



"Waterspirit Woman"

# **Aboriginal Women, Water and Health: Reflections from Eleven First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Grandmothers**

**Kim Anderson**

**A PAPER COMMISSIONED BY:**

**Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health  
Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence**

**October, 2010**

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**PRAIRIE WOMEN'S HEALTH**

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## **Cover artwork**

Title: Waterspirit Woman Medicine, 2005

“In our traditional teachings First Nation women have a sacred connection to water. This woman carries the sacred water in a pre-contact pottery vessel, made by her own hands, created with riverbank clay. As she pours this blessed water the flowers grow with all of Creation’s love.”

Artist: Leah Dorion, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, [www.leahdorion.com](http://www.leahdorion.com).



# Introduction

The Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health (ACEWH) and Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence (PWHCE) have recently been collaborating on research concerning Aboriginal women and water. After conducting a literature review about Aboriginal women and water and a review of data for a boil water advisory mapping project, the Centres determined that cultural and community-based knowledge would add a valuable component to their exploration of Aboriginal women, water and health. They commissioned researcher Kim Anderson to interview Aboriginal Grandmothers<sup>1</sup> and write a paper on the subject. Dr. Anderson interviewed Grandmothers from BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Nunavut while Libby Dean (working with ACEWH) and Roberta Stout of PWHCE contributed to the research by conducting interviews with women in Labrador and Alberta. Executive Directors Barbara Clow (ACEWH) and Margaret Haworth-Brockman (PWHCE) served as co-principal investigators on the project, providing guidance and leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Grandmothers” is used here to denote senior Aboriginal women who have taken up a degree of leadership and responsibility in their communities. I have capitalized “Grandmother” to indicate that the term is used to signify a position of authority or responsibility, rather than a biological actuality or role as grandparent to children within one’s bloodline.



# Methodology

This project involved interviewing a small number of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Grandmothers from across Canada. Participants for the project were chosen from different regions of Canada and different Indigenous nations so as to explore the diversity as well as the commonalities among Aboriginal women and their relationships with water. We were, thus, able to capture the reflections of women who were raised with different types of water, including oceans, prairie creeks and rivers, the Great Lakes and glaciers. The cultures that these women come from are as diverse as the land they are based in, but there are common approaches that allow for the telling of a collective story and the possibility of collective action on a (Canadian) national scale.

Prior to conducting this research, approval was sought and received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Human Research Ethics Board of Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In addition to the ethical standards set out by the board, Dr. Anderson, an experienced Indigenous researcher, approached the Grandmothers in accordance with protocols and current research standards for Indigenous communities. Verbal consent was secured from all participants at the time of the interview to confirm their agreement to participate in the interview and the research project. Verbal and written consent were received from all participants after they reviewed and assisted in the editing of the final version of the paper to ensure they were satisfied with the result.

Participants had the choice to participate anonymously or to be identified by name according to their wishes. This is in keeping with the principles of “Indigenous copyright” and is especially pertinent when working with Elders. In providing Indigenous knowledge, one typically identifies who they are and whom they got the knowledge from, much in the same way that scholars identify their written sources. This system of validating knowledge, acknowledges teachers and thinkers who have gone before, and ensuring that the line of knowledge keepers and knowledge transmission is maintained.

The following Grandmothers were interviewed for this study:

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Nation</b>	<b>Home/Childhood Territory</b>	<b>Currently Residing</b>
Marie Anderson	Nlaka'pamux	Interior BC	Vancouver
Pauline Shirt	Cree	Northern Alberta	Toronto
Maria Campbell	Métis	Northwestern Saskatchewan	Batoche, SK
Rhoda Innuksuk	Inuit	Nunavut	Ottawa
Frances Murphy	Inuit	Labrador	Labrador
Linda Palliser	Inuit	Labrador	Labrador
Jan Longboat	Mohawk	Southern ON, Grand River	Six Nations of the Grand River
Josephine Mandamin	Ojibway	North Shore Lake Superior	Thunder Bay
Jean Aquash O'Chiese	Ojibway	Southwestern ON, Lake Erie	Onoway, AB
Dorris Peters	Sto:lo	Interior BC	Mission, BC
Ellen White	Coast Salish	Southeast Vancouver Island	Suneymuxw First Nation

These eleven Grandmothers were approached according to the protocols typical of their various nations. Gifts, and in some cases tobacco, preceded the interviews. Interviews were open ended and unstructured, allowing to Grandmothers to take the discussion to where they wanted it to go. A general outline of the project, including questions that covered the topic area was given to them in advance for their consideration.

The general areas and questions to be covered were introduced as follows:

**Significance of Water**

We'd like to learn something about the significance water in your community and/or cultural traditions.

(i.e. the meaning of water in your culture, spirituality, and history and/or its significance politically or economically in past or present.)

**Water and the Roles of Women**

We'd like to learn something about the relationship that women have to water in your community and/or cultural traditions.

(i.e. what roles and responsibilities do women have, and how are they distinct from those of men?)

### **Issues of Water Quality**

We'd like to learn about any challenges that you or your community may have experienced that are related to water and water quality. (If you live in an urban setting, you may want to speak generally about what you see in other Aboriginal communities you work with).

(i.e. where do people get the water they use; do you have adequate supplies of good drinking water, is the water supply threatened in any way; do you use water from other sources when you are on the land, and how is this different?)

Due to cost limitations, the interviews with the women from Labrador were done by phone, but all others were done through in-person visits. Interviews were taped and transcribed and sent to the Grandmothers for review and approval.

Several themes came out of the interviews, which were coded with NVivo qualitative research software. These themes provided a structure for the following manuscript.



# Reflections of the Grandmothers

## Water is Life

*Water is what sustains us. Water is what brings us into this world, and water is what keeps us in this physical world. And so it's our life.*

Jan Longboat

The relationship between water and health is direct and foundational; as the Grandmothers pointed out, all life is dependent on water. They spoke about how water is critical for maintaining life within the physical realm, commenting that the human body is mostly comprised of water and that without the hydration that water provides we perish. As Rhoda said, “we *are* water, and we need water to stay alive.” Rhoda and some of the other Grandmothers also commented on how significant water is in terms of cleanliness and the prevention of ill health and disease. “Water means health,” Rhoda remarked, “because if we can’t wash, we’re not healthy. And if we can’t wash our children and their clothes, we are not healthy.” Water is thus one of the most significant elements in maintaining physical health and well-being; a point which would likely be raised by most people if they were asked about the relationship between water and health. What may be distinct about the Aboriginal Grandmothers’ responses is that most of them also referred to the spiritual quality of water, and to the significance of this spirit in terms of creating and sustaining life.

