

Feeling connected to the land

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It's the land, it is our wisdom
It's the land, it shines us through
It's the land, it feeds our children
It's the land, you cannot own the land, the land owns you

Solid Ground, Dougie Mclean

Feeling truly connected to the earth – and beyond that, to the immeasurable universe – always starts very intimately in your immediate environment. It starts with feeling embedded in the surrounding land(scape), the local manifestation of Mother Earth. At the same time, this feeling part of a greater whole is a profound spiritual experience in which material existence is transcended and life feels animated. From there, the foundation is also laid for our connection with other people.

Our relationship with the land

On a societal level, for hundred thousands of years – when we still lived as hunter-gatherers, but also long after – the relationship between us and the surrounding land has been one of a deep connection with it. During that long period, we felt completely embedded in the cycles of the natural world, which we marked with rituals and festivals. We were aware that she was constantly providing us with gifts—including food, medicine, clothing, and building materials—that made our lives possible. We were very grateful for it and therefore took the best possible care of her.

As far as the development of Western culture is concerned, with the emergence of the first city-states in Mesopotamia – roughly from six thousand years ago –a turning point occurred in our relationship with the land. From that period on, we collectively began to mentally separate ourselves more and more from nature – to self-centeredly raise ourselves above it. The focus shifted from the land to ourselves. We no longer felt

included in the surrounding world, but began to position ourselves primarily in opposition to it.

This also meant that the natural world lost its animated, sacred status for us. It was reduced to matter, which – divided into separate objects – we could take possession of and exploit one-sidedly. We began to project this sense of separation also on our fellow human beings: the men started to place themselves above the women; a dualistic fighting ethos came to predominate in the human mind.

Land ownership

The legal concept of (private) *land ownership* could only be conceived from the egocentric, restless mindset of the male rulers at that time. It formed the basis on which a patriarchal, hierarchical structure of society could be built, which from the very beginning has caused much misery and suffering to the dispossessed women and men at the base of the hierarchy.

In the numerous bloody wars that were waged between the city-states, and between the later nation-states and empires, land ownership has always continued to play a central role. As is well known, that struggle has never stopped. On a global scale, today's 'world leaders' are still hungry for more land ownership. Needless to say, in their minds, and those of their loyal followers, there is no sense anymore of being connected to the animated land around them – and on a larger scale to Mother Earth.

On the way to a different story

The American cultural philosopher Charles Eisenstein has referred to the story in which competition and struggle have become central as *the Story of Separation*. In his view, this has now become an old, outdated story that has started to cause so much damage and suffering in many areas worldwide that it directly threatens our survival.

But fortunately, he has also seen many indications that a completely different, hopeful story has been developing for some time – a story in which the heart, and the sense of connection generated from there, is once

again central. Inspired by the ideas of the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, he has called this story *the Story of Interbeing*. It is a story that is already spreading among the people outside the spotlight of politics and the media.

Eisenstein also regularly referred to this story as *a New and Ancient Story*. With this term he has emphasized that it is not only a new, but also a very old story. It is precisely in these ancient cultural elements that we can find clues for the fact that our lives are always embedded in the larger context of the natural world around us. In this respect, we can draw inspiration from the visions of our distant ancestors as well as from current, still living, indigenous communities. I will briefly outline those visions below.

The Sacred Marriage in the Stone Age

Let me start with the vision of our distant ancestors. Already in the New Stone Age – several thousand years before our era – they have depicted their deep connection with the surrounding land (landscape) mythically and symbolically. The English archaeologist and meteorologist Terence Meaden has shown that this connection played a central role in the construction of megalithic stone circles, such as that of Stonehenge in England. When the sun rises at Stonehenge during the summer solstice, in clear weather a long shadow is cast exactly to the center of the stone circle via the Heelstone – which is located outside the stone circle.

According to Meaden, the builders of this stone circle deliberately ensured that a male phallic shadow reached into the center of the female round circle – and there fell on the so-called Altar Stone. In this he recognized a symbolic/mythical depiction of the Sacred Marriage – between the then worshipped Mother Earth Goddess and the Sky God. He pointed out that many other stone circles were based on a similar exchange principle and that the other seasonal changes were also recorded in this way in the arrangement of the stones.

In other megalithic structures from that period, the interaction with the sun also played a central role. This has been the case, for example, with

Newgrange – a well-known, man-made, circular mound in the Boyne Valley in Ireland, with an imposing interior space that can be reached through a long narrow tunnel. During the winter solstice, at the rising sun – and a cloud-free sky – a ray of sunlight falls through that tunnel all the way into that inner space, which is illuminated for a short while. Instead of a shadow, a masculine, phallic sunbeam shines inside. It is not difficult to imagine that with the shape of the mound our distant ancestors may have depicted a female womb – and that it symbolically referred to the matrix of Mother Earth in which all terrestrial life is contained.

The Celtic Sacred Marriage

In later Celtic culture, the Sacred Marriage has also been given a place, in a more anthropomorphic form. The Celts held the view that the king (or chieftain) of a tribe, as a representative of the God of the tribe, only obtained sovereignty to rule over his subjects after he had ritually married the Goddess of the Land. Through this marriage ritual, both the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people were guaranteed. It created a *servant leadership*, a leadership that included the responsibility to take care of the land as well as the people. This has been reported in their mythological stories. In this context, it is interesting that according to the Irish archaeologist Barry Cunliffe, all Celtic Goddesses were reflections of the Mother Earth Goddess and all Celtic Gods of the Tribal God, the God of the tribe.

