

Soul of the Body, Soul of the World:

Initiation and the Reintegration of Nature and Soul

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*I would love to live
Like a river flows,
Carried by the surprise
Of its own unfolding.*

John O'Donohue, *Fluent,*
conamara blues

We live in a time of global crisis. For the first time in our human history, we face the dilemma of the wholesale degradation and destruction of our planet. Such is the disconnection between humans and the natural environment that we have forgotten the fact that like the myriad of plants and animals who share this world, we are first and foremost creatures of the earth. In so doing, we have allowed our lives to become unbalanced and unsustainable towards the planet. In our forgetting of this ancient knowledge we have unwittingly repressed our relationship with nature, and thus a complete experience of soul to the unconscious. The enlivening presence by which we once lived our lives, has become dormant within us. It is as eco-philosopher David Abram has observed, "We are human only in contact and conviviality with what is not human. Only in reciprocity with what is Other do we begin to heal ourselves."¹ It is imperative that we awaken to the need for healing and balance in our relationship with nature.

The Celtic and druidic traditions offer us a great source of healing and renewal through an engagement with the natural world, as well as with the numinous reality of the Otherworld. The Irish terms for these, *coích anama* (which translates to "soul shrine") and *anam* (soul), suggests an interweaving of both realities as being our fundamental make-up. The very fact that the body was considered a shrine is a radical departure from many of the current religious notions; namely that the body, being earthy, is something that must be transcended in order to access the sacred. Contrary to this, it has been suggested that the Celts viewed the soul as existing around the body. This can be a profoundly liberating perspective. The body and soul are like a weaving or braiding of two threads into a single entity. We might say that our braid has become

frayed at the edges, and has begun to unwind. A major aspect of what Thomas Berry refers to as the “Great Work” of our time, is the re-weaving of these two strands.

Initiation is the means by which this task can be achieved. Initiation is a process which involves a breaking down of the ego-self, which consists of our habitual patterns and limiting images of our self-identity; as well as a rebirth of the ego into a more balanced relationship with the deeper self, or the soul. This is a natural process which every person has or will experience at some point in their life. It is an imperative from the world of the soul, which asks us to dive deep within and seek there a more sustainable vision of our life. In many earth-centered societies this rite of passage would have been a natural stopping place on the path of life. We have lost our maps though, and so many of us wander, lost and confused on what C.G. Jung called the “night-sea voyage”.

A primal Irish map of this process, which can be expressed and experienced in a variety of ways, is what Frank MacEowen calls the Three Spirals of Initiation. Using the triple spiral from the Newgrange passage tomb complex as a guiding symbol, he lays out his model as the downward spiral, threshold spiral, and upward spiral.²

The downward spiral is basically a descent into the unconscious, and an experience of the breaking down of the basic ego structure, for the purpose of disposing of habitual and limiting patterns of behavior which feed the ego and deny the soul. This can be a frightening time, especially when, as in our society, we are not properly supported while going through such experiences. It is the death of an old way of being, which no longer serves the vitality of the soul. What must be understood though, is that this death will prepare the grounds for a rebirth of a more authentic self.

The threshold spiral is the period after the initial breakdown of the ego structure and a time of seeking a vision for a more “soul-centric” way of belonging to the world. It is at this stage on the initiatory journey when one encounters their *dán*. *Dán* is an Irish word with an interesting set of meanings. It can mean poetry, art, a gift or skill, and destiny or fate. Simply said, in this context, our *dán* is a unique soul-gift that each of us possess which we were born to birth out into the world as our destiny. This is the soul-sustaining vision that we travel the downward spiral in search of. If the downward spiral is our descent to the Underworld, the threshold spiral is our wandering within the Underworld in search of this new vision.

The upward spiral is the integration of the vision, our *dán*, into life, and the alignment of the ego into a deeper relationship with the soul. Another word relating to *dán* is *bradán*. *Bradán* refers to both the salmon, traditionally seen as a fish of wisdom in the Irish tradition, but has also been interpreted to mean “life principle”³, that which nourishes and sustains us. Our life principle is the place from which we draw our fundamental nourishment and energy. Our *bradán* can be drawn from many sources, and not all of them are necessarily of the highest value to the soul. We can choose to draw our nourishment from life-affirming sources, such soul and nature, or we can draw it from our life-negating sources, such as our dysfunctional and disconnected society.

