

“Celtic Spirituality: A Living Tradition”

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Wisdom is a little bit like kindness, I think. We can always use more of it. Wisdom is that deep understanding that helps us to more easily navigate the waters of life. Just as Celtic spirituality has evolved over time, Unitarian Universalism is also a living tradition, and we draw inspiration and wisdom from the world's religious and spiritual traditions.

There is a lot to know about any religious or spiritual tradition, including that of the Celts, and I'm not even going to try to give you an overview of their beliefs and practices. I do want to explore some aspects of Celtic traditions with you this morning and consider how they might inform our own spiritual wisdom.

As is sometimes the case, I did quite a bit of reading for this morning. Whenever I'm dealing with history, that's generally what I like to do, because the more I learn, the more complicated and nuanced I realize the history actually is, and the more careful I need to be to try to get the story “right.” In this case, I found contradictory information, which led me to read even more to try to reconcile the conflicting versions.

The history of the Celtic peoples has been shrouded in mystery. For almost 300 years, archeologists and historians have been saying that the Celts originally migrated from Eastern Europe about 2700 years ago. It turns out that this widely-accepted theory was based upon some very limited archaeological findings from the 18th century.

So now, just in the past few years, we have DNA analysis and the work of geneticists and the archaeologist and writer Sir Barry Cunliffe, who paints a completely different picture in his book, Facing the Atlantic. Most of the genes in the populations of Britain and Ireland actually come from the Iberian Peninsula, specifically the Basque region of northern Spain. Stories in the 11th-century Irish collection known in English as The Book of Invasions even include allusions to Spain as the origin of the Irish. Bill Price, in his book, Celtic Myths, says, “...it would not be unreasonable to suggest that [Celtic] myths, in some form or another, arrived in Britain and Ireland with the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers as they came into the islands from refuges on the Iberian peninsula.” This would mean, as

Cunliffe suggests, that the Celtic culture in the North Atlantic has existed *in situ* for at least 8,000 years!

I find the arguments for a continuous culture in northern Britain and Ireland to be compelling. One of the most important implications is that the majority of Celts were never under Roman rule, which would have been the case if they had migrated from Eastern Europe. The many different Celtic tribes held a common spirituality and body of traditions which were NOT suppressed or obliterated during pre-Christian times. Today, we have to try to sort through a Christian overlay, but still, we have an opportunity to gain a window into a unique European culture which still includes remnants of its ancient indigenous roots.

According to tradition, St. Patrick introduced Christianity to the Irish Celtic tribes. Not much is known about St. Patrick. He was born in Britain to wealthy parents and he is believed to have died on March 17th, in the year 460 or 461. When he was 16, a group of Irish invaders took him prisoner and he spent six years in captivity in Ireland. He wrote later that he escaped by walking nearly 200 miles to the Irish coast and from there, somehow returning to Britain, probably hitching a ride on a boat.

In his writings, he tells us that an angel came to him in a dream and told him to return to Ireland as a missionary. Patrick began religious training which lasted for more than 15 years. After he was ordained as a priest, he was sent to Ireland on a dual mission: to convert the Irish AND to minister to the Christians already living in Ireland (which suggests that Patrick didn't actually introduce Christianity to Ireland).

Because Patrick was familiar with the Irish language and culture, he chose to incorporate traditional ritual into his lessons of Christianity instead of attempting to eradicate Celtic beliefs. For example, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter since the Celts were used to honoring their gods with fire. He also superimposed the powerful Irish symbol of the sun on the cross to create what is now called a Celtic cross. Perhaps the best-known legend is that he used the native 3-leaved shamrock to explain the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Celtic church developed undisturbed for the next two hundred years as a form of Christianity that interwove its indigenous traditions. Eventually, the Roman Catholic Church caught up with them and outlawed this "aberrant" form of Christianity. But here's the thing: the Celtic traditions were oral, passed down from generation to generation, and Christianity was a written tradition. It is mostly

because of the introduction of writing and the recording of this oral history that we can glean any knowledge or understanding of pre-Christian Celtic teachings.

Pagan Celtic spirituality understood that all of nature is cyclical, and that there is a direct continuity between the material world and the Otherworld. The Otherworld was seen by the Celts as the home of their gods, and was cherished as the place of the ever-living. In one story, a charioteer called Loegaire (“loy’-geer”), entered the Otherworld and exulted, “At the entrance to the enclosure is a tree / From whose branches there comes beautiful and harmonious music. / It is a tree of silver, which the sun illuminates. It glistens like gold.”

