



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Dancing with the Celtic Spirit”

© by the Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

Thou art the joy of all joyous things, Thou art the light of the beam of the sun, Thou art the surpassing star of guidance, Thou art the loveliness of all lovely desires...

‘The Invocation of the Graces’ from *Carmina Gadelica* (1900)

*Poetry is a special use of language that opens onto the real.
The business of the poet is truth telling, which is why in the Celtic tradition
no one could be a teacher unless he or she was a poet.* Huston Smith

*St. Patrick’s Day is an enchanted time – a day to begin transforming
winter’s dreams into summer’s magic.* Adrienne Cook

Sermon

Are you enjoying the music? I love Irish, and more broadly Celtic music—and not just because I am part Scottish, thus harkening from another Celtic land. This music feels happy and joyful to me. It makes my heart feel lighter and sends my feet dancing. It’s impossible to feel sad around such lively music.

The Chieftains recorded a traditional Irish song I want to share with you. It might be called a drinking song, but that’s not what I like about it. What’s in the glass you raise doesn’t matter, it’s the spirit of the song that does. Here are the first few lines and chorus:

Kind friends and companions come join me in rhyme
Come lift up your voices and chorus with mine.
Come lift up your voices, all grief to refrain
For we may or might never meet here again.
So here’s a health to the company and one to my lass.
Let’s drink and be merry all out of one glass,
Let’s drink and be merry, all grief to refrain
For we may or might never all meet here again.

This is a communion song, a request to share a cup among companions. There's no better friendship ritual for a fellowship, whether here, in a neighborhood bar, or under a cathedral of stars.

More verses follow, but this portion reveals some basic Celtic spirituality. The invitation to join the singer in rhyme evidences the ancient Celts love of words. They loved to sing and tell stories of heroes and heroines, deities, and spirits. Words brought harmony to the chaos of their primitive lives. Ancient Irish bards trained for years to memorize songs and stories, perfecting their role as memory keepers. Rhymes and patterns helped them remember the stories.

Bard-poets kept the histories, praising courage and good deeds. Druids kept the wisdom and rituals needed to navigate life's many mysteries. These histories and stories were shared orally because ancient Celtic peoples didn't develop their own writing. When Christian clerics like Patrick arrived the Celts learned to read and write. Their own records of Druid rituals don't exist, though songs and stories survive.

As the Chieftain song suggests, Celts liked gathering in one another's company to sing and be merry. Drinking to celebrate St. Patrick's Day keeps up an ancient tradition. The request to 'refrain from all grief' shows the Celtic preference to celebrate life's joys over its sorrows. Death was always close by, so they knew the truth that 'we might never meet here again.' Life was short and needed to be enjoyed while it could, before it was too late.

Since today is St. Patrick's Day, it's an obvious time to examine Celtic spirituality and enjoy some cultural gifts from Ireland and other Celtic lands. We're happy the Green Flag Band has joined us again this year. Thank you. Your music is the perfect accompaniment to our exploration of ancient Celtic spirituality.

Ancient Celts experienced the world very differently from most modern peoples. Westerners have generally kept religion separate from ordinary life. America's dominant view is influenced by Platonic and Christian understandings that the world as a duality. The sacred and profane remain separate. God is above in a heavenly realm while we humans are below, reveling or wallowing in our human sin and frailties. Humans are not divine and the dead stay dead, science tells us. Only Jesus was human and divine, and dead souls wait, ready to sit at the right of Jesus come Judgment Day, some religious doctrines tell us.

Celtic spirituality was a reflection of their understanding of reality. They believed the living, the dead, and the deities and spirits all co-mingled, all could associate with one another. Some people did this more easily than others, particularly the visionary poets and seers. The average human only saw glimpses of the unseen world, the Otherworld with a capital 'O'. The Celtic world was alive with fairies, sprites, leprechauns, plus gods and goddesses all living side by side to mortal humans.

Magic occurred everywhere. When drinking some water from a spring seemed to cure an illness, it was the spirit or deity of the spring who provided the healing. If someone lost a prized possession, it was the mischievous sprites and fairies fault.

Rocks and rivers, mountains and streams, trees and groves and other features of the landscape were thought to be where spirits and deities lived. These land features marked where the Otherworld was most accessible. You could place one foot in a stream and one foot on the earthen

bank and be part of both the human and the Otherworld at once. Female deities lived in water, male deities among the trees and groves of the forests.

