



5th January 2008

To all of you dear friends and fellow travellers on the Path in our new Céile Dé Group in *****.

Bliadhna Mhath Ùr! – Happy New Year!

I want to thank you all for the beautiful card - which arrived today – and all the sentiments written on it. I will make sure that your good wishes and thanks are passed on to everyone here who does the work to make sure the tradition gets to you and others in the world. I would also like to show it to members of our Scottish groups over here, as I like to think that we are all linked in our love of the tradition. We have met in Soul, even though we have not yet all met each other in the flesh.

I also am very grateful to C**** for taking the time to enclose the letter that described your first ever Solstice gathering as a group.

It is always so very nourishing to me to hear how you all get on during your meetings and how you are all faring in your explorations of the tradition. So please all of you, do feel that you can always get in touch with me about your inner lives. Not only that, I feel it's also very important for you to check in with me with any questions about the tradition or any obstacles you have been encountering.

I smile and think here of C****'s story about how you struggled to be able to read the solstice poem in the dark..! Immediately, I feel the need to respond with something that perhaps I have never said to you, but should have.. so I will say it now... *“It is better to get the words and the running order “wrong” and wing it than to take a script into a spiritual ceremony.”*

I have often baffled B*** by saying to him that Céile Dé are less about “ritual” than many other expressions of Celtic spirituality seem to be... and then I go and produce “rituals” for you all to do! I tend to think that any such bafflement between people who genuinely want to understand each other are often down to missed-communication... which itself is often down to different people having different uses and meanings for certain words. I think I begin to realise now one of the ways how that seeming contradiction about “ritual” can be resolved...

In my “personal dictionary of definitions”, I tend to use the word “ritual” to mean a quite elaborate ceremony, filled with many words and gestures and sometimes even role-playing. Often such a ritual has, for my taste, become so complex in its execution that it induces nerves (oh *!*?! what happens next?!) or it requires too much left-brain activity (such as excessive or wooden reading) for the Divine/Grace/Holy Spirit/Inspiration (whatever you want to call it) to shine through...

So, even though you were probably doing everything to the letter in your Céile Dé Solstice ceremony, by my definition you were inadvertently doing *just slightly* what I would call a “ritual”! Why? Because you were depending on a script.

Dear friends, I had it would seem, forgotten to tell you that the piece of paper I sent you was not intended to follow you into the ceremony. It was a *guideline* for you to familiarise yourselves with, so that you had a sense of what you needed to do. *Then it was to be discarded.*

I have read one or two entirely scripted “rituals” from other traditions... indeed I was even been present at one of them, many years ago. What made that particular ceremony poignant for me, despite the shuffling of papers; the fumbling for candles to read by; the excruciating acting of some of the participants; was the innocence and sincerity of the people, despite how many odds were stacked against them ever being open to something coming from the beyond...

Have you noticed that in Céile Dé ceremonies there are virtually no scripted words? In our *Anam Sionn Nan Naoimh* (Soul-light of the Nine-Fold Ones) Ceremony, for instance, there is only one set phrase that everybody speaks together. This is very deliberate and it is partly so that there is nothing we have to read from a piece of paper – because there is so little we have to worry about forgetting.

With regard to the “Labouring of the Light” poem; the only thing that needed to be recited in our solstice ceremony, the obvious ideal is for at least one person to take it upon themselves to memorise it. Then, at each subsequent ceremony, that person has something tangible to offer. They have taken responsibility for holding up that side of the structure. As the years go on, someone else in the community may learn – or better still *compose* - another poem that they think would be fitting to speak (not read) during that point in the ceremony. In fact the poem I gave you is traditional only in the sense that anything is; it was made by someone within the Céile Dé tradition specifically to be spoken at that point in a Solstice ceremony. The first person to speak that poem in a Solstice ceremony was the composer of the poem. Then, as the years went on, other people also learnt the poem and so it became part of the tradition. That’s how it works... and it’s how traditions become

powerful; an oral tradition is a sort of “survival of the fittest”. People won’t keep something alive in their memories unless they feel it’s worth the effort.

But I always advise newcomers to the Céile Dé to wait a while before they feel they can add anything to the tradition. It takes a while for any new culture or set of practices to get so deeply inside you that they are a part of your marrow. It’s best to wait until then before you add to that tradition... Some people agree with this sentiment of mine, some do not. I propose it not as a rigid fact, but as a guideline, simply because I have observed that people today are hungry for roots and traditions... then they find one.. then they start to add bits of their own into the mix, things that they like from other traditions... then, before long, they find themselves hungering for some other roots and traditions because they have just diluted out of all recognition the one to which they wished to belong. It takes time to become a tradition-bearer. And most people today seem to be under the illusion that they don’t have the time to wait... they want everything right now.

All traditions are slow to enter, it’s like being re-born and having to grow up all over again. But there is time, if you’re willing to be patient. We must be patient...

So... Please... no reading... Think about committing to deep-memory the chants and the few traditional words you are given. It is another way of sinking the tradition into the deeper levels of your lives. I say *deep* memory very deliberately. Our memories are rather like computers in this respect; we have “temporary files” that hold things just for a while - and boy can they clutter up our systems! They aren’t available for recall for long because we haven’t dug them in very deeply. Then we have the memories that are so ingrained that they seem to impress themselves upon our very psyches, along with the most powerful events in our lives. The ancients knew that there was a mysterious relationship between memory and the expansion of our souls... It is one of the things that the Céili Dé have not forgotten. *What you deliberately take into your psyche affects the hue and nuance of who you are in this life.*

So how do you commit sacred words to deep-memory? For a start, don’t cram the words into your head just a few days before the ceremony... Start to learn the words *at the very least* a month before (there won’t ever be that many words to learn remember). Live them, breathe them... Take them for walks in the hills... speak them to the trees and the rivers. They will listen... they may even join in... they do in Scotland. Perhaps because they’ve heard them before.

