

Wild Earth, Wild Mind:

The Story of the Soul of Place

Jason Kirkey
Copyright © 2006

*Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars
The inner – what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.*

-Rainer Maria Rilke

Everything is a story. In the march of progress we have lost our place in the greater story of all things, and so have lost a vital soul-piece. To step out of this story is to risk everything. We have proved this beyond a doubt. The destruction of the environment has coincided with a collective sense of alienation, disenfranchisement, and deracination. Every day in our rationalized insanity we further the destruction and desecration of the earth. Thomas Berry reminds us that "a degraded habitat will produce degraded humans."¹ Healing this degradation of self and world is the task of an emerging era in human history. We must adapt and step back into a relationship of reciprocity with the story of a more-than-human world.

We are undoubtedly a part of this world. We were birthed out of it, and so maintain a bonded relationship with the earth. Modern psychology has been thus far unable to recognize this. However, what more fundamental relationship could exist than the one between a being and its place. Place is the most pervasive of all influences on the psyche. This understanding has been explored in the more accepted domain of environmental psychology, however this discipline largely fails due to its anthropocentric nature of focusing on the use of environment to stimulate human wellness.

The emerging, and far more radical, field of ecopsychology goes steps beyond this. Ecopsychology is a direct reaction to our stepping out of alignment with the story of place and being. Even the word "ecopsychology", as theorist John David points out, comes from eco-psyche-logos: the story of the soul of the home or the story of the home of the soul.² It is the study of the human soul in relationship to the soul of nature. As such it recognizes the need for reciprocity between the two, and that because nature has a soul, it has intrinsic value, completely independent of our human need for its resources.

Psychology itself suggests that it is the study of the soul, however it seems to have come a long way from these roots in the modern West. Transpersonal psychology has done a lot to reclaim the spiritual dimension of psychology, however it often tends to over-spiritualize things and holds to the opinion that the only value to physical nature is that it is an expression of spirit. Ecopsychology on the other hand recognizes the spiritual in nature, but also states boldly that the physicality of nature is just as important as the soul of nature. After all, we don't relate to other humans merely for the experience of getting into contact with their soul. We relate to the entirety of their being as it is expressed, both as spiritual and physical. This is especially evident in sexual relationships. This is the relationship being pointed to in the ancient mythological theme of land-as-lover.

Many of the world's indigenous earth-honoring spiritual traditions might be considered primal ecopsychologies, or as Theodore Roszak calls them "stone age psychologies". In the modern study of ecopsychology the traditions of shamanic and animistic people are often looked at for the parallel concepts and practices that it shares in common. This is an important part of the work because it embraces the reclamation of our indigenous soul. Culture is so entwined with the land from which it emerged, that alienation from place is often synonymous with alienation from an authentic relationship to culture.

To be indigenous, one does not have to be rooted in the same land as their ancestors or part of an unbroken native cultural tradition; few in fact still exist which have avoided influences from the modern world. Rather, to be indigenous means to be located in a place, and for that place to inform the way in which you belong to the world. For this reason we might consider an important supporting addition to ecopsychology to be a form of cultural psychology; a practice of reconnection for the dis-placed and uprooted.

The Celtic spiritual traditions provide such a framework of connection. The Irish word *tuatha* is a beautiful expression of the inherent ecopsychological leanings that characterize the primal Celtic spirit. *Tuatha* has a dual meaning; it refers to both the people and the land in a single breath. *Tuatha* does not just mean the land as the ground below our feet; its connotation is of the land-as-place. This is an important distinction, as it essentially recognizes the soul of the place. It is the place of the people, but as the word suggests, the place and the people are not separate entities; they are one and the same. Such is the intimacy of this relationship that the land is the people and the people are the land.

