

Anam Cara

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Bridget of Kildare is my kind of saint. Famous in Celtic spirituality, she is known for having twice performed the miracle of turning water to beer! While this capacity is certainly an appealing quality, I am also drawn to Bridget's strong encouragement of spiritual friendship. It is said that when her foster son came to visit her, she intuitively sensed that his soul friend had died. She counseled him to seek a new one right away, noting that "anyone without a soul friend is like a body without a head." People then believed that the soul resided in the head and so she was using an image that they would immediately understand. The suggestion was that we are incomplete without spiritual friendship, that it is critical for the life of the soul.

In the West, we are most familiar with the strain of Christianity coming out of Rome. The rising popularity of Celtic Christianity has made us more aware of elements in this stream of the tradition such as the Celts' strong sense of God's immanence in the natural world, their awareness of the sacred in everyday life, respect for the leadership and gifts of women, and the fluidity of constructs of time and space. *Anam* is the Gaelic word for soul and *cara* for friend. Thus, *Anam Cara* is the soul friend, a concept which is uniquely valued in Celtic spirituality. Originally, the *Anam Cara* was a teacher, spiritual guide, or confessor to whom one could reveal the inner workings of one's heart and mind. Author Edward Sellner, in his book titled *The Celtic Soul Friend*, notes that the role evolved beyond this more formal one to a broader practice associated with healing, ongoing transformation and spiritual mentorship. The *Anam Cara* was a personal, intimate relationship of affection and depth, characterized by mutuality and shared wisdom. The friendship was one rooted in the spirit, thus making the participants "friends of God."

The *Anam Cara* relationship was not only something Bridget advised for others, but also expressed in her own life. Numerous poems and blessings in the Celtic collection *Carmina Gadelica* speak of the ways in which Bridget's soulful companionship, even after she was no longer physically present on earth, graced the authors' lives. Indeed, quite a few of the Celtic saints are said to have traveled great distances to spend time with those they regarded as soul friends.

This ancient practice and recognized social-construct of Celtic life has much to offer us in the pace and complexity of our times today. It may well be that spiritual friendship is even more critical for the life of the contemporary soul than it was in Bridget's time. As Ira Progoff notes, our journeys are full of "solitary work" and the Celts also valued solitude and contemplation as important for the spiritual path. Indeed, the ideal Celtic recipe for soul-making balances extensive private meditation time with intensive spiritual relationships.

In its simplest form, the companionship and encouragement of a soul friend can enhance our sense of belonging to the world and aid us in overcoming isolation. In his book on Celtic wisdom, John O'Donohue explains how, in the context of the *Anam Cara* relationship, our inner landscape may be explored and illuminated in ways which are not possible alone. He notes that the deep affection found in such a friendship alters perception, bringing integration and healing. As he explains, "when your affection is kindled, the world of your intellect takes on a new tenderness and compassion."

The *Anam Cara* is a relationship which acts as a chrysalis in which the truths of our lives can be revealed, the workings of the soul explored, discernment and insight offered, and wisdom shared. Through having and being an *Anam Cara*, we may indeed find that a sacred space has been created, a place where we may be held, "gentle and firm," as mystery plays out.