

# The Veil Between the Worlds

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A little over a year ago, my colleague Anne Bonney, associate pastor over at the First Congregational Church in Chatham, took a group of eight people on a spiritual pilgrimage to the island of Iona, off the coast of Scotland. Iona, an island three miles long by one mile wide, has long been considered a special place for Celtic spirituality. Here's how Anne described it on the church's website<sup>1</sup>:

"Iona is considered to be the cradle of Christianity for much of Scotland and northern England and the center of the ancient Celtic Church's mission to Britain.

"It is one of Britain's most holy and historic places and often described as a 'thin place', a place where the material realm is only thinly separated from the spiritual.

How many of you believe in parallel universes? How many of you have ever suspected that there might be other worlds which exist alongside our world? I don't expect there are many; we tend to be a skeptical lot, basing our values and our decisions on the existence of one reality, an everyday world that has its share of mystery but whose basic parameters we think we understand. Those of us who believe in God would tend to want to put God into this one reality, rather than outside it. The existence of other worlds is kind of a hard sell to Unitarian Universalists.

If you greet the idea of another world with skepticism, I'm going to ask you to suspend that for the moment. It may be that by the end of my sermon you might be more willing to entertain some possibilities.

Halloween, or All Hallows' Eve, is the Christian version of the ancient Celtic pagan festival which was known as Samhain (pronounced sow-en). Samhain was the Celtic new year, when the year turned over.

We have recently celebrated the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, as a time for taking stock and making restitution. Samhain, the Celtic New Year, is also a time for reckoning.

The ancient Celts, as far as we know their religion, had an active belief in a parallel world. It was inhabited by powerful supernatural beings called the *aos si*, (pronounced ess she) who were thought to live in fairy hills or mounds. Samhain, it was said was the time that the veil between the two worlds was thinnest. Samhain legends such as Tam Lin tell of eruptions of the fairy folk out of the nether world into the villages of the common people. Samhain, in other words, is the seasonal equivalent to the thinness that Anne Bonney describes for the Island of Iona.

One scholar who has studied the origins of the holiday, Folklorist Leila Dudley Edwards, has this to say about the meaning given to it by contemporary pagans in light of its history:

The most important focus of the festival for many pagans is the emphasis on death as rebirth and the vast importance of having a time specifically dedicated for letting go, being aware and acknowledging the more difficult aspects of life. It is the time of 'going into the dark' as one individual puts it. Samhain is the point of the year which embodies the concept of the mutual dependence of light and dark, and strongly acknowledges the presence of the supernatural world. The process of earth's regeneration can be directly related to personal feeling and life experience. Loss and death are essential elements of life and cannot be denied; Samhain provides an opportunity for people to process these feelings, to experience the 'underworld journey' and through its experience obtain greater strength and knowledge of self. Several pagans told me that they recovered from the breakup of emotional relationships or bad experiences at this time, exorcizing memories or 'ghosts' and psychologically discarding unwanted baggage from the previous year.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.chathamcongregational.org/ionatrip.htm>

<sup>2</sup>From essay on Samhain published in *Paganism Today* ed. Charlotte Hardman, Graham Harvey, Thorsons, 1996

Now by this time some of you committed rationalists are looking at your watches and wondering if you can slip out the door unnoticed before this line of talk goes any further. Most of us will not take readily to the supernatural as traditionally conceived. The idea of fairies, elves, ghosts or goblins actually abroad in the land wreaking havoc is at best charming relic of another era to most of us.

Now to some extent this is because the fairy and the elf have been domesticated, subdued, Disneyfied and robbed of their power. For the ancient Celts, they were forces to be reckoned with.

We have a visceral reaction against anyone who takes such forces seriously today. In yesterday's New York Times, for example, there was a piece about the religious folks that Gov. Palin has been associating with. While the article was careful to say that it didn't know what Gov. Palin actually believed, it went on to describe a strain of Pentecostalism called spiritual warfare, and talked about a widely viewed YouTube video which had Sarah Palin anointed by a visiting African preacher as he prayed for her to be protected from "every form of witchcraft." The Times provided the following background on this video:

Bishop Thomas Muthee, the Kenyan preacher shown on the YouTube video anointing her as she ran for governor, is celebrated internationally as an effective spiritual warrior who led a prayer movement that drove a witch out of his town in Kenya. The removal of the witch, Bishop Muthee says, resulted in a drop in crime, alcoholism and traffic accidents<sup>3</sup>."

