

GATHERING IRISH ESSENCES: A JOURNEY INTO THE MYSTERIES OF IRELAND

The Irish Essences honor the Irish landscape's unique spirit, generated through many centuries of conscious interaction between the people and their land. While we are acutely aware of the devastating effects of our greedy materialism on the natural world, Ireland remains the emerald green jewel of its Celtic name, Eire. Celtic practices are based on an awareness of the innate aliveness in everything. Echoes of ancient conversations with the spirits of the land can still be heard, whispering through the island. When I visited in 2004, I sensed this living sacredness in many places — in the stones, in the waters, and particularly in the trees.

The rich Celtic mythology and folklore linger still in the hearts of the Irish people today. Meeting them in their homeland, I had the humorous impression of them breathing with the earth through their feet. One Irish woman said her countrymen simply 'know' things, and since they may not have the words to name what they know, they to hire foreign experts to teach them what they innately feel in their bones.

Listening to Nature is the core of my work, yet I was completely unprepared for Ireland's whispering magic. The trees and stones are animated in ways I rarely experience on my native Canadian soil.

Dunderry Park

When I participated in a Body-Soul Intensive held by Marion Woodman in Ontario, I felt an immediate kinship with Paula Reeves. I said her first book, *Women's Intuition, Unlocking the Wisdom of the Body*, was a dog-eared favorite in my library. Acknowledging my love-affair with nature, she invited me to attend her workshop in Ireland in the spring of 2004.

The week-long intensive was held at Dunderry Park, a beautifully restored Georgian manor an hour north of Dublin. Developed by a woman with a vision of a spiritual center, Dunderry has become a home for shamanic studies for people from all over the globe.

As I walked the beautiful property and touched its old stately trees, I felt I was on a parallel retreat, listening not just for the messages to my body-soul, but also to the messages from the land. The earth, stones, and trees vibrated so strongly I could almost hear them singing. At first I didn't know whether this was due to my heightened receptivity, being away from home and on retreat, or if it was a genuine perception about Ireland. I decided simply to be open and to listen with my entire body to everything that called me.

Initiation at New Grange

During the course, the twenty participants visited two sacred sites, New Grange and the Hill of Tara. Older than the Giza Pyramids in Egypt, New Grange is a passage-tomb constructed around 3200 BC. Sometimes it is called the Womb of the Moon, perhaps because its narrow window-box at the entry orients to the light of the winter solstice. For 17 minutes on that day, sunlight streams down the 65-foot stone passageway, illuminating the back chamber.

Sensing the power of this place, I took time to be alone before entering the passage with the others. A deep sense of awe came over me as we passed the huge stones at the entrance, carved with triple spirals and other strange markings. Squeezing through the stone passageway, I felt like I was entering the womb of the Great Mother. Then the familiarity struck me. I'd encountered this same energy in my meditations when I created the Great Mother essences. Here was the physical setting I experienced in my meditations — the stone womb, the deep listening silence, the sense of being viscerally held in dark feminine mystery. The carvings felt familiar, like a vague, forgotten language of spirals and whorls depicting the movement of universal energies. To build

such a remarkable space, the creators of this site must have known things about nature that we no longer comprehend or entertain. Dismissing the rather simplistic theories offered by our tour guides, opened myself to the mysteries in this remarkable place.

Deeply moved by what I experienced in this womb, I stumbled out of the passageway and went to the back of the hill to be alone. A rabbit hopped up to me, clearly unafraid; and I squatted near him for a few moments of quiet communion. In the midst of such ancient mystery, even the simplest encounter with a rabbit felt numinous. I thought I'd regained my composure but when I made my way back down the hill to our bus, an enormous rush of energy swept in from behind me, buckling my knees. Overcome with the sensation of a blessing and a wash of recognition, the knowledge rose within me, "I will never be the same again." Meeting these deep, ancient energies at New Grange made me feel that until now I had been only dabbling with the forces of Nature. In deep humility for the centuries of Celtic exploration of the earth's mysteries, I stumbled down the hill to the bus. It took several hours before I could converse freely again with my classmates.

The Hill of Tara

A few days later, on a beautiful spring evening we toured the ancient Hill of Tara. Even though the countryside was green and peaceful, I felt agitated, on-alert for something I could not see or name. Paula Reeves came up to me and asked what I felt. I stood still, tuning into the land. "Abuse of power," I said, almost shuddering. "A huge abuse of power..." Standing with her back to me she also listened, and her quiet comment was "Blood, lots of blood." Later I learned that in 222 A.D. when the men were away from the Hill of Tara, King Dunlaing of Leinster massacred all the women in their compound, leaving their bodies for the men to find when they returned.

