



Aspen – Tree of courage

*Vital spark of heavenly flame,
Quit, oh, quit this mortal frame!
Trembling, hoping, lingering, flying!
Oh, the pain, the bliss of dying!
Cease, fond nature, cease thy strife,
Let me languish into life!*

*Hark! they whisper--angels say,
Sister spirit, come away!
What is this absorbs me quite,
Steals my senses, shuts my sight,
Drowns my spirits, draws my breath?
Tell me, soul, can this be death?*

*The world recedes; it disappears;
Heaven opens on my eyes; my ears
With sounds seraphic ring:
Lend, lend your wings! I mount! I fly!
O grave, where is thy victory?
O death, where is thy sting?*

Alexander Pope 1688- 1744

Aspen is known as the trembling tree (P.tremula) and Christian lore states that the tree shudders at the thought that its wood was used for the crucifix. Other traditions equate the

movement of its leaves (due to its long flat leaf stalks) to speech and language. The movement of the leaves can be seen as the tree whispering or communicating with spirit and you can see why when you stand under its boughs and hear it rustling.

The rustling leaves may be that the tree can hear from afar and is stirred by what it hears. The tree therefore can be seen as an entrance to other-worlds and may be used for divination.

Horrible grief, test tree or Aspen.

Distinguished man or wood.

Kinsman to the Birch, Aspen.

Additional name for a friend.

Book of Ballymote 1391

In the ancient Celtic system of the Ogham the tree is seen as a Test Tree and a later common phrase 'to tremble like an aspen' could be related to this. To face fears and highlight your weaknesses takes great strength, are you prepared to tremble like an aspen to move on in your life?

Oscar, a Celtic warrior from Irish literature, had to kill the High King against impossible odds to protect his kinsman. He is likened to an aspen and described as 'no way daunted despite terrible injury'.

What does it mean to be a Warrior in Celtic mythology?

In Celtic lore there are bloodthirsty battles and warriors fighting against all odds but they also contain a feminine aspect within these blood thirsty tales.

As mentioned in earlier essays when we enter the Celtic twilight, we start to shed the conditioning of absolutes and arrive in a place betwixt our conditioning.

The distinction between sexes is not so apparent in early Celtic tales as women fight alongside men and some of the most powerful warriors are women. Fostering is a key component of Celtic literature and the young are often trained and raised by foster parents.

The warrior's bloodline may be mixed so they have aspects of the enemy and their comrades running through them, such as Lugh Lamfada whose Mother is part of the very Giant race that

he fights against. Lugh has to kill his own Grandfather who is the leader of the Giants. This theme continues in later stories such as Arthur's son Modred who fights against him and in Robin Hood who is both Saxon and Norman.

These stories inform us that our role models and guides/trainers that are not blood relatives have extremely important roles in shaping our future. It may be that the learning of the child is opposite to what the blood relative can offer and this is not a failure on anyone's part.

Coming back to the male and female attributes which run through both sexes we can continue to blur the edges as the other distinct feature of the Celtic warrior is their sensitivity and their use of poetry and emotion. The battles fought are often part of a mythology imbued with romance and magic as the warrior's life infuses with other realms and the beauty of music and nature.

Eleanor Merry (author and poet on Celtic traditions) speaks of the way in which the warriors come into the energy of oak when entering into battle and then bathe in the beauty of love under the birch boughs.

The key Celtic warriors such as Fionn MacCuaille, Oisín, Aengus, Mongán, Diarmid and even the ferocious Cúchulainn are poets and thinkers as well as warriors associated with the knowledge of the Bardic arts. They are strong men with a sensitivity that permeates their lives, bringing us back to the trembling aspen which enables us to conquer fears.

The male stereotype is again under scrutiny in these tales as typical images are pushed aside. The Dagda who is said to be the chieftain of the Tuatha de Danann, the tribe from which many of the Irish Celtic deities come from is coarse and crude and the stories are happy to mock him despite his key status. In Fiona MacLeod's works she calls Dalua from the faerie realms a fool as well as a being of immense power and portrays Aengus as a figure of love and death. This way of being is typical of Celtic stories which weave their way through the opposites to find wholeness.

The strong man of the tribe is said to be Ógma whose attributes are associated with language and eloquence as well as war and aggression.

