

Irish Arts Center | NYC

In spring 2020, Irish Arts Center teachers across music, dance, language, and storytelling [scrambled to think of engaging ways to digitally adapt their classes](#). As every theater and classroom in New York sat empty, and unease permeated people's attempts to make a "new normal" amidst pervasive loss and the wails of ambulance sirens across the city, these teachers inventively conceived ways to access joy and playfulness by uniting people around shared interests. They offered new knowledge, and perhaps most importantly, community, as a weekly salve. Two repeat students—Elise Hanley and Cecelia Beyer—found solace in these classes, while also, themselves, sustaining their own communities against isolation: Hanley as an Episcopal priest (associate rector) at Church of the Epiphany on the Upper East Side, and Cece as a rabbi at Temple Sholom in Bridgewater, NJ.

Reverend Elise Hanley's grandparents immigrated to the United States from Ireland as children, and, when she herself was a young child, her grandmother had attempted to impart the Irish language on her, teaching her Hail Marys and Our Fathers in Irish. Barely seven, she was uninterested in the language; it wasn't until she was a teen that she became suddenly "enthralled" by it after meeting a native speaker, and came to love Irish trad music. She says, "It took over 30 years to finally start learning the language, but it feels like"—she exhales in a sigh of relief that sounds like homecoming—"to finally be doing it."

Raised within the Catholic church—where women to this day are refused the title of priest—Hanley switched to the Episcopal Church, having felt from a young age the calling to be a priest. In her first position in New Haven, Hanley began learning the Irish language. She says, "One of the things that has been important to me, in finally beginning to learn the language, is learning some prayers and how to mutter some basic sentences at God in Irish—I'm still trying to get that down!"

She relocated to New York to work at Church of the Epiphany, just a few weeks before the pandemic overwhelmed New York. Much like Irish Arts Center teachers, she suddenly had to navigate adapting her services to Zoom, finding a way to connect with congregants, and create a sacred space, from her own home. As everything shut down and her professional life went online, she enrolled in her second ever IAC class (having taken Irish step dance many years back) and her first IAC class online—taking Irish Language II: Beginners via Zoom with award-winning TV/radio producer and native Irish speaker Siobhán Ní Chiobháin, and was struck by her "infectious, warm, welcoming energy."

"Even though I know I'm going to mispronounce everything and make mistakes, she makes me feel comfortable making those mistakes so I can learn from them," she says.

Hanley notes how Ní Chiobháin's classes approach Irish in all its vital contemporaneity—whether she's sharing Tweets, puns, or the occasional song by Irish-language hip-hop trio Kneecap. "She brings in stuff I never would have found on my own. It's another view into not just the language but the culture and the history, and it's done in a really energetic way."

Rabbi Cece's embrace of human multifacetedness—whether cultural, linguistic, or artistic (she's classically trained in violin, ballet, and voice, but also loves playing folk tunes, and competes in Irish step dancing and sean-nós singing)—parallels Irish Arts Center's own educational ethos. Its classes can open up new worlds for anyone of any age and various skill levels, whether as a prolonged passion, a means for finding community, or simply something new to engage.

Rabbi Cece, though distantly Irish by way of the Appalachian on her mother's side, did not grow up with Irish culture in her household (or even, at first, realizing she had Irish ancestry), but rather developed an appreciation for it on her own: taking tin whistle lessons at 12 with a then-college-aged Séamus Egan (incidentally, the brother of IAC's bodhrán teacher, Siobhan Egan-Moore, with whom Rabbi Cece's husband Gabriel took online classes at IAC this spring, alongside introductory language classes with Siobhán Ní Chiobháin). It was through connecting to numerous traditions at Irish Arts Center, however, that Rabbi Cece got in touch with the full extent of her passion for Irish culture.

"My second year of rabbinical school, I needed to get out of my Upper West Side bubble," she describes. "I looked at IAC and they had an introductory adult Irish dance class, and I'd always wanted to learn this. I had been a dancer—I did musical theater, that was my hobby, I was that kid—and tap, ballet, and all that. I always used to joke that I was trained in classical ballet, classical violin, and classical voice, and everything I wanted to do was folk dance, folk music, and folk singing. I found this class and that was the end of that—I've been competitively Irish dancing since that first class at IAC."