And of course, once you’ve learned the words, keep them alive for the rest of your life. They have become the gift of your tradition that you can offer your people.

Doing things like this memorising of sacred ceremonial phrases, poems and indeed our chants is not only strengthening your muscle of commitment (we are a very “provisional” people these days and often need to learn how to commit to our spiritual path and community) it is also taking something of which you have only a surface understanding and *making it a part of you*. When you have taken it deep into yourself, speaking the words starts to become as natural to you as breathing. You are taking the first steps towards becoming a tradition-bearer.

The lack of any kind of oral repertoire committed to memory is an indication of the different culture into which most people now coming into our tradition have been brought up. In the few places where remnants of traditional Celtic culture survive, it is taken for granted that people will come into a gathering bringing their own gifts to offer. In traditional Scottish social gatherings, called *ceilidhs* (ceilidh is Gaelic, it just means “to visit with someone”) people will sometimes say “*Tell a story... sing a sang... show yer bum, or oot ye gang*” (Tell a story, sing a song, show your backside or leave!) In other words if you intend to just sit there passively, expecting us to entertain you, and have nothing yourself to offer, then please leave!

It’s really only been during the last generation here in Scotland that all of that has started to change and many people here too are becoming passive and dependent on something other than ourselves (usually electrical) to provide them with entertainment. In the old days, everyone had their own repertoire of songs, poems and stories that they were famous for. The one who had the biggest repertoire in the community was usually the *seannachie* – the local story-teller, as the word is usually translated, but it actually means “One who knows the Old Lore... or Tradition-bearer”.

Because of the lack of traditional culture in the lives of most people in the “First World” today, the work of Céile Dé today is slightly other than it was in the past. In the old days the work took for granted that people came into Céile Dé spirituality bringing with them a certain cultural mindset (which of course, always includes both useful elements and other elements that are best discarded for a spiritual life to flourish). Today that is rarely the case. So a certain amount of the teaching is about reclaiming certain traditional gifts and skills that will in turn enhance our celebration of the spiritual life. Most of these gifts are a part of all ancient traditions - and in the Celtic culture they are no different. Within the work of the Céile Dé, focussing as it does on seeds that will bear spiritual fruits, they include –

- Song – Especially our sacred chants
- Sacred storytelling – The huge body of myth that forms the “Old Testament” of the Gael.
- Our few ceremonial phrases and poetry. – This one shouldn’t take long!
- The valuing of the oral tradition – The committing to memory of all of the above.
- The use and exploration of Gaelic – To whatever level a person can manage (it’s a tough language to learn!)... Because language is born out of culture it is therefore also a doorway back in to that culture.

As a corrective to having lived in a world that has weakened our natural abilities with all of the above, we might also advise a degree of -

- Temperance – A thoughtful, non-fanatical controlling of one’s exposure to and dependence upon the things that weaken all of the above., such as “vegging out” in front of the TV, PC, Playstation, etc. every night.
- Relationship with Nature – as a cure for the physical and soul dis-eases produced by the above.
- Exposure to long periods of silence. – This and all of the other “cures” form the arena into which Spiritual experience can enter.

Finally, it may be important here to distinguish between the Cultural aspects of our “Celtic Spirituality” teachings today and the purely spiritual aspects. That’s fairly easy... anything that comes under the specific heading “Celtic” is cultural... and anything that comes under the heading “Spiritual” should be a universal Human experience. The latter is in no way dependent on the former. The former is at best our chosen way to express and celebrate the latter. At worst, we come to believe that “our way of expressing and celebrating” is superior to anyone else’s way. In other words, if you combine culture with spirituality, you get religion. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as you remember what you are doing and why.

Religions, or spiritual traditions, as they might also be called, are beautiful things. But there will come a point where we all have to drop the noun or the adjective, such as “Celtic” or “Christian” or “Pagan” or “Buddhist” or whatever it might be. The Ultimate Experience doesn’t say “I am Celtic”.. etc., It just says –

... I AM ...

There seems to be a shortage of adjectives and nouns all round as we begin to approach the Ultimate!

And, in writing this letter to you, dear friends, I began by inviting you all to step deeper into the Céile Dé tradition and one of its doorways into Spiritual Freedom;

that of daring to free yourselves from the tyranny of “fear of getting it wrong” and of shuffling ritual pieces of paper in too-dim-to-read candle light. And I have finished my letter by finding the answer to the question that had been haunting me all week –

“Why is that that I cling to living and breathing this particular tradition, when I know in my heart that no particular path/religion/tradition has exclusive access to The One?”

And now I reply to myself –

“Because I feel secure enough within my own skin to be able to say – I don’t *believe* in any of it... I am not attached to it as a Truth with a capital “T”.

...But I do find it very beautiful and I know that Beauty feeds my growing soul... and My soul is the Bride who wishes to become beautiful so she is attractive to Her Lover, Truth.

...And even that is just myth... all storytelling and poetry... just *words*... They are not *The* Truth, which is beyond words... But they are precious words. Words that, *if I can love them without believing in them*, take me Home, to a place of such silence and wonder! The placeless Place that is to be found in the dissolving of all fears, all desires... the dissolving of “Celtic”... the killing of the Buddha on the Road... and the reconciliation of Heaven and Earth.

Le graidh. Immanaire.

(With love. May it be for Good)

Fionntulach

