

Cycles, Ceremonies, and Creeping Phlox

An Autoethnographic Account of the Creation of Our Garden

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Abstract

This autoethnographic text outlines a devastating ending (the death of my cat) and a beautiful, new beginning (a marriage) and how these events are inextricably linked to a garden that has inspired numerous personal and relational meanings for me. In this feminist text, I reveal my actions, experiences, and ideas in and around our garden and its connections with my personal, spiritual, social, and ecological identity. More specifically, utilizing a spiritual ecofeminist lens, I analyze my experiences within the garden to further define my experiences and place them within a larger social and cultural context. I invite readers into my experience so that they, too, might consider their own relationships with nature and the role of gender therein.

Keywords: *Animal companion, autoethnography, ceremony, ecofeminism, gardening*

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Introduction

Endings and beginnings, beginnings and endings. I have seen a few in the five years I've been sculpting and tending the garden my husband, Brian, and I co-created. As an ecofeminist, I embrace and practice my own unique form of Earth-based spirituality, and I have come to think of our garden as a gateway, or invitation, to my ongoing personal, spiritual transformation, and evolution. Ecofeminism is underpinned by, but is not limited to, liberal, Marxist, radical, cultural, and socialist philosophies, all of which are concerned with improving the human/nature relationship (Merchant, 1990; Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 1993). Earth-based spirituality has three core principles, as described by Starhawk (1990): First, the Earth is alive, and we are an intricate part of the Earth. Second, everything is interconnected. Third, upon understanding these interconnections, we commit ourselves to creating a community that connects us to the Earth, and enables us to take action together to sustain the planet and its diverse life forms, including humans (Starhawk, 1990). The notion of interconnection contextualizes my usage of the term *nature* throughout this paper, positioned as a distinct entity but experienced as a "complex system of rhythms and interconnections of which human beings are a part" (Fullagar, 2000, p. 65). Myriad spiritual practices and paths have influenced me over my lifetime, including pagan, Indigenous, and Buddhist teachings. Earth-based spiritual practices, including ceremony, prayer, and contemplation, for me, are essential in establishing and maintaining a compassionate, mindful, and committed relationship with the planet and the entities that dwell upon it.

I am dedicated to the principles of Earth-based spiritual ecofeminism and feel connected and committed to nature as a whole; however, above and beyond wilderness settings, I have an especially intimate relationship with our garden. Raisborough and Bhatti (2007) believe the garden is a "politically charged place" (p. 474) and a space of agency for women. They claim it is a space in which women can gain empowerment, allowing them to reposition their "active and confident relations with others as well as their active relation to socially recognizable gendered norms" (p. 474). This autoethnographic exploration is a platform to reflect on personal experiences of empowerment, the process by which I secured increased control over my life and nurtured my capacities and potentiality in conjunction with support from others (Arai, 1997), that includes acts of patriarchal resistance and reproduction, in relation to nature, non-human others, and my partner in the garden.

Ecofeminism is a theory highly underutilized in leisure studies, having only been explored, to my knowledge, in a single paper by Fox (1994) more than a decade ago, yet it offers a valuable lens to examine gender and leisure. Ecofeminisms make important connections between differing forms of oppression and "attempt to remedy the way in which women and others have been historically and discursively marginalized by a patriarchal centre" (Fox, 1994, p. 42). Ecofeminism recognizes that everyone's needs, including the nonhuman world, must be taken into consideration in relation to all others in order to dispel dualistic thinking that "divides the world into hierarchical dichotomies with one aspect regarded as superior and the 'other' regarded inferior, recognizing instead the existence of multiplicities" (Mack-Canty, 2004, p. 158). In this way, ecofeminisms challenge leisure scholars to embrace multiple perspectives, strive to empower others, clarify the importance and complexity of leisure for humans and nature, deepen the appreciation of our own perspectives, and "[accounts] for the limits of our vision and the damage caused by the violation of those limits" (Fox, 1994, p. 52). Ecofeminisms bring a unique and inclusive approach to leisure studies, and I believe this paper to be socially and theoretically relevant to this special feminist issue of the *Journal of Leisure Research* in that it truly reflects a third wave feminist stance inclusive of nature as a living entity and partner in leisure.

Fox (1994) believes that, “leisure scholars are obligated to examine the foundation and assumptions of our knowledge and frameworks and whether our knowledge nurtures or oppresses people and nature” (p. 39). Mention of connection or relationship between humans and the environment is normally lacking in the leisure literature. The exception are leisure scholars who study place-based natural resource management where place, a humanistic geographic construct, takes in account the meanings individuals associate with their interactions with their environments (Benoni, Stedman, & Kruger, 2010; Brook, Wallace, & Williams, 2006; Wynveen, Kyle, & Sutton, 2010). Leisure scholars have also investigated the relationship between spirituality and outdoor settings, especially around outdoor wilderness and adventure programs (Fox, 1999; Heintzman, 2002, 2010; Henderson, 1993; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004); however, the results of such studies often focus on how the natural setting triggers spiritual responses in humans, rather than the relationships that are built between human and nonhuman others, and few of these are investigated from a gendered perspective.

On a broad, cultural level, ecofeminism attests that nonhuman nature is a feminist concern because women and nature share interdependent political concerns in the face of so-called development including militarism, sexism, racism, classism, and environmental damage (Mack-Canty, 2004). Ecofeminism combines theories from both ecology (interdependence, multiplicity of life forms) and feminism (intersections of oppressions including racism, colonialism, classism, and heterosexuality) to inform its political stance and its efforts to create “equitable and environmentally sound lifestyles” (Mack-Canty, 2004, p. 169). On a personal level, ecofeminism as a political practice encourages direct action to protect and enhance the web of life and advocates for personal lifestyle changes that are ecologically beneficial (Bullis & Glacer, 1992; Mack-Canty, 2004). According to Bullis and Glacer (1992), a web provides an alternative to hierarchy and includes all participants as equal; that is, even soil is as important and integral to the web as humans. As a leisure professional, I cannot ignore the negative or positive consequences of leisure research and practice (Fox, 1994) in its position to gender and nature. This paper advances the feminist agenda in leisure studies by exploring spiritual ecofeminist ethics and the connection between leisure, gender, and nature in the context of the garden.

