

## **Pilgrimage - Approaching the sacred landscape with presence**

*The footprints of an elder race are here  
And memories of an old heroic time  
And shadows of an old mysterious faith  
So that the place seems haunted and strange sounds float in the wind*

**The Book of the Buren**

**Edited by JW O Connell and A. Korf.**

***What is it that draws us human to visit sacred places all over the world especially at this time on the planet?*** This question has been with me for many years. There are many possible responses to this question.

Approximately 30 years I began to visit places known as sacred places within the landscape of Ireland. This was a very new concept of spirituality for me. As I began to visit these special places some people might say “Did you feel the energy in this place or wasn’t the energy here amazing or powerful “ Since I had not experienced the energy my answer was No or what is it that you are speaking about ? This concept of places with special energies was very new to me. I wondered what I needed to do in order to experience these energies. What was the secret that seems to facilitate some people to experience these energies and others, like myself, not to experience them? After many disappointing visits with other pilgrims to these sacred places and not yet knowing what to expect or how to prepare myself, I had an awakening. The idea that came to me, as a gift, was that the first step toward experiencing these special energies was that I must drop down into myself, feel my feet firmly planted on the ground and allow my attention to drop from my head into my body and feel the earth beneath my feet. I also needed to let go of the left brain /rational thinking with its need to know everything logically .This was challenging for me, since most of my life up to then was involved in a scientific training/ education . This awakening didn’t happen all at once but gradually over time I began to “sense” the energies of the places I visited and I began to notice the different energies present in different places.

I was surprised by the different feelings, thoughts and images that were evoked in me at different sites. I soon realised that each of the sacred places had a special alignment with certain deities and with certain mythologies and ritual practises that took place at particular times of the year. I found it helpful to know something of the purpose associated with a particular place, before I went there without being too

attached to that knowing. This supported me to be more fully present and to meet the energies available at each of these special places .

**Nigel Pennick in Sacred Celtic Landscapes** speaks of the “poetic vision of landscape, which he says is en-souled with spirits as a particularly human and therefore humane vision of the world. In this vision everything is seen as a subject not an object and spoken about by its own name. This may indeed a more wholesome vision of the earth than the soullessness into which our planet has descended.

Ireland has I believe a deeper connection with an older vision of the earth than other European countries. Ireland is a place where beneath its modern façade lies a dimension that is a deeply rooted, connected with the spiritual world and with the cycles of the natural world. In Ireland hints of Celtic, Celto-megalithic and Christian traditions and beliefs are expressed throughout the land. Stone circles, dolmens, court cairns and other megalithic structures mark places in the landscape, Soul Energy is stronger and where “Spirit” is tangibly present. This dimension of world has been mostly hidden in modern times. Recently this sacred aspect of the land has been reawakening as more spiritually sensitivity people visit these special places

The Celtic and pre-Celtic people, like all primal people, understood the sacred nature of the land out of which they emerged and that sustained them. They understood the land as a living body, infused with spirit and soul where nothing was impersonal. This awareness of the energies present in different places was foundational in choosing land for different activities and uses. They knew that the landscape had certain places where the presence of spirit was tangible in a special way. Here, the place-soul, or *anima loci*, could be experienced by anyone who had developed the necessary sensitivity. At these places, the human-divine connection was more tangible, and the veil between the worlds was thinner. Because of their special energy, such sites were chosen for temples, churches, and other places of worship. When people came, tuned into, and acknowledged the *anima loci*, the energies present in the place were called forth more fully. The unseen spiritual energies became more accessible to human awareness. As people responded to the energies present there, those energies became more embodied in the place, always in a way specific to that location.

Theologian **John Macquarrie** speaks about the intense sense of divine presence that was a core belief within the Celtic spiritual tradition: “The Celt was very much a God-intoxicated man whose life was embraced on all sides by the Divine Being. But this presence was always mediated through some this-world reality.”<sup>i</sup> This was an egalitarian spirituality in which everyone had the right and responsibility to develop

their spirituality. What made this possible was the Celts' capacity to see past the material world and experience its spiritual essence, a capacity developed through years of spiritual practices and facilitated by their immediate connection with the world of nature. Along with a belief in the essentially spiritual nature of all creation, they believed that reality constituted a continuum that extended from the physical, material realm through non-material realms to the space where pure spirit resides. It was considered both possible and desirable that people visit these non-material realms to find insights and inspiration.

