminist symbolic of “natality and flourishing” (2), a notion she claims has considerable biblical basis in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (157). Similarly, twelfth-century St Hildegard of Bingen, who had “a connection to the sacred in all things, especially Nature,” writes about this vivid-living quality of divine nature through her exploration of something she terms *viriditas*: a verdant green quality that is inherent in plants and also in the human soul (Clendenen 2010: 51).

Marion Woodman (1985) also examines this innate abundance of pristine nature. She cites “the Virgin Archetype”^{viii} as basic to an understanding of this. The “Virgin archetype,” she says, using the analogy of a virgin wilderness landscape to explain it, is that aspect of the feminine, in man and woman, that is rooted in the instincts, with a loving relationship to the Great Earth Mother. The ancient iconography of the Black Madonna is also a powerful symbol of this earth-based feminine face of the divine. According to Woodman, the Virgin Archetype holds the possibility for transformation

and rebirth because it has the courage to *Be* and the flexibility to always be in a state of *Becoming*. Woodman remarks that men and women who relate to this archetype do not make mothering synonymous with femininity (78). Woodman relates how the Virgin of Montserrat in France exemplifies the intersection of sexuality and spirituality and especially presides over marriage, sex, pregnancy and childbirth. She also explains how the Medieval Benedictine monks of Montserrat saw “their craggy mountain, lush with flowers, as an image of the Virgin herself” (121).

This reverence for, and encounter of, an inherent nurturing, earth-divine quality in the pristine wilderness is evident in the eco-spiritual travel writing examined. This immanence of the spiritual typically manifests in these texts as a highly sacred-feeling^{ix} association with the landscape. Ehrlich (1985) explicitly uses religious metaphors to convey this. For Ehrlich, the earth is “sacramental, to be read as text” (71), and “we are supplicants, waiting all spring for the water to come down” (75). Ehrlich’s spiritual orientation is multifocal and includes Navajo mythology as well, where the “rain is the sun’s sperm coming down” (83); an indigenous perspective also inspires her to write, “Christians see artificial divisions between sacred and profane, unlike the native Americans who become diviners, visionaries, healers” (105); but when Ehrlich describes the gifts of this sacred landscape, it is in terms of the Eucharist: “the sky is a wafer. Placed on my tongue it is wholeness ... placed under my tongue ... enough to stretch myself over the winter brilliances to come” (130). In *Tracks*, Davidson similarly conveys an immense mythical presence of the land. The earth is a place from which we receive celestial sustenance and divine wisdom, something Davidson highlights through her central motif of nomadism. “No amount of anthropological detail can begin to

convey Aboriginal *feeling* for the land,” she says. This bond is “their law, their ethics, their reason for existence” (1980: 167). In an interview just before the release of the film, *Tracks*, Davidson states: “Nomads are the most grounded people in the world;” she describes this as “an existential at-homeness in the landscape that all nomads have.” (Throsby 2014).

Metaphors

Metaphors function as important mechanisms of understanding in spiritual writing. Metaphors not only assist an author in integrating what are frequently the paradoxical human-divine truths of a spiritual quest, but they also function as a tool for healing, transformation and renewal. Woodman and Dickson (1996) discuss metaphors at length, particularly the curative, transfigurative potential of the use of metaphor. Metaphor means “a crossing over,” she says. Woodman and Dickson advise that we need to ingest our metaphors with as much respect as we ingest food, adding that both act as transformers (70). They claim that in assimilating the metaphor we bring about a total response—emotional, imaginative and intellectual—and that it is in taking an imaginative leap that we embody the metaphor (192).

The eco-spiritual travel writing texts surveyed frequently make use of metaphor and the imagination. These authors’ profound, healing connections to the landscape provide continual examples of this. Metaphors are particularly apparent in Strayed’s (2012) writing. When Strayed re-names herself following her divorce, she finds the layered definitions of her new name, “Strayed,” are full of metaphoric meaning: she “*had* strayed,” she “*was* a stray” and from those wild places her straying had brought her, she

knew things she couldn't have known before" (96-97). Possibly one of the most compelling examples of the imaginative healing use of metaphor, however, is towards the end of her trek, when Strayed reaches the deep blue "stillness and silence" of Crater Lake. In contemplating the inordinate beauty of this place, formerly "a wasteland of lava and pumice and ash" (273), Strayed also understands core principles of truth and transformation in relation to her own life. It is here that Strayed feels she's "arrived" (273). Knowing this immaculate lake had once been a giant volcanic hole where, as she says, the mountain's "heart" (273) had been removed, Strayed understands how it is also possible for her to fully recover, transform and truly thrive.

