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**VISCERAL GRIEF – IMPRISONED SOUNDS.
KINAESTHETIC BODY MOVEMENTS IN THE SCOTTISH
KEENING AND HIGHLAND BAGPIPE PIBROCH TRADITIONS**

Keening. The Bible. A Return to Reason.

In the Book of Jeremiah written (650-570 BC) we hear... “Reason within yourselves and call for the Keening Women to come. Send for the wise skilled women to come, to let them quickly raise a wailing over us. So that our eyes may run down with tears and our eyelids flow with water.” (Ch9, Verses 17-20.)

At a time of great suffering for the People of Judah, keening is prescribed here as a vehicle for the restoration of reason and balance and the release of human distress. The practice of wailing at ritual mourning has remained a common practice indigenous to many traditional societies.

The Scottish Highland Clan and Its Keening Women

In Medieval Scotland, Highland Clan Chieftains retained the services of Keening Women, or “mnathan tuirm” as part of the clan retinue. Other significant roles within the court of the clan chief, included Bards (oral historians), Sennachies (wisdom keepers and tradition bearers) and, Harpists, and, more latterly, Pipers.

Keening women officiated at funerals, creating an intentional “egregor”, or entrained group thought container for grief, facilitating both the un-cried tears and the transition of the soul to “Tir nan Og” - The Land of Perpetual Youth. This was done through a combination of orchestrated wailing with accompanying kinaesthetic body remonstrations. Overwhelming grief was thus afforded a physical vehicle for release and psychological resolution through shared community grief ritual.

1642 – The Practice of Keening is Banned by the Protestant Church

In 1642 at the Synod of Argyll, the Scottish Protestant Church outlawed the practice of keening or “coronach“, and the keening women were divested of their grief tending role.

“It is ordained that every minister both in preaching and catechising endeavour to inform them how unseemly to Christians, and offensive to God and scandalous to others the like practice and carriage must be.”

Part of the prevailing belief among the clergy, it appears, was that in moments of unrestrained howling the Devil might enter in.

Similar happenings took place in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Despite this dictum, however, the practice was to sustain itself in isolated regions, until well into the 20th Century.

The Clan Piping Schools and the Pibroch Lament

This chapter in history (late 1500s to early 1700s), was also marked by the zenith of the Clan Piping Schools, which, under the patronage of the Clan Chieftains, taught their pupils though the use of sung vocables or “canntaireachd” (chant). It was arguably during this period that the finest Highland bagpipe masterpieces were composed.

The music known as “pibroch”, came in three categories. Salutation Tunes (to honour clan nobility), Gathering Tunes (to assemble clansmen for battle) and Laments to honour passing of noteworthy figures. Pibroch is known as “Ceol Mor”, or big music, distinguishing it from “Ceol Beag”, or small music such as reels, jigs and strathspeys - the popular music of the people.

Woven into the Pibroch compositions were the sounds and textural expressions of the natural landscape which gave birth to them. From the jaggedness of majestic ancient rock formations, to the ebb and flow of the tides. During this period too, whole families were wiped out by the scourge of smallpox. The sounds of mourning, sounds which remain essentially unchanged over the passage of time, permeated human experience. Underpinning pibroch laments lie the sounds of grief in the human voice - the downward cadences of wailing, and staccato sobbing.

1974 – The Writer’s Personal Encounter with the “Lost Practice”

The writer, as a young student social worker, encountered the keening completely unexpectedly on the Island of Lewis in the remote Outer Hebrides.

Born into a traditional singing family she recognised, within the spectacle, sound cadences familiar to her own musical ear. And reminiscent of the bagpipe laments.

She was required to visit a mentally troubled old lady who was seen as a nuisance in the village as a compulsive hoarder and whose bizarre behaviour included stealing silver foil and milk bottle tops and filling her home with them. The lady was likely to have been born in the 1890s.

Communication was difficult as she was a native Gaelic speaker with no English, who lived alone.

This lady, it was later discovered, had lived through the “Iolair disaster which had befallen the islands in 1918. (On the 31st December 1918, the whole island was in celebratory mood, waiting to welcome home its young men who had survived World War 1. Tragically one of the two ships carrying the men capsized in a gale within plain sight of the assembled islanders with catastrophic loss of hundreds of men. The women were reduced to combing the beaches the next morning to drag washed up bodies from the sea).

Movements and Sounds Observed

The following spontaneous ritual took place on the eight separate occasions and lasted many minutes each time.

Perched on a low stool, Murdina suddenly began to wail.

The wailing was rhythmic “AAA EEE! AAA EEEE WAEeee! MARRA AAA! MARRA HAAAA! OCH OCH! Repeated circular sound happened, interspersed with sobbing. She brought her arms above her head and mirrored the rhythmic musical wailings - waving her arms slowly up above her head and then to the floor.

On occasions she knelt down hammering the ground, wailing. At other times hammering her chest.

The writer, after the first outpouring, shocked and at a loss for words, intuitively knelt on the floor opposite her and mirrored her sounds and body movements. In what became an interaction, the sounds and movements were shared.

This spontaneous mirroring action appeared to evolve a therapeutic response, as after the outpouring of wailing was spent, the lady approached her each time for the comfort of an embrace.

A Plea for Cultural Retrieval of Keening.

Today we live as global citizens in a time of increasing existential threat to our well-being. Daily we face the terrifying spectacle of the loss of our natural home - Mother Earth.

The ancestors considered keening and death ritual physical release as central to the healthy evolution of society.

“Reason within yourselves and call for the Keening women to come“. Part of God’s spoken Word.

Which begs the question...

Has there ever been a more appropriate time in human history to retrieve and revive the ancient wisdom practices of the keening women ancestors?