Situated on a high point of land overlooking forty percent of the island, Tara is the home of Ireland's ancient kings and chieftains. In the great banquet hall, kings and queens, doctors, poets, and judges would meet to establish law, handle disputes, and recite the stories of the land. Tara's history dates back 5000 years, and for much of this time, it was the heart of the kingdom. With five roads radiating from the hill, Tara was a meeting place of power, both secular and sacred. The notion of an invisible vertical center is integral to Ireland's mythology. Through an axis mundi or world tree, the people felt Tara was both a dwelling place for the gods and an entry into the underworld.

Saint Patrick confronted the ancient Celtic religion with his Christian message at this powerful site. Attempting to squelch the pagan rituals, legend says he banished all the snakes from Ireland. The snake is one of the most powerful symbols of pure sexual life-energy. In reality, Ireland never had any snakes, but St. Patrick's presence challenged the pagan lifestyle and drove the Celtic mysteries underground. Tara's secrets still call out to traveling seekers. A group of Israelites, convinced the Arc of the Covenant was buried on the hill, excavated in the early 20th century only to find a few Roman coins.

While our guide chatted about Tara's history, I found myself drawn to the trees in the graveyard. Standing by a large beech, I heard, "The (ancient) energy is shifting from the stones to the trees..." I took this as a cue to look beyond the obvious, to not be focused solely on the historic monuments.

One of Tara's main attractions is a tall phallic stone called the Lia Fail or Stone of Destiny. Located on the highest hill, it is ringed with deep circular mounds. My colleagues touched the stone with fascination, but I felt so viscerally disturbed I could approach it only briefly. Realizing I was having a very different experience from

my colleagues, I left the group and walked alone to the fairy tree, an ancient hawthorn near the forest at the base of the hill. There I heard, “Come back (to Tara). You have more work to do here. Make every effort to return.” I had not planned to return but in that moment I resolved to follow this guidance. The last message from the land that evening was, “A great sadness hangs about this place. We are doing what we can to rectify this. Some (human) celebrations assist; others set us back. Simplicity is key.”

Making the first Essences at Dunderry

After the intensive, I stayed on at Dunderry for a few days. I wanted to make some flower essences to capture the energies in several special locations on the property. One of my favorite settings was a beautiful woodland sanctuary near a small pond. I chose the white Rhododendrons blooming in the moist greenness to represent the pond’s fecund energy.

In a field at the back, a womb-like cairn was being constructed for shamanic rituals. I went into the underground dome every morning to sound and to spontaneously move. A Horsechestnut tree bloomed nearby, attracting swarms of bees. As I stood beneath it, I realized the magnificent tree was acting like a quiet sentinel for the farmers’ fields and the sacred cairn. The Horsechestnut essence would represent the stabilizing presence of Ireland’s majestic trees.

Touching the Stone of Destiny

Returning to Tara, I prepared myself to face its intimidating energies with a backpack of supplies: my journal, paper for making a map, music manuscript paper, an empty bottle for water, a basket to gather flowers for the essence, and a light picnic. I was directed to the woman at the giftshop for she understood the sacred energies on Tara’s Hill. When I told her about wanting to make a flower essence, she said, “Go first to the well. It’s just down the road.”

I walked down the road expecting to find an ancient stone structure. Instead I saw a small herd of cows drinking from a rather disheveled concrete trough. This could hardly be the sacred well! After going back and forth a few times, I realized this must be the place and I dipped my bottle into the fresh water spilling over the rocks just above the trough.

Then a grisly red-bearded groundskeeper approached me and we chatted about where I was from. (Did I know his cousin in Toronto?) As he turned to leave, he wished me well, kissed my cheek, and offered me a simple blessing. Having girded myself to face the lingering energies of patriarchal abuse, this man’s simple kindness completely disarmed me. Our meeting was a reminder to stay open to the fullness of the mysteries.

Still, I approached the Stone of Destiny like a spiritual warrior, ready to introduce myself and announce my intention. In a rare private moment when no tourists were around, I put my hand upon the four-foot pillar, stated my spirit name and announced my desire to let the energies of this place evolve. “I come with respect, to listen to and sing this land.” Then chanting briefly, I held my hand on top of the stone. A tremendous burning sensation like a shot of hot wind, roared up through my palm. I deepened my grounding, held my hand steady, and let some ancient, powerful energy rise in and through me as I affirmed my right to be there and do my work. Later I remembered the legend about how this stone would audibly roar when touched by a rightful king.