A key point raised by many of the grandmothers is that water is life because water is spirit, and without spirit we have no life. This came out in Ellen’s interview, as she talked about how the elders in her community would say “when you take the water off the body, you cannot call in the spiritual energies.” Without water in our bodies we are dead; not only because of the dehydration that happens in the physical domain, but because of a lack of the spirit energy that signifies life. This understanding of water as a spirit energy is at the core of what many of the Grandmothers talked about when asked for their thoughts on water.

A few of the Grandmothers began their interviews by speaking about the role of water as a conduit in the transition from life in the spirit realm to physical life on earth. As Maria pointed out, “You can’t have birth without water. That time between the spirit world and being born, you can’t have that without water.” Pauline talked about this role in terms of “the great, shining, pure lake” that transports human consciousness from one realm to the other. She spoke of the role of the Grandmother that is the keeper of that lake in the spirit realm. According to

Pauline's teachings, "we come through that third level of consciousness—the Spirit, the water realm." We need our "spiritual grandma" who "holds that vessel, that everlasting flow of water" on the other side to help us make the transition. This spiritual grandmother then helps us with our "earth grandmothers" in birthing. Up until the 1950s in many Aboriginal communities, these earth grandmothers were midwives and/or older female relatives who were there to tend to young mothers and catch the newly born.

In Maria's childhood community it was considered a grandmother's job to welcome new life into this world. Maria noted that it was also a grandmother's job to send you back to the spirit realm, as older women were also responsible for dressing and preparing the dead for this final passage. The understanding was that there was a spiritual grandmother on the "other side" to engage in the transitional act of releasing and receiving. As Maria said, "my understanding of death is that when you leave and you come out the other side, the old lady is over there to catch you. So I just assume that you don't have a dry birth when you come out the other way either." She pointed out that "the old lady washes you when you come in, and she washes you when you leave." Maria recollected that grandmothers on this (earth/physical) side washed the newborn babies and those who had passed on. They also worked with specific medicines for birth and death, which they picked from particular bodies of water, and which will be discussed later in the paper.

According to Jan's teachings, a person's spirit brings everything about who they are when it makes the transition to the physical world, and this is carried in the water inside the womb. "Our very feelings, our very thoughts—right from conception—are in that water," she said. "And because we've personalized it through thought, when that water brings us it will always stay with us." Jan explained that this process signifies a commitment between the spirit world and the physical world, emphasizing that "we made a pact that we would never leave each other, and so that water will always take care of us."

This notion of water as a conduit is represented in how water is referred to in Mohawk. As Jan explained, "when they speak about *ohnkanos*—that's how you say water in Mohawk—that doesn't just mean water. What it means is that spirit; that spirit that brought us here through the universe, through the spirit world, and that will always take care of us. It means how we got here spiritually." Pauline also made reference to the role of water as a conduit in the womb, stating "you are in the womb for nine moons, which is the foundation for your life. In there you are taught and cared for by your mother—everything within the surroundings of that water (*nibi*)."

The distinct relationship between women and water according to many Aboriginal cultures is connected to the fact that women's bodies have the capacity to host and sustain the life force that water represents. As Jean pointed out, women carry water during pregnancy, and the first part of giving birth involves the release of that water. Pauline talked about how the baby spends nine moons in the "water vessel" that is the womb, and how birth is "like the Saskatchewan river; you are flowing so fast in there and you are sliding as you come out." She noted that "the spirit of the water helps you at birth, and the spirit of the child within the water vessel is called and courageed by the grandmothers (Nokomis), who are the helpers and midwives on the earth level."

Women are thus what Josephine calls "carriers of water," and the care of a pregnant woman is critical for this reason. In Pauline's teachings, there is a spiritual grandmother who takes care of the water inside a woman's womb, but Pauline also noted how important it is for those in the physical world to do the same. She remarked, "When you are in your mother's vessel during that time, it's the responsibility of the mother to keep herself clean by helping the child to listen to take care of and understand the medicine bundle teachings for its life journey. [The child also needs to be] nourished in a safe environment. It's the father who takes care of the environment, takes care of the food and the water and the drinks for the safety and care of the baby and the mother." Rhoda noted that water is also involved in sustaining new life through the mother, "because for women, we produce milk; babies are able to drink from their mothers."

All of these connections are manifest in the significant role that water plays in Aboriginal practices related to pregnancy, birth and newborn care. Ellen talked about how "before the baby is born, they bathe the woman to make the baby appreciate where he or she is." The mother thus connects with the baby by also being enveloped in water. Ellen noted that sometimes babies "rebel," causing morning sickness in their mothers as they don't like being in the liquid of the womb. Ritual bathing of the mother can help with this process. Ellen also described some of the protocols which involved water during birth in the past:

*(A long time ago) two elders were always hired to witness where this baby is going to come out. And they have a way when the baby comes out. Some of them cover their faces and some really know to watch. [Prepubescent youth], around that age or younger, [also] all lined up there. They had been bathing and all that, purifying themselves—to see, to visualize, what is going on,*

*and to hear. They want them to be there, maybe before the puberty rites are going to be worked on them....*

*...The baby is born and is praised first. Giving water, giving some more water, and medicine...*

*...They said the old people would have their hands in water, and then they were given this baby, the newborn one. And they would lick it and touch it and smell it. Why? They were identifying the smell, the aroma and the DNA... the breath of body. You know, the energies of the body are right there. So if anybody says that baby doesn't belong to these people, oh gosh, they'll be right there.*

Ellen explained that after they cut the cord, they would let it drip while the elders walked around with the baby. The prepubescent children in attendance would touch the blood as it dropped, rubbing it into the soles of their feet, “so they would continually be walking on Mother Earth and getting help from Mother Earth.” They would then touch it to different parts of their bodies that were connected to their work in the future. These connections of water, blood, the earth, community, past and future were life sustaining.

