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First Parish Church
Brunswick, ME
Karin Beard

The Family of Things

For me, the core of Celtic Spirituality is that everything is Sacred. In other words, of God. Earlier in my life, I had no understanding of what Celtic spirituality is. I was first exposed to its wisdom five years ago when I went on a pilgrimage organized by Heartbeat, a nonprofit organization for which I now work as their Communications Coordinator. Heartbeat provides opportunities for people to practice listening for the Sacred in all things and to foster healing across divides.

Heartbeat might sound like a strange name for an organization. It comes from a story central to the Celtic mission which remembers the disciple John the Beloved as leaning his head against Jesus' chest at the Last Supper. He was therefore said to have heard the heartbeat of God. In our work, we adopt this practice of listening.

The pilgrimage I was attended was on a portion of the Camino de Santiago on the Northern Coast of Spain and was led by John Philip and Ali Newell. John Philip is a notable Celtic theologian, author, and speaker. If you haven't read him before and are interested in exploring Celtic Spirituality, you might start with his book *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*. I have found it very helpful in my own exploration and learning.

As I was heading to meet up with the pilgrimage group for the first time, I was feeling increasingly nervous. Like many

young adults, I was not particularly connected to an intentional spirituality community at that time. What if they can spot right away that I'm a fraud who has no spiritual life or practice? What if I'm mooching on an experience to just be able to go back to Spain, where I spent my junior year abroad? What if these people are all weirdos and now I'll be stuck on a seven-day trip in a rural part of Europe with people who won't shut up about Jesus?

Lucky for me, that first night with the group, I sat next to another young woman, and in a moment of barely contained panic, I confessed: "I'm not sure I should be here. I feel like a fraud." She looked back at me and replied, "Oh thank god. Me too."

It turned out that that week on the Camino was one of the most powerful and moving experiences of my life. It was particularly enriching because, as a group, we came from a number of different faith traditions, and our conversations and the community we built that week were better for it. The time on the Camino also helped me to reclaim my sense of spiritual life and to see the reaches of it in my daily existence in a more expansive way.

This introduction to Celtic Spirituality had me looking at things differently. If "God is the Life within all life"¹ that means everything – all humans, all flora and fauna, all creation. Buildings and rocks, trash and

¹ Newell, John Philip. *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*.

fields, joy and pain.

George MacLeod, the founder of the modern Iona Community in Scotland, which I've had the opportunity to visit through my work, believed that we should not seek God by turning away from the material and physical world, but by turning more deeply and intentionally toward it. He liked to say, "Matter matters."²

Part of the richness of that week was experiencing the sacredness of everything in community, even the difficult moments. Mid-week, we had what we now all still refer to as our "Wednesday Night Conversation." As we sat around the dinner table, some inter-group points of tension were raised. For the next three hours, we disagreed, we cried, we were vulnerable and angry and hurt, and though at the end I think we all felt closer, I wouldn't say we "resolved" or "fixed" anything. It was incredibly painful at moments, and yet no one left the table. Connected through the community we'd intentionally built, we stayed present with each other. I felt then that not only is every individual thing sacred, but so are the connections between us. The interconnectedness, our place in that web and our relation to all creation, is sacred. On that Wednesday night, God was most particularly in the space that we were holding for each other.

I returned from the Camino feeling electric and connected. "Everything is god! The world is sacred!" And it is. But then I returned to the work I was doing at that time as an advocate for victims of domestic violence.

I had to again face all the brokenness and darkness of the world and human choices. Confronted again with these realities, I was shaken and confused. It's easy to feel the immediacy of God in the stunning Spanish countryside amongst supportive, vulnerable, and compassionate friends.

Even when things were difficult on the Camino, we all brought a commitment of compassion, seeking understanding, and a posture of listening. It was those commitments that allowed us to feel loved and respected in the midst of turmoil. Even as I was crying at the table, I realized no one was storming off and I was overwhelmed by everyone's willingness to engage and listen as much as they spoke.

The realities of my daily work were not that. I experienced great support from my co-workers, but the situations that the people I was supporting and I were navigating together were just hard. Turns out, it's a lot harder to listen for the heartbeat of God in a domestic violence situation.

I was totally discouraged. In my despair, I paused, listened, reached for connection, and found hope and love in my co-workers.

At my first team meeting back after the Camino, they asked me about it. In describing my trip, I unpacked a lot of what I had been struggling with since returning. Looking at them, I found myself saying "I realized I had really missed having a spiritual community. And then I realized that I already have one with you all."

My previous view of what a spiritual life is was too narrow. Spiritual community can be

² Ibid

in all sorts of surprising and unexpected places. Church is one of the most obvious examples, but I keep working to expand my perspective on where it might be hiding in plain sight in my life.

On the Camino, we were asked to bring a prayer to share with the group. I brought my favorite poem, *Wild Geese* by Mary Oliver. I have loved this poem since the moment I first read it in high school, but it has continued to take on deeper meaning for me as I have come to understand it not just as a poem, but a prayer. It's one I repeat to myself frequently. I'd like to leave you with it now.

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert,
repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your
body
 love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell
you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of
the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean
blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and
exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*