In Search of a More
Challenging the Dominant

by Priscilla

À partir de son expérience personnelle, l'auteure démontre comment, en grandissant dans une communauté pleine de ressources, elle en est venue à accepter les «vérités» dominantes de l'industrie forestière au détriment de son vécu et de ses propres vérités. Elle demande une récupération de vérités plus complexes qui dépasseraient les stéréotypes travailleur/environnement qui divisent les ressources des communautés et qui défieraient la logique de l'industrie forestière et des économies industrielles occidentales.

I grew up in a working class family that depended, primarily, on the forest industry for our livelihood. I use the word "primarily" because our lives were enriched by the subsistence foods that we gleaned from the surrounding forests, lakes, and rivers. Our relationship to the forest was filled with contradictions. On the one hand, my father's work in the paper mill (and our primary source of livelihood) depended on a constant supply of "economically valuable wood fibre" extracted from the region. On the other hand, our quality of life was so much richer for the many ways in which a healthy forest provided both physical and spiritual sustenance. We lived "off" the forests and "in" the forests—depending on both the destruction and the continued vibrancy of forest ecosystems. At the time, these contradictions were not visible to me. In fact, I grew up learning that this was the "natural" order of the world—the ways things should be. There were no contradictions, and no alternatives.

As a young woman, I learned several things. I learned that the paper mill—and the forest industry—was off-limits to me. This was the domain of men—"real" men. The privileges and hardships of this world were mine only vicariously through the men who worked there. And despite the privileges of a steady, full-time, and fairly well paying job, I learned that it was an unpleasant domain. My father complained constantly of the stresses of shift work, of the noise and dangers of the machinery, of the pressures from management. As a young child I learned to fear the loss of his job, to feel the fear that comes with threatened layoffs, with drawn-out strikes, with his injuries, to feel the worry of paying bills on a pay cheque too small to cover all the expenses of our large family. And I learned to accommodate his grumpiness, to be quiet when he was trying to sleep after coming off of midnight shift, to help my mother who bore the major responsibility for raising the seven of us. I came to know about the forest industry through both the stories he told and through all the ways in which the demands of his workplace touched our lives at home.

I also came to know about the forest industry through the stories told by others and through all the ways in which it touched our lives in the community. As I was growing up, I learned that the company was "good" to us—it was a "good corporate citizen." We rented a company house, went to company Christmas parties, played on company-sponsored teams, and knew that if we did well in school we could receive a company scholarship. For the young men whose fathers worked in the mill there was also the promise of summer jobs, as well as the lure of permanent jobs when they finished school. I learned that the smells from the mill were "the smells of prosperity" and that the tainted fish in the river where the mill dumped its effluent were the inevitable costs of this prosperity. Neither were to be complained about, for the company kept us well fed and housed. And I learned the power of mill rumours—the subtle ways in which those in the community who did voice their dissatisfaction and concerns could be so effectively silenced by others at the mere hint of mill closures or layoffs—"if we have to put in pollution controls."

I did not come to know the forest industry through the ways in which it touched the life of the forest. The logging operations were far off in the bush, out of our

Complex Telling

Story of the Forest Industry

Boucher

sight. To us, the logging roads provided access on our family outings to pick berries, go fishing, or have a picnic near a lake. Often, we would pass row upon row of reforested trees—some of which I might have planted on one of our annual school tree-planting outings. These fields of new growth were proof that the company was practising "responsible" forestry—I was not to worry. And I didn't. I had learned to trust these assuring stories, to trust that the forests to which we came would always be there. And it was through these outings that I learned to both love and fear the forest. On the one hand I came to experience and marvel at the intricacies of nature, to observe and explore the goings-on under the forest canopy, to feel the immensity of that which was so much greater than myself. On the other hand I was told stories that taught me that to survive in the woods you had to be "tough like a man," that I had to be on guard against "wild" animals, that I had to be in control of both the wilderness and my fears.

What I didn't realize at the time was that, as a white woman growing up in a resource community, and in western industrial society, I was being taught my place in the universe. The lessons that I had learned were of two sorts: those that came from within me as I directly experienced both the forest and the effects of the forest industry on home and community, and those that came from without as I listened to stories told to me by others. And it was these stories, rather than my own experiences, that came to dominate my understanding of both the forests and the forest industry.

The stories told to me by others taught me to fear nature, to see it as something which needed to be controlled and managed, as something to be exploited for human use. I learned to see the forests as a source of fibre that would feed the mills and the prosperity of our family, community, and nation. But this prosperity, I was told, depended on continued economic growth, on secure supplies of timber, on international competitiveness, on "profitability." These stories explained to me that nature could be controlled through "scientific management" for the benefit of all of us—and that the best people to "manage" these forests were, of course, the company, the "professionals," the "experts." Left in their capable hands, the management of both the forests and forest workers would bring material wealth to all of us. In exchange for our cooperation—our willingness to believe their stories, our willingness to accept their prescriptions for "economic progress"—we would be richly rewarded. At no time was there any sense that the price of these material rewards might be too high. We were hooked.