The purpose of this autoethnographic paper is to share two pivotal stories that were instrumental in repositioning the way I relate to others via the personal, social, and environmental identities I have fostered throughout the process of designing, creating, and maintaining our garden. These stories demonstrate how I simultaneously resist and perpetuate gender norms while engaged with the garden, a complexity of paradoxical experience recognized by third wave feminists. According to Foss and Foss (1994):

“personal narratives about the events of women’s lives, their feelings about those events, and their interpretations of them, reveal insights into the impact of the construction of gender on women’s lives, their experiences of oppression and of coping with and resisting that oppression, and their perspectives on what is meaningful in their lives” (p. 39).

Sharing my stories not only contributes to the improvement of my life by encouraging me to discover my own truths (Foss & Foss, 1994) but also provides me with an opportunity to gain a clearer understanding of my own spiritual and evolving relationship with our garden. According to Fox (1994), an ecofeminist ethic acknowledges that storytelling and first-person narratives need to take a more central role in the generation of knowledge as different leisure patterns and concepts emerge from the voices of women. These patterns of differences will change as people

interact and respond to influences of other cultures, technology, and consequences of previous decisions (Fox, 1994). Bhatti and Church (2007) suggest the garden can be analyzed through four key dimensions: as an *idea* that shapes our understandings of nature within key social relations; as a *place* seen as an escape, but where there can also be conflict over how it is used; as an *action* or the physical activity of gardening; and finally as an *experience*, of being involved in an intimate relationship with nature that helps us to connect to the earth. In this personal narrative, I will be discussing these four key dimensions, how I relate to nature, how I use the garden, my actions in the garden, and my gardening experiences from a feminist perspective. How does my gender shape my relationship with nature? Or my relationships with human and nonhuman others in regards to the garden? How do I use the garden compared to my male partner? How do I contribute to the reproduction and resistance of stereotypical gender roles in my own backyard? In short, how do I, as a woman, experience our garden? These questions warrant examination because they seek to explore the interconnectedness of women, other humans, and nonhuman nature (Mack-Canty, 1994), while simultaneously striving to understand how gender roles and relations are reproduced and/or resisted within the leisure setting of the personal garden (Parry, Glover, & Shinew, 2005).

In the end, I will revisit my story and analyze it through a spiritual ecofeminist lens. Through this lens I believe I can continue the dialogue of the garden as a political space, further dismantle gendered stereotypes in the garden, explore the perpetuation of gendered patriarchal practices and their consequences, and demonstrate personal empowerment that ultimately benefits the planet through the practice of Earth-based spirituality. I strive to stir within readers a speculation of what the environment sparks inside of them, while challenging them to consider their relationship with spaces from a spiritual ecofeminist perspective.

Feminist scholarship regards women as the experts of their own lives, and personal narrative, as considered by Code (as cited in Foss & Foss, 1994), is an exploration of personal experience that encourages women to “claim their cognitive competence and authority, their knowledgeability, and their right to know” (p. 42) while also constructing new methods and theories that truly take women’s knowledge into account (Foss & Foss, 1994). Autoethnography as a research method is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness about one’s personal relationship to culture. To start, I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions while writing about my personal life (Ellis, 1999). Throughout the story, the autoethnographic gaze moves back and forth from the external social and cultural aspects of their personal experience to the internal, vulnerable self that is moved by and moves through cultural interpretations (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography is an appropriate methodology in conjunction with ecofeminist theory because storytelling and first-person narratives are vital to one’s conception of self as fundamental in relationship with others, including the nonhuman environment (Fox, 1994). Fox (1994) states that if leisure provides a means of resistance, as it does in my story, it becomes vital to hear and understand the voices of the ones who have resisted in order to inspire action. In terms of the social and practical relevance of my story, “[w]omen symbolize that which is repressed and denied, but highly relevant, for the survival of patriarchy (Leppanen, 2004, p. 41). Leppanen (2004) challenges me, as a woman, to make a conscious choice and decide whether to use my power and knowledge to “service and reproduce patriarchy or to use it as an impetus for change” (p. 41). While reflecting on my experience, Ellis and Bochner (2000) wisely ask me to consider, “What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of a person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?” (p. 746). In evaluating autoethnography, Bochner (2000) asks that not only

facts but feelings be strongly represented in the work; that is, “emotional credibility, vulnerability, and honesty” is expected (p. 270). He, too, demands ethical self-consciousness and wants the writer to show concern for “how others are portrayed, for the kind of person one becomes in telling one’s story, and to provide space for the listener’s becoming, and for the moral commitments and convictions that underlie the story” (p. 271). When an autoethnographic story contributes to one’s understanding of social life, is aesthetic, demonstrates adequate self-awareness and self-exposure, impacts upon the reader emotionally and intellectually, and embodies a sense of lived experience, it is then seen to meet the standards of criteria as set by Richardson (2000). This is an autoethnographic account of an ending that led to a new beginning and how our garden was an intricate part - and even the result of - it all. As is encouraged in autoethnography, mixed genres such as poetry, journal entries, and photos are included.

