

# Hunger for the Holy

Jerry R. Wright

On a recent pilgrimage to the island of Iona, Scotland, a land and spiritual community which still pulsates with a Celtic heartbeat, I was freshly reminded of the common borders shared by the Celtic tradition and the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. Having studied the parallels between the two for several years, the week on Iona provided an *experience* of their convergence. This brief article will explore some of the psychological and spiritual threads from these two nourishing traditions, one ancient and the other modern.

Our immersion in the ancient Celtic tradition highlighted two ironies of our present age. First, while we live in a culture of comparative plenty and abundance, where most of our appetites are easily satisfied, there is yet a persistent, gnawing hunger which stalks the modern person. Since the deeper hunger is generally unconscious and, therefore, undifferentiated, it goes unattended and manifests in a variety of psychological symptoms, in both individuals and cultures. The unmet hunger, in a multitude of disguises, prompts most of the people who seek depth psychotherapy or analysis. The hunger, I believe, is the “hunger for the Holy.”

The second irony is closely related: that for which we hunger - the Holy - is abundantly available, ever-present, yet generally veiled behind a world-view which sees only the externals of life and values only that which can be quantified.

Unlike the modern western mindset, the Celts were not burdened with dualism. They did not separate what belongs together - visible/invisible, time/eternity, human/divine, matter/spirit. Thus, they were keenly aware of the presence of the Holy in and within the ordinary. Their spirituality was marked by a sense of the immediacy of the spiritual realm, of God’s presence in the whole of life and they had regular means of acknowledging that presence. Prayers, poems,

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songs, and rituals were part of the common life of awakening, greeting the sun, milking the cow, preparing the fire, cleaning and cooking, crossing the threshold, setting out on a journey. In the midst of the ordinary they experienced a sense of the sacred by living what Carl Jung would later call “the symbolic life.” Jung’s own sense of the pervasive presence of the Holy was captured in the provocative inscription over his doorway, “Called or not called, God will be present.”

For the Celts, there was no separation between praying and working/living. On our pilgrimage, the seamless connection between prayer and life was beautifully symbolized in daily worship with the Iona Community. The day began with common prayer in the Abbey sanctuary. The morning service did not end with a benediction, however, but with responses that prepared the community for the day ahead. At the close of the day the community gathered again, but not with a “call to worship,” since worship had been going on all day in the work, recreation, study, and ordinary tasks. Only at the conclusion of the evening service was a benediction offered to accompany us into the night. By this simple practice, the Celtic perspective of the interdependence of sacred and secular continues to be honored.

By contrast, the modern mind tends to divide reality into sacred and secular, to split experiences into *either/or*, to keep the opposites of life at arms length. Dealing with the opposites of life in this way has devastating psychological and spiritual effects, which Carl Jung addressed throughout his writings. The primary split which concerned him was between conscious and unconscious and the one-sided attachment to the conscious, visible, material, and rational world.

When we become attached (‘addicted’) to the external world to the exclusion of the inner, our *interiority* will haunt us, often manifesting as symptoms of dis-ease. We become hungry with a hunger which no thing or person or deed can satisfy. When this happens it is well to remember the addiction adage: *we can never get enough of what we don’t really want.*

Both psychological and spiritual discernment involve the fine distinction between *craving* and *longing*. Craving usually has an object in the external world, something/someone tangible, and usually generates a compulsive drive for more and more. Longing involves something invisible and is usually for an experience rather than an object. The two, *craving* and *longing*, are often confused, especially in an era and culture which prizes the external and has lost its tether to the invisible inner world. The attempt to satisfy a deep *longing* (ex., for the Holy, meaning, relationship, love) with something that satisfies our *craving* leaves both the craving and longing unsatisfied. Again, *we can never get enough of what we don’t really want.*

When individuals and cultures abandon the inner sacred precincts, the void is filled with something else. Usually, as Jung noted, it is some psychological disorder or, collectively, something ending with “ism.” Current candidates would include fundamentalism, consumerism, voyeurism (so-called reality TV), conservatism/liberalism (political rancor and talk radio) and other desperate efforts to force something finite to provide ultimate meaning.

