

## CHAPTER NINE

# CONNLA'S WELL

## THE WAY OF THE SOUL



*All things in the universe, in their own subjectivity,  
are pervaded by inherent tendencies  
toward fulfillment of their own potential.*

—BRIAN SWIMME AND THOMAS BERRY

*Man follows the Earth  
The Earth follows Heaven  
Heaven follows the Tao  
The Tao follows what is natural.*

—LAO TZU

THROUGHOUT WANDERING WE ARE SEARCHING FOR OUR WILDNESS. THAT IS WHY we must go beyond the edges of our identity, and sometimes even beyond the edges of civilization. Our wild nature is soul; it is our deepest identity when we allow the unbridled flow of the cosmos through us. There is nothing “supernatural” about the soul in the sense that it is not some non-physical essence which lives on after death.<sup>1</sup> We must also be careful, however, of letting soul fall into the category of metaphor, for surely it is more than this. Inasmuch as it is not a spiritual-as-opposed-to-physical *substance*, it is also not merely a descriptive device. Rather, soul is the radiating forth of our self-nature, a way of being in deep and direct participatory relationship with the world.

In many animistic cultures the word for soul and the word for breath and wind are the same. We can see a relationship between these words in the Irish language

as well: the word for soul is *anam* and the word for breath is *anáil*. What we can say of the breath can be said of the soul—it enlivens us, nourishes us, is invisible in nature, but visible in effect, and it allows us to speak and disclose the contents of the heart. This common association between breath and soul points to a conception of soul that is very different than the ingrained Judeo-Christian interpretation common to the modern world. David Abram writes of the Navajo *nilch'i*, or Holy Wind, which echoes the *anam-anáil* relationship in Irish:

Although *nilch'i* is conceived by the Navajo as a single, unified phenomenon, the Wind in its totality is also assumed to be comprised of many diverse aspects, a plurality of partial Winds, each of which have their own name in the Navajo language. One of these...“the Wind within one”—refers to that part of the overall Wind that circulates within each individual...Only recently have anthropologists like McNeley been able to break out of the interpretive blinders imposed by the Christian worldview in order to recognize that the powers attributed by Western culture to a purely internal soul or mind are experienced by the Navajo as attributes of an enveloping Wind or Atmosphere as a whole. The “Wind within one” is in no way autonomous, for it is in a continual process of interchange with the various winds that surround one, and indeed is entirely a part of the Holy Wind itself.<sup>2</sup>

This drives the point home that the soul is primarily a *relational* reality and thoroughly biological in nature. Rather than the Christian conception that the soul confers, through its presence in the body, divinity into matter, the body can be seen as numinous in itself. In the *Carmina Gadelica*—a collection of poems, chants, blessings, and invocations from Scotland gathered together by Alexander Carmichael in the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—he translates a *choibh anama* as “soul-shrine,” a term which in the blessing quite clearly refers to the body. This suggests a view of body and soul as a continuous reality. The body is the soul, or as John O’Donohue often says, echoing Plotinus and the Navajo *nilch'i*, “the body is in the soul.”

The soul is the ecological reality of self-nature. It is an ecological reality because it only becomes visible and embodied through a relational exchange with

the more-than-human world. It is also, however, deeply personal, meaning that we are each diverse and unique “breaths” associated with the larger, more continuous nature of wild soul. In the opening words of his foreword to Bill Plotkin’s *Soulcraft*, Thomas Berry defines the biological conception of soul as “the primary organizing, sustaining, and guiding principle of a living being.”<sup>3</sup> Soul is our primary identity, which contains the unique gifts we have to offer to the world and compels us to give them. It is made up of “inherent tendencies” which guide the being toward fulfillment of its purpose.

This is not unique to humans, but because of our self-reflective consciousness humans are seemingly more likely to choose a dysfunctional and destructive course of action that is contrary to the functioning of the community than other forms of life. If soul is the deepest nature of a living thing which contains its primary guiding principles then we can see reflections of soul at work in the natural world. What is the purpose and meaning of water, or of the honey bee, the leaves of a tree, or the forest fire? Each of these things might be said to have both a self-intending purpose—a purpose which seeks to fulfill its own unique goals of self-nature—and a function within the community which is mutually beneficial to other forms of life in the ecosystem. The raging of a forest fire is simply the expression of the self-nature of the fire, but it also can help clear the underbrush of the forest which allows seedlings to get sunlight. The seeds of other species of trees, such as the redwoods, can only begin to grow after a fire has passed. Thus the fire plays, *through the fulfillment of its self-intending purpose*, an integral role within the ecology of some forests.

In the Irish language we might call this principle of a thing its *dán*. *Dán* has an array of diverse and curious meanings. It means art and poetry, but it can also mean destiny, and can refer to a gift in both the material sense as well as to a skill. Stuart Harris-Logan believes the diversity of meaning contained in the word “points toward an obscurity in meaning; the transmission of a concept not readily absorbed in the English language.”<sup>4</sup> Harris-Logan relates this word to the acquisition of a shamanic power.

I have come to understand it in a related, but slightly different way. I have mentioned several times now Bill Plotkin’s idea of the soul gift. This seems to be a perfect parallel to the Irish *dán*:

Each of us is born with a treasure, an essence, a seed of quiescent potential, secreted for safekeeping in the center of our being. This treasure, this personal quality, power, talent, or gift (or set of such qualities), is ours to develop, embody, and offer to our communities in acts of service—our contributions to a more diverse, vital, and evolved world. Our personal destiny is to *become* that treasure through our actions.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, this is not a new concept by any means, and appears to have been present in the ancient Western world through the Roman and Greek concepts of *genius* and *daimon* respectively. Archetypal psychologist James Hillman has done much to resurrect these ideas in modern psychology, most notably in his bestselling book *The Soul's Code*. Might we add to genius and daimon, the Irish *dán*?

