

Fionn MacCumhaill and the Salmon of Knowledge

Retold by Margaret Brady

Fadó, fadó in Éirinn... that's how we begin our stories in Irish - long, long ago in Ireland – fadó, fadó in Eirinn... nine hazel trees grew overhanging a deep pool on the river Boyne. Nine was a very significant number for the old Celts, and these were very significant trees, for they came from the other world, and it was said that all the wisdom of the other world could be found in the nuts that grew on their branches.

But, as is the way of such things, no one could ever quite find the trees, or find the pool and so the only creature to eat the hazelnuts that fell from the trees was a salmon who swam in the pool, who would eat them as they dropped into the water. And the salmon gained all that wisdom and became known as the salmon of knowledge.

It was said that the person who ate the flesh of the salmon would absorb all its wisdom and plenty of people tried, but for many years, no one succeeded. It is interesting to note here the Celtic view that all wisdom comes from nature, and that it is by becoming one with nature (eating the flesh of the salmon) that we become wise.

Now, living in Ireland at that time was a boy called Fionn MacCumhaill. His father had been a great warrior – the leader of the band of warriors called the Fianna - but he was dead, and his mother was determined that young Fionn would grow up to take his place. So, to prepare him to lead and serve his people, she brought him to the Sliabh Bloom mountains, where he was trained by two women, one a warrior and one a druid. Fionn apprenticed himself to the wisdom of the feminine and he learned, not only to fight and to defend himself, but he also learned the ways of nature, and of how to survive in the wild, and he learned the magic of the druids, to protect himself against supernatural forces. These were all things that would make him a worthy leader in years to come.

But it was not enough for a leader to be skilled in battle, he also needed to be wise – and this is a lesson just as apt today as it was then. A leader had to know the lore of his people, the poetry and music and history and law, and so, when they had taught him all they knew, the two women sent Fionn to apprentice to Finnegas, an bard who lived on the banks of the river Boyne, in County Meath.

Finnegas was a poet of great renown and a very learned man. He had spent seven years living by the Boyne, trying to catch the salmon of knowledge. Every day, he sat on the banks of the river and tried to catch the salmon. Because Finnegas was an ambitious man, and he wanted to catch that salmon so that he would be celebrated as the wisest man in all of Ireland. Like many learned men, Finnegas thought well of himself and he wanted others to think well of him too.

So the boy Fionn apprenticed himself to Finnegas, and Finnegas taught him all the things he needed to know to be a wise leader. And when he wasn't teaching Fionn, Finnegas sat by the river and waited for the salmon.

Now one day, Finnegas finally caught the salmon he had been hunting for so long, and he shouted for his apprentice to go and make a fire and cook the salmon. And he left Fionn to do all the work while he dreamed of the glory that would follow, now that he would be celebrated as the wisest man in Ireland. And Fionn went and got the stones and set up a fire pit and prepared the salmon and put it on a spit and prepared to cook it for his master.

But as he was turning the spit, a drop of sizzling oil flew out of the fire and burned his thumb. And without thinking he put his thumb into his mouth, and sucked it like a little child, to take the pain away.

When Finnegas came back, he took a look at the salmon, and he took a look at Fionn, and he saw that something looked different with his apprentice. As he looked into his eyes, he saw that they held wisdom and knowledge that they hadn't had just a few moments before. And Finnegas said to the boy, "did you eat the flesh of the salmon of knowledge?" And Fionn said "No, master, I didn't. All that happened was that I burned my thumb and put it in my mouth to make it feel better."

And with those words, Finnegas felt his dreams come crashing down around him. Because he knew now that it was the boy Fionn who had gained the wisdom of the salmon of knowledge, and that that dream would never be his. And in that moment, Finnegas saw the folly of his own ego and he began to see how his dream had trapped him. He too began to taste the seeds of true wisdom.

Turning back to his student, he said "Well Fionn, now that you have tasted the salmon of knowledge, you will be the wisest man in all of Ireland. So you must sit and eat the flesh of the salmon, so that its wisdom will go into you." And, something he had never done before, Finnegas humbled himself to serve his apprentice. He finished cooking the salmon for him and he served it to him.

So Fionn ate the flesh of the salmon of knowledge, but when he had eaten he didn't feel any different than he had before. He didn't feel that he knew anything he hadn't known before. And he said, "Master, I don't think it worked." And Finnegas said to him, "Fionn, you touched the salmon with your thumb, and you tasted the salmon with your thumb. Now, put your thumb back in your mouth and see what happens." So Fionn put his thumb back in his mouth and sucked it like a little child, and this is a symbol of how we gain wisdom – that we have to be like a little child again, to enter beginners' mind and let go of all of our preconceptions, surrendering our ego to nature to make space for wisdom to enter. Because as soon as Fionn sucked his thumb, just like a little baby, all the wisdom of all the worlds came flooding into him. And from that moment on, he was the wisest man in Ireland. And that was also the day when his teacher Finnegas became truly wise as well.