



# TRILITHON

THE JOURNAL OF SCHOLARSHIP AND THE ARTS  
OF THE ANCIENT ORDER OF DRUIDS IN AMERICA

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# Trilithon

The Journal of Scholarship and the Arts of the  
Ancient Order of Druids in America



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Winter Solstice, 2019

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*Colophon*

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My tidings for you: the stag bells,  
Winter snows, summer is gone.  
Wind high and cold, low the sun,  
Short his course, sea running high.  
Deep-red the bracken, its shape all gone  
The wild-goose has raised his wonted cry.  
Cold has caught the wings of birds;  
Season of ice—these are my tidings.

*Ireland, 9th century*

# Editor's Introduction

Welcome to the 2019 issue of *Trilithon: The Journal of Scholarship and the Arts of the Ancient Order of Druids in America*. I am writing this, now four months behind our originally intended release date, in a sunny window in downtown Washington, DC. It is a gorgeous fall day, with crisp, clear air. This release, our sixth, marks my second year as editor of this publication. It is a team effort, to say the least, relying on the copyediting acumen of Karen Fisher, the savvy of our layout artist, Robert Pacitti, and the editorial coaching and cover art of now Grand Archdruid Dana O'Driscoll. We hope you enjoy what you read here and will consider contributing to a future issue.

Please allow me to say a few words of thanks to our past layout and design lead, Paul Angelini. Paul joined the *Trilithon* team in 2015 and set to learning layout and design techniques in order to oversee production of the 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 issues. He brought a good deal of humility, positivity, and open communication to his work on the team, introducing new ideas and working hard to learn the specifics of production as he problem solved any issue the team encountered. It was a pleasure to work and learn with Paul, who capably produced the first issue I oversaw as editor and taught me a good deal about teamwork during that process. Paul will be missed! We welcome Robert Pacitti as our layout and design expert and look forward to the synergies that come of his new energies and visions.

This issue of *Trilithon* welcomes new authors and sees the return of familiar names. Some contributors in this issue responded to my request for essays that spoke to the experiences and practices of druids who live and carry out their work within cities: Erin Rose Connor's contribution, "Urban Druidry: The Cauldron of the City," and Grand Archdruid Emeritus Gordon Cooper's piece, "A Just City," kick us off with thoughts that recur throughout this issue—cities are the site of magic and spirit. But organizing and planning within cities requires vision and a commitment to socially just principles. My own piece, "The City and the Druid," makes clear, however, that the city is an underrealized location that is primed for druidic work.

Echoing with this attention to cities throughout this issue is the recognition that climate change is already dramatically impacting the ecosystems upon which we rely. Dana O'Driscoll's piece, "Druidry for the Twenty-First Century: Practicing Nature Spirituality in the Age of the Anthropocene," makes visible this pressing realization, and Claire Schosser's piece, "Gaia and the Cauldron," explores the hidden environmental message in the Mabinogion's story of the cauldron of renovation. The grief, fear, and sorrow of these realizations are echoed by the two poets high-



lighted in this issue, William Herrington (“Last Butterfly”) and Jason Stieber (“Endlings”), who reflect upon personal encounters with the last of a species.

Readers will find other, more typical, contributions from druid writers in this issue as well. Dana O’Driscoll’s piece, “Channeling the Awen Within: An Exploratory Study of the Bardic Arts in the Modern Druid Tradition” OBOD’s 2018 Mount Haemus Award essay, is reprinted here and explores “the impact of the bardic arts on the lives of druids practicing bardic arts.” Nancy Forest shares her candidate essay with us, making clear connections between Jungian psychology and Druidic philosophies. Lisa Jacobs reviews three books of interest to druids: Barber and Barber’s *When They Severed Earth from Sky* (Princeton University Press, 2004), Chamovitz’s *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (Scientific American, 2012), and Hall’s *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (SUNY Press, 2011). Additionally, I share a piece about creating Imbolc corn dollies for use in rituals and to bless my home. We end this issue’s nonfiction entries with another cross-community exploration, an interview with Byron Ballard, author and “Village Witch” of Asheville, North Carolina. In this interview, Byron speaks to her work as a community advocate and informant about the Appalachian tradition.

On behalf of the Trilithon team, we hope that you enjoy this issue and learn from the many practices and experiences shared herein.

A H-uile Beannachd/Every Blessing,  
Moine Michelle

# Letter from the New Grand Archdruid Into the Future of AODA

*An earlier version of this letter appeared in AODA's Fall Equinox letter. This is an expanded letter to the AODA membership.*

Members of the AODA,

As of the fall equinox in 2019, I became the ninth Grand Archdruid of AODA. In this letter, I want to reflect upon the contributions of Gordon Cooper, our Grand Archdruid Emeritus, share what I see as AODA's strengths, and share where I'd like to see AODA go in the future. Gordon Cooper served as the Grand Archdruid for four years, stepping into the role in 2015 at the winter solstice, and resigning from the role at the fall equinox in 2019. He was preceded by John Michael Greer, who served as Grand Archdruid for twelve years.

Gordon's leadership focused on building support structures for our membership, building community, and offering additional services and materials to our membership. It was during Gordon's time as Grand Archdruid that we started the AODA newsletter (which we continue to do quarterly), allowing members a regular connection with the happenings of the order. Gordon also created a new grove category called home circles and supported membership on the path of building community using this approach. During Gordon's leadership, we moved from a Yahoo Group to a new internet forum, which allowed much more flexible discussions, private messaging, photo sharing, and much more. Our forums are alive and vibrant with many members sharing and staying connected. During these four years, we also completed and released the New Candidate Guide and Apprentice Guide. Finally, we released a new website, updated throughout, that is mobile friendly. We honor Gordon on his new journey and wish him the brightest blessings. I also want to recognize the ongoing hard work of so many of our AODA volunteers: Adam Robersmith, Claire Schosser, Kathleen Opon, Adam Milner, Kelly Trumble, Moine Michelle, Karen Fisher, and Timothy Whitmore-Wolf. Along with all of our forum moderators and amazing mentors, AODA is an organization that is run, and built, on volunteers.

I joined AODA in 2007. At that time, I was searching for a spiritual path, having largely

abandoned anything that came before. In AODA, I was given a set of tools and practices, and encouraged to explore my own spirituality. I was encouraged to radically deepen my relationship with nature, make Earth Path changes, tend trees, meditate, and cultivate bardic arts. In reading our applications, member discussions, and degree reflections, I know that the same thing is true for many of you—AODA is your spiritual home. It is a place where you belong: regardless of what you believe or who you are, you are welcome here. These practices offer us a guiding light in times when disconnection from the earth is causing such terrible harm.

AODA has a lot that we do really well. We are an incredibly dedicated group of people who focus on ecology, nature honoring, and nature awareness. AODA members make Earth Path changes, live ecologically, plant trees, and learn about our own ecosystems. We consider carefully our role and impact on this earth, which we hold sacred. In more specific detail, I'd like to spend some time reflecting on our strengths as an order and then my vision of where we might be heading in the future.

### **Nature Connection and Nature Spirituality**

One of the most abiding aspects of AODA practice is the way in which nature is central to everything we do. This isn't just a respect for or use of nature as part of a spiritual practice, but rather, seeing the natural world immediately surrounding you at the core of your spiritual practice. AODA druidry has at least three features that help members root themselves deeply within their own bioregions and practices.

### **Wildcrafting Your Druidry**

The concept of wildcrafting your own druidry was first described by Gordon Cooper years before he became Grand Archdruid. This manifests as a deep commitment to developing locally based druid practices that focus on a deep understanding of your local ecology, local seasonal wheel of the year, and so on. Rather than using boilerplate seasonal wheels of the year based on far-off locations, AODA druids develop all kinds of different practices based on their individual locations.

### **Nature Reciprocation and Regeneration**

The second feature is practices that forefront reciprocation as a critical part of a spiritual path. For the last few centuries, humans have felt that they can simply take from nature with reckless abandon. In fact, we cannot, and the true cost of our actions is coming due. In AODA practice, we recognize that saying you revere nature is not enough—rather, it must be accompanied by practices that engage, in permaculture terms, care for the living earth and fair share, taking only what we need. These practices also focus on regenerating nature. When they take up AODA druidry, all of our members engage in lifestyle changes and tree planting to help give back. Many AODA members go well beyond the required work and truly embrace nature reciprocation as a core part of life, practicing permaculture or other regenerative practices. AODA druidry, then, is the deep green kind of druidry—the druidry that helps protect and heal our landscapes.



## **Nature Knowledge**

The third aspect of nature connection central to AODA is a commitment to growing ecological knowledge about the world around you. Most people in the modern world know virtually nothing about nature, and we make it a point in AODA to change that. Thus, all AODA members focus on learning more about their local ecosystems, through several different practices. Regular time spent in nature, including both focused and broad observation, helps us gain direct experiences that allow us deeper connection. We also read books, take classes, and learn about different parts of the ecology, geology, hydrology, and so forth in our ecosystems. This is a powerful practice—by learning about nature, we grow more connected with nature.

## **Adaptable and Effective Rituals and Frameworks**

AODA works with a system of seven elements, including the four classical elements (earth, air, fire, and water) and three aspects of spirit (above, below, and within). The three aspects of spirit are tied to the telluric current (earth energy, spirit below), the solar current (solar energy, spirit above), and the lunar current (nywfre, the spark of life, the spirit within). We offer members a core daily practice, the Sphere of Protection (SOP), as a protective and balancing ritual that offers lasting benefit. I have been working with the SOP and this elemental system for a long time, and it has been extraordinarily adaptable and useful in a wide variety of circumstances. The SOP can do anything from setting me up for my day to helping me send healing energy to a friend to doing land healing and blessing on a larger scale. One of the other great things about the SOP, which is partially covered by my next two points, is that it is also infinitely adaptable to one's local ecology, local beliefs, and individual practices. Each person has the opportunity to create their own take on this ritual, thus making it even more meaningful and personal. John Michael Greer once explained it to me in person as a “Swiss army knife” and this is an apt metaphor.

## **Creating Room for Individual Paths and Honoring Diversity**

One of the other strengths of the AODA path is the way in which it appeals to people of many different walks of life and belief systems. AODA is a path of nature spirituality, compatible with many other belief systems. It is nondogmatic and instead offers you a set of tools to help you discover and develop your own spiritual practice. Within AODA, we have an incredibly diverse range of druids: polytheistic pagans, animists, Christians, atheists, Buddhists, and more. I love the fact that you can have a practice rooted in nature spirituality and keep your existing beliefs, or explore them in a new context. This allows AODA to appeal to a wide range of people from different walks of life. I think this is important today, given some of the social and political challenges we face at present in the face of growing religious intolerance and the rise in hate groups. Let's let peace prevail in the quarters, and certainly, within our order.

## **Flexibility and Self-Direction**

AODA's core curriculum focuses on individual choice, individual path, and following the flow of Awen. In addition to offering individuals a set of core tools (meditation, nature observation, celebrating the seasons, the SOP), it also offers a lot of flexibility in choosing one's path. Members can choose to pursue any number of bardic, ovate, or druid practices while working through the curriculum. Members also develop plans of study that are focused on their lifestyles and local ecosystems. No two druids end up doing the exact same thing as part of their path into AODA.

## **Traditions and History**

AODA is the oldest druid order in the US. Established in the US in 1912, AODA is currently 106 years old. During that long history, it has had several twists and turns, the most recent when John Michael Greer resurrected the order in 2003, when it was down to less than a dozen elderly members. Now, AODA is thriving, with 1,200 members, mostly located in North America. The SOP, the oldest of our practices, was introduced sometime in the 1960s by Dr. Juliet Ashley. We suspect it was also likely adapted from older practices. This is a tradition with staying power.

## **Where We Are Heading**

Now that we've taken some time to reflect back on what we do well, I would like to share some ideas for where we are heading into 2020 and beyond.

One of the conversations I'd like to continue to have within the order concerns what our druidry looks like for the twenty-first century. How do the changes and challenges that we face in our world impact who we are as druids? How do individual druid practices help support us in the face of these challenges? What does AODA druidry offer each of us? What does AODA druidry offer the world? These kinds of conversations are increasingly important as we move further into the ecological predicament that we face as a species and as members of the planetary ecosystem. I also think another one of our important strengths is honoring the diversity of our membership. In AODA, druids from all walks of life and belief systems are united by the common understanding that nature is sacred and that we can find our spiritual home within the living earth. I'd like to take the time in the next few years to explore more about the different druidries that people experience within AODA and find additional ways of honoring the diversity of our membership. This includes people living in different ecosystems, urban settings, coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds, and persons with disabilities. I want to create a truly adaptable AODA that is accessible and meaningful for all.

Another part of my vision for AODA druidry is continuing to expand the support and mentoring we offer. Our mentoring program, led by Archdruid of Fire Claire Schosser, has been going strong and supporting our new members. Because AODA is a small order and members are widely scattered geographically, this program has been invaluable to our new members. Another initiative, led by Druid Companion Kathleen Opon, has been to reach out to new members at the three-month, six-month, and one-year mark to see how they are doing. This kind of outreach can be critical for new druids, particularly those on a solitary path.

The Archdruids will be carefully examining the curriculum, asking for your feedback, and working to revise the curriculum based on the feedback of our members. This will, of course, require us to expand and update our New Candidate Guide and Apprentice Guide as well as eventually develop Companion and Adept guides. In addition to the core materials, I hope to release a number of supplementary materials that will be available to all members of AODA and that will offer additional means of engaging with core pieces of the AODA tradition.

Please reach out to me with any questions, ideas, or things you'd like to contribute to the AODA. We are, as always, a volunteer-based organization that is run and supported by members like you.

I very much look forward to the next stage of our journey together as an order.

