

## Escape from the Fey: How to Rescue History

I am a firm believer in non-sense. I believe... I truly believe in that which does not make sense. I believe in miracle. One of my favorite Unitarians of all time, The Reverend Ralph Waldo Emerson said that miracle was monster. We UU's have cheered the sentiment through the ages. But I am here to say, Ralph, - on this count - sorry not sorry. I believe in the potency of miracle.

This does not mean that I believe that miracles happen, per se. Although, to be honest, I remain agnostic leaning romantic on even that score. Rather, I believe in the potency of miracle in a story. Often it is the impossible that makes meaning memorable. We include miracle in myth to articulate truths and feelings that defy straight forward description. We rely on the impossible to spice up the otherwise dusty ethical. Miracles loosen the seams of possibility and open our perception just a bit wider.

And so I am a firm believer in non-sense for its ability to make sense of a sensual world my senses are yet too insensate to process without it. Miracle is to spiritual feeling what impressionist paintings are to nature.

Now, having said that, it is not news that we do not sense all that is sensible. We don't. That's a fact. I am also comfortable in asserting that there are... events... that occur beyond any kind of physical sense, human or otherwise. These are the emotional, spiritual, and psychic occurrences that have no physical evidence yet are undeniably impactful. Tales of miracle and non-sense open our perception to these occurrences. Miracles allow us to see. They heal our myopia, our blindness. It's a miracle!

In that case, the story of Janet and Tam Lin is a real eye-opener. It's full to bursting with non-sense... in order to make sense. Does that make sense? Its very premise is that there is an otherworld populated by Fey.

So what sense is brought by engaging with the Tuatha de Dannan? The Tuatha de Dannan were the original fearies, the fey. And there is some speculation - I honestly do not know how credible, but I find it intriguing - that they are a myth held memory of an actual and historical people that preceded and were displaced by the ancestors of the modern celtic peoples.

It is said that the Tuatha de Dannan relinquished the land to dwell in the otherworld and are frequently given divine and royal status; royal gods. From the other world they haunt us and seek traffic with us in this world, whereby magic seeps in, and power. And souls are won and lost.

All Souls Day - or Ancestors Day -, which we will celebrate next week, puts us on the front porch of this otherworld. As the seasons cycle from the outward brilliance of summer toward the inward focus of winter, Ancestors Day is an open door, a transitional moment in the liturgical and cosmological year. We are on the cusp of the Fey lands, the dreamlands, preparing to encounter what lies within.

Even if this is all metaphor, I find thinking in blatantly metaphorical ways helps animate the world with meaning. So it is helpful to think about encountering the otherworld. Though, to my way of thinking there is, in truth, only one world. I reckon that what we call the otherworld is the bits of this world that we can't usually apprehend directly.

And here as we approach All Souls day I say again that, for me, the other world, the dreamworld, and the underworld are all rough synonyms for one another; articulations of a sensed reality that may take on important distinctions from one another in the mouths of different cultures, intentions, and vocabularies but are, in essence, one thing.

The other world. The dream world. The underworld. It is populated by what we do not normally see or do not wish to see and also by what we know so well it is camouflaged by familiarity. And we call them ghosts or ancestors, angels and demons, downloads, the fey, wisdom, loss, and dream. The Tuatha de Dannan.

According to Celtic lore, the Tuatha de Dannan themselves displaced a race of beings living in Scotland and Ireland before being displaced by the ancestors of the Celts. That these migrations and colonizations are housed in myth should not obscure the fact that they are mythically stored recollections of genocides of lost Indigenous peoples.

In myth our regret is often discharged by romance, and by romance repackaged into a spiritual *other* that lurks on the edge of both our consciousness and our conscience. As a historical pattern, we have done this very thing to our indigenous folk here in America. The Noble Savage has become less cartoonish over time, but no less operative at present even with us knowing we ought to be respectful rather than merely rapacious. I mean we still do it. I'm as guilty as anyone even though I know better.

And yet, there is somehow some weird wisdom to it. We frequently ground our veneration of nature in this vestige of the noble savage myth. I'm not defending that ethically. But, in and of itself, the wisdom is life saving and beautiful.

The noble savage myth is, roughly speaking, our Tuatha de Dannan. This is not to dismiss the wisdom and beauty held by those our ancestors displaced. It is simply to say that we seem to have the propensity for mythologizing the victims of the sins of our fathers into something

mystical and formidable. I don't even know that I'm mad about it. I'm mad and sad about the displacement. And ashamed. But turning it into fiction does the weird thing of keeping it alive, creative, and hopefully transformative. That's more an observation than a justification, mind you.

After all, we are the inheritors of a, to put it too politely, complicated history on this continent and even before. We stand here on the cusp of all souls day, a day where we venerate our dearly departed, yes, but also engage with our deep ancestors with full knowledge - or at least a creeping suspicion - that somewhere along the line of our great great greats some seriously shady poop went down in which our blood served as both suppressor and sacrificed.

