

What You Should Know to Be a Filidh

Filidh's were the storytellers and keepers of the sacred order within ancient Celtic tribes, the living memory banks of an oral culture. Eleanor Hull, in his *Textbook of Irish Literature*, said in earliest times the Filidh combined "the functions of magician, lawgiver, judge, counsellor to the chief, and poet. Later, but still at a very early time, the offices seem to have been divided, the brehons devoting themselves to the study of law, and the giving of legal decisions, the druids arrogating to themselves the supernatural functions, with the addition, possibly of some priestly offices, and the *filí* themselves being henceforth principally as poets and philosophers."¹ In this article I will be looking at the earliest conception of the Filidh, before the various divisions of duty begin to take hold.

What does it take to be a Filidh? In the olden days, at least twelve years of training.² Much of this involved an intense concentration on the development of memory skills. John Carey, in his paper *The Three Things Required of A Poet*, elaborates on three psychic skills mentioned in the tale of Finn mac Cumail, "that give the Fili, or professional poet his special status".³ These are *imbas forosnai*, or "knowledge which illuminates", *tenim laedo* "illumination of song", *dichetal di chennaib* or "extempore incantation". Each of these gifts or powers, developed through the dedication of long work, deserves an essay in and of itself. As part of my own work as an amateur metahistorian and aspiring filidh, they are subjects that I am still researching. Still one must begin somewhere, and my dreams took me to the work of contemporary poet Gary Snyder.

Besides having a long term interest in the work of the Beats, I had a powerful dream involving my version of Gary Snyder that spurred me to read more of his work in late 2009. My ongoing engagement with his poetry and essays, have subsequently deepened. Like the filis of old Snyder has spent more than a fair portion of his time among mountains, rivers, and woods. His home is in the Pacific Northwest and part of my admiration for him lies in his dedication to his bioregion. From what I can tell he is a person who has a strong connection to the land. To those of us who seek to honor the earth and its inhabitants, this connection is primary. While this primary connection may seem obvious to me, and whole slews of eco-activists, it is not so for those who have shut their eyes to the basic facts of life. These are people who have lost touch with the environments which they traverse and are immersed in every day. What will it take to pull them up out of a mire of soul sucking distraction? Among other things, stories. These are a special province of the filidh.

This essay analyses Snyder's poem, "What You Should Know to Be A Poet", keeping especially in mind the soul and world repairing functions of a poet. First let us look at the poem as a whole before taking it apart piece by piece. Any good poem or story speaks for itself, but it can still be fun to excavate the vast amounts of knowledge contained within each compacted line.

What You Should Know to be a Poet

all you can know about animals as persons.
the names of trees and flowers and weeds.
the names of stars and the movements of planets
and the moon.
your own six senses, with a watchful elegant mind.
at least one kind of traditional magic:
divination, astrology, the book of changes, the tarot;

dreams.
the illusory demons and the illusory shining gods.
kiss the ass of the devil and eat sh*t;
fuck his horny barbed cock,
fuck the hag,
and all the celestial angels
and maidens perfum'd and golden-

& then love the human: wives husbands and friends
children's games, comic books, bubble-gum,
the weirdness of television and advertising.

work long, dry hours of dull work swallowed and accepted
and lived with and finally lovd. exhaustion,
hunger, rest.

the wild freedom of the dance, extasy
silent solitary illumination, entasy

real danger. gambles and the edge of death.

- Gary Snyder⁴

According to Snyder a poet should know “all you can about about animals as persons.” Learning what roles an animal plays within its ecosystem is certainly valuable, useful not only for the preservation of ecosystems, but also in the remediation of those already damaged. When I approach an animal as a person though, beyond facts, figures, and statistics, I touch something closer to myself and my own being –the soul of another. Humans are not the only species with soul. The whole world is a shrine for the soul. This is something you should know to be a filidh.

Animals are encountered everywhere, from the industrial urban environment to the suburban, from rural farmlands and forests to untouched pristine wilderness. Nature is a continuum and from it we cannot be separate. No matter where one may live, animals will be encountered. The filidh is at home in the city as much hiking through the brush or paddling up a stream. In this waking world animals make star crossed paths with us and we can look to them for guidance, as their appearance is always relevant to our lives. Creatures are also encountered in the amber field of dreams. These connections should be noted and studied by the aspiring filidh.

Snyder says a poet should know “the names of trees and flowers and weeds”. To learn them the poet should also be a *flâneur*, a rambler, walking anywhere and everywhere as the famous Romantic, Symbolist, and Beat poets themselves did. Along the way learn the local flora.