Irish law contains an important term related to *dán*. The *duais* was the reward or gift due back for the presentation of one's poetic *dán*. Although this refers specifically to a king rewarding a poet for their praise or elegies, we can see a similar kind of reciprocity in the natural world, such as in the example of the forest fire. The fire gives its gift which allows the seeds of the redwood to open and the forest, in exchange, provides fuel for the burning of the fire. They gift each other mutually. Similarly, from the perspective of a human, to be an embodiment of *dán* is to be in continual and enhancing exchange with the world. The *duais* given in return might take many forms, from the fruits of the land on which a person lives to a more subtle form of support from the Earth community that comes as a felt sense: leaning soulfully in to the world, the world leans back in toward you.

There are many stories in the Irish tradition that deal with this sense of "sacred gift." Returning to the *Second Battle of Maigh Tuireadb*, before the battle broke out between the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Fomorians, Lúgh arrived at the gates of Tara. Keeping in mind that as the center of a mandala, Tara represents wholeness, sovereignty, and Truth, it is significant that the doorkeeper tells him "no one enters Tara who does not possess a gift." The statement is elevated to a spiritual and psychological imperative. Entering into the wildness of our self-nature means also the simultaneous discovery and gifting of our *dán* as an offering to the Earth community.

The story of the famous high king, Cormac Mac Art, and his encounter with

the silver branch and the Otherworld well of wisdom, details the discovery of *dán* and the responsibility it places upon him in service of his community.

## CONNLA'S WELL

ONE DAY, WHILE IN THE PLAINS BELOW THE HILL OF TARA, THE HIGH KING, Cormac Mac Art, saw a great warrior striding towards him. Over his shoulder he carried a silver branch with three golden apples, which made the sweetest music he had ever heard. Cormac stopped the warrior and asked him where he came from. "I come from a land free of suffering, where no one ages, and no one dies, and no one ever falls ill." Cormac told him the same was not true of this place. They declared an alliance and each named their terms. Cormac was eager for the music of the branch and cried out, "I must have it!" The warrior granted him this provided that Cormac, in return, grant him three boons. It was agreed. Both strode off, content with the new alliance.

Cormac returned to the hall of Tara with his silver branch and his company marveled at it. He shook it and everyone who heard its music fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

Now, some time passed and the warrior returned. He requested from Cormac, for the first boon, his daughter who he would take away to his kingdom. To this, Cormac reluctantly agreed. The warrior left. At the same time the next day, however, he returned and requested his son as the second boon owed to him. Again, Cormac knew he had no choice but to agree. He had already sworn to grant this man three boons in exchange for the silver branch. As king he must uphold his oath. The warrior returned at the same time on the third day and now, predictably, requested Cormac's wife.

Cormac handed her over but soon after the warrior had left he set out in pursuit of them. After a time, without gaining on the warrior at all, he found himself enveloped in a thick mist on a plain as far as his eyes could see. When the mist began to clear he caught sight of a great keep surrounded by a shining bronze wall. Within the keep was a house made of silver, partially thatched with the feathers of white birds. A group of the most beautiful people worked to thatch the roof, but whenever it was half complete a wind would come and blow their work away.

Cormac moved on and saw a man kindling a fire and setting an oak log on top of it. Then the man would go away and return shortly with another log. As soon as he returned to place the new log on, the first one had just finished burning to embers. His actions were perfectly synchronized.

Finally Cormac came to another keep, in the court of which he saw a great spring flowing forth like a fountain. Around the water were nine hazel trees laden with nuts and in the pool were five salmon. Every now and again a hazel dropped one of its nuts into the pool of water to be eaten by the salmon, whose bellies turned purple with the juice. Out of the spring flowed five streams whose running created a melody as beautiful as the silver branch's.

He proceeded on into the keep, seeing the warrior seated in a chair. A man entered behind him, an axe slung across his shoulder, holding a log and a pig under his arms. The warrior told the man to make ready, "for a great guest has joined us tonight." The man set up his fire, and skewered the pig on a spit for roasting.

"This pig shall not be cooked until a truth is spoken over it for each quarter," the man declared. And so the men of the hall gathered and took turns speaking their truths over the pig, and with each story told the pig was rotated and Cormac saw that one quarter had been cooked. Finally, at the last quarter, it was Cormac's turn. He told the men gathered of the warrior who came carrying the silver branch and how he traded it for his family, and that now he has come to retrieve them or otherwise stay here amongst them. With that the pig was cooked entirely and portioned out to those assembled.

Cormac announced to the hall that he might never eat a meal unless there are at least fifty men in his company. The warrior suddenly began to sing in a voice not unlike the melody of the silver branch. Cormac fell fast asleep. Upon waking his company of men were there with him, and his wife and children as well. He was delighted to see them again, worried that he might have bargained them away forever.

The warrior revealed himself as Manannán Mac Lir and told Cormac that the land he was in was called the Land of Promise. "I have brought you here for a reason," Manannán said, "knowing that you would not suffer to have your family taken away." He would allow Cormac to keep the silver branch and in addition presented him with an ornate cup. "If a lie is spoken over it," Manannán said, "the cup will

break into three pieces. When three truths are spoken over it the cup will become whole again. Thus shall Cormac rightfully judge as king." But, Cormac was warned; on the day that he died all these gifts would be taken from him.

Manannán went on to explain that the spring he saw on his way to the hall was the spring of wisdom known as Connla's Well. The five streams are the five senses and they flow out into the world as the rivers of Ireland. "Everyone drinks from the streams," said Manannán, "but only poets, skilled ones, and the people of art drink from both the streams and the spring itself."

Cormac awoke in the morning in the green fields below Tara with his family, his Cup of Truth, and the silver branch. Manannán had spoken truthfully. When Cormac finally died, the cup and the branch both disappeared from this world. But while Cormac lived he was arguably one of Ireland's greatest kings, for his wisdom and the Truth of his rule.

## TRUTH AND THE ORDER OF THINGS

AT THE HEART OF THIS STORY IS THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH OR *FÍRINNE*. TRUTH, IN this instance, is not simple honesty; it is a far more complex concept, one responsible for the binding of cosmic order. The modern Druidic practitioner, Greywind, identifies the Celtic concept of Truth as being a "measure of the degree to which something is rightly integrated with the underlying unity of all things."<sup>6</sup> Greywind's "unity of all things" is the cosmic order, expressed in Irish myth by the four directions and kingship at the Hill of Tara in the center, the point which binds all other points together. It is no coincidence that it is the king who is expected to be an embodiment of *Fírinne*. If the king is not aligned with Truth it was believed that the crops would fail, the wells dry up, and the people left to die. Much like in the story of the wounded Fisher King where only the initiatory grail could restore order and health, only a king aligned with Truth could restore right cosmic order to Ireland.