It is interesting, however, that this concept would be linked with the salmon. The salmon, in Celtic mythology, is a fish of wisdom, which imparts *imbas* (divine inspiration or poetic frenzy). The salmon is the symbol par excellence of the wisdom of the initiatory path. Their journey from the source pool to the ocean, and their final swim back up the river where their death feeds the life of the new spawns clearly reflects the process of initiation. Bradán suggests that the place we might draw our nourishment from is wisdom and our *dán* itself. It suggests that by aligning ourselves with our soul-gift – by living the story we were born to tell – that we enter into a deeper communion with Dana, the enlivening principle of the universe, and the initiatory process.

Simultaneous with the initiatory journey are two other processes of connection, alignment, and reintegration, which work on similar levels. These processes are ones that assist us in aligning our lives to our soul as well as with aligning our soul to the soul of the world. They are parallel journeys, and all three work as a single process of healing and transformation.

A 16th century manuscript from Ireland, contains a poem which details the workings of what it refers to as the three “cauldrons of poesy” or the cauldrons of the soul. The cauldrons are like mediators between body and soul, ensuring both physical and spiritual health. They have often been compared to the chakras of the Hindu tradition, and perhaps rightly so, as they are very much akin to “energy centers”. They are conduits for spiritual energy, directing its flow through the body and soul.

The first cauldron, the *Coire Goiriath*, or the Cauldron of Warming is our connection with life itself. It is positioned in the belly, and is said to be “born upright” in all people. The position of this cauldron is indicative of our most basic health. If the cauldron were on its side, we might be suffering from a threatening illness, or else be getting ready to depart our life. For the cauldron to be completely tipped onto its lips would indicate that we are in the process of dying. I would venture to say that what warms this cauldron is “Dana energy”. Dana or Danu is the primal mother goddess of the Irish, who gave her name to the Danube river, the area around which the Celts emerged into history. Dana, however, can also be related to as a primal “energy” similar to chi in Chinese philosophy. It is both a nourishing and initiatory energy. Therefore it would be accurate to say that the Cauldron of Warming holds and simmers our life force, and serves as our connection with Dana. The downward spiral might be thought of as our descent into the Cauldron of Warming. Interestingly enough the cauldron is often used as a symbol of initiation in the Celtic traditions, such as in the Welsh tale of the poet Taliesin. Taliesin gains his poetic wisdom when three drops from the cauldron of inspiration, which he was stirring over a fire, splash out and burn his hand. Trying to ease the burning, he brings his hand to his mouth and so imbibes the elixir he had been stirring.

The second cauldron is the *Coire Éрмаi*, or the Cauldron of Motion, and is our connection with the emotions. However, as alluded to in another translation of the term, “Cauldron of Vocation”, it also contains our *dán*, or destiny. It said to sit at the place of our heart. The position and activity of this cauldron indicates the person’s engagement (or disengagement) with their *dán*. The *dán* is activated by engaging with the deep

longings of the soul. Just as we might think of dán as Dana in motion, the Cauldron of Motion might be thought of as being the Cauldron of Warming in action; the essence of life's movement towards the fulfillment of the soul's deep longing.

Unlike the Cauldron of Warming, it is possible for the Cauldron of Motion to be inverted in the living. As Celtic scholar and shamanic wisdom-keeper, Caitlín Mathews points out, "In most people, only the [Cauldron of Warming] is operative, and the [Cauldron of Motion] is inverted over it, indicating a closed circuit of experience."⁴ The text points out that the forces which turn this cauldron are joy and sorrow. Another interpretation of these two forces by Frank MacEowen is "longing" and "ecstasy".⁵ If our dán is truly rooted in the longing of our souls, then it is revealing to note that it is the same force of longing, and the ecstasy of such an initiatory encounter, that is the driving force which can turn the Cauldron of Motion, opening us to that "circuit of experience". This is the energy and momentum of the threshold spiral at work, which brings us into contact with a renewed and life-sustaining soul-vision.

