

The Celtic Cauldron – Forgotten Archetype

November 1, 2017

The Celtic Cauldron belongs to an era long passed. Amongst any list of familiar archetypes - such as The Warrior, The Victim, The Queen or The Judge - the Cauldron would seem very much the odd one out. So what is it that confers its archetypal power and status? In a recent workshop entitled 'The Coaching Cauldron – creating a container for transformational change' (which my colleague Heather Mullin and I co-facilitated through the auspices of The Circle[1]) we explored how one might work experientially with the Cauldron in a coaching context. In this blog piece I will leave the coaching issue to one side but focus instead on what we stand to learn from studying such an ancient symbol.

One way to look at the pagan, polytheistic world is to see how its belief systems shaped the way the human psyche was configured. If one borrows a context from archetypal psychology - that our 3D experience of reality is illusory and our psyches are actually enfolded holographically into the cosmos - then this establishes a series of correspondences between what is apparently 'out there' (the world) and what is 'in here' (the mind). For the ancients, the cosmos was full of divinities either associated with natural phenomena (fertility, rain, the harvest) or with leading roles in their cosmogenic myths. Structurally polytheism populates the psyche with numerous such reference points which evoke high level cosmic principles (the archetypes). Amongst these is The Sacred. With monotheisms, by contrast, for all the creativity and devotion that they have inspired, there remains a danger of over-concentration in the psyche on a single divine reference point. This can open the way to extreme, unbalanced and polarised attitudes ('my God is better than yours' etc), in which there is a splitting off from the archetypal fulcrum; God then becomes dragged down to the level of the ego in service to an ephemeral agenda. One theory behind Christianity's adoption of the Trinity, in which the feminine principle is represented (albeit obliquely) alongside the Father and Son, was that this made the new monotheism more receptive to the pagan mind. The cult of the Virgin Mary may well have evolved as a bridge to the Ancient World in which worship of the Goddess was long established. At the same time the pagan mind already knew the Trinity as an echo of the Ancient Egyptian myth of Horus, Osiris and Isis.

But times change and with the passing of time values also shift. This means that the interior of our psyches is also subject to change. In a process that is culturally, if unconsciously, sanctioned archetypes get dethroned from their position in the psyche or, perhaps more accurately, we cease to identify consciously with certain higher principles and promote others in their place. It is not hard to see, for example, how a celebrity-obsessed, individualised contemporary culture might be in thrall to the Hero archetype at the expense of, say, the Hermit. Thus, we come to our Celtic Cauldron, a forgotten archetype, if ever there was one. What possible relevance could this have for urbanites today?

In the myth of The Cauldron of Ceridwen[2] we encounter in the Iron Age Goddess Ceridwen a personification of the feminine in all her transformative power - wise and capricious, bountiful and

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fierce, ruthless and relentless, loving and vengeful. The myth offers a depiction of unadulterated feminine power, potentially quite shocking to modern sensibilities. Through the cauldron, presided over by the feminine and guarded by the masculine, the feminine principle is linked with the inexhaustible, life-giving and regenerative power of Nature. But Ceridwen, being venerated by Celtic[3] people, is very much a local figure, rooted in the landscape. Offerings in the form of ceramic cauldrons were purposefully left for her, sunk deep into the earth by her devotees. The cauldron itself comes to represent archetypally an alchemical container in which all things can be contained and all transformed into something else. But there is much more. The cauldron is also a symbol of depth. When connecting to it, there is an invitation to open up to and acknowledge one's own depths. The famously dark, bubbling contents of the cauldron may appear impenetrable but we need to develop the faculty of seeing beneath our surface reality and be courageous enough to probe those hidden depths of ourselves. Stirring the cauldron thus evokes the possibility of catalysing inner change. If we feel overwhelmed at the prospect of initiating change then we can rest assured that the cauldron can contain the uncontainable.