Maintaining the proper order of things, Truth, was the role of the sacral high king in ancient Irish society. We might take this story to be Cormac's initiation into both Truth and soul. He is asked to sacrifice that which he loves most: his family. He does this in exchange for a silver branch, a symbol in Irish mythology synonymous with entry into the Otherworld. In conforming to Manannán's requests he

is granted access to the Otherworld and taken to Connla's Well. He is told that everyone drinks from the five streams of the senses, but only poets, druids, and the *áes dána*—skilled ones, a term used to describe the Tuatha Dé Danann—drink from both the streams and the well. He is given the Cup of Truth to take back to his hall at the Hill of Tara.

The cup is a symbolic representation of the cosmos. There was a formula for taking an oath that was popular among many Celtic tribes: "If I break my pledge, may the sky fall upon me, the sea rise up to drown me, and the earth crack open to swallow me." Tom Cowan suggests that there is a parallel between the shattering of the cup and the shattering of the world if *Fírinne* is not upheld. The cup breaks into three pieces if someone tells a lie. However, if the king fails to be a proper representative for the unity and integration of things, an ambassador of *Fírinne*, then it is the cosmos itself which will come apart.<sup>7</sup> The integrity of both the cup and the cosmos lies in the maintenance and mediation of Truth from Connla's Well.

This cosmic order is derived from the Otherworld, a dimension of the world synonymous in and of itself with wholeness and sacrality. Hence, it is not a place which is separate or far from here at all. Patricia Monaghan describes the Otherworld as "intangible but quite real; out of sight, under the hill, on the wind; nearby, just not right here."<sup>8</sup> It is like the ever receding horizon, or movement caught in the corner of the eye. Look at it directly and it vanishes. It is something to relax into, rather than something to possess or behold—a dimension of perception, not a discrete place. The Otherworld is the soul of the world, the interior subjective depths of the cosmos where world and psyche are one in a seamless unity of being. It is this world seen in its holistic dimensions beyond our fragmentary consciousness. To pulsate with the depths of the whole in this way is what is meant by *Fírinne* or Truth.

The sacred, wholeness, and soul become apparent and made visible when the boundaries are first broken down and then transcended. This is the reason that initiation is such a painful event, a dying. The Otherworld is sight when the wonder-eye of beauty has awoken. It is a fully sensual perception of the world in all its wildness and soul. The Otherworld is what turns words into poetry, brushstrokes into art, and chords into music. It is what turns humans into human *beings*, opening us to our philosophical and spiritual depths.

To dwell in Truth then is to be integrated into the Otherworld, into a way of

seeing and being that is sacred, ecological, initiatory, soulful, and wild. To enter the Otherworld is to be acted upon by things greater than the fractured self; we are in a sense given the Cup of Truth and responsibility over the making or the breaking of the world. Fírinne is like the *Dao*, it is the Way of things in their natural rhythm, and we can either be aligned with that flow or struggling against it. Of closer relationship with Ireland than Daoism is the Sanskrit term *dharmā*, important to both Hinduism and Buddhism. It too is often translated as cosmic law or truth but like *Dao* or Fírinne is perhaps a word best left untranslated. Similarly, across the Atlantic, the Navajo describe this principle as *horzo* which is usually translated as beauty or harmony. Such a concept of a Way or natural order is central to many, if not most, indigenous cultures.

Edward Goldsmith writes that “Like the developing embryo in the womb, each life process must follow an appointed constellation of chreods or path if it is to achieve its end-state and thereby contribute to maintaining the critical order of the cosmos.” He goes on to say that “The Way to be followed by all human beings was the same as that which must be followed by society as a whole, by the natural world, by the cosmos and therefore by the gods themselves. There is thus a single law which governs the behavior of the whole cosmic hierarchy.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Goldsmith's “single law” may in truth be more multivalent than he describes, we might consider the Way as a general tendency toward the fulfillment of soul. The Earth is in such trouble because we do not, either as a culture or as individuals, follow the Way. We do not follow *Slí na Fírinne*, the Way of Truth.<sup>10</sup> Instead we have distorted our path against this natural order and devastated the world through our social adherence to *frith-Fbírinne*, the anti-Truth, or that which goes against the natural order, as though in the Industrial world the sun circles from west to east around us. In Goldsmith's terms the Industrial human species has become heterotelic—abnormal in behavior and not at all in consonance with the critical ecological order.

Lao Tzu had a principle in mind for when things obeyed the Way or *Dao*. He called it *Wu Wei*. Similarly, in Ireland, the king was said to possess *Fír Flathemon*,

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\* A term coined by the biologist C.H. Waddington from the Greek *chre*, meaning necessary, and *odos* meaning path. It refers to the path which a developing embryo must take to reach its end-state. Goldsmith expands the meaning to refer to any natural system.

the Ruler's Truth, when in right relationship with this natural order of things. A person, community, or an entire culture might also be said to have Fír Flathemon. It is this which we must develop in ourselves and in our culture if we are to heal the fractured psyche of humanity and enter into a mutually enhancing relationship with the Earth. Not possessing this principle of Fír Flathemon it is impossible for our society to become integrated into either the Earth or the cosmos, and we remain fractured and discordant with the larger whole of which we are a part. We remain on our current Slí na frith-Fhírinne.

Can we, both as individuals and as a society, dip our hands back into the waters of Connla's Well and drink deep draughts of Otherworld wisdom? Can we, like Cormac, receive the Cup of Truth and in our lives walk boldly on Slí na Fírinne? Such are the questions whose answers will determine the viability of the human species in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## THE SALMON IN THE SPRING

THE OTHERWORLD WELL OR SPRING IS A COMMON MOTIF IN CELTIC LITERATURE. It is a threshold place where the underworld powers of the soul effervesce up into the ordinary world of sunlight. Connla's Well, sometimes called Nechtan's Well or the Well of Segais, is the mythical Otherworld source of the River Boyne, a sacred river perhaps comparable to the Ganges in India. As is described in the story of Cormac Mac Art, it is surrounded by nine hazel trees, inhabited by salmon that eat the nuts which fall from the trees. Its water flows into the five streams of the senses. Undoubtedly it is a well of wisdom.