The third and final cauldron is the *Coire Sois*, the Cauldron of Wisdom. This cauldron is our connection to vision, poetic knowledge, and Otherworldly wisdom. It is said to be positioned in the head, or in the area of the third eye in many other mystical traditions. Like the Cauldron of Motion it is on its lips in most people. However it is through the turning of the Cauldron of Motion, that the Cauldron of Wisdom is able to turn itself. Here, like the upward spiral of initiation, we have the alignment of dán with bradán – our vision, the motion of Dana in our souls, becomes the new source from which we draw our essential life energy from. We shift from drawing on the ego, and instead drink deeply from the soul. With all three cauldrons upright and simmering, we become a clear conduit for Dana to express itself in our bodies and in the world.

To carry this map out one step further, we can also witness this same pattern of the three cauldrons in the cosmological map of the Three Realms in the Celtic traditions. The three worlds of sea, land, and sky (sometimes spoken of more generally as underworld, middleworld, and upperworld), are often conceived of as the Great Triskele. The Great Triskele, as described by Séan Ó Tuahail in his *Foclóir Draíochta* (Dictionary of Irish Druidism) is a, "binding (which is indivisible and may never be broken down to three separate parts) [which] insures the integrity of the cosmos; as an individual binding it ensures slán [health]..."⁶ These three worlds, which as Ó Tuahail points out, are indivisible, and serve as a macrocosm to the three cauldrons of the soul-shrine. Like the three worlds, the cauldrons are an indivisible binding which ensures the integrity of the body and soul.

Just as the Cauldron of Warming, is the life-sustaining energy center in the body, the underworld serves the same purpose to the three realms. It is the place of primal life-tending energy. In Celtic cosmology, as in the cosmologies of many other shamanic and animistic cultures, the three realms are seen as being bound together by a world tree, an *axis mundi*, which facilitates the hierophany of the sacred, of Dana, into ordinary reality. The underworld serves as the roots of the world tree, and is also symbolic of the unconscious. Although we are always connected with the underworld and the unconscious in some manner, we have a choice as to how conscious our connection and

relationship to it is. We can choose to be asleep to this primal reality, or we can be awake to it, and participate fully in this realm of consciousness. The path to this waking up is the same path as turning the Cauldron of Warming; the downward spiral of initiation into the underworld of our unconscious, to recover the vision of our *dán*.

The middleworld relates to the Cauldron of Motion in that it is the place of ordinary reality and ego consciousness; the place where everyday life plays out. It is literally the place of motion. When the Cauldron of Motion is inverted, and our *dán* is inactive, we have a “closed circuit of experience” to the mysteries of awakened living. This condition also closes off our experience of the middleworld. When this cauldron is inverted we are closed to a true experience of ordinary reality because we have closed off the experience of the sacred to the underworld, and repressed it into our unconscious. Following our soul-longing deep into the underworld is the path of seeking a vision of our *dán*, and opening ourselves to more expansive and conscious ways of life, rooted in the mysteries of soul.

The upperworld, like the Cauldron of Wisdom, is a place of vision, poetic inspiration, and wisdom. Just as the underworld might be thought of as the dwelling place of the imminent divine, the upperworld is the place of the transcendent divine (which both meet and intermingle in the middleworld). The upperworld is the realm of enlightenment, as thought of as in many of the Eastern traditions. In the Celtic tradition it might be thought of as the place of divine inspiration and poetic frenzy. In this way it mirrors the Cauldron of Wisdom. Similarly to the cauldrons the process of awakening to life, of activating the Cauldron of Motion, leads eventually to the turning of the Cauldron of Wisdom, opening us up to the upperworld, and the activation of our “poetic inspiration”, and the dynamic balance between soul and ego, in which is held the potential for a deeper relationship with the Soul of Life.

