

## Thin Places

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I want to speak with you a little bit about thin places, 'áiteanna caol' as they might have been called in Irish.

The ancient Irish were fond of the threshold spaces – the edges of things. They believed that the boundaries between the worlds were thin and at certain times and in certain places, they were thinner than others. At these 'thin' times, in these 'thin' places, it might be possible to see or travel through the veil that separates us from the invisible world all around us – to make a connection to the spirit world.

Samhain (Halloween) is the thinnest of thin times, as it served as the threshold between one year and the next. For our ancestors, the old year ended at sunset on October 31, but the new year didn't begin until sunset the following night. There was a whole 24 hours of threshold time in there when the spirits might wander. Anything might happen. This is why you traditionally play fortune-telling games at Halloween, and why you light Jack O'Lanterns in pumpkins or turnips, and dress in costumes, so that any mischievous spirits that might be abroad would think that you were one of them and would leave you in peace. It was said if you did encounter an otherworldly trickster and became lost or confused, you should turn your coat inside out to rid yourself of the enchantment and make sure you were back on the right side of the veil! Carrying a pinch of salt was also considered a good way to bring yourself back to the everyday world.

Of course, Samhain is also the time for honouring the ancestors and remembering our loved ones who have passed. It coincides with the Christian feasts of All Souls and All Saints. For many of us, the thin times and places are not about supernatural occurrences but about feeling close to loved ones who have gone before us.

Thin places can be actual places. They were often threshold spaces in a very physical way. For example, caves were often seen as thin places because they were literally entrances into the earth. The Celts believed that the Sidhe, or fairy folk, lived in the hollow hills, so venturing into the earth was a game for the brave or foolhardy.

Among the most famous of such caves is Oweynagat in Rathcroghan in Co. Roscommon, said to have been the birthplace of the legendary Queen Maeve of Connaught. Maeve was a fierce warrior queen said to have married five kings. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this made her promiscuous and a bit of a disgrace, but if you think back to what I told you about the sacred marriage that took place between the king and the land, a mythical queen who married five kings is almost certainly a sovereignty goddess representing the land. Oweynagat is also said to have been the home of the battle goddess Morrigan and her three magical, terrifying giant wildcats who would emerge at Samhain to terrify the locals. The 12<sup>th</sup> century monks wrote of this cave as the 'gateway to hell', making it perhaps not the kind of thin place that you might want to visit to meditate!

Other kinds of thin places include fairy hills, old Neolithic passage tombs often marked by a single hawthorn, believed to have been entrances to the otherworld. This is the mound of the nine hostages, the oldest surviving monument on the hill of Tara, the traditional seat of the high kings of Ireland. It is a passage tomb built around 3000BC, and people were buried there for at least 1500 years. You can easily imagine how stories might have sprung up around a place like this.

The sea shore was also thought to be a thin place, perhaps not surprising, given that the sea was essentially unknown. You were never entirely sure what might emerge – or what might happen if you went in.

Also revered were mountaintops like Knocknarea in County Sligo where a cairn marks Queen Maeve's tomb and sky meets earth.

Lakes and wells were also traditionally thin places - places like Glendalough where the lakes, long before Christian times, were said to be home to a great supernatural serpent (representing druid wisdom and knowledge), or

Lough Gur in Limerick, sacred to the goddess Aine, or indeed holy wells all over the country, where life-giving water, often associated with healing, pours forth from the earth. Still today, if you visit a holy well such as St Brigid's well in Co Kildare, you can see that offerings are often left by people who have visited to pray or to ask for healing.

A thin place is a threshold, not just physically, but in our consciousness. It's the transition time in our lives – moments of birth or death when we can feel that something indefinable has shifted and will never be the same again. It's the shift we make when we enter a ritual space, when we invite the ancestors to be present in a healing circle, when we believe that something greater than we can see and touch is accompanying us. And this is why people visited thin places – because they held the promise of transformation, of gaining wisdom or inspiration or gifts from spirit.

And of course, thin places don't just exist in Ireland, but in every country and culture. We might think, for example, of the New Mexico Pueblos, or one of my favourites from my time living in the US – Yosemite valley, ancestral home of the **Ahwahnechee** people.

Or in Canada, we might consider sacred sites revered by those of both first nations and European descent, such as Lac Ste Anne in Alberta, whose healing waters were recently visited by Pope Francis.

There is a reason that those places traditionally known as thin places are out of the way – isolated, remote, often hidden. It's because it's hard to make that shift without stillness. It's hard to connect spiritually if you are constantly caught up in the hustle and bustle of the everyday. It's hard to reach a place of unknowing if you are stuck firmly in the midst of familiarity and certainty. Yet that is the promise of a thin place – that we don't know what might come next, it might be beyond our imagining. We might just be transformed.

This is why we invite you to seek the thin places in your own life. You don't have to descend into the darkness of Oweynagat, or climb Knocknarea, but find the silence, the threshold space, the uncertainty. Find the parts of yourself that make you question what you know to be true. Find those places where your life and your consciousness brushes up against the unknown – the fears, the shadows, the unspoken dreams - and challenge yourself to stay there for a while.

## Reflection

1. So we are on the other side of the Samhain threshold into the dark.  
Now we are ready to step through another thin place into the light... the light that comes after the darkest time of the year.
2. How is this THIN PLACE for you in your life right now. Can you name it?  
What is the threshold place you are in right now?
3. What are you leaving behind? What dark place are you emerging from?