

Brigid cailleach and midwife to a new world.

Reflecting on the turmoil present in the world today it is clear to all, but those steeped in denial, that all is not well. It seems that something ails us humans; something that causes us to live in ways that disrespect our mother, the living earth, and all our relatives. We ask what is it in us humans that create such a restless world where there is little sense of belonging, nurture or home and which causes so many of the species with which we share this planet to suffer ?

The exclusion of the Feminine energy in our naming and understanding of the Divine is reflected in a corresponding absence and valuing of feminine energy in all aspects of life in western society. The devaluing and exclusion of the feminine energy over the past centuries has created a distorted story about life which has resulted in a world whose shape and vibration creates disharmony.

So how do we find our way back to a more harmonious way of life? If we know what is missing and what ails us, it may be possible for us to make the journey back towards wholeness and health.

In times of great danger and challenges, cultures often seek the wisdom for the journey ahead in the stories and myths that sustained them in an earlier time. However as Poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill suggests this requires an understanding that “Actual myths and stories themselves soar way above any uses to which they may have been put to already and can and must be retranslated by each generation in terms of their own need and thus liberated into a new consciousness “(1)

At the present time there is a wonderful re-emergence of aspects of ancient spiritual traditions by people all over the world. The reconnection and embodiment of these ancient spiritual traditions, myths and stories has the potential to release the spiritual power needed for us to become agents of transformation within our society.

At this time many people are becoming aware of the wisdom of the feminine. As this happens, the absence of genuine feminine energy present in most institutions, both religious and secular, throughout western culture, becomes obvious. To include the presence of the divine feminine energy in creating a world whose shape is more wholesome requires a fundamental reclaiming of the essential role of the feminine in all aspects of life. In order to create change within the physical world and in our society it is necessary to change the dreams and stories held within the imagination of a society.

My own journey over the past 25years has been primarily within the Celtic spiritual tradition. This tradition has emerged over many millennia and continues to evolve. It includes the wisdom of the megalithic, the pre-Christian Celtic and the Christian Celtic traditions as they met and engaged with each other through the ages. I believe the rekindling of the flames of this tradition, which have lain dormant for many centuries, “like coals under the smooching awaiting a new kindling” holds a key to the recovery of the wisdom needed to create a more sane society.

“God is good and he has a great mother!” a statement sometimes heard in Ireland, reflects an important truth at the heart of the Celtic spiritual tradition, one that honours the presence of the divine feminine and understands that even God emerges out of the feminine energy of being-ness. The Divine Feminine is present at the heart of this spiritual tradition and plays a central role in both Celtic spirituality and Celtic culture. There are many goddesses within Celtic mythology, however Brigid as both goddess and saint, occupies a central place as representative of the Divine Feminine within Celtic tradition. Reconnecting with and re-memembering the spirit and archetypal energy of Brigid, in both her Goddess and saint manifestations, is an essential task of this renaissance. Brigid, although normally associated with the maiden and mother aspects of feminine energy, is also expressed in the *cailleach* form, as indicated in the prayer “*Molamid Brid an mhaighean; Molamid Brid an mhathair; Molamid Brid an cailleach*” (Praise to Brigid, the maiden, the mother, and the crone).

These three different, but related manifestations, the maiden, the mother, and the *cailleach*, or crone together create a divine feminine trinity. Each aspect of this trinity occupies a different role within the life, death, and rebirth continuum. The Feminine energy is both the harbinger and the birther of new life and is the destroyer of life that has been spent. It is experienced at the thresholds of life and death and rebirth.

In the past 20 years there has been a new awakening of the importance of Brigid and her place within our lives and our world. Her Feastday at Imbolc is now celebrated in many places in Ireland and all over the world. There is an understanding that what is needed now is for people to recover those qualities that Brigid embodied in her lifetime and which marked her as a woman of true spiritual power. It is time for us individually and collectively to recover the qualities that Brigid embodied in her lifetime, marking her as a woman of true spiritual power.

As we consider the qualities embodied by Brigid as reflected in the stories of her life as abbess of Kildare Ireland, it is obvious that these qualities are similar to those present in her incarnation as pre-Christian goddess

Brigid is considered a threshold person, one who can straddle both sides and remain detached. This quality, which is central in her life, is highlighted in the stories of her birth, which attest that she was born on the threshold of the house, neither within nor without; that her father was a noble man, her mother a slave; and that he was a pagan, her mother a Christian. From her origins, she has this ability to stand in the void and remain centred within it, while holding the creative tension between two opposite perspectives. Many stories from her life portray her as a person capable of resolving conflicts in a healthy manner. Being centred and aligned within herself, she is detached and can grasp the energies of both sides clearly thereby facilitating a resolution. She has the ability to stand still and remain focused, in spite of the uncertainty present in the outer world.