The House, our Home

On December 16, 2006, Brian and I took possession of our new home, a quaint, brick Ontario cottage with a kitchen at its heart, a charming slanted loft, a warm and sunny enclosed front porch, and a spacious back sunroom lined with windows (see Figures 1 and 2). As beautiful and cozy as the little house was, though, the yard was the deciding factor in choosing *this* house to be our new *home*. Snow blanketed the ground, making it impossible to discern the available space for flower beds, but the yard was big and partially fenced and would easily accommodate the dog we so wanted. An enormous blue spruce stretched out from its centre, majestic and proud, but for the big, floppy branch hanging crookedly to the right at the very top. A tree with character. The potential of this space was limitless. We were in love.

Previously we had lived seven years in the second story of a big old house on a busy corner. Its garden was small but filled with a variety of native plants that attracted birds and butterflies. That garden had whetted my appetite for gardening and aided me in learning the basics. Now, in our new home, I had a much larger canvas on which to paint. It was blank and beckoning; a space to call our own. My inner artist was gleeful.



Figure 1. The Backyard



Figure 2. The Front Yard

A home fulfills our basic human needs, to higher-order needs, social relationships and personal identity (Gross & Lane, 2007). The garden may be treated the same, albeit as an external feature of the home, insofar as it can provide a sense of worth and other benefits associated with making a connection with the natural environment (Clayton, 2007). A garden is personal space that can provide a means of expressing personal taste and preference and bring us into closer contact with nature (Clayton, 2007; Gross & Lane, 2007). A garden, like a home, is often seen as

a refuge from the public world of work and politics, and yet, as we shall explore, neither can be “neatly separated from the social construction of the home in which gender relations are deeply embedded” (Bhatti & Church, 2000, p. 184).

From Devastating Endings...

January 7th, 2007, 9:07pm

Dear Journal,

Yesterday, Saturday, January 6th, 2007 at 8 o'clock pm, my wee Parsley slipped away from us, through the veil, over to the other side. I don't know that I will ever forget the details, but I feel I should record them, just in case. In case of what? I don't know. Why should I record his death, but not his life? Why don't I write his life?

Parsley was my familiar and, even now, walks beside me on the Other Side, our Higher Selves forever kindred. Totally hedonic and possessing a vivacious sex drive, he liked to hump his stuffed bunny ('til her hat would fall off her head, poor thing!) and before that, socks, slippers, blankets, and the like. He also loved to eat and came looking for food at every opportune moment, especially when his favorites—peanuts, peanut butter, popcorn, and tuna juice—were out. He kissed foreheads. He had the very best purr in the whole wide universe; it was so strong, loud, and resonant! He could read me like a book...and I him and we were respectful of each other's moods. I'm not sure anyone has ever been able to understand me like Parsley could.

My heart is cracking, heaving, aching...IT HURTS! I miss you so much already, Parsley. You were so, so little when those neighborhood kids knocked on the door and asked me to take you. I wish you could've lived out your senior years here with us in our healthy, beautiful new home. I wish you'd gotten to roll around in the grass in our new backyard. I am thankful, though, that you died here, where we could bury you close to us. I'm thankful you didn't leave us in that musty, dirty old closet at the apartment that you began retreating to again and again when you got sick. I'm so sorry that you suffered. I am thankful that we were all together when you died...I'm especially grateful for that. No matter how natural it may be, I could not stand the thought of you dying alone.

We had a beautiful burial for you. White candles, crystals, tobacco, sage, the prayer wheel and sacred water were all brought out to honour you. We cried and smudged together. Brian dug your grave. We made your body comfortable in your basket with two of your favourite blankets. We laid one out underneath of you, then put your bunny in the bed with you and covered you up with the other. I washed you too, Buddy, 'cause I know you weren't able to groom towards the end. But you were handsome anyway. I washed your face and whiskers, stroked your velvety ears, and kissed you between the ears at least a thousand times. I didn't want to have to take you outside in the cold, in the dark, and put you in the ground. That was the hardest thing I've ever done...to put you in the ground. Brian lowered you in very gently and tenderly and so lovingly covered you with soil. I bought Gerberas today and put them in a vase next to the little alter I've set up at your site.

I'm going to miss you as a source of consistent comfort. I could curl my body around you, pet you, and you would just purr and be present for me. If I was lucky, as I

often was, I would get a kiss. You and me, Parse, it was always you and me. Now you're gone and I'm still here...without you. And I'm having a hard time with it. But I'm coping. Ceremony is good, it heals me. It brings me close to you and turns your death into something Sacred.

I am so thankful I was able to share 13 and a half wonderful, adventurous, amazing and sometimes chaotic years with you. I'm preparing to let you go. I've got one more ceremony to perform tomorrow night where I'll help to send you off, and witness your stepping through the gate, but I just need those few hours between then and now to hang on to you a little while longer, ok? It's a selfish act, but necessary, and I know you love me for it. Forever after that, Parse, as long as this is our home, I will tend the site where your body is buried (see Figure 3). Keep your ears perked, Buddy, because there'll be times when I'm going to be talking to you. I Love You, Parse. Good-night, Baby. Mama Loves You. xoxo



Figure 3. Parsley's gravesite with creeping phlox and white sage, early 2009

Before I could even become intimate with the land, Parsley essentially became our garden's first "planting." Sadly, we were forced to pick a random place for his burial, without knowing the progression of the summer sun. All winter long I peered out the windows of the sunroom and stared at that little mound with deep sorrow. Mournfully I plotted how we could enhance its beauty to honour him. Psychologically, I beat myself for failing to choose a sunnier spot. It was so dark there all winter long, and, like all cats, Parsley worshipped the sun. It was a long, cold winter and my guilt was as thick and heavy as a snow bank after a colossal snowstorm.

Brown (2006) claims the grief experienced over the loss of a family pet can elicit the same range of emotions experienced after the death of a person. For me, it was worse. Parsley loved me unconditionally. He never judged me and his acceptance and love for me was unwavering, a model of relating to others that humans could really benefit from, in my view. Where would I find that purity of love and acceptance now that he was gone?