Then I moved quickly, sensing I had little time to complete the work. I had determined through muscle-testing that I needed five elements for the essence, and I was to find them by following my body’s instincts. The first, Gorse and Pine were easily found. When I came upon the Oak tree, I took time to listen for its melody, jotting

down the song I heard while sitting with my back against its broad trunk. Meanwhile, some Druids were gathering in the woods nearby for their own rituals. Scrambling over fences and crawling through thickets over foxholes lined with animal bones, I sought the flowers of Cottonwood tree. I was nearly finished but I couldn't find the last tree which I knew must be a Beech. I was not to gather flowers from the beeches in the graveyard but the Beech tree in the woods where I was guided to search was nowhere to be found. Trekking back and forth through the dense thickets, I began to panic. What if I could not find the tree? Would my mission fail? Finally I stopped, forced myself to calm down, and immediately knew what was happening. The Beech tree *was* missing — that was the point! The ancient energies *had* shifted; what had been here was now gone. I must take the gathered flowers and complete the essence under Dunderry's huge Beech tree.

A delightful Detour

Back at the gift-shop, I warmed myself with a pot of tea and wrote some notes in my journal. A young American couple were asking the shopkeeper for directions to Lough Crew. I introduced myself and asked about their journey. The woman told me of her strange dreams in which she saw Ireland's shape and distinctly heard place-names she did not know in real life such as Sligo and Boyne. They were on a pilgrimage to explore the dreams, following their inner compass from place to place.

"We're off to Lough Crew this afternoon," she said. "First we're stopping at Kells, the home of the ancient manuscripts, then to Dunderry Park tonight for a drumming circle." This was uncanny. I had wanted to visit Lough Crew and having no easy access to transport, dismissed it as impossible. They invited me to join them, and I delightedly agreed. Together, we climbed the hill at Lough Crew and sat on the Hag's chair in the sunset. I sensed a gentle peacefulness and deep feminine wisdom in this place, quite a different energy than those of New Grange and Tara. We were too late to enter the locked passageway, but I probably did not have the stamina to engage with the fullness of its mystery. We returned to Dunderry just as the drumming circle was gathering in the great hall. During our trip, I realized our shared commonality: all three of us were musicians on a spiritual quest, listening to our hearts and the magic in this remarkable landscape.

Returning to Dunderry

That evening, I took the tree-flowers and placed them in a bowl with the water from Tara's well beneath the ancient Beech tree on Dunderry's entranceway. It was a simple ritual to assist the energies that I felt wanted to shift from Tara's Hill to other settings like Dunderry where the ancient wisdom could flourish anew. In the morning, I moved the bowl onto a stone table in the sunlight and then gathered the flowers for the final essence.

My intention for this essence was to honor and support the energies building at Dunderry Park. With this focus, I strolled the property sensing the trees that should be in the combination. Oak (also in Tara's essence), Holly, Mountain Ash, Willow, and Hawthorn were needed. I assumed the Beech tree would be part of the combination, but no, its energy was not to be gathered in the usual manner. Instead, I was to listen to and write down its song! This felt like strong encouragement from the tree to move into a new phase of my work.

Later, I invited the two women who cleaned the mansion to sample the four essences. We had grown friendly over my private stay after the retreat. Puffing on their cigarettes on the back step, they took a sip of each essence and commented with their frank, no-nonsense intuition. "This one's got a real kick to it... Ah, now this one feels like a mother's lullaby." I would never ask a complete stranger to do this at home, but proving or testing the essences with these Irish women felt totally natural.

Learning to Listen to Nature's Songs

To complete my time at Dunderry, I sat at the base of the giant Beech tree, the grandfather of the property, and listened for its song. Like all the songs I'd gathered during this time, it was simple and short. During my visit, I received a number of tunes from the trees and land. I had virtually abandoned my music, a central part of my creativity when I starting making flower essences. Now it was alive in me again. I was beginning to hear the plants not just through poetic words but in their musical voices!

On my return to Canada, I continued tuning into Sheenanowah, the sound-priestess guide who had awakened in me on the trip. I had been introduced to her in meditation long before this trip and I had received her wisdom and honored her in different ways, but the experience in Ireland was a total immersion into this aspect of myself. Back home, I continued tuning in to this energy each morning for several months and I received a series of exercises for deep listening and sound-healing — the foundation of a whole new phase of my work. Then I got busy with other things, set this work aside and for a time, and forgot Ireland's compelling whispers.