Blessings under the fire maples,

Dana O'Driscoll  
Grand Archdruid  
Druid and Bardic Adept  
Ancient Order of Druids in America



# Urban Druidry: The Cauldron of the City

*Erin Rose Conner*

*Erin Rose Conner is a Druid of OBOD. Born and raised in San Francisco, she makes her living telling the stories of the historic ships of Fisherman's Wharf. Busker, singer-songwriter and modern mythologist, she learned her craft on the streets of Renaissance Faire, cloaking education in the guise of entertainment. She has brewed the Awen on the shores of Llyn Tegid with the Druids of Wales, sung around the fire with the Druids of Sussex, and is even now planning her next adventure. Hear her songs and read her stories at [erinroseconner.com](http://erinroseconner.com).*

I'm a city kid. I was born and raised in San Francisco, and have lived my whole life on the West Coast of the United States. Most of it has been spent around San Francisco Bay. The rhythms of the climate, the wet winters and dry summers, are deep in my bone and blood. The wind and waters of this place fill my lungs and surge through my body. I am made of this land, even in this age when our food comes from so many different parts of the world.

People say that our area has no seasons, that summer is so cold and damp, that there is no color in the fall. For me, to be a druid is to look at a place for what it is. Then the land can give its gifts to you. We have two seasons here, the wet and the dry. They correspond roughly to the dark and light halves of the year as far as the moisture patterns go, but I notice that the light changes earlier, sometime in August or September, and in February or March. Sometime in late summer it takes on a darker, richer tone, and I feel the darkness begin to swoop in. In the early spring it brightens as the first wildflowers begin to bloom. Their season is short, as the rains taper off and the green of the winter creeps down the hills with the water. The grasses begin to turn golden with the sun as their season fades. The times and places vary with the many different biomes that make my home so interesting, and so changeable. Climate change is also altering these patterns, and I am watching this land move into the next age with the rest of the biosphere. This place, like many others on this planet, has never followed the Northern European model that the eightfold year is built on, and so living here and practicing druidry is an exercise in translation.

Unlike Northern Europe, winter here is a time when life returns to the land. Our streams begin to laugh and dance across rocks in beds long dry from the harsh, beautiful light of summer.

Even as the light dies, you can feel the land open up and the trees rejoice as they receive the water. In my yard the plants that cannot make it through the dry season on their own, mostly herbs and those confined to pots, are no longer irrigated by bucket. The natives and drought-tolerant exotics grow plump and green. I walk bareheaded in the first showers of fall and look for rainbows. In December I go to the forests in the hills and look for mushrooms, if we have had sufficient rain by then.

In the spring, as the rains taper off and the light returns, I go camping as often as possible. The season of flowers is short and beautiful, and the sun is not yet the ball of flame it will become by the summer solstice. By August the hills are gold, and the light becomes a hiss of energy, a palpable sound of insects and dry grasses. Summer is fire season, a time growing longer and more terrible every year in this era of change. Few of us who have spent many summers here can say that we haven't been touched by fire in some way. All it takes is a spark. . . .

Many of the creeks are silenced by now as wet and dry change places. The few that still run are quiet places for contemplation and refreshment. The water I carry with me is sweet beyond telling, life itself sliding cool down my throat. In the hills and on the mountain I walk with Lugh, and I come home smelling of him. In the cities I hug the shady side of the street and dress lightly. I walk Ocean Beach in the water, barefoot with my skirt tucked up as I tread where sea meets land. The sea is refreshing, sparkling and clean as it sucks the sand from underneath my toes. Spiritually I have traveled through Unitarianism and atheism, paganism and Wicca, and at last to druidry. All of them have shaped me, and in my heart I see Unitarianism as the cauldron that contains them all. My practice of urban druidry came to me as a complete surprise, as I was working through the Bardic Grade of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. I was looking out over my neighborhood one day and suddenly, I didn't see the trees among the houses, but the houses among the trees.

I realized in that moment that the forest had never left Oakland, California, a city that has been built partly in the remains of a redwood forest. We cut that community down to make room for our own and then planted more trees where we thought they belonged, of the varieties we chose. Some might even be the very same trees—the largest and oldest of the redwoods and oaks that remain on the lowlands, the young redwood forest in the hills that grows from the same strong roots of the trees that were felled. Then there are the magnolias that grow in front of my house, the hawthorns, and the olives on the top of Tenth Avenue, the Tasmanian blackwoods beside San Antonio Creek and the palms that have been planted in many of the yards. There is a live oak growing inches from my foundation that I don't have the heart to destroy, and I watched the silver birches in the yard on the corner die of old age. We humans know somewhere inside ourselves that trees are our siblings and though we often choose them like furniture or drapes and change them when they don't suit us any more, we plant them wherever we have room. Our reasons for doing so and our treatment of them can be a source of wisdom if we allow ourselves to become aware of them.

That day I saw the houses among the trees I began to know that this forest we put here resembles our community. We all come from many different lands, and live together by necessity

and by choice. Many of us had little choice, at least at first. My parents chose to have their children here, just as those trees were chosen by the hands that planted them, and as I, alone among their children, have chosen to stay. Others came for refuge, and some for money. Some missed their homes and brought the plants that said “home” with them and planted them here. I see eucalyptus and bramble as normal parts of the plant community because I grew up surrounded by them. Who’s to say, now that they’ve been here so long, that they should “go back where they came from?” They can’t, any more than we humans can. Just where would that be? How is our remaking of the landscape any different from that of the people who shaped this city? What issues will we create for the folk of the future to live with in our quest to return this place to some perfect untouched past?

While I love the forest, and go to visit trees in their own communities as often as I can, I think that when so many of us live in cities, to hold up a forest ideal and measure all other places against it is to miss the druidic opportunities spread before us. When we tell ourselves that we cannot truly be druids unless we wander among the trees, we turn off that part of ourselves when we are not in the places that we have labeled “nature.” Could the pain and disconnection we experience when we do so be at least partly a result of that turning away, not a result of our surroundings?

We did all of this to ourselves, and to the plants. To me, this is a rich source of contemplation, and a great responsibility. We humans began a great change in this world, without realizing the consequences. Here in California, our hills are golden because the European grasses we brought here can’t survive our summer dry season, but they can seed themselves and grow fast enough to outcompete the native grasses. Yet plants have always migrated, since the first algae found a way to live out of the water. All we did was accelerate the process. Yes, we have created problems by doing so. Our planet is sick; we have created a great extinction event. We have put an end to an entire geologic age. Now we must become more than we have been.

We need to be part of this world, responsive to it, at one with it. We need to do as the planet directs us, and to do that we must immerse ourselves in both the cauldrons of the cities and the community of nature. The planet will find a new balance. All we can really do is decide whether or not we will be part of it.

When I go to the forest, it is a sensory experience. I truly see the green all around me. I smell the freshness of the air and hear the sounds of the community of life there. Since I am not in this environment on a regular basis, I think I sense it more deeply and fully when I’m there than I would if it were part of my daily life. Paradoxically, I think I have access to more variety of experience, not less, because I choose my forest journeys, and I have more choices than you might expect, living in the heart of a densely populated urban area as I do.

First, I choose to walk to the transit station each morning, and to my workplace on the other side of the Transbay Tube. It gives me a chance to visit the urban forest and my neighbors within it on a regular basis, and see them change through the seasons. Some, particularly the palms and the solitary redwoods, are struggling to survive in conditions alien to them. The palms are in an environment too cold and wet; the redwoods are largely alone, and many have their feet

in brackish water, or underfoot, or under concrete. Many of the street trees are planted in such a way that their lives are short and difficult. Their roots are confined in tiny sections of poor soil and their roots cannot breathe properly under concrete or in compacted soil. Other trees, like the aspens and various types of eucalypti, have found this different area quite suitable to their needs. They have few enemies here. Periwinkle and bramble will happily take over enormous swaths of land. English ivy will gladly pull native redwood down if allowed, so one of the things I do on my morning walk to the transit station is to pull a few climbing bits of ivy from the trunks of the redwoods on the community college campus as I pass. So every walk in an urban forest can be a lesson in natural history and a chance to shape it.

When I have the time to make a day of it, I can get on the bus and go up to the hills above Oakland. Once a redwood forest at least as impressive as Muir Woods grew there. The Spanish named the area now called the Redwood Bowl Palo Colorado, and one grove of trees there was so impressive it was later marked on charts as the Navigation Trees. By lining up those trees with the tip of Yerba Buena Island, mariners could avoid an underwater hazard called Blossom Rock. After the Gold Rush, men who didn't strike it rich and who had nothing before their eyes but dollar signs took over the Palo Colorado. By 1860 they had cut down every tree there, save one. I have seen the top of Old Survivor, a runt of a tree, growing high up a hillside out of a crack in a boulder, blessedly inaccessible. I have never found the place in the forest of young redwoods where it grows, but I can take two buses and go looking, and I do.

Another set of buses takes me across the bridge and up Mount Tamalpais, one of the few places here that actually still carries a name the First Peoples gave it. As a druid, it is my duty to learn the history of this place I call home, and to always remember that I live and adventure on the lands of the First Peoples. My house in Oakland, the only one I have ever "owned," is on Ohlone land, as were all the houses of my childhood in San Francisco. If you are in North America, you're living on Indigenous land. Whose land is it? A tool that will allow you to find out is available at Native Land (<https://native-land.ca>).

Mount Tamalpais is part of the land of the Coast Miwok. It, like Oakland and most of this coast, was logged. Muir Woods, the world-famous grove of trees that every guidebook exhorts people to see, is one of the only remnants of the old growth of that vast redwood forest. My closest weekend camping spot is on the mountain above it, a place the tourists rarely go. The bus will drop me right at the campground, and as a camper without a vehicle, a practice that I encourage every druid to experience, I am able to do it at a much cheaper rate, one that balances the extra cost of the bus ride nicely. Another advantage to this way of traveling is that one can leave the forest by any route, without having to return to a vehicle. I camp in a forest of young Douglas firs up there at Pantoll. Our coast was once covered with many different types of oaks, bay laurels, alders, and madrone, among others. The two marketable species, the ones that towered above all the others and made up the old growth that survives only in pockets like Muir Woods, were Douglas fir and redwood.

The job that pays my bills is actually quite compatible with my druidry. I work in an urban national park, and I tell the stories of the historic ships that are preserved there. Intertwined



with those vessels are the stories of the forests, and of my little home in Oakland. You see, some of the vessels I work aboard are built of Douglas fir, and the house I live in is built of redwood. In an interesting juxtaposition, the Douglas firs live at the top of the mountain overlooking the sea. The redwoods live in the lower elevations, their roots in the water that they help to produce. The rot-resistant redwood is not suited to shipbuilding, being too brittle to dance and flex in the waves as a ship must. Its resistance to fire and rot would otherwise make it an excellent candidate, and I think it a great privilege to type these words in my little Craftsman cottage at the top of a hill. Douglas fir, on the other hand, is an excellent wood for shipbuilding. Heavy, flexible, and strong, it bends to the shipwright's will and the steam box, and yields to the saw and the adze. However, when wet and dried repeatedly, it returns to the elements quite quickly. The ships built from it are now all but gone, save for our lumber schooner, created to harvest the trees she was built from. The story of our European presence on this coast, like the story of Europe, is one of deforestation, and I tell as much of it as our visitors can handle. I am finding it a rich source of wisdom as a Druid as well, and so my practice encompasses my livelihood as well as my spirituality.

If I walk downhill from Pantoll, as I sometimes do after camping, I can choose from two wonders. I can walk down to the sea and in the process see the shape of Point Reyes, and the wide Pacific. I can end my journey downhill at Stinson Beach before catching my bus home, and sit on the white sands with the wind from Hawaii and Japan blowing me clean. I can also choose the other path down through the forest and see where the Douglas firs end and the redwoods begin. The place where this happens is almost mathematical, the contour of the land marked out in living wood. None of the trees there are very wide; this area was obviously cut completely. When the trees grew back, they each took the area where they thrived, leaving a clear lesson for the druid that passes this way. It is there that the sound of Redwood Creek, which supports the only natural salmon run in the Bay Area, can first be heard at summer's end, its lowest point, just before the rains come. I try to do it early, if I go this way, because this is where Muir Woods begins. Very few tourists venture this far, as it is an unrelenting uphill climb. If I do this early, I can pause a few times in the deep silence of Redwood. There are a few old-growth remnants along this trail, trees large enough to stand inside.

Fire has always been a part of California. It is what causes many of the plants here to sprout. It clears the brush and keeps the forest healthy—or it did, before we came and upset the balance the First Peoples had established here. We saw a garden and mistook it for a wilderness, and now we have a chance to learn from the mistakes of those who came before us. The trees of Muir Woods are part of this learning. Many of them are hollowed by flame, charred inside but still very much alive. *Sequoia sempervirens*, after all, means ever green, ever living. To sit inside one of these trees and have a chance to meditate in that live stillness is worth getting up early! There are other forest journeys open to me via public transit from my city, but the point of this piece is, after all, urban druidry, and I might go weeks or even months without a trip to a truly wild place like Mount Tam. It might be a year before I go to a forest farther still because I choose not to own a vehicle. We all must make our own choices, considering our own circumstances, so all I will say is this: the ways we get to wild places, the ways we travel each day make a difference

to our lives and the life of the world we all share. If nothing else, the ways we travel and live create our patterns of thought, and our habits. There is great wisdom and awareness here for the druid, and I think that it is important for us to think about our choices. We are, after all, practicing Earth spirituality and our connection to the planet we are part of.

I enjoy the adventure of finding out just how far I can get using a mode of transportation, like a bus, that will make that trip up the mountain whether or not I'm aboard. To me, that's as close as I can get to carbon neutral for trips of this length until and unless I can reclaim the time I spend working. I also really enjoy walking, and find that I'm healthier and stronger the more of that mode of travel I can use, and I am more connected to the land I travel across as well. My conception of time has also changed considerably. It is true that I am out of my house for twelve hours each workday, but I get four miles of walking in a day just during my commute. That is time I can use thinking as well as exercising. It is moving meditation in the truest sense. When I sit on a bus or a train, likewise, it isn't time wasted. I carry a phone and a tablet, and so have plenty of reading and writing that can be done. I can listen to music, take classes, or do meditations. If I sit in traffic, I'm not the one doing the driving, so my time is in many ways my own.

