

Part I



The Stories Begin

Called To Healing was born from a basic human need to story personal experience. Humans have this need to story, but all of us do not organize our experiences into written form. Usually a focal event precipitates that organizing. For me, the event was a violent incident that involved one of my children. It was an event that caused me profound grieving, grieving that, in retrospect, was necessary in order for me to see that I had been living most of my life uprooted from my Self. It was an incident that gave me the impetus to find that Self. In March of 1990 Owen was deliberately shot in the eye by a neighbor boy with a BB gun. In the end, my son did not lose his eye; he did not even lose any vision, a circumstance we were not to know for about twenty-four hours as we waited for surgery results. That act and its aftermath, however, marked the beginning of a journey for me that would end with the writing of this book.

The event had begun as I left our house to pick up my older son, Jason, at his friend's house. It was five in the afternoon. Owen (I thought) was outside playing with friends. Jason called for me to come and pick him up. I told him that I would, as soon as I could find Owen so that he could come with me. He was nine years old; I had never left him home alone. As I left the house to find Owen, I met a force outside of my door that was so strong, it pushed me backwards. I looked around. There was no wind. The air, in fact, was still. There was no one there. Nothing was under my feet that

could have tripped me up. Instinctively I thought: "Something has happened to Owen." I ran from the door and down the porch to find him. He wasn't out front or down the street. I rationalized that he had gone next door to play with the two boys who lived there. Again I felt how still the air was, as before a storm. Living in Oswego for all these years has accustomed me to near-constant air movement, calm and noisy, caressing and ferocious because the city is situated on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. I stood on the sidewalk for a moment, then shook my head to dismiss the message: *something has happened to Owen*. I came back to our house, got in the car and drove to pick up Jason. I was gone twelve minutes. When I pulled into our driveway with Jason, my neighbor met me at the car. "Jean, Owen's been hurt. He's at the hospital."

"Was he hit by a car?" I asked.

"No," she replied. My mind started racing, trying to think of other possibilities.

"What happened?" I asked.

"He's been shot," she said.

I collapsed behind the steering wheel like a puppet whose strings the maker had abandoned. "Shot?" I said. "Is he dead?"

"No. He was shot in the eye."

"Who did it?"

"Timmy. John is with him."

In the twelve minutes I was gone, three things had happened: my husband had come home; five neighborhood boys who had witnessed the shooting had walked Owen home from around the corner and down the next street where the incident happened; and Owen and John had gone to the hospital, four blocks from our house.

As I heard the words, *he's been shot*, I knew that not only had Earth's non-verbal "voice" called to me as the force that had pushed me backwards as I walked out the door, but I had ignored that voice, as I had been ignoring similar messages from Earth and Self for decades. It was that insight that also caused me to momen-

tarily collapse behind the wheel of the car that fateful day. Finally, I acknowledged the voice, and this time would choose not to ignore it.

Two more such incidents happened shortly afterwards that called to me to begin my journey to Self. Anytime there is a hospitalization, however brief, that involves a gun, the hospital personnel are required to call the police to file a report. When a police officer took Owen's statement about the incident, one of the questions he was asked was, "Where was your mother?"

"She had gone to get my brother."

"Then your mother was not at home?"

"No. My mother was not at home."

Until that day, I had never left Owen alone for one minute, let alone twelve of them. And now, written in the police report was, *my mother was not at home*. That I had gone to pick up my other son was not entered into the report. I asked, "why not?" The officer replied that that part was not pertinent to the case. Both John and I were with Owen when he gave his statement, but, "Where was your father?" was never asked. That the report only noted the presence or absence of the mother from the home still causes some anger in me: not only had I followed the cultural rules for being "the good mother" for all the minutes I had been a mother, except those critical twelve, the choice to leave Owen and pick up Jason had been a "Sophie's choice." I was forced to choose an "either-or."

It may have taken me decades to finally heed Earth's call to healing, but once I did listen and then chose to continue listening, I acted on what I heard. In May, I "heard" about The Union Institute and its unique approach to doctoral studies, wrote for materials and participated in the entry colloquium in October. My journey/story had begun.