These courageous, resourceful, revolutionary women all travel alone through untamed lands of overwhelming natural beauty. Their relationship with the landscape is healing, sensual, sustaining, inspirational and divine. In the eco-spiritual travel writing reviewed, landscape metaphors function as powerful tools for these women to access healing and deeper, more authentic understandings of self/Self. Their idea of the holy is not remote and inexpressible, but immanent and accessed easily, naturally, through an attunement to a living, nurturing, Divine Virgin Earth.

Pilgrimage Writing

Spiritual journeys are also explored in the genre of pilgrimage writing. Pilgrimage combines travel and the spiritual quest to specifically explore a divine form of "the other" both without and within. "We follow our spiritual compass, and get back in touch with our earth, our roots, ourselves" (Cousineau 2000: xv). This form of journeying occurs in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. All have developed extensive

pilgrimage cultures. There are ancient pilgrim trails to Rome, Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela and Mecca, among others. Some of these much-travelled pilgrim paths are explicitly symbolic of the pilgrim's journey to enlightenment, such as the Hajj—a Muslim's pilgrimage to Mecca; or the one-thousand-four-hundred-kilometre trail including eighty-eight temples on the Japanese isle of Shikoku—a Buddhist pilgrimage trail representing the pilgrim's journey to enlightenment. Currently, "Pilgrimage is one of the most common phenomena found in religious culture today, ranging from sites that transcend any national or cultural boundaries, to regional and localised sites that may conversely affirm cultural belongings" (Reader 1993: 3). As the year 2000 approached, more people were embarking on pilgrimages than at any time since the Middle Ages (Cousineau 2000: xvii).

The historical importance of the pilgrim's journey^x is also confirmed in culturally diverse theological, literary and mythological texts. Examples include Italian, Dante's *Divine Comedy*; Spanish, St Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*; English, Bunyan's allegorical representation of the spiritual journey to enlightenment in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678); and the Russian classic, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, about an anonymous pilgrim who seeks to reach enlightenment through constant prayer.

Central to an appreciation of many present-day pilgrimages is the notion of the subjective sovereignty^{xi} of the spiritual seeker. The term subjective sovereignty implies not just individual freedom and self-sufficiency but also indicates that the potential to reach the Divine "Other," or Enlightenment, is within self/Self. This notion of personal spiritual authority enables present-day pilgrims to explore long-established religious

sites and draw inspiration from the lives of the saints^{xii} in individually relevant and unique ways. Liliane Voye (2002) remarks on this imaginative exploration of traditional spiritual sites in commenting on the popularity of Catholic pilgrimage destinations such as Santiago de Compostela, Chartres, Lourdes and Medjugorje. She says that these traditional pilgrimage sites now also come within the province of “popular” religion (115). Voye emphasises the importance of this for Catholicism, even though the secularisation of these sites decreases the power of the church to control and impose behaviour (133). Swatos and Tomasi (2002) likewise explain how “new spirituality values personal experience as a key to religious meaningfulness.” They relate that a visit to a punitively holy site is an experiential way of touching the numinous (208).