This brings me back to the city. We talk a lot, it seems, about how unnatural the city is. We see cities as places we must escape from to be in tune with the Earth. I don't find this to be useful or even true. Cities are systems. We made them. They are as natural to this world as the beehive and the anthill. We are the ones who have defined "natural" and "unnatural." The very word "synthetic" denotes a new whole made from different parts. That describes our cities very well, and need not be a pejorative term. Cities are where we all get together to share our different ways of being in the world. Different creeds, colors, cultures. Different experiences that we can share to learn what works and what doesn't. Cities are places we can go to become more than the sum of our parts, where we can find solutions to the problems we have created and how to live with each other and with the rest of the world.

I think that one of the gifts of the city is a chance to interact daily with people who aren't the same as us. I hear different languages spoken on the street, on the bus. Different customs brush my sense of space and I don't always understand what is said to me even if it's in English, the only language I speak fluently. Different smells, different sights, styles, all of these enrich my life even as I walk paths of concrete and navigate by street sign and bus line. They make me more able to see the strength in our differences, something I think we will sorely need in the years to come as we come to grips with the task of reconnecting with the rest of the planet.

Like any forest, river, or mountain, a city has a distinct spirit. Is this a new entity, built by us as we live here and put our energies into a place and create our thoughts of what belongs here by embodying them in wood and concrete, marble and steel? Or is it a relationship built with the cooperation of the spirit of place who was already here? I don't know, but I do know that it is possible to build a relationship with it, just as I have relationships with the spirit of Point Reyes and the deities I work with.

You can start interacting with the city spirit in your own area, or wherever you visit. All cities have one. Gordon White, the creator of Rune Soup, in his book *The Chaos Protocols: Magi-*

*caTechniques for Navigating the New Economic Reality* says to start with where you feel the essence of the city the strongest. In San Francisco I followed my nose—and the energy—to the waterfront, and the oldest warehouses in the city, now several blocks away from the current shoreline. Here is my perspective of the spirit of San Francisco:

1857

Barefoot in skirt with tattered hem  
 Rising from the shallows where the Embarcadero would stand.  
 She turned, her hair flowing over her shoulders,  
 Pirouetted, changing as she spun,  
 Her hair caught up, a trident in her hand as she poses  
 High above Union Square.

1967

She lies on her back on Hippie Hill  
 Staring at the ribbons of fog dancing on the edge of blue sky.  
 Acid rainbows, Cannabis kiss  
 Dancing with the Dead at the Fillmore.  
 Tomorrow is here, Love is the answer.  
 My younger self dances, kicks over mushrooms in the wet grass.

2017

A skirt of stars, pinpricks of Light in darkest night.  
 Chrome boots with heels pushing her up to the sky.  
 Thin as the beams of steel holding up the high rises.  
 San Francisco has always had a taste for the finer things.  
 A talent for standing on the knife edge.  
 Techie dreams, her artists driven away, for now.  
 We may yet return  
 When her Phoenix falls.  
 Rises again.

I work in a relatively young city. The Presidio, Mission, and trading post were founded in 1776, but San Francisco herself received her name in 1847. Most of the peninsula remained sand dunes until the twentieth century, and so, like Oakland, where I live now, the original shape of the land can be seen and sensed still. It is only in the last forty years that the area became the rich enclave it now is. I grew up in a city not yet full, where everyone who wanted one could find a home—but San Francisco has always been a city that reinvented herself after each disaster. Her first housing crunch came in the Gold Rush, when ships were hauled ashore and roofed over, and

her hunger for wood partly drove the lumber boom that denuded the West Coast. San Francisco's symbol is the phoenix because of the frequent fires in her early years. Between 1849 and 1851, she burned no less than seven times. By the time I went out on my own, we were in the teeth of the first crisis of homelessness, and I was forced across the Bay, where I have remained ever since. I can't blame people for wanting to live here. San Francisco is a cradle of invention and always has been. My parents were drawn here, and I have stayed as long as I have because I cannot bear to leave. I doubt I will be able to remain, but who knows? Like all druids, it seems, I long for a place in the forest, but the longer I study in the cauldron of the city, the more I realize what magic dwells here. My current home in Oakland is a different place, much hotter and sunnier than San Francisco. While it is not the place I would choose to live—I miss the gray skies of summer and the fog that creates such silence in the heart of Golden Gate Park—I am content.

Life is full of trade-offs. In order to have the music of different languages in my ears, to be able to busk in the transit stations and participate in the mingling of cultures and spiritualities in my area, I have to adapt. My meditation practice is a case in point. I have access to quality training in this skill. In the Berkeley hills, the Nyingma Institute has excellent instructors as well as a beautiful Victorian room, paneled, dark, and saturated with the energy of years of practice. On any given Sunday, I can go there and, for a nominal fee, take a lesson, and I have also taken a few of their longer courses. It has formed a firm foundation on which to base my druidic practice. In the city, this is very useful, almost a necessity.

The cauldron of activity that makes up the place where I live can be quite distracting. Even in the early morning the endless procession of cars is a part of the background. It's hard to remain in your sacred grove when you're next to the road. I've learned to let it be. Everything is as it should be. I begin in the layer my body sits in, the city. It remains, but slowly, the layer of my grove, of the shore, of a distant hilltop coalesces around me. I can choose where to put my attention—isn't that what meditation is for? In this way, I don't have to postpone my deeper practice for the times I can go to the forest, and I have the additional practice of being with my neighborhood, and hearing its beating heart. It isn't so different, after all, from walking through that same neighborhood and seeing the trees, the birds, the people. All are part of this world we are living in, and all have their own spirit, their own magic.

And so I am a modern druid, rooted in the city, called by the forest. The druidry I practice has had a long and hard path since the Iron Age, and while I am grateful for the Reconstructionists who are reclaiming what wisdom they can, I am not one of them. We live in wonderful, terrible, pivotal times. Once again, we are passing through a narrow and dangerous place. We need the memory of our past, and the tales and tools of our ancestors to root us. We also need the tools of the Industrial Age to save ourselves and our world. By using them without thought, without awareness, we have painted ourselves into a corner. We need all our skills and knowledge to come into right relationship with the rest of this superorganism called Planet Earth that we are part of. The internet and the tools of modern communication are creating a net of awareness over this planet, a vital part of the next age we stand on the brink of. The cauldron of the city is one of the places we can brew the Awen that will allow us to create a druidry of the future.



# Interconnected and Interdependent The Transformative Power of Books on the Druid Path

*Kathleen Opon*

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Those of us who choose a druid path learn early on how interconnected and interdependent we are to our environment and the flora and fauna of which it is composed. My personal belief, nurtured by my study of Buddhism and the Buddhist concept of “interdependent origination,” is that everyone and everything is interconnected and, in very many cases, interdependent (Fremantle, 2003). While meditating on this concept one morning, it suddenly occurred to me that each of the books in AODA's second-degree curriculum required reading list contains themes of interconnectedness and interdependence (AODA, 2017). Taken together, the entire curriculum is interconnected and interdependent as it forms our philosophy and process as a druid organization and helps guide us all on our personal druid paths. This article is adapted from the essay I wrote as a part of my second-degree exam.

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary describes “interconnected” as “1. Mutually joined or related. 2. Having internal connections between the parts or elements,” but I prefer the Wiktionary definition: “intertwined; connected at multiple points or levels.”

“Interdependent” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “dependent upon one another; mutually dependent.” Things can be interconnected but not be interdependent, of course.

Understanding the concepts of interconnection and interdependence has been important to me in the development of my own practice. When it came time to write my exam paper, I struggled because several of the books I had read did not resonate with me. I wondered how I could better understand them and their importance to my druid path within the AODA. As I pondered this, an image of the Tree of Life came to me, followed by the idea that each book in the second-degree curriculum corresponded to a particular part of that tree and thus to a role in the development of not only the AODA, but of druidry as a path and the growth of those who follow that path.

## The Roots

First, of course, we have the roots. The function of the roots of a tree is to absorb nutrients from the soil and transport them up into the trunk and also to support the tree and anchor it in the ground. In keeping with the theme of this article, the soil represents culture and history. Drawing from those, the roots provide a nutrient rich base for the entire tree.

Human beings who are seeking spiritual enlightenment can be seen as carrying a seed that will eventually grow into some form of a spiritual path. My personal druid path began with the seeds planted by books I read before joining the AODA. In proceeding through the AODA grades, these seeds were nurtured by my studies and began to set roots. In reflecting on the books of the Apprentice grade, it occurred to me that the function of the roots, in our curriculum, is performed by *The Mabinogion* and *The Kybalion*. Studying *The Mabinogion* and *The Kybalion* stimulates the roots of a spiritual concept to start to grow and spread.

*The Mabinogion* represents the mythical, legendary base of our tradition. Interconnection is evident, especially in the Four Branches, which some, including John Michael Greer (2010, 14), consider to be the biography of a single person as well as a representation of the cycle of the seasons. The Dolmen Arch course takes this even further, claiming that “the four branches comprise the biography of every person who has ever awakened to the call of the inner life. All the characters of the four stories are parts of the whole self of that person, or aspects of the cosmos within which he grows toward spiritual maturity” (Greer, 2010, 2).

The first branch provides the spark of inspiration, as well as suggestions for coming to grips with the process of spiritual growth.

The second branch reveals the struggle with the concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, and the awakening of the self’s higher potentials.

The third branch represents outward initiation. We see suffering with doubt as part of spiritual growth. This struggle eventually leads to full spiritual awakening.

The fourth branch looks at the events of the first three stories from this new, awakened perspective.

The fact that these stories have survived as long as they have and have been translated so many different ways, even being Christianized in many instances, is evidence of their interconnectedness not only with Druidry but with the growth of modern spirituality in general. I also see interdependence. Our history and the development of druidry are dependent to some extent on these stories, but the stories themselves might have disappeared if we had not made them a part of our tradition and continued to pass them on from generation to generation of druids.

*The Mabinogion* has been a challenge for me since I was first introduced to it as a part of my studies with the Sisterhood of Avalon. My skills at discovering hidden meaning and symbolism in these stories is weak, and I have often wondered why it is such an important text to so many traditions.

The Dolmen Arch Course has helped me in my study of this text. Each grade of the course works with one of the stories in *The Mabinogion* and through meditation on the druid, bardic, and ovate elements in the stories, I have gotten better at recognizing and describing the symbolism. Another helpful source in understanding *The Mabinogion* is *Mabon and the Guardians of Celtic Britain* by Caitlin Matthews (2002), which goes deeply into the history and symbolism of this important work.

While *The Mabinogion* provides a legendary root for druidry, *The Kybalion* provides roots for our mystical and magical beliefs and practices. Some say evidence of the influence of these hermetic teachings can be found in every religion, interconnecting the concepts set forth in this book not only with druidry but with all religions, thus also interconnecting druidry to all other religions.

The entire *Kybalion* is steeped in examples of interconnectedness and interdependence. The Principle of Correspondence brings us the statement “as above, so below; as below, so above” and describes interconnectedness and interdependence perfectly. The Principle of Vibration is “Nothing rests; everything moves; everything vibrates.” This principle explains the interconnectedness and interdependence of different manifestations of energy, mind, matter, and spirit through varying rates of vibration. The Principle of Polarity is explained as “Everything is Dual; everything has poles; everything has its pair of opposites” and shows interconnectedness by degree in one direction or the other, interdependent on vibration. The Principle of Rhythm, described as “Everything flows, out and in; everything has its tides; all things rise and fall,” is interdependent on degrees of polarity so is also interdependent upon vibration. The Principle of Cause and Effect is obvious: “Every Cause has its Effect; every Effect has its Cause; everything happens according to Law”—interconnectedness and interdependence made manifest!

All seven of the hermetic principles act together, interconnected and interdependent, and “are in full operation on all of the many planes, physical, mental and spiritual” (Three Initiates, 2017, pp. 63–64). The practices of the AODA are connected to the concepts put forth in *The Kybalion* on many levels. Our belief in the interdependence of humans and their environment, our practice of working with the energies of the elements, and the process of the Sphere of Protection are only a few ways we are interconnected with *The Kybalion*. And here, as with *The Mabinogion*, I believe there is interdependence because as we have used *The Kybalion* as a basis for our occult

beliefs and practices, *The Kybalion* remains relevant because it is being put into practice.

While I've struggled through the years with *The Mabinogion*, *The Kybalion* resonated with me immediately. The concepts discussed in the book opened my eyes to the magic around me at every moment of the day. It also helped me to feel more hopeful and positive by showing me that rather than being linear and rigid, life and those living it are balanced within a continuum that can be changed or experienced differently by changing the momentum or the way we view them.

## The Trunk

The trunk of a tree transports the nutrients provided by the roots up to the rest of the tree. It essentially connects the branches and leaves to the roots. The function of the trunk, in our curriculum, is performed by the books *Basic Ecology* (Buchsbaum & Buchsbaum, 1970) and *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold & Schwartz, 1987).

A person on the druid path in whom the seed of spiritual awakening has been planted, a spark ignited by *The Mabinogion* and *The Kybalion*, seeks to manifest these concepts in the physical world. Here is where the trunk of druidry develops. The real-world practice and manifestation of the occult and legendary concepts are made physical in the science of *Basic Ecology* and the philosophy of *A Sand County Almanac*.

*Basic Ecology*, like *The Kybalion*, is all about interconnectedness and interdependence. But in *Basic Ecology* these concepts are brought to life in a physical world in a way that the seeker can witness and touch in his or her real world. The book clearly shows the interconnectedness and interdependence of plants and animals, from the smallest bacteria to the largest mammal, and goes so far as to state that in most cases they could not exist at all without each other. The book also shows how many effects between living things occur indirectly but that these indirect impacts are no less important. For example, plants need phosphates to grow, but these phosphates would not be available to them if dead bodies of plants and animals were not decomposed by bacteria and released back into the ecosystem.