Now, I am all in favor of a drop in crime, alcoholism and traffic accidents, but my sympathies when I read this are definitely with the witch; I found myself wondering, I wonder what he or she really did to deserve ostracism, and I wonder where he or she is now. So our skeptical side reacts strongly against some claims of supernatural beings and powers, but I hope we can read a myth like Tam Lin with an open mind, for I think it has much to teach us. I want to invite you this morning to consider whether there are other worlds, not in a supernatural sense, but in the sense of worlds beyond our normal understanding.

Clearly there are worlds beyond our usual senses. We know from our science classes that the apparently solid bench on which we sit actually is mostly empty space, if you could look at it closely enough, with molecules made of atoms made of subatomic particles made of something even more tiny, bound up in a mix of matter and energy which shifts as soon as you start to look at it.

You also know that as you sit here at the end of the earth called Chatham that there is another realm called the ocean which starts less than a mile away in which the rules are very different, particularly under the surface. Some of us are very familiar with it, but for us landlubbers, the realm of quahogs and starfish and tuna is another world altogether, as strange as the fairy hills were to the Celts.

And another world I have just become acquainted with is the world of high finance. Until a month ago, I did not know what credit default swaps were and had only the vaguest ideas of leveraging and hedge funds. Now they are part of my daily information diet, though I don't pretend to understand them. All of this money swirling around the world, like the activity of the atoms and molecules, took place without my knowledge or caring.

Hamlet says, "There is more in heaven and earth, Horatio, than is dreamed of in your poor philosophy."

When we consider all the other realms there are, we realize that what we take for ordinary reality is a careful construction of our minds. Psychologists and anthropologists and linguists and philosophers know that we build the worlds we inhabit.

As I was driving around this beautiful town yesterday, I was reflecting on how tidy and solid it all seemed. Everyone's lawns look so well cared for; someone over on Stage Harbor Road is having major landscaping done; for a week I watched trees being removed and earth being moved around, and now new landscaping is beginning to take shape with new retaining walls being built. If they do it well, in another two weeks it will look like it has been that way for decades.

One of the attractions of New England is that rocky, solid feeling. We are a flinty lot. We like to think we can weather any storm. The rest of the country may go through upheavals, but we will remain

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<sup>3</sup>"YouTube Videos Draw Attention to Palin's Faith " New York Times October 25, 2008

unscathed.

Those of us who moved here with a nest egg may have felt that we had reached safe harbor. We invested our egg, lived off the income, bought a piece of land whose value was bound to keep going up.

But in the last few weeks, I think some of us have begun to sense a another world, a world not of solidity but of void. Some of us have begun to fear that time may come when our investments don't retain enough value to keep us afloat. Some of us are already staring into the abyss, and some of us are on the brink.

It is unsettling, to put it mildly, to sense that the world in which you thought you lived is not the only possible world. It is at least as unsettling as it must have been to Janet to realize that the father of her child was a fairy.

Why do I take up seven or eight minutes of time on Sunday morning in church attended by modern, rational people to read a ballad about a love between a Scottish lady and a fairy knight. First, because it's the finest literary product of Samhain and thus gives us an entry into what the predecessor of Halloween may have meant to ancient pagans. But second, because I think it suggests approaches to encountering other worlds.

It's always scary to encounter other worlds, and its particularly scary to think of rescuing someone you love from the clutches of another world. In another world, the rules may be all topsy-turvy. The standards of behavior you have learned may not apply.

More importantly, the shape of the problem with which you're grappling may be forever shifting right in your hands, the way Tam Lin kept changing shape right in Janet's arms. As I listen to the pundits on TV, I begin wondering, what is the shape of the crisis that we're dealing with. From one point of view, it's a crisis of too much consumer debt and not enough savings. From another point of view, it's a credit squeeze at the inter-bank level. From another it's a drop in the valuation of real estate, from another the drop in valuation of stocks. From another, it's a crisis of faith. There are political dimensions, but it is hard to spell out what they are. The shapes keep shifting.