To talk about the interaction of soul and place, we need to clarify what we mean by "soul" and what we mean by "nature". Depth psychologist and ecotherapist, Bill Plotkin, defines soul as "the vital, mysterious, and wild core of our individual selves, an essence unique to each person, qualities found in layers of the self, much deeper than our personalities."³ In Jungian psychology the soul is understood to be the Self, which is independent of the ego. This is beautifully articulated in a poem by the early 20th century Spanish poet, Jiménez:

I am not I.
I am this one
Walking beside me whom I do not see,
Whom at times I manage to visit,
And whom at other times I forget;
The one who remains silent when I talk,
The one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,
The one who takes a walk where I am not,
The one who will remain standing when I die.
(translated by Robert Bly)

In many ancient cultures the soul is often related to the air or breath. This sentiment survives in the Irish language, in the connection between the words *anam* (soul) and *anáil* (breath). In Latin, another Indo-European (which is also the “mother language” of Irish), the connection is even more closely expressed, and *anima* is the word for both soul and breath. Breath is air, and this shatters the common Western assertion that the soul is trapped within the body and in need of liberation. On the contrary the soul is something we intimately engage in each moment, it is both all around us and infusing our being with life (which is another meaning of the Irish word *anam*). As poet-philosopher John O'Donohue writes, "The body is your clay home, your only home in the universe. The body is in the soul; this recognition confers a sacred and mystical dignity on the body."⁴

Inherent in this understanding is the claim that even the individual soul, or Self, participates in a much wider relationship with the world. It is as pervasive as the air we breathe. The soul extends beyond our limited notions of the egoic-self, and engages and relates with all that it comes into contact with. In this understanding, soul is hardly limited to the human soul. It touches and infuses everything with story. There is nothing that does not participate in this dialogue. This is the foundation of animistic thought; there is soul in everything and nature is the most elegant expression of soul as matter.

This of course still leaves us grasping with the question of what nature is. It might seem obvious at first, but upon closer examination becomes as elusive in defining as the ever-shifting Otherworld of the Celtic world. In many ways it defies categorization and definitions because it so absolutely fundamental and pervasive of our human experience.

Nature might be thought of as the physical and sensual world which retains the integrity of its core wildness. Because humans are a part of nature, this does not necessarily mean that nature is everything divorced from the impacts of human activity. We might say that nature is the sensuous places in which soul dwells. Rather than defining nature as everything Other than human, we can make the leap to include ourselves within this spectrum. But neither is nature just the phenomenal world; it is also the spiritual, cultural, and psychological dimensions contained therein. In this understanding nature and soul are one, and neither is raised in importance above the

other. A tree is just as much a soul as it is a collection of wood cells and chlorophyll. Neither experience of the tree is more primary or valuable than the other because they are essentially the same experience to begin with.

This stands in direct contrast to attempts to over-spiritualize nature. Sometimes it is spiritual enough to just stand and feel the wind through your hair, the icy winter rain across your face, or listen to the gushing of a stream under the diverse and brilliant color of autumn leaves. Hidden within this sensual experience of nature is exactly where we meet the storied presence of soul.

The soul of place is an invisible presence that permeates the land. It is the Land behind the land, just as our own soul is the Self behind the self, "walking beside me whom I do not see". One has only to be touched by the beauty of the natural world to know this power; a cloud-covered mountain peak, the bright sun shining yellow-green through a canopy of forest leaves, the flight of geese reflected in the clear blue water of a dark lake. The soul of place reveals itself in the pure and authentic presence that nature holds herself in.

When we cease to experience the presence of the world, we lose our own sense of presence, and further alienate ourselves from nature and soul. However if we are willing to join in this dynamic dance of nature, our own sense of soulful presence becomes enlivened within us. This sort of dialogue between nature and soul came to expression in a poem of mine:

PRESENCE

Something about
the way
mountains and trees
dance with the shapes
of clouds;
the symphonic echo
of stillness against the
steady relaxed drifting
and gentle waving that's
beckoned by wind.
Beneath it the lake
answers back with
portraits of clarity
wrapped in the ripples
of its own interpretation.

Presence is the
spontaneous joining in
of our own
surprised voices.