Stephens and Hill (1996) wrote that a pet is not simply a substitute for a human. Rather it is a friend and family member who provide us with love and acceptance regardless of our gender, age, appearance, social or economic standing, or accomplishments. Compared to human relationships, which are often based on these external markers, and may be confusing, complex, and at times painful, "bonds with pets are unambivalent (*sic*) and relaxed, and perhaps more consistently intimate and loving" (p. 190). And unlike human children who grow to fend for

themselves, pets remain with us the duration of their lives, fulfilling our need to nurture and love on a daily basis. Given that pets offer us so much it is no surprise that an individual who has lost a dearly loved animal companion may grieve intensely.

Brown's (2006) perspective resonates with me when he explains that women have greater bonds with companion animals than do men, for women report greater feelings of despair following the death of a companion animal and women who do not have children living with them are more likely to develop strong bonds with their companion animals. Often, as a result of women's feelings of despair after losing a pet, they report seeking psychological support services more than men to cope with their loss. I was 17 years old and on my own when I adopted Parsley (see Figures 4 and 5). He and I lived alone together for almost seven years and during that time I came to rely on him as a source of affection, comfort, and humor—a friend that I could always rely on. Brown (2006) claims pet owners who live by themselves, are female, and have no children with them—people like me—are especially susceptible to a strong grief response and social isolation after the death of their companion animal. Thankfully, I didn't go through his illness alone. I had support from Brian and my sister, Kelly, who lived with us at the time. However, even now, five years later, I find it heart-wrenching to think back on Parsley's illness and passing.



Figure 4. Parsley, 1997



Figure 5. Parsley, 2003

...To Beautiful, New Beginnings

After Parsley's death, I went through a tremendous personal shift. From ages 17 to 24, I was on my own with Parsley. When Parsley died, Brian and I had been together for six and a half years. I was 30 years old. On January 30, 2007, I had this to say in my journal:

Will the grief ever end? I know in my heart that I'll miss you for the rest of my days... I've so long to go on without you! It doesn't seem right. And I'm developing a fear that I've never faced before your death, Buddy...I am afraid of being alone. I could never have dealt with your death alone, now I find I'm afraid to lose Brian. It can't happen. I can't be alone because I get swallowed by darkness and find it a struggle to find the light again....

On February 23, 2007, as if reading my thoughts, Brian proposed to me. As is the trend for many third wave feminists, I was not interested in an institutionalized marriage that involved gaining access to a license or legal recognition (Auchmuty, 2012); rather, as a lifestyle choice, I simply wanted to commit myself to Brian on a deeper, spiritual level through ceremony. We chose to have the wedding in the backyard and that meant that we had an incredible amount of

work to do in a short time as it was our first summer at the house. Only seven weeks had transpired since Parsley died and, still being deep in mourning, I wanted him involved as a part of our union. I understood innately that it was Parsley and the love that he had freely demonstrated that had triggered my need to love another in the same way, to want to love another unconditionally and for always. I was determined that Parsley's grave would be incorporated into the design of the garden and included in the wedding procession.

The Creation of the Garden, the Honing of Our Identities

There are many layers of identity associated with being a gardener. Identity and gender are closely linked because reactions and behaviours from others are often shaped by gender expectations and norms. According to Keisling and Manning (2010) identity refers to how people see themselves based in part on reactions to their behaviour from others with whom they interact in relationship, including human and nonhumans, as well as closely regarded inanimate objects such as a home or land. Self, others, and the environment, then, are three broad and overlapping factors that provide a basis for meaning when discussing gardens (Clayton, 2007). Self-related factors are found in activities that one does in the garden and their self-identification as a gardener. Factors related to others include social relationships that are made through gardening as well as the social consequences of being related with an attractive place. The physical features of the garden and its symbolic significance constitutes environmental meaning (Clayton, 2007).

Because the garden is a place embedded in our daily routines, it can be used to explore the interactions between home, leisure, and gender relations. A domestic garden is not simply a site where men and women assume different roles, but it is also a place that is shaped by the recurrent restructuring of gender relations. The garden is a space and place where gender relations are actively worked out and negotiated, which may have more general implications for understanding the role of the home and leisure in gender structures (Bhatti & Church, 2000; Parry et al., 2005). Parry et al. (2005), tell us that, despite the importance of gardens for studying gender roles and relations, very little research has examined them from a leisure perspective.

Self-Identity and the Garden

As a part of everyday life, gardens, the meanings of gardens, and ways of gardening communicate ideas about the role of leisure in home-making within which the family and gender relations are highly significant (Bhatti & Church, 2007). When it comes to the gendering of our roles in the garden as a place of self-identity, I ask myself: to what extent are my meanings and experiences of working in the garden different from Brian's? As you will see, I have discovered that the reproduction and resistance of gender roles in the garden is not always clearly evident (Parry et al., 2005; Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007).

When I consider the physical actions I undertake in our garden, I self-identify with those respondents in Bhatti and Church's (2000) study who maintained the need to see the garden as a location where heterosexual gender divisions can be renegotiated. Social stereotypes and cultural reinforcement have traditionally considered the view of tools and hardware "as anaturally masculine domain" (Bix, 2009, p. 39); however, my ability to transgress tool use as a male activity openly defies these stereotypes. I am healthy and strong and consider working in the garden a part of staying that way. I have never shied away from the shovel or the wheelbarrow, pushing the rotary lawnmower, or lugging can after can of water from the barrel to the plants in the heat of summer. I will work outside for hours on a crisp, sunny day in spring using shears and ladder to prune the trees and trim the hedges. I enjoy the heavy lifting of rocks to line a flower bed, I

adore the look of freshly spread mulch. I am not afraid of work and feel greatly satisfied when I witness the end results of such efforts.

