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The Center of the Universe

BY DIAN KILLIAN, PH.D. • THE GAELIC EFFECT: HOW THE IRISH LANGUAGE CAN SAVE THE WORLD • 21 SEPTEMBER 2026



One of many portals... [Poul nabrone Dolmen, the Burren] (Photo by author; all rights reserved.)

First, *fáilte romhaibh anseo, a chairde* (welcome here friends)! I value honoring agreements so want to name I'm seriously late this week (was under the weather and getting taxes done!). I hope this essay's worth the wait. Thank you for being here.

Recently I was at the Féile Scéalaíochta Chléire, the International Storytelling Festival on Cape Clear. At the opening event, we were welcomed in Irish: “*Fáilte go hÓileán Chléire. Níl áit níos fearr faoin spéir.*” (“Welcome to Cape Clear Island—no place better under the sky.”) This is akin to saying, “The best place under the sun”—i.e., the whole world. (Note Irish avoids mentioning the sun!) Chléire is indeed a special place. To emphasize this, a popular t-shirt depicts Ireland as the “other”

island: “an island off the coast of Cape Clear.” Chléire of course is at the center of it all.

Yet I have always felt this way about Ireland as a whole. For me, this little island-nation—the whole island, smaller than the state of Maine—is the little-known center of the universe.



Knowing where you are (Cape Clear). (Photo by author; all rights reserved.)

“Numinous, like numinosity, comes from Latin *numinosum*, referring to a dynamic agency or effect independent of the conscious will.” —Jung

The first time I had an inkling that I’d discovered the center of the universe was looking out over Sleah Head on the Dingle peninsula. The words radioed inside my head: *This is God’s country*. I was startled. This is not how I usually think. (Isn’t every inch of the earth sacred? I don’t usually reference God this way.) Yet Sleah Head could startle anyone. Mountains rise behind you, with (on that day) soft clouds lazily drifting down the lush fields, knitted together with stone walls and flower-full hedgerows; the fields abundantly speckled with sheep. Sea birds cried above and spiraled

out, with all this vivid landscape suddenly dropping into the sea. With an odd *meh* from the fields, the resounding sound is of waves echoing up the cliffs—the water below not a muddy gray-green, but the shocking translucent blue of Kingfishers. In the distance, numerous other islands poke up their heads. The world goes on forever.

There's good reason Kerry is known as "the kingdom." Sleat Head is an *áit aoibhinn* (a delightful, beautiful—even enchanting—place). *B'aoibhinn le mo chroí é* (my heart delighted in it)—and still does. It all felt so big and small at once; diminutive in scale, yet expansive; soothing, but electric. In the distance, a thin, black ribbon of road winds its way back towards Dingle; below, an even smaller road inches down to the gold strand. This has always fascinated me about Ireland. Other places are just BIG (the Alps, the fjords, the Grand Canyon). How does Ireland do both at once?



Near Sleat Head... and the best way to see it: as a bird. (Photo by author; all rights reserved.)

This was my first glimpse into the center of the universe. It was also one of my first experiences of “everyday magic.” Others use this term to describe mindfulness practices: gratitude, or seeking beauty in the mundane. Yet for me, everyday magic is not something I consciously choose or invoke. Rather, it’s like those stories of being transported by faeries—where you suddenly and unexpectedly find yourself in a strange field or a new place and you have no idea how you got there. It’s disorientating and unexpected and outside your control. I think of that line, “surprised by joy” (first used by Wordsworth and then C.S. Lewis). It’s close to what Carl Jung meant by the *numinous*: “a profound, awe-inspiring experience of a dynamic, mysterious agency that seizes and overwhelms human consciousness from outside the control of the ego.” Similar to faeries, the *numinous* “seizes and controls the human subject, who is always rather its victim than its creator.” [Jung]

Like the Dr. Seuss story, *Horton Hears a Who*, it can often involve something that seems very small (even minuscule) and yet expands out to an enormous scale. Who could imagine—without magic—a whole city on a speck of dust? It can also be a lonely experience. Especially because it might seem unremarkable from the outside—even by others observing the same thing—it can be hard to describe. (It took a lot for others to finally hear what Horton heard.) “The *numinosum* is ...the influence of an invisible presence that causes a peculiar alteration of consciousness.” As such, it has a “specific yet inexpressible quality.” [Jung] This is part of its nature, because it’s not fully of/in this world. It’s connected to the world but the world is the portal: suddenly there’s something much bigger than what you expected (and what the physical eye can see).