Male beauty

The beauty and love of man is embodied in Aengus Óg who is born of the union of the Dagda (the land) and Boann (the river). He has birds circling his head which are said to be the forms of his tender kisses. He takes the form of the swan to be united with his sweet heart creating divine music and yet he is powerful indeed and is thought of as a deity that can wield terrible

magic and bring death as well as life. In one tale he guides Diarmuid, his foster son who he has blessed with irresistible beauty and charm.

Aengus helps Diarmuid overcome many great difficulties as Diarmuid elopes with Fionn MacCuaille's betrothed Grainne. In one scene Diarmuid has to face the baleful indomitable Giant Searabhan Lochainn which no body of water can drown and no weapon can pierce him.

As Diarmaid and Grainne fled across Ireland they built Dolmens at each place they spent the night. Dolmens are two massive lime stones parallel to each other over which is placed a third stone, the cap stone, creating a crude kind of shelter. Today you can still see the Dolmens all across Ireland which the locals call the "bed of Diarmaid and Grainne", bringing the passion of love into the landscape for eternity.

When Cuchulainn and Ferdia, the two most powerful warriors of the Ulster cycle meet in battle, the tenderness between them is incredible as they grieve the fact they are on opposing sides.

*'Ah, Fer Diad, I loved the blush in your cheek,
your fine, upstanding young form,
your clear eye, your way of speech,
I loved the way you held yourself.'*

Tain Bo Cuailnge (Cattle raid of Cooley) by Ciaran Carson

The Cattle raid of Cooley which features Cuchlainn is filled with blood thirsty action and yet still such tender poetry permeates this epic story.

We find therefore in Celtic tradition the greatness of speech and poetry combined with love and music are as valued in a man as power, strength and physical prowess. That women are as active and ferocious as the men and each change roles as both may be powerful or whimsical according to character rather than gender.

The great giants of Irish mythology are often depicted as grotesque with deadly attributes and yet one of their key kings and his son are described as the most beautiful in all of Ireland. When Elotha son of Delbaeth courted Eru, a Queen of the Tuatha de in the text of The Second Battle of Moytura translated by Whitley Stokes he is described thus:

'...a man of fairest form. Golden yellow hair was on him down to his two shoulders. A mantle with bands of golden thread was around him. His shirt had trimmings of golden thread. On his breast was a brooch of gold with the sheen of a precious stone therein. He carried two white silver spears, and in them two smooth riveted shafts of bronze. Five circlets of gold adorned his neck, and he was girded with a golden-hilted sword with inlayings of silver and studs of gold.'

In the same source Elotha predicts that his son will be seen as beautiful and that *'for every beauty thing that is seen in Ireland, whether plain or fortress or ale or torch or woman or man or steed, will be judged in comparison to that boy...'*

The aspen seems to embody these differing characteristics. It shakes and quivers, grows quickly and dies early just like the stereotypical warrior but also is able to create its own woodland. In Britain I have visited several aspen woodlands that have probably been created by one rootstock. In Utah (USA) one single aspen is thought to cover an area of 106 acres!

Although the single tree is short lived in North America it one of the oldest living organisms in the world as the same root stock is producing new shoots as it has done since the last ice age.

It seems just like the warrior you can strike the tree down but still it bounces back ready to fight a new day from a secure rootstock.

A further association with the aspen and warriors is shields have also been made from this tree and the Greek word for aspen (aspris) means 'wood to make shields' reminding us of its connection to warriors and going forth. This tree can therefore help us find the courage to face our fears as well as testing us before moving on.

Aspen is the knowledge that you are never too advanced to feel fear and shake with grief. This is the realisation that will take you to a place of protection and an advancement of knowledge.

In our own lives the fear is more likely to be standing up to what we believe in or being ourselves no matter what the outcome. Are you prepared to face loneliness, humiliation or loss of material wealth to be true to yourself?

The uses and ecology of Aspen

**Aspen Populus tremula (Latin) Eadhadh (Ogham) Aspris (Greek)
Black poplar Populus nigra White poplar P.alba**

The Ogham name Eadhadh is most commonly associated with the aspen which is our only native woodland poplar. In the British Isles however, the tree as an individual trunk which only lasts 50-60 years before succumbing to heart rot. Its root system can live for much longer but is easily killed by other tree competitors as aspen is intolerant of shade. This tree has a history therefore of benefitting from human interference as it grows well in a coppiced wood and especially when deer eat other tree species which would have otherwise suppressed it.

