

# Greetings from the American Frontier

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While driving across country a few weeks ago, and true to form, my mind began wandering backwards through time. As the great-granddaughter of 19th century homesteaders, my time-traveling always seems to start from a place: the North American High Plains—or as the Lakota People refer to it, the center of Turtle Island.

As the scenery rolled by the car window, I found myself remembering one of my favorite stories—the one about the enigmatic Impi Mikkonen, my great grandmother by marriage. Impi was born in Finland to a family of good-standing, and for reasons we will probably never know, immigrated to the United States around the turn of the 20th century. After passing through Ellis Island and spending some time in Minnesota, Impi found herself in Lead, South Dakota, which for the next 100 years would also be the address of the largest gold mine in the world, Homestake.

Impi was about 20 years old when she became the housekeeper and nanny to my widowed great-grandfather, Jacob, who soon married her. Together they had two more daughters which left my three-year old grandmother somewhat of an only-child because she was situated in the middle of two sets of children. The first five brothers and sisters were old enough to take jobs, marry, and become self-sufficient, which was fine by Impi. Eventually, it became evident to my grandmother, that her two younger sisters were the apples of Impi's eye—leaving no room for her.

According to my grandmother, Impi never did like her; therefore she always got the short end of the stick. For example, Grama was always the one to have to run errands and be at her step-mother's beck and call while her pampered little sisters got to stay in, play with their dolls and be treated to handfuls of homemade cookies. Grama did tell me she never resented her two little sisters because they saw how their mother played favorites, so when she looked away, they sneaked half of their cookies to their big sister.

Because my great-grandfather developed black lung disease, he had to quit working at the gold mine. His brothers, who had opted for farming instead of mining, talked him into moving out of the Black Hills and into situating his family on, unbeknownst to him, the gumbo flats east of Belle Fourche. For those of you not familiar with this particular type of soil, gumbo starts out as regular-looking somewhat powdery brown dirt, but when mixed with rainwater, it turns into a type of mud that has a life of its own. Needless to say, it is not the ideal soil for growing crops, so my great-grandfather started his farming career with two strikes against him.

This story of my two grandmothers is not unlike that of many other homesteaders, but this particular one conjures images of the dry heat of summer days brimming with the aroma of freshly cut prairie hay. The smell of sweat and the feel of scratchy horse hides beneath my young grandmother's hands as she urged the team to pull one last load into the musty cool barn where a trough full of sweet oats, a long cool drink of water, and a deep brushing were waiting. While my grandmother tended to the horses, her weary stepmother would head to the kitchen to prepare supper and begin readying the rest of her household for bedtime. Soon the neatly cut wood had heated the cast iron stove and the smell of boiling coffee, homemade biscuits and beef stew, or moi-yaka, as my grandmother called it, filled the small house.

For many of the years I listened to my grandmother telling this story, I never failed to hear the strand of resentment which wound through her words—kind of a 'Cinderella's complaint.' But one day I realized the resentment had disappeared and it had been replaced by an addendum of sorts. You see, when she turned 17, my grandmother ran away from her wicked step-mother and hitch-hiked all the way to Montana. But a short

stay with her oldest sister and her no-good husband who wouldn't work and provide for the ten children he had sired, opened my grandmother's eyes in a hurry. She returned to the Black Hills and eventually married my grandfather, a fellow Finlander, and someone she had known all her life. Of course life on the gumbo flats never did get easier for my grandparents. The Great Depression hit and poverty was rampant. But despite the uncooperative environment, life on the land had a wholesome quality to it and my mother, her sister and their parents made the best of it.

Many years after Impi had died and my relationship with my grandmother had matured, I asked her why she lost the resentment toward her step-mother. Her answer to my question came to me through a mutual dialogue that lasted the rest of her life.

Obviously there was much more to Impi's story, especially her never-ending homesickness for her beautiful homeland. Even though I've never been to Finland, my grandmother has. She told me it looks a lot like Minnesota— many deep, blue, glacier-made lakes, endless stands of tall fragrant evergreen trees—and always very lush and very beautiful. When my grandmother talked about Finland, inevitably she added the comment, “No wonder she was so unhappy! Can you imagine leaving that beautiful country and ending up on those god-forsaken gumbo flats! America must have been such a disappointment! Poor Impi, now I understand why she was so bitter.”

