

“A PASSAGE TO IRELAND”

**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschusen and Cynthia Stiehl
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

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Call to Gather: An Irish blessing
I should like a great lake of finest ale
For the King of kings.
I should like a table of the choicest food
For the family of heaven.
Let the ale be made from the fruits of the earth,
And the food be forgiving love.

I should welcome the poor to my feast,
For they are God’s children.
I should welcome the sick to my feast,
For they are God’s joy.
Let the poor sit with Jesus at the highest place,
And the sick dance with the angels.

God bless the poor,
God bless the sick,
And bless our human race.
God bless our food
God bless our drink,
All homes, O God, embrace.¹

I. “I Will Go With My Father A-Ploughing”

Today’s sermon will feature Cynthia Stiehl singing three poems written by the Irish poet Joseph Campbell. Some brief biographical comments about the poet might be helpful as you engage with Campbell’s beautiful tributes to the Irish landscape.

The first thing to know about Joseph Campbell is that he is not the famed mythologist Joseph Campbell. This Joseph Campbell was born in Belfast in 1879. Most of his poetry focused on his beloved Ireland. A member of Sinn Fein, he sided with the Republicans during Ireland’s civil war and spent most of that war in prison. Some of his more well-known poems address the politics of revolutionary Ireland. In 1925 he moved

¹ Table grace associated with Brigid, who founded a monastery at Kildare around 500 C.E. Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Anchor, 1995), p. 174-175.

to the United States, where he founded the first School of Irish Studies in the country at Fordham University in New York. He returned to Ireland in 1939 and lived in seclusion until his death in 1944.²

A British composer, Roger Quilter, set to music the three poems we will hear today. Quilter, who lived from 1877 to 1953, was widely known in music circles for his vocal compositions.

The first poem we will hear this morning is “I Will Go With My Father A-Ploughing:”

I will go with my father a-ploughing
To the green field by the sea,
And the rooks and the crows and the seagulls
Will come flocking after me.
I will sing to the patient horses
With the lark in the shine of the air,
And my father will sing the plough-song
That blesses the cleaving share.

I will go with my father a-sowing
To the red field by the sea,
And the rooks and the gulls and the starlings
Will come flicking after me.
I will sing to the striding sowers
With the finch on the flowering sloe,
And my father will sing the seed-song
That only the wise men know.

I will go with my father a-reaping
To the brown field by the sea,
And the geese and the crows and the children
Will come flocking after me.
I will sing to the weary reapers
With the wren in the heat of the sun,
And my father will sing the scythe-song
That joys for the harvest done.³

[Cynthia Stiehl then sang the Quilter arrangement of this poem.]

The idea that we have lived and can even remember past lives has never resonated much with me. I have never even had a hint of a recollection of any previous life. However, if reincarnation turns out to be true, it would not surprise me one bit to discover that I lived a previous life in Ireland. There is something about Ireland that strikes a chord very deep within me. The landscape, the music, the dancing, the people, the pubs, the Guinness Stout: these all speak deeply to me.

² <http://www.ulsterhistory.co.uk/josephcampbell.htm>.

³ <http://www.rc.net/wcc/ireland/mverse14.htm>.

A journey to Ireland in 1985 was one of the most enjoyable trips of my life. My college friend and travel companion Eric and I enjoyed our first few days in Dublin, but we were very eager to get out and see the countryside which we had heard so much about. We took a train to Gallway on the western coast, and then a bus to Connemara.