However, Brian has an agenda all his own in the garden, and he is not interested in the least bit in performing any job that would be considered “soft” by his standards (Parry et al., 2005). Give Brian a job that requires heavy lifting, power tools, or the digging of a deep hole to house a tree and he will tackle the job enthusiastically. And it is largely for this reason that I do reproduce some traditional roles while working in the garden. Brian, for instance, does not plant, nor choose what to plant unless something he is really drawn to at the nursery catches his eye. And even when that happens he is not considerate of whether it is a hardy species or a perennial. He does not consider where it will go or how it will complement the rest of the garden. It is a purely aesthetic attraction that guides him; I am the one left to do the planning ... and weeding. The weeding never ends! Though the act of weeding does seem a stereotypically gendered activity that reinforces and reproduces oppressive gender relations as per feminist notions of housework as an unpaid burden of care for women (Shaw & Henderson, 1994), I do not perceive weeding as a constraint or burden in my leisure. Instead, I feel a responsibility toward my garden based on an ethic of care, that is, a high moral imperative to care for needs and sustain relationships (Day, 2005). My feelings of love and care for the garden move me to weed, as does my perception of weeding as therapeutic for me, an opportunity to yank, pull, hack, dig, claw, and cut—relieving pent-up stress and frustrations. In terms of the planning, I do most of it; in fact, I will often design a feature I would like to have in the garden, such as the stone wall or the octagonal bench under the spruce tree (see Figure 6), and Brian carries the job out. In this way, as was reflected in the article by Parry et al. (2005), I maintain a leadership role despite this reproduction of traditional gender roles.

For both of us, the garden is a place to express our creativity and unleash our inner artists. However, the mediums we choose to do this are very different. Brian’s projects are often of a larger scale, such as the aforementioned wall or bench. Carpentry and stonework are skills he takes great pride and pleasure in honing. My expression can be found in the flower beds themselves, and pottery is a favourite pastime. My pieces can be found spread throughout the garden, snippets of spiritual symbolism scattered selectively here and there (see Figure 7). As was found in Parry et al. (2005), Brian and I share responsibilities in the garden based on what we are good at and what we enjoy doing. We work very well together that way.

Women’s empowerment is related to myriad factors that I consistently experience during my time in the garden. A feminist conceptualization of women’s empowerment embodies “power to” as opposed to “power over” (Bunch & Frost, 2000). In regard to our garden, I have the power to exercise self-expression, self-esteem, and self-determination. I perform highly physical labour and do most of the decision-making. I acquire and master specific skills, organize my own time for leisure, and pleasantly engage in defying gendered expectations about appropriate leisure pursuits. And the beauty that I assist in creating while accomplishing all of these things does, indeed, lend my life a very gracious and fulfilling quality. These are all elements of my day-to-day lifestyle in part because of the existence of our garden (Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007), and our garden is a source of my empowerment.



Figure 6. Octagonal bench

Empowerment is a central feature of resistance, as a positive aspect of resistance and through the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and vision that enables one to resist (Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007). Resistance can be seen as an act or series of actions that enhance freedom of choice and personal control (Shaw, 2006). The garden offers me *my space* and *my time*, and I use this space and time in my leisure in a self-determined way that often resists and destabilizes traditional and normative interpretations of femininity (Parry et al., 2005; Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007). I counter the reproduction of oppressive power relations and work alongside Brian as his equal. In fact, I feel as though I have more power in the garden than Brian simply based on the knowledge I possess about gardening.



Figure 7. Goddess Plate

Social Gardening Identity

Gendered social relations, embedded in the domestic garden and gardening, often emerge from the way people talk about their gardens in relation to family members, neighbours and the wider community (Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007). For Bhatti and Church (2000), the garden “provides useful insights into not only the changing nature of leisure but also the role of leisure in the continual evolution of social relations” (p. 185). When it comes to the gendering of our roles in the garden as a social place, I ask: to what extent are my meanings and experiences of being with others (human and nonhuman) in the garden different from Brian’s?

When I reflect on our individual ideas of what it means to be with others in the garden, I see that both Brian and I value the garden for the good times it affords us. Countless barbeques and casual parties have taken place in our garden in five years. I love to play hostess; I adore leading guided tours for the curious or equally enthusiastic, naming plants and spontaneously digging out cuttings to gift my guests. Brian lives to play games and host small tournaments with others in our garden, such as ladder ball, washers, and darts. Sitting beside a fire, though, is likely our favourite way to connect with our friends and family. When all of these elements come together in a single day, I think we both classify it as perfectly choreographed. Kicking back with a glass of wine and garden gazing is an infamous pastime for Brian and me when it is just the two of us. While some of these social identities and activities that occur in our garden may be seen as conventionally gendered (e.g. the hostess/gamer roles mentioned), ultimately, the garden is a space for coming together to connect with ourselves, each other, and friends and family.

And there is a community of nonhuman others with whom we commune on a day-to-day basis living in our garden. The cedars burst with song sparrows and the spruce plays home to two pair of mourning doves and a multitude of chickadees. The grackles bully the little ones on our deck, hogging the seed we put out. The squirrels, too, grow fat at our feeder, on constant alert for our dog, ready to jump to the safety of our neighbour’s garage roof in a single, giant bound. I will never forget sitting under the spruce with Brian and almost getting knocked in the head by a little sparrow desperately fleeing the cooper hawk who stalks the neighborhood. The hawk blasted through the branches in pursuit, and right there, in front of our very eyes, we witnessed the sparrow’s capture and imminent death. The cycle of life making another turn.

