



## *A Druid in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Sarah Fuhro

### **Letter from You**

I awoke and the morning brought me a letter  
Which I can't read, since I don't know how.  
I'll just hold it to my forehead, press it to my heart.  
When the night grows still and the stars appear one by one  
I'll spread it on my lap and be silent.  
The rustling leaves will read it to me then,  
The rushing stream will chant its words,  
And the seven wise stars will sing from the sky.

I'll never find what I'm looking for,  
Or understand what I should learn,  
But this letter still unread has lightened my burden  
And turned all my thoughts into song.

--Rabindrath Tagore

### **Druidry as a World View**

Druids see the earth as a place of infinite beauty and magic, where everything is alive and full of meaning. The natural world has messages, which can be heard in silence. And the mysterious letter which arrives to 'illiterate' human beings, as in the poem above can be read in the wind, the flight of birds, the sound of flowing water and the stars above.

From the Druid point of view, there is no hierarchy in creation. Humans are not above or below other creatures in importance. We are not the stewards of the earth, nor are we a separate act of creation. We are here as a stone or a goose or a dog is here, and partake of the same energy current which flows through all.

Because of this, Druidry has a special place in the present crisis of ecological damage wrought by human activity. By knowing we are part of the fabric we can, perhaps, return to balance in our relationship to all the residents of our planet. When we view the earth as a living entity, the mother who has given us life, our relationship to her

becomes clear. And instead of feeling isolated and alone, we become aware of the help all around us from other living creatures and from the spirits who have always resided along side of us and guided us in the past.

Druidry is a way we can look at the ecological disaster we have recently acknowledged and find a way to reconnect with rather than 'manage' or 'control' or 'fix' the damage. Druids are trained to a deep listening which means asking rather than telling the rest of the world how we can help.

Rather than a religion with a list of beliefs, Druidry is an outlook on the world and the universe. Perhaps, because it is not monotheistic, it does not concern itself with being 'the one, true and only way' of viewing reality. Some Druids retain their connection to Christian, Jewish or Buddhist practice. Each of these traditions has some aspect of Druidry within them. And part of Druid practice is to acknowledge the truth in all spiritual seeking. Others feel that Druidry is their spiritual home, their religion.

Druidry has retained the outlook of the ancestors of modern people. It has much in common with the worldview of indigenous people, yet is particular to the culture from which it developed.

### **There Are More Worlds Than One**

Druidry teaches us this deeper connection to the natural world, but it also introduces us to the invisible world, to the realm of faeries, nature spirits and to the layers of reality we call the past, the dead, or the future still to come. When we learn to move between the visible and invisible worlds, not as sleepwalkers but as citizens of both, we begin to make friends with those invisible beings who would guide us and act as our friends. If we acknowledge the world we cannot see with our eyes, we discover our fear of the unknown diminishes. We find names for our guides and our teachers. The poet W.B. Yeats said:

We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet.

One of the inevitable results of a monotheistic religion is a concern about the presence and influence of other spiritual beings. When Christianity began to focus on the polarity between good and evil, conversation with non human entities became suspect if God was all good. The monotheistic world did not have a place for beings who simply 'were.' From the Druid point of view, the traditional Otherworld, which exists always and along side our own, was and is always accessible. When we suspend judgment about *whether* this world exists, we simply step into it, and may find wisdom in entirely new forms. Like good tourists we need to meet other cultures, or in this case other realities on their own terms, before we condemn them, worse yet, deny their existence.

I left in the doorway of the bower,  
My jewel, the dusky, brown, white-skinned,  
Her eye like a star, her lip like a berry  
Her voice like a stringed instrument.

Traditional



### **Imagination and Creativity**

Perhaps it is the willingness to acknowledge other dimensions, which awakens imagination and creativity in those who explore Druidry. Inspiration plays a powerful role in the lives of many Druids. At the end of Druid rituals, Druids have an Eistedfoed, a Welsh word which means a 'sitting.' This is the opportunity for all in the circle to share poetry or song, joke or brilliant idea. It's quite remarkable to see how quickly all who share in Druid celebrations and study find a creative voice and open themselves to the creative flow, which is the heritage of all.

The initial grade of my Druid order is Bardic. Bards study the four elements and locate themselves in the natural world. The result is often an opening to poetry or art in some form.