We are in a worse position than Janet. Like her, we are wrestling with something terrifying and close at hand whose shape keeps changing. But unlike her, we have not had anyone in authority tell us what's going to happen. It may be a snake we're dealing with.

We experience shape shifting whenever we confront something that's brand new. It is a deep instinctual function of our brains when confronted by something new to try to assimilate it to something we already know. Dr. Rorschach conjectured that you can tell a lot about our subconscious experience by asking what shapes we see in an ink blot. Before there were Rorschach tests, there were clouds on which to test our imagination for shapes. There is a scene from Hamlet in which Hamlet is trying to yank Polonius' chain, and Hamlet says,

"Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?" Polonius replies, "By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed."

Hamlet says, "Methinks it is like a weasel."

Polonius says, "It is backed like a weasel."

Then Hamlet says, "Or like a whale?" and Polonius says

"Very like a whale."

My point is that cloud shapes have no inherent meaning and besides, they are always shifting in shape, but the mind is always trying to assimilate the shape to something it knows. We can't help trying to make sense, even when we know that what we're trying to make sense of is inherently meaningless.

When we try to understand what's going on with the economy, we enter the territory of trying to read a market. A market is made up of hundreds or thousands or millions of individual actors, each of whom has a brain exactly as complex as ours. We may see it as a bear or as a bull or as a bull masquerading as a bear or a bear masquerading as a bull. We may see it as driven by fear or driven by greed or driven by hope.

Like Tam Lin was to Janet, the market is intimately bound up with our well-being, and yet is dangerous and constantly shifting shape.

And there is another realm very much on our minds today, and that is the American electorate. We follow the polls closely, but we are also conscious that the polls don't always reflect behavior in the voting

booth. We make maps with red and blue and pink and purple states and try to understand the shape of the electorate. In another fortnight, the voters will have spoken and possibly we will enter into a new government founded on values very different than those which have guided our government since the turn of the century. The economic situation, of course, makes this essentially uncharted waters for the new government and for the rest of us.

I don't extol the Celtic holiday of Samhain to try to convince you that the fairy folk are going to ride en masse down Old Queen Anne Road on Friday night, or that the Selkie will come ashore at Lighthouse Beach and start talking to us. But I do put it to you that the idea of a thin veil between this world and another world, and of shape shifting visitors from the other world, are powerful and useful metaphors for the times. What I hope you might take away from these reflections is a sense that this world which has seemed so solid and permanent is actually quite vulnerable and contingent. The more news we hear about major business institutions falling, the more it seems like the ground is opening beneath our feet. It is necessary for each of us to watch our steps closely.

At Samhain, the Celts say that the veil between this world and the other world is at its thinnest. As the scholar Ms. Edwards puts it:

the barriers between the realms of the living mortals and the past dead and future unborn weakened, allowing both chaos and future hope to enter into the normal day<sup>4</sup>.

Both chaos and future hope lie on the other side of the veil.

Now to combat the Celtic celebration of Samhain, the early Christian church developed the notion of November 1 as All Saints Day, in which Christians are asked to pray for all the saints of the church, mostly for the martyrs who had perished during the time of Roman persecution before Constantine.

It appears that around the turn of the first millennium there was some dissatisfaction that there was a day to commemorate the martyrs, who presumably had gone immediately to heaven, and nothing to help the lowlier souls who were struggling through purgatory. So in 998, St. Odilo created All Souls Day for the purpose of praying for ones own departed and thus helping shorten their time in Purgatory. It was celebrated November 2.

In Mexico it has come to be celebrated as *Dio de Los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead. It is a time to remember all those who have died in the previous year. Next week, I invite you to a Day of the Dead observance during the service. You are welcome to bring a photograph or other memento of a loved one who has passed away, and we will place them on a table in front of the church and say their names out loud. In this way we can keep memory alive.

We have many windows on other worlds, if we just know where to look for them. I'd like to close with one attempt to look behind the veil, a beautiful poem by Don Marquis:

*Have I not known the sky and sea  
Put on a look as hushed and still  
As if some ancient prophecy  
Drew close upon to be fulfilled?  
Like mist the houses shrink and swell,  
Like blood the highways throb and beat,  
The sapless stones beneath my feet  
Turn foliate with miracle.  
And life and death but one thing are –  
And I have seen this wingless world  
Cursed with impermanence and whirled,  
Like dust across the summer swirled,  
And I have dealt with Presences  
Behind the veils of Time and Place,  
And I have seen this world a star –*

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<sup>4</sup>Op Cit, fn 2.