The undeniable connection to the concepts of *The Kybalion* is illuminated in this statement from *Basic Ecology*: "These ceaseless exchanges of materials and of energy between living things and their environment follow circular pathways, which are repeated in endlessly repetitive cycles" (Buchsbaum & Buchsbaum, 1970, p. 21). The seven hermetic principles brought to life! When I first saw this book on the book list, I wondered why we were being assigned such an old book. Wasn't there a more modern book about ecology that could be used? However, the book does convey its concepts well, and I came away from it with a clear understanding of the interconnectedness of all things in nature and of my own responsibility to try to protect that.

In *A Sand County Almanac* spiritual seekers learn to place themselves in their environment and see their own interconnectedness and interdependence with all parts of it. It becomes personalized rather than just scientific as we read of one man's journey through the seasons, studying how even small changes, in weather, animal behavior, and human behavior, for example, can have big impacts, both positive and negative. Most importantly, this book painstakingly works out a land ethic that elegantly describes humanity's interconnectedness and interdependence with the

natural world.

*A Sand County Almanac* gives personal structure to the druid love and commitment to nature and separates druids from those who still see themselves as disconnected from, above, and more important than the environment and the natural world in which they live. The discussion of ethics near the end of the book clarifies this beautifully: “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (Leopold & Schwartz, 1987, p. 203). As there is no mention of nonhuman members, this implies a community of people. For a Druid, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land. In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (p. 204).

Now our druid seeker is ready to branch out and create a new spiritual path, building on the roots and trunk developed by these first four books.

## The Branches

The job of the branches of a tree is to provide a way for the leaves to act as a net to collect sunlight in order to feed the entire tree. They allow nutrients from the roots and trunk to nourish the leaves and help them thrive. They also provide the shape of the tree, depending on their spread and formation. In our curriculum the function of the branches is performed by *The Book of Druidry* (Nichols, 1990) and *The Druid Revival Reader* (Greer, 2011b).

Once a druid seeker has absorbed the nutrients of legend (*The Mabinogion*) and hermetic principles (*The Kybalion*) and made them real with science (*Basic Ecology*) and philosophy (*A Sand County Almanac*), the interconnectedness and interdependence between them become clear. To the seeker, his or her place within the scheme of things is revealed. At that point the branches of the tree develop as each independent druid forges a spiritual path based on their interpretations of these elements. The branches become more specific to each individual spiritual path, further developing the concepts of humanity’s interconnectedness and interdependence with everything. These books have helped inform the paths of many within the AODA.

In *The Book of Druidry*, interconnectedness and interdependence are central themes. Interconnectedness with the past, with nature, animals, and the land, and with culture and mythology dominate the book, incorporating and expanding many of the ideas put forth in the books that served as roots and trunk.

The first part of the book discusses the history of druidry and its connections to ancient cultures and religions. We see our interconnection to our ancient ancestors and how our spiritual path has roots in ancient history. In ancient times, philosophy, culture, and religion were all one in spiritual life. As druids, I believe we strive to emulate that ancient example of interconnectedness as we seek to incorporate our spiritual beliefs into the way we live and our efforts to decrease our negative impact on nature.

The book goes on to discuss how, even though druidry as a path seemed to disappear for many years, the folklore, customs, and seasonal celebrations continued, evolving as the culture



changed. Pagan celebrations, for example, evolved as Christianity attempted to dominate the culture. Their continued existence is evidence of their powerful interconnectedness with the people who still practice them and the history and cultures of those who came before.

We can also see the interconnectedness of our tradition with the seasons and nature, as our entire ritual cycle is based on these and probably would not exist without them. There is much discussion in the book about sacred plants such as the oak, yew, and mistletoe. The oak and mistletoe are of course very much interconnected, as mistletoe grows up the oak and was collected there by druids in ancient times. The book goes even further in fitting into my theme by connecting the oak tree to the hermetic principle of correspondence in *The Kybalion*. Nichols writes, “Just as the great branches of the oak spread above, so wide grow the strong intricate roots below. ‘As above, so below’ is the key” (1990, p. 152).

This focus on the importance of these sacred plants also demonstrates the interconnectedness and interdependence of the beliefs and rituals of druids throughout history to nature, making another connection to the theme and the trunk books, *Basic Ecology* and *A Sand County Almanac*. Here in *The Book of Druidry*, Nichols continues his examples of interconnectedness and interdependence of druids with nature in his discussion of the seasons, pointing out connections such as mistletoe with the winter solstice; the yew with All Hallows; snowdrops with Imbolc; clover or trefoil with the spring equinox; hawthorn with Beltane; vervain with the Summer Solstice, and apples with the fall equinox. “Trees and plants with various degrees of sacredness and symbolism about them are indeed many—there is no such thing as a complete list” (p.155). And without them there would probably be no druids.

The last part of the book details the druid ritual year, which since ancient times has been used to “both honor and connect with the sun, moon and Earth and to provide a cyclical rather than linear framework around which to orient their lives” (Nichols, 1990, p. 297). This is another example of druid interconnectedness with nature (the trunk books) and the hermetic principles (the root books), best expressed thus: “But the most important aspect of each observance is an attunement and recognition and celebration of the quality of the particular time and place” (p. 297, interconnectedness with nature) and “The nature of the ceremonial year is best realized by the circle of designed opposites which are complimentary” (p. 299, interconnectedness with hermetic principles).

*The Druid Revival Reader* (Greer, 2011b), in its very makeup, is an example of interconnectedness and interdependence, as it consists of a compilation of writings from twelve different authors with expertise in some aspect of druidry. It takes us on not only a linear historical journey of druid ideology from 1743 to 1966, but also shows the intertwined and interconnected nature of the writers as they draw on earlier influences and in turn influence those who come after them.

Each author represented in the book expresses their own thoughts on druidry and the druid revival. Together they demonstrate the vital importance of the druid revival in the creation and continued growth of modern druidry. A few examples from the book follow.

**Edward Davies, *The Mysteries of Ceridwen* (1809)**

John Michael Greer introduces Davies's piece by describing his influence on (and interconnectedness with) the Druid Revival: "More to the point is Davies' impact on later Druid writers, including those at the core of the Revival tradition; most Druid writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used Davies' colorful vision of Druid initiations and teachings as a central source" (p. 25).

**Iolo Morganwg, *The Bards of the Island of Britain* (1862)**

In the introduction to this piece, Greer writes that Iolo Morganwg "had a more potent influence on the Druid Revival than any other single person" (p. 57), despite his questionable sources and lineage. Morganwg was especially influential in his study and practice of Welsh bardic arts. So even though some of his claims about himself and about modern druidry have been discredited, Morganwg's connection and deep influence on the druid revival cannot be denied.

**David James, *The Customs of the Druids* (1836)**

In this piece, James makes a case for a connection between Christian religion, particularly Anglican, and druidry. He does this by detailing druid practices, dress, and ceremony and comparing them to Anglican, pointing out similarities. Once again druidry is validated as a spiritual practice, interconnecting it with other world religions.

I found it especially interesting in this piece that James describes the three classes of the Bardo-Druidic Order as the Chief Bard ("to preserve the memory of the Arts and Sciences," p. 87), the Ovate ("maintenance of science," p. 88) and the Druid-Bard ("to give moral and religious instruction," p. 88). These classes are very similar to AODA's branches, illustrating a clear connection to and influence on our group and practices.

**Lewis Spence, *Druid Teachings and Initiations* (1928)**

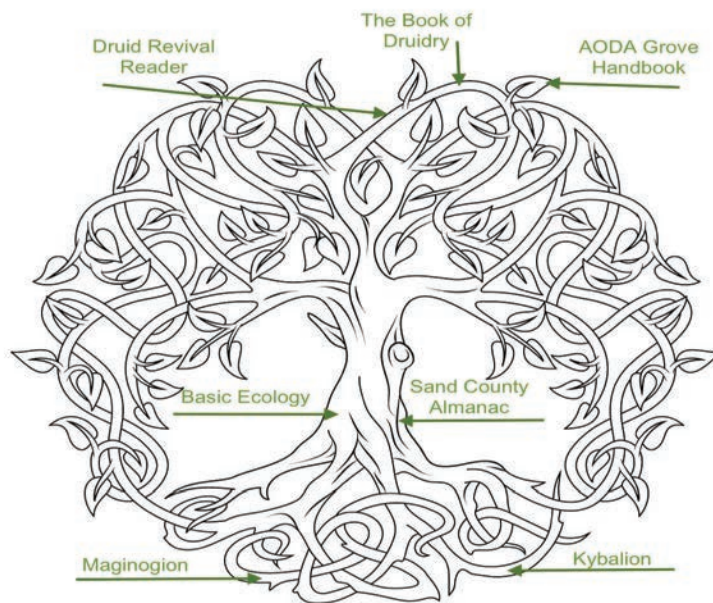
Greer describes Spence as a participant in the druid revival, contributing insights based on his knowledge of older revival literature. Spence wrote three books that have remained standards in druid revival reading: *The History and Origins of Druidism*, *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain*, and *The Mysteries of Britain*, from which this piece is taken. In this piece Spence gives a detailed discussion and description of the concepts of Abred, Gwynvyd, and Ceugant and humanity's relationship to each, as well as the role God plays in them. The human's journey within and through these circles is still an important element of druid spirituality, and while Spence did not discover them, he did a wonderful job of elucidating them.

Clearly all of these authors are interconnected with Druidry and by extension to each individual druid organization. We can also determine that many of these writers are interdependent on each other, as later authors build on and are influenced by earlier authors and each other, thus expanding their own knowledge and influence but also keeping the ideas of the writers from the past alive.

## The Leaves

In nature, leaves turn light energy into nutrients for trees. Using the complex process of photosynthesis, the leaves essentially breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen, cleansing and refreshing the air in and around the tree. As much as they rely on and are part of the tree as a whole, each individual leaf is unique and separate unto itself. Following the theme of this essay, the leaves represent each individual druid organization. In our curriculum, The Druid Grove Handbook represents and details the AODA leaf of the druid tree.

In *The Druid Grove Handbook*, John Michael Greer (2011a) discusses the formation of the Ancient Order of Druids in America as part of the larger druid revival. He explains how decisions regarding leadership structure, symbolism, and ritual were developed based on comprehensive research and discernment. He describes the process of collecting and incorporating ideas from many sources, both past and present, to put together our still-evolving ritual and grove format. He details the role the AODA leaf plays in the much larger tree of druidry. This book functions as an essential training manual for ritual for members of our order.



**AODA Apprentice Curriculum:  
Interconnected and  
Interdependent**

## **The Interconnected, Interdependent Druid Tree**

In this article I have attempted to show how the seven books of our Apprentice curriculum demonstrate interconnectedness and interdependence, with each other, with druidry as a whole, with the AODA, and with each druid. These seven books, though very different in substance, tone, and style, fit together and form a guide for independent druids on this path. Each book gives many examples of the interconnected and interdependent nature of the subject of the book, whether it be biological science, ecology, philosophy, spirituality, or druidry. But they also all form an interconnected web of influence, knowledge, and inspiration for each of us as members of the AODA and as druids in a larger community. Taking them all together, we can see how knowledge can grow, sparked by the roots of ideas, traveling up a trunk, expanding and learning from those ideas, branching into individual spiritual ideologies, and eventually distilling into individual spiritual paths.

Using the interdependent parts of a tree, I have described how these books build upon each other and how each plays an important role in the health of the tree as a whole (the concepts, beliefs, and spirituality of druidry as a whole) as well as the healthy development of each individual druid organization (the leaves). The very nutrients that develop the roots and trunk are provided by books that have inspired the way of life cherished by all druids, helping them develop ideas and rituals that eventually branch off into the various individual druid groups, organizations, and traditions.

## **Final Thoughts**

This druid path has been a challenge for me as well as a joy. Reading these books was an interesting if sometimes excruciating experience. It helped to clarify for me the branch of druidry that truly calls to me, which is the druid branch. For those of you reading who are walking the same path, particularly if you are currently working through the first two degrees of the AODA curriculum, I offer some suggestions for successfully navigating your journey through these books.

First, know that there is a reason each was chosen and that they are valuable in your growth as a druid. Join the AODA online forum to discuss and process your experience with the books. The forum can be a lifeline when you feel stuck or frustrated.

Meditate, meditate, meditate! Use chapters, paragraphs, even individual words in your daily meditations. The insight gained through having the patience to do this is invaluable.

Take time to find joy in the readings. Light a candle, burn some incense, whatever calms you and helps you concentrate. Read a chapter, then sit quietly and contemplate. What thoughts and feelings are evoked? What insights emerge? Take notes and highlight passages. This will be helpful when you begin work on your essay. This will also help you develop your own personal relationship with these books and how they contribute to your own path as a Druid.

For me, writing this essay was an illuminating journey through the growth of a druid tree of life, from the roots, through the trunk, to the branches, to the leaves, with the seven books of the AODA Apprentice curriculum.

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# A Just City

*Gordon S. Cooper*

*Gordon S. Cooper is Grand Archdruid Emeritus of the Ancient Order of Druids in America. His formal education includes a bachelor's degree from Regents University of New York (now Excelsior College) with a dual major in Turkish and anthropology and a minor in natural sciences. He has worked as a signal and electronic intelligence analyst while in the US Navy. As a civilian, he has held jobs as an office manager, database designer, telecommunications device for the deaf relay operator, and financial services specialist at DSHS in Washington state. His avocational passions include historical research, Victorian photographic processes and finding stuff of interest for his friends. He has six raised garden beds in his back yard, and four ducks with their water pond for his front yard.*

As a druid, I thought it appropriate to begin with an old story, as it is currently understood. It may provide a point of reference.