Many contemporary pilgrimage narratives are examining a sense of the numinous in this way. There is a palpable sense of a non-rational, spiritual reality, which appears to be, ostensibly, accessible to all. For instance, when Jean Shinoda Bolen visits the ancient pilgrimage destination of the holy well of Chartres in *Crossing to Avalon* (1994), she writes about how she “receives a gift of the earth, where something gives like a Mother” (29). Bolen attributes these gifts of the earth to the telluric (magnetic or cosmic) currents that snake through the ground, represented as serpents. She says these offerings of the earth are received “kinaesthetically,” where her body is like “a tuning fork, or a dowsing rod” (28). Her description is akin to Turner and Turner’s (1978) explanation of spiritual experience where “The body acts as a contact point for communication with the “supernatural other” through visions, apparitions and miracles (146–156). Hodge also describes an analogous type of access to this magic in his essay, “The Goddess Tour” (2006), where Hodge visits various Mediterranean sacred sites

connected with the ancient goddess culture. He experiences the Goddess is still a living force in the caves and murals from before 10,000 BCE in the French village of Magdalene (35). Hodge accounts for this supra-natural experience by describing it as a mind and body attunement, whereby knowledge, emotion and spirituality meet and interact: “One repeats ancient actions in ancient places in the modern world,” he says (30–31).

Another significant feature of these present-day pilgrimages is an apparent elasticity of time. Bolen (1994) describes a type of warping of time, terming this phenomenon “sacred time and space” (121); she advises “some landscapes affect us like dreams, or poems, or music” (126). Hodge also experiences the plasticity of time when he returns home and finds the Goddess continues to exist in a shrine for the Goddess of Tenerife in their front room, and in images of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the car. He refers to this warping of reality as “the space–time matrix of the Goddess” (30–31). He says, “Modernist time is linear, but postmodern time bends and plays tricks” (133).

Time-space realignments and other disruptions, so typical of the existential uniqueness of these contemporary, transformational pilgrim journeys, result in these authors experiencing a more flowing instinctive connection with life. Their experimental journeys are examples of Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000) “liquid modernity theory.” These journeys are also examples of the sorts of new approaches to spirituality Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips (2006) investigate. They observe that because traditional religions, especially in the West, have lost their spiritual efficacy, contemporary seekers are looking for “re-enchantment.” Hume and McPhillips explain this in terms of

bringing back the imagination and the possibility of magic into everyday life (xv). They advise that perimeters are fluid and flexible and that postmodern religion encourages a disintegration of old dichotomies such as fact and fiction, real and imaginary (xvii).

A number of popular pilgrimage narratives explore these fluid-experimental boundaries, including Sue Monk-Kidd's *Travelling with Pomegranates* (2009) and Elizabeth Gilbert's bestseller, *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007). Monk-Kidd, accompanied by her daughter, travels to various Mediterranean sacred destinations, including Eleusis in Greece (sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone), and Ephesus in Turkey where the Virgin Mary was said to have lived out her days. Being in these ancient places of power, and pondering their mythologies and sacred realities, Monk-Kidd experiences a shift and intuitive deepening of understanding, as well as moments of illumination. This prompts her to consider deeper authenticities of self, especially of a feminine divine Self, as well as her relationship with her daughter. Gilbert also navigates new boundaries of understanding when she travels to Italy, to India to the ashram of her guru, and to the paradisiacal world of Bali. She continually questions her place as a woman within the context of a traditional Western paradigm. Through her travels and enquiry, Gilbert rewrites her spiritual, social, intellectual and cultural context in the world and comes up with her own unique mix.

Central to the pilgrimage writing surveyed is the importance of the power place. For example, in Glastonbury, an ancient pilgrimage destination, Bolen (1994) finds, "the ordinary world and the otherworld seemingly overlap" (126). Correspondingly, Hodge (2006) claims that a series of Mediterranean sites built around the idea of Atlantis are

representative of the place of the axis mundi—the meeting of heaven and earth. This power of place is also experienced as an experience of Immanence imbued in the pristine Virgin Earth. Bolen believes that communing with Nature is a sacred dialogue, upon which our spiritual development as a species depends (1994: 31); she describes these earth attunements as a heartfelt experience (1994: 240). Marion Bowman also looks at the present “new awakening to the Earth” (1993: 38), especially in Glastonbury. She notes the manifold meanings and diverse nuances attached to this place by different groups, and describes it as a “multivalent pilgrimage site for a variety of spiritual seekers” (2009: 161).

