

interview by Sorcha Feilnar

# Return *of the* Völva

A Völva (“staff-carrying woman” in Old Norse) was the traveling culture bearer of the Middle Ages and Immigrant Era of Scandinavia. The völva carried the luck of the land and the people within her memory, and could speak the öorlog of others, manipulate *wyrd* fibers (energy lines) and reach deeply into the mind and soul. As women completely free of traditional bonds or oaths, the word völva came to mean “evil magic doer” or witch, and in modern Norwegian it means “lady parts” and is considered an insult.

Kari Tauring, a Nordic roots artist, has been exploring the meaning of völva within the context of her family, Norwegian cultural traditions, and within modern Heathenry since 2003. She has represented the “office” of völva each year at Midwest Thing from 2010-2014. (<http://midwesttribes.com/>).

In March of 2012, I was introduced to Ms. Tauring by Hrefna Wolfwalker of Hawk’s Bayou Kindred and Raven’s Nest in South Mississippi. Ms Tauring had agreed to come from her home in Minneapolis to be a part of an event hosted by Hrefna’s Kindred. When she arrived, I saw a petite woman with an unassuming air. But upon meeting her face-to-face I recognized the genuine glow of someone who has made it her life work to bringing the path of the ancestors to life.

## Rediscovering Northern Traditions with Kari Tauring



*It's clear that your path leads into the past to your ancestors in the Midwest and further back to Scandinavia. How did you become conscious of your path?*

I was about three years old when I experienced my first spiritual quandary. While spinning round and round on my bottom I exclaimed, "But mommy, who was God's mother?" The stunned look on my mother's face indicated that she might not have an answer. Then in about the third grade I confessed to my grandmother that I didn't like to sit in church because praying always made me feel like singing and dancing. My grandmother assured me that I could do that sort of praying in nature. "Every time Jesus had a very important prayer he was on the mountain or in the garden or the desert," she assured me. So I began to pray in nature — and nature answered back.

When I was thirteen, I was sitting at the top of the Pyramid of the Sun outside of Mexico City and I felt the overwhelming presence of Choc Mool. This was very disconcerting to someone raised in Midwestern Lutheranism! Fortunately, my youth pastor acknowledged the existence of other Beings, noting that the first of the Ten Commandments was not that no other gods existed, only that the Jews were not to worship them. At that moment I knew that I would dedicate my life to finding out about the gods and goddesses of the world, and figuring out how they fit into my world view.

The next turning point came in a linguistics class when the late Dr. Luann Dummer introduced me to the rune alphabet. Even though I had grown up in a Norwegian-American enclave, I had never thought to look deeper into my roots than Lefse, Lutefisk, and Lutheranism. The process of combining Nordic spiritual traditions with my music and teaching gradually developed and by 2003 I understood myself to be on the path of staff-carrier.



*Was information about your ancestry readily available to you or did you find it necessary to research your heritage?*

It is important to know that your ancestors are whomever raised you. The word *ætt* in Old Norse means "family grouping by blood, marriage, and adoption." So finding your heritage is a matter of looking in your own backyard.

My mother's side is 100% Norwegian and has been documented back to the 1400's. Oral traditional stories and songs, as well as letters and photographs, were kept both in Norway and America that inextricably bind me to both lands.

My father's side is mostly untraceable. My last name, Tauring, is Latvian for "butterfly," and my grandfather was Latvian and Luxembourgian. My grandmother was Scotts-Irish, French-Canadian, English and as she said, "some kind of Indian." I honor all sides of my family by singing songs in their native languages, keeping photographs rotating on my ancestor altar, and recognizing when they are coming through me with lessons from their particular thread of my *öorlog*.

It is important to know, though, that your ancestors are whomever raised you. Many students over the years who are either adopted or have no access to who their parents or grandparents were have asked me how they should identify with and honor their ancestors. The word *ætt* in Old Norse, and in Norwegian, means "family grouping by blood, marriage, and adoption." So finding your heritage is a matter of looking in your own back yard. One way to do this is genetic DNA testing that can give you a hint about what folk traditions to start looking into.

