

One daughter and two foremothers
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How do we honour our female essence in the midst of our rushed lives?

"Mum, I'm so stressed. I'm behind in all my classes, my skin is broken out. I'm a mess!"

I was standing in the pharmacy of a medical clinic, waiting for my 19-year-old daughter's prescription to be filled. I took a good look at her; her shoulders were rounded, her normally cheerful face clouded with anxiety.

Jessie had been feeling sick for more than a week. She'd missed classes at her college and forced herself to work through exhausting shifts at her part-time job in a busy grocery store.

"Do you think you can make it to class tonight?" I ventured.

Back came the tense reply. "I have to! I can't afford to miss any more school."

A few years ago, I'd read about the opening of a *hammam* in Vancouver. The *hammam* was described as a Near and Middle Eastern purification treatment involving steam and "gommage," or exfoliation.

"I've got a wild idea. Come with me."

We walked a few blocks east and found the *hammam*. Opening the door, I breathed in the scents of aromatic oils and heard the burbling sound of a fountain interwoven with middle-eastern music. Luck was with us; they could take her for a treatment. After exchanging her shoes for sandals, Jessie was whisked off down a passageway.

A few hours later she emerged looking so transformed that I immediately booked an appointment for myself.

The next week, I was back in the *hammam*. Lying on a slab of marble, I surrendered to the silken steam enveloping the chamber in a white fog. My body changed from solid flesh to melting moisture.

Jasmine, the attendant, explained the importance of the *hammam*, which had its roots in 7th century Islam. *Hammams* were often built adjoining mosques so worshippers could be cleansed and purified before prayer. As Jasmine scrubbed me down with black Moroccan soap, she commented on how strange she found young western women's attitudes to nudity: "They walk in the street in such revealing clothes. But when they come to *hammam*, where it is private and for women only, they are embarrassed of their naked bodies."

It is pretty weird, I agree.

Jasmine leads me to the Sultana Lounge and shows me a divan plumped with cushions. Water plays in the fountain and the lilting music beguiles me as I again lie down. The lounge is intimate but exquisite, with arches and pillars and glowing colours. Jasmine brings me a brass tray with a date square and mint tea. I fall into a reverie.

In perfect idleness, my mind is free to wander: What (if any) traditions do Canadian women have that might be similar to the *hammam*? I'm thinking about Canadian women like myself, descendants of the early immigrant settlers. I can hardly imagine the extreme hardships my 19th century foremothers had to endure. Still, most women of my generation live at a frantic pace in these early years of the 21st century. How do we honour our female essence in the midst of rushed lives?

Then, suddenly, a strange female voice comes into my mind. Who is she? She's very old, from another time and place. Is she great, great, great, great grandmother Elizabeth Forbes, an immigrant from Scotland to Ontario's Lanark County in 1821? Or perhaps it's Agnes Stevenson, another four-great-grandmother who came to Bytown (now Ottawa) in 1827?

What would Elizabeth and Agnes think about their descendent lolling in the eastern sensuality of a *hammam*, reclining on velvet and silk, nibbling a date square? Most likely, they'd agree with their Upper Canada contemporaries, the pioneer writers Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill. A stern, Scottish woman's voice comes into my head:

"To succeed in the New World, a settler's wife should possess the qualities of thrift, constant industry and self-denial. She looketh well to her household and eateth not the bread of idleness."

No, Elizabeth and Agnes would not approve of my eating the date square or sloth. And although times have changed, faint echoes from my Presbyterian-Scot foremothers still ring through my mind, translated into the language of my times: You really shouldn't spend the money, waste the time, be self-indulgent when there's so much work waiting to be done.

Will Jessie hear these voices as her life gets busier and busier? As I get ready to leave the *hammam*, I call home.

"Hi Jessie, I'm on my way home and I wanted to talk with you about the *hammam*. Have you got time?"

"Sure, mum. I don't have much time, but I'll put the kettle on for tea."