*Bright, shining, wonderful in space.*

And if you put that poem to the inspirational tune Jerusalem, you will have hymn #337. We'll sing it in a minute, after I play you some fairy music during the collection.  
Amen.

Reading: "Tam Lin" (Child ballad #39A; *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 1882-1898* by Francis James Child)

Plot synopsis: The lord of the manor forbids any women to go to the glen of Carterhaugh, for the young fairy knight Tam Lin lives there and every woman who visits there leaves something behind. Janet, daughter of the lord, goes down to anyway where she meets young Tam Lin and falls in love with him. Tam Lin was an earthly knight, but he has been captured by the fairies and held prisoner in the fairy kingdom. As the affair progresses, Janet realizes that she is pregnant. The knights around her father's castle are concerned that people will think one of them is the father, so Janet tells them that no earthly knight is the father of her child. In despair, she returns to the glen of Carterhaugh, and is pulling roses as if to try to end her pregnancy. Suddenly, Tam Lin appears and asks her not to try to kill the child. He says that tonight is Halloween, and every seven years the fairies sacrifice one of their own, paying a tithe to Hell. He fears that the tithe paid tonight will be himself.

But he says that the fairy folk will ride through the village tonight "at the mirk and midnight hour", and if Janet wants to rescue him so that he can be a father to the child, she will need to stand at the side nearest the village. He will be on a milk-white steed. She will need to pull him off his horse. When she has grabbed him, he will change shapes: first he will be a lizard, then a snake, then a bear, then a lion, then a rod of iron, then a glowing coal, which she must throw into the well. If she does this, she will have her naked knight, whom she must then wrap in her mantle for modesty. So it comes to pass just as Tam Lin predicts, and Janet wins her knight after much shape shifting. Janet's gain is the fairies' loss, and at the end of the ballad she is roundly cursed by the Fairie Queen.

1. O I forbid you, maidens a',  
That wear gowd on your hair,  
To come or gae by Carterhaugh,  
For young Tam Lin is there.
2. There's nane that gaes by Carterhaugh  
But they leave him a wad,  
Either their rings, or green mantles,  
Or else their maidenhead.
3. Janet has kilted her green kirtle  
A little aboon her knee,  
And she has broded her yellow hair  
A little aboon her bree,  
And she's awa to Carterhaugh  
As fast as she can hie.
4. When she came to carterhaugh  
Tam Lin was at the well,  
And there she fand his steed standing,  
But away was himsel.
5. She had na pu'd a double rose,  
A rose but only twa,  
Till upon then started young Tam Lin,

- Says, Lady, thou's pu nae mae.
6. Why pu's thou the rose, Janet,  
And why breaks thou the wand?  
Or why comes thou to Carterhaugh  
Withoutten my command?
  7. "Carterhaugh, it is my own,  
My daddy gave it me,  
I'll come and gang by Carterhaugh,  
And ask nae leave at thee."
  8. Janet has kilted her green kirtle  
A little aboon her knee,  
And she has broded her yellow hair  
A little aboon her bree,  
And she is to her father's ha,  
As fast as she can hie.
  9. Four and twenty ladies fair  
Were playing at the ba,  
And out then came the fair Janet,  
The flower among them a'.
  10. Four and twenty ladies fair  
Were playing at the chess,  
And out then came the fair Janet,  
As green as onie glass.
  11. Out then spake an auld grey knight,  
Lay oer the castle wa,  
And says, Alas, fair Janet, for thee,  
But we'll be blamed a'.
  12. "Haud your tongue, ye auld fac'd knight,  
Some ill death may ye die!  
Father my bairn on whom I will,  
I'll father none on thee."
  13. Out then spak her father dear,  
And he spak meek and mild,  
"And ever alas, sweet Janet," he says,  
"I think thou gaest wi child."
  14. "If that I gae wi child, father,  
Mysel maun bear the blame,  
There's neer a laird about your ha,  
Shall get the bairn's name.
  15. "If my love were an earthly knight,  
As he's an elfin grey,  
I wad na gie my ain true-love

For nae lord that ye hae.