Pauline spoke about the use of water during labour and birth in her culture, illuminating how birth is understood as a ceremony:

*The grandmas do the boiling of the water and the medicines and all of that... The placenta needs to be looked after, and there is ceremony for that. And however it is going to be, it always has to do with the water. The emphasis is placed on water; the spirit of that [nibi]. The aunties/women prepare the food and do the cooking, and they have a feast there. And as they welcome the baby, the father sings his clan songs welcoming the baby [too]. The baby is given that first drink by the mother [colostrum], and is washed with medicines.*

Pauline pointed out that “every time you bless the water, every time you sing, every time you acknowledge the spirit of the water, it becomes medicine, because it is spirit.” She also mentioned how much water is involved in “that great ceremonial act” that happens at conception; “the sweat, the tears of joy or happiness or sorrow when the father gives the seed and the mother receives it in her prepared vessel; the water is there all the time!”

The role of water as part of the larger feminine body of Mother Earth (as she is understood in many Aboriginal cultures) was raised. Jan remembered this impression from her childhood, where she maintains that they were “very connected to all forms of water:”

*I remember when the dew came. Like when the coolness of the upper world meets the warmth of the earth, it forms the dew and the mist. And the old people said “That’s Father Sky and Mother Earth mating.” They are mating now. And now these little droplets of water will come down and they will water the earth so everything will grow. Isn’t that beautiful? So they would say “go out there and take the mist or the dew and rub it on your skin because that’s spiritual growth.*

Jan noted that their mothers and grandmothers also used to encourage them to play in the light rain, to “let that water wash you.”

A number of grandmothers drew the equation between life-giving waters carried by women and what occurs with Mother Earth in her life-giving cycles and abilities. Josephine talked about her affinity with Mother Earth, because of the shared experience of carrying water and releasing it at birth:

*When the baby is born, the water comes out first. Water gushes out. The affinity with Mother Earth [comes from] the same [process]. I began to realize that Mother Earth does the same thing in the spring when she is going to give birth to the young. Her water starts to gush out and spring water starts to flow. And pretty soon, life comes.*

Waters that are prominent in the springtime are associated with birth and renewal, and in many Aboriginal cultures there are ceremonies that celebrate these first waters. Jan referred to the “sweet water” ceremonies that are conducted with maple syrup among her people:

*We’re told that in the spring (the birthing cycle) [we are] to take water from the trees. So that’s the first sap that we are given, that sweet water, that wahta, that maple water. [We are told] to drink that, to purify our body and detoxify; to cleanse not only the physical body, but the spirit, the emotions and the [mind]. [We] take that water right from the tree. It’s that first medicine the creator gives us in the spring, to purify ourselves after the long*

*winter. So we take that water into our bodies again to make us strong, to renew our whole being.*

Jan learned from her elders that when water changes form—as it does in the spring—it is given a “brand new power.” The benefits of engaging with this power are evident, for example, when snow and ice change to liquid form. Jan explained:

*They say that when the water first flows in the spring, because that’s a brand new cycle, you take the water against the current; you grab that power. And you make the first medicine in the spring because it’s got brand new power again. We still do that today. We go out when the ice becomes water again and starts flowing. We take that water from the current and we drink it and make spring medicine from it.*

Pauline also referred to the cleansing and awakening powers of spring waters, remarking on the role that the fish play in cleansing the sediment of the waters all over Turtle Island. “The spirit of the fish clans also work closely with the water spirit as it does its spiritual work,” she said. The spirit of these fish clans also receive assistance when they call other spirits to drum. “You’ve probably heard it in the springtime,” said Pauline, “you know, big thunder sounds in the water (when the water breaks). That’s what they call the great spirit drum. They awaken everything.”

## **Water is Sentient, Water Forms Relationships**

*There’s that feeling of sensing Mother Earth. There’s times when I stand by the water, and I can feel the pulsing, the pulsing of the water standing by the shore. I can feel that connection myself with the water.*

Josephine Mandamin

In her interview, Jean pointed out that “Mother Earth is a spirit and water is a spirit.” This understanding of water as spirit leads to an understanding of how relationship can be established between water and other entities. The sentient and interactive relationship between Mother Earth and the sky waters came across in this description by Ellen as she talked about the healing properties of water:

*Mother Earth would say, “I’m so dry now.” The rain comes.  
“Okay, I’m not so dry. I’m warm now.” And the steam goes up.  
And they said that it was the second water that comes down that’s*

*the strongest. It delivered messages to people who were qualified to receive that message.*

The relationship between women, Mother Earth and water was raised in many of the interviews. Pauline talked about the connection she made between herself and the waters of Mother Earth as a young girl. She recalled:

*One of the most beautiful times was in the springtime. I would see these little rivers or little streams, and I knew that was me. I could smell it and feel it in my body. I became part of that beauty, that stream, because I knew that was me. And it was because I had those teachings from when I was a little girl in my mother's vessel. I knew that was me flowing there, beautiful, just gurgling away.*

Maria grew up in Northern Saskatchewan where there were creeks, and she remembered being told by her grannies that these creeks were the veins of mother earth. She commented on how this affected her consciousness:

*When you are a little girl, that [image] really makes you think about the water [and] the little creeks in a different way. You think about them snaking all over the land. That was the blood veins of the earth. You know that if you don't take care of those things, you can bleed to death or you can get diseases or infections from them.*

Jean also commented on how water is the blood veins of Mother Earth, pointing out that just as humans are mostly composed of water, so is Mother Earth. She remarked that re-routing waters underground is like re-routing the veins in our bodies. The relationship between waters within our bodies and the waters in our environments remind us of how everything is connected, and how life is dependent on these connections. The relationship between water and humans is thus understood to be responsive and reciprocal, as will be discussed in the next section.