Our deep longing for the Holy is captured by Dr. Jung's observation late in his life: *The decisive question for man (humankind) is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life. Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interest on utilities, and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance...The more a man lays stress on false possessions, and the less sensitivity he has for what is essential, the less satisfying is his life...In the final analysis, we count for something only because of the essential we embody, and if we do not embody that, life is wasted..*" (Memories, Dreams, and Reflections, p.325)

**A**re we related to something infinite or not? Elsewhere, Dr. Jung's favorite words for the infinite were *archetypal* and *numinous*, the latter borrowed from Rudolph Otto meaning "holy." Jung seized upon the word *numinous* because it best expressed the experience of one's encounter with the archetypal dimension of the deep psyche. That experience might include ecstasy, dread, fascination, or awe. In all cases, one knows that one has been encountered by something greater and more powerful than the personal ego. When he spoke of religion, Jung usually meant "the attitude peculiar to a consciousness which has been changed by experience of the numinosum." (CW: 11:par.9)

The hunger for relationship with the infinite or numinous, what I term "the Holy," was such a central concern for Dr. Jung that he wrote to Mr. P. W. Martin in August, 1945: *You are quite right, the main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neurosis but rather with the approach to the numinous. But the fact is that the approach to the numinous is the real therapy and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experiences you are released from the curse of pathology.* (Letters, Vol. 1, p. 377)

For the Celts, the natural world was a numinous place, "charged with the grandeur of God," (Hopkins) and "every common bush afire with God." (Browning) Predating the Church's exaggerated emphasis on the "Fall of creation," they were convinced of the essential goodness of creation and a humanity which bore the image of God. God was not something/someone to escape to but a Presence which filled the cosmos which could, and did, manifest at any moment. From this perspective, life was not so much a problem to be solved but a Mystery to be honored, in contrast to our modern concern for getting life, including ourselves, fixed, micro-managed, or 'together.'

Theirs was no romanticized outlook, however. The Celts were well aware of the harshness of life, living as they did "on the edge of the world" where inclement weather, disease, and violence were ever at hand. While holding to the belief that the creation is essentially good, they believed that life was also streaked through with a terrible darkness which sometimes covered the good, but did not obliterate it. They, like Jung, were aware that an encounter with the Holy may leave one starry-eyed, ecstatic, or filled with a peace that passes all understanding. Likewise, it may leave one confused, bruised, or broken. They experienced the Holy before it was split asunder and sanitized by rational theology.

Both traditions, Celtic and Jungian, seek to preserve the

wholeness of the Holy by wrestling, as Jacob did, with the mystery of the opposites rather than eliminating them. Jacob limped away from his encounter with the angel knowing that he had barely survived, but had received a new name. Jacob, the trickster, had met the Trickster. Likewise, Saul encountered the Holy on his way to Damascus and was thrown to the ground, blinded, humiliated and spent the rest of his life sorting out that appointment. He, too, received a new name: Paul. It appears that the Holy is not as interested in our peace and tranquility as in our humility and homage.

The ambivalent, awesome nature of the Holy is notably preserved in Jung's description of 'God' which he gave in an interview a few days before his death: *To this day God is the name by which I designate all things which upset my subjective views, plans, intentions and change the course of my life for better or worse.* James Hollis suggests that this is possibly the most humble, most faithful confession ever uttered by a person in the twentieth century. (Creating A Life, p. 62) Jung's confession comes from one whose own hunger for the Holy took him to uncharted depths of the soul.

Both the revival of interest in the Celtic tradition and the relatively new Jungian psychology can be viewed as necessary compensations for the current religious atmosphere dominated by literalism, fundamentalism, and rationalism. Each of these 'isms' is an attempt by frightened egos to control, manage, and market the Holy rather than to honor and have reverence for the Holy. None of them can satisfy nor sustain the hungry soul.

But neither can the Celtic nor Jungian traditions satisfy the hunger in and of themselves. What they may do, however, is help to differentiate the various human hungers, to hone our hunger for the Holy, and to cultivate an attitude of receptivity and reverence for the Holy. What they may do is help to heal the modern split between matter/spirit, physical/spiritual, inner/outer and help us to appreciate what Teilhard de Chardin calls *the breathing together of all things*, the interdependence of all things, visible and invisible. If they assist in these vital ways, that will be sufficient ■