“The *numinosum* – whatever its cause may be – is an experience of the subject independent of his will.” [Jung]

This leads me back again to liminality and the Irish words *ceantar* and *alltar*. (See *The In-Between Spaces*). On one level, these words seem like opposites: the tangible and the unseen. Yet in fact they are intimately connected. The land is the portal. It’s the *tobar* (the sacred well)—or the cave or river—that expands consciousness. [See *Caves and Cairns*] All the human-made ones, such as Newgrange (as amazing as they are!), are an attempt to mark what’s already there: a place of charged, (magical) presence.

Inherently connected to animism, magic reflects a world that’s fully alive (see *A World Pulsing with Life*). This is how it transports us to new places and outcomes, as seen repeatedly with the *Tuatha Dé Danann* and in *The Táin*. Amergin Glúingel (Amergin the White-Knee), the chief poet and druid of the first Celts, the Milesians, also had a profound response when arriving in Ireland. Unlike in Genesis, where everything is claimed by naming it, in the *Song of Amergin*, the druid sees that he is everything: “I am the hawk on the cliff, I am the tear-drop of the sun, I am fairest of the flowers, I am the boar of valor, I am the salmon in the pool...” (The beautiful new song by Clare Sands below is inspired by Amergin’s incantation.)

Amergin showed how “vital” is connected to “vitality.” Both come from *vitalis*, meaning “of or belonging to life,” from the root *vivere* (to live). Originally referring to life-sustaining functions, “vital” came eventually to mean something of critical importance: life energy and what matters most.

For me, that’s another quality of everyday magic: aliveness. In that moment you feel fully alive, even on fire. In the musical *Hades Town*, Eurydice asks Hermes why she would possibly go with Orpheus. Hermes replies, “Maybe because he’ll make you feel alive.” Isn’t that what we’re all looking for—aliveness? Corporations try to sell it to us in a bottle—literally (look at all the ads for soft drinks; why else would we spend so much on sugar water? It’s because all those ads show fun and connection—loads of *craic*—with other people laughing, talking, dancing).

This aliveness is connected to transformation and new possibilities. One of my favorite stories is about the Hindu monkey God Hanuman. He’s under a spell, so has forgotten he’s a God. It’s not until he’s trying to save Lord Rama’s wife from an evil demon that someone reminds him, “Hey, you can do this. You’re a God!”—and the spell is broken. He then picks up an entire island and saves the princess.

The truth is that everyday magic can happen anywhere. Where is your center of the universe?

“The numinous cannot be conquered; one can only open oneself to it. But an experience of the numinosum is more than an experience of a tremendous and compelling force; it is a confrontation with a force that implies a not-yet-disclosed, attractive and fateful MEANING.”—Jung

So many cultures have physical places that they consider the *omphalos*, the navel of the world. *Axis Mundi* is the Latin term for it: the “axis of the world”—the invisible vertical column or sacred pillar (like a world tree or mountain) that anchors this realm with the sacred. In Ireland, the Hill of Uisneach is considered the umbilical cord: the physical and spiritual center of the country. According to the Copernican principle, the universe has no spatial center; all locations are equivalent. Yet maybe these ancient cultures could see (or feel) something that Copernicus couldn’t? Everywhere is sacred. Yet particular places are portals.

As a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), I am more prone to noticing the numinous. I also especially crave it. Elaine Aron, the psychologist who pioneered the study of HSPs, has written explicitly about this: how HSPs deeply crave and more readily experience contact with the numinous. I definitely experience more “everyday magic” here in Ireland. I also experience the numinous through the Irish language. It’s one way I know this is the center of the universe for me, my *omphalos*. I am grateful to be here.

At Scoil Scairte in Clare this summer, Kathy Scott spoke about *dán*—one’s purpose, gift or calling in life. She said that often it’s right under our own nose and we don’t see it. Fairytales are full of stories like that: dire warnings, omens, and even magical help that is overlooked or not heeded. So how do we notice that fertile ground under our own feet—the particular magic that’s offering herself to us, now? How do we connect to the sac-

red and our own primal chord—to help shift into greater possibilities? We seem to need that ancient grounding—and center—more than ever.

Hoping you discover some magic this week—or it finds you,

Dian (i mBaile Átha Cliath—in Dublin)

P.S. Above I refer to magic as “she.” In the Irish language, the word “magic” (*draíocht*), that also means wonder and awe, is a feminine noun. The Irish language is too, of course—feminine, and magic!

P.S.S. Miss the recent chat about the Blasket Islands? Check out Part One here.



In memory of Séamus, my familiar...

Not able to become a paying subscriber? *Ná bí buartha.* (Don't worry.) You can support The Gaelic Effect by "buying me a cupán tae" or a pint here. Thank you!

