

Druidry, Shamanism and Magic

The belief that there is more to life than the world of appearances, that an Otherworld exists, leads logically to the belief that we can make contact with forces and beings that exist beyond the world of appearances. Many people have had experiences of ‘extra-sensory perception’ – even if only fleetingly, perhaps just once or twice in their lives. And a significant proportion of people have had experiences of making contact, or of being aware of the presence of loved ones after they have died.

Some people feel that an exploration of the Otherworld or of ‘other dimensions’ is not for them, and it may even scare them to contemplate making such an attempt. But for others, nothing could be more exciting. Like explorers, they may sense there is some risk (of delusion, madness, or the disappointment of failure) but their inherent curiosity drives them forward.



This desire to explore the world beyond the ‘veil of appearances’ has always existed – holy people, shamans and wizards in every culture have discovered a host of ways to open the ‘doors of perception,’ as Aldous Huxley put it, and to travel through those doors. They have meditated, eaten magic mushrooms, smoked herbs, created hallucinogenic brews from roots, plants and animals, danced or drummed until they entered a trance, fasted or retreated into solitude for months or years on end – all in the hopes of breaking through or out of the matrix of ‘consensus reality’ to achieve an experience of realities or states of consciousness beyond the everyday.

Mystic and Shamans and Shamanic Journeying

Although the term ‘shamanism’ comes originally from the term used to describe the practice of traditional Siberian healer-magicians, in recent times its use has broadened into what Michael Harner, a world authority on shamanism, has called ‘a method to open a door and enter a different reality’. Some contemporary writers even talk about ‘Celtic shamanism’ when they refer to certain practices mentioned in Celtic literature that help the seeker enter different realities and return with visions, insights or information. Those who are shamanically inclined will use guided meditations, trance work, dancing or drumming to achieve their aim of entering other states of awareness – a process which is often termed ‘journeying’ and which has also been called ‘astral travelling’.

During these journeys, encounters often occur with Otherworldly beings, such as an ancestor, a deceased relative or friend, or a spirit guide, who may appear as an animal, a human, or in some other form. Sceptics may consider these experiences the result of an excessively vivid imagination, but those who have taken these journeys often experience profound insights and healing. Sometimes these shamanic experiences occur spontaneously – when in a dream we meet a being who gives us healing or advice, or when awake we become aware of someone who has died counselling or consoling us. But those who follow Druidry as a shamanic path attempt deliberately to make contact with the Otherworld – to take the belief that ‘all is connected’ literally, and begin to explore certain of these links and connections.

Some teachers work with drums, encouraging those present to travel on the beat of the drum to the Otherworld, while others will use the power of their voice to guide the listeners’ awareness. Either of these techniques will usually be embedded within a ritual designed to establish a sense of being within a sacred space, and to evoke the guidance and protection of Deity or deities, and perhaps Otherworldly guardians or spirits. Dance, sacred movements or gestures, and chanting may be used during the ceremony, and ritual objects, candles, incense, statues and pictures might be employed to enhance the participants’ awareness of the sacred.

The Path of Magic

There is yet one more way in which Druidry can be pursued – as a path of magic. The magical approach in Druidry, like the mystical and shamanic, follows from the belief that ‘all is connected’ and that other worlds or dimensions exist in addition to the realm of appearances. But it also takes into consideration the view that we are meant to be here, that we are destined to be active, creative participants in life, and that our thoughts, feelings, words and actions all have an effect which obeys the Law of the Harvest. Like ripples in a pool caused by a stone falling into it, the magician sees each person as an influential being, who can cause either joy or sorrow by the way that they live their lives. Many people think of magic either as the creation of illusion, as in stage magic, or as the attempt to manipulate circumstances or people through spell-casting in order to obtain things, such as love or wealth. But there is another type of magic that is much more interesting and which involves at its heart sensing life as awe-inspiring, as magical in the best sense of the word. From this perspective Druidism offers ideas and techniques that can enhance one’s awareness of life as magical, and can make the practice of magic a conscious attempt to assume responsibility for our thoughts, words and deeds. The world then becomes a magical place, and one’s life a magical journey that takes place within it.

Two concepts in Druidry are helpful in pursuing the magical path. In the Asterix cartoon books the Druid Getafix is often seen stirring a cauldron to create a magical elixir that will confer superhuman strength on Asterix, the hero of the tale. Such an elixir does exist in Druidry – not in the form of an actual liquid, but in the form of an energy which is seen as bringing illumination, inspiration and wisdom. Known as Awen in Welsh, and Imbas in Irish, Druids sense this as a universal force which flows through the world and which can be encouraged to flow through us to bring us these gifts. The words ‘Imbas’ and ‘Awen’ are chanted in ceremonies or meditation, and the study of this force, and how to encourage it in our lives, forms the basis of much Druid training. Another force is said to exist too – Nwyfre, which is a Welsh word, deriving from an ancient Celtic word Naomh, meaning ‘firmament or heavens’. Nwyfre is the life-force that flows through the Universe, and which is called Chi or Qi in China and Prana in India.

By cultivating the flow of Nwyfre and Awen, the Druid aims to improve their physical vitality and their creative ability. Rather than working with the energies of Awen and Nwyfre to manipulate events or circumstances, the Druid uses these forces to transform themselves. Ironically, this often has the effect of changing outer circumstances more effectively than any attempt to manipulate them directly, because our circumstances often depend upon our internal states, and until our internal state changes, attempts to alter external conditions will often be simply palliative and short-lived.

Some people avoid anything which is labelled magical. Yet, once we understand the way in which magic is used and understood in Druidry, we can see that it involves an ethical attempt to take responsibility for the fact that we are causal beings – that we affect the world around us, whether we are conscious of this or not.

There are two ways that we can work magically with Druidry. The first could be termed passive and involves adopting an attitude of awe and reverence towards life and the world. This ‘way of being’ is also a way of seeing, as the writer Marcel Proust expressed so well when he said: ‘The real magic lies not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.’ When we see and understand life to be magical, we start to experience it as magical in our hearts and souls too. The second way could be termed active and involves becoming aware of the creative power that we possess simply by being alive, and then consciously working to use that creative power in the service of our values and ideals. Here we can see how the goals of the Druid to work towards love, wisdom and creativity can become in themselves magical goals.