The interaction between the soul of place and the human community is of prime importance in shamanic cultures. There is much debate about whether or not Celtic culture was a "shamanic" one. Much of this debate hinges on the way in which we define shamanism. Most scholars tend to focus on it as what Mircea Eliade called an "archaic technique of ecstasy", and focus on the shaman's ability to heal and travel to the spirit realm. This however ignores the most important function of the shaman: that of mediator between the human community and nature, or the soul of place.

If we contemplate the shaman from this perspective, we can begin to understand that the shamans were the first ecopsychologists. Their ability to heal was grounded in the continued reciprocity between the human and natural communities. There was a recognition that disease and illnesses were largely a product of an imbalance in this more primal relationship. David Abram articulates this well in an interview, *The Ecology of Magic*:

If the magician was not simultaneously doing this work of offering prayers and praises and ritual gestures to the other animals and to the powers of the earth and the sky, then he might heal someone in the community and someone else would fall sick, and then he would heal that other person, and someone else would fall sick. The source of the illness is often perceived as an imbalance within the person, but it is actually in the relation between the human village and the land that supports it, the land that yields up its food, its animals for skins for clothing, and its plants for food and medicine. Humans take so much from the land, and the magician's task is to make sure that we humans always return something to the land so that there is a two-way flow, that the boundary between us – the human culture and the rest of nature – stays a porous boundary.⁵

It is this role which marks the druid of Celtic culture as a shamanic figure and an ancient expression of ecopsychology. Druids, though they had a wide role to play in society – including everything from historians to judges to healers, diviners, and spiritual counselors – might be summed up best as keepers of memory and reciprocity between the tribe and the land. They were threshold people who through their cultivated skills mediated this relationship. Though the druids may have played a central role in Celtic society, it is worth noting that the ordinary people of the community also participated in the same worldview and were responsible for their own personal relationship with the gods and the land.

As historians, storytellers, and genealogists, the druids played the role of tribal memory keepers. This keeping of memory was also an important part of their role as cultivators of reciprocity. An early Irish text, the *Senchus Mór*, asks the question, "What is the preserving shrine?" It replies to itself, "Not hard: it is memory and what is preserved in it." Seeking depth and clarification, it asks the question again, "What is the preserving shrine? Not hard: it is nature and what is preserved in it". The preserving shrine is the memory of the land. The understanding that the land has a memory is radical to the modern world, but pervasive to ancient thought. This is essentially an

articulation of the soul of place.

The dinnseanchas, the place-name stories of Ireland, are a perfect example of the interplay of memory and land. Each place has its name and the story of how that name came to be associated with that place. Although many of the surviving dinnseanchas are medieval fabrications, there are authentic stories mixed within and the survival of the tradition speaks to the Celtic propensity to situate themselves in a storied and enlivened world.

This sort of practice is by no means limited to the Celtic people. The Apache tribes of North America also have a strong tradition of place oriented stories. Similarly the Aboriginal people of Australia have the tradition of the songlines. In fact the dinnseanchas might be thought of as the "Celtic songlines" in some respects. The dinnseanchas are an expression of the Celtic dreamtime, the mytho-poetic history of the relationship between people, the gods, and the land. In many such place-name story traditions, including the songlines of Australia, it is in the retelling of the stories the place is renewed and recreated. This is much like the ritual re-enactment of the cosmogony of a people, which is evident in most native cultures around the world. It had a firm presence in the Celtic world as well at each of the four seasonal festivals. One might speculate that the dinnseanchas served a similar purpose. By telling these stories we participate in this mytho-poetic process of creation and thus renew the land and revitalize our relationship to it.

Oral cultures recognize, far more so than our written and alphabetic culture, the power of words. For oral cultures, language was a matter of the body and senses, rather than the disembodied abstract use of written language that our culture is accustomed to. The name of something was not just a series of self-reflective human symbols, but a deep and embodied experience of the thing itself. In a sense, the name of something was the thing, as well as a recognition of its enlivened nature. This theme is powerfully explored in David Abram's book, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Language and Perception in a More-Than-Human World*.