It is said that Fionn MacCumhaill, the leader of the Fianna, gained his poetic inspiration from a salmon that swam in the Boyne River. Fionn's teacher, Finn Eces had spent seven years trying to catch and eat the salmon of wisdom who had eaten the hazel nuts from Connla's Well, and thus had all the knowledge in the world. When finally he caught it, he charged Fionn with slowly roasting it over the fire, turning it evenly so that it did not burn. When blisters began to appear on the fish, Fionn, worried that his teacher would be angry with him, popped them with his thumb. The juice burned him and he instinctively put his thumb to his mouth to stop the pain. He swallowed the juices of the salmon, receiving its poetic wisdom

rather than Finn Eces. Ever since, when Fionn needed to know something, he would chew his thumb and the answer would come to him.

To visit and drink from this well or spring is to discover the vitality and power of the soul, it is to discover the *dán* which initiates us into Fírinne. It is interesting that the word for salmon in Irish is *bradán*, and that aside from meaning salmon it can also figuratively refer to the life of a hero (who in Irish myth is often portrayed as a semi-shamanic figure), as in *bradán bethad*, or also more generally to the life, spirit, or pulse of a thing.<sup>11</sup> This makes sense of course when we contemplate the lifecycle of the salmon. An adult salmon leaves the pool it was born in, travels downstream with the current to live its life. When it is ready to die it swims upstream, back to the place of its birth, lays eggs, and dies. This cycle bears striking ecological and biological resemblance to the psychospiritual initiatory process by which we discover and birth our souls. We too travel to the center of ourselves, our old lives dying away so that a new, more soulfully integrated life may emerge.

Before the *Second Battle of Maigh Tuireadh*, Lúgh arrives, seeking entrance to Tara. He is told that “no one enters Tara who does not possess an art.” Tara being the center of our psychospiritual and ecological mandala, we can interpret this to mean that no one enters into wild wholeness who does not embody their *dán*. Lúgh being the *samildánach*, the many-skilled, is granted access. It should be no surprise then that Lúgh is both trickster and psychopomp, traits which seem to point toward his role as an archetypal initiator. Likewise one’s Fír Flathemon is deeply entwined with the embodiment of *dán*. To know one’s deepest purpose and self-nature and to assent to enacting it in the world is precisely what it means to walk on Slí na Fírinne. Thus, to enter Tara, the archetypal center of kingship is to be an ambassador of *dán* and Fírinne, and to contribute meaningfully to the ecological community.

Our life energy is intimately tied to the discovery and sensual embodiment of our *dán*. Manannán declares that only those who drink from *both* the rivers of the senses and the well are *áes dána*. This sensual embodiment is important—it is not enough to simply have had an encounter with an initiatory image of the soul. Initiation only occurs when we not only *know* the *dán*, but we *become* the *dán*, like the salmon whose death allows the birth of offspring. Similarly, our dying to the old life and stories provides the fertile ground whereby we might be born into a new, more soulful, story.

The embodiment of *dán* is quite literal in this way. It is an *em-body-ment*. This is portrayed by the five streams of the senses connecting to Connla's Well. In Part One of this book we explored perception in relationship to nature, calling it Tuatha Dé Danann vision. This relationship between the Tuatha Dé (the *áes dána*) and perception points to a fundamental order underlying the encounter with the soul. If nature and the human soul are intimate reflections of wildness, or *Fírinne*, then it goes to say that the same modes of perception allow us to authentically encounter both. Ultimately this means that we cannot experience our soul if we cannot experience nature in a participatory manner.

The perceptual psychologist Laura Sewall calls this "ecological perception" and has identified five practices to help develop it as a skill. Although her focus is on the visual perception, many of the practices are just as relevant or adaptable for all of the senses:

These practices include (1) learning to attend, or to be mindful, within the visual domain; (2) learning to perceive relationships, context, and interfaces; (3) developing perceptual flexibility across spacial and temporal scales; (4) learning to re-perceive depth; (5) the intentional use of imagination.<sup>12</sup>

These are practices for participating sensually in the ecology of place. Equally, however, we might say they are practices for participating sensually in the ecology of *self*. Consider Bill Plotkin's definition of soul as "ultimate place" or "ecological niche." These are practices of deeply perceiving wild nature, the ultimate place of plants, animals, stones, rivers, etc. To truly see a stone, for example, one must be mindful of its presence within the senses; perceive its relationship to the wider ecology in which it is located (animals burrow under it, moss and lichens grow upon it); be fluid and flexible enough in perception to encounter things freshly and without expectation; perceive *our own* embeddedness in this ecology, and use the imaginal faculty to develop a relationship.

To encounter the soul, the practice is no different. If the soul is our deepest and most authentic identity within relationship to all other things, our ecological place in the world, then it will take nothing less than an ecological mode of perception to encounter that, develop a relationship with it, and be so deeply embedded

in our wild nature that we effortlessly embody it in the world. In the same way that a chrysanthemum can be nothing but a chrysanthemum, once initiated we can be nothing but our *dán*. It becomes as natural an expression of our self as breathing is to our survival. We *can* refuse it before we are initiated into it, but once we take that plunge into the great mystery of self and nature, even our refusals, in the end, turn out to be a secret path to deeper understanding and embodiment.

This does not mean that even in becoming an expression of *dán* or soul that all neurosis is eliminated or that our behavior cannot still become *frith-Fhírinne* or heterotelic. Returning to the example of a forest fire, the fire may get out of control and end up actually destroying the ecosystem rather than contributing to its maintenance. The fire is still expressing its inherent self-nature, its *dán*, but it is doing so in a way that in a human being we would call neurotic. Chögyam Trungpa makes a similar point about individuality and enlightenment:

Individuality sometimes comes out of ego, like wanting to be an emperor, a king, or a millionaire. But individuality can also come out of personal inspiration. It depends on the level of one's journey, on how far you have been able to shed your ego. We all have our own style and our own particular nature. We can not avoid it. . .the enlightened expression of yourself is in accord with your inherent nature.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise one's *dán* can be expressed in either neurotic or enlightened styles depending on where a particular person is in their journey, and how well they have learned to let go of the egoic and Fomorian ways of being in the world.