After unloading our classically American huge backpacks in a bed and breakfast, we took a memorable hike. The hike first took us along breathtaking ocean views and then up into the hills where cattle roamed and peat was harvested. The hills gleamed a gorgeous green in the bright sunlight. A farmer chasing us, swinging his stick and yelling in Gaelic at us added to the drama of the hike. I think he didn't like tourists (and I'm afraid we looked very touristy, even though our big backpacks were stowed in the bed and breakfast). Keeping our eye on our backsides, we beat a rather hasty retreat. The next thing we knew, we stumbled upon ruins of a very old castle or monastery. Exploring the ruins linked us magically to a long ago chapter of Irish history. Reluctantly leaving the ruins behind, we made our way back to the village where we were staying. As we neared the village, a strong storm suddenly kicked up off the ocean. It came out of nowhere: we didn't even have time to get on our ponchos before we were totally soaked. For several minutes driving rain and high winds pelted us, and then just as suddenly the wind and the rain disappeared. We stood there, soaked from top to bottom, eyes blinking in the once again bright sunlight. It was a memorable walk!

What struck me most in all the sites we saw that day was the beauty of the green. Everything I had heard about the incredible, unbelievable green color of the Irish countryside turned out to be true. That green is etched in my memory forever; I have not seen a green of that hue and depth before or since that visit to the Emerald Island. Hearing Cyndy sing Campbell's beautiful words takes me right back to that magnificent green.

II. "Cherry Valley"

The second poem we shall hear is called "Cherry Valley." One reviewer called Quilter's setting of this poem by Campbell an "ecstatic little watercolor."⁴ In music and words, Quilter and Campbell paint a picture of cherries in beautiful spring blossom. The white of the blossoms anticipates the later deep crimson of the ripe cherries. As you listen to the words of the poem spoken and sung, keep that image of an ecstatic little watercolor in mind.

In Cherry Valley the cherries blow;
The valley paths are white as snow, white as snow.
And in their time with clusters red
The heavy boughs are crimsoned, crimsoned.

Now the low moon is looking through
The glimmer of the honey dew.
A petal trembles to the grass,
The feet of fairies pass and pass.

In Cherry Valley the cherries blow;

⁴ http://www.musicweb.uk.net/classrev/2003/Nov03/Quilter_songs.htm.

The valley paths are white as snow, white as snow.

[Cynthia Stiehl then sang the arrangement of this poem.]

Nowhere in the Christian world are its pagan roots nearer to the surface or more strongly planted than in Ireland. Ireland injects into the symphony of Christianity a decidedly pantheistic theme: a recognition that God is in everything—and most obviously and movingly in nature. Campbell believed this passionately and gave it lovely voice in his poetry. For Campbell, all is linked together in the beauty so richly evident in Ireland. God is in everything—even us. And we are one with nature. In another poem, he writes:

I am the mountainy singer—
The voice of the peasant's dream,
The cry of the wind on the wooded hill,
The leap of the fish in the stream.⁵

I have to believe that the intense beauty of the Irish landscape—the green of the countryside, the white of cherry blossoms, the crimson of ripe cherries—has something to do with Celtic spirituality's irrepressible pantheism. These all nudge us to the inescapable conclusion that if there is a God at all, God must be in the glories of Nature. Ireland is such an evocative land; it feels like the feet of fairies move through it, magically injecting color and beauty and the divine into all that is. Ireland was a natural place for paganism to remain strong—not only because it sits on the fringe of Christendom, but also because of the unusual magnificence of its land.

Consider John Scotus, the great Irish philosopher of the 800s. Thomas Cahill in his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization* lifts up John Scotus' biting (and classically Irish) sense of humor. For example, there's the two line poem on the death of Hincmar, Archbishop of Rheims and notoriously anti-Irish:

Here lies Hincmar, crook. But savage greed aside,
He did one truly noble thing: he died.⁶

But John Scotus is best known for his insistence that Nature is roughly synonymous with God. As Cahill writes, for Scotus "reality is a continuum, and all God's creatures are theophanies of God himself, for God speaks in them and through them."⁷ Scotus, and numerous of other Irish going back to St. Patrick himself, helped bring together Nature and Christianity in ways that still speak powerfully in the 21st century. I'm not clear on the lineage, but I think it must be true that this wedding of Nature and Christianity influenced the Romantic poets in England as well as the Transcendentalists here in the United States. Not only did the Irish save the classical tradition (as Cahill asserts), but they also created something new by fusing Christianity and pre-Christian paganism in a way that hadn't been done elsewhere. This great contribution is inextricably tied to the beauty of the land, to the Color White and the Color Crimson—and especially to the Color Green.

