

Anam Cara: The Twin Sisters of Celtic Spirituality and Education Reform

By: Paul Michalec

My profession is education. My vocation—strong inclination—is theology. I experience the world of education through a theological lens and I live theology with educational sensibilities. Hence, as I studied John Phillip Newell’s articulation of Celtic spirituality I noted passages that seemed to resonate with the writings of educational reformer Elliot Eisner. In this paper I will articulate some of these cross connections, particularly in the areas of the senses for knowing the world, the use of art to explain personal knowledge, and listening as a form of learning. The Celts speak of an “*anam cara*” [or] soul friend. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging” (O’Donohue, 2009, p. 13). To my reading, the Celtic spirituality of John Phillip Newell and the educational reform of Elliot Eisner are *anam cara*; two friends from different traditions with shared perceptions about what it means to be human and engaged in knowing the world.

Critique of dominant forms of knowing

As *anam cara*, Eisner and Newell share similar intuitions and critiques about the ways that dominant forms of knowing have obscured deeper and more complex ways of seeing the true essence of humanity, engaging the world, and creating knowledge. Eisner, for instance, points to the historical imperative in education to quantify and categorize learning. He notes that Franklin Bobbitt, a highly influential early 20th century curricularist, and others, were enamored with cataloging learning objectives: “Bobbitt listed nine areas in which educational objectives are to be specified. In these nine areas he listed 160 major educational objectives, and Bobbitt was not alone in his belief in formulating objectives. Pendelton, for example, listed 1,581 social objectives for English” (Flinders & Thorton, 2004, p. 110). The long-term consequence of

systemized-education is “that in the process of rationalization, education—always a delicate, complex, and subtle process having to do with both cultural transmission and self—actualization—has become a commodity” (Flinders & Thorton, 2004, p. 282). Under such an epistemology, non-rational forms of knowing (poetry, art, senses, etc.) are excluded from learning and cognition becomes a shallow representation of full human potential to engage the world.

With similar intent, John Phillip Newell criticizes the Imperial Church for its austere application of theology, ritual, liturgy, and sacraments to curtail the forms of human/God relationship: “What cannot be said is greater than what can be said. The tendency to name and define the Ineffable has given rise to the tendency also to standardize our experience of the Presence” (Newell, 2008, p. 94). The Celts, in contrast, embrace the ineffable and hold an expansive and unquantifiable notion of God. Like Eisner, Newell (2008) pushes back against formalized ways of knowing, especially our understanding of God: “There are ways of perceiving that have been beaten out of us. Our inner ears have been silenced, either because of modern materialism that have stripped matter of its ancient music or because of religious dualisms that have separated the spiritual from the material” (p. 51).

For Eisner, bad education is curriculum that prevents the full formation of cognition, thus stunting human ability to fully know the world. Eisner’s *anam cara*, Newell, argues that bad spiritual development is a form of evil, resulting in stages of non-being, with limitations for seeing and experiencing the divine inside, the divine outside, and the divine that is ineffable.

Senses as knowing the world

A key question energizing the work of Eisner and Newell is, how do we know anything in the world? Eisner (1996) answers by first critiquing the rationalistic foundations of education

grounded in Platonic ways of knowing: “It should be remembered that the tendency to regard cognition as something independent of both ‘sense data’ and feeling has a long history. Plato regarded knowledge that was dependent on the senses as untrustworthy” (p. 23). Instead, Eisner firmly believes in “an interdependence between sensory experience and knowing” and by sensory he means all the ways we taste, smell, touch, and physically interact with the world (Uhrmacher, Moroye, & Flinders, 2017, p. 10).

While Eisner is suspicious of the Platonic *mind/body* split, Newell (1997) is equally concerned with the *spirit/matter* separation in the Imperial Church that perpetuates fear of the senses, sensuality, and bodily ways of knowing: “Western religious traditions have tended to stop short in approaching sensuality, especially where it related to relationship and sexuality” (p. 100). In contrast, Newell (1999) posits that the senses are essential to knowing God in all things. In a burst of aesthetic ecstasy, he proclaims: “To experience the goodness in life, therefore, is to be in touch with the gift of God. We have smelled the freshness of the earth after rain. We have known the delight of biting into a crisp autumn apple. We have touched the cool smoothness of a rock, sea washed for millennia. The goodness is there” (p. 38).

Art as telling about the world

If we know the world through our senses how do we share, as Alexander Scott calls it, our “deeper part of the human being” with members of our learning or spiritual community (Newell, 1999, p. 70)? Eisner (1996) advocates for “forms of representation” as a process for making private knowledge, acquired through the senses, public and accessible to others. As he notes: “Forms of representation are the devices that humans use to make public conceptions that are privately held. They are the vehicles through which concepts that are visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile are given public status” (p. 39). Because of the

ineffable quality of deep forms of knowing, art becomes the preferred venue for going public: “And I would add that what is most educationally valuable is the development of that mode of curiosity, inventiveness, and insight that is capable of being described only in metaphoric or poetic terms” (Flinders & Thornton, 2004, p. 113).

The Celts understand God’s wisdom as “creativity, imagination, and wildness” in both spirit and matter (Newell, 1999, p. 84). And as such, Newell (2008) argues that “Celtic spirituality is more poetic than doctrinal. Belief is pointed to rather than defined” (p. 84). The crosses on the island of Iona, for Newell (1999), are emblematic of Celtic artistic expressions of God: “The high standing crosses that incorporate scripture imagery on one side and creating imagery on the other reached their peak of artistic expression” (p. xxi).

Discernment and listening

Artistic expression for Eisner and the Celts is an important way of both learning *about* the world and expressing understanding *of* the world. Yet to see the world this way requires the capacity to discriminate between competing data points. For Eisner this means “discernment”—knowledge formation—and connoisseurship which he defines as: “The ability to notice and differentiate qualities” (Uhrmacher et. al, p. 12). And by qualities he includes both visible and invisible elements of the world: “We learn to recognize the features of a friend’s face, but not simply to be able to pick that person out of a crowd. Faces tell us much more. They provide nonverbal clues that we learn to ‘read’ or interpret for information about how a person is feeling, their attitudes, and that person’s relationships with others” (Eisner, 1996, p. 12).

For Celts, “the concept of listening for the heartbeat of God within all things, ourselves, one another and the whole of creation was a feature of the spirituality of the Celtic mission.” (Newell, 1997, p. 32). Newell (1999) sees listening with the inner eye as the foundation of deep-

attention and learning: “The Celtic tradition invites us to look with the inner eye. In all people, in all places, in every created thing the light of God is shining. It may lie buried and forgotten under the layers of darkness and distortion but it is there waiting to be recovered” (p. 9). Newell, like Eisner, draws on the human face as an example of listening deeply when he tells the story of looking into the face of a baby and seeing God looking back.

One becomes a connoisseur of wine by living/experiencing the wine with all of one’s senses; and one becomes a listener of Celtic spirituality by living into the life of the natural world with all of one’s senses. A person enters into relationship with the wine and one becomes a Celt by moving into relationship with the divine in all things.

Conclusion

John Phillip Newell (2008) claims that “there is a longing in the human spirit for what is immense, for what expands our vision further into the unbounded-ness of the universe” (p. 120). One way to reach for the unbounded-ness of the universe is with the help of an “*anam cara* [who] brings epistemological integration and healing. You look and see and understand differently” (O’Donohue, 2009, p. 16). As *anam cara*, Eisner and Newell offer each other new ways to see the universe expansively. Elliot Eisner offers an educational lens to Celtic spirituality and John Phillip Newell offers a sense of spirituality to energize the learning process.

References

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