The Union Institute approaches doctoral studies through a learner-centered, non-traditional way. I took advantage of that way and incorporated into my research not only the culture and history

of women back to pre-biblical times but also the culture and history of my uprooted moorings. I came to understand that the Self listens and learns differently from the way the self listens and learns. I came to understand that what the Self hears is Earth's voice, heard through Earth's stories. This was the voice that called me to heal the wounds from decades of inner uprootedness.

As I realized this insight and began to put my story on paper, I knew that I would need to use some words differently to describe what I was learning. Therefore, I have made some distinctions between identical words that carry different meanings. When I refer to *self* with a lower-case *s*, I mean the mundane, ordinary, routinely-patterned, day-to-day self that operates as part of society. When I use *Self* with an upper-case *S*, I mean the core that is each unique individual. When I use *earth* with a lower-case *e*, I refer to the dirt that is the ground on which we walk. When I use *Earth* with an upper-case *E*, I mean the planet that, in our vast universe, is our home.

Here is my story of how I wrestled with taking a path in life that I had no intention of ever taking, never knew that it was possible to take, but once I saw that it was there to take, knew that if I did not, the wound created by that act on my son would never heal in me. I had a strong enough will to know that I did not want to go through the rest of my life with the sense of the uprooted and fragmented self that began to dominate my life. So even at the points in my journey where quitting the search would have been both easy and socially acceptable, I chose to push through the fear that can accompany one into the unknown.

In my search/journey to connect self to Self, I read and listened to stories from women (and a few men) who have made similar journeys and came through those journeys having experienced new discoveries. For me, I knew that the path to wholeness would be found in stories, because stories in and of themselves hold healing properties; it is one of their attributes.

It is in this personal appreciation for story, then, that I turned to the work that became the healing experience for me. Through this journey and the stories I heard and read, I have another way of evaluating and living life. I have not made radical changes in the external manifestations of who I am. Inwardly, however, self is rooting to Self and I, like the seed that sends roots down into the soil while simultaneously sending shoots up toward the sun, I am growing wholly. *That* is the result of the choice I made in March of 1990 when Earth called me, as it called me many times in the past but I chose not to hear; however, this time I chose to listen and to act.

One story that I was drawn to early on in this journey to Self is "Magic in a World of Magic" by Anne Cameron. In it, the young narrator tells a story concerning two important life-questions that I asked myself after my world was turned upside down that day in March 1990: "Who am I?" and "How did I come to be?" This young narrator is invited to join a circle of older women telling stories; one of the older women is her grandmother. She is eager to please her grandmother, so she brought her grandmother gifts: "I brought juice for her throat and food for her belly . . . but what did I bring for her spirit, [Granny asked]. A person can go days without water, weeks without food, but only hours without hope or love. And what did I have for her soul?" For Granny, what nourishes her soul is a story. When the girl says she is not certain what to tell about, the grandmother charges her with: "Tell me how you came to be and who you are." In telling her story, the narrator goes back to, "Long ago and far away . . . , long before there were Authorities, there were people. . . . And these people lived in families, with the oldest mother as their wise one, and everything belonged to the women, and all women were mother to all children."¹

Vickie L. Sears writes a story called "Sticktalk" in which her narrator learns from a Medicine Stick who she is and how she came to be. Medicine Stick tells the woman who found her: "I am a root once ground-grown and anchored into the earth. As are you.

Always.” The Stick reminds her: “I am also a water floater. . . . And, I am a maker of fire.” In other words, this root, of and from the Earth, represents the element of earth, lives complementary to water and is known to give her life to fire and be transformed, as is she who is the listener of Stick’s story. “Listen in yourself to the old parts. They are still good” says Stick. Each day since finding Stick, the narrator touches her “in leaving or coming,” and she thanks the “Hall of Grandmothers and the Creator” for placing Stick in her path. This listener in the story who finds Stick lying on the ground is in need of a story to nourish her spirit. She is in a phase of her life where she feels eternally lonely and disconnected from life, uprooted. Knowing that her soul needs to be fed, Stick nourishes her with the story of “how she came to be and who she is.”²

Another question I found myself asking as I read and listened to stories is “what truths are they telling me?” *They* refers to the stories, the story tellers, and the characters in the stories. To find answers to this question, I took the words *story* and *truth*, placed them on a metaphorical turnstile so that I could look at the different facets of these words in order to see, in the turning, what the facets told me about the *they*.