As a child and a young woman Brigid constantly challenged the accepted norms of her society, especially those expressed by her father when they opposed to her own values.

This reflects Brigid as a person who lives her life from a place of deep inner knowing and inner authority. She also refused to marry any of the suitors that her father arranged for her, because she had chosen a different life path and destiny. She would not compromise her soul journey!

Brigid's generosity is legendary and is related in numerous stories of her giving away food and clothes to people who came to her monastery or whom she met along the way. This generosity was, it seems, based on her absolute faith in the abundance of the universe to provide all that was needed in each moment. Each time she gave away the butter or meat needed for the next meal it miraculously reappeared in time for that meal!

Brigid's capacity to bring forth new life, to nourish, to create plenty in the crops or an abundance of the milk from cows, and to manifest or create *ex nihilo* is a reflection of the true abundance and with the prosperity of the society, living in relationship with the land, created by her. Her life and work thrived because of her deep trust and an absence of fear.

It is said that from the moment Brigid learned to know God her mind remained ever focused on God. She remained connected to God and the heavens while living on the earthly plane. Her power of manifestation was a result of this ability to be aligned heaven to earth. The strong connection between her inner and outer worlds allowed her to focus her energy onto a particular intention and ensure its manifestation.

The story how Brigid got the land for her monastery in Kildare is a wonderful example of her ability to manifest what is needed. She states clearly what she needs and asks the local lord for land. First he refused but she is not deterred by this. She pursues her request in a different way by asking "Give me what land my mantle will cover" He says yes! When she placed the mantle on the ground it grew until it covered enough land for the monastery. This reflects a woman who can hold her intention clearly, even when on the surface it seems that her request will not be met!!

These inspiring stories of Brigid relate to her active life in the world, where she embodies and live true spiritual power! But what and where is the source of this power?

To fully understand the power and the qualities that Brigid embodied, as reflected in the many stories about her life, we need to begin with an exploration of the role of Brigid as Cailleach the aspect of the Divine Feminine, that rules during the season of Samhain (winter) at the beginning of the Celtic year. This I believe is the wellspring from which Brigid's power manifests in the world emerges.

What then is the energy associated with the hag, crone, or *cailleach* aspect of the divine feminine? The *cailleach* is the embodiment of the tough mother-love that challenges its children to stop acting in destructive ways. It is the energy that refuses to indulge in inappropriate personal or societal dreams. It is the energy that will bring death to those dreams and fantasies that are not aligned with our highest good. Yet, this *cailleach* energy also will support the emergence and manifestation in the world of the highest and deepest within us. It will hold us safely as we embrace the darkness within ourselves and

our society. It is an energy that insists that we stand still, open our hearts, and feel our own pain and the pain of the earth. This is the energy that teaches us how to stay with the process when things are difficult. This energy will not allow us to run away!

The *cailleach*'s way of being is a slow, inwardly focused way, with minimum outward activity: a way that values times of active waiting that pays attention and allows life to unfold.

An essential part of the journey that all the great heroes and heroines in world mythologies undertake includes facing and embracing the energy of surrender, darkness, and death. The hero or heroine learns the next step required in their outer world journey only by submitting to and being initiated into the dark world of the *cailleach*.

Through this initiation the mature masculine power can emerge and lead each person to find their true path. When this happens the action that follows will be in the service of the true feminine and bring forth wisdom and compassion creating new life, vitality, and sustainability.

However because western society is currently dominating, by the young masculine energy, present in both men and women, characterised by its "can do" attitude, there is an urgent need for each of us to make this heroic journey with the *cailleach*, so that we will become agents for the transformation of our society.

A story from the Celtic tradition that illustrates the importance of the *cailleach* and her energy is the story of Niall of the Nine Hostages. Niall and his four brothers come to a well to get a drink of water. The well is being guarded by an old woman who represents the *cailleach* or hag. When the first brother goes to the well, she tells him that if he wants to drink the water, he must give her a kiss, he is horrified and refuses; she sends him away. The other three brothers go in turn on the same errand, and each refuses to kiss the hag. As the story goes:

Then it was Niall's turn. Faced with the same challenge, he kissed the old hag and embraced her. When he looked again, she had changed into the most beautiful woman in the world. "What art thou?" said the boy. "King of Tara, I am Sovereignty . . . your seed shall be over every clan."ⁱ

This story suggests that in order to have access to the life-enhancing energy represented by the water in the well, it is necessary for the young masculine to embrace this particular and perhaps unattractive aspect of the feminine energy. Why is this so? The *cailleach* represents the wisdom gathered by living in right relationship with the earth, something that requires reflection, stillness, and attentiveness. It knows more clearly what is needed and what is possible in each situation, and it is aware of the consequences of particular actions. It knows how to proceed slowly; it understands the value of times of waiting and times of allowing. It knows how to be and how to act.