Naming a thing or knowing the name of a thing has long been associated with magickal power. It is important to distinguish between power over something and power with, for a filidh would never wish to manipulate for his or her selfish glory, but seeks to raise the consciousness of all, to ever greater levels of playing. Restoring colour to a world that is growing ever so gray is the special job of poets at this time, and to do so it may be necessary to call forth the souls of the plants and animals who are on the verge of disappearing.

Any good poem calls forth its implicit qualities, whether good or ill, through the power of its words (praise be Thoth). Poetry can evoke and invoke. Knowing the names of trees, flowers, and weeds asks the poet to be involved in the life of the land. If the name of a plant is known, what else can be known about it? What stories, songs, and myths are associated with the plant? What medicinal virtues do its leaves, roots, and stems hold for us? Some plants offer the gift of prophecy, others merely intoxication. There are those considered poisonous, and to greater or lesser degrees, some of those poisons can be transmuted alchemically. It is not surprising that one of Walt Whitman’s poems is called *Calamus*, the leaves of this famous grass being associated in biblical times with the gift of prophecy.

I heard once in a source I cannot place (briefly ponder current media barrage reality) that children recognize more corporate logos than plant species. This trend must be reversed. Through poetry and storytelling the mysteries of the natural world can be restored. When we know the name of something we may be less likely to destroy it, as our intimacy with it has grown. A filidh should have frequent and intimate encounters with plant life. Filidhs may be able to recharge their creative batteries through esoteric eroticism, the ecstasy that comes from tuning into the ever evolving and regenerative play of life around us.

Knowing “the names of stars and the movements of the planet and the moon” helps the Filidh to fall gracefully into syncopation with natural time. The cycles of electricity, the glowing screens of computer and television, the collective light pollution eeking out from cities, have for many of us obscured the awe inspiring majesty of the starry sky, Nuit. The stars dwarf our worldly ambition, helping us to get a sense of the bigger picture. Learning the constellations alone can fill one with a lifetime of stories from many different cultures.

Snyder says we should know our “own sixth sense, with a watchful elegant mind.” The mind must be stilled from an excess of voices and internal chatter in order to receive clear messages from the senses – the signs and symbols of synchronicity that speak to us when we make ourselves available to listen. Poetic insight, while informed by the five senses, is revealed by the sixth. Polishing the glass of intuition so that it may reflect clearly should be basic maintenance of the human instrument.

A traditional form of magic should also be learned. Snyder mentions four types, and these have been most commonly used for divination. A watchful elegant mind, open to the insights of intuition has less need for formal divination. Rather, the traditional arts of magic should be studied for their deeper applications.

The second stanza addresses dreams and the denizens who inhabit the multiverse, beginning with “the illusory demons and the illusory shinging gods”. In this stanza Gary shows how the poet acts as a shaman by traveling into the astral landscape, into the higher and lower worlds. In dreams a person comes into contact with spiritual beings of all shades and stripes, the demonic, angelic, the indifferent, ghosts who haven’t moved on. Dreams are the playground of the soul, and in them direct knowledge of the universe and our place in it can be gained.

In the lower world the poet connects with these beings in a most visceral way, by kissing the ass of the devil. This specific image recalls to my mind how the Knights Templar kissed the ass of Baphomet as part of their initiation, which in turn can be elaborated upon as a metaphor for eating shit. Having congress with devils was certainly dangerous in the times of the Inquisition, but thankfully now those interested in these paths can pursue them without fear of being burned at the stake. Even so most folk will recoil at the image of kissing the devils ass and eating his shit. From an alchemical point of view however, eating shit may be equated with the negredo stage of the divine transformation. The black, dark, base matter of life must be internalized, and eaten, before it can be transmuted into the philosophers stone. The devil is also symbolic of creative power, especially as it applies to the material substances of the world. To partake of the devils defecation is to ingest what he more thoroughly digested. Images of poop in my own dreams often seem to refer to creative output. Putrefaction transforms into enlightenment.

All of this is followed up by Snyder suggesting we “fuck the hag”, or the Crone, an aspect of the Triple Goddess (who appears also as the Maiden, and the Mother). In her old age, at the peak of her wisdom and in the full grasp of her accumulated power, on the verge of transitioning through the blue gates of death, the poet goes to the Crone or Hag for initiation. By copulating with beings from the otherworld, the boundaries between this world and the other merge for a time. To have intercourse with spiritual beings is to enter into discourse with them. When the poet emerges from holy sleep, new powers are found awakening in the soul, gifts from the congress that has been shared with the spiritual allies who are now his intimates. These beings are the muses who will make the tongue silver.