The stories I have listened to and read that make sense to me on this journey have their roots in ancient times. They are stories whose roots go deep into goddess consciousness, course through thousands of years of our planet’s historical veins, and send up shoots in today’s writings about nature. They begin with sentences like: “When the world was new and young”; “Did Mama sing every day?”; “Nature has been for me, for as long as I can remember, a source of solace, inspiration, adventure, and delight, a home, a teacher, a companion”; “Preserved in a cave sanctuary for over twenty thousand years, a female figure speaks to us about the minds of our early Western ancestors”; “I was born in the city of the Voudoun—New Orleans, Louisiana”; “Long before there was an earth and long before there were people called human, there was a Sky World”; “Together with a few human beings, dead and living,

and their achievements, trees are what I most love and revere"; "I belong to a Clan of one-Breasted Women."

They are the stories of Demeter, Sarah, Lorraine, Inanna, Luisah, Beth, Hildegard, and Terry. There is something in these stories that I hear, and I say, "I know that story; that is my story, too." They are stories that tell me that being born female did not condemn me to a belief that, therefore, I am profane, unclean, put on this Earth only to continue to release evil and pain in the world when I release new life through birth. They are stories that proclaim that the female is sacred. I present my discoveries in Part II called, "Storytelling and Truth-telling: 'I Remember and I Recall.'"

In Part III I present an eco-feminist, reader-response analysis of four fictional narratives. The narratives I have chosen are *Cactus Thorn* by Mary Austin, *The Dollmaker* by Harriette Arnow, *The Fires of Bride* by Ellen Galford and *Send My Roots Rain* by Ibis Gómez-Vega. The women who authored these narratives created women characters whose lives are formed and transformed by their relationship to Earth. At certain junctures in their lives, the women characters are uprooted from Earth and from the core of the Self. A woman so uprooted is alienated, fractured, not whole. Unless that woman finds a way to root, she cannot heal to wholeness. I look closely at the journeys of these women characters during their experience of being uprooted, and examine if and/or how they reroot themselves.

Part IV examines the complex meanings of *sacred space*. As my journey continued, I discovered that I had a need to find an inviolate place where I could feel safe to ask the questions that required me to be courageous on finding the answers; or, if I could not find the answers, at least have the opportunity to delve as deeply into the questions as I needed to delve. The everyday world became both frightening and inauthentic for me, because the questions I was asking were not the kind to be probed between folding loads of laundry and picking kids up from school. I needed space that provided me with uninterrupted time that I controlled.

The women in the stories that I was drawn to and the women who told the stories I discovered had that same need.

Thus I drew solace and instruction from their journey's lessons, and I write these reflections in Part IV. I suggest that sacred space—finding it and naming it—is necessary for uprooted women to root themselves with Earth in order to begin the process of healing their Selves and their Beings. I found the process of rooting also heals the Earth, the same Earth that helps these women to be healed and nourished on their life's journey. It was my most joyous discovery, the ongoing, interwoven relationship between Earth and Self, and that discovery—and the writing of it—that rerooted my self to Self. I gained the perspective that I had been actively seeking since that fateful day in March of 1990.

Mircea Eliade suggested a journey into the sacred in the 1950s. He argued that all nature is capable of revealing itself as a “cosmic sacralit.” Acknowledging the presence of alienating, profane space, he believes that, properly speaking, “there is no longer any world, there are only fragments of a shattered universe, an amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which [men and women] move, and are governed and driven by the obligations of an existence incorporated into an industrial society.”³ The experience of sacred space, says Eliade, makes a meaningful life possible. I found that the manifestation of the *sacred* in space creates the center of one's Self. Thus human life can only be lived in sacred places, because it is only in those sacred places that people participate fully in their Being.