Approximately 359 million years ago, a new group of species came to dominate the land—the first conifers. By using the newly manifested binder lignin, these true trees could take advantage of more sunlight than simple, ground-hugging plants. The resulting proliferation of forests would have several consequences. First, the most obvious waste product, oxygen, had no adequate negative feedback mechanism. The unchecked oxygen levels rose to unprecedented and catastrophic heights—it is estimated that it reached or exceeded 35 percent, versus the present-day level of 21 percent.

These high oxygen levels led to several major changes in the environment in the Carboniferous era. Land-dwelling arthropods were not as restricted in body size, and responded by evolving and growing to unprecedented sizes. Giant dragonflies and millipedes exceeding eight feet in length were the most obvious response, at least from our distant perspective. A single lightning strike could and did ignite spectacular forest fires, turning trees filled with explosive sap and wood into Roman candles.

The second waste product was the lignin, which could not be consumed by any living organism at the time. The trees that died simply fell over in place and stayed there. Those buried by sediment and time turned into anthracite coal, the fuel for the Industrial Revolution that is nearly exhausted now.

Modern humankind has reached a similar environmental turning point—we consume far more energy than can be sustained or safely produced. Our choice of technological and economic

models have created a society that has chosen to ignore the viability of any structural foundation for a society, including that most modern of human accomplishments, the city. We as a species are not entirely certain why the first cities were built, nor how they functioned. What is certain is that their existence led to a host of consequences that seem desirable. Cities can serve as repositories for knowledge and as markets for the flow of goods, services, ideas, and tangible expressions of ideas, including the arts.

However, from all I can determine, a truly just city does not exist as yet. A just city is sustainable, humane, and diverse, and recognizes the limits that geography and travel impose on its visitors, guests, and citizens. It is less afraid of the rain and earthquakes because it grasps their consequences and builds accordingly. It understands that the safety of its favored elite depends on the physical and emotional comfort of all of its inhabitants, and works for equitable and meaningful support for its inhabitants. Understanding that education and society are linked, it provides education and cultural opportunities to all of its inhabitants and visitors, and exports its understanding of its own successes and failures to sister cities, towns, and villages as requested.

If I were to suggest a model for us to learn from, it would be a modern version of classical Alexandria, located then and now in Egypt. Strabo describes Alexandria as a model of public access and aesthetic attentiveness. “[The city] contains also very beautiful public grounds and royal palaces, which occupy a fourth or even a third part of its whole extent. For as each of the kings was desirous of adding some embellishment to the places dedicated to the public use, so, besides the buildings already existing, each of them erected a building at his own expense; hence the expression of the poet may be here applied. . . . All the buildings are connected with one another and with the harbor, and those also which are beyond it.”

These canny decisions ensured that one-third to one-quarter of the city would consist of public squares, temples, libraries, or administrative buildings, or would supply government jobs. Almost certainly this helped ensure the justified reputation of the city as a safe place of learning, commerce, and the arts.

The failure of city leaders was in not grasping that external violence and dissent would one day visit it, bringing an end to the greatest library and collection of scholars in the



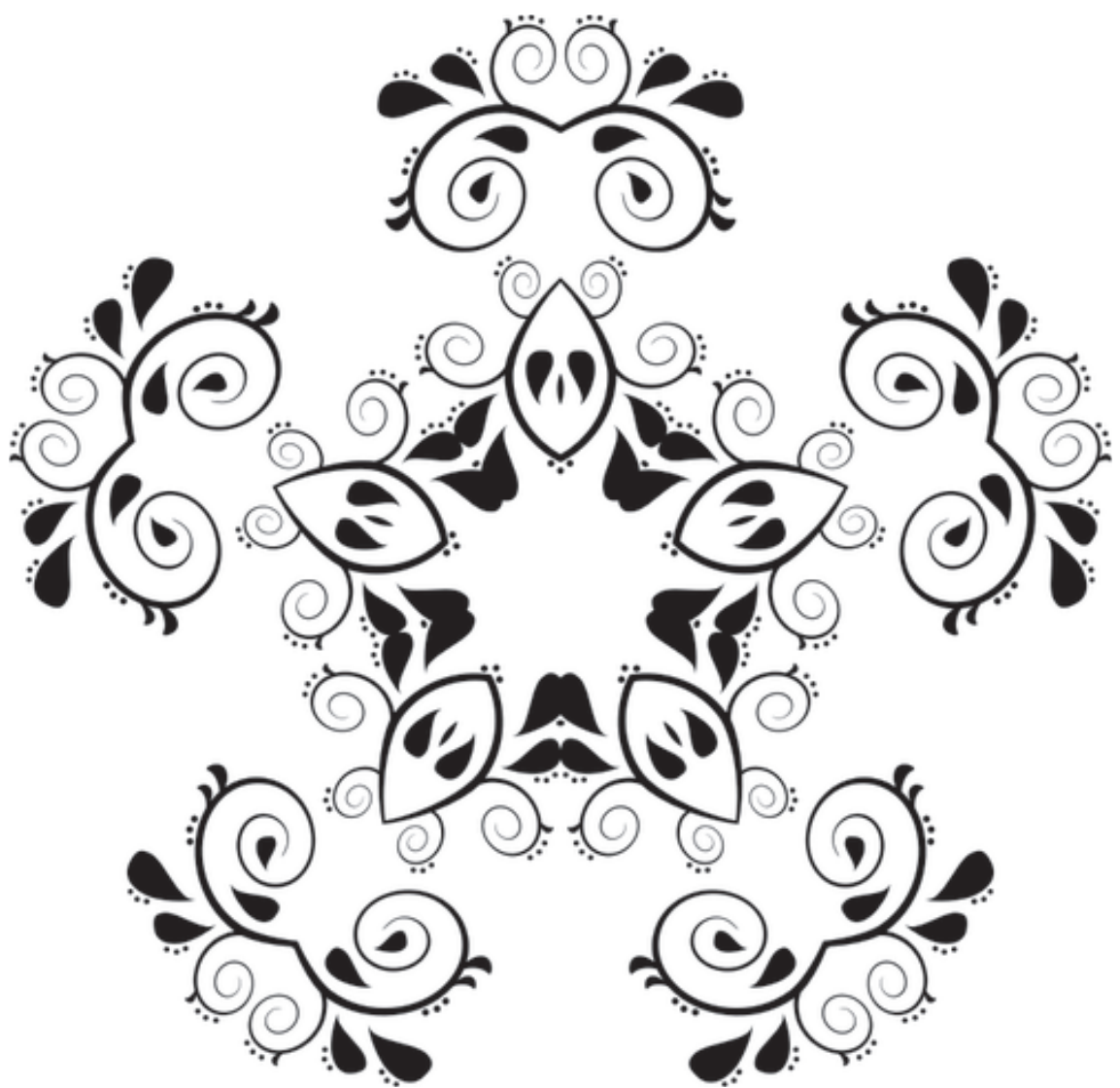
Mediterranean world. Had it been a more just city, its leaders would have grasped that its stability depended on the existence of other just cities whose emotional and intellectual demeanor neither promoted nor encouraged violence.

\* \* \*  
\* \* \*

I live in Bremerton, Washington, a city of approximately 47,000 residents, located on the western shore of the Puget Sound, more or less directly west of Seattle, Washington. I have lived in Bremerton since 2002. My work to make this a more just city and region has been energized by the separatist and xenophobic actions that occur in this city and county. I am involved in environmental and equality movements at the county and city level as an embrace of the way in which I understand all versions of Iolo Morganwg's Druid's Prayer. Iolo's vision of druids was radical for its time, embracing the culture of a minority that was banned from speaking its own language. The call for reason, harmony, peace, the place of the arts, and respect articulated by Iolo is as radical now as it was when written.

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# The City and the Druid

*Moine Michelle*

*Moine Michelle is a contemplative druid who lives at the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac rivers in southwestern Washington, DC. While she has always been in love with truly wild spaces, she is learning to love the city for all its many surprises, spirits, and stories. In her free time, she can be found kayaking, hiking, listening to live music, and hanging out with a ferocious twelve-pound chihuahua, two stubborn Shiba Inus, and a newspaper man.*

[A] truly animist perspective holds everything as sacred, and knows that spirits are everywhere. . . . Once you embrace the city as a spiritual setting in its own right, and begin to view it with one eye in the other-worlds, you will find a special and potent magic there. Streets that may only serve as a frustrating maze when trying to find the nearest ATM can become the winding route of a labyrinth when traversed with a magical mindset.

—Sarah Kate Istra Winter, *The City Is a Labyrinth*

All the very best of us  
String ourselves up for love.

—The National, “Vanderlyle Crybaby Geeks”

I was surrounded by 6,000 other people during one of my most recent magical experiences—a sold-out live music show at the Anthem in southwest DC, an urban venue on the Washington Channel. There’s just something incredibly juicy about seeing a band that you’ve been singing along with in your car or shower for a few years. This performance was by The National and the event was electric in all the ways you might imagine: We were close to the stage; we were packed in tight with everyone else who wanted to be near the stage (though everyone in front of us was much taller than I am); the sound was so loud my breast bone buzzed with the bass and drums. I sang along to every song, surrounded by those taller-than-me people who also knew all the words



and sang-shouted to the ceiling. These sorts of experiences undoubtedly rival the early days of the Theatre of Dionysus, the first known theater within breathing distance of the Greek Acropolis—music and heat and energy.

For the last song of the show, “Vanderlyle Crybaby Geeks,” The National’s lead singer, Matthew Donald Berninger, went conspicuously silent, while the band played on. Without missing a beat, the crowd took over, singing the song, start to finish. “Leave your home / Change your name / Live alone / Eat your cake . . .” This is a tradition for The National and their fans; the band has been ending concerts with fans singing this song for the last six years, new fans learning the lyrics so that they can join in. And herein was the magic—while many of us had been singing along all night long, for this song, we were the voice at the center of the experience. We made the music and the evening complete: “All the very best of us / String ourselves up for love / All the very best of us . . .” As the crowd around me sang, as I joined in, as the sound of my own voice lifted and mingled with the voices around me, an unshakable sense of shared purpose and focus rose and unfolded too. The back of my neck broke out in goosebumps—as it does often when I witness something moving in ritual. We had done this, unscripted. Unprompted. Yet here we were collectively making this happen. I was feeling a little awed, a little awakened, and in touch with something that could only be created communally. The power of our possibilities. A sense we were all in this together.

It was the best that ritual can be.

\* \* \*

*Let us carry this work of peace forward.*

*Let us be whole.*

In much of my druidic work, I’ve reflected on the importance of being in the world—the living world, the material world, the real world, with all its warts and bumps and bruises and hurts and frustrations and astounding, unfolding, heartbreakingly uplifting beauty. Like many druids, I have longed to live more closely to nature on my own land in a remote area. There, I am certain that I will find the deep peace of natural rhythms as I care for the land I own and tend. For me, this dream has been the height of my calling—building a close relationship with a personal plot of land, cultivating a healthy existence for that land and its many beings.

My financial reality, however, has kept this dream out of reach.

For now, I share a 900-square-foot apartment with my partner in southwest DC. This choice makes saving to purchase our own land with a little house feasible within the next five to seven years.

I’ll admit that moving to the city was a sea change. I’d been in a very suburban area where the fences that demarcated each family’s thirty square yards of “private” green space offered some semblance of my druidic dream, even if I was living in a rental. With my own backyard, I could have a fire pit and see a few stars. I could invite others over for small and quiet seasonal ritual. I

lived close to a gorgeous county park that offered wild space for hiking and druidic meditation several times a week. I had a small garden where I grew vegetables, my favorite flowers, and herbs. Yet this area felt culturally dead to me. There were churches and big-box stores and chain coffee shops, but few places that showcased local art or music or culture. I had friendly relations with my neighbors and on occasion we discussed issues with one another. But there was little that linked us beyond living on the same block. And there was no real impulse to work together beyond the occasional, typically easily resolved, issue. We had our own spaces and separate values. Our space allocations reinforced that we were strangers, coming and going in our cars, with little regard to one another beyond courtesy.

Having now lived in the city for several months, I have realized that an urban infrastructure enables me to live my values in ways that I hadn't entirely anticipated. Density and proximity are important elements of this realization. I live just four blocks from my grocery store, a fantastic weekly farmer's market, a small hardware store, a pharmacy, the neighborhood library, and a thriving area along the channel that offers restaurants, shops, and historical landmarks. I buy and eat locally as often as possible. I rarely drive my car. Instead, I conduct my daily and weekly errands on foot or via public transit. Moreover, my neighborhood is quite diverse and set up for the community-minded; organizations run by people who live and work in the neighborhood are a strong presence at weekend and holiday events—offering opportunities to meet others, making visible our shared values and fostering a sense that we're all in this together. Through the summer months, a group of neighborhood businesses host “meet your neighbor” dinners one Sunday a month at the park a block away. Family and community events with live music, local food, and craft booths are offered frequently. These events often include information booths that invite residents to speak up, to become involved in the city and neighborhood planning, and to contribute to the neighborhood's welcoming vibe. Moreover, the more I attend local council and neighborhood planning meetings, the more I see that volunteers and those who show up often make a significant difference to how conversations unfold and visions develop. And the more I attend these events, the more I come to know the faces and names of my neighbors.

All of this took me entirely by surprise.

## What the City Taught the Druid

“It is easy to be an animist in a forest,” Sarah Kate Inslee Winter (2017) writes. “But most of us don't live in the forest, or anywhere near one.” Yet, as Victoria S. (2019), author of the *Druid in the City* blog notes, druids seem to have an especially hard time connecting to cities and cityscapes. Our most recent models for druidic work often present a different sort of living as ideal, harkening to the UK's idyllic countryside or the allure of homestead living—all of which have very important ideals and lessons to offer today's druids. These snapshots of spiritual life and reflections of core druidic values can easily overshadow other visions for druidic identity and practice. Put simply, little druid literature focuses on the ways that cities, their spaces, and their peoples provide focus, energy, and sites for magical work in the twenty-first century.