The sentient quality of water was also evident in the way the Grandmothers remarked on its changeability, and how they described it with a broad range of anthropomorphic qualities. Some of the Grandmothers discussed how specific bodies of water carry different types of spirit energy and/or have different work to do. Pauline explained:

*[As with] everything, it's spirit. Like some people are strong, some people have a rough time, [etc.]. It's the same thing with water. All water is spirit; all water is special because it comes from that same level. But they do their work in certain places, like people do their work in certain [areas]. [For example], my mom and dad were very artistic, [but] I can't bead. I don't do any beading. But I can do other things they can't do. So it's the same thing with the water. All water is spirit and special but they have to do their work in [particular] places, or [do] special things.*

Maria provided an example of a lake in her childhood territory that had a particular job to do. She talked about “Notokwew Sakhahikan,” the “old woman’s lake,” remembering that it was a place they used to visit with their families when they were doing summer travelling to pick berries and Seneca Root. “About an hour or two before we got there, my grandmas used to say ‘shh... talk softly,’” she explained. “Now when I think about that place, I always think about these soft voices and really gentle sounds.” Maria noted that children were never allowed to play or swim in this lake; it was only the old ladies who waded in, which they did to pick medicines they would later use for midwifery and their work around death. Notokwew Sakhahikan thus nurtured the medicines that elderly women used to assist with transitions between life and the spirit realm, as noted previously. Maria further explained that there was a story associated with the lake, that “there was something that lived there that had to do with family and kinship.” Her father had told her that a marriage had happened, and the offspring of this marriage had cemented an alliance between humans and whatever lived in that water. “This formed a kinship so that the way we would treat the water or anything that came from the water would always be the way you would treat any human,” she said, “...[just] like your grandmother or your relatives.”

Dorris told a story about a lake in her territory that also had healing properties. It involved her great-grandfather’s family, and is worth sharing in her own words as it demonstrates the strong connections between her people, healing properties of the feminine as they are connected to water, and the life force that resides in certain bodies:

*[My great-grandpa] had a home in Hope, on the reserve there. He used to go to that lake and pray and do healing for other people ... Anyway, what happened was that his son got leprosy and different people told his son to leave the family because his sister might get this disease.*

*So [the son] started living by the lake. He was staying there, and he was getting worse and worse because this was affecting his face and his skin. So he thought he'd commit suicide.*

*There's a bluff there. He went up there to the top of the bluff, and he jumped in the water. When he got in the water, he hit the roof of a house at the bottom of the lake. He landed there, and he was alive. And the people that lived in the house came out and looked at him, and said, "Oh, you came to the right place." So they took him in the house, and they put him to bed. They said that they know how to cure the leprosy. They had a name in our language for that.*

*Do you know what they did? They washed their hands in the water. [And] they are living in water! They wash their hands in the water, and then they put spit on both of their hands. They spit in it, and that's what they put on him. And the next day, he was all better. So he stayed there and helped the people.*

*Then all of a sudden, [this] mask showed up.... So they told him that he can go home now because one of the masks had appeared. And the first one he got had the shawl to go with it. It was for his sister because their dad was a healer.*

*They told him how to get out of the lake, and he can come back through the same way. The water went under the ground, and that's where his parents were getting the spring water from.*

*When he got there, there were no scars or anything.... and his parents were very happy to see him. And they were surprised because they figured he'd died of this disease. He asked them where his sister was, the oldest sister. They asked him no questions but they called his sister. She was working at a garden or whatever she was doing. So he took her and he brought her to where the water is, and he got her to pull the rope out. He untied the rope from the tree, and he helped her. He didn't touch the rope. He was helping her by her body, her waist, and was pulling it out. And his dad got there when the mask came out. And he said he knew that [it was for the sister], because it was women's*

*medicine. So she got it out and the mask was dry and so was the shawl. And so grandfather knew.*

Dorris told more of the story, which involved the son going back to the lake and helping the underwater people with their healing work. “He even went and got some people that were sick there—that [came] there by the water,” Dorris said. “And they healed them and let them out again.” During this time, a second mask appeared which the son tied to a cedar rope and had the second oldest sister pull out, as it was hers to work with. Dorris noted that other masks were found in other lakes in the region in the same way.

The connection between the people and this lake has to do with the gifts of healing that came out of it, and those were gifts of women’s medicine, as they were in Maria’s story. Dorris’s story also has to do with kinship, reciprocity and caregiving, which define the type of relationship that people can develop or nurture with such life-enforcing waters. In other instances, the powers of the water can be more dangerous, for according to many of the Grandmothers, water can offer all types of messages and energies. Marie remembered that in her home territory there were “little deep places” they called *Hahaatgo*. “And that means there’s some kind of bad spirit there that could take you away,” she said. She added that “there are certain areas that nobody ever goes to.”

In her interview, Josephine talked about the different kinds of messages she got from each of the Great Lakes when she did an extended ceremony with them in the form of a “Mother Earth Water Walk.” Between 2003 and 2009, Grandmother Josephine, along with other Aboriginal women and their supporters, walked around the perimeter of each of the Great Lakes, and finally up the St. Lawrence River to where it meets the Atlantic Ocean. On these walks they would carry a staff and a pail of water from the body they were walking beside. The Mother Earth Water Walk thus afforded participants extended periods of time to engage with the Great Lakes, each in turn. As a leader in all of the walks, Grandmother Josephine came to understand that each had very distinct qualities and messages to communicate at this time. Beginning in Lake Superior, she was struck by the beauty and unpredictable nature of the lake. She recalled:

*I was standing on the shoreline of Old Woman Bay, the sandy shore. I was standing there and the water was so still, so beautiful. I [was] just in adoration of the water. And [I was] just praying for it and praying to it. All of a sudden a big wave comes and it just hit me right up to my knees. It was so still. All of a*

*sudden, it just came like that. I took my tobacco, and I'm standing and just laughing and feeling tickled by the coolness of the water on my feet. It was playing with me. I wasn't scared. I was just surprised. "Oh, you're teasing me," I was telling her.*

Josephine commented, "You know, you don't know what [Lake Superior] is going to do from one moment to the next. It's strong and can survive many, many things. It's very strong. So I have that feeling that Lake Superior is a woman."

The second walk, around Lake Michigan, brought an appreciation for the caring presence of the ancestors. Along the way, the walkers saw pictographs on rockface in one area, large rocks with imprints and human shadows in another. At one point they visited an area where there was a "council of trees." Josephine described the experience there:

*There were great big maple trees; four on this side, and five on [the other] side. On top they were shaped almost like an umbrella or an awning, but they were not touching...*

*I took my pail and I walked around. Not just me but the others too; [we] walked around and offered tobacco to each of the trees. And then when we were finished I kind of felt compelled to give them water. Because they were so old-old and dry. So I took the pail and I had a cloth, and I wiped the trees. You know, to give them some wetness. And when I got to the one over on the [other] end, I heard that man go "Hey!" I looked at him and he said, "Look, look!"*

*I looked up and water was coming down from the tree. It was crying. And it wasn't sugar water, it was pure water. This was in June. Maple syrup doesn't run [at this time of year].*

*I just prayed for that water and prayed for the tree, and I finished what I was doing.*

After this experience, Josephine asked their local guide if Aboriginal people frequented the area. When she was told that Aboriginal people had not been there much since the settlement had been taken over by Jesuits, she replied, "You guys should come and fast here and really pay respect to these grandfathers." She noted that the trees were probably standing in the rows as such because "this must have been a sacred ground at some point in time."