To prepare myself for this research, I sought out life stories that have nurtured and enlightened me on my own particular life's journey. “Which stories have I needed to know to move me along my journey?” I asked myself. I found that a story appealed to me if, when I interacted with it, I saw another facet of where I came from, who I am, and how I can cope with what the world—culture—tells me is true. Often what the world tells me is true is in contradiction to what Earth tells me is true. The resonance of such

an interaction taught me how I came to be, who I am and what, in effect, are my life's truths.

A woman's journey, however, has never been as visible or as valued as a man's journey. There is ample history supporting this position. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, the men wrote the laws and held "the truth." These laws live on through the pages of the Bible where a religious hierarchy exists with a single male deity at the pinnacle. Women were subsumed into the generic "he" and told that "he" included "she," (but "she" did not include "he.") Even though Genesis 1:27 says that, "God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female he created them," females have been denied visibility and value. Like the Declaration of Independence that espouses, "All men are created equal," white women and people of color were excluded from the generic "men," that "men" meant men, white men, particularly white men with property.

Nicole Brossard laments this cultural invisibility and marginalization of women. She tells readers that because the dominant language users have attempted to erase the female, it is important that each woman tells her story. She says that even though "it is getting late . . . each woman must repeat her story at least once in her life, with passion and with hope, as a kind of inscription." This is an imperative for each woman because not only is "the reality of woman . . . not the reality of men" but because women have been written out of history. Each woman telling/writing her story will show the desire "to assert herself in language by actualizing with its help a manner of being . . . , a manner of seeing . . . , and a manner of thinking . . . because "where there is Masculine, one sees no *feminine*." Brossard goes on to say that to render the woman visible "is a writing task which necessitates shifts in meanings as yet unedited in the imaginary realm of language."⁴

A woman telling her own story, finding her own truth outside of her relation to the male, is not a new idea. It is as old as Inanna,

Isis, Astarte, Hathor and Sky Woman. It is as old as the tale of Mother Earth is old. In "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," Carol Christ acknowledges the truth of women. She writes that, "the simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of the goddess is the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power . . . that [women] will no longer look to men or male figures as saviors." In fact, women need not look to *female* figures as saviors either, because women do not need to be saved: "the divine principle, . . . the sustaining power, is in herself."⁵ Women, then, can choose to worship no male deity again. We are whole, self-sufficient, meaning-centered, and sacred.

However, women need not burn all bridges, forging individual paths with neither support from those around us nor ancestral memory of those who went before us. Rather, we can acknowledge and rejoice in the fact that certain images of the goddess and what they represent are reflections of what is in all of us as women. That image can be the Buffalo Woman of the Plains Indians; Kali, a goddess of India; the African goddess, Oshun of the ancient Yoruba tribe; or the powerful Celtic triple goddess called Bride, or Bridget. To acknowledge them is to acknowledge that it is the Earth that is life-giver, that Her treasures feed, clothe and sustain us while we live, and that when we die, she accepts us back into her.⁶

Some of the stories that I present are informed by the writings of women scholars who have personally journeyed to sacred sites of goddess centers in such diverse places as Sumer, Ireland, Greece, Hungary and India: Merlin Stone, Mary Condron, Riane Eisler, Carol Christ, Buffie Johnson, Marija Gimbutas, Elinor Gadon, Z Budapest. Some of these writers have experienced the life of a woman-centered culture, longed for by Nicole Brossard, some time in their growing-up years: Paula Gunn Allen, Luisah Teish, Carol Lee Sanchez, Anne Cameron, Alice Walker are a few who know that experience of a woman-centered culture, usually (but not always) from the culture of their family. Living that life led them to

uncover the truths of their existence as women with their own histories in their respective cultures and in their respective times.

I have never been to the sites designated as goddess sites where anthropologists and historians have uncovered caves and labyrinths and passages that hold artifacts pointing to a goddess culture existing for thousands of years before the patriarchy. I have, however, participated in a culture where the female energy of my mother's mother (a midwife), and of my mother and her six sisters nurtured and centered my growing-up energy in a time of strong patriarchal dominance: World War II, the post-war period, and the Eisenhower years.

