

Returning to Sacred Ground

Michael Kearney

WITHIN A CELTIC COSMOLOGY there are three worlds: *Cruinne*, *Alltar*, and *Neart*. We can visualize these as three concentric circles with *Cruinne*—the outermost circle—corresponding to space and time, the causal, material world of everyday reality. *Alltar*—the middle circle—is the realm of dreams and visions, of a-causality; it is the place we come to in deep meditation, the place we come to before we die. *Neart*—the innermost and third circle—literally means ‘no-thing’; it the unmanifest that is replete with all possibility. The three worlds of Celtic cosmology are not intended to represent a hierarchical value system. Each world is equally important in its own way. Within this cosmology, the ‘goal’ of spiritual practice is a way of being that allows us to be in all three worlds simultaneously. And when we are, we are awake, alive, and deeply connected.

Attitude

For the Celts, nature and the divine are synonymous. Nature is ‘divine ground.’ And nature is an embodiment of all three worlds—*Cruinne*, *Alltar*, *Neart*—as a dependently co-arising, interweaving, dynamic flux of energy and light. Think of a great tree, with the branches as *Cruinne*, the trunk as *Alltar*, and the roots as *Neart*. And imagine that each part of the tree—the branches, the trunk, and the roots—is in bloom. The whole tree is blooming.

Within a Celtic cosmology, nature is seen as ‘thin place,’ where the veil between worlds is porous. So when we are in nature, we are in more than one world—*nature as liminal space*. As we move into nature, we come into the ‘now,’ for nature is always in the present tense. The great trees standing in the morning mist never move from where they are. They are *there*, utterly there, and utterly present—*nature as embodied is-ness*.

Intention and Hope

We might consider stepping into nature as ‘vision quest’; not in the sense of receiving some special vision, but of allowing nature to initiate us into another way of seeing and another way of being. Might we be open to moving from a *Cruinne*-only way of being in the world, to a *Cruinne-Alltar-Neart* way of being in the world, and to the new way of perceiving, and of behaving, that comes with this?

Irish philosopher and nature-mystic John Moriarty talks about how this can happen as a paradigm shift from “me-you consciousness” to “we-consciousness.” He describes a moment where nature affected him in this way. It happened one day as he was walking on his native Kerry Mountains, very much in the grip of his demons. Suddenly, a wild hare got up from the heather at his feet and ran away. Looking down he saw the indentation of where the hare had been lying there in the heather. Letting himself down onto the ground, Moriarty lay his head in the still warm space. He lay there for some time, “Letting nature happen to him.”

We each have our hopes as we head into nature. Perhaps a necessary first step is letting go of an expectation of any particular outcome. T. S. Eliot writes, “Teach us to wait without hope for hope

would be hope of the wrong thing.” When we first arrive in nature we are filled with our stories, our dramas, our noise; it’s all about us, and what we notice and see comes from this perspective. So rather than expecting anything in particular, we might simply be aware that one possible outcome is that we will pass from being *foreground* to nature’s *background*, to being background to nature’s foreground.

Tasks

It begins with paying attention. Mary Oliver, whose work as a poet flows from her relationship with nature, writes: “To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.” And again, “This is the first, wildest and wisest thing I know, that the soul exists, and that it is built entirely out of attention.” Paying attention is what brings us into the present moment, and into relationship. Implicit in our fully sensate attention is a quality of profound receptivity, an allowing, in Moriarty’s words, “Nature happen to us.” Novelist, Henry Miller, writes of the radical implications of such a letting go: “I know what the cure is, it is to give up, to relinquish, to surrender; so that our little hearts may beat in unison with the great heart of the world.”

Knowing

How do we know if we have left the isolation of *Cruinne*-mind? How do we know if we have arrived in nature? Not in any place in particular so much as in a process, a way of seeing? How do we recognize that this has happened?

Immediately prior to this shift, there may be feelings of fear and anxiety as something in us, maybe the ego, senses that we are crossing a threshold. We are moving from a place that is familiar and domesticated, to a place that is unknown and wild. There is a kind of death involved here, a “dying before we die.”

This is where we come to the limits of language and of abstract conceptualizations. This is something that the animal we are recognizes as subtle shifts in the quality of our energy and awareness. We may be aware of qualities such as lightness, and of being wide-awake; a sense of porousness, of being part of something more, of being deeply connected, of being vividly-alive.