The post-rational, earth–divine, existential journeys of these contemporary pilgrims are full of enquiry, contradictions, transformation and change. The idea of rebirth and return are central. “Rebirth to a new life involves healing the wounds of bereavement, loss and disruption” (Reader 1993: 222). Rebirth suggests a significant shift at a fundamental level in one’s soul and psyche. In this process, an experience of the Divine, the Absolute is often pivotal. In accessing the liminal, “the ideal is felt to be real... [and] the tainted social persona may be cleansed and renewed” (Turner and Turner 1978: 30). However, a rebirth encounter could conceivably range from a healing shift into deeper layers of understanding self/Self to a full rebirthing experience of mystical Enlightenment.

Many of the pilgrimage texts surveyed are investigating new relationships with the Divine Other. They explore a Self, God/Goddess, Enlightenment that is not only out there in the ancient architecture, sacred sites, holy books and religious leaders, but also

an innate authority to access Source from within. In their embodied experiences of the spiritual, it seems there is a natural overlapping of self/Self, human/divine, in a liminal, third space. In indigenous traditions the transitional space of overlap between complementary opposites is important. Yunkaporta (cited in Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina 2010) relates how when opposites meet in nature “a dynamic synergy occurs,” such as “where high ground meets low ground, where sea meets land.” He claims this is not a compromise: that all through nature when opposites mix “something new that is better than either is created” (206).^{xiii} One may also discern in the embodied human-divine overlap, there is this same potential for a dynamic synergy, a new wisdom holding the contradictory vibrant truths of both head and heart and perhaps opening other-dimensional ways of being, a reality that is possibly better than either.

Vocational Spiritual Journeys

The biography of Dianne Perry recounted in *Cave in the Snow* (1998) tells of the spiritual journey of this young English woman, aged twenty, when she travels alone to India in 1964 to become a Tibetan Buddhist nun and is eventually re-named Jetsumna Tenzin Palmo. While her story is a type of existential sojourn and a pilgrimage, more specifically, her remarkable spiritual journey is an ardent, life-long devotion and vocation. Her strict regimen of prayer, meditation and spiritual austerity are supported and guided by her teacher, Khamtrul Rinpoche, whose particular advice pertains to the Kargyupa school of thought, one of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Palmo is led to the Kargyupa path synchronistically and instinctively before leaving for India. Although she initially studies in the monastery, it is later, within the context of the Togdenma tradition,^{xiv} that Palmo isolates herself for twelve years in a cave in the snow:

“My Lama not only sent me to Lahoul... [a remote Himalayan area], but always said to me, ‘for you, it is better to be alone’” (Palmo 2006: 30).

For Palmo, the spiritual intensity of being in the cave for twelve years is not only exactly what she wants, but this extended time alone focusing on the practices also enables Palmo to confront the existing Buddhist idea that you cannot reach enlightenment in the body of a woman. She explains that despite the fact that some Buddhist mythologies pay homage to the notion of women’s Enlightenment, and legends of Dakinis and a multitude of female Buddhas such as *Tara* exist (Mackenzie 1998:125), there is no proof that these women actually lived (Mackenzie 1998: 127). Palmo enjoys her austere, high-altitude seclusion and says even though people thought she stayed in the cave to rival Milarepa, it was nothing like that (Palmo 2006: 31).

After emerging from her isolation 13,200 feet up in the Himalayan snow, Palmo returns to the West for a time, and appropriates the powerful spiritual wisdom of her Tibetan Buddhist journey to re-story her connection to Christianity in Assisi. Here, she discovers a revitalised understanding of Christian saints such as St Francis and St Clare of Assisi, and St Teresa of Avila. Afterwards, however, even though continuing to travel globally giving dharma talks, Palmo returns to Himachal Pradesh region of Northern India to start-up a Tibetan Nunnery, one that, among other things, facilitates the Togdenma training for its nuns.