Celtic teachings, which have come down to us through Welsh tradition, recognized that there is an invisible world that interpenetrates and affects the visible world. Everything exists on several levels simultaneously: the physical, the spiritual and the symbolic. The Celts believed that individual souls were reincarnated and that divine beings appeared regularly on Earth.

Celtic culture was interwoven with nature, and recognized that the entire Earth was ensouled. There were gods and goddesses of every aspect of the natural world and which underpinned every aspect of their daily lives. The Celts believed that the course of nature is the will of the gods. It follows that they venerated both local and general deities, usually in natural sanctuaries, especially shrines at springs, rivers, lakes and in woodland.

The deeply profound understanding that spirituality exists within nature and that humans are not separate from nature is one of the most significant elements of Celtic spirituality. A 10th-century Welsh poem reflects this understanding: “The Father has made [so many] wonders in this world that it is difficult for us to find an equal number. Letters cannot contain it, letters cannot express it.” With the overlay of Christianity in place by then, the Celts at that point viewed nature not as existing in its own right, but as the handiwork of God. But Celtic Christianity still recognized the existence of an unseen world interpenetrating the visible world. It retained a particular reverence for the world of nature and its spiritual forces, that is perceived as revealing the presence of the divine.

The ancient Celtic worldview took nothing literally. Everything was expressed through poetic metaphors that accessed the invisible inner nature of things that cannot be put into words directly. For the ancient Celts, the spoken word and song were the primary means of disseminating wisdom. The Bards, who were the musicians, singers and poets, and the Druids, who were spiritual teachers,

possessed an immense body of traditional lore concerning nature, the seasons, astronomy, life, death and transformation.

The Bards often passed on wisdom in “threes”:

“The three signs of a just man: to love truth; to love peace; and to love an enemy.”
(Welsh Bardic Theological Triad No 64)

“The three paths towards truth: to understand it; to love it; and to seek it.”
(Welsh Bardic Theological Triad No 33)

“There are three things which a man ought to avoid, as he would the fall of fire on his heart: pride, cruelty and covetousness; for where they are, all his doings will degenerate into ungodliness, irreligion and all mischievousness.”
(Welsh Bardic Theological Triad No 54)

The founding fathers of the Celtic Church came from a Druidic background and had been educated in the traditions of Celtic paganism. So it was natural that they should adapt Druidic concepts and merge them with Christian teachings. St. Patrick explained to the early Celtic Christians that, “Christ is my Druid,” in other words “my spiritual teacher.”

In Celtic clans as well as in the Celtic Church, mutual respect and support of the entire community was the guiding principle of everyday life. Through charity and kindness, everyone can be in harmony with their neighbors and the divine.

The Celtic spiritual way asserts that, as much as possible, we must perform every activity in a mindful way. There is no part of life from which the spiritual dimension need be excluded. Celtic religion thus provides meditations and prayers for every aspect of life. An example of this Celtic spiritual mindfulness comes from the ancient Welsh text called “The Mode of Taking Food and Drink”:

When you take your food, think of him who gives it, namely God, and while thinking of his name, with the word put the first morsel in your mouth, thank God for it, and entreat his grace and blessing upon it, that it may be for the health of your body and mind; then your drink in the same manner. And upon any other thing of quantity, which you cannot take with the name of God in your mind, entreat his grace and blessing, lest it should prove an injury and a curse to you.

In Celtic spirituality, every act, even mundane, everyday tasks, can express the sacred.

The immanence of the divine, meaning that there is a sacredness within and among all that exists; the reverence for nature; the love of truth and peace; its ethical teachings; the value of community; the opportunity to find the sacred in every act: these are some of the legacies of Celtic spirituality that many of us might embrace.

As Unitarian Universalists, we try to be sensitive about taking religious traditions out of context. “Celticity,” as the idea of “being” Celtic is often called, is a fairly modern concept. Between the people living in Celtic lands and the people around the world who think of themselves as having Celtic roots (the Celtic diaspora as it is sometimes called), there are millions of people who identify as Celts. Sir Barry Cunliffe writes, “Perhaps the only real definition of a Celt, now as in the past, is that a Celt is a person who believes himself to be Celtic.”

Does that mean that anyone who wants to can adopt Celtic customs and celebrate Celtic holidays with Celtic rituals? I think that has to be an individual decision. However, spiritual wisdom is wisdom if it is so to our ears. Spiritual truth is truth if it is so to our ears. If any of these things Celtic speak to you, they are yours to take into your heart and soul.