The Bardic grade represents, in modern form, the many years of training which ancient Druids had to undergo in order to memorize long epic poems which held the history and genealogy of the people they served. Despite the fact that Druids were literate in Greek during much of their history, they were forbidden to write down these poems or any other matters particular to Druids. Memory was seen as a device to strengthen psychic powers and to keep secret sacred texts. Gypsies retain this notion and resist literacy in a world, which may often take advantage of those who cannot read and write. Yet among gypsies divination and musical ability are still held in high regard as they were among Druids.

### **Who Were the Druids?**

It's fair to ask, if Druids of the past wrote down no sacred texts or histories, how can modern Druids claim any connection with ancient Druids? Most of what is known about the Druids comes to us from writers such as Caesar who were hostile towards them. Roman occupiers of Britain and Gaul were in constant conflict with the Celtic tribes and were particular enemies to these men and women who were the teachers, poets, healers, judges, shamans and sometimes chiefs.

But much of what has developed over the last several centuries as the 'Druid renaissance' has come through meditation and through deep listening. There is also the sense that Druid wisdom was never really lost, but was retained in the culture to be rediscovered. Some of it can be found in folklore, in stories and songs. The stories of

King Arthur, for example retain many of the values and perspectives of Druidry, even when they are glossed over with Christian vocabulary. Christianity of the British Isles kept some of these traditions alive as well. The deep mystical aspect of the Catholic Church retained some of the connection to the spirit world of the pre Christian people even while it condemned all that came before Christianity. The saints have many of the characteristics of the old gods and goddesses they replaced. Christian holidays fell conveniently on the same sacred days celebrated for millennium. Churches were built on sacred sites over stone circles or near holy wells. People who were aware of the powerful energy of these places and times of the year were able to continue to connect to familiar festivals and in familiar places. The Protestant revolution reawakened another aspect of Druidry. For it said that men and women must make their own connection to God, and that all people are equal in the eyes of their creator.

### **The Role of the Druid**

Druids were not priests in the Christian sense because they did not intercede between the gods and their people. Trained in Druid colleges scattered throughout the Celtic lands they held and passed on the knowledge of their culture. They were not a separate ethnic or religious group, but rather those who were educated in traditional knowledge which they were to share with their communities in their roles as teachers, historians, healers, judges, scientists and diviners.

Druids were, for the most part, forbidden to carry weapons, yet if a Druid stepped between warring parties, they were to stop their fighting immediately.

The history of the Druids is long for we assume there were Druids in Britain before the Celts. Stonehenge, and the other great stone sites in Britain, Ireland and France were built long before that linguistic group's arrival. Celtic tribes no doubt had shamans and wisdom holders of their own and the people whose lands they invaded had similar 'medicine' men and women.

The derivation for the word Druid is debated, but may mean 's/he who has knowledge of the oak.' Druids are often associated with the oak tree in story in legend. Oak is often the tallest tree in the forest or the field, the king of the trees. His acorns fed the wild pigs (Druids were sometimes called 'piglets'), it was shelter and provided warmth in the winter and shade in the summer. But oak is sacred to many peoples, at least in part, because of the special attraction between lightning and oaks. Lightning gods are the highest gods in many Western pantheons. Zeus, Jupiter, Thor and an early Hebrew name for God, Shaddai were all gods associated with the power from the sky of lightning.



### **Sacred Trees**

In Druid lands all the trees were sacred, each in their own way. The Druids developed a secret alphabet called Ogham, which used characteristics of trees and plants as a way to communicate meaning. Some have suggested this tree 'alphabet' was also a calendar with a tree for each lunar cycle of the year.



### **The Wheel of the Year**

Central to Druid practice is the celebration of the eight festivals of the year. These are the Solstices and Equinoxes and the four points of the year which occur at the midpoint in the fixed signs of the zodiac. In England these are called the cross quarter days and they have become part of Christian celebration as well. They are Imbolc (February 2), Beltaine (May 1), Lughnasadh (August 2) and Samhain (November 1). On these eight holidays, Druids and their friends gather in circles to celebrate rituals of the season. In

my own grove these are always performed out doors in a variety of sites. There were no Druid temples, but stone circles, groves of trees and other special sites were chosen served as gathering places for meetings and rituals.

