

The Three Cauldrons of Poesy: Dreams, Visions and Ancestry

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The question I posed for *Dreaming Without Borders* is this: How can we who are of European descent connect with the authentic dream traditions of our ancestors? In most cases, those ancient traditions are so deeply buried that many of us — I, certainly — had no idea such practices ever existed. And yet today I will tell you about the *Three Cauldrons of Poesy*, a medieval Irish manuscript that is weaving itself into contemporary visionary practices, including my own.

My telling takes the form of three stories, a story about a manuscript, a story about what the manuscript may contain, and a story about how I came to learn about it and what happened after that.

First, the manuscript.

Ireland in the Eighth Century was a land of kings and saints, druids and miracles. The monastic houses were so highly respected that young nobles from Britain and Gaul traveled there to be educated. The monks, eager to show that Ireland's culture was as rich as any in Christendom, began recording her ancient oral poetry and history in written Irish for the first time.

One day in the scriptorium, a monk reaches for a fresh piece of vellum. Dipping his quill into a well of ink compounded of iron and oak gall, he begins writing about the Three Cauldrons of Poesy, part of the training of poets in Ireland. His writing, itself in the form of poetry, describes the properties and effects of each cauldron. The monk says he is recording the

teachings of Amergin, that most famous bard of the Milesians who conquered Ireland in times of legend.

Once written, the manuscript is copied, perhaps as a gift from abbot to abbot, or student to patron.

In the eleventh century, Ireland was changing. The terror of the Viking raids gave way to established trading settlements along the coasts. The Church of Rome had won the day and was supplanting the traditions of the indigenous Celtic Church. Relations between monks and bards were not as comfortable as they had been.

In a scriptorium, a monk copies a centuries-old manuscript on the training of poets. Much of the poetry is obscure and open to misinterpretation, so he adds explanations in prose. Rome is against this pagan learning, but he values and understands the old ways. He makes sure this material, at least, will survive.

Sixteenth century Ireland was a land in turmoil. The Old Irish and Anglo-Irish were in conflict with each other as the English pushed in from the east. The great monastic houses lay in ruins. The task of preserving the ancient lore fell to hereditary bards under the patronage of the great lords.

Somewhere in Ireland, in a great house, a scribe prepares another compilation of old materials. One by one, he copies legal tracts in his large script. But then, in the midst of a pile of law, he finds poetry, and the Three Cauldrons are copied once again.

What are the Three Cauldrons?

Sources of nourishment, objects of quest, and containers of transformation, cauldrons simmer at the heart of Celtic myth. They are sought after but out of reach, redemptive yet threatening, holding mysteries that few ever plumb. And yet our manuscript says we each have cauldrons born within us.

How many cauldrons do we have? Not hard: Three is ever the sacred number of the Celts.

The first is *Coire Goriath*, translated as the Cauldron of Warming, Incubation, Maintenance or Sustenance. *Coire Ermai*, the second, is the Cauldron of Vocation or Motion. *Coire Sois*, the third, is called the Cauldron of Knowledge or of Wisdom. Most translators believe all three cauldrons are present at birth, but one interpretation is that each cauldron is only 'born' or generated within us when we are ready.

Each cauldron can be in one of three positions: upright, tilted, or inverted. The position indicates the ability of a cauldron to function. An upright cauldron can hold and 'cook' its ingredients; a tilted cauldron allows its contents to slip away; an inverted one loses everything.

Coire Goriath, the first cauldron, "distributes wisdom to people in their youth," including the basics of language that every poet and learned person needs. The word "*goriath*" is obscure and seldom used, but seems to connote sustenance and maintenance, as well as the warmth of generosity. One line of poetry locates this cauldron in the belly. *Coire Goriath* is born upright, ready to hold the sustaining broth of our life and health. While its contents may vary in amount and quality, the cauldron itself remains upright unless we are very ill or near death.