16. "The steed that my true love rides on  
Is lighter than the wind,  
Wi siller he is shod before,  
Wi burning gowd behind."
17. Janet has kilted her green kirtle  
A little aboon her knee,  
And she has broded her yellow hair  
A little aboon her bree,  
And she's awa to Carterhaugh  
As fast as she can hie.
18. When she came to Carterhaugh,  
Tam Lin was at the well,  
And there she fand his steed standing,  
But away was himsel.
19. She had na pu'd a double rose,  
A rose but only twa,  
Till up then started young Tam Lin,  
Says, Lady, thou pu's nae mae.
20. "Why pu's thou the rose, Janet,  
Amang the groves sae green,  
And a' to kill the bonny babe  
That we gat us between?"
21. "O tell me, tell me, Tam Lin," she says,  
"For's sake that died on tree,  
If eer ye was in holy chapel,  
Or christendom did see?"
22. "Roxbrugh he was my grandfather,  
Took me with him to bide  
And ance it fell upon a day  
That wae did me betide.
23. "And ance it fell upon a day  
A cauld day and a snell,  
When we were frae the hunting come,  
That frae my horse I fell,  
The Queen o' Fairies she caught me,  
In yon green hill do dwell.
24. "And pleasant is the fairy land,  
But, an eerie tale to tell,  
Ay at the end of seven years,  
We pay a tiend to hell,  
I am sae fair and fu o flesh,  
I'm feard it be mysel.

25. "But the night is Halloween, lady,  
The morn is Hallowday,  
Then win me, win me, an ye will,  
For weel I wat ye may.
26. "Just at the mirk and midnight hour  
The fairy folk will ride,  
And they that wad their true-love win,  
At Miles Cross they maun bide."
27. "But how shall I thee ken, Tam Lin,  
Or how my true-love know,  
Amang sa mony unco knights,  
The like I never saw?"
28. "O first let pass the black, lady,  
And syne let pass the brown,  
But quickly run to the milk-white steed,  
Pu ye his rider down.
29. "For I'll ride on the milk-white steed,  
And ay nearest the town,  
Because I was an earthly knight  
They gie me that renown.
30. "My right hand will be gloved, lady,  
My left hand will be bare,  
Cockt up shall my bonnet be,  
And kaimed down shall my hair,  
And thae's the takens I gie thee,  
Nae doubt I will be there.
31. "They'll turn me in your arms, lady,  
Into an esk and adder,  
But hold me fast, and fear me not,  
I am your bairn's father.
32. "They'll turn me to a bear sae grim,  
And then a lion bold,  
But hold me fast, and fear me not,  
And ye shall love your child.
33. "Again they'll turn me in your arms  
To a red het gand of airn,  
But hold me fast, and fear me not,  
I'll do you nae harm.
34. "And last they'll turn me in your arms  
Into the burning gleed,  
Then throw me into well water,  
O throw me in with speed.



35. "And then I'll be your ain true-love,  
I'll turn a naked knight,  
Then cover me wi your green mantle,  
And hide me out o sight."
36. Gloomy, gloomy was the night,  
And eerie was the way,  
As fair Jenny in her green mantle  
To Miles Cross she did gae.
37. At the mirk and midnight hour  
She heard the bridles sing,  
She was as glad at that  
As any earthly thing.
38. First she let the black pass by,  
And syne she let the brown,  
But quickly she ran to the milk-white steed,  
And pu'd the rider down.
39. Sae weel she minded what he did say,  
And young Tam Lin did win,  
Syne covered him wi her green mantle,  
As blythe's a bird in spring
40. Out then spak the Queen o Fairies,  
Out of a bush o broom,  
"Them that has gotten young Tam Lin  
Has gotten a stately-groom."
41. Out then spak the Queen o Fairies,  
And an angry woman was she,  
"Shame betide her ill-far'd face,  
And an ill death may she die,  
For she's taen awa the bonniest knight  
In a' my companie.
42. "But had I kend, Tam Lin," said she,  
"What now this night I see,  
I wad hae taen out thy twa grey een,  
And put in twa een o tree."