To be initiated does not just mean that we come to experience ourselves in our *dán* and embody it in the world. The very notion itself comes with a steep requirement: wholeness and integration with the proper order of things and the development of ecological width and depth to our identity. In other words, we must not only come to embrace *dán* but strive in our embodiment of it to express it in accordance with *Fírinne*.

In embodying these qualities we effortlessly embody who we most deeply are. Like the grass can only be grass, and the rivers can only be rivers, when we are initiated we can no more be anything but our soul than a mountain can be a mountain.

Our evolution and continued viability as a life-enhancing species on this planet requires our ecological integration into the cosmos. The human being is at its most creative wholeness when it freely and effortlessly mediates its own realized wildness into the world.

## DÁN

I DISCOVERED MY INTEREST IN SPIRITUALITY AT A YOUNG AGE, WHEN I WAS TWELVE. Though for as long as I can remember I had a fascination with the natural world, it was at this time that I fell head over heels in love with the Earth. Several years later I was experiencing a depression. Who, sensitized to the wild rhythms of Earth and soul, would not look at our contemporary industrialized culture and feel a deep and abiding sadness? We live in a culture fascinated by self deception and indulgence, things antithetical to the psychological, spiritual, and ecological imperative of subjective communion.

My depression, although not debilitating, lasted for some time. I had good friends and a healthy social life, yet inside and underneath I knew there was something important that had escaped me. Bill Plotkin points out that in our development there are both nature tasks and culture tasks, and that healthy growth and maturation must occur along both lines. As is often the case in modern industrial nations, I developed normally along the cultural line, but was wholly estranged from nature. When I was nearing eighteen, the commencement of cultural “adulthood,” my depression came to a climax, as if nature would not wait any longer.

I had been studying spiritual traditions and even engaging in basic practices, such as meditation, for several years. I had not truly been *living* it, however. Although I imagined myself as quite spiritually mature I was in truth deeply cynical and jaded toward the world. My early spirituality was more of an attempt to escape from my despair and from the world rather than connect in any authentic sense with my soul. I imagined, after high school, retreating from the world, going to live a more simple life in nature.

A small glimmer appeared on my horizon when I discovered Naropa University. I had long since given up on formal education, feeling as though my experience with public school had failed me entirely. Modern life felt incredibly empty and

without purpose. I had plenty of passion but I could not seem to find any environment that would nurture me in any beneficial way. Finding Naropa, a Buddhist inspired university founded by Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa, I also found an inspiration to remain in the social world. Perhaps there I would find in my own particular style of being a way in which I could contribute to changing the world. Something in me started waking up.

Throughout the years I had flirtations with Eastern religions, but for nearly as long as I counted myself a spiritual “seeker” my abiding interest had always been in the Celtic traditions of my ancestors. It was around this time that I was accepted into Naropa University and began the process of mentally and emotionally taking leave from my childhood home and moving out on my own. In my anticipation to join the community at Naropa I spent much of my time looking over the materials they had sent me. I looked through the brochure for the Extended Studies department, which offered a variety of workshops and classes to the public, trying to get a feel for the place. One program which caught my eye was being taught on the Celtic traditions. It had already passed, but I remember being intensely drawn in by the description and hoping that the fellow teaching it would return.

One evening in early spring I went to the bookstore with a friend. I had long ago lost much hope that I would find anything worth reading in the New Age section of chain bookstores, but I still perused them out of habit. Amidst the trash of authors offering magic spells, wishful thinking, and glitzy spiritual escape from the mundane, a title caught my eye. It was called *The Mist-Filled Path* and the spine listed Frank MacEowen as the author. The title and a small inset picture of a misty forest stirred up longing in my chest. The name of the author sounded familiar though I could not put my finger on where I might have heard it before. I picked it up and flipped toward the back of the book where I read a brief biography about him. He had attended Naropa University. Now I was sure where I knew the name from. He was the one offering the Celtic themed workshop at Naropa! I took the book to a seat and read the foreword. It was described as a book for “exiles, wanderers, and seekers.” I knew it was a book for me.

It only took me a few days to get through it. I soaked the writing up. His words resonated with something deep inside me. For the first time I realized not only how depressed I was but *why* I felt the way I did. I felt like there was something waiting inside of me. One night after reading a few chapters from the book I had to set it

down. Whatever it was that had been waiting in me, it felt now like it was quickly waking up. I could not sit. I could not do anything but keep moving my body in unison with the pace of my mind. It was as though I was filled with energy. I tried doing sit-ups to get it out of my body. It didn't work—this was larger than just the mental energy of new ideas and insights.

Eventually, through all this movement, my mind began sinking deeper into my body. It was like uncovering layers of sediment, coming to see the larger picture and roots of my emotional state. I found myself staring, as though dumbstruck, out the kitchen window. The light at the back of the house was on and it illuminated the branches of a tree at the edge of the yard. Looking at this tree I remembered my deep love of the natural world, a love that had become an intellectual abstraction rather than a felt experience and expression. I felt then a deep cleansing and sense of connection with everything around me. A cloudy numbness receded from me.

I was so overcome with sensation that I had to lie down on the floor, as if I was struck and knocked out by my confrontation with something so much greater than myself. After a time I was able to go upstairs to bed, but the experience was not over. Closing my eyes, I felt like I was falling and as though the cells in my body were on fire. It was a kind of spontaneous shamanic experience, triggered by my own surrender to soul. When I landed, I stood in front of a tree within my visioning mind. It guided me along a path and down into a cave where I fell again, this time being helped up by the hands of many people who I recognized intuitively as ancestors. One of them stepped forward and took my head in his hands. Something I could not name or even recall afterwards was transmitted. It was a wordless, imageless nothing. Yet I felt that something of great personal importance was communicated. I could feel it in my body. Something had changed.

