

Anam Cara

by Tommy Thompson

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For no particular reason, except that I very much liked doing so, when I was Chair of ATI, I always gave the keynote addresses. When my two terms as Chair ended, the Agenda Planning Committee suggested politely that I should probably step aside and let others step forward who might want to give the keynote. Last year, in Virginia, in the USA, Buzz Gummere, who was a student of both F.M. and A.R. Alexander, entered the arena and gave his delightful and heartfelt fireside chat in praise of women and their contribution to the evolution of the human endeavor.

This year, after having begged Jano Cohen, our chair for the AGM agenda, for "just one more keynote" so that I could speak in Ireland, and in turn following the example set by Buzz, my intention is this year to praise the Irish, and their contribution to the human endeavor.

What, you might ask, have the Irish done except to move away from Ireland and write great literature? And what, you might ask, are my credentials to sing praise to the Irish? Like Buzz, I've a bit of Welsh, and quite a bit of Irish and Scottish ancestry, so I am not entirely foreign to the soil. Furthermore, I am relying upon the insight and wise counsel of an Irish friend who assured me that he thought everyone was Irish anyway. (I'm told that's a very Irish point of view).

Why then have I earnestly sought to come from keynote retirement (alas) for a last go at it?

A year before Ireland was selected as this year's site for the AGM, one day I found myself browsing in a bookstore in Harvard Square, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Naively, I came upon a book display. One of the books on display was Thomas Cahill's book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

"How the Irish Saved Civilization", I mused, and so I immediately glanced around to see if there were other such books of humor in proximity. There were none. Could this author

be serious? Countries flashed across my mind for races of people who might have somehow "saved" civilization. Ireland was not at the forefront.

Historically, Ireland had been, previous to the fifth century C.E., a country of warrior savages, Celtic pagans who painted their bodies and fought naked, indeed, rode naked into battle, possessed by what they called "warp-spasm" where they reputedly shape-shifted their appearances into monstrous, howling, demon-like fighters; furthermore, they sacrificed their own to Celtic pagan gods, and their chief export-import was slaves. How could this race of warrior-poets have saved civilization?

Intrigued, I bought the book. As I read it, the evolution of their thinking sounded remarkably similar to how ATI evolved. Not only did they save civilization, they nourished and enriched the whole bloody thing. Cahill's book was not a book of humor. Far from it.

Recall if you will that the precarious era spanning hundreds of years between the fall of Rome around the mid-fifth century and the Renaissance, the order of the day was the call to battle: war, raids, pillaging, and other unsavory acts of barbarism. The promise of the continuation of civilization as we have come to know it was tenuous at best—certainly not very promising. What, in those early years, even before the beginnings of the fall of Rome (which itself took several hundred years to complete), were the Irish doing? Like everyone else, they were fighting each other, and everyone else—only usually more fiercely. All feared the Irish.

I repeat, all feared the Irish.

Then, something happened, something fractal occurred. Actually there were two occurrences that set in motion changes which affected all of Europe, and in turn shifted this warrior mentality in the Irish to a race of people devoted to the advancement of knowledge and learning.

The first of the two events only indirectly assisted this change in character. The year was 406, when the Rhine River froze solid, and as Thomas Cahill describes, *"provided the natural bridge that hundreds of thousands of hungry men, women and children had been waiting for. They were the 'barbari'. With this crossing, and with a natural barrier opened into a segment of the Roman Empire, the hastening of the fall of the Roman Empire began. Beyond that lay hundreds of years of chaos."*

The second event occurred one day, no doubt at a certain hour, at a given moment, when a shepherd slave boy—16 years of age, kidnapped years previously from Brittany by Irish raiders and sold into slavery to an Irish chieftain, bored and unsettled, living a life of desolate solitude while watching over his flocks on endlessly cold, mostly wet days and nights, barely clothed, with no shelter—by his own account, took to praying, and praying, and praying to his god. His almighty, after several years of conversation, told him to

leave his flocks and Irish-chieftain master, and to travel a couple of hundred miles across Ireland to the sea and arrange passage to Brittany, to go home and study.

In those days, for a slave to cross Ireland, noticeably a slave, and sail away was unthinkable. It just didn't happen—but that's what Patricius did, only to return having spent years in a monastery and having been ordained as both priest and bishop. His request upon his ordination was to return to Ireland, to return to Ireland as Irish as the Irish, even so much as to out-Irish the Irish. His mission was to convert all of Ireland to his Irish version of what was the emerging version of Christian Catholicism.

Patricius the slave was to become St. Patrick. The stage was set for Ireland to save civilization.

How did Patrick succeed in his mission of conversion? Patrick was no Greco-Roman Christian; he held no such view. According to Thomas Cahill, "*Patrick viewed the world as holy, the 'book' of God, a healing mystery, fraught with divine messages.*" This view, pagan as it was, is distinctly Irish. The Greco-Roman pessimism and Platonic suspicion that the body was unholy and devoid of meaning was anathema to both Patrick and to the Irish. The body was part of the book of God, to write in as you were able; the body had its own healing mystery.