Here the Celtic myth intersects powerfully with ancient Dogon[4] culture. For the Dogon, who are the oldest extant people on the planet, their cooking pots were purposely oval in shape. This was to call to mind three key principles of their cosmogony: the primordial egg, which holds all unrecognized potential of the universe; the oval-shaped disk of the sun, the source of all life; and the egg-shape particle which they intuited contained waves, prior to the waves converting into matter. For the Dogon and our earliest African ancestors all the elements were present in a cauldron ritual: earth in the ceramic pot itself, fire underneath it, water in the shape of the bubbling liquid and air in the form of the steamy vapour rising from the pot. If we step back we can imagine that such daily rituals would have been the bedrock of community, bringing all members together around the cauldron, enabling the flourishing and dissemination of oral tradition and thus the celebration of heroic acts, wise elders and unique features of the landscape. But there is also, as Laird Scranton[5] has suggested, surely something truly grounding and life-affirming that comes from perceiving cosmological symbols in everyday life; this way one constantly connects higher and lower, the ephemeral and the transcendent. The pagan world further offers through oral tradition the daily experience of relating to the universe with awe, of seeing the numinous in nature, celebrating the seasons, revering the stars and distant planets - in other words seeing reality for what it most essentially is: multiplicity within unity. When one listens to the Kogil[6], the Dogon or the Dagara[7] it is clear that in their ancient traditions great consideration was given to the cosmos as a whole, with man's role to bridge the heavens and the earth seen as a sacred duty.

So, if we fast forward into our modern world what do we notice? A theme of this blog is that the sacred has been downgraded from Enlightenment times but is being revived. If Basarab Nicolescu[8] is correct that 'the sacred is actually the essential element in the structure of consciousness' then demotion of the sacred will surely damage the very foundations of the psyche.

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Given the correspondences alluded to between our external and internal worlds, we can say that the multiple crises confronting the world are consistent with a human psyche that has indeed been hollowed out. What to do about this we shall return to.

Where the cauldron takes us first is to the land and the connection between food, place and community. The two dominant monotheisms of the modern world are global whereas pagan cults always carried a local topographical affiliation. In a globalised world, the global becomes privileged over the local in various ways. Food processes, for example, become mechanized on a global scale, food itself becomes commodified with the market making it available to wealthy buyers even when out of season. But if our food comes from elsewhere we do not notice that forests are cut down to make space for the grazing of cattle, or that less and less land is available for growing crops or that the topsoil is in increasingly poor state. Moreover, with the disappearance of over half our world's forests in the past 200 years, we are weakening our ability to cool our climate, protect our biodiversity and store our carbon. We are also destroying a crucial mechanism in the functioning of our climate - the water cycle. We may hear about this environmental degradation but - crucially - if we are not acculturated to revere Nature as sacred we will struggle to grasp the significance of what is happening to the natural world. Christian scripture did not prime the psyche of its adherents for planetary or environmental awareness, and Enlightenment thinking which emphasised man's rightful dominance over the Natural world promulgated a bulldozing masculinity. So, one can infer from this that the western psyche lacks systemic attunement to the archetype of Mother Nature.

What might change that? So far, the impacts of deforestation are sadly only being keenly felt by those at the sharp end, well out of sight of those with the heaviest energy footprint. Colonisation started the process, especially around the African ports, and the ensuing warming of the planet and degradation of land has led to millions of climate exiles. The number of globally displaced persons in 2017 is a new record. So far Europeans are not grasping the systemic explanation for the arrival of these climate and war refugees.

Then there is community. Long gone are the days when our ancestors would sit around a large pot or cauldron to enact a daily sharing ritual. Certainly food still plays a ritual or ceremonial role in our lives - but these family gatherings in western culture tend to be limited to key days in the national calendar or anniversaries in the life of each family. How many of our neighbours do we sit down to eat with? Not so many. What do we share with each other then? Not much! So how strong are the bonds that bind us? Not very! And then there is the way we eat our food nowadays, often alone, sometimes on the run, frequently in front of the TV. Sometimes it is delivered to us by a man in a helmet whose face we cannot see! So arguably we are increasingly out of relationship with our food, its source, our communities, and our planet. The fact that our cities all over the world are

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becoming filled up by exiles from the countryside means we are becoming deracinated and urbanised on an unprecedented scale.

There is thus a rootlessness to modern urban living, notwithstanding all of its conveniences, as populations shift countries or continents according to necessity or the vagaries of the job market. So, the invitation with the cauldron archetype is to reflect on what part of us needs to be more earthed than it currently is. The visit to the supermarket to pluck plastic packaged natural products off a shelf is a tame echo of the hunt - no danger, no skill and very little blood at all - thereby neatly reinforcing our sanitised separation from the Natural world. Through our more recent identification with technology and the mechanistic world we have forgotten Nature. This is risky. The capitalist system that powers networks for transporting food around the world is still fundamentally dependent on Natural capital - on Nature - for its survival. In early 21C western societies it seems that urbanites have not only taken for granted the functioning of the market-place but have unconsciously placed their trust in it as a substitute for self-sustaining community.