I was amazed to read in Bhatti and Church’s (2000) article that the post-war garden was primarily seen as a masculine space, a replacement for the pub—I have always identified with

the garden as a feminine place; a space tended by women. In my mother's family, my grandfather, father and uncle tended the lawns, the fields or the exterior of the home while the women, my grandmother, mother, and aunt planted, picked, and prepared the food that Nana grew in the vegetable garden. Flower beds were highly prized and a source of pride for the women on both sides of my lineage. I understand now that the garden should not be regarded simply as either a masculine or feminine place, but rather as a place shaped by the continual restructuring of gender relations (Bhatti & Church, 2000), as it is at my home.

To be sure, women were highly integral to the success of our garden. A countless number of the plants found in our garden were donated by my stepmother, aunt, mother-in-law, and neighbour. And these women offered so much more than just plants. They offered advice, support, and plenty of compliments, thereby boosting my confidence and increasing my knowledge. Their gardens, each separate and unique, lent me ideas and inspiration for the layout of our own. According to Keisling and Manning (2010), social identity is formed with those groups or places in which an individual feels they fit. The social relationships facilitated by gardening as well as the social implications of being associated with an attractive place are socially meaningful. In initiating our own garden, I feel as though I have gained passage into the realm of fellow gardener by other women who are gardeners. I feel as though I have evolved in their eyes; like I have learned a new language and been accepted into a new culture. It is a feeling of belonging. The garden would not have become what it is without the generosity and understanding of these women. The space needed to be transformed for the wedding, and we had five months to make it so; we were uniting our families, building a community there, in that space. I think these women understood our need, my need, for it to be perfect. They wanted to help in the best way they could, and they did, thereby weaving the ecofeminist values of care, love, friendship, nurturing, and reciprocity into the creation of our garden.

Backs bent

Grime under nails

Immersed up to wrist in life-giving matter, rich and black

Strained knees stained

Bodies perspiring

For me

Giving beauty freely, living gifts vibrating with anticipation for home

Because you know

Because you have walked before me

Because you can

Splendor manifested

Blessed is the essence

Radiating with the energy of selflessness the blooms shine brighter

I see you in the bud and in the blossom

You are here

Love and gratitude

Environmental Gardening Identity

Kiesling and Manning (2010) tell us there is a spectrum of gardening approaches. These range from the conventional approach, which assumes there is an endless supply of resources to grow anything one wants anywhere one wants, to the ecological approach, which conserves resources and matches plants and places based on regional conditions. Ecological gardeners place great psychological importance on gardening in harmony with ecological processes. Often their expanded sense of self leads to more environmentally sound practices in their home gardens (Kiesling & Manning, 2010).

Our garden knows nothing of pesticides or synthetic fertilizers. If left to its own devices, the garden would happily tick along without us. The compost bin steadily breaks down the food that previously nourished our bodies and the newspaper that fed our minds. The water barrels (see Figure 8) retain each precious drop the eaves trough dispenses. And even water barrels are a precautionary measure, for the plants in our garden are tolerant of hot, humid summers and can go days and days without water. Wildflowers flourish; tiger lily, aster, phlox, white sage and coneflower stand tall and proud. Violets, yarrow, sweet william, coreopsis and geranium fill out all of the crooks and crannies. Fruit pops from every corner; raspberries, blackberries and strawberries love to play hide and go seek and the rewards are always worth looking in those hard to reach spots. Sour cherries (see Figure 9) and nectarines weigh down the branches of their life source. It is a very pretty picture to behold.



Figure 8. Water barrel



Figure 9. Basket of sour cherries

The Ultimate Conclusion

The Big Day

On August 25, 2007, our Sacred Marriage Ceremony took place in our garden. It was as though the foliage and flowers wrapped us all, bride, groom, priestess, and guests alike, in an enchanted embrace and brought a touch of magic to the ceremony that an indoor space simply cannot. Parsley's grave, nestled within the parameter of the circle we had carved out of the earth to contain our sacred marriage, was decorated with chunks of amethyst. It brought me tremendous comfort to know he would be part of the circle of friends and family attending that day, and close to me when I said "I do."

We were at the mercy of the weather, and it rained until 4:30 that afternoon. Evidently, rain on one's wedding day is good luck, so we took it to be a positive omen and kept our fingers

crossed throughout the day. Fortuitously, my intuition had guided me in scheduling the wedding for 7 o'clock in the evening, because August can be unbearably hot, and there was plenty of time to set up chairs and lights and still get showered and dressed. As guests arrived, they were welcomed by the sounds of drumming and smudged gently with burning sage. Instruments were offered and music was made together. When Brian and I stepped out the door, hand in hand, as equals, to walk down the garden aisle, the clouds (quite literally) parted and a ray of pink-gold sunshine spilt its soft, dusky light over our path (see Figure 10). The drummers' changed the rhythm to indicate our presence, and all of the guests turned to look at us from their seats. It was a moment I will never forget.

Brian and I co-wrote our vows with the priestess and discussed, in great detail, the intent and tone we wished to set for our wedding. The sacred marriage ceremony was to be the coming together of far more than just two people. We wanted to fully commit to and honour our relationship, our home, the land, and our combined families and bring them all together as one community for an evening. A wedding is one of those rare opportunities to bring together all the people you love most in this world, and we aimed to make it a rich and memorable occasion. That was the intent we set and that is what unfolded in that sacred time and space we deemed our marriage ceremony. I would like to share some of the special moments of our wedding procession with you, to illustrate my meaning more poignantly.



Figure 10. Brian and me

The Welcoming

Kimberly and Brian welcome us all here today to share in the joy of their ceremony of Sacred Union, of Sacred Marriage. Together we are weaving and strengthening the fabric of community, love and friendship that surrounds and nurtures these two beautiful people. May the peace and love in this gathering be felt across the world (I. Sisson, personal communication, August 25, 2007).