Storytelling, specifically in the context of myth, is about creating a threshold. Myths and stories take us to a place that is not quite fact, not quite fiction – it is someplace between these two. It is a liminal place from which we can access the Otherworld which is the indefinable, elusive, and shapeshifting interiority of place and individual; the place, to use Theodore Roszak's term, "where psyche meets Gaia". The dinnseanchas provide an excellent medium for this dialogue because they deal directly in the subject matter of place. The dinnseanchas provide this threshold – between memory and nature, fact and fiction, human and other – and thus allow us to navigate and mediate the energy of reciprocity across the boundaries.

A specific story from the dinnseanchas, dealing with the creation and naming of the Boyne River in Ireland, captures this sense well. In this story, the goddess Boann is married to Nechtan, who is the protector of a sacred well in the realm of his sidhe. Only Nechtan and his three cupbearers were able to approach the well. Boann, however, attempts to do this. Interestingly she walks around the well counter-clockwise. The waters from the well rise up, and injure her, taking one of her eyes, a leg, and an arm.

The waters then chase her to the place of the Boyne River's mouth, where she is "killed" and becomes the river.

Within this story we engage in the reality of the land as threshold. The injuries Boann sustains are a common motif in several stories. One of those stories is the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh, in which Lugh takes on the "crane posture" of standing on one leg, with one eye closed, and one hand behind his back. There seems to be a threshold significance to this posture, in that it represents having one foot in both worlds. One might be able to view these injuries purely as a punishment for her violations of a taboo, however it seems obvious that something deeper is happening here. The well in question is the well of wisdom after all, and it is those waters which were released into the world. This sort of relationship with the land after all, with the sources of wisdom, is not without risk; through it we are transformed, and like Boann become threshold people, with our senses enmeshed deep within both nature and soul.

The *dinnseanchas* are in this way an entwining of nature and memory. Memory, and the cultivation of memory, was an important aspect of druidic training. This was for several reasons, not least of which was that in an oral culture, the extent of the memory determines the extent to which the traditions endure. However as memory-keepers – poets, historians, storytellers, genealogists, lore and tradition bearers – this meant more than the simple passing on of information. By holding the memory of all they did, they essentially were able to remind the ordinary people of the tribe who they were, both within the human world, as well as citizens of a more-than-human world.

The druid was precisely that person who had gone to the well of wisdom, like Boann, drank from its secret waters, and thus stood on the threshold between this world and the Other, mediating between the two. It should come as no surprise then to find that there is a possible etymological connection between the word druid and the Sanskrit word *duir*, which also gives us the English word "door". The druids became, to use a term from Frank MacEowen, "ambassadors of the sacred", and served the people as a doorway, a point of entry, into the sacred world.

If nature is the sensuous places in which soul dwells, then it is essentially that which connects us to the sacred, and fosters our relationship to the sacred world. This relationship to the sacred is as much an aspect of druidism, shamanism, and ecopsychology as the relationship of reciprocity to the phenomenal world of the senses. In fact, the two are co-arising, and one cannot exist without the other. To alienate ourselves from nature is to alienate ourselves from soul, from the sacred, and thus to become a mirror solely of the human world. Just as David Abram reminds us, "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."⁶ Otherwise we are like the written word, divorced and disembodied from the sensual world.

This connection to the sacred is as vital as air and water to our continued survival. The sacred facilitates the expansive relationship between humans and the world. It is the sacred which drives us towards this relationship because through it we recognize our kinship with all the soulful and animated world. Gary Snyder writes that "Sacred refers to that which helps take us out of our little selves into the larger self of

the whole universe."⁷ Earth-honoring culture remember this well, and life is oriented to the cultivation of this relationship, and thus to the movement from the "little self" into the "larger self" of the soul.