Patrick was around 40 years old when he returned to Ireland as bishop. His mission, which set the stage for Ireland's contribution to Europe, spanned 30 years into the middle of the fifth century. Probably, Europe will never see such vast and sweeping changes again. What was happening?

By then, in an unparalleled and amazing manner, the Roman Empire (which had held sway for a full 11 centuries) was careening into chaos. Essentially the pivotal basis for Ireland's legacy to the world was that while Roman rule went from 1100 years of internal peace to both internal and external chaos, along with the rest of Europe, tiny Ireland went from chaos to peace. How did Patrick do it, and what was his legacy? And how can this possibly have anything to do with ATI?

To begin with, most probably he did not rid Ireland of its snake population, driving them into the ocean, as is commonly told. However, he did end Ireland's penchant for human sacrifice and slavery. For those Celtic pagan institutions to go, Patrick first had to win over the Irish and be accepted by this fierce race of uncompromising people. This he did simply by doing what no man had done before him, which was that he simply refused to be afraid of them. For this unprecedented stance, he was accepted. Then they watched him match word with deed, and they grew to respect and love him so much that he eventually became one of their own—only better. He was, in their words, "a simple man, a true man."

Patrick dispelled their penchant for human sacrifice by suggesting that Jesus had done it already. His was the last sacrifice for all sins, so there was simply no longer a need for it any longer. Jesus died for all sins, once and for all.

Slavery was another matter. No one in the history of the world had spoken up against slavery, except for Moses and Spartacus. Simply, Patrick convinced the Irish to let go of owning and exploiting another person by appealing to their own appetite for freedom. Moreover, they accepted Patrick, and to accept Patrick and his distinctly non-Roman version of Christianity, you had to accept the fact that Patrick himself had ceased to be a slave. Thus the stage was set. The Irish were now religious, and, as with all things the Irish did, they were fiercely religious.

Ireland is notable for being a land where Christianity was introduced without bloodshed. As such, there were no Irish martyrs and this troubled the Irish in the fifth and sixth centuries, after Patrick had passed away. A valiant death by violence had always been their warriors' way. So to have received Christianity without a fight spurred the Irish imagination to think up some mode of martyrdom.

Unbeknownst to them, it was this very thinking, iconoclastic and quixotic as it was, that led to "how the Irish saved civilization." Prior to the Irish, Christianity was made distinct by "red martyrdom," that is to say, martyrdom through bloodshed. With the Irish, there was first "green martyrdom," and later, "white martyrdom".

The Green Martyrs were those who, having left behind them the ordinary comforts of society, retreated to the woods, a mountaintop, or a lonely island—somewhere outside "tribal jurisdictions". There they studied scriptures and communed with God.

Often these hermits were simply deluded mystics. Even Kevin of Glendulough, a sixth-century hermit, lived in a hole in the rock wall of a cliff. However, he eventually, and much against his desires, allowed a monastic community to gather and form around him. Compelled to leave his hole in the wall, he moved down to the level shore and there a small monastic community developed. It exists today. Some of you will remain in Ireland after the AGM and visit the site.

It began with a single hut shaped like a beehive, with smaller beehives for his followers. The main hut served as church and altar, while the surrounding huts grew into monastic sites of learning. One after another these sites appeared, which became the first monasteries in Ireland. It is in these monasteries that the Irish scribes copied all the ancient classics (the ones you read today), including their own.

So while the rest of Europe was busily burning Europe's remaining libraries, Irish scribes born from Patrick's legacy of framing Christianity in a distinctly Irish way, the Green Martyrdom adepts, were busily restoring and preserving ancient texts.

A kind of university developed from those monasteries. Both commoners and nobles flocked from all the countries of Europe to study at these university-monasteries, which accepted both those who simply wished to learn in addition to those who wished for a life of the cloister. These centers of learning became noted for including as part of their emphasis on scripture, a study of all the ancient classics. And, the Irish monks shocked the civilized (Roman) Christian world by including all and everything.

As Green Martyrdom gave way, the monk Columcille, Patrick's successor in Irish history, established "White Martyrdom". He did away with bishops, replacing them with abbots, who were much closer to the people, and established the tradition of stepping into a small boat with no sail, to drift wherever providence might carry you. If you were lucky enough to find harbor, you established a monastery. Otherwise, *fini*. Lindisfarne exists today because of this very endeavor. The White Martyrs established monasteries throughout Europe, even while Europe was rapidly declining in every civilized regard.

To quote Thomas Cahill, "*The Celtic mind was neither discursive nor systematic. Yet, in their lyrical speculation, the Celts brought the sublime unity of life and experience to expression. The Celtic mind was not burdened by dualism. It did not separate what belongs together. The Celtic imagination articulates the inner friendship that embraces nature, diversity, underworld and human world as one. The dualism that separates the visible from the invisible, time from eternity, the human from the divine, was totally alien to them.*"

This Celtic notion of friendship is inspired by a unique understanding of love and friendship called *anam cara* or "soul love." *Anam* is Gaelic for soul, and *cara* is the word for friend. So *anam cara* means "soul friend" or the friend of your soul.