So how can we, you and I, begin the journey back towards wholeness and balance?

Brigid in her *cailleach* form can help us to embrace these difficult and fearful aspects of our lives. The cauldron, a central image in both the Celtic and other traditions, is a vessel for transformation and transmutation. In many stories, the cauldron is first filled with unpalatable raw things, which then are used to create a nourishing soup using the transforming energy of the universe through the action of fire and water. The transformation of the contents of the cauldron is supervised by the *cailleach* energy, which works inwardly, quietly, and slowly to bring about an unforced and timely rebirth. The transformation of the cauldron's contents concentrates their essence and offers them back in a new and more suitable form. From this process, we learn that the possibility of transformation and re-birth always exists, no matter how devitalised something appears to be. A new rebirth can be achieved when we submit ourselves and our concerns to the inward and slow transformational energy of the cauldron and the *cailleach*.

Philosopher Richard Kearney in his poem [Bridget's Well](#) speaks of the importance of this inward and downward journey and suggests that it is the only way to access the life-giving and inspiring fire of Brigid that lies underneath the water.

“I will rest now at the bottom of Bridget's well

I will follow the crow's way

Footprint by footprint

In the mud down here

I won't come up

Until I am calmed down

And the earth dries beneath me

And I have paced the caked ground

Until smooth all over

It can echo a deeper voice

Mirror a longer shadow “(2)

This poem suggests the importance of that deep journey to the well where the source of new life and the fire of passion is found. At Imbolc (Feb 1st) Brigid appears as the fresh maiden of springtime emerging from the womb of the *cailleach*, queen of winter. The tiny spark of new light discovered in the deep womb darkness of the winter solstice has grown sufficiently to safely emerge from that inner world and begins its transformation of winter into spring! Now Brigid embodies the energy that breathes life into the mouth of dead winter. The energy of Brigid at Imbolc is the energy of Yes. It can only emerge from the place of stillness!

Brigid is also closely associated with the life giving aspect of fire, a fire that doesn't burn but which can never be fully quenched. When this fire comes from a clear and deep

space, as happens following the inward journey, it will be significant and filled with truth and potency. This life giving fire will act within in individuals, within the land, in the relationships between the people and their land, fanning the fires of creative endeavour so that all of life forms can partake in the symphony of new life emerging each springtime!

Richard Kearney's in his poem *Brigit's well* also speaks of the re-emergence of a new fire born of a deeper place within

"Then the fire may come again

Beneath me, this time

Rising beyond me

No narcissus- flinted spark

Behind closed eyes

But a burning bush

A fire that always burns away

But never is burnt out" (3)

The fire discovered through this deep journey is an inner light which guides each of us to find our next step!

I believe that the archetypal energy of Brigid, the embodiment of the divine feminine, present within the Celtic tradition has the capacity to lead and support us in transforming the present wasteland into a new life sustaining society. For this to happen, we need to understand that the archetypal energy that Brigid represents is an real aspect of the human psyche , one that has been largely dormant over the past few hundred years but is now re-emerging. Each of us can become keeper of the Brigid flame by developing and living those qualities and values that distinguished her. As we align ourselves with her archetypal energies, she supports us too courageously and safely to face the demons of this time. She teaches us how to stand still in a wobbling world ,to act as a unifying force , to hold the space of possibility and so become agents of transformation. So we ask that

"The mantle of Brigid about us

The memory of Brigid within us

The protection of Brigid keeping us from harm from ignorance, from heartlessness this day from dawn till dark" (4)

When we embrace her energy Brigid will hold us and guide us through this transition. I believe she is the one who has the power to awaken in each of us “An eye to see what is the heart that feels what is and the courage that dares to follow” (5)

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1 Amergin Jan de Fouw Amergin Wolfhound Press Dublin 2000 (afterword) no page number

2 Richard Kearney quoted in Stephen J. Collins The Irish Soul in Dialogue the Liffey Press Dublin 2001 p 147

3 Richard Kearney quoted in Stephen J. Collins The Irish Soul in Dialogue the Liffey Press Dublin 2001 p 147

4 Poem source unknown

5 Celtic triad found extensively in the literature