

Mikkel Aaland



"It's All an Adventure"

23 and Me: Where are you from, where are you going?

How do you know where you are going if you don't know where you come from?

When I was growing up my mother always told my brother's and I about our relationship to Chief Joseph Brant, the great Mohawk leader. He sided with the British during the American Revolutionary War because he thought the British were more civilized. Her story of our lineage sounded plausible, but the evidence was anecdotal and lacked quantifiable proof. I dismissed it as just a story. That changed when I sent a swab of my saliva to 23andMe, and then received an ancestry report based on my DNA.

As expected, my father's side was nearly 100% Scandinavian, with a hint of Finnish. On my mother's side the British/Irish dominated. That was no surprise either. I have actual Civil War pay stubs for Matthew William Farmer, my great-great grandfather, who emigrated from Ireland in the early 1850s. He signed up to fight for the North during the Civil War so he could have a fast track to US citizenship. He survived the war long enough to produce offspring, but died soon after from complications from a botched amputation. Scrolling through the 23andMe list of other minor influences I finally came to what I was looking for, Native American heritage. It accounted for only .5% of my DNA, a tiny grain of hereditary material floating in a large sea of European genes. But there it was and it was all I needed to confirm my mother's story that in the 18th century a powerful warrior sent his seed sailing down a river that eventually led to me.



Family is like a river. What our ancestors do upstream flows down to us and what we do flows down to our children. Some people call it family karma, some call it ghost genes. I call it the river in my backyard.

My mother passed away years ago, so I couldn't share my excitement with her. Instead I went to the basement and found all her files and material on our well-documented ancestor. As I remembered, he was indeed the leader of the Mohawks, tall and distinguished looking. Thayendanegea, as he was known among his people, was known as an inspiring leader, compassionate with his captives, and a steadfast defender of Indian rights. He was reported to have made two trips to England, and even sipped tea with the Queen herself. After the British lost to the colonists, they compensated Brant by giving him and his tribe land near Brantford, Ontario, where a granite and bronze statue still stands in his honor and where my mother's grandfather, George Arthur Goodson, was born. With his third wife, Catherine Croghan, herself half Irish, Brant fathered seven children. The last one was born in 1796 and her name was Elizabeth, which is also my mother's name.

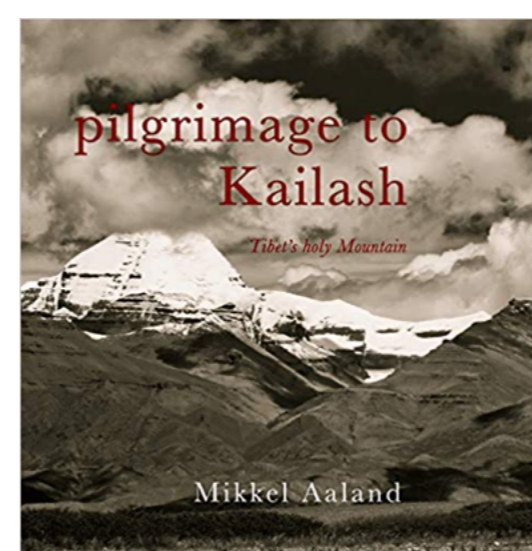
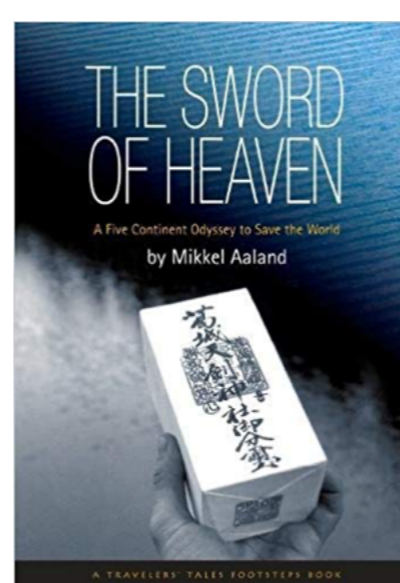
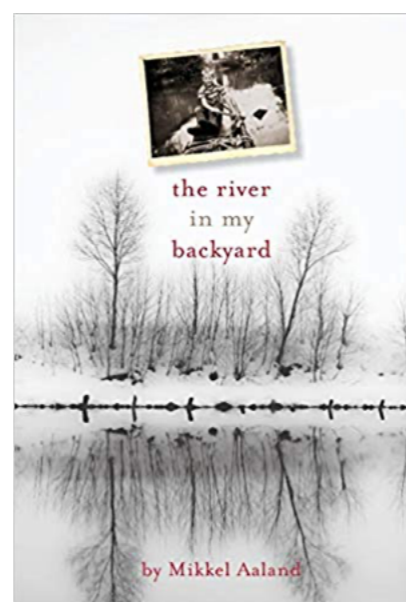
The results of my DNA test has brought Chief Joseph Brant and all those who came before me into sharp focus. As long as I can recall I have identified with Native American beliefs, especially those regarding our relationship with nature and the spirit world. Has Brant been influencing me the whole time? Was it the blood from Ireland, the land of bards, which compelled me to put pen to paper and write my own stories? I like contemplating where I come from. How else can I understand where I am going?

Privacy Concerns

Several people I know hesitate taking a DNA test for privacy concerns. I totally get it, but I don't think that should be a barrier to getting useful information from one's DNA. Technically it is against 23 and Me rules but what about using a pseudonym to sign up? Here is a link to an article by a person who used this workaround. <https://venturebeat.com/2013/09/20/how-to-use-23andme-without-giving-up-your-genetic-privacy/>

The River in My Backyard, Etc.

Family themes run through my books. In my latest memoir, [The River in My Backyard](#) (Cyberbohemia Press 2016), I explore how epigenomes, or ghost genes, may pass trauma and life experiences from one generation to the next. (Click [here](#) for a link to the book trailer.) In [The Sword of Heaven](#) (Traveler's Tales 1999) I write about the Shinto concept of family as a river and in my coffee-table photo book [Pilgrimage to Mt. Kailash](#) (Cyberbohemia Press 2013), I chronicle a journey I took to place my parents ashes at the foot of a holy Tibetan mountain.



Header image credit: Joseph Brant, 1786. Painting by Gilbert Stuart. New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown.

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