

The Story of Airmid and the Healing Herbs

You might remember this story if you cast your mind back to our first Anam Cara workshop where we told you about the Battle of Moytura, the battle between the Tuatha de Danann and the Fir Bolg. Well, this story directly relates to that. It is a short one but an important one as it brings one of the important female deities to the forefront, someone who probably was seen as having a minor role in our Celtic folklore but whose story explains how healing and medicine came into the world.

Airmid was a Goddess, one of the Tuatha De Danann. With her father Dian Cecht, the God of Healing and her brother Miach, an alchemist and healer himself, she healed those injured in the Second Battle of Maigh Turaigh. Now you may remember that in this battle, the king of the Tuatha De Danann, Nuada, lost his arm and because a High King had to be perfect in body and mind, he ran the risk of losing his royal title. So Dian Cecht, the healer, fashioned an arm out of pure silver and as this made him whole again, Nuada could continue as the High King and rule his people once again.

However, Airmid's brother Miach believed that with his and his sister's healing expertise, they could come up with a better solution. Combining their skills, they built Nuada an arm of flesh. But when their father Dian Cecht found out, he was furious. How dare Miach shame him in front of the High King and the other members of the Tuatha De Danann. He attacked Miach in a jealous rage, and though Miach was a skilled healer who could keep up with his wounds in battle, eventually he dealt him a savage blow to the head that ended his life.

After Miach's death, Airmid was devastated. She went to his grave to grieve every day for a year, and as she wept her tears of grief, they watered the earth. From the earth and Miach's body, all the healing herbs of the world sprang – 365 in all according to the number of sinews and joints in Miach's body – one for each day of the year. Realising the importance of this gift, Airmid gathered all the herbs in her cloak, collecting and organizing them according to their properties for healing. They spoke to her and told her all of their healing powers. As she laid them out on her cloak as she was taught, she organized them into combinations that could cure every ailment on earth.

However, as jealousy eats into the soul, Dian Cecht found out about this and still angry with his son Miach, in his rage, he lashed out at Airmid and her cloak and the herbs were scattered to the four winds. For this reason, no living human knows all the secrets of the herbs, not where to find them, nor how to

use them. They are all there somewhere in the world, but only Airmid remembers how to use them to heal.

There is a postscript to this story.

One of the other stories associated with Airmid is the Well of Slàine in Co. Meath. The myth tells us that she built this well with her Father and with other healers and using a few herbs that she had managed to save from Dian Cecht's fury, they were able to sing incantations and with the herbs bring warriors slain in battle back to life. However, as the Tuatha De Danann began to move away from the world into the land beyond beyond, An Tír na nÓg, their enemies piled stones into the well so it could no longer be a place of healing. Eventually the well was Christianized to Our Lady's Well and it stands today in Slane, Co.Meath as a symbol of healing and ancient heritage.

Reflection Questions

- 1 This is a story about lost wisdom and healing. It's easy to get caught up in thinking that everything was so much better in the past, and focusing only on what we have lost. Is there a place in your life where you need to let go of the past and move more fully into the present moment for your own healing?
- 2 The healing plants grow, watered by Airmid's tears of grief as she tends her brother's grave. Sometimes we can discover healing by tending – or leaning in to – our own grief. Is there a grief in your life that needs tending so that healing can begin to grow?
- 3 This story highlights the magical healing powers of nature. Have you ever experienced healing from nature? How has nature replenished you in times of loss or hardship?