



Choosing a Soul-Friend

When is someone able to witness to the souls of others? When she is able to witness her own soul first. When is someone able to correct others? When he can first correct himself.

—Colman mac Beognae, *Apgitir Chabaid* (trans. CM)

The idea of the *anam-chara* (anum-KHAR'a) or soul-friend, arose in the early Celtic monastic tradition. Ideally, each monk or nun had his or her own spiritual adviser and companion, who was sometimes also the person's confessor. The task of a soul-friend also included offering suggestions and setting tasks that would help correct the person's imbalances.

Each one of us needs our own special soul-friend, someone who can offer nonjudgmental attention as well as words of encouragement, someone in whom we can confide our secret fears and apprehensions as well as our joys and successes. Soul-friends offer us a very necessary reality check and bullshit detector when we delude ourselves or get into deeper waters than our abilities can support. A soul-friend, chosen from the ranks of our mature and discreet friends, is one who loves us sincerely and holds the good of our soul paramount.

A soul-friend must show resourceful perception and gentle strength, dismantle illusion and mirror reality clearly, encourage practice and cultivate trust, curb the tendency to be rash but not diminish the zeal that fuels it. The choice of a soul-friend to accompany us on our spiritual journey is determined by her unswerving dedication to our soul beyond considerations of emotional appeasement or polite restraint. Only the truth and a sensitive hand can bring polish to our soul.

Caitlin Matthews, *The Celtic Spirit*