

## Circling Back

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Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta

*“Home will always be here, but first I have to leave*

*To come back with my own mystery.”*

*-Red Moon Road*

I never planned to get a degree. I grew up on a homestead in Canada’s Northwest Territories, an hour and half by bush-plane from the nearest road. Named after the Hoarfrost River that flows into Great Slave Lake about half a mile to the east, it was a near-empty acre of sand, lichen, and spruce trees when my parents arrived in 1987 from the US. I have never known another home. For eighteen years, my days were filled with cutting trails and firewood, running sled dogs, hiking, paddling, sailing, swimming, hunting, fishing, picking berries, gardening, hauling water, and doing homeschool. It was an upbringing unique from outside perspectives, but like most children, I took it for granted. Isolated though we were, I never longed for a different place. My love for the Hoarfrost is one of the few constants of my life. During my four years at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta, my degree program, ironically named “*Global and Development Studies*,” has fostered a focus on the *local*. That focus has come with the realization that perhaps what I uniquely have to offer the world can be found in the place I left.

At eighteen years old and facing the looming end of high school, I was not a particularly reflective or critical thinker. A future that took me even temporarily from my home place was daunting but I could not have said why, and my best career idea to that point was to work seasonally as a racehorse exercise-rider. Then into my world came twelve Augustana students for the sixth biennial instalment of AUPED 281, a course colloquially referred to as “Dogsledding.” Bonds formed quickly. Our conversations raised questions about our places in the world as we transitioned from adolescence to adulthood. Leading by example, these liberal arts students were the catalyst for my shift to what Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard calls the “ethical stage” of life (qtd. in Mündel 68). I became “concern [ed] about doing what is right and just in [my] relationships with others” (Mündel 68), and in my relationship to place.

With no better plan, I applied to Augustana. When I came to Camrose, Alberta and this thousand-student campus in September 2014, a degree was the last thing on my mind. My Augustana experiment was to be eight months of trial and error, and then I could skedaddle back to the Hoarfrost and say that I *had* tried something else. I fervently promised myself and anyone who would listen that I would be back home to stay before long. Though they never said it outright, I could hear the murmurs of those around me, my parents included, who expected me to change my tune as soon as I immersed myself in the world away from home. Our little cluster of cabins and trails on the east arm of Great Slave Lake would surely lose its lustre when compared to the activity and community of university life.

Four years later, I was wrong about the eight months, but they were wrong about my rejection of my home place. My liberal arts degree has drawn me closer to, not further from, my connection to place and especially the Hoarfrost. In my first semester English class, we studied a poem by William Wordsworth. As the shepherd Michael walks over his land, Wordsworth writes

that “these fields, these hills/...were his living Being, even more/Than his own Blood” (75-76). I understood for the first time that a soul rooted in place was an old idea, not one that engaged me alone. The essay I wrote for that first-year class was the first of many through which I have explored what I live and breathe in my home place.

I will graduate in June with a B.A. in “Global and Development Studies” (GDS). When asked by well-meaning family and friends to explain what I am studying, I usually turn to specific stories. My three-week GDS placement coaching cross-country skiing on a remote Cree reserve ignited a passion and opened the door to meaningful employment after graduation. Class conversations with Alberta agrarians Takota Coen and Don Ruzicka taught me that wise responses to global challenges can come in one’s local place. Speakers at Augustana’s “Spirit of the Land” class and conference each November bring fresh ideas about economy, cultures, and the land. This conference was where I first heard it said that each dollar I spend is a vote “yes” to a certain way of treating people and resources (Magnus-Johnson, 2014). Readings of Naomi Klein, Wendell Berry, and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in my second-year “Spirituality and Globalization” course taught “neighbour love” in a globalized world (Moe-Lobeda). The resulting awareness of the ripple effect of my every choice has been a blessing and a curse but is the impetus for locally-focused purchases and an ongoing interrogation of my own wants versus needs. The degree itself is something that has come almost incidentally as part of this process, more of a back-pocket resource than one I will have tattooed to my forehead. Convocation implies a sense of closure, but the learning that led to convocation continues.

Even with my newfound “global” perspectives, the Hoarfrost identity still holds my heart. In Camrose, hundreds of miles from home, I turn on the tap and wonder about the source of my water, then wonder about the source of my wondering. That curiosity stems from eighteen

years of direct connection to my heat, water, and meat — but it is a liberal arts degree that makes me articulate those thoughts instead of taking them for granted. While a liberal arts institution is far from the only place where one’s life-long assumptions and narrow worldview can be challenged, I believe a place like Augustana, in its faculty and students, provides fertile ground for those conversations to take place. In the oft-repeated words of our Dean Allen Berger, at our best we learn to “listen deeply in hopes of being changed” (Berger). I have been changed. If I spend my life at the Hoarfrost now, it is because I see that my connection to that place is something rare and valuable, not something I cling to because I am too scared to try anything else. The irony is that one would expect me to finish my “global” degree with wanderlust and endless travelling ahead. Instead my liberal arts education has combined with my own upbringing to reinforce an identity rooted in a beloved home place.

Gary Snyder wrote that “the most radical thing you can do is stay home” (56). Four years ago, I did not understand. Leaving home for Augustana was the most radical step I had ever taken; staying home was the safe option. Now Snyder’s words make sense. Circling back to the Hoarfrost is radical. It is my response to the challenge issued over the course of my degree — making a commitment to a place in a transient world.

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