The heroic is indisputably apparent in Palmo’s vocational spiritual journey. Indeed the subtitle of her story suggests a heroic mission: “A Western Woman’s Quest for

Enlightenment.” Her pursuit involves determination, resoluteness, courage, endurance, as well as inordinate dedication and inner strength. Palmo (2011) says:

You might ask yourself, is it worth the time and effort to swim upstream when everybody else is going down with the current?” But it is those who can swim upstream who reach the source. (57)

Palmo’s analogy of swimming upstream to source clearly suggests the endlessly long and difficult process of the spiritual journey. This notion about spiritual journeys is widespread and explained through many theoretical and theological frameworks. The *Katha Upanishad* alludes to the complex struggle and dedication required, explaining “the path [to Self] is narrow as the edge of a razor” (61). St Teresa of Avila (1961) also describes the inordinate challenges and trials of this path in her spiritual classic, *Interior Castle*. And Carl Gustav Jung (1999) explains it thus:

Unfortunately the spiritual journey is never straightforward. It is made up of fateful detours and wrong turnings. The right way to wholeness is via longissima, [the longest way] not straight but snakelike, a path that unites the opposites in the manner of the guiding caduceus, a path whose labyrinthine twists and turns are not lacking in terror (184).

The endurance and heroism of Palmo’s spiritual journey is indisputable, but what is also remarkable is the highly detailed training in the virtues and subtle spiritual concepts that counterbalances this, such as the complex, lengthy visualisation practices Palmo daily undertakes. Particularly compassion is central. In fact, in dedicating her life to the Kargyupa path of Buddhism with its central image of Chenrezig—the Buddha of compassion—this idea is fundamental.^{xv}

Conclusion

These epic journeys in contemporary women's eco-spiritual travel writing, pilgrimage and spiritual writing show the immense changes, intense questioning and remarkable transformations that are currently taking place worldwide. Each of these women variously re-stories their connections to self/Self and to life. Metaphors, magic and mysticism frequently play a pivotal role. The criticality of the power of place is also fundamental. Ancient sacred sites and the Virgin Earth function as sanctuaries and provide access to healing, timeless wisdom, divine inspiration and renewal.

In this rewriting of self/Self there is recurrently a fierce sense of the author needing to be alone, as if there is an intrinsic knowing that each has, in one or another, outgrown their former state. The chrysalis-type space is not vapid and empty, but full of pregnant potential. While enwrapped and cocooned in primordial Virgin Nature, or the earth's mystical telluric currents, or sacred time in an ancient place, or a high-altitude cave immersed in Buddhist practice, these authors heal, revitalise and change. A "crossing over" occurs. Each, variously leaves behind the social-cultural-familial-spiritual context of an old life, metamorphoses and in some way emerges anew.

The revolutionary, transformational spiritual journeys of these women involve a deepening of authenticity, empathy and spiritual connection. Yet, at the same time, recurring motifs of independence and heroism are indisputably apparent. Alone, these courageous women in the wilderness are reclaiming lost and forgotten realms of self/Self and through their journeys fashioning new imaginaries for a feminine face of

the Divine. As we grow inter-culturally and face the complicated international twenty-first century environmental and social problems, these new authentic, fundamental, feminine frontiers of understanding imply relevance for both men and women. In this complex contemporary global world, truly genuine, innovative, ethical, nurturing imaginaries for Embodied-Divine ways of being deeply human are very much needed.

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Endnotes

ⁱ This view is also explored at length by a number of men: Eminent American literary critic M.H. Abrams (1973) controversially claims “autobiography and the circuitous journey are the central forms of Romantic and modern literature from Blake to D. H. Lawrence” (ix). Abrams terms the journeys of pilgrims and prodigals, such as the Prodigal Son, the “great circle” (141). Leigh (2000) also notes this circular trajectory of the spiritual journey, which he argues is often impelled by a pivotal childhood experience such as Black Elk’s entire vision, which flows from a childhood vision for which he struggles in vain throughout his life (2000: 47). T.S. Eliot’s autobiographical poem *Four Quartets* ends in this way as well: “to arrive where [he] started and know the place for the first time” (1971: 59). Jung also describes a spiritual journey towards wholeness as a spiraling circular path, where one is constantly “circumambulating” the Self, in order to become a separate indivisible unity or “whole.” Jung terms this process, “individuation,” a process that does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to oneself. He clarifies, however, that this process is an “opus contra naturam,” meaning, “throughout this journey one must make a conscious effort not to act instinctively” (1973: 395).