Coire Ermai, the second cauldron, is the key to developing poetic inspiration. Never upright at birth, this cauldron starts out on its side in some people and inverted in others. *Coire Ermai* does not hold a particular kind of knowledge, but rather the “fire of knowledge” which is inspiration. It mediates between the basics of *Coire Goriath* and the advanced knowledge of *Coire Sois*. Some authors call *Coire Ermai* the Cauldron of Motion to emphasize the turning of this vessel as it empties and fills again and again.

Coire Ermai is filled with what we inherit from our ancestors, by spiritual gifts, and by life experience. The poem says *Coire Ermai* will be upside down in the “unenlightened,” on its side in poets, and upright in those who are masters of poetry. The manuscript makes clear that anyone, no matter how lowly his or her birth, can develop the position and contents of this cauldron through appropriate effort.

What experiences turn the second cauldron? Sorrows and joys. The four sorrows of longing, grief, jealousy, and the pain of exile inspire poetry and, over time, lead the apprentice to mastery.

Four human joys turn the cauldron: The first is the joy of sexual longing, which a gloss makes clear is neither chaste love nor the sanctity of marriage, but rather the pleasure of illicit relations. The second is freedom from want; for example, a place to live and sufficient food. The third is poetic accomplishment after hard study, and the fourth is poetic inspiration, that *imbas* contained in the nine hazels of Segais' Well.

The Irish have a passionate attachment to the joys and sorrows of this earthly life, so it is no surprise that emotions engendered by life experiences are key to poetic development. Although no location is given in the poem, we can place *Coire Ermai* in the chest, surrounding the heart.

Coire Sois, the third cauldron, is the font of wisdom about which little is said in the manuscript. This last cauldron is said to start out upside down in all of us, to be turned by mystical joys. Once again, no placement is given in the poem, but this cauldron can be located in the head, which the Celts considered to be the seat of the soul. The gifts of this cauldron are not limited to poetry. The manuscript says “...out of it is distributed the knowledge of every other art ...”

How can we work with the Cauldrons?

Nothing in the manuscript describes how the cauldrons were used. Perhaps they were teaching metaphors; perhaps they were images used in meditation or dream incubation. P.L. Henry links the cauldron positions to physical postures, noting that the word used for the upright position of *Coire Goriath, fa'en*, also describes the upward-facing posture used in late bardic schools for composition, the position maintained by placing a stone on the belly. The inverted starting position of *Coire Sois, for be'olu*, is the same as the prostrated posture of poets seeking the enlightenment of *imbas forosnai*, the wisdom that illuminates.

How did I learn about the cauldrons? Looking back, the path is much clearer than it seemed at the time.

Ever since I was a child, I've had vivid, memorable dreams and a deep connection to my Irish background. My father's parents were born in Ireland, as were most of my mother's great-grandparents. Irish history, music, and myth fascinated me. As I got older, my interest in mythology extended into many parts of the world and, I'll admit, into fantasy novels. I studied anthropology and education, and headed into a conventional enough career in medical education.

Which ended in 1995, when I developed acute onset rheumatoid arthritis. After a few months in bed, I started to regain my strength but was never able to resume a full-time career. At one point, I began exploring guided imagery as a way to cope with chronic pain and stress, and discovered that although my physical body faced challenges, my mythopoetic function was quite healthy.

The mythopoetic function is our ability to imagine, fantasize, or enter into visualizations in a way that feels real. The term was coined in the 1800's by classicist Frederick Myers, and applied by French psychiatrist Theodore Flournoy to what happens within the unconscious in both night dreams and waking visions. Freud's view of the unconscious as the repository of repressed personal history deflected attention away from imagination as a focus of study, although pioneering French psychologist Pierre Janet never lost his interest in this area.

The mythopoetic function links night dreams with waking visionary experiences like guided imagery, active imagination, and shamanic journeying, all of which I've explored, and all of which can serve as avenues into the Three Cauldrons of Poesy or any of our ancestral traditions.