The cauldrons of the soul are a microcosmic expression of the three worlds, manifested in the soul-shrine of the body. The soul of our bodies is the soul of the world, and the soul of the world is the soul of our bodies; and this soul reaches out, encompassing all things within it. In this way we are fundamentally woven into the very fabric of life. As Tom Cowan writes in *Yearning for the Wind*, “The soul is not in the body, the body is in the soul. This is not easy to understand or to live. But we must try. If we don’t, we circumscribe our life and greatly reduce the ways we know our souls, we strengthen the Great Split between us and creation.”⁷

The “Great Split” is the belief that we are separate from creation, from the shaping powers of life. It is the belief that we are somehow outside the world, looking in. The truth is, however, that no such split has ever existed. It is the great illusion of our times, which tells us that we are separate, thus lulling us into a sleep where we forget our most ancient connection and relationship – that to the primal Earth-Spirit. The three cauldrons and the three worlds teach us about the interweaving of nature and soul, the visible and the invisible. Through the process of aligning with these realities we are aligning with soul and nature, and awakening to the Soul of Life.

Initiation is the movement which brings these realities into alignment within ourselves. This process is nothing more than the journey towards wholeness; towards

the fulfilling of our potential as fully realized human beings. It is the process of waking up to our *dán* and living in alignment with it. This is the doorway, or threshold, to an authentic relationship with both nature and soul as a single weave.

When we wake up to the presence of nature, we are also waking up to the presence of soul. They are intricately woven together, and relationship with one requires us to relate in some way to the other. Any attempt to know and work with the soul, which does not know and work with nature as well is fundamentally incomplete. Just as one cannot not understand what it means to be human without taking into account the wider relationship it has to the landscape from which it was birthed, we cannot understand the human soul without understanding the more expansive soul of nature, in which it dwells.

There is a story in the Irish tradition of Cormac mac Art, and his journey to the Otherworldly Land of Truth where he sees the well of wisdom. The image of this well is a potent one, and points to certain fundamental orientations of the Celtic soul. Swimming within it are five salmon, which eat the hazel nuts that fall from the nine trees around it. Flowing forth from the well are five streams. Manannan, the god of the sea, and thus an Otherworldly figure, tells Cormac that the five streams are the physical senses. He says that all people drink from the streams, but that only poets and the *aois dana* drink from both the streams and the well. Just as one can see the five streams of the senses as having their source in the well, one can also take another perspective, and instead use the streams as pathways back to the well itself. In other words, the simple process of being physically present and awake to nature through our senses, is a viable doorway to accessing the dimensions of the soul.

To be truly present with nature however, we are required to slow down, and develop mindfulness to the world around us. Our modern world has compelled us to shut down our senses in some very traumatic ways. Our fast-paced lives do not afford us the luxury of a deep and sensual relationship to the physical world. By staying locked into our own limited and self-confined patterns of tuning out of the world we close ourselves off to any sense of authentic relationship to the soul of life; in effect we replay the patterns of soul-repression that have contributed to the “Great Split”, or “Wounded Soul” as I have come to call it.

What the world needs in this time of unprecedented crisis, both on personal and global levels, is a waking up to the sacredness of life; in effect, a global initiation and re-alignment between soul and nature. This is the world that we have inherited, and it is up to us to decide in what condition the future generations of the earth will inherit it in their own turn. We each hold the potential for waking up and blending with the soul of life. All it takes is a single draught from the streams of the enlivened senses to begin our journey to the well of wisdom – the place where the *aois dana*, those initiated into the activated soul-gift of their *dán*, drink from. We become the *aois dana*, because we become ambassadors of Dana into the world. We become in ourselves an axis mundi, a world tree, by opening our souls to the life-tending currents of Dana, and becoming a hierophany of this enlivening presence into the world.

Endnotes

1. Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Language and Perception in a More Than Human World*. New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 22.
2. MacEowen, Frank. *The Spiral of Memory and Belonging: A Celtic Path of Soul and Kinship*. Novato, California: New World Library, 2004.
3. Ó Tuahail, Séan. *Foclóir Draíochta*. 1993. January 21st, 2006.
<<http://www.adf.org/rituals/explanations/focloir-draiochta.html>>.
4. Mathews, Caitlín and John. *The Encyclopædia of Celtic Wisdom: A Celtic Shaman's Sourcebook*. Rockport, Massachusetts: Element, 1994, p. 231.
5. MacEowen, p. 194
6. Ó Tuahail.
7. Cowan, Tom. *Yearning for the Wind: Celtic Reflections on Nature and the Soul*. Novato, California: New World Library, 2003, p. 6.