When a person comes down from such a peak experience there is often a corresponding depression. Humans are not meant to always live at the heights of spiritual ecstasy. To be functional in the world, to be of service to the other people and living things in the environment, a poet must know how to ground herself in the routines of daily living. The hearthstone is far from being a constraint to hamper the soul. It is a place returned to with joy, and the daily matters associated with its maintenance should be undertaken in the same spirit. After traveling through the lower worlds and upper worlds the gifts that have been given freely to us must be given freely back to the world; we return to make love with our human counterparts, husbands and wives, we return to the role of parenthood and bonding with children.

Spiritual practices should never serve to remove one from the world, but to help engage more fully with it. The psychonauts, shamans, and astral voyagers who are most adept at the psychic arts are also the most practical. The practice of being a Filidh does not make one removed from everyone else, but, by being a person who carries the stories, songs, and poems of a people, the Filidh is a person who is available to the people.

This is why, in my mind, some of the best stories and poems are those that are easily knowable, not requiring decades of scholarly acumen. They have an immediacy about them, and have not been obfuscated by deliberately so only the learned have access to what is contained in them. A true Filidh crafts stories and poems that touch the heart and soul of all. This cannot easily be done from ivory towers, or by becoming so spaced out in esoterica that you cannot function on the material plane of existence.

To keep oneself humble and in tune with the world, “long dry hours of dull work” should be “swallowed and accepted”. Another way it could be said is in the Zen precept “Before enlightenment chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.” Dishes still need to be washed, clothes hung out on the line to dry, homes maintained. We do not transcend the material world, but transform it through our consciousness. Stripping and sanding the paint off my porch has become a meditation for me. The sweat beads on my brow, on my back, in my arm-pits. After a few hours I start to notice dull pains and aches in my arm, from the repetitive motion, but as I work, I feel a sense of craftsmanship growing in me, a connection with the world of things. Working can be seen as a form of Karma Yoga, sweating out impurities, putting equity into the soul. I feel in touch with my body, a useful counterpoint to all the work I do in my head as a writer. It’s fun to get my hands dirty, and after a day of honest labor food, beer, sex and sleep are fully enjoyed.

Snyder speaks of the “wild freedom of the dance”. Dancing has always been a primary method for entering into ecstasy for both layperson and shaman. In a dance the gods, goddesses, animal spirits and ancestors are called upon and may even enter the body. The earth is honored by dance. The feet are drums pounding on her back. The heartbeat is raised. Breathing deepens. The dancer becomes entranced. Movements of the head, hair, limbs, torso take one away from the consensus mind, into the deepness of one’s own. Dancing is a bridge between the worlds.

The “silent solitary illumination” or “ecstasy” is the vision quest, the lone poet on a mountaintop or some other wild place hunting for dreams and visions. Alone and with no one to talk to the internal dialogue and chatter of the mind has a chance to become quiet and the poet is able to listen to the world speak. Blaise Pascal wrote, “all men’s miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone”. Here Pascal’s Christianity is close to Snyder’s Buddhism. Both agree that relentless distraction stirs up unending desires, which cause suffering. Out on the vision quest the poet faces her own mortality. When the dream that has been cried for is delivered it is like an answered prayer, but one that requires action out in the world. We return to the fold of community renewed. Now instead of following the path someone else has laid down for us we have our own map to go by, our own visionary blueprint to build from.

Finally Snyder says a poet should know “real danger: gambles and the edge of death”. What great and bold acts of genius were ever committed by playing it safe and following the quotidian line? Who has moved into new areas of research and discovery by refusing to test boundaries and push envelopes? The treasures that are to be found in the deep may be guarded by formidable foes, but in facing them we prove our own strength. Once those glittering jewels have been claimed as our own we will never be content with the rinky-dink pleasures found while wading in shallow waters.

A poet should know the edge of death and walk it daily. In his higher capacity the Filidh may even act as a guide or psychopomp into the realms of the dead. The Filidh

may take on the role of “speaker for the dead” on behalf of the community. With a fine tuned discernment the Filidh will be able to incite proper actions on behalf of the departed when necessary, and ease those who are called into their passing. By walking on the edge of death we gain strength for what we need to do now. Contemplating the end of physical life is a great way to break through blocks of procrastination.

Gary Snyder’s poem may be short, but learning and living what is set out in the poem is a lifetime of ongoing work. Luckily when one is a Filidh, there is no set end, no fixed point where “I am finished” can be said. Being a poet is an infinite and open-ended game. Large victories and small successes may be had along with momentary defeats. These do not constitute the end of play, but rather are mark further points of development and departure.

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1. Textbook of Irish Literature, by Eleanor Hull
2. Word of Skill: The Art of Celtic Storytelling by Mara Freeman available at: <http://www.druidry.org/obod/theorder/archive/mara-wordskill.html>
3. The Three Things Required of A Poet, by John Carey, in Eriu, Vol. 48, 1997.
4. No Nature, New and Selected Poems, Pantheon Books 1992 by Gary Snyder.