Anthropologist and shamanic practitioner Barbara Tedlock writes that "People who have lost a living connection with their elders and their culture of dreaming may try to strengthen their spiritual bonds through dream incubation: they make a pilgrimage to a place where people have experienced special dreams in the past. There they spend the night, or several nights, in the hopes of having an important dream." There are scholars within IASD actively exploring the links between special dreams and sacred places, but I'd like to suggest something a little different: that for those of us who are far away from the sacred places of our ancestors,

myths, legends, and traditions like the Three Cauldrons become special places, frameworks for visualization and dream incubation that can help us re-forge broken connections.

I'd like to share three examples of how the Cauldrons have helped re-forge my connections to my Irish roots. In each case, the work I did combined scholarly research, shamanic journeying, and dreamwork.

One of my first challenges was to understand how cauldrons relate to energies within the soul or psyche. I found it though studying chi. Energy today means machines and wires, an invisible force that crackles and burns like fire. But the ancient Chinese model for the human body was a garden. The meridians were irrigation channels carrying chi like water to all growing things.

This image of energy as water fits Celtic tradition. Wells, rivers, lakes, and the ocean itself are all sacred to Celtic peoples as sources of healing and inspiration. It might be difficult to picture a cauldron full of electricity, but when the image of energy is wet and fluid, a cauldron becomes the ideal container.

The idea that the fire of energy could be carried in water is found in the Indo-European heritage Celts share with many other peoples of Europe and Asia. This theme, recognized by mythographers and folklorists, is called "fire in water... a potent essence preserved in a body of water, accessible only to a chosen few, and endowing those elect with extraordinary powers."

In Irish myth, one of the most famous instances of the fire-in-water theme is *imbas forosnai*, the wisdom that illuminates, found in the nuts that fall from the hazel trees growing around Nechtan's Well. It is not surprising, then, that this Well appears in the Cauldrons of Poesy. The fourth human joy that helps

turn the second cauldron is this same *imbas*, poetic inspiration. It is given the most detailed description of any of the emotions in the list, which can be translated as: “[J]oy at the arrival of *imbas* which the nine hazels of fine mast at Segais in the *sid*’s amass and which is sent upstream along the surface of the Boyne.”

Wells are in-between places where waters from the Otherworld enter our world. Nechtan and his three cupbearers guard the Well at Segais and only they are allowed to approach it. One day, Nechtan's wife Boann decides to visit the well. As she draws near, three waves arise and take from her an eye, a hand and a thigh. The waters overflow, carrying Boann away to the sea, creating the Boyne River.

The Shannon River was created when Sinend, another woman, decided to visit Connla's Well under the sea to gain its knowledge. It is at Connla's Well that the hazels of wisdom grow, sacred trees that bear leaves, flowers and fruit together. The hazel nuts, full of magical wisdom, drop into the water creating a "royal surge of purple" carried in water throughout the land.

The Salmon of Wisdom eats the magic nuts, becomes wise, and displays an outward sign of this wisdom in its speckled skin. An elderly poet waits seven years to catch the magic salmon, then sets young Demne to watch it cook. When the young boy is splashed by hot oil from the cooking fish and puts his fingers in his mouth to cool them, he gains the wisdom the old poet was waiting for. Renamed Finn mac Cumhal by the disappointed poet, the boy begins a life of magical adventures.

All these tales include a dangerous quest for magical knowledge contained in water. In Ireland, this poetic inspiration is *imbas*. In Wales, it was called *awen* and figures in the tale of Cerridwen's cauldron and the initiation of the great poet Taliesin.

Another insight I'd like to share relates to Joseph Campbell's belief that the unique contribution of Western culture to the world has been the idea of the individual. He stressed in many of his writings that moment in the Grail stories when the knights decide that each will find his own way in the dark forest, forging his own path through the wood. Campbell was a champion of individuation, the personal quest.