Josephine told other stories about how the walk around Lake Huron demonstrated “the gelling together as male and female,” while Lake Erie demonstrated to the walkers “how people can be dead to themselves.” Lake Ontario was a place where the walkers felt a heaviness, and this was most profound around the nuclear plants. As Josephine described it, “None of us touched that water for some reason because we felt it was so polluted... We were afraid to; there was something in the water we were afraid of.” She relayed the story as follows:

*We passed Toronto and [got to] Pickering. There was a point where we felt really tired. [Someone] said, “this water is so heavy.” I was wondering why I was so tired. I picked up the pail. It was the same amount that we always carried. And for some reason it was extremely heavy. We took many turns that day until we crossed the border to New York, and it was still the same. We even changed the water. To replenish it, we changed the water again. We thought it wouldn’t be the same, but it was heavy.*

Josephine noted that she heard a news report after the walk which described Lake Ontario as “heavy water” because of the pollution.

Josephine’s stories demonstrate both the sentient quality of the water, and the personal relationship that one can develop with it. Marie provided another example of personal relationship in talking about the role of water as a teacher in her life. At puberty her mother had instructed her that “water is a precious gift” and that “you look to the water for teachings.” This is something that has come back to her in her adult life, as she pointed out:

*Throughout my life I’ve looked to the water. It can have many faces. It can be calm and neutral. It can be dangerous. You know, it has many reflections. And so I think that it is a very good teacher for us. So what I realized in my life, when I get into a pickle or something happens to me, I go like the water. I go still, calm, neutral, like a still lake. And when I need strength, I can think of it another way, that it’s moving and we continue to move. And it has a goal. It goes to the ocean. It has many, many teachings.”*

Many of the Grandmothers spoke about the waters of their upbringing and about how these waters influenced their identity. They pointed out that communities were typically established near water in the past. As Frances said, “Before contact,

everyone lived in their family groups, and they moved around to their camps depending on the season, depending on the animals. And you always set up your camp near your water source. That was really important.” Maria mentioned that the Métis had always settled along rivers. In spite of the proximity to water in many of these communities, however, water was something they had to work hard to get, as it often needed to be hauled in. In some cases, Aboriginal communities were pushed off the lands with the best water access and/or had to ask for access to natural water sources and wells from the settler population. Because it wasn’t easily accessible, the Grandmothers learned to respect and protect water in their early years.

Over time, Aboriginal women have had to adapt to modernization and environmental degradation, and their relationship with water has had to weather these changes. Jan reflected on how she had been intimately connected to the river and creek in her childhood community because they drank directly from these natural sources, drew this water for washing, bathed and swam in it, and caught their food there. She reflected that their land-based lifestyle allowed for a close relationship with water in all its forms, stating, “we were out there connecting with all of the different elements that are part of creation—you know—the winds, the water, the sun, the moon.” Jan went on to discuss how this connection was fostered, and pointed out how it has changed:

*Our life was built on understanding the cosmology, the sky world. Because again, water was our life...So I believe when I was growing up, we were closer, and I think it's because we were right in it. We lived in it. It seems like it's not that way today because you turn on a tap. And not to say that water is any less sacred but it's a different kind of connection today. It's a totally different kind of connection than it was when I was growing up and connected to. All the differences of water right from a solid form to a fluid form again, and the thunder beings and the moon...That is where I learned the connection and how everything worked together. That was my first understanding of how everything came together at certain times of the cycles. At wintertime, it was different than spring and summer and fall. And our old people truly, truly understood that. They understood that language of –what they used to say, it's the language of the universe. 'You've got to understand the language of the universe.'*

Like Jan, most of the Grandmothers lamented that they had once been able to drink directly from the natural waters in their area. This relationship with water has been hard to give up, and Rhoda, Josephine, Linda and Frances all talked about how people in their communities still prefer to get drinking water from natural sources where possible. Linda noted that in her community, “There’s a few women that usually go and get water directly from the lake or the pond so they wouldn’t have to taste the chlorine that’s in it.” Frances explained that “even though almost everybody in town has running water, a lot of people still go and fetch their water from the brook. All through the winter they go over on their snowmobile or they walk over.” When asked why people do not like to drink the chlorinated town water, she replied that “it’s the taste. You can taste the chlorine. You can smell it. Even when you’re running the tap and filling a glass, filling your kettle, whatever, you can smell the chlorine.” This was compared to the “pure” and “ice-cold” brook water that was said to be “really clean and so good for you.” The brook water was also connected to traditions of having a “boil up,” an outing on the land where “you take some food and take the kettle and go to near a brook to get some water to have tea, boil tea.”

The notion that water has varying characteristics came up in most of the interviews, and the Grandmothers demonstrated their sensitivities to this. Josephine mentioned that the fasting she does on the land four times a year “awakens the senses,” and she talked about being able to smell water. “There’s a different smell for different waters,” she said. “Swamp water—I’m sure you know that. [But] salt water smells different, spring water, lake water. You know, different lakes. Each of the Great Lakes smell different.” Rhoda talked about how people in her community prefer water from melted icebergs “because you can’t smell the land from it.” This water is harvested from iceberg chunks that are found floating in the Arctic Ocean. Elders in particular do not like drinking the water that comes to the community by truck, so iceberg and other natural waters are still used for making tea and for drinking water. According to Rhoda, the water from the reservoir has the unappealing taste of rocks, mud and chlorine.

Other grandmothers talked about their drinking water preferences, indicating that they, too, are sensitive to the contemporary ways in which we treat water. Jean, for example, stated that bottled water tastes “dead” and Josephine teaches that “anything wrapped in plastic dies.” Thinking about the amount of bottled water we now massively consume, she asked “Are we feeding our people dead water?”