Divine Pairs

The English archaeologist Miranda Green has pointed out that the Sacred Marriage could be the basis for the imagination of *divine couples*, of which various depictions in stone have been found from the Gallo-Roman period. I think that link is plausible. This form of imagination has not only found a place in the Celtic world, but also in many other cultures. All traditional traditions, in which a Goddess was linked to her Son/Partner, have expressed this. Well-known examples are Inanna and Dumuzi, Ishtar and Tammuz, Ashera and Yahweh, Isis and Osiris/Horus, and Kybele and Attis. Here too, the Goddess was primarily connected to the land, and the male God to the ruler and his people. Although we are no longer accustomed to

such divine couples, because of our monotheistic heritage in the religious field, we can still recognize a reflection of them in the Christian imagination of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus – which seems to be complemented in our time by the rediscovered bond between Mary Magdalene and the adult Jesus.

The Wasteland

We must not forget that behind the imagination of the divine couple and the Sacred Marriage there has always been a worldview in which the connection of the people with the surrounding, animated land was central. In this regard, the medieval King Arthurian stories about the Grail, which have been known throughout much of Europe, have shown the dramatic consequences of breaking this Sacred Marriage bond. In this Celtic-inspired heritage, stories were told about a wounded Fisher King. His injury reflected the creation of the *Wasteland* – a degenerate state in which connection to the animated land had been lost. As a result, the land had become barren and the people had also started to suffer.

The first manifestations of this Wasteland can of course already be found in the aforementioned city-states in Mesopotamia, when patriarchal rulers started to expand their power further and further through the concept of land ownership. Much later, the search for the Grail, by knights such as Perceval (or Parzival), was all about healing that Wasteland. Through this healing process, the land would become fertile again and the people would live in prosperity and health again. In short, the Sacred Marriage – in which servant leadership, care for the land and for the people were central – would be revived as a result.

Indigenous visions

It is beautiful that the deep connection of our distant ancestors with the surrounding land has been able to survive in many living indigenous cultures. According to the English journalist Simon Winchester, for some cultures – such as tribal Africans, New Zealand Maori, Arizona Hopi or the sea peoples of Polynesia – land ownership is still confusing and very strange. They themselves still feel intimately connected to the natural world

around them. Winchester, for example, cites the vision of Massasoit Sachem, chief of the Native American tribe the Wanpanoag. For him, the land was ‘our mother who feeds all her children, beasts, birds, fish, and also people. The forests, the rivers, everything in them belongs to everyone and is for the use of everyone. How can one man say it's only his?’

In the film *Aluna* from 2012, the Kogi – a living indigenous tribe in Colombia – warn us in the Western world about the damage we have caused, and are still inflicting, on the earth: ‘You are mutilating the world because you do not remember the Great Mother. If you don't stop, the world will die’ (...) ‘If you knew that She could feel, you would stop.’ The worship of this Great Mother, *Pachamama*, has played an important role with the indigenous peoples of the Andes Mountains and at least goes back to the Inca culture.

Reflection of our condition

The American healer Loren Cruden has pointed out the importance of the Celtic connection to the land for our present time: ‘The Celtic sympathetic resonance with the land was clear in cultural attention to the fitness of secular leaders, in the conviction that the land’s wellbeing, on which the people’s health acutely depended, directly reflected the health of a leader’s fitness. Land cannot be deceived. It reflects a truth of our condition as human beings and reveals atrocities and follies as well as our capacity for good. But today, in the arrogance of shortsighted greed and flippant posturing, many people do not want to look at what the land reveals about our fitness.’ Cruden wrote this in 1998, and I think that by now more and more people are watching and listening to what the land has to tell us.

The meaning of the Grail

The stories about the Grail have shown that in the Middle Ages there was already an awareness that something essential is missing from our Western worldview. In our time, the message of those stories has only become more urgent. According to the English psychologist and mythologist Sharon Blackie – who has written beautiful, enlightening books about Celtic mythology – in this respect we still live in a Wasteland. In her view, the

phenomenon of the Grail makes us aware that we still suffer from the ‘wounded, merciless, over-extended masculine’ and from the ‘loss of the life-giving gifts of the feminine’.

For Blackie, the significance of the Grail for our time lies in two areas that cannot be seen separately from each other: reassessing the feminine qualities that have been suppressed in our culture for centuries – including dreams, creativity, openness, nurturing and community – and reconnecting with the place where we live. About the latter she has said the following: ‘One of the wounds dealt to us by the coming of the Wasteland, is our severance from the land, the rupturing of the relationship between people and their places. Healing the Wasteland requires a healing of this wound. Our return, then, requires a place in which we can be grounded, rooted; a place in which our particular gifts and wisdom can flourish; a place in which we can fully embrace the natural world around us, and our part in it.’

Healing from the heart

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung indicated a long time ago that feminine and masculine qualities are not tied to the sexes. Individually, we can only become a whole person if we balance both qualities in ourselves. But it is also true that in the outer world we can no longer leave the healing of the Wasteland to a few others.

In this context, I find it surprising and hopeful that the well-known Dutch historian and writer Rutger Bregman has also started to worry seriously about the fact that currently on a global scale servant leadership is largely lacking. He therefore argues that we should all develop our ‘moral ambition’ and that from there, to the best of our ability, we should contribute to a ‘moral revolution’ – no matter how small or modest it may seem.

Through the empathy and imagination of our hearts, we can give substance to this. In this way, space is created in our minds to be able to give shape – in Eisenstein’s words – to the more beautiful world that our hearts know is possible. This will be a world in which we also feel collectively connected

again to the place where we live, to the surrounding land and therefore also to Mother Earth.

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Sources:

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Terence Meaden: about his research, see my article "Sacred Marriage in the Stone Age". (available on my website, <https://eng.wimbonis.nl>).

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