

Recovering Treasures in Celtic Spirituality

The Crone as Anam-Cara or Soul-Friend

by *Brigid Murphy*

Cet article explore la découverte de la spiritualité et des racines celtiques comme un moyen de donner un sens à

Irish people, along with countless colonized others, have been damaged by an imported and imposed spirituality. It is only in my later years that I have been enriched by a return to my Celtic spiritual heritage.

la vie, de retrouver la sagesse des aînées et de la transmettre par le biais de la fraternité des coeurs.

I left Ireland, my native land, not long after the end of World War II, 1948 to be exact, to start my teaching career as a nun in Canada. This was also the year that Ireland achieved its full independence from Britain. I came from a political family involved in the growth of the independence movement, and the rise of the Fianna Fail Party under Eamonn de Valera. I grew up listening to stories of the heroes of the rising in 1916, the Civil War, the Black and Tans, the 1922 Treaty pro- and anti-, all movingly if not quite accurately portrayed in the recent movie *Michael Collins*. Against this background, my traditional “religious” life did not seem to have much meaning. It was many decades before I understood why. Those decades, more particularly from the mid-’60s to the late ’80s, awakened me to the realization that my Irish, traditional, religious background, which affected my entire approach to life, was fragmented and dualistic. It did not appear to connect with much of what was going on in my everyday life, to say nothing of my growing-up days.

As John O’Donohue states:

The Celts hated separation and division. When you look at the western tradition in politics, religion, theology, and psychology what really damns it, is how it splits things off from each other.

This kind of dualism damages people, wounds people. It needlessly separates body from soul, mind from body, people from nature, ourselves from others and from God.

I began to understand the way in which the Greek and Roman influence on our Celtic tradition split us off from our deepest core. Irish people, along with countless colonized others, have been damaged by an imported and imposed spirituality. It is only in my later years that I have been enriched by a return to my Celtic spiritual heritage.

Two aspects of this Celtic legacy have spurred my comparatively recent and growing interest in Celtic spirituality—the importance of the “crone” and “soul friendship” (*Anam-Cara*). There are still many people who question the word “crone,” and indeed, if they looked for it in the dictionary would find something like “a wrinkled, ugly old woman; a hag,” etc. It was not always so. In Ireland, both before and after the Celtic invasion about 500 BC, the crone (from the word *coron*—crown) was the wise woman, the *Cailleach*—Hag or Holy One. She was likened to the Goddess Anu, and was revered as the giver of life and fertility (Ó Duinn). The Holy Woman was woven into the consciousness of the people and left her mark on the land itself. Places were named for her. Mountains, in particular, seemed to be places of worship.¹ Barbara Walker suggests the

ways in which the crone has been esteemed:

When the Crone was recognized as a valid image, the old woman was not seen as a useless object, as she often is today. Beyond her sexual and maternal functions, she had others, perhaps even more important. She commanded respect. Her advice was sought. Her community looked up to her and took her ideas seriously. (175)

With the gradual decline of the power of the goddess, and subsequently of women, in the centuries that followed it is no wonder that the Hag of Béarra is lonely in Padraic Pearse’s (1879–1916) famous Gaelic poem.

*Mise Éire—sine mé ná an
Cailleach Bearra
Mór mo Ghloir—mé do rug Cú
chulainn cróga
Mór mo naire—mo chlann féin
do dhíola a máthair
Mise Éire—uagní mé ná an
Cailleach Béarra.*

I am Ireland—I am older than
the Hag (Wise-One) of Béarra
Great is my glory—I gave birth
to great Cúchulainn.

Great is my shame—my own
children betrayed their mother
I am Ireland—I am more lonely
than the Hag of Béarra

(Walsh 12)

The crone is returning, however, and not a minute too soon. While historians are trying to sift out the fragments and put them together, I have personally attended several workshops on crone spirituality as well as given them, over the past decade. We are hearing more and more stories coming from older women who are

meeting and naming their situations, claiming their power, and making themselves heard.

Here in Toronto, as part of the Older Women's Network (OWN) we are addressing many issues affecting older women (health care, housing, economic security, affordable legal assistance, creativity) and letting our voices be heard where it counts. Last year, I made contact with a similar organization—OWN Europe—which only got started after the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). I met Mamo MacDonald, a representative from the Republic of Ireland for Europe, along with many others, who

are doing very creative work. This is an example of the modern crone whose voice is being raised to challenge and heal this fragmented world in which we are living. I am glad that I have lived to see this day and can add my voice to those of my sister crones for the sake of ourselves and the next generations to come.

And where do I get the kind of energy that this work is calling on? I believe it comes from a very ancient Celtic tradition—soul-friendship or *Anam Cara*:

Go off and don't eat until you get a soul friend, because anyone without a soul friend is like a

body without a head. The water of a limey well is not good to drink nor good for wishing. It is like a person without a soul friend.² (qtd. in Sellner 61)

These words, attributed to Brigid the Christian saint whose story is influenced by memories of Brigit the ancient goddess, intrigued me and gave light to my later journey. For some years now, I have been a spiritual guide in the Celtic tradition of *Anam-Cara*. To be a soul-friend is to work against the dual-

ism that afflicts each one of us in the western world. It is to walk with another in a non-judgmental way, putting that person in touch with her/his own story, her/his own voice, and encouraging them to trust it. It is to see the living connection between ourselves and all of creation. It is to be aware that we have a rich choice of treasures to be called on within our Celtic tradition, which can give light to a world which seems, at times, to have lost its way.

Crones have long memories, but in so many ways our memories need to be healed. Since we are of the generation who are recovering our voices as crones, we also want to mourn the loss of so many older women who have been abused, reviled, ignored, executed, and even burnt at the stake as witches. We need to befriend them and keep their memory alive. We also need to be soul-friend to ourselves, allowing healing to happen as we reflect on our own history and as we tell our stories surrounded by other soul-friends. This can happen anywhere. Kathleen Fischer illustrates this in relating the experience of a woman about to leave a shelter for homeless women:

She believed being homeless was more than not having a roof over your head. She saw it rather as about being bewildered, about losing one's identity, familiar surroundings, and confidence that you can find a way out. During her time at the shelter, mentoring was for her often a spontaneous thing.

It's sort of a surrealistic potluck, with everyone bringing her own past, and taking from the past of others, the wisdom and compassion offered.

A mentor, she believed, is someone who tells the truth about her life. (Fischer 164)



Brigid's Well, Faughart, Co. Louth.

Crones are mentors if we live our lives honestly and are not afraid to share our wisdom.

It took many decades to find meaning in my "religious" background. Now, it feels like I have come full circle. My crone years are becoming my most fulfilling years. The discovery of my Celtic heritage as a non-dualistic approach to life and the wonderful richness of soul-friendship have given me a lode-stone that I want to continue to discover and share with sister crones as well as pass on with love to the generations to come.

Brigid Murphy is a crone in the Celtic tradition of Anam-Cara. She has enjoyed her years in Canada as an educator, as a pastoral coordinator in a high-rise complex, and as a member of a faculty of theology. She will retire to Ireland in 1998.

¹Séan Ó Duinn OSB, a noted Celtic scholar, cites several of those places: Dhá Chích Anann (the two breasts of Anú) twin hills just inside the Kerry border, Carraig Chlódna, Tonn Chlódna (Glandore Harbour), Cnoc Áine, sacred to the goddess Áine, Cnoc Sí Úna, County Tipperary, called after Úna, as well as others.

²St. Brigid to a cleric, Book of Leinster.

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