We house that trauma in our subconscious. We transform it in our stories. We reproduce it in our body's cells, in our reactivity, and in our society's systems; our transgressions, our pain, our shame. This is epigenetics on both a metaphorical and biological register.

Epigenetics is where real live sciencey gene expression is both altered by experience and then transmitted over generations. So, perhaps one of my ancestors suffered some violence or oppression and generated a genetically connected reaction to it. Some behavioural echo of that reaction will manifest in my own genetic expression either as default or as response to some incident or circumstance.

We are the survivors of the savageries of millenia. We bear their scars. In so far as we live in a human world, we live in a traumatized world. And of course, it is often the case that the traumatized create trauma. If we can include epigenetics in the equation, I would contend that nearly all trauma is caused by prior trauma.

And, as many of us know all too well, trauma - epigenetic or otherwise - burbs up in personal and devastating ways; from the cycle of violence and abuse that unfolded and continues to unfold both in history and in our personal lives to the stupid, reactive snarl-fests we have with whoever we're closest to.

How do we heal this epigenetic trauma? How do we stop the spiral of pain through time? How do we handle our complicated ancestry? The weird part is that we both benefit and suffer in light of our ancestor's actions. If there is shame and pain and violence, there is also love and hope and wisdom in them.

And so it is that we find our ancestors in the same place that we find the displaced; a place of preservation, a place where the work continues: the otherworld, the underworld, the dreamworld. They all haunt us from the otherworld: the Fey, our ancestors, our sorrow, our hope, our wisdom, our sins. They still live there, at least as emotional, spiritual, and psychic occurrences that have no physical evidence yet are undeniably impactful.

Stories of the fey, like Tam Lin, are one way of looking at this displaced world, this mystical other and, I suppose, honoring it, reckoning with it, and giving it potency - and even agency - so that it can work on us. Transform us.

And we do this work, in part, through stories. I imagine that was not intentional when these stories were created. But it seems pretty clear that these stories are our collective subconscious speaking to us.

And so what is it that Tam Lin wants us to know in light of this, admittedly speculative, understanding that the beings of the other world exist, at least in part, as our subconscious guilt for reaping the fruit of the sins of our fathers seeking agency and redemption? What does Tam Lin tell us about reckoning with our ancestors even as we root from them?

Our ancestry can hold us captive. There is inherited wisdom, yes. But there is also a historical malevolence that struck deals with hell. And that deal sacrifices our innocence and nobility and keeps us divided from ourselves, each other, and the world to which we belong by right.

So what are we to do? We do as Janet does. We do not back down. We enter the otherworld to engage, confront, and heal our ancestors. In the tale, there is no terror from the Tuatha de Dannan upon losing their sacrifice. It is as though in freeing Tam Lin from them, Janet has freed them from their unholy bargain.

We enter their world, engage with their sins, and hold on through a furious transformation; a non-linear and wild series of reactions to being embraced. What is being embraced, in this sense, is the spirits of our ancestors manifesting epigenetically in our bodies, behaviours, perceptions and souls. We hold on, remain steadfast in the face of reactivity until we hold only their fiery essence, their life force.

And then we go deeper. For in the heart of the forest - itself a kind of archetypal otherworld for all its forbidden wildness - Janet tosses Tam Lin's life force as a burning coal into the well. I think maybe a well, in terms of an archetype, is the spring of the subconscious. Filled with still waters fed by the earth itself, it is an unseen place. A place of mystery and truth. A place of purification.

I will take this as a recommendation to engage directly with our cultural inheritance and hold fast in the face of reactivity until we can release the essence of our ancestry into our subconscious and find ourselves reborn into innocence (remember Tam Lin comes out naked) and re-integrated with ourselves and the world.

So that is sort of abstract. What is not abstract is the epigenetic damage that we all carry and transmit into our relationships and society at large. Sure, we can lessen the damage by developing better policies that keep our neighbors safe and free. But in conjunction with that we also need to do this soul work. Otherwise the underlying conditions of reactivity, oppression, and even genocide remain dormant but alive within us.

And that soul work is only as abstract as you permit it to be. We've got a team participating in the Root & Reckon program who is doing this very kind of work. They will run a service in the coming months. Come.

And then, next Sunday you will have the opportunity to loosen the seams of possibility and open our perception just a bit wider. You'll have an opportunity to engage with non-sense, with your ancestors and the otherworld, and continue to build relationship, to find them in you; both the sins they carry and their resilience in the face of that pain. And if we remember the story of Janet and Tam Lin, perhaps we will remember to engage and remain steadfast until we find ourselves freed from the infernal bargains of the past and reborn into innocence - maybe naked - and re-integrated at last with ourselves, each other, and the world.