Due to modern practices of planting and neglect the aspen is now in decline. Aspen does not easily reproduce from seed as the seed has to germinate within a week and needs to be exposed to prolonged immersion in water. The suckers it produces do vary and some experts claim to be able to tell the difference between male and female trees. One notable variation is the 'giant aspen' which grows in Suffolk and Essex to a much larger size than the usual species. Although Aspen will grow happily in wet soils that do not drain such as clay, it has been shown to deal more effectively with drought than ash or birch in the dry summers of 1975-6. It seems to avoid habitats where there is water movement such as plateau or valley alder woods, preferring more stagnant water habitats. Aspen is a tree of cold climates and with birch and sallow was one of the first trees to colonise Britain after the last ice age.

Aspen has soft white wood which perishes easily and is poor building timber. Although ignored by the modern forester there are a surprising amount of references to it in medieval documents maybe due to the fact it grows well in coppice woods, and all timbers at that time were put to use. It was considered to be one of three non-coniferous softwoods (alder and black poplar being the other two), and therefore sometimes incorporated into building structures such as homes and windmills. As a specialist wood it can be used for carving and sculpture but was traditionally used for arrow shafts and clogs. In fact, authorities were actively encouraging its use for arrow shafts in the 1400s due to a plentiful supply.

Aspley Guise (Beds) and Stonham **Aspal** (Suffolk) are places named after the aspen and may indicate the tree was more common outside of a woodland habitat than it is today. Eadhadh, the Gaelic name for aspen, can be translated as 'most buoyant of woods' and indicates its use for the making of oars and paddles. Aspen flowers before it comes into leaf and is wind-pollinated.

Our other native poplar is the black poplar (*P.nigra*) referred to in Medieval documents as 'popeler'. It is a large non-woodland tree and once one of the most common farmland trees in Eastern England. It is now rare and only occasionally seen. The black poplar has distinctive rugged boughs once used to make cruck frames. These are curved timbers used to hold up

roofs especially in medieval barns.

The black poplar stands, a black outline against the sky with large heavy curved branches sweeping down to the ground, oozing sap known as balsam indicative of the Goddess of Death.

When a new tree was planted at docking time a lamb's tail was buried under it as a gift to the Goddess. Ointments can be made from the buds of this tree to treat bruises, inflammations and gout. The sap or balsam from the tree can be used as incense.

The last poplar tree I would like to mention is the white poplar (P.alba). It stands in stark contrast to the black poplar with its wonderful silvery downy leaves which flutter in the wind that cannot fail to uplift one's spirits. Like white willow this is the species most commonly associated with witches, especially medieval French witches.

There is a debate as to whether this tree is a native to Britain. Often thought to have been introduced to this country in the 1600s. It is referred to in documents dating from 1200-1300 as 'abel'. Whether it is an early introduction or a true native we may never know.

This tree has a leaf with 5 points symbolic of witches and is said that the balsam was used to help witches fly at night when rubbed onto their bodies. The white leaves are said to move you into a trance, give the gift of eloquence when placed under the tongue and connect the tree to the moon. Its distinctive white bark can be used to make a rather pleasant tea which is used for pain relief.

SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES FOR ASPEN

Aspen is a tree which invites us to recognise our achievements and encourages us to come into our own as well as to shake and tremble to face those things that challenge us.

Do you have unfinished business that you need to face?

Are you allowing fear to hold you back in your life?

Can you enable yourself to be gentle and kind when the world challenges you?

Deepening your connection with Aspen

Finding a mature aspen tree is worth the effort, it truly fills the skyline and dances in the wind. Listening to its messages can bring much clarity into your life. As you connect with the tree you can embrace the qualities of its ability to live a short time and yet its determined spirit to make the most of that life as it grows speedily and spreads effortlessly. This is further enhanced by an aged rootstock, a foundation that is undaunted by time. Can you build a solid foundation that will support others long after you have passed away?

Practical tasks

If you wish to make a tea from poplar bark, I recommend that you use the bark of white poplar (*Populus alba*). The bark is stripped in June but please only do this if you can identify the tree and not cause any damage.

The safer option is to go to a local herbalist or online from Tree harvest who are a family business which provides herbs that are fair trade. Visit: <https://www.tree-harvest.com/>

The aspen has soft white wood which is a delight to carve and work with. You could prune some of its suckers without damaging the tree at all. Once you have the wood you can meditate with the tree through the wood at home.

May the determined energy of aspen help you face challenges in your life effortlessly.