Additionally, students have found that opening up to receiving their ancestors has been enough to bring them into dreams or journeys. The part of *Völva Stav* training that sets good boundaries is important here, because sometimes we may not want to know who our ancestors are, or what they have done may want to be forgotten. But this is exactly the information we must remember. As Sinead O'Connor says, "there has to be remembering and then grieving if there is ever going to be forgiveness and healing."






Putting these tools in the context of Norse tradition and language has been a huge part of my work with my öorlog. Christianity and the idea of “original sin” does not explain how one woman’s grief and pain in 1890 could translate into a drinking problem for her descendent in 1948. But “family of origin” dysfunction puts it into a context, asks for truth in memory, and full emotional healing.

Those thoughts, feelings, actions, cultural traumas, beliefs about self and god that we inherit from our ancestors are as important as the genetic material. Modern science is catching up with this notion in the study of epi-genetics.

When I began working with the runes, they had the affect of unlocking my öorlog (what I then called “tribal karma”) which included ancestor memories. The ancient Norwegians in me began to speak.


I began to use the phrase “Inherited Cultural Grief” after

hearing the song “Famine” from Sinead O’Connor’s album, *Universal Mother* (1994) soon after my first son was born. I have also learned from the study of Holocaust survivors, which refers to this as “historical unresolved trauma.” The Native American community often calls this phenomenon “Ancestor memory.”

 ***What prompted you to explore the idea of Inherited Cultural Grief? Was it something you discovered from your own heritage?***

I began to explore “family of origin” dysfunctions back in high school when I discovered Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA). I often joke that my work had to go this way because I come from the “Land of 10,000 treatment centers” here in Minnesota. There’s one on every lake!

My Latvian heritage is very compelling and mysterious to me. I can only go back to my great grandmother Tauring, who was pregnant with twins when her husband left the post of Baron of Riga to escape political trouble. She miscarried those babies at sea while emigrating to the U.S. and lost other children besides. She was very sad, angry, and placed that burden on my paternal grandfather who then took it out on my father and his siblings through alcoholism and abuse. This was one of the first examples of inherited cultural grief that I endeavored to heal in my heritage and it has been truly wonderful.

 ***How does healing Cultural Grief improve a person’s well being and happiness? Does it have wider cultural implications?***

Since this work begins with the healing of family-of-origin dysfunctions, the result in improving personal relationships is immediate. Healing deep cultural griefs also puts us in compassion with others who have experienced similar trauma. No group becomes oppressive without having been oppressed itself. It is key that European-Americans look at their ancestral trauma in order to stop perpetuating oppressive systems. Moreover, the deeper we go the more we realize that we are related to one another, and that this world surely needs deep healing.

It is important that a völva be able to help heal and bridge the fractures between Christians and Heathens, both within individual öorlog and in the community at large. Denying our Christian ancestors does not offer healing.



*What does it mean to be a völva – both generally, and specifically to you?*

Being a völva, and teaching what that means in the world today has been my decades-long quest. As the Eddas and later folk songs describe, a völva lives outside of the communities she serves. She is expected to be wise in the histories of the people and the land. She talks with animals and deals with mountain trolls. She can cast spells and heal, travel between the worlds, and retrieve lost soul parts. She is a *spåkjerring* (wise speaker) and *seidr bearer* (one who attains a state of seidr and works within the nine worlds for healing). So, these are things I offer, both to do and to teach in my diverse community here in Minnesota for Heathen festivals, in Lutheran church basements, in schools, community clubs and all sorts of interesting places!



*Being a völva meant being a bit apart from the traditional social norms of women in the Norse Clan society structure, correct?*

From what we know, yes. These women were “un-affiliated” and lived *utgard* (outside of the farm or community boundaries). This would give them a “non-partisan” view of the *wyrd* of any community they visited. I want to stress that the Nordic lands were tribal and diverse. The idea that there was a unified orthodoxy among staff carriers and the people they served is a modern notion: every family, clan, and village had their own unique ways of understanding and being in the world. The skill set of each völva would have differed, one reason they were described as part of a collection of women.