When the experience ended, I listened to the sound of the wind through the trees. I thought I heard the rustle of leaves though it was March and the branches were still bare. Perhaps I was merely hearing things, or perhaps it was the sound of my self growing green once more. I had never heard the wind in quite the same way as I heard it that night. I fell asleep to its music.

In the morning I expected that this mystical experience, this feeling of being utterly transmuted and washed clean, would be gone—turned to ashes like so many of my previous “spiritual highs” or peak experiences. To my surprise I awoke still

feeling new, as if I had just been born into the world again. It was spring outside, and inside it was spring too.

When I finished the book I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I knew I would teach, that somewhere in the spaces where Celtic spirituality and ecopsychology meet I would find a way of being in the world, a way of being that I could share with others. I knew the path was long, but I also knew that going through the passage from despair to connection I could help others do the same. I did not need to be a “finished product.” We could wake up to the world together. I started writing and connecting with others who were looking for the same connection.

Months later, now living in Boulder, Colorado, I attended a workshop run by Frank before I returned home for Christmas for the first time since I left. The first night, after a short lecture, he guided the group in a meditation using soundscapes and breathwork which he associated with the three “cauldrons of poesy” spoken of in a 16<sup>th</sup> century Irish manuscript. During my meditation, I found myself in a visionary state back in the cave of my ancestors. This time they led me out of the underworld cave and into a tall bonfire surrounded by more spirits of my ancestors. My chest was tattooed with a symbol which has become central for me in understanding my *dán*. It was only after my pilgrimage to Ireland that I had this “soul marking” physically tattooed onto my chest in recognition of the new life I was then born into.

Our relationship to and understanding of *dán* is constantly deepening when we commit ourselves to its embodiment in this way. As I sit writing this book I am aware that the imperative to do so is rooted in the embodiment of my soul. The poetry I write and publish comes from the same place. These are all expressions of my *dán*, my self-intending purpose in relationship with a wider community.

In writing about soul gifts, Plotkin distinguishes between the gift itself and the “delivery system” which is used to embody and express the gift. The *dán* is far more subtle than the delivery system. The delivery system might be something like teaching, writing, becoming an artist or psychologist, or even doing something for which there is no “job title.” There may not be a need to develop a delivery system at all since our simple being in the world can often be delivery enough. More often than not however the soul compels us to its expression in very direct and particular ways, and this often results in finding methods of doing this effectively.

But the *dán* itself cannot be named. You can not isolate it anymore than you can isolate the quality of burning that is a forest fire or the hardness of a stone. The *dán* and the soul—for they are not discrete “things” but rather one is the active, outward, and definite expression of the other—are the fundamental quality of a thing’s being. The soul is the complete gestalt of a thing’s essential nature. We each radiate this essence to the degree to which we are in congruence with our self-nature. This action of conscious radiation is *dán*. Our self-being becomes our art in the world.

*Dán* is the activity of *Fírinne* in much the same way that, in Chinese philosophy, *De* is the activity of *Dao*. *De* is often translated as “virtue,” in the sense of power or potency rather than morality. A better definition comes from Alan Watts who described it as an “extraordinary skill at living.”<sup>14</sup> *De* is life in accordance with *Dao*, the action of following the Way. We might think of *dán* and its relationship with *Fírinne* in a similar way—the opposite of *frith*-*Fhírinne*—that is, not as a specific “skill” or “gift” but as skillful self-nature in harmony with *Fírinne*. In order to connect with this depth of self, however, we must go beyond ego and the Fomorian eye or otherwise continue projecting a distorted image of the self into the world. It is the question of whether or not we are radiating in congruence with the Way of *Fírinne* or against it.

By enacting *dán* as an embodiment of the soul we become wild. If the wilderness of nature is made up of those places which retain their ecological integrity—their relational coherence in purposeful and creative order—then likewise the wilderness of the individual being, human or otherwise, relies on the enactment of its soul. Just as, in Snyder’s words, “each place is forever (eventually) wild,” each human is too.<sup>15</sup> Just as the Buddhists say that we are enlightened before we ever search for enlightenment, we are wild before we are ever initiated into the soul. It is our first identity, only covered over subsequently as mind, body, and nature dissociate.

This self-nature is the teleological fulfillment of the human being. In other words, just as in a biological sense the mature adult is the *telos*, the “end goal,” of the child, the *dán* is quite literally who we were born to become in the world. Hence, in Irish *dán* means not only art but destiny. Of course, the path does not end there. Just as the adult does not stop maturing and aging, discovering *dán* is only the beginning; then begins the life long task of actually doing the work of the

soul. Doing this work the need for the kind of satisfaction and happiness preached by the self-help gurus drops away—a deeper, more wild joy fills us. Once initiated, we can no more choose not to embody dán as spring can choose not to bloom. It happens: utterly, wildly, simply. It is then only a matter of our particular style of wild being.

## THE THREE CAULDRONS

ONE OF THE MOST INTRIGUING OF IRISH TEXTS COMES TO US FROM A 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY legal codex. The text was called “the Cauldrons of Poesy” by modern scholars, as it deals quite uniquely with the subject of poetic inspiration. It details three cauldrons which are said to be located in the body: the Cauldron of Warming located in the belly, the Cauldron of Motion (or Vocation) located in the chest, and the Cauldron of Knowledge in the head. These cauldrons might be considered as internal centers of subtle energy within the body, an interrelated system of “containers” for both holding and converting energy, similar to the chakras in Indian philosophy.<sup>16</sup> It would appear from the text that this energy is tied both to basic life processes and health as well as emotions and the soul.

This term, subtle energy, is often used in mysticism as a translation for words such as *chi*, *qi*, *prana*, *mana*, *kundalini*, and many others from diverse cultures. In Irish, cognates can be found in words such as *neart*, which literally means strength or power, and *imbas*, which refers to a kind of poetic inspiration or illuminating knowledge. Although these words give us a distinct language with which we can speak about this subtle reality, they tell us very little about what it actually is.