At this point in this story, my mind usually likes to veer toward the thought of religion. According to my mother, one of the shirt-tail relations who also came over from Finland brought with him an ultra-fundamental version of Lutheranism, which our branch of the family rejected. Since I know that my great-grandparents did not attend church regularly and neither did my mother's family, I have wondered if faith in a Christian God had a place in the trials and tribulations of my homesteading relatives.

It's common knowledge Christianity played a significant role in the creation of America beginning with the Puritans who moved to the New World in order to escape religious persecution and to practice their faith freely. As I've learned more about our own UU history, I am glad to

know that both Unitarianism and Universalism had fairly significant roles in America's westward expansion.

After the arrival of the John Murray in 1770, Universalism quickly grew into one of the biggest denominations in America. There are two reasons for this phenomenon; the first has to do the fact that Universalists were strict on congregational polity which was very compatible with frontier communities who wanted maximum local control. And the second reason the Universalist Church became so prevalent was due in large part to the advent of circuit riders. Frontier preachers, such as William Farwell, Nathaniel Stacy, and Stephen R. Smith, traveled from one small settlement to another preaching universal salvation. Many of these dedicated souls had been nurtured and encouraged by Universalist theologian, Hosea Ballou. Of course at the beginning of the 19th century, the American frontier meant the land between New England and the Ohio River. By the middle of the century, the frontier had been pushed as far as the Mississippi River and after the Civil War the Oregon Trail had opened up the North American Great Plains.

Soon after the end of the Civil War, the final defeat of the Plains Indian Nations and their subsequent banishment to the reservations was accomplished. The Christian belief in evangelizing and converting the heathens was taken very seriously, and to this day, Christianity still has a significant presence on Indian land. Another part of the westward expansion was the establishment and growth of the Mormon Church which, according to some accounts, is the fastest growing denomination in America today.

Being the skeptic I am, and knowing there have always been skeptics, I know that success or failure of a risky adventure such as moving to the untamed frontier could not be determined solely by the strength or weakness of an individual's faith. Maybe that's due in part to the fact that I never heard my family story told in religious terms: the women followed the men who left Finland in order to escape being conscripted into the Russian army—not for religious freedom. But surely anyone who found the courage to make this choice must have had faith in something. Unlike the Hebrews who actually did find the land of milk and honey, many American pioneers did not. What about all those who experienced overwhelming disappointment and failure? Whose fault was

that? Theirs or God's? Who or what did my unhappy great-grandmother blame? Where did she find comfort when overwhelmed with homesickness? Where did she find the strength to get up in the morning and persevere through yet another day?

I am aware that many Christians still believe their God has a plan for each of them. Pairing a divine plan with a strong mandate from the Bible to dominate the earth, our Christian forbearers had the moral justification for what came to be known as manifest destiny. Scriptural support for this idea is found, for example, in the book of Deuteronomy, where in chapter 8 it is written:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills,.... a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you.

Obviously, as I grew older and began to understand Bible stories from a mature perspective, I realized the most important ones only made sense if I applied a pretty sophisticated level of allegory to them. And, when in her later years, my grandmother began earnestly studying the Bible, our conversations served to convince me that most of the good folks in this world have a more literal understanding of Biblical scripture than I do. Somewhere in the space between high allegory and literalism, Christianity ceased to be the source of my spiritual power. I didn't lose my spiritual power; I just lost the source I had been exposed to as a child and when I moved out of the city and into the Black Hills, I found a new source—the earth itself.

In the book, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*, Elinor Stewart wrote,

The sun was just gilding the hilltops when we arose. Everything, even the barrenness, was beautiful. We have had frosts, and the quaking aspens were a trembling field of gold as far up the stream we could see. We were way up above them and could look far across the valley....Occasionally we could see the snowy peaks... when you get among such grandeur

you get to feel how little you are and how foolish is human endeavor, except that which reunites us with the mighty force called God.(Stewart, 28-30).

One of the reasons I love this passage is because it comes from my Lakota, Ojibwe, Arapaho, and Black Foot teachers who taught me why my feelings are more than just a positive emotional response to pretty scenery—they are a reflection of my true religion.