### **Celtic Gods and Goddesses**

Before the male sky gods there seemed to be more emphasis on female deities. The Celts retained their connection to a triple aspect goddess who was sometimes beautiful young maiden, sometimes-fertile mother, and sometimes crone who took back to the earth all that had come out of it. The Moon and her monthly cycle from dark to light and back to dark again and her journey through the ecliptic was central to the philosophy of the Druids and the Celtic people. Eclipses and the longer cycle of the moon as she moves through the sky and rises and sets across the horizon are all recorded in the sacred sites of Avebury, and Stonehenge in Britain, Callanish in the Hebrides and Carnac in France. Druids were famed for their star knowledge. What we call astronomy and what we call astrology were intertwined. The stars spoke to Druids and their people just as the trees and stones and animals and spirits spoke to them.



### **Female and Male Energy**

Who is she the melodious lady-lord'  
At the base of the knoll,  
At the mouth of the wave?

Traditional

Druidry celebrates the balance of male and female energies. This is reflected in story and song, in the description of how the universe is constructed, in the creation of sacred sites, in the ever changing pantheon of female and male divinities, and in the training of both men and women to be Druids. It continues in my Druid order and grove (gathering of Druids) where, women and men seem to be drawn to membership in equal numbers.

### **To Be a Snake**

Druids were called serpents, for in ancient times snakes were associated with ancient wisdom and immortality. The connection of snakes with Druids had two aspects. Serpents were seen as wise because they knew the wisdom of the earth, where the snake lives, and this is the education of the Druid. Snakes were seen as immortal, for

the snake sheds his old skin when he outgrows it. Those trained to be Druids had the ability to renew themselves through taking on many forms.

When Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland, it may simply refer to the overthrow of the culture, which had produced the ancient astronomical sites, the poetry and the beautiful craftsmanship of pre-Christian Ireland. Of course much of that culture was retained in what came after. The stories were changed to fit a Christian outlook, but at first Druids became priests or monks without shedding their druidic 'skin.' In 500 CE, the political power of Christianity put an end to the Celtic church. Until that time priests married and women participated in religious activity. At that time, thousands of Druids were slaughtered as they had been under Caesar, and Druid culture and outlook went underground, much as a snake might.



### **Not Lost, but Transformed**

Yet Druidry saw death as transformation and the eternal wisdom, which Druidry contained could not be lost or forgotten forever. Merlin is a clue as to how that wisdom was retained through the changes of Christianity. He has remained the great wisdom holder, the magician, the astrologer, the advisor to the High King, Arthur, called Once and Future King. Each generation of children grows up wanting to know what Merlin knew and participating in adventures of the Round Table in imagination.

### **Life and Death**

*Peredur rode on towards a river valley whose edges were forested, with level meadows on both sides of the river. On one bank there was a flock of white sheep, and on the other a flock of black sheep. When a white sheep bleated, a black sheep would cross the river and turn white, and when a black sheep bleated a white sheep would cross the river and turn black.*

--from the Mabinogian

All the world's great religions have some version of an afterlife. Druidry would say that the world of the living and the world of the dead are never really separated. Part of Druid training is to be able to move back and forth between the land of the living and the land of the dead and to experience them existing simultaneously and side by side. The idea of reincarnation is part of the Druid outlook, but so is the idea that the parallel world of non-manifest form is equally rich and rewarding. In addition, during one's lifetime, it is possible to move between forms. This is similar to the shamanic experience in many cultures. The druid becomes a bird or wolf or a stone at will because all of these forms are made of one substance sometimes called Nwyfre or life force.

And he became a salmon,

And she became a hawk,  
And he became a hare,  
And she became a hound,  
And he became a grain of wheat  
And she became a hen

### **Druids and Physics**

If we really explore the web of life, as perceived by the Druids, we may discover how to access energy without consuming it. We can already see this with wind and sun power. There are stories which say that the huge stones of Stonehenge were moved through the playing of musical instruments by those who knew the secrets of sound and physics. Ancient knowledge of vibratory energy may be about to converge with modern physics.