The knowing and the energy, hidden, lying dormant in me for over four decades came alive and gave me the desire to research more about my half of the species and its history when I read *The Chalice and the Blade* by Riane Eisler in 1987. My world view changed dramatically when I finished reading this book. Though there had been other books written on goddesses before Ms. Eisler's, I had found no reference to them; Ms. Eisler's book marked a crossroads for me.

In the past, when I had asked the question, "Where did I come from?", the answer I was given was "from God," with emphasis on *God* as *He*. Reading this book made me realize that the vague feeling of uprootedness that had been with me from childhood (I never quite "belonged" anywhere) came because no one had ever answered my question *Where did I come from?* in a satisfactory way. I knew that I did not come from anyone I had read about in the Bible, and until Ms. Eisler's text I did not know that there was a pre-biblical tradition of the goddess, my source of Being, the tradition from whence I came.

Learning not only *when* God was a woman but *that* God was a woman, I came to realize that if *I* had been lied to about where I came from, so had countless others. Reading Riane Eisler's book started me researching whatever I could find on the topic of pre-biblical spirituality. The more I read, the more I became aware that

not only had I been lied to, but that the lie about coming from a male god precipitated other lies being told as truth: males are superior to and hold property and sexual rights over females; and males, being God's image on Earth, have dominion over all other Earth creatures, from wolves to redwoods to females. Thus males have been given a right to conquer and plunder prairies, rain forests, and the seas' fish population in the name of progress and profit and development.

Childhood memories of physical abuse started to come forth to me, and those senseless acts of being hit for no apparent reason started to make sense—if there can be sense found in senseless acts of violence. Adult males could treat women and children in any way they found suitable because of the truths held by the culture, in particular the community where I grew up. A man could hit me “for my own good,” and I was to be grateful. That man could be father, uncle, even neighbor. After all, as male, he held the God-given power to discipline me so that when I grew up and married, I would know my place, be a God-fearing woman. I would have been trained “right”: *right* meaning that I would grow up to be the silenced woman, as I had been reared to be the silenced girl. It was said of me: “she’s such a good girl, so quiet. She obeys well.” Yes, I hoped that to obey would mean that I would not be hit anymore. That was a false hope, because I was hit for more than having transgressed a rule; I was hit at random.

In my childhood, there was another interesting pecking order: men could hit women and children, but women and children could not hit men. However, women could hit children if the men gave them permission to do so. Thus the men were placed in the position of being God's judge and jury on Earth. Ironically, there was someone who had power over even the men: the local priest. He held the power to condemn any and all of us to Hell for all eternity. He told us often that he had that power—and that we were condemned. From this perspective of male superiority and

dominance, physical abuse was condoned and practiced in my family, my community, and my church.

The second book that had a dramatic effect on me was one that was published in April 1991 called *Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry About Nature* by Lorraine Anderson. What Ms. Anderson wrote about in *Sisters of the Earth* answered a question nagging me for years, a question that I could not find any information and *collected* research on: where were the women role models to whom nature mattered as much as, but not in the same way that it mattered to the men, from whom I would know, "Who am I?" Where were the female Aldo Leopolds, the John Muirs, the Henry David Thoreaus? Indeed, where was Thoreau's *mother*? She was my metaphor. I would ask people in a rhetorical manner: "And what of Henry's mother? Did she, too, write about ants or wilderness or war and we do not have her papers? Did she write some of the works credited to her son? Was her perspective the same as or different from her son's on ants or wilderness or war?"

Yes, I had Willa Cather and Rachel Carson and, of late, Annie Dillard as role models. But I knew "deep down," from my growing-up years in farm country near Aldo Leopold's home and from participating in human interactions with the Earth, that there were more than three women who were up to the task of writing their experiences with and their appreciation of the Earth. My interactions with the Earth, namely the woods in back of our house, the fields at the bottom of our hill, and our immense garden were my sources for consolation and solace in my childhood. I had not written about those interactions but I had had them, and I remembered them.