These different qualities, characteristics and scenarios involving water allow for numerous types of interactions and relationships with water, and this is especially

true for those who are open to it. Many of the grandmothers talked about a particular characteristic of water—that of healing—and this is the subject of the next section.

## **Water Can Heal**

*Water will agree to help you with anything you ask of it.*

Ellen White

As previously mentioned, water signifies life and water sustains life, and this translates into a number of healing properties and applications. In her interview, Rhoda gave an example of how water from natural sources can have a healing effect on people. She mentioned that Inuit elders who are transferred to southern hospitals often crave their own water, and sometimes the community is able to accommodate these needs. Recently, she was involved in a case where they flew in a cooler with iceberg chunks for a cancer patient in an Ottawa hospital. “He was so sick, and he was thirsty for some good water,” she said. “Not store bought water, not from the tap, but real clean water.”

Ellen talked about how water has always been used in ceremonies stating, “We use it in spiritual practices; we use it in the Big House; we use it in burials—We use it for everything.” She explained how water is used in naming ceremonies for babies and at puberty ceremonies. Her own puberty passage involved being taken to the ocean and meeting the rushing waters between the rocks, becoming lodged in one place and then “unstuck” with the assistance of the water, all of which was elemental to the healing gifts she would carry throughout her lifetime. Ellen also mentioned that people traditionally used water at marriage ceremonies, stating “It’s almost like the priest’s blessing of holy water. They always washed—not crossing like that, but right down the back.”

As a healer who was trained by her Elders before her, Ellen learned that water could be used to cleanse people, just as it was used for ceremonies to mark life transitions. “It’s the same way we were trained when you do healing to get rid of all the [toxins],” she said. “Grandpa Tommy used to say ‘you get a lot of muck on your body when you’re walking [around].’ ” Water was used in these circumstances by healers who were called upon to cleanse the body of impurities. Ellen explained that, “We use water to cleanse certain parts of the body. It’s like the knife when the doctor cuts you.”

Marie had memories of certain healers that worked with water in her childhood. She talked about an old man who used to work with a basin of water. “He [would] put it on a little box in front of him, and when he sang, you could hear a loon,” she said. “Then he took the rose bush when he was singing and sprinkled water on us. He was singing all the time. And you could hear the loon and him singing.” Dorris remembered that her father had undergone a water cleansing as a boy. This involved being dipped in an icy river in the wintertime for four days in a row. She noted “he never got a cold or anything—but they were preparing for something. I don’t know if it was healing or whatever it was.” Unfortunately, Dorris’s father was taken to residential school and it is likely that whatever training he was undergoing was interrupted. Dorris noted, however, that he was the only one in his family who underwent that cleansing, and that he grew up to be a good hunter and the caretaker for his extended family. A similar reference to cleansing and preparation was shared by Ellen, who talked about how people used to ask for protection from the water, and this was done before dunking themselves in it four times.

Ellen and Marie both indicated that water can be used by anyone to cleanse and to heal. Marie relayed this by telling a story about how an Elder had once taught her to use the water for her own healing. She had been traumatized, and was told by this Elder: “Marie, a long time ago, the water was the healer for our people. I think it’s time you went to talk to the water.” Marie told of how she then learned to connect to the water for her own healing:

*[The Elder told me] ‘As soon as you wake up in the morning, right before it gets even light, (the little light is coming)... you get up and you go to the water. It doesn’t matter where you are; go to the fresh water where it’s running—like a river or something like that, a creek.’*

*[I lived in town at the time, and] the water was probably a mile away. So I went there. And she told me when I got there [that] I had to break a rose bush, any kind of wild rose bush. She said, “You break one of those and you talk to the water, and you tell the water your troubles. And you put the rose bush in there, and you sprinkle it over yourself. And you pray, pray to the Creator to help you.” She said “that will help you.” That’s all she told me.*

*So I went and I did it. And after I got home, I phoned her and I said, “I did it; I went to the river this morning.” And so she said,*

*“Okay.” (I guess she was giving me the information little by little, I don’t know). She says, “Now you go do it again tonight before it gets dark.”*

Each time Marie returned from her visit to the water the Elder told her to go back again the following day or evening. This went on until she had completed four days and four nights of visits. Marie concluded by saying “You know, it really did help... It cleared and closed [what I was experiencing] in a good way.” She noted that “since then, any time I have a difficulty, I do the water treatment.” She talked about how it is possible to “do the water treatment” in the modern settings we find ourselves in, and provided an example of how she had advised a younger family member to work with the water in her shower at home. In this instance, Marie replicated the instructions that were given to her by the Elder thirty years previously.

Ellen shared a similar teaching about how we can use our “everyday” water in the shower to help with cleansing and healing:

*When you go into a shower and you praise the water, you say, ‘Help me. I don’t feel very good today. Cleanse this body.’ You don’t plug the drain. ‘Cleanse this body and take all the stuff that is not pure in my body away. We love you and we thank you.’ Four times. You don’t keep turning around. Because if you keep turning around, this energy will... it’s like a big long rope, and you’ll be all tied up in that. So you just do it one, two three, four, and you are washing all parts. And then you back out. You thank it and you back away, and then shut it off. And stand there for awhile before you get out of the shower.*

Ellen stressed that water carries spirit energy whether it comes from running water “way up in the woods,” within the human body, or out of the shower. Healing involves learning to work with those energies, and this begins with respect. Ellen’s teachings are to back out of the shower for this reason (to avoid presenting to the water where “all the unwanted ugly stuff [that is not used in the body] comes out), and to avoid getting tangled up in the energies, which can be “like a long rope” that twists and tangles around us.

Like Ellen, Josephine made note of working with the directional energies of water. She explained how they had to work with these energies on the Mother Earth Water Walk:

*When you pick up the water [in the pail] first thing in the morning and you walk it all day, it flows just like the river. You can't bring it back; it has to keep moving. If you want to go back, you have to go around like the river. You can't step back with it. Because our water songs tell us that water is ever flowing forward. In [one] song, it says the water doesn't go backwards.*

The energies of water can thus be used for healing, but in order for this to work, there must be respect for how these energies operate. In turn, there needs to be reciprocity in the care. If we take care of water, water will take care of us.