Her journey to learning the Irish language started with a simple desire to connect to, and sing along with, the folk tunes she loved: "I wanted to be able to sing along to Clannad and Altan and know I was pronouncing everything right," she says. That gave way to her own singing: "With the music I sing liturgically, similar to Irish music, in particular when I'm singing the sean-nós music, you're telling a story. There's a performative element to all singing, but my job is to let the prayers do their work and inspire the people in the room to something higher. The end goal of both things that I love is to be a vessel for the music, for communicating the emotion and the story of the piece."

These various arms of her cultural learning meant she was always circling the Irish language itself—which, as she took classes and became more and more comfortable, brought her closest to what she describes as her "Irish soul." She elaborates, "When a person wants to convert to Judaism, we say that they have a Jewish soul, and the conversion process is just aligning their soul with their outer life. A friend of mine jokes that I have an Irish soul. Yes, I have Irish DNA somewhere in me, but my soul has this deeper connection to something bigger than me that is Irish."

Now, scroll down Rabbi Cece's Twitter timeline and you're likely to find tweets like, "My phone just autocorrected 'the city' to 'Athenry.' Huh? #IrishRabbiProblems" hovering among various witticisms and observations about both Irish and Hebrew, insight into her work as a rabbi, and amplifications of Irish language activism conversations (as well as a requisite Bernie Sanders mittens meme and a *Wild Mountain Thyme* parody).

"I didn't realize the deep dive I was going to take into it," she says, "that five semesters of IAC language classes later; a weekend of immersion later; a couple of IAC Irish language day programs later; I would be interviewed last year for the [Motherfoclóir](#) podcast as the 'Irish language speaking rabbi.'"

Both Rabbi Cece and Reverend Hanley's experiences of the past year in key ways mirror those of IAC teachers: sustaining community around traditions, storytelling, and mores within a contemporary framework—and, in the shift of all facets of life online, having to completely recalibrate to nurture those communities away from the physical spaces that hold and contextualize them.

From her own work, Reverend Hanley recognizes the extra energy and warmth needed to connect with people over Zoom. "Whether it's Siobhán's lessons or my sermons, we're curating an experience without the usual comforts of the class, the blackboard—or the church, the stained glass windows, the organ, all the things that focus attention or reverence or immediately suggest community. You have to start from scratch in a sense. Having to lead that so frequently, it's great to get to be a student and simply absorb. It's a real gift not being in charge!" That said, the class and her work haven't remained completely separate: Ni Chiobháin helped her prepare a verse of scripture in Irish for Pentecost Sunday.

She recalls of the class, "I'm a more extroverted person, I actually *like* being in Zoom groups when they're well run, so I found the class a really good chance to meet new people—you can zoom in from anywhere, and I've made a couple of acquaintances I would have never met from all over the place. We sometimes broke off into small conversation groups and we all struggled together, or just opined about how terrible everything in the world was. Especially in the early weeks of the pandemic, it was chaos at work figuring out what we'd do, and getting to start the class felt like a breath of fresh air and a real source of sustenance." She'll be starting her third consecutive class with Ni Chiobháin this semester.

Rabbi Cece—who likewise had to teach and hold services online this year—said of the reasons it's crucial for her to both create and seek community within both cultures she loves, "I love the richness of my Jewish life and Jewish tradition and what I do for a living. My friend John Aherne, one of my early dance teachers at IAC who's now actually a priest, says he felt a calling from God. I never felt a calling from God. I felt a calling from community, a calling to connect to something bigger than myself. And similarly, there's this whole other part of me that craves the community that wants to get together and play tunes and speak in Irish and talk about this gorgeous corner of the world, to fulfill that other part of my soul. Well, this year we didn't have the choice to get together in person, but the online classes allowed me to continue studying and meet new learners, cause I always value finding more like-minded people."

Ultimately, she keeps coming back to IAC not only for its perpetuation of tradition, but for the bridges it creates with the present and future. "When I was 12, I'm sure I was interested in leprechauns or the beautiful greenery of the shamrock. And I love a trad session in a pub, but IAC is also very much about what modern Ireland feels like. Whether it's in their approach to education or in their programming—with contemporary theater, for instance I remember ThisIsPopBaby's *RIOT* with Panti Bliss, which I loved—there's so much to offer and so much to enrich your soul. It's like, come for the leprechaun, stay for the drag queen."

—Moze Halperin