A Völva traveled great distances from village to village, sometimes in a regularly scheduled yearly rotation. Völur were also known to “set up shop” in public houses or at thingtide gathers and festivals to offer their prophesy work. In pre-Roman/pre-Christian times, the völva was free to travel in this way safely because she was a revered figure. As a visitor, the strict laws of guest friendliness (still observed in Nordic homes) applied to her. She was perhaps a bit scary because she had a relationship with nature entities and creatures from the nine worlds. Her favor was often sought – and her anger was commonly feared.



*Was she summoned in times of crisis or distress? Did she carried news of the villages she visited with her as she traveled?*

Absolutely. They would carry news that could affect a whole region such as new raiding parties that have appeared on the scene, diseases, problems with farming or fishing, or changes in family structures with political implications. Sometimes I describe them as a wandering *Farmer’s Almanac*.

Each völva had her own gifts: some were more skilled in battle magic, others were healers, and many were sought out as seers. Some had the ability to direct weather, commune with animals or to shape shift.

In my experience vö lur use a seidr state to perceive the *wyrd* web connecting the öorlog of people, family units, communities, time lines, earth lay lines...and then make predictions or shift the direction of the *wyrd* with magic incantations and rune songs. In a seidr state they can communicate with nature wights, animals, gods, and ancestors long passed and work deals with them to affect the lives and fortunes of the living. They can also use this skill to curse, heal, change the direction of war, and play with people’s minds. The accuracy and consistency of these skills gave a völva respect as well as wealth, and their graves were among the richest finds in Scandinavia.



*How did the role of the völva change with the coming of Christianity?*

Everywhere that Christianity went, patriarchy grew: as a it became unsafe for women throughout Europe. Many vö lur sought the patronage of warlords and chieftains, which removed her non-partisan view and created rivalries between the vö lur and the chieftain’s wife, who was also often gifted in some of her arts, such as *spå*, healing, leech craft and/or in war council.

Such rivalry between powerful women for what crumbs of respect was very damaging, and I believe that the stress of this competitive and unbalanced system is part of the inherited cultural grief among European-American women, and women in general. Better for society that strong women should support and cooperate with one another. Cooperative women in solidarity of purpose is a real threat to patriarchy.

As Christianity took hold, *vitki* (staff-carrying men) adopted the role of bishops within the political church structure. The *völur* were driven out and generally had to eek out a living as charm sellers and “readers” on the outskirts of towns. Such women gained a reputation as witches or sometimes witch-doctors. They were called trollwives (spellcraft women) and *spåkjerring* (prophesy-women). But just as the word *völva* has become derogatory, *kjerring* (meaning “honored lady”) is now used in modern Norwegian in place of “bitch.”

Altogether it was the change in the status of women in general that was the downfall of the *völva*. But healing as women’s work and the magical connection of spinning, weaving, brewing and other women’s work was maintained even into the Immigrant era, despite the passage of laws prohibiting the practice of spirituality in connection to this work. Women who were *jordmors* (midwives) and *gamledoktors* (old time doctors) were persecuted. When Norway was still an underdeveloped colony of Denmark and Danish pastors were sent to outlying districts, it was assumed by the Norwegian community that the pastor’s wife would be doing the doctoring. There are accounts of pastor’s wives ordering doctoring books and trying to step up to this role and their letters home expressing their sheer terror at being expected to do a job for which they were wholly unprepared.



*How has the role of the modern day völva changed? Has the role of the völva become more in line with that of a modern teacher or is she still seen as a mystic and powerful figure?*

This is a most excellent question, though it may be premature to try and define the role of *völva*. I view it as important that a *völva* be able to help heal and bridge the fractures between Christians and Heathens within individual *öorlog* and in the community at large. Denying our Christian ancestors does not offer healing to them or to the community.