Beyond this the cauldron invites us to reflect on our depths and our power, the many levels contained within us. How are we using our power in the world? And to what extent are we attending to our depths? Do we tend to work at our egoic level to gain power over others, or are we seeking the centred power that comes from inner transformation? How do we access our abundant creativity? What parts of us may need to die in order for other more enlivened parts to emerge? And within the totality of our being what are we not looking at attentively enough, what aspects are perhaps too dominant or too withdrawn? And what about the balance of power within us of the masculine and feminine energies? What do we choose to stay unconscious to in our multiplicity and why? Sadly, it is seldom that those of us in cities look up in awe at the stars - they are all too often obscured by pollution; we are far more likely to look down, frowning at our smart phones. Our gaze is already taking us away from the cosmic to the narrow, the ephemeral, the atomized. And with our gaze go our values.

Finally, there is the legacy of our pagan ancestors and what we are not listening to in the indigenous people of today. Christianity, once institutionalized and harnessed to the Roman empire, shifted to a 'civilizing' mission, which ended up taking the lives of millions of pagans. This same mission, sanctioned by a succession of Popes, later underwrote slavery and justified colonialism. But today 80% of the world's bio-diversity^[10] survives in the 11% of the world's forests which are under the stewardship of indigenous people, most of whom are pagan. Is this an accident? As we 'saw off the branch we are sitting on' it is salutary to ask what these people know about the land that modern, urban dwellers have forgotten.

To extend our metaphor further, as planetary temperatures rise humanity is slowly cooking in its own cauldron. Of course, there is a need to find collective will to turn the heat down while we

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address the various options we have for surviving and thriving. Indigenous people have been playing their part all along and for many years now have been trying to wake up their 'younger brother'[11] to change his ways. But as Meadows[12] pointed out many years ago, the western mind is not acculturated to respond to slow-burning, long-term threats to its sense of security - particularly if almost all the impacts are felt by others in far-off lands. The western world has taken a leadership position over the past 200 years but one requirement of this role is to understand the systemic impacts that flow from this. I'm arguing in this piece that as the west assiduously colonised other lands, a cold, mechanistic model - an entirely false archetype - has in turn colonised our psychic interiors, displacing The Sacred and the life-giving feminine principle. Sometimes it takes an ancient myth to help us see how far we have ungrounded ourselves.

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[1] The Circle is a community for psychosynthesis practitioners, launched in 2015.

[2] In our workshop we read from Sharon Blackie's telling of the myth, found in *If Women Rose Rooted*, 2016. September Publishing.

[3] Celtic peoples are widely believed to be ancestors of the Irish, Welsh and Scots, as well as the Cornish and Bretons. For an introductory history please see Barry Cunliffe's *The Celts*, 2003. OUP New York.

[4] The Dogon dispersed from their original homeland in West Africa and can be found across many countries in Africa today. They regard themselves as the landlords of Africa and guardians of ancient Pharaonic wisdom. They have an Earth Institute in the UK.

[5] See *The Cosmological Origins of Myth and Symbol*, 2010. Inner Traditions.

[6] The Kogi people have made their home in a small mountainous corner of NW Columbia. A documentary, *Aluna* (2012), describes their particular version of cosmic consciousness and their efforts to reach out to 'younger brother' to avert a catastrophe in the natural world.

[7] The Dagara people can be found in modern day Burkina Faso and Ghana. Author and shaman Malidoma Some (*Ritual*, 1993. Swan and Raven & *Of Water and The Spirit*, 1994. GP Putnam's Sons) has made his people's indigenous wisdom widely available to international seekers.

[8] This haunting phrase comes from *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, 2002, SUNY.

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[9] See Seeding Positive Change in [Seeding Positive Change.pdf](#)

[10] See Cultural Survival <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/issues>

[11] This is the term used by the Kogis to describe westerners or others whose unsustainable practices are disturbing the planetary balance.

[12] Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, Dennis Meadows, William Behrens III. Limits to Growth, 1972. Club of Rome