In his essay "The Secularization of the Sacred" he writes of three words for love that represent three kinds of love, *eros*, *agape*, and *amor*. *Eros* he describes as biological and indiscriminate, our desires, our libido. If we think of this as our desire for the stuff of life, for what we need to live and thrive as a physical being, it can be linked to the first cauldron.

Agape is spiritual love, the connection with what is beyond the human experience. This is the goal of all spiritual traditions, although all do not understand or experience it in the same way. This can be related to the third cauldron, the Cauldron of Wisdom.

Campbell is most interested in *amor*, the ideal of the medieval troubadours reflected in songs and tales often based in Celtic myths and themes. He says, "... the aim ... of *amor* was not in any sense ego-extinction in a realization of nonduality, but the opposite: ego-ennoblement and –enrichment through an altogether personal experience of love's poignant pain."

This sounds very much like the description of some of the joys which turn *Coire Ermai*, the second cauldron, and also echoes the trajectory for personal development proposed by Ken Wilber, which begins in the undifferentiated libido of early childhood, then moves necessarily through the development a strong ego container, before heading for the

experiences of nonduality offered by mystical disciplines. Which all sounds hopelessly philosophical except that it gives me a positive way to think about the ego in a time when many teachers seem to be telling us to get rid of it completely. In other words, it affects how I live.

My third insight relates to the idea of worthiness. When I began working with the cauldrons, I assumed the second cauldron would be strongly connected with the Grail. I did a lot of research and visioning along those lines, but things just didn't fit. Although there are many parallels drawn between the Grail of the Arthurian legends and the cauldrons of Celtic myth, there is one vital difference: In the old stories, heroes may need to be strong and honorable to win the gifts of a cauldron, but worthiness as a moral and religious quality is not an issue. I came to believe that the connection between attaining the Grail and being free from sin was a Christian overlay on an older pattern, and I needed to reach farther back.

For me, *Coire Sois*, the Cauldron of Wisdom, is the cauldron of Cerridwen, witch goddess of the Mabinogion. Cerridwen had a very ugly son. To ease his way in the world, she decided to give him great powers of prophecy and poetry. She gathered herbs and set them simmering over a fire that must burn continuously for a year and a day.

She set the serving boy Gwion Bach to tend the fire. As he did, he learned just what this cauldron was. As the fateful day approached, Cerridwen stood her ugly son near the fire, to catch the first drops that would spring from the cauldron when all was ready.

Many versions of this story say that Gwion Bach just happened to be standing by when the mixture bubbled up, but Patrick Ford's translation clearly states that Gwion shoved the ugly son out of the way. The burning

drops fell on Gwion's fingers which he shoved in his mouth to taste the magic.

His first realization was that Cerridwen wanted to kill him, and he ran. As he ran, he changed shape again and again to escape her wrath. Cerridwen changed right along with him, and when Gwion thought to hide himself as one grain of wheat among many, she became a small black hen and swallowed him up.

Cerridwen found herself pregnant with the transformed boy, and could not bring herself to kill him outright. She put him in a tiny boat in a river, which begins the tale of how Gwion is reborn as the mighty poet Taliesin.

One message of this tale is that we cannot be worthy of this kind of illumination. "Worthiness" in the sense of conventional virtue had little to do with *imbas* or *awen*. To attain the highest levels of poetic inspiration, we must be willing to take risks, place ourselves in danger, open up to experience, and reach out for something we know might burn.

The only known copy of the Three Cauldrons of Poesy is dated to the early sixteenth century, probably 1539. The manuscript, MS 1337 (H. 3. 18) is in the library of Trinity College in Dublin. So far, no other copies have been found, although I have heard that monasteries in Europe still hold ancient manuscripts that have neither been examined nor translated for centuries. Perhaps there are copies out there waiting to be discovered.

Such discoveries will add new layers to the cultural context and a deeper understanding of the ancient meanings of the Three Cauldrons. Whatever we may learn from history, our own dreams, visions, and experiences will always hold the key to our best future, even if we get a little scorched in the process.

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