And we beckoned the Universe to also join us in our celebration:

Calling in of energies of all directions and Blessing of the elements

Great Spirit, Creator, Creatress, Goddess and God, Mother Earth, and Father Sky. We stand before you in gratitude for this joyous ceremony of the Sacred Union of this Woman and this Man. We call to all who create for us this Sacred Ceremonial Space of protection, wisdom, peace, and joy. We call to our Sacred Ancestors and all Beings of the Light who are present with us. We honour their infinite wisdom and are deeply grateful for the love they hold for us since always and for always. We call in the Totem Animals who walk with this couple, Hawk and Beaver. We call to the little people and fairies who play here with us and give thanks for the magic, laughter, and delight they bring. We call to this enchanted garden, this regal tree and give thanks for its life giving qualities as shelter and as Tower of Power. We give thanks for the birds and creatures who visit this garden and find protection in this Great Blue Spruce (see Figure 11). We call to the elements of water, air, wind, and fire and give thanks for their gifts of life. At this time we offer a special thanksgiving to the



Figure 11. The blue spruce

great Messenger, Water. We give thanks for its Life-giving and emotional qualities. We are reminded to flow with the river of Life, trusting that when we act in Love and Awareness towards each other that each new twist and bend in the river will bring us to witness new vistas and beauty together. We offer this prayer to the Roots of this Great Blue Spruce. May the beauty of the Sacred Marriage Ceremony travel out to the universe through this amazing Tower of Power. We call to the four directions: North, South, East, and West. Know that we are grateful for this opportunity to gather drawn here in this ceremony. We call your loving energy to this gathering to bless all present (I. Sisson, personal communication, August 25, 2007).

Raising the Energy

A pledge of support from our guests was made, and I will never forget their resonant “We do!” when the priestess asked them if they, as family and friends, would commit themselves to love and support us in our sacred union. The priestess blessed us. We exchanged our sincere vows, lit candles together, and exchanged rings. We signed our marriage certificate, and the priestess presented us to our guests as partners in life. We kissed passionately and were ceremoniously cheered. And then, holding hands as one (see Figure 12), we raised the energy upward and outward in order to share what had been consciously and collectively created amongst us with the rest of the Universe (see Figures 13 and 14).



Figure 12. Holding hands



Figure 13. Collecting the energy



Figure 14. Raising the energy

Revisiting My Story: An Ecofeminist Reflection

“...spirit is not found outside the world somewhere – it’s in the world: it *is* the world, and it is us” (Starhawk, 1990, p. 73).

Right from the onset, in its formatting, I see this paper as exploring the natural cycles of the Earth. From devastating endings, to new, beautiful beginnings is a re-creation of the unavoidable cycles of life, death and rebirth on a grand and metaphorical scale. In reading ecofeminist writing, and through my Earth-based spirituality practices, I have come to learn that nothing is permanent and that change is inevitable. We all age, we all die. But death and decay is an excellent catalyst for change (Javor, 1990), as was demonstrated by my own shift upon Parsley’s death of moving into a new understanding of my need to commit myself on a spiritual level to my partner, Brian. In not running from Parsley’s death, but rather in honouring it and working through it with spiritual tools such as drumming, lighting candles and holding ceremony, I actually move into a space of acceptance and celebration of his new eternal life and make room for evolution in my own life simultaneously.

According to Russell (1990) individual lifestyles, one’s everyday choices and behaviour, are key in affecting social change. Through what she calls “the politics of lifestyle” (p. 226), women (and all human beings) can achieve social change while gaining personal empowerment. She believes the politics of lifestyle are a markedly feminine politics in that it is inner and universal, personal and all-inclusive and it is based in the understanding that lasting societal transformation begins with and rests on transformation of the individual. In the first journal entry, I speak of ceremony helping and healing me. As I reflect on and contemplate the entry, I vividly remember those three wondrous ceremonies I held for Parsley during his three day journey through the veil. Drumming, keening, and reciting prayers of sincere love and gratitude for our lives lived together became a rite of transformation for me. Ornstein (1990) describes rituals as rites of evocation and transformation, mythic reenactments of a journey back to the matrix of being. And, indeed, for me anyway, there is a sense of being engaged in an ancient act while holding ceremony. I truly felt as though I was conversing with Parsley’s higher self, his spiritual essence, during his funeral ceremony. I felt that the ancestors and spiritual entities of those that walked this land before us were present and that Brian, Kelly, and I were connecting with one another on a psychic plane, even while standing shoulder to shoulder with one another. During the enactment and performance of rituals, Ornstein (1990) claims we come into closer contact with the subtle energy forces that shape, mold, and create reality. Rituals permit us to live a new myth, to experience the origin of the universe and its symbols, its traditions, its modes of expression. As we enter the ritual, we begin to embody these new knowledges and new feelings. Ritual, Ornstein states, hastens the processes of community creation and alliance building, of psychic transformation, and personal and group empowerment. This is reflective of my experience. Ceremony is empowering, transformative, and brings people together in a way like no other social situation can. Brian and I still receive compliments and comments from people who attended our sacred marriage about the sheer potency and power the ceremony encompassed. They often tell us they have never been to a wedding quite like it and with this feedback I see that our politics of lifestyle have, indeed, affected and influenced others. I am thankful for Ornstein’s ability to put these experiences into meaningful expression.

Ecofeminism and ecological gardening are also intricately interrelated. Environmental identity develops from an individual’s direct, personal, immediate, and emotionally significant

experiences with the natural world that change the individual's understanding of self (Keisling & Manning, 2010). My understanding of self in affiliation with our garden has been affected through deeply personal, significant, and (though sometimes sad) positive experiences, a sense of connection to others, and memories of special events, such as the ceremonies and social get-togethers I have mentioned, as well as private moments by myself or with Brian.