In his autobiography, Chief Luther Standing Bear wrote,

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills and the winding streams with tangled growth as 'wild.' Only to the white men was nature a wilderness and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. (Deloria, 90).

It makes sense that some white folks were afraid of the new land— be it the dense forests that still hem in the Atlantic coast or the humbling immensity of the western expanses and Rocky Mountains. It makes sense that many white folks thought the new land was full of wild animals and savages— after all, according to their religion they never were an actual part of it; and the effects of this separateness are significant. In fact, the idea of being separate from the land is fundamental to how the captains of industry justified its conquest.

But Lakota teacher, John Trudell, offers an alternative explanation. He suggests that when the European immigrants left their ancestral lands and crossed the ocean to come to Turtle Island, the ties with the land where the bones of their ancestors are, were not only physically separated, they were spiritually separated. Therefore, they and many generations of their descendants live with a place inside of them that is empty. It is the place where the spiritual connection with the ancestral land used to be. Trudell points out the many ways Americans try to fill this empty space inside of them—drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, and most recently— consume, consume, consume.

One of the most important distinctions between western and traditional indigenous cultures is the concept of materialism. Within traditional indigenous values, the acquisition of material things is not a value, the most obvious example of this is the failure of the treaties—the Indians did not believe anyone owned the land. But the words of Chief Seattle remind us how much the Native Americans understood the true value of the land, “if you destroy the earth, you destroy the sons and daughters of the earth.” When compared to the Western idea of the land being given to man in order to be conquered so its bounty could be used by the few to dominate the many—the contrast is compelling.

As for me, I think time has made a full circle. I think manifest destiny has run its course, and where we find ourselves now is needing something religious. I agree with the Native American philosophy: the land is more than just a resource to be exploited by humans. It is the source of life—our food, our homes, our births and our deaths. I do not think we need to worship the land like it is God—but it a good place to find God (in quotes). One of the reasons I’m a church-going Unitarian Universalist, is that as a religious body, we know that we are not separate.

Poet, John Ruskin describes our earthy church like this:

There is religion in everything around us,  
A calm and holy religion  
In the unbreathing things in Nature.  
It is a meek and blessed influence,  
Stealing in as it were unaware upon the heart,  
It comes quickly, and without excitement,  
It has no terror, no gloom,  
It does not rouse up the passion,  
It is untrammelled by creeds...  
It is written on the arched sky,  
It looks out from every star,  
It is on the sailing cloud and in the invisible wind,  
It is among the hills and valleys of the earth  
Where the shrubless mountain-top pierces the thin  
atmosphere of eternal winter  
Or where the mighty forest fluctuates before the strong wind,  
With its dark waves of green foliage,

It is spread out like a legible language upon the broad face of  
An unsleeping ocean,  
It is the poetry of Nature;  
It is that which uplifts the spirit within us...  
And which opens to our imagination a world of spiritual beauty  
And holiness.

And that is how I think so many of our grandparents survived. Not all of their days were filled with work and disappointment. There were family, community, art, music, and love. And between the patches of dense woods and bad dirt, there was the good land where the sun shone, the water flowed, the flowers bloomed, and the spirits of the ancestors could be.

I like to think that my unhappy great-grandmother found her God on the land where she lived. Perhaps it was in the same place where I have spent many hours: sitting on the top of the small hill above the family’s original homestead, enjoying the Black Hills in the distance. This is where I can smell the same prairie hay my grandmothers did. This is where I can look into the same clear blue sky my grandmothers did. It is where I can sense the presence of not only my ancestors, but all of the ancestors. The Lakota people say, Mitakye Oasin—All My Relation.

If you find a special place like this, and I suspect many of you already have, you probably know of its power. These special places have always beckoned—to the people who, millennia ago, walked across the Bering Land Bridge—to the Europeans who sailed across the ocean—to you and me.

The land lures us not with the promise of gold strikes and grand cities, but it lures us because we must be lured. There is a place within our soul that needs to be connected with the earth. Without it, we will not heal. Without it we will continue to destroy the earth and ourselves.

For a heart that is ready, it only takes one moment to be humbled by the earth. It is a good thing for humans to be put in their place once in awhile. Only then will all of our hearts understand and a new circle can begin.