

## Life on the Water

By Niomi Phillips

According to the Ancient Greeks, water is symbolic of renewal, blessing, reflection, purification, transition and transformation. Water, it seems, is my autobiography. In the Ancients' elements of life—fire, air, earth, water—the water element is also associated with autumn and with west.

West in the symbolism of literature is an inexhaustible subject. There's the biblical west of return to the Garden of Eden; the west of ancient literature, sunset and death; the European and American traditions of new beginnings and exploration. In the American tradition, the Pacific Ocean plays a prominent role.

The ocean, the lake, the river are my life!

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The Red River of the North, the border between North Dakota and Minnesota, floods regularly. The plate-flat valley is the bed of an inland glacial lake, and when the Red tops its banks, the muddy water overwhelms the prairie.

The hundred-year flood in 1979 introduced my family to life on a raging river— sand bags and dikes and creeping basement sludge: the five-hundred- year flood of 1997 reached over the tops of the sofa on our main floor. We fled to our cabin on the lake.

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The lake cabin is the iconic Minnesota family place: the land cleared by husband Monte with some help from me and our daughters, the pine-walled cabin built by him and his friends. I resented those building years. He was having weekend fun, bonding with his buddies, while I stayed in North Dakota to make sure teenagers behaved. When I whined to my mother, she said, with no sympathy, "There are worse mid-life hobbies than building a cabin."

At the time, I didn't buy into that or into my husband's, "I'm doing this for our family and our future." Of course, he was right. Thirty-five years later, this lake place is where our children and grandchildren reconnect and renew their ties. They have Christmas and 4<sup>th</sup> of July traditions here. Their reunions are recorded in a dozen photo albums, on video, and now I-Phones and I-Pads.

The seedling pines Monte planted after he cleared the brush are now fifty-feet high, and I sit at my computer looking beneath their branches at the lake. The morning sun reflects white clouds and the pines and birches on the opposite shore like a mirror.

In the years since the Red flooded and we retreated, I've cluttered this place on the lake with gardens and yard junk. Now I have to stop mucking in the dirt and creating flower pots of rusty pails to remind myself why we live here. I need to pause and appreciate the water and the trees and the music—the loon calling and the chorus of frogs.

"Have you ever heard frogs?" a winter friend, lifetime-city dweller, asked me. *Incredulous*, I thought, stunned into renewed appreciation.

The frogs sing at dusk. But in the dawn, the quiet on the lake is so profound I can hear the conversation of two fishermen trolling for walleye near the shore and the splash of the loon landing from his visit to nearby lakes.

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The Ancients weren't wrong in ascribing renewal to water. In the years of demanding professions, busy community lives, three growing girls, when couples can lose each other gently or even harshly, the lake was our balm, a weekend reconnection, a quiet transfusion.

Another water, the Pacific Ocean, has given us renewal in the retirement chapters of our lives. We found Kaua'i, not the island of Waikiki, but of Lepeuli beach, where, most winter days, a handful of snowbirds and half a dozen locals claim this dot on the ocean. We hike down a winding cliff path, shed our backpacks, and set our chairs under the kamani trees for the day.

I walk the shore to the mantra of the waves. The ocean, unlike our lake, is never quiet. On a warm, sunny morning when the tides are low, the waves *wash, wash, wash* to shore, like a Beethoven sonata. When the tides are high, it's the rhythmic crash and roar of a Wagner overture.

The ocean reaches to the horizon, infinite water and sky, and you *know* the world is round and immense and beyond your ken. There is no reflection on this water. It is unlike my lake which often mirrors the clouds, and where I'm protected from the horizon by pines and birches on the opposite shore.

I walk the ocean shore writing Pulitzer-worthy poetry, of course. I meet my friend Daniel. We nod and smile. Daniel composes music for ballet as he walks. In another life, Daniel soloed with the Toronto ballet. His parents live in Minneapolis, so he *knows* my other *place*.

Daniel is the son of a Lutheran minister, but he finds spirituality on the beach. In regard to God, he tells me, "We don't have to strive for answers. It may all be revealed someday, and it may be bigger than we can even imagine." He tells me to be open and appreciate spirituality however we find it—in church or at the beach.

An albatross swoops so low I feel the soft breeze from its wings. The Laysan albatross live at sea, return to Kaua'i in January, and nest on the cliffs. Like our Minnesota loon, this bird is revered and protected and touches something deep and elemental within you.

I once read, "If you love a Place, you love each other more." My husband and I love this place. The renewal and the blessing and the transformation that the Greek ancients attributed to the water element, affect us.

In spring, we return to our other water and wake again to the call of the loon. Whatever chaos in the world, the albatross and the loon are dependable.