## **Reciprocity, Responsibilities, Hope**

*We've known for a long time that water is alive. Water can hear you. Water can sense what you are saying and what you are feeling. There's been a place where I put tobacco in the water, where the water is so still. It was dead. I prayed for it. I put my tobacco in the water and my tobacco started floating around. So the water came alive. It heard my prayers. It heard the song. So I know it listens, and it can come alive if you pay attention to it. Give it respect and it can come alive. Like anything. Like a person who is sick... if you give them love, take care of them, they'll come alive. They'll feel better. It's the same with our mother, the earth, and the water. Give it love.      Josephine Mandamin*

The reciprocal relationship between people and water was clearly defined in Aboriginal communities of the past, for, as Ellen said, “the old people always knew what the water was and what the water said and how to connect with it.” A big part of this reciprocity involved simply giving thanks and appreciating the water for what it offered. Maria shared a memory from her childhood in which “the old people would take that water, hold their dippers underneath their tin cups, and they would drink that.” She remembered that “the words that they would use to describe that water, that it was really pure and clean—it was almost like a religious experience to drink it.” Respect for water and giving thanks was thus a fundamental teaching in Maria's childhood. She pointed out that “when we were little kids, the first thing we were taught was that when we'd come to the water, you'd put tobacco down—partly for the relatives in the water and then for the water itself, just to show respect. [This ensured] that it wouldn't harm you, and that you'd only get good stuff from it.” Jean teaches that these traditions can work in the

modern world, emphasizing that it is good to put down tobacco before using water –even water for taking a bath.

Jan shared a memory about how the elders in her community acknowledged and thanked the water, as follows:

*I used to always watch the old people when it would thunder. [In] the spring when the thunders came back, [the elders] would get up in the middle of the night. We have these pouches, they're called thunder bags. And that's one of the things our women made. And in this thunder bag is tobacco and a pipe. The old people always had a bag right by their door. So when they heard the thunder beings come back they would get up and fill their pipe with Indian tobacco and smoke to the thunder beings. Because, they said, 'the thunder beings are bringing us water. They are bringing us life to sustain us. And we give our greetings and our thanksgiving again to the thunder beings.' And they smoked. They let that message go up into the universe with that tobacco, to carry that message of greetings, of thanksgiving. They said [that] if we don't thank [the thunder beings], if we don't greet them and thank them, they may not come. And if they don't come, we don't have any life because we won't have any water. They bring the water. So they come and they are ready to give us water again. They're ready to water our gardens and ready to bring the food up for us to sustain us again in this physical world. And they would never fail to do that.*

Songs are another way of caring for and acknowledging water. Pauline discussed the role of water songs during birth, explaining the necessity of singing these songs to the spirit grandmother who helps in this transition. “What we’re saying in those water songs is we are welcoming the spirit of the water,” she said. “And by welcoming the spirit of the water, you are taking care of the life force here on earth.” Pauline commented that we are now forgetting to do the work of offering tobacco, singing the songs and thanking the spiritual grandmother at birth. Josephine also spoke about how important it is to maintain water songs, pointing out that they sang many songs along the Mother Earth Water Walk. “I developed my own songs for the water, how it sings, how it sounds, how it feels, how it looks,” she added. “I made my own songs for it. I’ve sang to the water for that purpose.”

The Grandmothers were asked whether women had specific roles or responsibilities with respect to water. Some of the women spoke to the roles of men and women in gathering water in land-based communities. Rhoda noted that it was the men's job to ensure that women had enough water for the family before they went out hunting. "Our fathers worked very hard getting blocks of ice and stacking them up, especially every fall," she said. "They made it as easy as [they could] for all those mothers... so that all they had to do was just chop from it and take what they need." The men would make big dome shaped structures out of ice, "and that would last you for the winter for your storage and things" said Rhoda, explaining that the men would also saw and pile up sheets of ice.

In Frances' childhood community "it was both women and men who were responsible for getting water and making sure that it came from a good source." Today, however, women in her community have a more direct relationship with water. She pointed out that "it affects women, especially in the home. Here, it's a lot more women than men who are responsible for feeding the children, and they need water to do that. They might be the ones who make the call to find out what's going on with the water at the town council, to find out about the water advisory and that sort of thing. And [they make] sure that it's addressed." Linda commented that in their contemporary community, the women use water more than the men, "because they are the ones to do the cleaning." She noted that they also spread the word around regarding water quality. "I guess everybody is health conscious now, and they don't want any sickness," she said. "I think they go and tell everybody to boil the water—they spread [the word] a lot faster than men do."

Some of the Grandmothers talked about how women have a special connection to water because of their lifegiving abilities. As previously described, women are known to be "carriers of water." Pauline explained that "it's the responsibility of the woman to look after water because of its connection to that third level of consciousness, where the great, shining, pure, beautiful lake is." She added, "as women, it's our responsibility to keep the essence—the spirit of that water alive by ceremony." Jean noted that women not only have the responsibility, but also the power to take care of the water, and she pointed out that it is women who pray over water in their ceremonies.

Jan talked about how "women carry the water message," and linked this to teachings about women's cycles and the moon, stating "our grandmother the moon looks after all of the waters, from the biggest waters to the littlest waters and the tides. And so our grandmother [is] *etisoto*—what that means is our grandmother will always take care of us because she's there orchestrating the waters and life." Jan

referred to (full) moon ceremonies, saying “we were taught to celebrate every twenty-eight days when she comes to show her full face and remind us of our role and responsibility as a woman.” These ceremonies involve lighting a fire, “that male energy,” and balancing water through ceremony, so that female and male energy are balanced again. “It takes both to make a life,” Jan said. “And so [we] never forget that every twenty-eight days it's our role and responsibility to thank our grandmother for bringing life forever, since the beginning of time. We drink that water [at the moon ceremony], take in that water in to give thanks and thanksgiving.” Women’s lifegiving cycles are, of course, linked to these cycles of the moon, and so the connection is quite clear. But as Josephine said, “our relationship with water is not just [about] our relationship with giving life; it’s a relationship [based in] thinking how we live on this earth. That’s really a lifelong learning.”