⁵ <http://oldpoetry.com/oprintall/Joseph%20Campbell>.

⁶ Cahill, p. 208.

⁷ Cahill, p. 209.

In her book *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker comes to conclusions about where God is and what God is like that are very congruent with Celtic spirituality. Listen to this extended passage from *The Color Purple*, in which the narrator Celie recounts a conversation with her friend Shug:

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like [crap].

It? I ast.

Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It.

Shug a beautiful something, let me tell you. She frown a little, look out cross the yard, lean back in her chair, look like a big rose.

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.

Shug! I say.

Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going on, and praise God by liking what you like.

God don't think it dirty? I ast.

Naw, she say. God made it. Listen, God love everything you love—and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

What it do when it pissed off? I ast.

Oh, it make something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.

Yeah? I say.

Yeah, she say. It always making little surprises and springing them on us when us least expect.

You mean it want to be loved, just like the bible say.

Yes, Celie, she say. Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?⁸

Ireland is a place where it's hard to walk by the color green and not notice it. For Campbell it was also hard to walk by the color white in cherry blossom time and not notice it. In this attentiveness to Nature is a huge part of the genius of Celtic spirituality.

III. "I Wish and I Wish"

The final poem we shall hear today is "I Wish and I Wish."

I wish and I wish
And I wish I were
A golden bee
In the blue of the air,
Winging my way
At the mouth of the day
To the honey marges
Of Loch Kyoombawn;
Or a little green drake,
Or a silver swan,
Floating upon
The stream of Aili,
And I to be swimming
Gaily, gaily.

I wish and I wish
And I wish I could be
A bud on a branch
Of the red thorn tree
That blows at the head of Blaid's Bed,
And sheds a petal
At ev'ry breath;
Or a white milestone
On the shining path
That climbs the cairn
And dips the hollow,
Up to the walls of bright Moymalla.

If wishes were fairies
I would not stay,
But they would wile

⁸ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Pocket Books, 1982), pp. 202-204.

My soul away;
And peace would creep
Into my sleep
As soft as a dream
At evenfall,
When the crickets sing
And the curlews call;
And 'tis I would wake
For no new morrow
On the grey round
Of this world of sorrow.

[Cynthia Stiehl then sang the arrangement of this song.]

As this poem so movingly conveys, for Campbell, the Irish countryside was a potent source of peace, even in the midst of the world so heavy-laden with sorrow. His poetry expresses a view that I hold very dear: that we can turn to Nature and find in its web solace, perspective, and peace.

And we don't even have to go to Ireland to find such peace. The trick, it seems to me, is to connect with the land—and find peace—wherever we are: whether it's Ireland or Walden Pond or the Fellowship pond or the Northwoods or our own backyard. Ultimately, these poems by Joseph Campbell don't direct me specifically to Ireland—even though it's a beautiful place and I would dearly love to visit it again—but to the beauty of nature that is much, much closer at hand. I think the challenge for each one of us on this planet—whether we live in the emerald hills of Ireland or the majesty of the Rocky Mountains or the sandy expanse of the Arabian desert or the flatlands of Wisconsin or wherever we live—is to find and to know and to appreciate the beauty of our place.

So the place to start the spiritual search is right here. Go out today and look at the magnificent colors of the Wisconsin spring: the green of the grasses and budding trees; the yellow of the forsythia; and the pinks, reds and whites of the flowering trees. Go out and drink in the beauty and know that if there is God, surely God is in these colors of nature. And surely God would want you to notice—that's why It keeps trying to get your attention with such outlandish beauty!

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