The reason I could not find the information I sought was that it was scattered; it had never been collected until Lorraine Anderson undertook the task. Indeed there are such women. In fact, there are so many that Ms. Anderson found that she needed to

limit her collection; she chose to include only women of the United States, and then she had to limit those choices.⁷

In the four fictional narratives that comprise Part III, I follow the theory put forth by Elizabeth A. Flynn in her essay "Gender and Reading," which espouses a feminist reader-response criticism. "Self and other, reader and text," she writes, "interact in such a way that the reader learns from the experience without losing critical distance; reader and text interact with a degree of mutuality. . . . Self and other remain distinct and so create a kind of dialogue."⁸

Reader-response criticism holds that the reader plays a vitally important role in shaping the literary experience. Reader-response critics, then, are ones who share the conviction that readers of texts play as important a role in interpreting those texts as the writers who wrote the texts and the narrators within the texts who tell the story. Reader-response criticism is a critical method that assesses what exists between the reader and the text, not what *ought* to be or what is *good*. Its purpose is to describe, not to evaluate.

There are clear advantages to using reader-response criticism. First of all, such a method acknowledges the active engagement of both the writer and the reader; it emphasizes the reader's comprehending a text by mediating the symbolic knowledge and experience expressed in the text with the knowledge and experience existing in the mind and the heart of the reader.

Such an interaction acknowledges the literary contributions of both text and reader and thereby provides a voice for the text and a framework for the construction of the meaning of the text. Thus, the meaning of a text depends on the interaction of the reader, the writer, and the interpretative strategies employed. What a reader gets out of a text depends on what that reader brings to the text.

Second, a reader-response criticism confronts the common ground taken up by both the experiences suggested in the text and the real experiences of the reader; between the reading *self* and the *other*: text. Reader-response criticism finds its fulfillment, Flynn

argues, when the critical, receptive reader achieves a balance of detachment and involvement, when the reader integrates past experiences with the experiences created by the text. Past and present are synthesized into a new experience from which, Flynn concludes, “the reader is transformed, renewed.”

If the *reader* integrates past experiences with the experiences created by the text, then the gender and philosophy of the reader are important. Flynn discovered this importance when, in the spring of 1980, she and two male colleagues team-taught a class of first-year composition with fifty-two students: twenty-six women and twenty-six men. The students were to respond to three short stories chosen by the three professors. The students' responses were the data for research in gender and reading. The results of the data provided the seed for Flynn's conclusion that the gender of the reader plays a significant role in reader-response criticism.

Patrocinio P. Schweickart, Flynn's co-editor, adds to the notion that the gender of a reader influences the critical response when she writes that the *philosophy* of a reader matters. For Schweickart, it is important to know whether or not a reader, particularly a reader of a female text, is a feminist. She claims that:

feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need “to connect,” to recuperate, or to formulate—they come to the same thing—the context, the tradition, that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics, and to the larger community of women.⁹

The problem of assessing the impact of a reader's gender and philosophy on the perception of a literary text reflects what Elizabeth Minnich calls a “root problem.” She writes, the problem is that:

A few privileged men defined themselves as constituting mankind/ humankind and simultaneously saw themselves as akin to what mankind/humankind ought to be in fundamental

ways that distinguish themselves from all others. Thus, at the same time they removed women and nonprivileged men within their culture and other cultures from “mankind,” they justified that exclusion on the grounds that the excluded were by nature and culture “lesser” people. . . . Their notion of who was properly human was *both* exclusive *and* hierarchical with regard to those they took to be properly subject to them—women in all roles; men who worked with their hands; male servants and slaves; women and men of many other cultures.¹⁰

The women writers whose works I have chosen to consider are “lesser people,” as are the characters whom they develop.

My interpretations of the fictional narratives in Part III will be informed by my gender, my philosophy, and my life experiences. A feminist reader-response reading of the texts, woven together with personal experience, conversations with friends and colleagues, and library research provides the basis for my interpretations.

This is a book, then, about several women, real and fictive, on their journeys into both sacred and profane spaces as they remember and recall the truths that tell them how they came to be and who they are. Some break through to discovery; some do not. Those who do, learn that it is Earth’s stories that root the self to Self and connect them with all that lives. It is Earth that tells them how they came to be and who they are.