



Sireadh Thal Seek Beyond

As the living Celtic spiritual tradition struggles to survive in a rapidly changing world, Will Gethin meets a unique woman, Celtic priest and bard Fionn Tulach, with a vision to breathe new life into this ancient transcendental path

A flame-haired woman sits before a harp of gold and green. A Joan of Arc-style fringe accentuates her bold, blue eyes and soft, Gaelic features and an evergreen tunic hugs her body, flowing down to her ankles.

'Come with me on a magical, mythical journey', she beckons, caressing the strings of her harp like an elfin minstrel weaving an enchanted spider web.

'Come if you dare', she gently goads.

I'm at the Universal Voices Song and Storytelling Festival at the Findhorn Foundation and tonight we are hon-

oured by a rare performance from Fiona Davidson, the UK's most distinguished bard, who toured the globe from 1985 to 2002, recording several albums in between.

Over the course of the next hour Fiona transports us to another world with enchanting stories, songs, lullabies and poems about nature, fairies, divine love and Celtic gods; as all the while her fingers pluck and dance across the multiple strings of her harp, the mythical sounds of folklore chaperoning us to the vibrant, natural landscapes of her magical stories.

While providing first-rate entertainment, this ethereal rhapsody serves a deeper, more serious purpose. For Fiona Davidson is also Fionn Tulach, head of *An Ceile De*, the oldest, continuous, spiritual tradition of the Celtic countries, and she uses this bardic element to spread her divine message.

'When people attend a bardic performance, they go with their theatre heads on', Fionn explains when we convene for a chat toward the end of the festival. 'They go with a willingness to suspend their disbelief, so they are more open. And because they're not putting

up any barriers, the truth goes in and you can affect people.

'You get the chance to stand up and talk about your love of God and about the power of the divine', she resumes, 'in a way that doesn't come across like a sermon from a pulpit. There's no need for a barrier because people can't be sure if it's you or if it's a performance, so everyone feels safe.'

Deep reverence for Nature

Rooted deep in the land, the living, Celtic, spiritual tradition originated somewhere between Druidism and early Celtic Christianity around 2,000 years ago and was characterized by a deep and lasting reverence for nature. Its priests were called *An Ceile De*, or *Culdees*, Companions of God, which Fionn has now been herself for almost 20 years. Scottish legend maintains that the *Culdees* were originally Druids who envisaged the coming of Christ consciousness. While the Druids had their many gods, the *Culdees* perceived the one god as being the sum of the many and focused on *the One*.

For Fionn, the *Ceile De* combines the best of Celtic Christianity and Druidism, drawing on the wisdom of both:

'The strong relationship with *the One* feeds my need for the transcendent which I was never able to get from Druidism alone', she explains. 'And the *Ceile De* relationship with Christ is so simple and beautiful and yet somehow also deeper than what we have in most churches today. It starts with recognizing that we have this place within us, which we call Christ consciousness but then, unlike most forms of Christianity, and more like other traditions in the world, it gives us a way of changing ourselves, of growing spiritually'.

While using bardism as a way of mediating the sacred in performance, Fionn uses the living, Celtic, spiritual tradition, *An Ceile De*, as the vehicle, maintaining that storytelling is about embodying the tradition you belong to.

'It's partly about acting as a bridge for the ancestors', Fionn explains. 'The Celtic spiritual tradition is in the land, in the bones, and it comes through if you allow it, because you are a medium'.

The Dalai Lama was moved to recommend an adherence to the spiritual tradition of your homeland when Fionn performed for him during his visit to Scotland in June, 2004.

'I was invited to perform for His Holiness as a representative of the native, spiritual tradition of Scotland at a *Dharma* Network conference in Glasgow', she recalls. 'And during his

ensuing talk he kept saying people should follow the tradition of their land, which felt like he was giving my work his blessing'.

Bardism, for Fionn, was the natural synthesis of her four teenage passions: music, magic, spirituality and nature. Mastering the guitar and writing songs, she escaped into the 'green world' whenever she could and read countless books. Trading in her guitar for a harp, she ultimately fell upon a Celtic pagan community who encouraged her to become a bard.

Becoming a bard

Over the ensuing years, Fionn flitted through various pagan groups on an insatiable search for a transcendent element which none of these groups could assuage. She eventually settled into a Druid community on the Isle of Arran, where her bardic skills were enthusiastically received and encouraged. And when she eventually left, it was to begin touring the highlands and islands as a bard – a tour that would ultimately guide her to her destiny:

'I imagined in the deepest way I could, what an ancient bard would have sounded like...'

'A typical Highland gentleman in a beautiful, rough tweed jacket approached during an interval', she recalls. 'He told me he was the head of a *Ceile De* order and that it was a family line'.

The elderly, Highland gentleman was eager to share the wisdom of his ancestral tradition with Fionn and others before he died. And, having at last found the transcendent element she had so long been searching for, it was like a homecoming. She felt called to revive the tradition and set about adapting it to meet the demands of the modern world.