Keisling and Manning (2010) claim that to be an ecological gardener, one must develop a sense of self that includes nature and recognizes the similarities between humans and other organisms—to *literally see oneself in the other* (p. 317). This statement embraces an ecofeminist perspective, as an integral component of ecofeminist philosophy is interconnection. “We exist as part of a seamless whole in which everything is connected to everything else” as Russell (1990, p. 227) wrote. The weaving of my personal, social and environmental identities has led me to a clearer appreciation of my intricate interrelatedness to human and nonhuman others and a deepened commitment to the environment starting in my own backyard by exercising sustainable practices on a day to day basis. As I stated before, ecofeminism as a political practice promotes direct action to protect and enhance the web of life and advocates for personal lifestyle changes which are ecologically beneficial. My commitment to my garden has an influence that emanates out from my personal life and touches the rest of the world. It is my contribution to the politics of lifestyle, a way of modeling right relations with the Earth and it is noticed by others.

Starhawk (1990) asserts that ecofeminist spirituality makes certain demands of us. I have found this to be true. For when you understand that the Earth is alive, you are called to protect that life. When you understand that all things are interconnected, you are called to act with compassion toward all things. Interconnectedness and compassion are what my relationships with others are based on. The ethics of ecofeminist spirituality is where my deep-seated love for Parsley, for my partner, for the women in my family, etc. stems from. There are no hierarchies in nature (Plant, 1990), and as I have come to this intensely freeing realization, I have also become capable of demonstrating deep empathy and love for others. I believe the most shining example of unbridled love and acceptance contained in this story, though, is to be found in Parsley. Let us imagine, together, the immense shift that would occur within human relationships with all others if we cared for one another as our pets care for us!

Ecofeminist spirituality, for me, is life-affirming, personally empowering, and a strong expression of a lifestyle that recognizes that the personal is political. What I have come to realize, thanks to Warren (1993), is that it constructively challenges patriarchy and recognizes it as a dysfunctional social system. Ecofeminist spirituality contests the oppressive conceptual framework that drives patriarchy, while genuinely empowering its practitioners. In this way, my spirituality actually resists patriarchy “as a conceptual trap” (Warren, 1993, p. 124). Ecofeminist spiritualities thereby honour, explain, and acknowledge the role women's spiritual experiences play in challenging and surviving patriarchal influence (Warren, 1993). Instances of defying patriarchal influence during spiritual practices embedded in my narratives are subtle, but poignant. For instance, I chose not to be *given away* or presented to Brian by my father; rather Brian and I walked hand in hand to the altar to be married as equals. Within the wedding ceremony, itself, nonhuman and beyond-human entities such as the Ancestors, totem animals, elementals, Creator, Creatress, Mother Earth, Father Sky, the blue spruce, the birds and creatures of the garden, the element of water, and the four great directions were all honoured and called in and the guests were active participants in our ceremony. There were no hierarchical dichotomies dividing us that day. Our interdependency with all others was made explicit.

Plant (1990) tells us the real work of ecofeminism starts at home. It is not just about fairness or equality; it is actually, truly working things out with all our relations, and humans and nature need a new image to mend those relations with each other and with the planet. I suggest that ecological gardening and recognition of the unavoidable cycles of life, death, and rebirth, which are found effortlessly with each passing season in the garden, is an excellent beginning to creating a new image of self, one person at a time. In the garden, women and men can find a way to break down gendered stereotypes and reclaim their power in order to develop equitable relations with one another, nonhuman others, and the planetary whole. I recognize that there were instances where I contributed to the reproduction of gendered stereotypes in my own backyard in that I perform most of the soft work (e.g., planting, weeding, watering) and play hostess while Brian prefers to engage in chores deemed as hard (e.g., landscaping, digging) and interact with others via games. However, as is the benefit of autoethnography, in sharing my story I have been given the opportunity to reflect on and recognize where there is still room for my personal growth in defying these stereotypes in a compassionate and creative way. For instance, I can approach Brian as my teacher to push myself beyond the limits of my comfort zone, and to learn to wield the saw and hammer and become involved in future projects, thus expanding my confidence and skill set even further. As illustrated in my narratives, though, even when reproducing gendered roles in the garden Brian and I regard one another as equal because we admire and appreciate the talents of the other in nurturing relationships and the ongoing creation of our garden space.

In retrospect, I see that my leisure is enhanced by the garden in myriad ways. Life would not be so full, sensorial, animated, or complete without the presence of our garden. My relationship with my partner, the amity of my pets, the bonding with women, and the camaraderie of friends and family are all experiences that are supported and facilitated by the garden. I owe a great deal of happiness to my garden and human and nonhuman others in my life. I embrace ecofeminist philosophy and my practice of Earth-based, ecofeminist spirituality as an antidote to patriarchy in that it provides me with the means to weave and express a feminist ethic of care into my personal and social systems and customs.

In our practice as leisure scholars, our understanding of the interconnectedness of all things, human and nonhuman alike, is imperative to the ethical creation of knowledge and frameworks of leisure scholarship and practice. The ecofeminist task is to develop and value non hierarchical, respectful, reciprocal relations and discourse between all humans and nature and to repudiate values that do not recognize the feminine. The practical relevance of ecofeminism to gender and leisure studies lies in its ability to guide leisure professionals on the path towards becoming a more conscious community that embraces multiple perspectives, endeavors to empower others, illuminates the value and complexity of leisure for humans and nature, deepens the appreciation of our own perspectives, holds us accountable for oppression experienced by women and nature due to our research, models and praxis, and strives to de-centre the patriarchy. My garden and the telling of its story—how and why it came to be—is a living manifestation of these held beliefs.

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