

“Nin-din-awe-maagan-i-dok,”

Celtic Spirituality and Indigenous Wisdom: A Way Forward, As One

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“My biggest ask of humans is quite large,” says the northern bat to a room of reindeer, wolf lichen, bog and other beings. “It’s a shift in consciousness, and an understanding that... we are all in relation.”

Talking bats? And lichen? If this sounds like a scene from a Disney movie, it’s understandable. In fact, this a transcript of a recent “Interspecies Council” that took place in the little town of Oppdal (oh-p-dah), Norway. Each year, humans gather to imagine what non-humans might have to say about the ecological issues facing their region. Begun in the 1980s, by two Norwegian environmentalists, the council’s aim is not to stand in the way of development, but to ask, “What would our use of land, water, and other natural resources look like if all life forms who depend on the area had a say?”

Events such as the “Interspecies Council” seek to acknowledge what Indigenous peoples have always known; everything is connected. Human beings are just one part of creation. We are all dependent on each other and every living thing. These ideas are intrinsic to Indigenous teaching and culture. And they were reflected in the beautiful Land Acknowledgement by artist and junior elder, Philip Cote.

As Christians in 2026, we acknowledge that many of our traditional church teachings have promoted domination and exclusion. Proclaiming who is inside and outside the love of God has led to some of our greatest tragedies. And viewing “stewardship” as synonymous with “ownership” has wreaked havoc on our environment. But buried in our past is another way of being God’s people in the world. A way that did affirm, “Nin-din-awe-maagan-i-dok;” All are my relations. All are one. Let’s go back to ancient Rome.

It’s the year 330 CE. And arriving in Rome is a strange, shambling Christian teacher from what we now call Britain, bringing with him to this busy urban center a theology imbued in nature, inclusion, and “walking humbly with God.” Pelagius wanders the city preaching that human beings are part of creation but not the lords of it. He sits with women as they spin and weave, teaching them to read and talking about scripture. Pelagius describes humans as essentially good. We fall short. We live unskillfully. But we carry an unquenchable divine spark, “planted more deeply than all that is wrong.” Pelagius wonders if anyone needs these grand church buildings he sees, erected at huge cost of life and resources. And do we really need priests and bishops to facilitate our relationship with the Divine? Christians in his homeland meet among the trees, gathering in circles that honour everyone as equals in the sight of God. Pelagius insists that guidance and wisdom exist in every heart. Sacred Presence reaches out to us from every rock and river, blossom and beast.

In 2026, this way of knowing God and living in creation may sound like a breath of fresh air. To the church authorities in Rome, it was terrifying. Christianity had only just become the state religion. Overnight we'd gone from illegal to legitimate. From renegades to rulers. Our leaders are now sitting at the emperor's table choosing doctrine and establishing a hierarchy of authority and control. Women are excluded. They were essential in the early church, but women aren't welcome in Roman corridors of power. And Pelagius isn't welcome either. He continually refers to Christ as "Teacher" and "Companion." The correct terms are "Lord," "King" and "Conqueror." Creation is subservient to mankind. And human beings are sinful at heart. Their only hope is the salvation offered by God through the one orthodox church. There isn't room for two perspectives. Not if we want to take full advantage of the government's backing. To continue to share in the power of authority, we need to stay aligned with the empire. Pelagius was angrily pronounced a heretic and his theology of interconnectedness blasphemy. Pelagius was banished from Rome and anyone who spoke of him was threatened with immediate excommunication.

But Pelagius' ideas of our place in the world didn't vanish. Celtic Christian Spirituality, as we now call it, was enthusiastically practiced for another 700 years in parts of Germany, throughout England, Scotland, Ireland, and some Nordic countries until orthodox church authorities finally drove it underground. No more would Christian ministers proclaim God's goodness at the heart of all creation. No more did we recognize Divine essence in trees and lakes or preach our interconnectedness to each other and the natural world. And those who did say these things were ruthlessly punished.

This is not to say that Imperial Christianity, as we might call what first developed in Rome and which we largely inherited, didn't accomplish anything valuable. Christians have often used our power for good, creating educational institutions, hospitals and hospices, and leading the charge for social justice in many ways throughout our history. But the theology of domination adopted so long ago fostered an attitude of superiority and entitlement, separating us from each other and the world of nature. Now, in the painful work of reconciliation, we have been given the opportunity to see how some of our beliefs have caused us to "wound our lives, the lives of others and the life of the world." In this moment, many of us feel ready to reclaim a theology that recognizes our interconnectedness. A worldview Indigenous peoples have always known. Today, their teaching invites us to open ourselves to new relationships and voices. Sometimes of a surprising kind.

In 2021, the residents of Ekuanistshit (Eco-on-ist-it), a First Nation community of about 500 people, located at the mouth of the Mingan River, Quebec, gathered with local municipal authorities to make an extraordinary decision. They gave a stretch of their local river, the Mutehekau Shipu (Moot-eh-hey-caw Ship-ew) or "Magpie River," legal personhood and rights—the first resolution of its kind in Canada. "We have always known

the river is alive. Our ancestors always said that,” explains Innu activist, poet and educator Rita Mestokosho (Mest-two-koe-shoe), “If the river is sick, then we will be sick. That is why we need to protect her.” Giving legal status to the river not only acknowledges the right of all creation to exist and to flourish, it also brings an essential viewpoint to development plans that can seek to be good for all.

Speaking about reconciliation, Australian Indigenous author, teacher, and activist Lilla Watson insists, “If you come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Among the gifts of reconciliation is humbly acknowledging that not only our survival, but our liberation is bound up in laying down our attitudes of domination and separation. While sermons preached by northern bats or meadow daisies may not be in our immediate future, we can recapture the ancient teachings of our Celtic Christian ancestors who saw divine goodness and sacred presence in all creation. We can uplift the wisdom of Indigenous peoples and see ourselves as one part of the intricate web of all existence. And together we can proclaim, “Nin-din-awe-maagan-i-dok.” We are all relations. We are all One. Amen.

(Scripture is within the bulletin.)



“Community Strength”
By Indigenous Artist Simone Mcleod