Yet druids, in particular, have always been more than people who work with natural energies, trees, and animals. Peter Berresford Ellis's history of the druids shows them as political advisors, philosophers, judges, historians, physicians, and astronomers, as well as visionaries, seers, poets, musicians, artists, mystics, and magicians. "They were a caste, incorporating all the learned professions," Ellis writes (1994, 14). As the experts of their era, they advised and watched over the state and offered solutions to the difficulties of their peoples. Inevitably, then, druids would be found in the cities and human complexes of these eras. Today, in fact, cities and neighborhood organizations often offer models of community building and public action that druids can learn from, join, and carry forward.

I want to argue that this often forgotten strain of druidism—the druid as city dweller—has become increasingly crucial in the contexts of today's global ecological catastrophe and economic inequities. The majority of humans now live in urban areas; our economic lives are tied to these areas of high density and cultural pluralism. And while cities are the sites of concentrated culture and active arts scenes, they are also the site of dramatic income inequality, political disenfranchisement, and ecological devastation. The poorest neighborhoods are often the most polluted; there is a clear connection between racial and class disenfranchisement and ecological imbalance. This also means that our cities must be on the front line of the changes toward sustainability humanity must make—our species must become greener, healthier, and friendlier to the ecosystems that sustain us, or we risk our own survival. These efforts must also be closely tied to education, social justice, and community-building work.

As Steven Cohen (2017) argues in *The Sustainable City*, focusing on preserving wilderness areas and/or working to keep natural settings untouched is not enough to move humanity away from the brink of the catastrophe we are about to witness. If humans are to avert climate catastrophe, according to Cohen, we will need our cities to coexist with the less curated natural spaces that surround them. And we will need to work hard to teach those who live in and govern cities that living in these developed areas does not separate us from nature—we must demand sustainable models of urban infrastructure for transit, food cultivation and distribution, and sewage and waste management. We must act quickly and decisively or the planet we live on will be changed so radically that there will be no going back. The science is staggering: In May 2019, the United Nations reported that 1,000,000 species are now endangered due to climate change. In September 2019, a report in *Science* announced that the North American bird population has declined by 29 percent since 1970 (Rosenberg et al., 2019). The World Meteorological Association (2019) has stated that the last five years were the hottest on record. This past week, in Denver, Colorado, the temperature dropped from a high of 83 degrees on Wednesday afternoon to 13 degrees on Thursday night—a full 70 degrees within 34 hours (Bianchi, 2019).

These are just some of the disturbing news points.

This is likely just the beginning.

However, my time in the city has given me some small hope for our collective future. In the few months that I've lived in the city, I've come to see the power of just one or two voices to

educate, enlighten, and open opportunities for others. I've attended public meetings to discuss the redevelopment of the city park that is a block from our building—this park will re-create features of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem, offering a vital opportunity to build awareness of the waterways, flora, and fauna of the region among people in the neighborhood. I've stepped onto the groundskeeping committee of my homeowner's association to argue for planting native species over invasive ornamentals, banning toxic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, and posting and sharing information about these choices to educate others about sustainable and organic gardening practices. I've connected with and volunteered my labor at the community garden a few blocks away; this volunteer-led effort not only offers plots to gardeners who live in the neighborhood, but sets aside several beds to grow hundreds of extra pounds of food to give to its neighbors (such as the people who live in the public housing complex next door). I've also lent a hand in neighborhood trash and waterway cleanup events. Beyond virtue signaling, this work has great personal meaning for me. But even more importantly, it has put me in touch with others in my neighborhood who share my values and want to work for a more sustainable and ecologically balanced future.

My neighborhood has become my front line for activism.

Granted, DC is a very liberal city, where decades of volunteerism and active community building have made my entrance in a short span of time easier than others may find it in their own cities. Indeed, because my city is the nation's capital, eco-activists and community-minded people organize and advocate with a ferocity that I know would be difficult to find in all areas of the US. Even so, I want to encourage other druids to consider the potential of neighborhood activism. We might take up druidic principles to inform and advocate for awareness of any local ecosystem—country, suburb, city.

Think globally, act locally, as the now quite dated adage goes. Neighborhood meetings and planning sessions often provide an accessible place to step up into this sort of public work in a significant way. Many local organizations and neighborhood associations are in dire need of volunteers with organizational acumen. We need only begin to reimagine our place and the purpose of our work to make a difference.

Druids, particularly AODA druids, who study and so are primed to advocate for regional ecologies and more mindful interactions with our environments, are well situated to step to the forefront of these discussions, urging that sustainability and right balance be at the center of policies, legislation, and projects. Further, when we see this type of advocacy as one face of our spiritual, and even magical, practice, we may even find this work significant in ways that are quite personal—fighting the despair and sense of powerlessness that is a pervasive undercurrent in media narratives and popular culture.

The promise of the green city, the city that is a center for culture, the arts, learning, and living in balance, is worth fighting for, even as the odds are truly stacked against us (and, increasingly, humanity in general). I've been personally buoyed and refreshed by the community of green neighborhood activists I've encountered since my move. I especially find comfort in the shared awareness because we do not have much time left to take action. What we need is truly

revolutionary—a revolution of workplaces, conceptions of value, and our daily practices. Druids are natural leaders in these conversations—supporting mindfulness and cooperation, as well as ecological and political awareness. As we work within coalitions, we might realize how the work we have done as solitaries or in our pagan-focused groups has prepared us to serve our neighbors, as well as the natural and spiritual realms.

### **What the Druid May Teach the City**

The more time I spend in the city, the more it reveals itself in unexpected moments as a place of beauty and wildness all its own. Spirit always finds ways to speak. Giant clumps of sheephead mushrooms grow from two old oak trees across the street from my building. As the sun sets, the light cast might turn the windows of a line of buildings to a flaming red. Dandelion and mugwort and mint thrive in the cracks of the sidewalks next to bus stops and at the gateways to city parks. Starlings gather by the thousands each fall and murmur in the wind currents over the Potomac and Washington Channel, before migrating north. A single rubber glove, glued to the knob of a maintenance doorway under a bridge—perhaps by a city worker's accident?—greet me every time I walk to the tidal basin, reminding me that the unexpected and joyful and strange is all around me.

Much of this beauty is human, yes: A few nights back, near midnight, I walked a friend to our building's front door to wait with him for his cab home. The quiet of the dark street was suddenly cut by riotous laughter—three young people of unspecific gender rode by on blinking rental scooters. *Whooooosh!* They were each wearing full bodysuits of blinking lights in green, pink, and yellow. I have no idea where they were going. I will likely never see them again. And yet that moment was as joyous and as magical as the day I stood in a downpour at a campsite and thanked the skies for sustaining me and the forest where I was camping.

I am beginning to see my urban home for what it is—a place of a different kind of magic. A place a druid can do important work of a different nature. When I open to the possibility that this city too holds enchantments, I can create the conditions by which I might better see the magic already in front of me. When we walk a city knowing that it will hold magic for us, we are opening the door for spirit to make itself clear to us and to do its work through us. When we live in a location believing that we have the ability, the opportunity to make important changes, we align ourselves toward that reality.

The change will not happen without us.

### **What the Druid Knows**

I am determined to own that retreat property outside of the city's limits. (It will take time and sacrifice and planning to make that dream a reality.) But I have also realized that I cannot allow my desire for retreat to eclipse my efforts to manifest a more just society that benefits humans and ecosystems alike. The stakes are simply too high for me to falter in these beliefs.

What is more, we can take what we learn from our work in forests and through druid teachings and apply those learnings to city planning, city life, and city workings. In *The Hidden Life of Trees*,



Wohlleben notes that trees are symbiotic, that is, they not only thrive in close proximity to one another but are in effect “more productive” when they live closer together, because “when trees grow together, nutrients and water can be optimally divided among them all so that each tree can grow into the best tree it can be” (2015, 21). These ideals are not so different than the ideals that organized tribal peoples before the rise of the industrial era. While it is unrealistic to think that we can simply go back to those tribal ways (economic and social entrenchments being what they are), we can use these models to reflect on how our cities are organized to reflect what we believe about human nature. Can people in close proximity learn to equitably distribute resources? Can humans come to see connection as a stronger force than competition? And with this shift, perhaps we will begin to see that we are not as separate from nature as we once believed. Our urban spaces may be curated with concrete, glass, and steel, but those creations are yet resting upon the same earth we call up in our meditations and blessings, the earth that grows our food and sustains us.

The roles of advocate, activist, and educator are as much a part of the historical blueprints for druidic work as are the roles of seer, mystic, magician, monk, or hermit. We might begin to explore and share these roles as a central part of our druidic work in the twenty-first century, much as we have explored the poetic messages of the ancient Brythonic myths that inspire so much of our current druidic practice and sensibility.

We might see the city as a natural site for a druid.

*Tomorrow night, I go to see Wilco. The show is sold out.*

There will again be power in our possibilities. A sense we are all in this together.  
It will be the best that ritual can be.

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# Gaia and the Cauldron: A Modern Mabinogion

Claire L. Schosser

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The collection of ancient Welsh tales now titled the *Mabinogion* (Guest 1877a) plays an important role in the AODA, first as one of the required readings of the Apprentice curriculum, and more generally because some of the symbolism found in AODA readings and rituals comes from this source<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, due to the influence of Welsh folklore in Revival Druidry as a whole, many students of Revival Druidry find themselves reading the *Mabinogion* at some point in their practice. However, the tales can be difficult for us to understand, and not only because they are set in a different cultural context than our own. Beyond that, the symbolic dimension of the tales can resist decoding, which may lead us to conclude that they have little to contribute to our lives and practice.

I contend that the *Mabinogion* has a great deal to say to us that is relevant and timely. While we tend to dismiss tales like the *Mabinogion* as make-believe, in fact we think in stories, and the stories that frame our thinking guide our actions and through them change our world. Consider how the story of continual technological, economic, and moral progress has impressed itself on Western civilization over the past several hundred years. Many people cannot imagine any alternative to it, despite evidence of ongoing decline in many different areas of life (Greer, 2015). However, a person or a group with only one story to explain how it began, how it is now,

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1 This set of 11 tales first appears in two different manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century, neither of which bears the current title. The core of the *Mabinogion* consists of a quartet of tales properly called the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*. Lady Charlotte Guest, who made the first English translation of the tales in 1849, supplied the title Mabinogion for the entire set that has been used since (Gantz, 1976)

and how it will change in the future will fail to respond appropriately whenever the flow of events does not conform to the requirements of the story. Those of us who have a diverse collection of stories to hand have a better chance of matching the best story to the events we experience and thereby knowing what is likely to happen next and how to prepare for it. As a collection of different story-patterns, the *Mabinogion* offers us different ways to understand and respond to individual and collective experiences.

To make the *Mabinogion* come alive, we meditate on themes within each tale, enabling us to recognize the symbolism within each theme, and from there we work through the way the symbols relate to each other to trace out the patterns of each tale. Then we can consider if any of the patterns from a tale correspond to events we experience as an individual or as a larger group and, if they do, what the tale has to say about how the events are likely to play out. We can then use the tale as a model for choosing how to respond to those events.

As one example of drawing out a pattern relevant to our druid practice from the *Mabinogion*, I will take a close look at the Second Branch and patterns I discern within it that unfold from one of its symbols, the cauldron of renovation<sup>2</sup>. One of the major symbols of Revival Druidry, cauldrons appear in different guises in different tales of the *Mabinogion*. In the Second Branch the cauldron of renovation first appears when King Matholwch of Ireland receives it from Vran the Blessed of the Island of Britain, along with a silver staff and a plate of gold, in compensation for damages Vran's brother Evnissyen inflicts on Matholwch's horses. This cauldron's property is that if a dead soldier is thrown into the cauldron, the next day the soldier will arise, alive, out of the cauldron, as good as ever except that the soldier will not regain his speech. Under prodding from Vran, Matholwch recalls that the cauldron had been in his kingdom before, in the company of a couple who had worn out their welcome but refused to leave. Through trickery, Matholwch forced the couple out and the cauldron with them; the couple and the cauldron wound up in Vran's kingdom. While the cauldron causes no immediate trouble for Matholwch in its second coming, it plays a large role in the later defeat of Matholwch's forces by Vran's, after Matholwch's mistreatment of his wife, Vran's sister Branwen, leaks out and Vran returns to Ireland to exact revenge. Evnissyen's secret slaughter of Matholwch's forces comes to naught when the soldiers that Evnissyen killed are thrown into the cauldron and return to life the next day. When Evnissyen sees this and realizes that Vran's forces face certain defeat, Evnissyen contrives to play dead so that Matholwch's soldiers throw him into the cauldron. Once inside, Evnissyen throws his arms and legs out wide, rending the cauldron into pieces and killing himself in the process. This act of self-sacrifice allows some of Vran's soldiers to escape death and eventually return to Britain, including Pryderi, the central figure in the Four Branches, and Manawyddan, who plays a critical role in the Third Branch, while Matholwch, all of his men, and almost all of the population of Ireland perish (Guest 1877c).

I find that the inner meanings of many of the symbols in the *Mabinogion* are best ap-

2 The Four Branches of the Mabinogi are the four tales in which Pryderi is one of the characters. *Branwen the Daughter of Llyr* (Guest, 1877c) is the formal name of the Second Branch.

proached as riddles to solve. The cauldron of renovation poses such a riddle for those of us who study it as druids. What is it, then, that can be killed yet rise again, as good as ever except that it loses the power of speech? There are a number of possible answers to this riddle, which I will leave for you to ponder. The meaning I want to explore in this essay can best be understood by a retelling of the Second Branch, as follows.