### **How do we learn how to approach the sacred within the landscape and be a pilgrim in the true sense?**

To be an authentic pilgrim, walking in the sacred landscape, one must understand the world as sacred and blessed, having many layers, some visible some invisible, all filled with living presences. One must also understand the many different dimensions of the human consciousness and how to access these aspects of human consciousness that will allow this special type of meeting between human and earth and heaven to happen. **John Matthews** in **Celtic Shamanism** referring to the Celtic otherworld known as **Tir na n Og** says "the otherworld is neither an archetype produced by the unconscious nor a product of the imagination. He believes it is a dimension of consciousness which a person can access when they are in a certain state of being". "**Ta Tir na n-Og ar cul an ti Tir Aileen tre na ceile**"

**Dr Noel Dermot** in **The Mountain behind the Mountain** "speaks about the special type of imagination that is necessary if we are to open up to the Celtic vision of nature." It is an intimation rather than a scientific world but nevertheless real world, full of the one great presence (the ultimate mystery) and showing itself in mysterious presences that are as it were messengers of the presence. He also asks "What are these presences? They belong to that imaginal world that opens up beyond the doors of everyday perceptions and which can be seen or sensed within an ancient tradition". This dimension of the world or of reality (the imaginal world) must be allowed to come and go in its own way, to preserve its own reticence and delicacy, to exercise a gentle control over our avid desire for knowledge as possession, to calm and refresh the spirit rather than send it into a spiral of questioning." Entering into this imaginal world is essential in order to access the deep spiritual aspects/dimensions of the sacred places. An important question for each of us to consider is

**“What is the purpose of my visit to any of the ancient places of power in Ireland (or any other country)?**

The answer to this question is crucial and will influence how we prepare to visit these sacred places. It will influence our approach and so how we are welcomed or not by the energies that reside in these ancient places. If we come with a superficial or acquisitive attitude then perhaps we will find very little there. The energies may retreat into their centre and will not be available to us. If however we are prepared and respectful then the energies will meet us sharing their wisdom and healing with us **Fiona Mc Lead**, Scottish Mystic, speaking of people visiting Iona points out “It is as you come to Iona that you find Iona. “ This is true for all sacred places...

Many western people have lost the deep connection with land necessary to hold this awareness. However, I believe there is still a strong connection within the Irish psyche with the idea of place as sacred which has emerged from the deeply held ancient beliefs about the nature of reality. **They held the following beliefs**

- An understanding that the unbroken wholeness of the universe is the true basis of the nature of reality and of the world
- The interconnectedness of the sacred and the secular worlds, of the invisible and visible worlds, in which the material world or the visible world flows from the spiritual or non-visible world
- An understanding that a continuum exists from the physical worlds through many non-physical, yet real worlds, to the ultimate mystery
- The ability to visit these non-physical, yet real dimensions of the world and to bring back images and wisdom for use in ordinary life

Pilgrimage is a very ancient spiritual practise, one which is experiencing a revival as people seek to make more meaning of their lives within a secular world. When we, as pilgrims, approach the earth in an open-hearted way, we can access the ancient perennial wisdom held within these ancient sacred places and experience the archetypal energies of the eternal otherworld. This awakens in us our innate knowledge of and appreciation for the Divine Presence within all living beings. This can be a deeply centering and healing experience for people on pilgrimage. This may be the reason that so many spiritual seekers visit Ireland its sacred places .Perhaps this is a gift that we (in Ireland) can offer to pilgrims who come here.

**The challenge and the opportunity for spiritual tourism is how to offer “the spiritual tourist” the best possible way to visit and engage with these special, yet fragile, places.**

**Two important questions for us to consider at this time are**

1. “How do we offer people access to these places in ways that honour their sacredness and acknowledges the protection needed to safeguard the special energies found there”.
2. And how do we, as guides and guardians of these tabernacles of memory, share the riches of these sacred places with pilgrims in an authentic way

In “**Invoking Ireland** “ **John Moriarity** tells us of the great battle ( **Magh Tuired**) that took place in ancient Ireland between two tribes of people, each of whom had a different understanding of the world. **The Formorians**, who chose to shape nature to suit themselves and the **Tuatha de Dannan** who chose to let nature shape them. In this battle the two tribes of people with different sets of values were fighting for the soul of Ireland. One tribe is seeking to turn it into a human convenience, the other tribe finding fulfilment in being at one with the wind and the rain. That battle continues in the present day not only in Ireland but all over the world. John Moriarity speaks about the destructive Formorian world view that destroys everything it looks at because it perceives everything in superficial terms looks at the world exclusively as commodity or sees it only in monetary terms (**Balor’s Eye**). If we, in Ireland, adopt this philosophy in our spiritual tourism venture then the sacred energies present in our sacred places will retreat again leaving us much poorer than we can imagine. If on the other hand we incorporate the **Tuatha de Dannan** vision of the world, which chooses to see into the mystery at the heart of all existences and bring this dimension into our spiritual tourism practises the magic of this land will shine through and transform both the land and all its inhabitants

As people engaged in the promotion of spiritual tourism and pilgrimage, we must take responsibility for the choices we make. The vision and the values we hold as we promote the sacredness of Ireland must be those that will leave this land richer and more enhanced for the generations to come.

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Spiritual Tourism Conference Waterford I.T. March 9<sup>th</sup> 2018

## **Useful Resources**

The Art of Pilgrimage Phil Cousineau

Invoking Ireland John Moriarty

Celtic Sacred Landscapes Nigel Pennick

Mythic Ireland Michael Dames

In Search of the Awesome Mystery Sean O Dunn OSB

A Legacy of Wisdom Judith L Nolan

Celtic Shamanism John Matthews

Mythical Ireland Anthony Murphy

Ever Ancient, Ever New (Celtic Spirituality in the 21<sup>st</sup> C.) Dolores Whelan

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