Two years later, I revisited this experience when I went to write the definitions for the essences sitting on my shelf and this story of my time in Ireland. My busy life had forced music underground again, but my dreams wouldn't let me forget. Repeatedly I dreamt about being late for a performance I was to give. The audience was assembled and waiting but I wasn't prepared or dressed appropriately.

My garden it is my sanctuary and laboratory. Though it is not as numinous as the sacred sites of Ireland, I am slowly building a setting of gentle power, beauty, and tranquility. This summer I turned myself to the task of listening this garden into beauty, walking the paths each morning, letting my body open to the ground beneath my feet, my senses taking in the beauty of the plants, the tiny details of serrated leaf, fading flower, snail and tiny frog that go unnoticed most of the time. I listened to the humming around me and the song rising within my own heart. Tuning myself through the slowed walking, a musical phrase would bubble gradually to the surface and I would hum this, over and over, memorizing it to the rhythm of my steps. I felt like the land was patiently teaching me, encouraging me with every step to listen and remember its songs.

When I was full and could retain no more, I went to my piano and wrote down what I'd heard, adding harmonies to the simple melodies. As a classically trained musician, this type of music-making sounded naïve and simplistic, but it also felt authentic.

And that is what I trusted. Having listened to the poetry of the plants for many years, I recognized their authority, their voice of simple beauty. Now I was to trust them as they dictated their songs to me. I must not let my overly-trained musicianship interfere. A small collection of songs is steadily growing but I am not ready to publish them yet. I am a student, delightedly in training!

Final Thoughts about Ireland

Since my trip, I have talked with others who have visited Ireland and their experiences were all different. Some were quite unmoved by New Grange, while feeling a tremendous energy at Lough Crew, a site I'd barely touched. It is impossible to predict or orchestrate a truly soulful experience. Far more than its sacred sites, Ireland is a living energy, speaking to each of us in our own language, whispering what we need to hear, moving us, if we are open, deeper into our destiny. This is Nature's sacred role, so richly alive still in Ireland – to support our fullest soul capacities and, with us, to sing the world into beauty.

THE IRISH ESSENCE DEFINITIONS

Beside the Pond

Rhododendron

*In the woodland's cool green shade
earth's dank and swampy perfume
bows to rare white blossoms.
The green arms hold their mysteries close,
while beckoning, 'Come near.'
In the hushed spring afternoon,
the darkened water becomes
a wishing well.*

Beside the Pond invites us into the heart of the forest to savor the steamy alchemy of wood, water, and earth. It is a call to linger by water in woodland settings — ponds, streams, or swampy areas, for inspiration and repose. Let the essence help you recall the full aliveness of woodland settings to feed and calm your body-soul.

In the Hedgerow

Horsechestnut

*The ancient tree stands,
a quiet sentinel,
between the farmers' fields
steadfastly witnessing the acts of men.
Hidden beneath its lush green canopy
its massive trunk has swallowed
part of the old wire fence.*

In the Hedgerow offers stature and stability over long periods of time. It encourages the rooted presence that weathers seasons of prosperity and scarcity. Let the essence give you a sense of perspective over the vista of your life so that you can regain your sense of purpose and inner certainty.

On Tara's Hill

Maple, Pine, Gorse, and Cottonwood

*On Tara's high round hill amid stone ruins —
some broken, some still proud,
linger echoes of banquet revelry and battlecries,
the stench of sour victories.
Haunted and embarrassed,
Tara's earth sings, "Not again, never again!"
while gorse and pine and oak
do their humble repair.*

On Tara's Hill invites us to remember and address sins committed through the abuse of power. It helps us to align with nature's healing energies so that ancient memories, held primarily in stone, can release the sadness and regret from the past. Let the essence assist you to face darkness of cruelty, excess, and loss of possibility that is our shared legacy from the past. While the essence can be used to address personal issues, its main

function is to heal traumas held deep in the cellular matrix of the earth, memories that continue to resonate at subconscious levels within our bodies.

Dunderry's Call

Oak, Holly, Willow, Ash, and Hawthorn

With pounding drumbeats and voices united in song,

Dunderry summons the four winds,

the ancient and the new.

Along the spiral pathway

and down the pillar of light,

all the summoned forces

make their journey to the center.

Dunderry's Call is an invitation to come home. Whether this is a physical gathering or an inner journey into the heart of stillness, the essence heightens the magnetic pull of attraction. Helping us honor and be drawn by the call vibrating in our hearts and bodies, the essence can help us find our kindred souls and the geographical settings that 'sing' with us. When we resist the constant yearning of our body-soul, Dunderry's Call helps us let go and surrender to the natural pulsations that would draw us homeward.