On two occasions I was able to take part in Druid rituals inside Stonehenge. The first time was at night during the period when this was still officially off limits. National Trust had given special permission to our order to celebrate the autumn equinox within the precincts of the great stones. During the ritual, the stars were very bright, and Venus, who was closer than usual was burning with a powerful green light overhead. The skies in Southern England are not often this clear. It was as if we were in another place or time altogether. We finished our ritual and found the fog was so thick driving back to Avebury that we could only see the rear lights of the car ahead of us. Several years later I took part in a daytime ritual in Stonehenge around the summer solstice. Again I was aware of the disappearance of time. I felt in my body the absence of time and was connected to all those who over thousands of years have entered these stone gates to celebrate and participate in the spectrum of energy which is particular to that location, a reservoir of memory for what has taken place



### **Time and No Time**

Time is a special study of the Ovate Grade, the second level in my order. The ability to travel backwards and forward in linear time is developed and the whole concept of Time becomes elastic and takes on a form, best described in quantum physics and by mystical poets. Time becomes an ally when viewed in this light. Once you experience the existence of No Time as I did in Stonehenge, then the issue of time as a quantity, i.e. not having enough time, becomes questionable. We can step into and out of time like a river which is forever in motion, but remains a river. I can't say I've been able to access that relationship to time except at moments!



### **Druids as Healers**

Healing is another function of Druid training during the Ovate grade. Healing, a Druid might say, can only be accessed by way of the life force, which keeps us in the bodily form we have chosen. First we must become aware of our inner power to heal, and then cooperate with that current of energy. Once a relationship with the natural world has been established, we can turn there for help. The plants around us have been the pharmacy for humans and animals over thousands of years. Herbalism, flower essence therapy, aromatherapy are examples of the conversation between plant spirit and human spirit. Ask any gardener and they will tell you they are healed and their spirits lifted simply by working in the soil and putting their hands upon plants.

But what can we do when healing is more difficult, when illness seems deeply rooted and intractable? Again, we must listen to our inner guidance. We live in a time when a huge spectrum of complementary medicine is available to us. Is this a time to work with plants? Or with energy? Or with chemical compounded drugs? Or surgery. All of these are a part of our heritage and culture and we are fortunate to have access to so many possible modes of healing.

Herbs support and strengthen our body's systems. They work slowly to rebuild the health of the organ or system affected, but herbs will not mask symptoms. We may sense that we need the intervention of allopathic Western medicine, which acts through combat with illness. Sometimes it is some combination of healing modalities, which returns us to health and balance. But it is the participation of the patient, which determines the ability of the body to heal itself.

### **Inner Work**

Part of the work of the Druid is to discover where she stands in relationship to herself. This is a continuation of the relationship to the natural world. Do you acknowledge your own right to exist? Do you take pleasure in your body? Do you offer your body the food, clean water, rest and exercise you need? Do you choose friends and companions who love and support you? There is a concept in Druidry of 'cara anam' the 'dear soul.' This is experienced on several levels. On the one hand this is the idea of a higher self or a guardian who guides and protects our soul. But there is also the idea that we have fellow human beings who play this role as well. Perhaps this is where the notion of 'soul mate' entered our consciousness. But instead of thinking of this as one human being who is 'perfect' for us, a cara anam is a friend who is a partner in deep soul work.

We may be lucky enough to have many friends or teachers who play this role and we find the work is mutual, rather than given to us.

Druidry also asks: How do you express your particular gifts and talents? Do you sing in the shower, or on the stage? Do you write poetry? letters to your Congressman? Do you speak up at work when you see an injustice, or a job well done by somebody else? Have you found a way to express who you are? Have you found a way to feel useful in the world? Do you feel a sense of anticipation when you get up in the morning, ready to begin a day of work and reflection? Druidry does not solve these issues, or provide the answers to problems, but the Druid outlook suggests that life is magical enough to contain the answer. Druidry always begins where you are now. You don't have to wait until you are enlightened, or have learned Gaelic, nor do you need to move to the country. It begins with the concept that each moment holds a jewel of experience and wonder. A simple act of gratitude for the seasons, for moonrise or for the pleasures of a walk with a friend is the devotion of a Druid.

The solutions to problems we have created in the earth's ecology are to be found by listening to the earth. By the simple act of learning the names of trees and stones and birds who inhabit our neighborhood, we are enhancing our relationship to the natural world. If we destroy our ability to live here on earth, life will continue without us, creating solutions to the problems we have created. But how much more wonderful it would be to take part in that healing. Druidry suggests that we are part of the natural world and can access the healing of our environment through deep listening to the earth's guidance.

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Sarah is a Druid member of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, an international teaching order, based in England. She is involved in the training of Druids. As an active member of the Boston Grove, she celebrates the eight festivals of the year in locations around the Boston area. She is an astrologer and flower essence practitioner who combines these healing arts. She is also a Tarot reader and teacher.

Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids [www.druidry.org](http://www.druidry.org)