Science tends to be skeptical of such concepts because they are not quantifiable. The use of the word “energy” has caused even further confusion and tends to be a catch-all term used to describe any non-material and non-mechanical phenomenon. The physicist F. David Peat offers some insight, writing that, “Energy is experienced as a feeling of internal power and an underlying movement and transformation. It may also be connected with meaning and integration within the body.” He goes on to make an important distinction between physical energy and subtle energy, using much of the same language which I have used to describe the soul:

Many of the biochemical processes within the body involve exchanges of physical energy, but these grosser forms of energy are not what I take the terms *healing energy* and *subtle energy* to mean. Rather, the latter are like the activity of a conductor of an orchestra or the choreographer of a ballet, that integrates and coordinates into one cohesive movement all the biochemical and energy processes of the body. Seen in this way, death is not the cessation of biological function...It is, rather, the breakdown of this symphony of coherent meaning that differentiates a living individual from a mass of functioning cells.<sup>17</sup>

This description of subtle energy suggests that it may be very similar, if not identical, to what I have described here as soul. Subtle energy is like the underlying meaning and coherence which remains implicate in the phenomenal world. Therefore, what is being mediated, processed, held, and “boiled” by these cauldrons is the intrinsic wholeness, not only of the self, but of the entire cosmos. Underneath all phenomena there is this pulsating flux, this seamless continuity of all things, which gathers the universe of our fragmented perceptions—like a broken mirror or mosaic—and coaxes our senses toward wholeness. Like the conductor of Peat’s orchestra it is the patterning principle by which the manifest is fundamentally guided.

The cauldrons are each said to be “born” in certain positions which indicates their ability to hold this energy and “heat” it. The Cauldron of Warming is born upright, indicating that the person is alive and in good health—the vital processes of life in the physical body are functioning. This is the most basic cauldron of poetic inspiration which indicates a philosophy among the Irish that body and soul are indeed one and that higher, or more enlightened, levels of consciousness must be primarily accessed *through* the body, not by rejecting or “transcending” it. The Irish text itself says much the same: “Question: is the source of poetic art [dán] in a person’s body or soul? Some say the soul, since the body is one with it...but it is truer to say that the source of poetic art is in each person’s body...”<sup>18</sup> This Cauldron of Warming corresponds to that spark of basic life and health within the biological body of the person.

Whereas the Cauldron of Warming is said to be naturally upright, the Cauldron of Motion is said to either be on its lips or on its sides in most people. The

position of this cauldron is based largely on one's awareness of and skill with their poetic gifts. The text states that in those of minor poetic talent it is on its side, but in master poets it is entirely upright. It seems that within this cauldron one gets their first taste of *dán*, sipping it from Connla's Well. In this way the Cauldron of Motion could be said to be intimately tied to our self-nature and it is here that we either become aligned or misaligned with *Fírinne*.

In her commentary on this text Erynn Rowan Laurie writes, "This is the cauldron which processes and expresses our emotions, and from which the beginnings of the poetic art arise. . . and it must be turned through the understanding, expression, and transformation of powerful emotions in order to attain a fully upright position."<sup>19</sup> This makes a certain kind of sense since the Cauldron of Motion is located in the chest, or perhaps rather, in the heart.

It is said in the text that anyone is capable of "turning" this cauldron, that it "exalts the lowly" and is where "the free-born are taught, / where the bound are set free. . ."<sup>20</sup> Thus, anyone is capable of discovering *dán*. The way that this cauldron is turned is said to be either through joy or sorrow. There are four divisions of sorrow: longing, grief, jealousy, and the exile of pilgrimage. Joy is divided into both divine and human joy, with human joy being further divided into sexuality, health, poetic attainment, and the joy obtained from the hazel nuts at Connla's Well.

Featuring as they also do in the three strains of music played by the Dagda's harp, it seems that joy and sorrow might be conceived as two fundamental realities. I use the word "realities" because while joy and sorrow can certainly be experienced as emotions, their position and prominence in Irish texts and stories suggests that they are pointing to a reality beyond this experience. Perhaps here joy and sorrow refer to something more pervasive, more unconditional, and far more direct.

In any spiritual journey with which we are brought into a deep communion with self-nature, *dán*, or *Fírinne* will likely bring about two different but simultaneous expressions of the self: joy and sorrow. These forms of joy and sorrow however are not the conditioned emotions of being either happy or sad that things have or have not met our expectations. They are, rather, self-existing qualities of reality and of the human experience. "Why are you always joyful?" Chögyam Trungpa asks in *Shambhala*, "Because you have witnessed your basic goodness [the basic "is-ness" of things, connected with the practice of meditation, and perhaps comparable to

Fírinne in that it is the natural order of things], because you have nothing to hold on to....”<sup>21</sup> It is the unconditioned joy and delight of simply being. We can feel this quality of being perhaps most in the health of the body, our basic sexuality, and in discovering *dán*.

Intimately tied to this in the Shambhala lineage of Trungpa is the notion of the genuine heart of sadness. Hand in hand with this joy comes also a sense of poignant longing or sadness due to having a broken heart. This is not the sadness or depression of feeling a sense of lack or loss in one’s life, but rather an unconditional tenderness in the heart. Trungpa says that “It occurs because your heart is completely exposed. There is no skin or tissue covering it; it is pure raw meat. Even if a tiny mosquito lands on it, you feel so touched. Your experience is raw and tender and so personal.”<sup>22</sup> The sorrow and the joy are in some senses almost identical because they both come from having a direct experience of reality and our willingness and ability to feel reality so fully and deeply that we are at once delighted and broken hearted.

It would appear from the text that it is the turning and generating of sorrow and joy in the Cauldron of Motion that converts and turns the Cauldron of Knowledge in the head. This cauldron is associated with illumination, *imbas* or ecstatic poetic inspiration, and enlightenment. Although it is in tasting the hazels from Connla’s Well that the poet or practitioner turns the Cauldron of Motion the text makes it quite explicit that the actual source of *dán* is in the Cauldron of Knowledge. This suggests, perhaps, that the Cauldron of Knowledge is synonymous with Connla’s Well, and that these upper two cauldrons are deeply entwined and turn each other through mutual feedback.

The Cauldron of Knowledge is born “on its lips,” face down, “distributing many artistic gifts.”<sup>23</sup> By turning the Cauldron of Motion through unconditional joy and sorrow, the *dán* distributed by the Cauldron of Knowledge is “caught” and the conversion of the energy turns the Cauldron of Knowledge upright. This represents complete continuity, integration, and synchronization between body and mind. This effectively brings us from fragmentation to wholeness, not only within our own body but within the larger dynamic order of things, Fírinne.

