**EARTH-CROÍ – STEP EIGHT – SIDHE**

Sidhe means **THE WORLD OF THE ANCESTORS** OR **THE OTHERWORLD.**

In Neolithic Ireland life expectancy was around 28 to 33 years, so our ancestors lived with the familiarity and continual nearness of death in ways that we have disregarded, especially in western society where the subject of death is almost taboo!

Yet for our ancestors, not only was death close and familiar, but also, according to the old myths and legends, those who had passed to the Otherworld were somewhere not too far away.

In his wonderful book *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World* John O’Dononhue says:

*There is a presence who walks the road of life with you. This presence accompanies your every moment. It shadows your every thought and feeling. On your own or with others, it is always there with you….The name of this presence is death.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Now that I’m well into my 60’s, I know that my death is gaining ground, but I have a feeling – unlike that poem by Dylan Thomas, that I **will** go gently into that good night – when the time comes. John O’Donohue also wrote about making death your anam cara – friend of the soul. And this is what our ancestors seemed to be able to achieve in their stories about the nearby and immanent world of the Sidhe.

Personally, what I love about the way in which the Sidhe is described in the ancient myths and legends is the mixture of its earthiness and familiarity with its otherworldly mystery. To begin with, the world of the Sidhe was really a familiar part – if an invisible part – of this world. The mythological cycle says that when the Tuatha de Danaan were defeated they went away by themselves and dwelled in the most beautiful of the hills and valleys of Ireland, and that hidden walls were put about them, *so that no one could see through, but they themselves* *could see through them and pass through them.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

So the mountains and valleys and mounds - the familiar fields and hills of Ireland - also contain the invisible Spirit world of the ancestors. In other words, the Earth is sacred because unseen Spirit resides there. This is what one of Ireland’s many great poets, Patrick Kavanagh, meant when he spoke about the divinity of the earth reflected through the humble ordinariness of a flower growing in a bog in his poem The One:

 *God is down in the swamps and marshes….*

*A primrose, a violet….*

*beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God*

*Was breathing His love in a cut-away bog.*

This respect for the sacredness of the Earth is acknowledged by many indigenous peoples across the world for whom the mountains, trees, rivers and valleys are actual manifestations of the sacred.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is a deep wisdom about honouring the body of the Earth and when, one day, we are returned to the Earth, in burial or cremation, instead of something fearful it becomes something beautiful – a home-coming to the sacred Mother Earth. Physically speaking, the atomic material which our bodies are composed of is being returned to intermingle with the atomic material of the soil – and the cycle of life continues.

Also, instead of a linear understanding of time, our ancestors experienced time as circular so that, for example, they never spoke of ‘the next life’ as if it was something following after this life. Instead, the world of Spirit was incorporated into the world of the material and the world of nature. A helpful image to understand this is when a stone is dropped into a still pond. The ripples go outwards, encircling the place where the stone was dropped. In the same way the energy of the Otherworld is always all around us, encircling and permeating our lives, if we have the eyes to perceive it and the ears to hear its music. The Celts often used the image of the spiral to express their approach to life’s journey, so that everything is circular, but when we come round again to the place/situation we were in before, we’re at a higher level of wisdom and perception and we have the energy connected with that. It reminds me of the words of the poet T.S. Eliot who wrote:

*We shall not cease from exploration/ and the end of all our exploring/ will be to arrive where we started/ and know the place for the first time. [[4]](#footnote-4)*

This is ancestor spiral wisdom!

In addition, the Sidhe gives us wisdom about the mystery of the eternal soul or spirit – the essence of that energy/ Neart which is enduring and much deeper than material form. This is the ancestral energy that is within us through history, heritage, blood, bones, memory and dreams.

The dead are not too far away. The otherworld is near us, around us. Our lives are looked over, watched, witnessed, with kindness. The energy/Neart of millions of years of the cycle of life and death is a power encircling us, as the moon circles the earth. We are never alone in this life for we are an integral part of past, present and future.

**WAYS TO PRACTICE SIDHE**

1. Some say that acknowledging that death is an inevitable part of life and that life is short can help us to live with greater focus, purpose and authenticity – what do you think?
2. Visit the graves of those dear to you who have died. Let them know they’re not forgotten.
3. Think about your own funeral. How do you want that to be? Write it down.
4. Ask yourself this question – if I was told that I had 6 months to live, would there be anything in particular I regretted not doing while I had the time? If so, DO IT.
1. O’Donohue, J. *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World* London: Bantam Press, P.243 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From Lady Gregory’s Complete Irish Mythology. London: Bounty Books, 1902. P. 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also a wonderful book by Manchán Magan *Listen to the Land Speak: A Journey into the wisdom of what lies beneath us.* (Gill Books, 2022) in which he explores the relationship between ancient Irish mythologies and the life of the landscape. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. T.S. Eliot **Little Gidding** from *Four Quartets* Originally published in 1941 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)