All great painters, writers and artists are bards, I was to learn during Fionn's three-day workshop at the festival, entitled *The Lure of the Bard*. As sacred artistes, they bring the divine energy of the unseen world – *Alltar* – into the world to show us through their performances or works of art.

Sacred performers and artists put themselves on the line, Fionn said. Whereas ordinary performers sometimes act from a place of ego, a true bard performs for something greater than themselves without seeking appreciation and access to divine creative powers is their reward.

Fionn attributes the development of her bardic skills to a curious alliance of her own imagination and divine assistance, which she calls the *imaginal* – a term first coined, she says, by Henri Corbin, an eminent scholar of Islamic traditions.

'I imagined in the deepest way I could, what an ancient bard would have sounded like', she tells me, 'because there was no one to teach me that. And I created this person in the imaginal who taught me. I knew what he looked like. I knew everything about him. I would sit and watch him perform in a great Celtic hall. For me he exists in some place between heaven and earth co-created by imagination and spirit'.

Fairies, Fionn tells me, also inhabit the imaginal void, but not as the cute, little, nature spirits we envisage them to be these days:

'Fairies are depicted in the Celtic tradition as awesome beings of power, luminous gods, which the Celts call the *Sidhe*. In one of the Gnostic gospels, Christ says: "The truth doesn't come into the world naked, it comes into the world in types and images". I think the truth filters itself into this world. And one of the ways it does this is through the imaginal. We can't look into the face of God, so we look into the face of *gods* and I think how I was taught to be a bard was somewhere mixed up in all that'.

The Celtic tradition teaches that through interaction with the *Sidhe*, the world of the imaginal, you reach an enlightened state of being, a *Nirvana*, which, as with the Tibetan Buddhists, is a state of *Nothingness*.

'But in the *Ceile De* tradition, you don't stay there', Fionn enlightens me, 'you don't attain *Nirvana* and disappear, you seek to be *Christ-ened* and come back to this world again, bringing *Nothingness* back with you; bringing what you seek to embody into this world'.

Levels of spiritual commitment

As part of her reformation of the *Ceile De*, Fionn is offering different levels of commitment, tailored to suit individual needs and lifestyles. At the first level, spiritual teaching and guidance is made available over flexible time periods. The next level of *anruth* is only for those wishing to explore the possibility of joining the order. And finally, full commitment is then possible for those wishing to give themselves in a formal, unconditional way by becoming an *aonach*, the *Ceile De* equivalent of a contemplative or, in some cases, priest.

Joanie Alderslade, a carer and complementary therapist from Perthshire,

first came into contact with the order 11 years ago and 15 months ago she committed herself to deeper involvement by becoming an *anruth* before more recently graduating to the next level of *aonath*.

'Being an *anruth* for a certain period meant having the space to see if this way of life was really right for me', she says. 'It was the first step toward a completely dedicated, focused spiritual life'.

And people are increasingly searching for a spiritual path embracing all aspects of life, Joanie tells me.

'When my own orthodox Christian upbringing couldn't answer all my life questions, I began to look at nature-based traditions', she says, 'and that's how I found *An Ceile De*, which seemed to encompass the best of both worlds. The Earth is revered as much the Christ. It's about living fully in every moment, about seeing that every blade of grass contains God.'

'The more I grow and eliminate stuff in myself', she continues, 'the more I feel connected to the world around me. It's my life now and I feel incredibly grateful to have found it'.

In August this year, Joanie was ordained to become an *aonach* and undertook a vigil in a hermit's cell on the Isle of Iona, staying up all night in prayer and meditation. In the morning, she received a new name, *Saorsa*, which means freedom.

While she continues to do the occasional one-off performance as a bard and a little bit of teaching on bardism, the contemplative life and passing on the *Ceile De* tradition are now Fionn's main focus. Workshops, retreats and individual teachings are held regularly in Scotland and groups are also starting to spring up around the UK and abroad, as interest grows worldwide.

'Fionn teaches how to become more fully who we truly are', says Shulamith Strauss, a Scotland-based teacher and global ethics promoter from Germany who has known Fionn and her work for 15 years. 'She shows how to be a conscious vessel for our highest potential in every day life and how to honour life's cycles.'

'I think it's the one thing that can change this tide of senseless consumerism in the world', she resumes, 'which destroys the resources of soul and soil, resulting in the violence we see around us'.

I ask Fionn if she thinks the tide isn't already changing.

'Yes, I believe it is', she says. 'There's been such a spiritual drought for so many over the last century or so and people are finally realising a vital part of

a lot of good people these days, not necessarily feeling the need to follow a tradition, like us, but just following their hearts. Thank God. Because it might just save the world. I think it's the one thing that will'.

For more details about *An Ceile De* and forthcoming talks, workshops and retreats please visit www.ceilede.co.uk. For details of forthcoming events at the Findhorn Foundation please visit www.findhorn.org

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