In believing these stories, however, I accepted the negation of both my self and my own experiences. These stories were not mine, however. As a woman I had no place in the forest, in the industry, or in the "profession"—no place in the decision-making processes that would, nevertheless, determine the fate of forest, community and family. This was "man's" story, as told predominantly by privileged white, western men (corporate bosses, government and labour bureaucrats, "scientific" managers, and "professional" experts of all kinds)—and as repeated by industry workers and community "leaders." Being outside of their stories did not shield me from experiencing and perceiving the consequences of their decisions and actions. But being outside of their stories negated the legitimacy of my knowledge, and its relevancy to the decisions at hand. In believing their stories, I dismissed the many ways in which I knew the forests and the industry. I accepted their verdict that what I knew was not relevant to their decisions. I accepted the silencing of my own voice—my own truths.

In the face of mounting testimonies to the global dimensions of the social, economic, and ecological crises confronting communities, nations, and the planet, I have come to question their stories, to challenge the dominant "truths" of my own western industrial culture. And to do so, I have had to reclaim the knowledge that I was taught to dismiss. I have had to learn to pay attention to the many ways in which my own senses tell me that all is not well in the forests and in our communities. I have had to strain to hear the testimonies of others who bear witness to the steady destruction of forested lands and communities in their own regions. I have had to learn to step back from the industrial practices and economic decisions of the forest industry in order to see that the majority of the world's work that contributes to the well-being of our families, communities and the earth has little value within their logic—to see that this well-being has no place in their calculations. I have had to learn to see the forest industry as simply one expression of unsustainable practices found within western economies. And finally, I have had to learn to ask the question: whose interests does this story of "economic progress" serve?

In becoming aware of my own silences and in reclaiming the ways in which I know about the forest industry, I have

become aware that "man's" story of the forest industry has silenced the voices of countless others. Missing from "man's" story are not only the voices of women, but the voices of all who would challenge his "truth." Among these are the voices of indigenous peoples whose traditional lands continue to be encroached upon, individuals and communities whose livelihoods are threatened by unsustainable forest practices, men who challenge the industry's stereotype of "a real man," communities and individuals who dare to challenge (in words and deeds) the prescribed path to "economic progress," and the voices of the forests that continue to dwindle in size and vitality as corporations persist in their pursuit of cheap wood fibre and profits. In silencing these (and other) voices, "man's" story has offered us a model of reality that ignores both the ecological and social contexts in which the forest industry takes place—a model of reality that has resulted in both ecological destruction and social disintegration. While this story may benefit a few in the short run, it serves neither our communities nor the planet well.

A story that acknowledges both the ecological and social contexts of the forest industry, and that is directed towards the well-being of self, family, community, and the earth, requires a much more complex telling. It is not a story that can be told by an elite few. It is, rather, the collective weaving together of all of the different ways in which we "know" the forests, our communities, and the industry. And it is the collective transformation of this knowledge into actions that is sustaining, regenerating and nurturing—actions that enhance life in the process of ensuring our livelihood. Challenging "man's" story requires that we reclaim both our own voices and our capacity to listen—not to the storytellers of "his" story, but to one another.

And perhaps by sharing our deep concerns and fears, as well as our visions and dreams, we can begin to move past the simplistic stereotypes that pit environmentalists against workers. I grew up in one of those worker's families—and I don't fit either of these stereotypes. Neither do most of the people I know. I share a deep concern for the health of the forests. And I share a deep concern for the well-being of families and communities that are now faced with a loss of their livelihood. Where I differ from "pro-industry" voices is in my unwillingness to support an industry that is based on the exploitation of both the forests and people, my unwillingness to defend industrial practices that endanger workers, destroy the intricate life-systems of forest ecosystems, and threaten the livelihoods of those who depend on a healthy forest for their well-being. Where I differ from "pro-industry" voices is in my unwillingness to support a materialistic western lifestyle that is based on over-consumption of the earth's resources, my unwillingness to support "expert" prescriptions for success in the global economy, and my unwillingness to support an economic model that entices us with material goods while depriving us of the time, energy, and resources needed to ensure our physical, social, cultural, ecological, and spiritual well-being. Where I differ from both "pro-industry" and some environmentalist voices in is my unwillingness to support community-based decision-making processes that continue to bring together elite, male-dominated "stakeholder" groups for the purpose of resolving land-use issues as defined by "man's" story—processes that continue to silence the voices and knowledge of those who do not support "his" truth. And where I differ from many environmentalist voices is in my unwillingness to wholeheartedly embrace prescriptions for "sustainable" economic alternatives that fail to challenge the patriarchal biases inherent within the industry, within the technologies developed, and within the definition of work itself, and my unwillingness to support community processes and organizations that continue to silence the experiences, concerns, strategies, and visions of women.

Tamara Thiebaux

If I have a vision for a sustainable society, it is one in which men and women participate *together* in the real work of the world—the work of sustaining our well-being within the context of the web-of-life. In such a world, the economy is not something that enslaves us in its mechanistic, capitalist, and patriarchal logic. Rather, it represents the ways in which we interact with each other and with the earth to produce life. The realization of this vision requires the rejection of all relations of domination—of both human and nonhuman "nature"—and the social negotiation of an ecological truth that is capable of guiding our interactions with one another and with the earth.

Priscilla Boucher grew up in a small paper town in northern Ontario and has a long-standing interest in the development of community-based sustainable economic alternatives. She is completing her doctorate in Planning at the University of British Columbia and gratefully acknowledges the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for its support of the research that contributed to the writing of this article. She is currently researching women's environmental activism around forest issues in British Columbia.