

How One Weekend Gathering 30 Years Ago Changed Everything

By Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg



Early KAW Council members at a gathering in British Columbia in 1988, including, second from left, Mark Larson, Michael Almond, Suzanne Richman, Mike Greever, Joy DeMaranville, Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ken Lassman, and Dan Bentley

I was 22, living in Kansas City, completely fed-up with the world of dating in general, and guys in specific, and not sure how I was going to make a living with or in spite of my writing habit. I was also in a car with my friend Ira, heading west to KAW Council's first gathering. We had a lot to talk about, so much that

we missed the exit out of the city four times until we finally got ourselves rightly on I-70. By then, we decided to stop in Lawrence, a place I had never been, to see some of his friends. A short stop turned into dancing at a Tofu Teddy concert at what later became Liberty Hall, and then, because it was late, staying at a friend of a friend's house. Walking up the stairs to that East Lawrence bungalow, I felt a voice over my right shoulder say, "This is your home for the rest of your life."

The next day, I arrived at KAW Council and met people who would become some of my best beloveds, the core of my tribe and community, and among them, even the one I would marry. Within a year, I moved to Lawrence, and the story unfolded from here.

This weekend is the 30th anniversary event for KAW Council. Why I went in the first place was that I had discovered bioregionalism a year before, and realized it was everything I had always sensed and known since before I had language. At the same time, bioregionalism is hard to define because it's more lived experience than tagline. Ken says it's more a meditation than a definition, but in a nutshell, it's about living in balance with place, and from where you live, and a deepening lifelong relationship with the earth, learning how to live sustainably, ethically, soulfully. When looking at any social, economic or political issue, bioregionalism offers a deep ecological

perspective: community becomes eco-community, political issues are weighed in balance with ecosystems or bioregions, economics focuses on community-based and ecologically-responsible enterprises. While we talk of specific bioregions, and within them, specific watersheds—such as the Kansas area watershed here that starts in western Colorado and ends as the Kaw river drains into the Missouri at Kansas City—we also talk of reinhabiting where we live. Bioregionalism is all about being where we are literally, metaphorically, ecologically, creatively.

All my life, I've been in love with the sky, the trees, the birds, the living earth. Even as a girl growing up in Brooklyn, I would draw pictures of trees for hours and over years before I became a woman who wrote poems about trees for hours and over years. I always sensed that God lived in the wind, perhaps even was the wind, which is a way of saying that to me, whatever is holy is essentially the life force itself. This is what Dylan Thomas calls “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower.” So for me, bioregionalism is a way to name an ecstatic relationship with the life force, which is what, on my better days at least, guides my life.

Finding others of the same stripes was equally ecstatic, and in no time at all, I was learning about and falling in love with both the prairie and the people. The first gathering led to many more seasonal forays all over Kansas as well as many a meeting and

potluck. We read Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," tried out recipes using wild edibles, wrote poetry and even had a traveling poetry bioregional roadshow for a while, sang incessantly, and got involved with each other in short-lived or long-tracking ways. When I say we shared birth and death, I'm not talking metaphorically: we've attended the births of one another's children, and in recent years, led funerals for some of our people.

Our tight-knit community and how we took bioregionalism to heart and home led us to help organize the first continental bioregional gathering, held in Missouri back in '84, and to organize the prairie bioregional congress in '02 as well as to be part of a growing network of bioregionalists throughout the U.S., Mexico and Canada as well as La Caravana, a group of traveling, performing (music, dance, daring feats!) bioregionalists from South and Central America. The congresses we've had in British Columbia, Maine, Mexico, and other points remain landmark events in most of our lives. I remember Danny saying to me that the prairie congress was the best week of his life, and I feel the same way.

Because our gatherings are all about creating a ceremonial community together—one in which we present workshops, network, share resources, and develop the friendships that sustain us in our activism and art—it's no wonder that there's a kind of

family feeling among us. I'm happily linked to a network of people from Cuernavaca to Toronto, and I feel like I could enter into most people's homes, open their fridges and have a snack, read their magazines, and take a nap on their couches.

The bioregional movement has been a source of creativity not only for me but also procreation too (those congresses are potent forces!), and all of my children were brought up in this movement. Natalie attended her first KAW Council gathering when she was two days old and her first continental bioregional congress in Texas when she was two weeks old. My sons were conceived at or shortly after bioregional congresses.

It wasn't so much the workshops offered on subjects such as ecofeminism or organic gardening at the congresses that shaped us all as much as it was the sense of community, and the collective wonder, respect and purpose we found together. I've learned about facilitation and group process, creating and sustaining local arts and culture, and the art of living with growing awareness of the seasons and cycle, all informing how I write, facilitate and organize.

It all started at a camp between Lawrence and Topeka, a touchstone that reminds me of what I want to cultivate most in myself to play well with others, do work that matters, and pay attention to the gift of being alive.

Reprinted from *Everyday Magic: A Field Guide to the Mundane and Miraculous* by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Meadowlark Press, 2017

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