At first, mounds of earth were called *sidhe* in Gaelic or Old Irish. But in time the faeries and spirits who lived in the *sidhe* were given that name. You might have heard of the banshee, a female spirit who wails at death and frightens humans who hear her cries. She's a frequent visitor at Samhain, or Halloween.

Specific gods or goddesses were thought to live in a particular site. Villagers might leave offerings to that deity in thanks or appeasement. Most Celtic deities were local, specific only to one place, though a few major deities can be found across Ireland. With local gods living in every feature of the land the Celts indicate their belief that the earth on which they live and depend upon is sacred, and that every force in nature and every feature of the land shares in the total divinity of all existence.

Have you ever visited a natural spring where it emerges from the earth as if by magic or some unseen divine hand? Has the trickling sound of water moving over a rocky stream seemed like a magical fairy orchestra playing? Have you stood in a special stand of trees or a grove where you felt something unseen was present with you? Or that something magical might happen—maybe even a colorful flower fairy with tiny wings might fly by? I believe in such magic, such wonders.

Maybe you have stood at Stonehenge, Carnac, Newgrange, or some other stone monument and felt its power and presence in some physical, visceral manner. Can you stand there without feeling something ineffable, unidentifiable? I can't.

Closer to home, can you imagine looking over the features of our grounds here or near your home and can you imagine that a local deity or spirit lived there? How might that affect your appreciation of the land? Would it become more sacred to you? Might you disturb it less?

The ancient Celts felt the land was holy in this way and needed to be treated with great respect. They did not dismiss these feelings as merely imagination or hallucination. They believed there was a reason for these feelings. It was real. And because the unseen was a breath away, you needed to be mindful wherever you went. A leprechaun might pass by hurrying to hide a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, or a fairy might lure you into the Otherworld to sing and dance forever.

So-called civilized Romans called the more primitive ancient Celts pagans. A pagan was someone who lived in a rural place in contrast to the civilized who lived in the cities. Eventually the term became synonymous with someone who practiced a form of earth-based religion and did not follow Christian doctrine. The pagan year was marked by the seasonal changes caused by earth's movement around the sun. The Celts celebrated the dates midway between the solstices and equinoxes—Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnassadh. Like the border created by the appearance of a land feature, borders in time created especially risky opportunities for mortals,

spirits and deities. As the seasons turned the Celts believed the boundaries between worlds became thin, allowing for greater movement between these co-existing worlds. Our contemporary Halloween 'trick or treat' customs developed out of this understanding.

A growing interest in pagan worship and rituals has been occurring in America and in Celtic countries in recent times. Many Unitarian Universalists call themselves pagans and practice rituals marking the cycle of the seasons, our Fellowship included. Given the modern world's disconnect from the earth and the challenges of global climate change and overpopulation, I encourage an interest in Celtic spirituality as a worthwhile remedy for this.

Most of us live pretty disconnected from the earth that sustains us. We rarely touch the ground or soil with our bare hands or feet unless we're gardeners or on a brief vacation at the beach. We treat the world and land as an object, a resource for our needs rather than as a subject demanding our respect and consideration. In Martin Buber's language, I think we could improve our environmental challenges if we adopted an I/Thou relationship to the earth. To speak of earth as Thou is to give it respect and equality, as opposed to earth as It, or object that is other, that can be disrespected indiscriminately.

Celtic people were well-rooted to their home lands. Individuals didn't own land, the entire clan did. They felt an obligation to care for and protect their collective territory and their clan, their kin. They had strong ties to the deities of their land, especially because the land provided their food and shelter needs.

In contrast, we generally have little sense of home because we move from place to place so readily. We take what we need and move on, paying little attention to what devastation we may leave behind. If we don't feel connected to the land, if we don't see the land as alive with spirits or deities, but dead and empty, we are not encouraged to care deeply about it. Granted, not all of us treat earth this way, but this is the modern way. Civilization has removed us from the land.

The Irish and the other early inhabitants of Celtic lands may seem primitive and superstitious, or simply creative and imaginative to think that the land is alive. But I believe that if we saw every feature, every stream, every tree, every *thing* on earth as sacred and alive, just as we are alive and sacred, then we might become better stewards of the earth we depend upon but are too quickly changing and damaging.

May we learn from the beliefs of the ancient people on the island St. Patrick converted to Christianity hundreds of years ago. May we see the divine in every hill and vale, river and stream in Athens and surrounding land. May we give blessings for every act in our lives. May we be a blessing for each other and for earth our home. May we rejoice in Earth's own celebration of St. Patrick's Day for she is putting on a glorious coat of springtime green. May it be so.