We can see this clearly in the Celtic world. There is perhaps no better evidence for this than the *Carmina Gadelica*, a compilation of prayers, charms, and invocations from the Scottish Gaelic world. Although the compilation is Scottish, there are similar prayers from Ireland and it would be far from irrational speculation to suggest that the tradition thrived there as well. Most of these prayers had to do with the ordinary. They concerned things like sowing seeds, going to sleep, waking from the night, lighting the hearth fire or smooching it in the evening. They were simple prayers, filled with a sense and presence of the sacred, which were recited throughout the day to keep one "in contact and conviviality" with the more-than-human. As evidenced by the compilation, this practice endured strongly in rural places even into the 19th and early 20th century.

When our world is enlivened by the sacred, even the so called "ordinary" becomes a profound expression of beauty. There is no such "thing" as the sacred, because all things are sacred. Instead it is more of an experience, a relationship, a way of seeing the world. In this way of seeing all things are enlivened, and so move away from the objective world of "things" and come to rest and belong in the subjective world of "beings". Because stories connect us with the sacred, and bring us into experiential relationship to it, they are a potent bridge which crosses the perceptual gap between the sacred and the ordinary.

In losing our own story in relation to the sacred world we have lost our bridge. That is to say that we have come to believe the illusion that there is a gap. This gap is the same one which leaves us stranded on one side and the more-than-human on the other side. It sanctions the realm of nature and the realm of soul to their separate sides of experience, leaving us bereft of their true unity. The illusion of the gap is one that leads us to need phrases like "human-nature relationship" which stresses separation and division. In truth though, this illusion becomes obvious as soon as we stop trying to live with nature, and begin living as nature, as members of a community of subjective beings.

To do this we need to reclaim our place in the story, which is to say that we need to be placed in a landscape and a spiritscape that is imbued with story, with consciousness, and enlivened by soul. In the presence of story there is the potential for soul-encounter – in ourselves, in others, in the land, and the more-than-human world. In many respects story and soul are one, because they are the subjective narrative of Self.

This of course raises the question of the story of the land. After all, don't we give and imbue the land with story? We most certainly do, but this is at best only a half truth. We can flip that very question around and point it just as effectively at ourselves. Doesn't the land give and imbue us with story? What story would humans have without the land, without the more-than-human world? We would have no story at all. The human story does not cause and create the story of the land. They co-arise from within because they are both essentially the same story. There is only the One Story. No

matter whether we hear it through the wind in the trees, the lapping of the ocean at the shore, the slow rising of mountains from the ground, the hooting of owls in the night, the cawing of ravens, the stags bellowing, or the voices of humans telling tales around the hearth. It is all one story of the soulful presence of the world.

We stand at a junction in history. The old human story is collapsing – revealing itself for its own myopic nature – and the institutions that once held and reinforced it are collapsing with it. The new story that is emerging is the one which calls us into creative kinship with the presence of the world. The druids of old practiced in their *neimheadh*, their nemetons, or forest-shrines. Returning to the *neimheadh* can be a profound metaphor for our return to the life-affirming story that we are now being called to surrender to. It is perhaps no accident that enfolded within this word is another word: *neimhe*. Heaven. Whether there are actual etymological roots between the two, or if it is just another note within the life-dream to startle us awake, ultimately does not matter. It is an invitation to sit in presence with a very simple fact: heaven has never been far; it is waiting patiently for our return to the wild and soulful earth.

Endnotes

-
1. Louv, Richard. "New world beyond the levees". *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. 4 October, 2005. 18 April, 2006. http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20051004/news_lz1e4louv.html
 2. Swift, Jed. "An Overview of Ecopsychology". *PSYT351e Ecopsychology*. Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado. September 2005.
 3. Plotkin, Bill. *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*. New World Library: Novato, 2003. p. 25
 4. O' Donohue, John. *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*. Bantam Books: London, 1997. p. 17
 5. London, Scott. "The Ecology of Magic: An Interview with David Abram". Scott London. 2006. 18 April, 2006. <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/abram.html>
 6. Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Vintage Books: New York, 1996. p. 22
 7. Snyder, Gary. *Good Wild Sacred*. Five Seasons Press: Hereford, England, 1984. p. 26.