Cormac’s entire journey can be seen as a metaphor through which each of the three cauldrons is experienced. He begins in the ordinary reality of Ireland, on the

plains below the Hill of Tara (Cauldron of Warming). After meeting Manannán he eventually travels to the Otherworld and sees Connla's Well and nine hazel trees (Cauldron of Motion). Finally, Manannán gifts him with the silver branch—a new way of perceiving the world—and the Cup of Truth, or Fírinne (Cauldron of Knowledge), which he takes back to Ireland to rule as an integrated king.

In this commentary of the Three Cauldrons I have treated the literal poetry implied in the text itself as synonymous with *dán*. I do this not to simplify the text or treat it as a metaphor, but rather with the intention that art can be approached in such a way that it becomes a practice of being, thus capable of disclosing *dán* to the artist. Chögyam Trungpa talked about the practice of “dharma art.” He described dharma art as an attempt to embody both artist and viewer. “Our message is simply one of appreciating the nature of things as they are and expressing it without any struggles of thoughts and fears.”<sup>24</sup> Dharma art, in this way, is much like the practice of meditation—a way not only of experiencing but directly communicating the true nature of things. In the language of this book it is a way of both coming to know and of expressing our *dán*.

Just as the cauldrons were used by the Irish poets to cultivate inspiration or *imbas*, we might use the cauldrons as the objects of attention in meditation—a somatically focused meditation capable of putting us into contact with the body we so often ignore—and attempting through art or poetry to encounter and express our lives, our world, and our selves simply as they are.

The first part of this practice is best done lying down. Begin by completely relaxing the body. You can do this by bringing your attention to each individual part of the body and relaxing away any tension. You can do this by actually feeling into the tension, possibly exaggerating it, and then letting it go. Start at the feet, placing your awareness in them, and let them relax. Move up the entire body, paying particular attention to the areas of your body where you normally feel the most stress, such as in the shoulders or back.

When you are relaxed begin by taking a few deep breaths. Place your hands on your belly, at the Cauldron of Warming. You're going to breathe into this cauldron of the body. Placing your hands at each cauldron allows you to focus your awareness and the energy of your breathing there. When I say “breathe” into the cauldron I do not mean it literally. Bear in mind here the close kinship between

breath and soul. Although you can not literally breathe into your belly, let alone your heart or head, energy follows awareness. You will find that you can “breathe” into any part of the body by placing the awareness of your breath on it. There is a distinct subjective feeling that goes along with this and you should find it quite natural and easy to accomplish.

Feel your hands resting on your belly, rising and falling with the breath. Take deep, long breaths. You might find it helpful to visualize a cauldron in the belly becoming fuller and fuller with each breath. Let your awareness sink into the cauldron. What sensations, emotions, or images does it stir? Just let whatever comes up in this process happen without becoming attached to it. The object here is not to alter consciousness or to have mystical visions but, particularly for this cauldron, to feel and directly experience the inherent luminosity of the body.

When you are ready remove your hands from your belly and come back into awareness of the body as a whole. Take a few deep breaths before placing your hands on the heart, at the Cauldron of Motion. Repeat the instructions for the Cauldron of Warming, filling the cauldron and placing your awareness into it. Take particular note of the position of this cauldron. Does it feel upright, on its side, or on its lips? Feel your heart, letting whatever sensations or emotions arise. You may find joy or sorrow welling up in the chest, unexpressed emotions aching to be felt. This can be a painful cauldron because of repressed emotions we may carry in it. Take your time with it, but notice also if it turns or changes positions and what new sensations arise in the body as it does this.

Again, when you feel ready, remove your hands from your heart and become aware of the whole body again. Take a few deep breaths before placing your hands on your head, at the Cauldron of Knowledge. Repeat the instructions from the other two cauldrons. Note the position of this cauldron, which at least at the beginning of this practice will likely be on its lips. As you meditate on this cauldron be aware of the sensations and images which might come up. What does this cauldron feel like? Is it “dispersing” wisdom through the body? What does that feel like? Are you able to turn it? What does that feel like? The important thing here is placing your awareness into the cauldron and feeling that space, rather than the contrivances of visually “turning” a cauldron. Just because you imagine it being turned does not mean it actually is, and so it is the interior experience of the caul-

dron itself which is of most value, rather than conscious manipulation of an image.

When you are ready return your awareness again to the whole body. Spend some time now meditating on the body, feeling the spaciousness of it. Use the body as the focus of your awareness in the way the breath is used in the practice of sitting meditation or *sitcháin*. Just allow your experience to be what it is.

Although this part of the practice just described can be used to good measure on its own, the second stage of this practice is to go directly from the cauldron meditation to artistic creation. Through the clarity of the body we can engage with the creative process in a way that places us into direct contact with our self-nature or *dán*. Stephen Nachmanovitch describes this: “We have our hands full with our own limited and limiting conception of self-hood. The secret is to *drop it*—whatever *it* may be. This is not deprivation but enrichment. It is dropping off hope and fear and letting our much vaster, simpler, true self show through, letting ourselves be ambushed by the great Dao that moves forever through this world.”<sup>25</sup> By touching it through the body we are capable of cultivating a wakefulness and presence which is rooted in the Earth and “the great Dao that moves forever through this world”—*Fírinne*.

There are no particular instructions for this part of the practice other than to, as Nachmanovitch says, “drop it.” Drop any agenda you have for the art whether it is poetry, painting, music, or sculpting. Drop the desire to make “good art” and the fear of making “bad art.” Drop the desire to express your ideas of your self or your ideas about the world. Allow yourself to be spontaneous, simply documenting through the art whatever is happening. What is happening may be an internal state, it may be the way the light is reflecting golden off the leaves of a tree, it may be an emotional state, or a sudden realization. You might even write, paint, or play something of no outward significance which nevertheless places you in direct contact with the creative spirit and reveals to you a more authentic self.

Before art is made the reality of your life and body is the living poem. First thought, best thought.