In the early Celtic Church, prior to St. Patrick, and dating back to Druidic thought, anyone who acted as a teacher, companion, or spiritual guide was called an *anam cara*. Patrick literally altered the entire notion of confession under the Roman version of Christianity by introducing the notion of *anam cara* into confession, confession being the basis for the individual's relationship to God. Under his introduction, referring to someone to whom you confessed, you could and would share your innermost self, your mind and heart totally revealable. Prior to this, in the early church, your sins were exposed to the entire village. You were exposed for your sins. Sins committed twice led to your being excommunicated.

No, said Patrick, we are Irish, and we have this concept of friendship rooted in Druidic thought called *anam cara*. When you had an *anam cara*, or friend of your soul, that friendship cut "across all convention, morality and category". You were joined in an eternal way with this friend of your soul and this should be the basis for all confession. Do not, he suggested, choose a priest necessarily who holds the proper credentials to hear your confession. Instead, choose, and go to your *anam cara*, who will hear your confession and encourage you to confess the same sin for the rest of your life. For as the Irish knew, you weren't likely, in Christ's words, to "go and sin no more". Undoing your ways is a life's experience of meeting yourself being yourself as a moment by moment affair.

Thomas Cahill explains the soul's journey in a beautiful manner:

Real friendship is always an act of recognition. When you find the person you love, an act of recognition begins, and brings you together. It is as if millions of years before the silence broke...your lover's clay and your clay lay side by side. Thus in the turning of the

seasons your one clay divided and separated. You began to rise as distinct clay forms, each housing a different individuality and destiny. Without even knowing it your secret memory mourned your loss of each other. While your clay selves wandered for thousands of years, through the universe, your longing for each other never faded. So when you meet or remeet and form an *anam cara* union, there is an awakening between you, a sense of ancient knowledge.... At this moment your soul awakens. The search begins and you can never go back. From then on you are inflamed with a special belonging that will never let you linger in the lowlands of complacency or partial fulfillment.... When the spiritual path opens you can bring an incredible generosity for the world and for the lives of others.

Now let's expand this notion of *anam cara* as it describes the exchange in learning and awakening through recognition between friends, lovers, spouses, and parents and children, and apply it to situations where there is a teaching and learning exchange, however the configuration manifests.

In this case, there is also a recognition of some deep longing—the desire for complete and total fulfillment of self. In the entire unfolding of human evolution and civilization, a key component to all advancement, both individually and collectively, has been the teacher/student relationship. Everyone learns from someone; if not someone, from some experience. Learning is necessary, inevitable, and natural. You do not have to work at it. You need only come to the point of recognition of the need to know and the recognition of who, among many, will satisfy this longing. Everyone at some point presents themselves as a student. At one instance you will teach, at another you will learn. Knowledge expands through exchange.

In *anam cara*, this exchange is unconditional. You have met the friend of your soul, and through unconditional love and exchange, a need has been addressed, a longing has been satisfied.

You become more of what you wish to be.

One of the truest pleasures I have derived from my experience in the founding of ATI, and during its subsequent growth and evolution as an organization, has been my privilege of being witness to, and part of, our expanding role of friendship.

If you think about it, ATI began amongst friends. There were just a few of us, 28 charter members, I believe. Sometimes small is good. Henry David Thoreau, the American naturalist who for a time (in order to experience his soul's desire) lived in a tiny cabin in the woods around Concord, Massachusetts, remarked about his keeping three chairs in his cabin: One was for himself, the second for a friend, and the third for a party. We began ATI somewhat out in the woods as well, with little more than two chairs—in friendship. But friendship needs recognition.

Having begun in friendship, immediately with us friendship was put to the test. Every aspect of each member's motives for wanting to forge this new society was examined. I

believe that we sought out our individual '*anam caras*' of necessity—referring to someone to whom we could share and confess our innermost selves, our minds and our hearts totally revealed, and we learned to listen. We learned to trust. And, where once there was misunderstanding, now there is trust; where once there was confusion, now there is clarity; and where there once was chaos, now there is peace.

Time for the next step...

Why are we all here in Ireland? And why so many of us? Could it be that there is some ancient recognition of clay—some distant longing to share your life, among membership, with your soul friend? That friend whose very presence awakens the higher part of you—that part of your soul that wishes to make a difference, to truly embody your soul's awakening, and to contribute unconditionally to all people everywhere as teachers and soul friends.

Imagine, as John Lennon imagined, an organization where exchange is rooted in *anam cara*. This is what I have imagined, and I give you, I give us, my Irish blessing:

In this organization and body of people
may we all support each other
to become all we've ever wished to be

We need some practice in bestowing blessings, so I've run off Bob Dylan's "*Forever Young*", which to me reads like an Irish blessing. I'll pass out copies, and ask for you all to divide into pairs; each of you read the blessing to the other, after which, I'll play Joan Baez singing Dylan's song. Consider it my wish for ATI.

Thank you.