

If you would acquire great wisdom, you will have to pay a price - after all, "A gift looks for a return." Odin hung nine days on Yggdrasil to gain the runes. He pulled out an eye to drink from Mimir's well. And, in the third of Odin's quests for knowledge and power, his seizing the Mead of Inspiration was the culmination of a long sequence of events that began with a journey and included a summer's work in fields of Suttung's brother, and more.

I found out the hard way about the price of wisdom when I made a pilgrimage to Ireland. Was the price worth what I gained? Absolutely. In fact, my motive in writing this is to urge you to travel to the lands of your own ancestors, and see what they have to give you. Perhaps you can use my own experience as a starting place for a pilgrimage of your own.

Just a few days before boarding the plane for Eire, I had returned from a long drive to Texas and back during which I wrapped up my mother's estate and claimed the inheritance due me from my immediate ancestors, namely my parents. The upcoming Ireland trip seemed to me to have a parallel intent, so I affirmed to myself the intention of claiming my spiritual inheritance - of receiving from the Ancestors those invisible, intangible thing they wished to pass on to me.

The first McNallen (or McAnallen as they call it over there) came to America in 1788. Our knowledge of the clan line would have stopped there, but for the hard work of Brendan McAnallen of County Tyrone in researching the family history. He had found, tucked into the Annals of Ulster,

Less than two days from the time I was supposed to climb onto the airplane in San Francisco, I went to the doctor complaining of chest pains. He suspected an unstable angina and ordered me to drive immediately to the hospital and admit myself for a series of tests. It was starting to look like my Ireland trip was over before it had even begun!

During the next twenty-four hours I underwent a battery of tests. My blood enzymes were checked for heart damage and I was hooked up to an EKG machine. The next morning I was given the ultimate ordeal in the form of a stress test on a treadmill. My heart rate was gradually increased to its theoretical maximum value as a cardiologist closely watched my heart's reaction for any abnormalities or problems. I surprised the medical staff, and myself, by not only passing it but by demonstrating exceptional fitness. My upcoming journey, nearly cancelled, was once again on schedule!

The possible angina had turned out to be nothing more than tightness of the chest muscles caused by tension. It occurred to me that crisis - usually a spiritual crisis, but at any rate a crisis of one sort or another - had to come before pilgrimage. The spiritual journey must spring from stress, regardless of whether the destination is Mecca, Jerusalem, Uppsala...or Ireland!

I will skip the travelogue, noting only that my eleven days in Ireland were no holiday. Most days I was tired - fatigued from trying to do too much, under stress from

having to drive on the “wrong” side of the road (and shift with my left hand!), and drained by all the logistical difficulties that arise when traveling in a foreign country. I had two close calls with possibly fatal accidents, which did nothing to add to my ease. Yes, this was definitely a pilgrimage, not a holiday!

I made a point of going to Newgrange, the hill of Tara, Dublin’s magnificent National Museum, a couple of the more important stone circles, and a few historical sites that were most of interest to me. But the highlight of the trip, spiritually, was a trek to a place now called Navan Fort, but known in the heroic tales of Ulster as Emain Macha.

The tales of the Red Branch, of Finn MacCool and Cuchulaine, mention this vital concentration of religious and political might. But my interest in Emain Macha was more personal; the first-ever use of what seems to be my family name comes from this location when, back in the sixth century, “Fergus, son of Nellan” was killed on the spot (Our family’s more recent historical roots center only a few miles away). In other words, Emain Macha is the earliest place where my blood takes the name it bears today. It is only natural that this would make it the focus of my spiritual quest.

By “coincidence,” the bed-and-breakfast where we ended up for the night turned out to be about a fifteen minute walk from Emain Macha. Sheila and I did a daytime reconnaissance, then went back after dark for private rites.

I climbed the hill in the darkness, a bottle of mead from Bunratty Castle in one hand and a horn in the other. I was alone; Sheila gave me time to mount the summit and time to speak in private with the Holy Powers and the Ancestors. I remember the lights of Armagh in the distance, other beads of light here and there on the horizon, a gentle wind, the mellow feel of the spring air against my skin. It felt like a night from my childhood, or, better said,

Much that I did and felt are too sacred to share, but the essence o