What defines a modern *völva* for me is dedication to high functioning life skills and impeccability of word, becoming healed healers. Only through the diligence of this process can we be trusted to read the *wyrd* of the European American *öorlog* without emotional attachment or personal judgment. To heal our *wyrd*, make amends (pay *shild*) for wrongs done by our culture to others, and to create a strong tap root for healing ourselves and others is the basis of my work and at the core of my teachings. Mending the broken warp threads of the European-American tapestry is essential for the health and healing of the whole world.





*What, in your eyes, is the most profound principle of your Path? How do the beliefs and practices of the Northern Traditions translate into your everyday life?*

Ancestor honoring and nature spirituality are the basis of Norse tradition – of all folk cultures, actually. Though I was raised in a Lutheran household, I was also raised in a household that held core folk cultural values. So the practice of ancestor honoring and nature spirituality were there. The past decade of work has been a process of learning the words, language, and tools to express these things in my own cultural context rather than borrowing language from other cultures to express these core folk spiritual values.

I spend many hours a day researching, writing, learning and rehearsing new songs, dances, and stories. I have taken several pilgrimages to the farms of my ancestors in Norway and continue to strengthen the ties that bind me to that land, and to my relations there. I notice runes every day – in the trees and sidewalk cracks – where I read messages from my ancestors, nature spirits and the gods. I am in constant conversation with the natural world. There has really never been a different way to be in my life but Nordic.

My family is the most important thing in my life. Raising our sons in the loving extended family of our community has made them a pair of very fine men. I was in 4H as a girl and in that organization we pledge “our Heads to clearer thinking, our Hearts to greater loyalty, our Hands to larger service and our Health to better living for our club, community, country and world.” This could easily translate to what are called the “Noble Virtues” in Heathenry.

With this in mind, I would say that the principal of Ansuz is very profound – the rune of the mouth and spoken word, dedication to impeccability of word. Everything we speak, however casually we say it, becomes a layer in our öorlog. This is the most important thing: that our words are clear, honest, and respectful.

Another very important concept is Skuld, one of the Norns, the three sisters of time and space. We honor the past as Urd and the present moment as Verthandi, but Skuld’s name means “that which by necessity ought to become.” Necessity is deeply important in Norse tradition, represented by the rune Nauthiz. We ought not say or do anything unless there is need. So these two concepts tie together.



*What advice can you give to others who would like to begin learning the Northern Traditions?*

To understand the Nordic mindset you need to understand and create a relationship with the runes. The Elder Futhark is the oldest record we have of our ancestors mind set, values, and perceptions of the world. Runes teach the myths and stories. Rune symbols unlock deep memories, ancestor memories. Birch, Lake, Cow and Ice, runes are the reflection of the Northern soul. Then read the Eddas and Sagas and the scholarship that surrounds these epic poems. Of

equal importance is to look to the immigrant traditions in Northern heritage. The songs, dances, languages, food, and celebrations of folk heritage contain ancient threads, messages from the deepest ancestors. Find a cultural preservation group and visit with the elders. Find out their stories and songs. Learn the languages. The Mother tongue is what keeps the culture alive and if you want to follow the spirit, you must learn the language of the soul!

*What new projects are you working on? What are you planning for the future?*

Over the past year I have been in the studio with my music partner Drew Miller, revisiting old songs and making new pieces for dance performance. We are planning a new Kickstarter to fund the production of two new albums. My new rune book, *The Runes: A Deeper Journey*, is nearly complete. I have been working on updating the iPhone/iPad app and I hope to make it available to Android users in 2015. I am also exploring on-line course possibilities with the Eye of Horus Metaphysical. We have already filmed an introduction! Finally, I am writing new poems and songs about my visits to my ancestral lands in Norway. All of my mother’s mothers come from one mountain – a UNESCO World Heritage site – in the Sognefjord. The archeology suggests that the same *ekte geitost* (caramelized goat cheese) has been made in that area in an unbroken tradition since the Bronze Age. That’s what I call soul food!

*Find out more about Kari’s projects, including her new recording Nykken & Bear at her website:*  
<http://karitauring.com>