## **Gaia and the Cauldron**

Once upon a time, King Francis of Bacon was sitting in the study of his castle, musing upon the past year. It had been a difficult one. The snows had fallen deeper and longer than they had for years, delaying planting and reducing the potential harvest. Then a mold brought on by cold rains not long before harvest had reduced it yet more. There wouldn't be much to eat for the next year, and a long-term trend of removing trees faster than they could regrow left the kingdom's woodsheds with little wood for heating and cooking needs. The king knew his business and realized that if he didn't come up with some plan to keep the commoners fed and warm, a revolt would occur, as a result of which his head was likely to end up on the opposite side of a large, heavy blade from his body. What to do?

Dire as this situation was, it wasn't the only thing on his mind. Francis was young, handsome, and virile, but he was without a queen, having only recently reached majority. As he pondered, a plan began to form in his mind. He'd been hearing about Princess Gaia in the kingdom across the sea. Apparently, she'd grown up to be a ravishing beauty—and she was as yet unmarried. Word was that King Jehovah, Gaia's brother, had refused several suitors for his sister's hand but remained open to proposals. Hmm, thought Francis. Suppose I ask the king for his sister's hand in marriage? Then our kingdoms would be allied for mutual betterment and protection. If the king has as many riches as is rumored, I might be able to keep the people fed until the next harvest, thus saving my neck. If Gaia's as beautiful as I've heard, I'll have a queen to keep me warm at night and provide a son to rule in his time.

The next day, Francis brought his plan before his advisors. Everyone agreed it was brilliant, and they immediately began to prepare a fleet and provisions sufficient to sail across the sea to Jehovah's kingdom. Soon they set off. After the usual trials, they reached Jehovah's kingdom and were granted an audience with him.

King Jehovah smiled at the young King Francis. Francis had arrayed himself in the finest garments he had available; and truth to tell, he cut a dashing figure. Princess Gaia, sitting across the table from Francis, was falling in love with him, a fact that Jehovah was quick to notice. And he was just as aware that Francis was completely smitten with Gaia.

"Welcome, King Francis of Bacon. May I call you Francis? And please call me JV; everyone does. What brings you here?" Now of course Jehovah already knew what brought Francis to his table, but the proper etiquette must be followed in these matters.

"What? Oh, yeah. JV, I've come here to propose an alliance between our kingdoms, an alliance that will allow us to protect each other against any harm that would befall either."

"And how might we cement this alliance?" asked Jehovah, arching his right eye just a bit.



He rather enjoyed putting Gaia's suitors on the spot.

Francis took a deep breath and screwed up his courage.

"King Jehovah, I hereby request the hand of your sister, Princess Gaia, in marriage."

At this Gaia's eyes lit up and her hand went to her heart, which of course Jehovah and Francis both noticed.

"I'm willing to grant you her hand in marriage, but only if Gaia gives her permission. Gaia, what is your answer?"

Gaia's face was soft and dreamy. "Yes, my brother, I accept Francis's offer of marriage."

Jehovah smiled. "Excellent! Let's make arrangements and prepare a feast!" And so it came to pass; the marriage ceremony was held, a great banquet followed, and when it was time for sleep, Gaia took Francis to her chamber and they did what newly married couples do, and plenty of it. Having cemented the alliance and made the marriage, Francis then brought Gaia back to his kingdom.

Now besides all her other virtues Gaia was wicked smart. And Francis was nearly her equal in that department. Between the two of them, they worked out a slew of ways in which to put the power of water and wind to use for the benefit of all the people. In due time Gaia brought forth children, and many other women did as well; no one could remember seeing so many children at one time in the kingdom, children that thrived on the plentitude of their mothers' milk and on the excellent harvests. And for some years all was well.

But then a long stretch of cloudy, cold, calm, dry weather struck the Kingdom of Bacon. Crops stopped growing. The supply of firewood dwindled to dangerously low levels. The streams ran too dry to power the water wheels that ground the grain that fed the people. The wind-powered grain mills didn't work either. The people blamed Gaia for their woes, saying that the weather had never been this bad before Gaia came to the kingdom. Francis realized they'd better act fast if they wanted to keep their heads attached to their necks.

He asked Gaia if she had any ideas. "Just one," she said. "Go back to my brother JV and ask for his help. He has something stashed away just for situations like this. But you'd best be careful, and get back here quickly. I don't know how long we have before the people take things into their own hands."

Francis promptly set out and, luck being with him, it didn't take him long to reach Jehovah's kingdom and the castle. Before long he and Jehovah were seated at the castle table. After an excellent lunch, Jehovah asked Francis what brought him there. (Jehovah already knew, of course, but the proper etiquette must be followed.) He thoughtfully stroked his beard as Francis poured out his tale of woe. After Francis finished, Jehovah remained silent for a long time, long enough for Francis to feel really nervous, even a little frightened. Finally, Jehovah spoke.

"Well, I do have something to give you." He looked hard at Francis, who felt the hairs start to rise on the back of his neck. "But you'll have to be careful with it. It has great power, but that power can hurt you more than it helps you."

Jehovah called over a servant and gave directions. Before long the servant was back, struggling to carry a cauldron almost as big as he was. Another servant carried in a large gold

plate and a silver staff.

Francis felt confused. He knew he could sell the plate and staff to another kingdom for food or firewood, if need be. But a cauldron? What good could that do him and Gaia? After the servant set the cauldron down, Francis saw that it was almost full of strange-looking black rocks peeking out of an equally weird-looking (and foul-smelling) black liquid. Francis couldn't help wrinkling his nose at the smell, something that Jehovah noticed, of course.

"Yes, it smells foul, that liquid."

Francis asked, "What is that stuff in the cauldron?"

Jehovah said, "What you have here is the cauldron of replication. It has the power to multiply certain things that are put inside it. Toss the right thing into the cauldron, wait a bit, and back out it comes, along with a lot more of it, good as new. Well, it can't talk, but then it doesn't need to."

Toss what in? The cauldron was full as it was, Francis thought. And you surely would ruin anything you tossed into that black liquid, if the rocks didn't smash it to bits first.

Jehovah noticed Francis' puzzlement, of course, and sighed. "Look, just take it back with you, OK? Show it to Gaia. She knows what it is. And your advisors can help you figure out what to do with it. But you'd better take this plate and staff with you as well. If you get in trouble with the cauldron, you'll need them. They can help you understand how to use the cauldron wisely. You just need to be sure to follow their instructions. And don't wait too long, because if you need to consult them, you don't have much time left."

Francis knew better than to ask Jehovah for any more information, or anything else, for that matter. The look Jehovah was giving him—well, if anyone looked at you that way, you'd beat feet, and fast. So that's just what Francis did, with a couple of his attendants carrying the cauldron between them and two other attendants carrying the plate and staff.

When he got back to his castle, he showed Gaia the cauldron. She gave him a look much the same as the look Jehovah had given him. "Yes, I know what that is. You'll have to get your advisors to help you with it, though. I've got to take care of the children." And she wouldn't say anything more about the cauldron or what to do with it.

So Francis took the cauldron to his advisors. They pondered on it and started to experiment with the strange rocks and liquid inside. It wasn't long before Sir Watt came up with a way to use the black rocks. See, he'd been working on this project he called an engine. Boil water to make steam inside the engine, use the steam to move a tool that you'd normally have to power with human muscles, and you'd have yourself a tool that could run all the time and not give you any trouble, unlike people who expect to get something in return for the work that they do. Of course, anyone could boil water with a wood-fueled fire. But all the wood in the kingdom was already spoken for. Then Sir Watt accidentally dropped a burning candle onto a few of the black rocks and lo and behold, the rocks burned! Hmm, he thought, this cauldron is supposed to make more of something you toss into it. Suppose I toss one of the rocks into the cauldron and see if more come back out. If they do, maybe I could use the rocks to fuel the fire to power this engine.

Straightaway Sir Watt fished out one of the black rocks and then threw it back into the

cauldron. Lo and behold, a whole lot of the black rocks flew out of it, and there seemed to be just as many black rocks in the cauldron as ever! Ducking just in time to avoid a nasty head wound, Sir Watt savored being right, and got to work. Before long, he and his crew had built engines throughout the kingdom, powering tools inside big buildings that made lots of strange things that, once they had them in their hands, people wanted more of. And powering big metal horses that galloped on metal tracks while pulling lots of boxes behind them filled with people or the strange things that they wanted. And powering big boats on the rivers, filled with people or the strange things they wanted. And the people were happy, or at least distracted by all the strange things and what they could do, for a while. But then they grew restive again, muttering against Gaia. Worse, the cauldron didn't seem to be working as well; it was chucking out fewer rocks for each rock chucked in. One of Francis' advisors suggested finding the gold plate and silver staff to see if they had anything to say about that, but Francis didn't want to admit defeat. And truth to tell, he couldn't; the people had grown to expect the big engines to keep on running the big tools to keep on making strange things for them.

So he asked his advisors to see if they could find a use for the black liquid. Some of them did; they found they could use the stuff in place of whale oil in lanterns. Useful, but not quite what Francis had in mind. Then Sir Otto came to him with something he called an internal combustion engine that could power a single carriage that could run on solid ground. Francis realized Otto had a winner, and the people did too; as soon as carriages powered from engines running on the black liquid became available, people wanted one. And truth to tell, they had their advantages over horse-drawn carriages. The engines were easier to take care of than horses; they didn't leave road apples all over the place (nothing like stepping into a pile of road apples to ruin a lady's shoes, and dress, and mood); and they were ready whenever people wanted them, unlike horses, which you had to feed, water, and rest if you didn't want them to drop dead on you before you got where you were going. And all they had to do was pour a little of the black liquid into the cauldron, and a whole lot more gushed back out for use in the carriages, leaving the cauldron as full as ever. Black gold, they called it.

Soon another advisor, who had been smoking as he stood next to the cauldron, realized this wasn't the best idea when an explosion occurred. As the other advisors cleaned up the mess, they pondered on what might have caused the explosion. One of them suggested that maybe something was coming off the cauldron, like steam off a pan of hot water. Pretty soon the advisors had rigged up a small balloon over the cauldron. Lo and behold, it began to fill up. A test soon confirmed that the stuff (they called it natural gas) in the balloon would catch fire. Soon after that some of Francis's advisors figured out how to use the natural gas for heating and cooking fires. And it didn't take Sir Haber long to make a replacement for manure out of the natural gas when it was mixed with air. A good thing, too: the people had multiplied to the point where the farms needed lots of fertilizer to grow enough food to feed everyone. Now that fewer people kept horses, there was less manure to fertilize the fields. The rest of the fertilizer had to come from something else, if the advisors wanted the people fed so they could keep their heads on their necks.

Then another advisor, Sir Wright, started to wonder if he could use the black gold to power boxes that flew through the air, like a bird. Indeed he could, and before long the sky was filled with large birdlike boxes that ate people at one place and threw them back up, unharmed, at another place very far away. And if you think that was the end of the wonders, think again. Some of Francis' advisors figured out how to make strange new things out of the black gold that people wanted as soon as they were available. Before long the people had big boxes hanging on walls that showed colorful moving pictures on them, and medium-sized boxes sitting on furniture that showed colorful moving pictures on them, and little boxes they held in their hands with colorful moving pictures on them. And they could speak to someone they couldn't even see through the boxes, and the person would hear them and reply, and they could hear it. And they could use their fingers to write words on the boxes, and people very far away could read the words on their boxes and write words back. Some people claim that some of the advisors made spider-shaped boxes carried within cylindrical boxes that were flung by giant catapults all the way up to the Moon, and that people living inside the boxes got out and walked on the Moon before the boxes scooped them up and brought them back to Earth. Some even say that other boxes were flung from the giant catapults so far that they reached the planets and even beyond them, and that through the eyes on those boxes people could see what was on the surface of the planets from their boxes! It was an amazing time, all right. But the people still didn't seem very happy; no matter how much they had and how wondrous it was, they never seemed to have enough.

Then the cauldron started to make less of the black gold every time some was poured in, and the level of the black gold in the cauldron began dropping. Soon some people couldn't get enough to run their carriages. The people started muttering against Gaia again. Surely she could fix the cauldron so it would continue to make as much, or even more, black gold as ever. So why didn't she?

Meanwhile, Gaia began to feel a little off. It was hardly noticeable at first. She felt a bit tired, like some of her energy was drained. She thought maybe the children caused it. She'd had a lot by now, and they kept her really busy. But then she started running a low-grade fever, so she went to the kingdom's doctors. The doctors didn't know what was wrong. They suggested she slow down, take some time off for herself. But just when was she supposed to do that? The children kept coming. It seemed like they were everywhere, disturbing the peace, driving off the animals, making a mess. She couldn't keep anything clean anymore.

King Francis worried about Gaia and the increasing mess, and about the situation with the black gold, and about the peoples' increasing discontent. He tried sending an envoy to Jehovah to ask for advice, but Jehovah was nowhere to be found; even his own advisors didn't know what had become of him. As the situation deteriorated, Francis realized he'd better do something, and fast. So he asked one of his advisors, Lady Meadows, to take a look at the gold plate and the silver staff and see if they had any advice to give. Before long she and her crew came back with a report.

"Your Highness," Lady Meadows said, "we've consulted the plate and the staff and they say that the longer we keep using the rocks and the black gold, the less the cauldron will have to give back. Nothing is unlimited, they say, not even the rocks and the black gold. Furthermore, when we

burn the rocks and the black gold they give off something that makes Her Highness sick. The more we burn, the higher a fever she'll run, the harder it will be for her to care for her children, and the more of a mess they'll create."

Francis shuddered. The situation was worse than he'd realized. He asked Lady Meadows if the plate and staff had any advice to offer.

She said, "Yes, they do. They say that if we turn back to water and wind and use some of what we've learned to put sunlight to good use, we can find ways to keep ourselves warm enough, well fed, well sheltered, and happy without the rocks and black gold and without most of the strange things we made out of them. Then Her Highness's fever will start to go down and we can all work together to clean up the messes. But we need to start work on this at once if we want to keep Her Highness from getting really sick and if we want the people to learn the new ways while there are still some rocks and black gold left to make it easier."