In some communities, elderly women had a strong and distinct relationship with water. Maria remembered that “it was our grandmothers that always had to do with the water. They were the ones that warned us. They were the ones that told us the stories. They were the ones that went and picked the medicine. Water was an important part of their work and their life.” She noted that it was the elderly women who always made offerings to the water as well. She talked about their relationship with “old lady lake,” Notokwew Sahkahikan, stating “I remember my granny going into the water. You know, the [old women] would walk out in the water and they’d bathe in it. We weren’t allowed to go in the water and bathe in it. We couldn’t even walk around the edge of it. But they would go in the water and walk [up to their knees].” Maria also noted that, in general, water was considered to be a feminine spirit. “In our stories there are creatures that are masculine that live in the water,” she said. “But with the water—I’ve never heard of it referred to in any other way than feminine—I’ve never heard anybody talk about [the waters] as grandfathers.” This connection might explain the kinship that elderly women had with the water.

A sense of kinship with water has inspired many of the Grandmothers in this study to take action. Jean talked about the motivation for making change, saying that “according to our traditions, we have family ties with animals, birds and fish life. No one thing is greater than another. We are all family, and we are family to everything, so if one of our family members dies, like water, then we would be sad. Water is Mother Earth’s blood; her lakes, rivers and inlets are her veins, and all life needs water to sustain it. [Losing water] is like losing a mother or brother or sister, that is the pain we feel when we lose our family member, water.” All of the Grandmothers voiced concerns about water problems in their communities and on the global level. Ellen talked about how she had been part of a fight to get

uncontaminated water on her reserve. Jean talked about strip mining, oil drilling, and contaminated lakes, lamenting that many of these lakes used to be places of great spiritual importance. “There is water everywhere, but very little real water left,” she said. Frances and Linda talked about boil water advisories and water rationing in their communities—issues that are all too common in Aboriginal communities across Canada. Maria’s reflections about environmental damage connects many of the themes raised in this paper to the urgency for action. She said:

*Anything that I learned about water or heard as a child was always associated with the realm of matasawin (spirit). So when you think of that and see the tar sands or you see places where people are polluting water, it is pretty overwhelming. And you really think about what is going to happen to us.*

Fortunately many of the Grandmothers also had messages of hope. Now that the Mother Earth Water Walk is complete, Josephine devotes herself to educating other people about the need to take care of the water, and she encourages people to work from a place of hope. She talks about the beginning of her work with water, which was grounded in a prophecy she heard:

*It was in 2000 when Eddie Benton was at this big gathering in Pipestone, Minnesota where we go for our sun dances. He was one of the speakers at the gathering to the people there, and he talked about the prophecy—that 30 years from now, an ounce of water is going to cost the same as an ounce of gold if we continue with our negligence. [He] talked about how women have to start working to pick up their bundles about the water, and how water is going to be so precious that there might even be wars about water. When he finished talking, he said, "What are you going to do about it?" to all the people. It seemed like he was looking straight at me when he said that, but I know he wasn't. It just hit me, that what I am going to do about it? And I thought about it for a long time. I thought about it and talked to people about it. And that one little word 'if' brings hope. There's hope in that. Every prophecy has a message of hope. Even though prophecy may be dire or whatever it is, but there is hope in every prophecy. This one is that little word 'if'—if we continue with our negligence, that's what is going to happen. And if we don't, what could happen? We could change things around. So there's that hope*

*right there. If we discontinue our negligence then we could really make things happen. So in that winter of 2002, that's how the idea came that we were going to walk around Lake Superior with a pail of water.*

Josephine reported that people often respond to her stories with “when I go home I’ll adopt a lake or a river. I’ll clean it up and pray to it and give it respect.”

After hearing about water walks, Maria was inspired to initiate one at the river near her home. Her reasoning was as follows:

*We live by the river but what do we know about it? People come and we walk down to the edge of the water. And sometimes people put tobacco in there but we’ve never walked along it see how damaged it is or what grows there or what lives there. We’ve never made a conscious effort to do that. So if we are going to have sweat lodges and we’re going to have fasts and stuff, and we’re going to sit on the hill for four days fasting, then I don’t think it’s going to hurt us to walk along the river for two days or whatever and just find out what is happening to our water, to our river. And let it teach us.*

The people who went on this walk picked medicines, observed the river and reflected on their relationship to it. Some carried pencils or cameras to record their experience. “Eventually they will do something with that knowledge that they got, whether it’s paint or write or whatever,” said Maria.

The Grandmothers spoke about the potential within technologies and systems that can be used to clean up the water, and are hopeful that young people will take up the education that is required to do this work. But they also stressed that everyone needs to be aware of the global water situation and take action in some way. “All people need to come together to make a shift in the way we are living with and treating water,” said Jean. “Ceremonies and prayer can make great change.”



## Conclusion

This paper fits within a larger body of “Aboriginal women and water” research that has been conducted by the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health and Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence. Whereas the other work has demonstrated some of the challenges that Aboriginal women face around water in their communities, this paper offers some insights into the complex understanding of water in many Aboriginal cultures, and the many ways in which Aboriginal women relate to it. Many of the Grandmothers drew attention to the spiritual significance of water, and they talked about how women have a distinct spiritual connection to water because of their ability to carry the waters of new life. Their stories also demonstrated the nuances and variability of water as they understand it, for in their cultural ways; water can be sentient and can carry different levels of power and purpose. Although many of the stories centered on how water was understood and related to in the land-based communities of their youth, the Grandmothers stressed that the values and relationships vis. a vis. water are just as relevant in today’s world. Good health is dependent on how well we manage our relationships with water, for if we are disrespectful or careless with this life force we put ourselves at risk.

These stories leave us with the question: “What are we doing to foster our relationship to this powerful and complex entity?” Some of the Grandmothers provided examples of what they are doing to re-establish and/or maintain a healthy relationship with water. Grandmother Josephine engages in practices great and small; from the Mother Earth Water Walk and sitting on Committees related to the revival of the Great Lakes, to starting each day with the small ceremony of thanking a glass of water and making an offering. By working with the water in this way, we foster its health as well as our own.

As the Grandmothers pointed out, we need both technologies and ceremonies, and most of all, we need to be mindful. It is our hope that this paper has given its readers an opportunity to reflect on the complexities of water and our relationship to it, while at the same time acknowledge the simplicity with which we can begin to do something about the state of our water today. We are grateful to the Grandmothers who participated in this study for helping us in these deliberations.