Then, simplicity; cellular-resonance; a sense of rightness, of being in *Tao*; a sense that whatever happens, happens, and its okay, and its alright; and with it a sense of ripeness—like a plum, at the right moment, falling to the ground.

Poetry, being closer to nature, may help us to find words. William Wordsworth, “With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, we see into the very heart of things.” John Moriarty, “We have become plankton in the abyss of faith.” Mark Nepo, “We are no longer gods who carve out rivers, but particles awakened in the stream.” Mary Oliver, “This is how you swim inwards, this is how you flow outwards, this is how you pray.” And again, “When deep in the tree all the locks click open, and the fire surges through the wood, and the blossoms blossom.”

Returning to Sacred Ground Meditation

This meditation may be practiced in one of two ways. The first possibility is in nature itself—where you have the opportunity to wander in nature, in wilderness, knowing that there is a place waiting to be found by you, a place that is already there, a place you will simultaneously recognize and be recognized by, a place where you are already known. Finding this place comes with patience,

and an open heart and mind, and is a process involving curiosity and intuition, of remembering and of being remembered.

The second possibility, which allows one to use this as a guided meditation with those who are sick or frail or confined to bed, is where we approach a remembered place in nature, with which we feel a special affinity, through the imagination.

The next paragraph is the introduction for those who are doing this meditation as an imaginal exercise:

Begin by closing your eyes—bring your attention to the sensations of the (bed, chair, floor, or ground) supporting your body, your back, your head, your arms, pelvis, legs . . . Notice the contact between your body and the surface that supports you . . . Drop into that contact . . . aware of the gravity in the weight of your body . . . With each exhalation, let go to this gravity and to the contact and the holding support beneath you, knowing that it is there . . . Now, remember a place in nature that is special to you . . . somewhere you love to go, love to be . . . A place where you feel safe . . . A place where you feel free to be yourself—awake, alive, connected . . . Imagine yourself arriving at this place . . .

As you arrive in this place, slow down, look around; begin to take in the detail. Notice the quality of the light, the colors, any movement or other detail that catches your eye . . . Let this sink-in . . . Fully dilated, just notice, receiving whatever is there . . . You are here now! You have arrived in this place you love, this place you love to be in . . .

Now, pause. Stand still in this place . . . Notice whatever sounds there are . . . Allow them to be as they are; receive them, drink them in . . . Now bring your attention to any smell there might be in this place . . . Sniff the air . . . Is there is any characteristic aroma? You may even notice some taste in this sensation . . .

When you are ready, look around you. Locate a spot where you could easily and comfortably sit or lie. If you would like to, gently let yourself down onto the ground . . .

You are sitting or lying now, in fuller contact with the ground, with the palms of your hands face down . . . Close your eyes; bring all your awareness to the contact between your skin and the ground . . . With each exhalation, let the weight of your body drop with gravity into this contact with the ground . . . Notice the temperature, the texture, the moisture or dryness; you may even need to move your palms a little to get an even better sense of this . . . If you are sitting, notice the contact between your feet and the ground, your seat and the ground . . . If you are lying, notice the contact between your feet, your legs, your pelvis, your back, your shoulders, arms, the back of your neck, your head and the ground of this place . . .

Notice how the ground of this place is *there*—is fully and completely *there*. This ground is holding you; the ground of this place is holding you. This ground has been there all along; this ground is here, now . . .

Once again, bring your full awareness to the contact between your body and the ground. With each exhalation, let yourself go to the ground of this place. Allow yourself to deeply relax into being held in this way. Let go to this ancient gravity, this ancient ground. Let go to this place that is always there, this place that knows you more deeply than you know yourself. Let yourself go, to being held in this way, to being known in this way.

And as you relax and let go in this way, if you notice your mind being caught up in thought, gently bring your attention back to the contact between your body and the ground; and once again, and with the exhale, let go to gravity, let go to the contact with this ancient ground . . .

(You might wish to have a timer set so you can practice this meditation for 10, 15, or 20 minutes, as you choose. As your timer sounds, bring your attention back to the sounds of the place you are in; when you are ready, open your eyes.)*

Quick now, here, now, always; (a condition of complete simplicity): costing not less than everything.

— T.S. Eliot



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