ⁱⁱ The prologue of *The Spiral Staircase* (2005) is T.S. Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday*. The poet’s slow and difficult, upwardly spiralling journey of spiritual recovery in this poem becomes for Armstrong a vivid image of her own journey—“a complete and satisfying fit between her own inner and outer worlds” (Armstrong 2005: 142).

ⁱⁱⁱ Other contemporary investigations into right relations between Self and Other and of sainthood include Edith Wyschogrod’s (1990) explorations. She suggests that sainthood involves “radical generosity,” and care of “the Other” in radical ways (xiv). The idea of charity and service is also foregrounded in Derrida’s view of hospitality (2002), which claims “Hospitality—this is culture itself” (361).

^{iv} Bassnett states that even towards the end of the twentieth century, most travel accounts were explicitly gendered, written mainly by men and about men. Bassnet looks at the unusual life stories of Victorian women travellers: *Ladies on the Loose*; *The Blessings of a Good, Thick Skirt*; *Spinsters Abroad* and others. She notes the diversity regarding subject matter and style, but finds one consistent line is the notion these women are somehow exceptional. Other recurrent themes include the importance of the everyday; and the differences between these women’s lives at home and on the road (2006: 226–239).

^v The term “self” refers to a smaller, egoic, mortal, understanding of our human truth, while “Self” implies the Divine/Absolute/God within. According to Jung (1973), “The Self is not only the centre but also the whole circumference” (398).

^{vi} Through extensive research into a pictorial script for the religion of the Old European Great Goddess, 6000–3500 BCE, Gimbutas claims the four-thousand-year matrilineal age was an epoch where life was lived in harmony and peace, and in accord with the creative energies of nature (xv).

^{vii} See also Chapter 1: “Sexual Difference” in Luce Irigaray’s *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984: 5–20).

^{viii} Woodman draws on John Layard’s research of “the Virgin Archetype.” She makes clear that the word virgin is not synonymous with “Chaste” in either Greek or Hebrew origins. The symbolic meaning of the Virgin Mary, like a “virgin forest,” is one in which the powers of nature are untrammelled, untouched, where the world of nature is representative of God (1985: 80).

^{ix} This is in contrast to the feeling in relation to “desire” that Dennis Porter (1991) remarks on in his investigation into twelve male travel writers from the eighteenth century to the modern period in *Haunted Journeys*. Porter finds that, while these accounts are diverse, “all are typically fuelled by desire and embody powerful transgressive impulses.” He refers to Freud’s views about the powerful links between travel and the libido. Porter claims that according to Freud, the libido is a “dynamic but obscure energy within a human subject that insists on satisfactions of a kind the world cannot supply” (1991: 8).

^x In Christian terms, life is represented as a journey.

^{xi} Subjective sovereignty is a term I deployed after reading Margry’s *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World* where Margry points out that during the early 1960s, individuals increasingly withdrew into the private sphere and attached greater importance to their “subjective autonomy” thereby giving rise to new forms of religiosity (153). I wanted to suggest that this personal authority implied far more than just personal autonomy: that everything is contained within self/Self

^{xii} Although Reader comments on the independence of modern seekers, he also remarks, “The eternal living legacies of saints continue to be honoured by contemporary pilgrims” (1993: 18).

^{xiii} Yunkaporta’s idea of the dynamic synergy that occurs when opposites meet in nature inevitably implies the overlap between night and day—twilight and dawn. These transitional times of twilight and dawn are also considered to be powerful in a number of Eastern spiritual traditions, and thought to be a key time to meditate and experience the Absolute, the Self.

^{xiv} The Kargyupa School includes the Togdenma tradition, something that had interested Palmo from the start.

^{xv} Ex-nuns, Monica Baldwin and Karen Armstrong also undertake life-long vocational, spiritual journeys. They travel to the edges of reason to confront new and challenging boundaries of self and to rediscover lost and forgotten aspects of self, as well as a feminine face of the divine. The heroic is definitely apparent in the existential odysseys of these women-religious, but what is also central is the notion of compassion. Armstrong, a spiritual warrior, is now spreading her “Charter for Compassion” throughout the world. She asserts, “Compassion is central to all religions” (2005: 329).