Ceridwen and her Nine Maidens

An explanation of the Celtic myth of Ceridwen and her Nine Maidens, which refers to an annual rhythm of nine forty-day periods, plus five extra days at midwinter.

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Ceridwen and her Nine Maidens is a Celtic myth concerning the goddess Ceridwen, the goddess of poetic inspiration, who is attended by nine maidens who take it in turns to stir the brew in the goddess' cauldron. Each maiden takes 40 days to stir the brew, and to breathe on the fire so that the brew is kept at the right temperature. Then she hands over the task to the next maiden. Whilst the maidens are stirring the brew and breathing on the fire, Ceridwen gathers roots, herbs, grains, nuts and honey from nature, all according to the seasonal time of the year and the lunar calendar, and adds them to the pure spring water that was in the cauldron at the start of the year, when the process began.

At the end of the year, when the brew is completed, it is known as the brew of *Awen*, and is able to bestow a state of illumination on anyone who drinks it.[1]

The fundamental meaning of the myth is that Ceridwen is the spiritual archetype of the pure, loving mortal soul that each of us could be – a natural soul or personality (psyche) of sufficient moral purity that is necessary to reach any kind of enlightenment.

The cauldron represents the body of Ceridwen, and the brew within the cauldron represents Ceridwen's psyche. The nine maidens are each aspects of Ceridwen that have to be developed in turn so as to reach illumination. They are akin to nine stages of soul development, experience and learning. The herbs and other things that are added to the brew as time progresses symbolise the experiences that Ceridwen has as she proceeds with her nine-stage development towards full or universal enlightenment.

Nine times 40 days totals 360 days, which is an ideal year, an ideal cycle of time, akin to the 360 degrees of a circle. However, in an actual annual cycle there are an additional five days (six in a leap year). The five extra days, which in Celtic and other traditions occur at midwinter, represent a fivefold blissful state of full illumination – the *Awen* of the Celts – in which one experiences and knows the truth of divine love in its fulness of universal light.

Other ancient cultures, such as the Ancient Egyptian culture, allegorised these extra five days as the birth of five children of light. Then, on what has become known as Christmas Day, the new cycle begins, with the soul more knowledgeable and loving than before.

Fundamentally this myth concerns how each of us (i.e. each person or soul on earth) experiences life throughout the year, and meets the challenges, opportunities and help that is presented. The myth presents it from the point of view of each of us being a loving person

who is striving to attain illumination or knowledge of truth. In other words, a loving soul who is striving to learn about the wisdom or laws of nature, physical and metaphysical, and what is best to do when, in a loving way.

The Celtic myth and other such myths use an annual cycle of time, but this simply represents all cycles of time. Each cycle of time can hold all truth, all wisdom, like a microcosm of the Macrocosm. The cycles of time can be great or small, it doesn't matter, as the same truth is in every cycle of time. However, an annual cycle is the best to learn from, as we have the Earth's nature and the Sun to help us, and everyone throughout the world recognises a yearly cycle. For this reason the Celtic myth, like other myths, uses an annual cycle.

In each stage of a cycle of time we learn a little bit more of the truth concerning that cycle of time, until we reach the end of the cycle and achieve illumination. Such illumination is a revelation or knowledge of the truth, the wisdom, in the cycle of time we have just experienced.

In order to attain illumination, the mortal natural soul (which, in these myths, is considered feminine in respect of its spirit or angel) needs to fall in love with and marry her immortal spirit counterpart, who loves his beloved mortal natural soul. This marriage is known as the mystical marriage of lover and beloved, spirit and soul, which bestows what is called partial illumination.

Lover and beloved, united as one in holy matrimony, become the individual immortal-mortal spiritual soul, which can then rise further in consciousness to achieve full illumination in the second marriage of the individual spiritual soul with the universal divine light of love. The experience of full illumination produces a profound delight, which is symbolised metaphorically as the couple's child or children of light.

The Christian Church still enacts this out with every traditional marriage ceremony, wherein the bride enters the church at the west end and gradually makes her way up the central aisle of the nave to marry her betrothed in the heart of the church. After the individual marriage of the couple, they process together up through the chancel to the high altar for communion with the Divine. After this holy communion (which is the second mystical marriage), the couple return down the central aisle hand in hand (or arm in arm), and share their love and happiness with all who are assembled there, who love them in return. In this way, the Two Great Commandments are acted out: love God, who is Love, and love each other as yourself.

The traditional ideal church is architecturally designed to represent a human being containing seven major chakras. The nave, representing the abdomen, contains the root, sacral and solar plexus chakras. The crossing (where the transepts cross the nave), representing the chest, contains the heart chakra. The chancel, representing the neck and head, contains the throat, brow and crown chakras. In the crown chakra is the high altar, seat of the Divine Presence, which is a Holy Trinity. Holy Communion is an experience of all three aspects of the Holy Trinity – universal light, presence of love, and pure Being.

In Hebrew Kabbalah, the bride is represented by Sephira #10 of the Tree of Life. Sephira #10 is also symbolised by the holy grail or vessel containing pure water, symbolic of the bride. The bride signifies the pure (or virgin) natural soul, who has been baptised, purified, and is as a result pure in love and therefore holy.

Sephira #10 represents all of us as mortal natural souls, especially when morally pure or holy, as tradition sees the soul as feminine in respect of its archetypal spirit or angel.

The kabbalistic teaching is that #10, with help from the other nine Sephiroth, gradually ascends the Tree of Life; first to Sephira #9, then to Sephira #8, then to Sephira #7, then to Sephira #6, where she marries her individual lover (her individual spirit or angel) in the heart of the Tree of Life. Then lover and beloved – the immortal spirit and mortal soul united as an immortal-mortal spiritual soul – progress to Sephira #5, then to Sephira #4, then to Sephiroth #3-2-1. These final three are a Trinity-in-Unity, where the second marriage with the Universal Light of Divine Being takes place, which completes the process. Then delight occurs, which is the birthing of light – a manifestation of the divine love that is all in all, together with an experiential knowledge of that light of love.

In other words, there are nine stages of experience, with a knowledge of each stage gained as the soul progresses sequentially through each stage.

In a fully enlightened state, Ceridwen becomes the Triple Goddess, having completed the three stages of maiden, mother and crone, with each stage having its own three stages – hence 3 x 3 = 9. When Ceridwen reaches full enlightenment, she gives birth to her children of light or delight. This, to the Celts, was *Awen*, a revelatory knowledge gained by experiencing true wisdom through love in action.

In Ancient Egyptian mythology, Nut and Geb's five children are Osiris, Isis, Horus the Elder, Seth and Nephthys. What is now called Christmas Day is when Horus the Younger was born, which started a new annual cycle.

There is another Celtic myth concerning Ceridwen, which concerns an annual time cycle known as a year and a day.[2]

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[1] See *'Inspiration and Illumination: IOA and Awen'* article.

[2] See *'Ceridwen and Taliesin'* article.