This was not exactly welcome news to Francis. Truth to tell, he liked all the strange things and the wondrous boxes and the colorful moving pictures on them himself. And he wasn't at all sure that his advisors wanted to figure out how to use less of the rocks and black gold, since they were well rewarded for using more of them. But then it occurred to him that maybe some of the common folk had some ideas. And they needed something to keep their minds off their problems, if he wanted to keep his head on his shoulders. He could see a plan coming together.

So it came to pass that Francis issued a royal proclamation about a new program offering special castle support to anyone who was willing to work on ways to use sun, water, or wind in place of the rocks and black gold. None of his advisors outside of Lady Meadows and her crew applied for support and most commoners shrugged their shoulders, but it happened that a few people took up the challenge. And they started making some progress and even exciting some other people into trying their own ideas. These folks formed themselves into a movement. And the town criers brought news of their work to every corner of the kingdom, and some more folks got interested and started taking up the new ways. It looked like the proclamation was beginning to bear fruit. Even the cauldron looked a little better.

But as it happened, Francis eventually stopped the program. Who knows why? Maybe his advisors, who were so richly rewarded for thinking of ways to use more and more of the rocks and the black gold, wore him down. Maybe the people were tired of hearing about how they needed to change their ways and just wanted to go back to looking at the colorful moving pictures. Whatever the reason, the special castle support ended, Lady Meadows and her crew left the group of advisors, and most of the people who had been working on ways to use less of the rocks and black gold gave up their efforts. And most everyone went back to using more and more of the rocks and black gold as time went on.

As Lady Meadows and her crew had predicted, Gaia's fever went up. As it did, instead of growing more tired, she started to gain strength from some unknown source. She now spent a lot of time crying and storming around the castle. Francis' agents throughout the kingdom kept bringing news of another flooded river from an especially heavy rain, another windstorm that knocked down everything in its path, another deadly fire. The kingdom's garbage collectors were



overwhelmed with the old boxes the people kept throwing out as the colorful moving pictures told them to get new ones. Francis' advisors were reduced to dropping the tops of mountains into the cauldron to get out a few more black rocks and globs of tarry rock from an adjoining kingdom to get out a little more black gold, all the while claiming in the colorful moving pictures that the kingdom led the world in rock and black gold production. Meanwhile the kingdom got noisier, and dirtier, and hotter, and more crowded, and more dangerous.

As Gaia's storming grew more intense, Francis' advisors told him he'd better lock her up if he wanted to have a kingdom left to govern, so he did, telling himself it was best for everyone. And they said to forbid the town criers from passing on any bad news, so he did that too. They assured him that they'd think of something if only he'd give them more gold and more time and more space to do so, so he did that too. What else could a king do if he wanted to keep his head attached to his neck? But that didn't stop all the bad stuff from happening; it just kept everyone from knowing enough about it to do anything useful. And Gaia started throwing temper tantrums in her prison cell, striking fear into Francis and his advisors alike. They threw up as many barriers as they could get their hands on in front of her cell, plus guards on duty twenty-four hours a day in front of Francis' chamber, while the advisors tried to think of something to do about the situation and Francis kept telling the people to be patient, they'd think of something soon and everything would be better than before.

Eventually Gaia gained enough strength to break out of her prison cell and into Francis' chamber, powering her way past all the barriers and the guards Francis and his advisors had put in her way. And oh my, was she angry! Francis tried to talk her down. His advisors kept telling her it would be OK. They'd think of something. But Gaia was beyond caring about any of them. She'd hoped that Francis and his advisors would learn to use the cauldron wisely, but that had proved mistaken. And now there was nothing to be done for it but to break the cauldron into a million pieces, before it could do any more damage—not that there was much left in there anyway.

When Gaia was finished with the cauldron, and with Francis and his advisors and the many strange things that had been made with and from the rocks and the black gold, there was nothing left of them to find. Nor were many people left to mourn all that had come to pass, and those who were left had little time for mourning. You see, for as long as the boxes with the colorful moving pictures kept working, the people kept watching them. It was as if they were in a dream. By the time the cauldron broke and the boxes stopped working and the people woke up, they were in a real fix, for without the rocks and the black gold, they were back to using their own muscles and wits to provide for themselves. During the time of the cauldron, most of the people had forgotten how to grow food and make shelter and tools and medicines using water, wind, sunlight, and earth plus their own muscle and brain power. Now they had to learn again while Gaia cried and stormed around them. And if you think that was easy, think again.

And the staff and the plate? Well, when the special proclamation ended, one of the advisors tossed them out with the castle trash. But a few commoners who had worked during the time of the proclamation suspected this would happen, and they'd staged a watch so they could rescue the staff and the plate. One moonlit evening, those on watch saw the gleam of gold and silver near

the top of the vast pile of trash. Moving carefully, they picked their ways up to the plate and staff, and they took the plate and the staff with them. What they did with them then—well, that’s another story. And thus ends the story of Gaia and the cauldron.

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Now that you’ve read the retelling—in which I highlight correspondences that I see between the story of the Second Branch and the story of fossil fuel use—I invite you to consider your response to it. In the rest of this article I discuss how my retelling holds within it a potential response to the dilemma that it highlights. To do this I will first describe a story-pattern that has informed my retelling and then discuss how the symbolism of the gold plate and silver staff helps me to acknowledge and accept where we are now and to choose beneficial actions on that basis.

One of the story-patterns I perceive in the Second Branch is the story of the missed second chance. Matholwch did not at first take the maiming of his horses for an insult perpetrated by his host, Vran the king of Wales. Why, he said to those who spoke to him about it, would Vran insult someone to whom he’d given his sister Branwen to marry? But members of Matholwch’s court insisted that it must be an insult, and Matholwch allowed himself to be persuaded. Preparing to leave Wales without asking for permission to do so represents the loss of his first chance for good relations between Ireland and Wales. But Vran responded with an offer to not only replace all of the maimed horses but to throw in a silver staff as large and tall as Matholwch and a gold plate of the breadth of his face if Matholwch would stay. Matholwch and his court accepted the offer and returned to the wedding festivities. Even then, Vran noticed that Matholwch didn’t seem to be all that cheerful, so he added the cauldron as an extra inducement to keep the peace between their kingdoms. This became Matholwch’s second chance to retain the alliance between himself and Vran, which he accepted. And at first the people in Matholwch’s kingdom were happy to accept Branwen and the gifts that she gave them. However, years later the whole of Ireland, including those closest to Matholwch, arose in fury at what they considered the insult of the maimed horses and the perceived slightness of the repayment. It was then that Matholwch’s fate was sealed, for his foster brothers drove Branwen away from Matholwch and his chamber, imprisoning her, and he did nothing to stop them (Guest, 1877c).

I believe that the pattern of the missed second chance also applies to our dependence on fossil fuels and the response of the Earth to the by-products of their burning. The cauldron of replication represents the fact that only a small fraction of the energy in a given barrel of oil or ton of coal is required to make another barrel of oil or ton of coal available for use. Those of you who are conversant with the history of science and technology, or those who have read John Michael Greer’s book *The Retro Future* (Greer, 2017), will recognize the names and events embedded in the retelling. A quick internet search will reveal their identities if you are unfamiliar with them.

In my retelling, the symbolism of the gold plate and silver staff corresponds with their symbolism in an extension of the Sphere of Protection ritual found in *The Druid Magic Handbook*

(Greer, 2007). The Cauldron working describes the establishment and charging of the Three Cauldrons, three different centers of *nwyfre* in the body. The Earth Cauldron beneath the navel is filled with the telluric current while invoking Spirit Below, and the Sun Cauldron at heart level is filled with the solar current while invoking Spirit Above. The silvery light in the Earth Cauldron is then brought up into the Sun Cauldron and both it and the golden light of the Sun Cauldron are brought into the Moon Cauldron in the center of the head and converted into white light during the invocation of Spirit Within. Thus, silver corresponds to Spirit Below and power, gold to Spirit Above and knowledge.

For me, the silver staff and gold plate of the Second Branch symbolize power and knowledge that Matholwch could have exercised but chose not to in his response to the challenge of his court and public opinion regarding the maiming of the horses. In my retelling, the plate and staff refer to the appropriate technology movement of the 1950s through the 1970s. The appropriate technology movement arose in response to the realization that at some point not too far in the future the finite supply of fossil fuels and the ever-increasing use of them would collide and cause fossil fuel use to peak and then begin an inexorable decline, dragging the economy with it. Further, the burning of fossil fuels increases the amount of carbon dioxide in the air and the oceans, which changes the dynamics of the cyclic processes that stabilize Earth's climate within a narrow range. The appropriate technology movement addressed both of these challenges by developing new technologies that used energy and resources sparingly by working with natural cycles rather than against them to meet human needs without making unsustainable demands on the biosphere (Greer, 2013b).

Despite considerable success in devising satisfying ways to live on a small fraction of the energy and resources used by most middle-class people in industrial nations, however, most of the movement's participants had to abandon their efforts during the Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s, when the government grants that had funded the majority of the work dried up. As the price of oil dropped throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the general public interpreted the price drop as a sign that the crisis was over and returned to their previous consumptive patterns (Greer, 2013b). Thus, we find ourselves in the same position as Matholwch did when he imprisoned Branwen and as Francis did when he imprisoned Gaia: we have burned up the fossil fuels we needed to develop the infrastructure required to make a controlled transition to a low-energy economy, and by doing so we have set in motion environmental and economic consequences that we cannot undo (Greer, 2016).

This conclusion runs counter to the story of progress that is embedded in the culture and civilization in which I live (Greer, 2015). But I have come to realize that the story of progress does not fit the flow of events that I have experienced during my life. A story of rise and fall such as the Second Branch better fits what I have observed. In the Second Branch, as in natural patterns such as those of the day, the year, and a physical life, something begins, comes to a peak, declines, and then ends. So too must our use of fossil fuels, and so too the economy and culture that depend on them. We need to find a way to survive through the far-reaching environmental, economic, and cultural changes wrought by our actions, changes that will make all of our lives more difficult than

they are now for the foreseeable future.

Given this, can druid spirituality and practices help me to work through the strong emotions aroused by living through economic, cultural, and environmental decline and rescue whatever might be possible out of the situation, as Evnissyen did when he broke the cauldron and as Pryderi and Manawyddan do in the Third Branch (Guest, 1877d)?<sup>3</sup> Does my retelling of the Second Branch offer guidance in this direction?

For me, one way in which druidry helps corresponds with the power embodied in the silver staff, the power of our emotions when fully felt and properly channeled. Within the Revival Druid tradition, meditation, druidic spiritual practices such as prayer and ritual work, and bardic practices offer various ways to experience and work with our emotions.

One of the effects of daily meditation is that we become conscious of emotional patterns that affect us beneath our awareness. Once we are aware of these emotions, we can choose an appropriate response. I have found that the emotional awareness generated through meditative practices done consistently over time has sustained me through difficult short-term situations and allowed me to act effectively within those situations. I expect continued meditation practice will become even more valuable in that regard as environmental and economic limits bite more severely.

Druidic ritual and magical work offer us ways to work with the powerful emotions aroused by the changes taking place around us. The solitary grove ritual of the AODA (Greer, 2011) provides a ritual container for blessing ceremonies, such as a blessing for the stream that I work with as a Missouri Stream Team volunteer.<sup>4</sup> The urbanized watershed through which this stream passes has degraded its natural functions and its quality. Because I cannot change the urbanized nature of the watershed, my work on the stream invokes a felt sense of loss for it and, I think, from it as well. By performing a blessing for the stream within a grove, I transformed some of the sense of loss into a healing and blessing on the inner plane that connects my life to the stream's life. This strengthens me as I continue with the physical acts of picking up litter and monitoring water quality, and I hope it will aid the stream to strengthen itself as well.

I have found the magical work of the Dolmen Arch course to be another source of power. The blessing I performed for the stream came from the magical enchantment skills I learned in this course. The Dolmen Arch course teaches a system of druid wisdom, magic, and healing based in Revival Druidry of the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> From working through the Dolmen Arch course I have learned and adopted a philosophical framework for my druidic faith and a means to calm my emotional reactivity and tendency to obsession through its magical work.

Another resource for those druids with an interest in magic is *The Druid Magic Handbook* (Greer, 2007). It includes practical magic that druids can use to help them work through strong emotions that are otherwise resistant to change, as well as magic that works with the solar and

3      *Manawyddan the Son of Llyr*

4      See Missouri Stream Team, <http://www.mostreamteam.org/>.

5      Greer, John Michael (2020). *The Dolmen Arch, volume 1: A Study Course in the Druid Mysteries*. Azoth Press.

telluric currents for the benefit of the land, a practice that could help to counteract some of the strain we humans put on it.

For those druids who connect with the religious heritage of Revival Druidry, the Gnostic Celtic Church, an independent sacramental church of nature spirituality affiliated with the AODA, is another source of practices that engage and work with our emotional and spiritual natures and the way these are affected by the changes we are living through (Greer, 2013a).

Poetry and other bardic arts like music have been part of Revival Druid practice since it began. The arts offer a powerful means to connect with and process the strong emotions we may feel in the midst of the changes taking place around us. My retelling of the Second Branch emerged as a way to express, through creative writing, the decline I observe around me and how to respond to it. The flow of Awen that attended the story-creation has kindled a renewed interest in further reducing my use of fossil fuels. Grand Archdruid Dana O'Driscoll reminds us that we may also use our bardic arts as a means to communicate directly with the living Earth, so that the arts can provide a means of healing not only ourselves but the Earth as well.<sup>6</sup>

Another way I apply the lessons I learned from the Second Branch is through knowledge, as symbolized by the golden plate. In my retelling, the particular form of knowledge referred to is that generated from the individual and group efforts of the appropriate technology movement. This knowledge is even more relevant to our daily lives than it was when it was first developed, for we are already experiencing the environmental and economic dislocations that Donella Meadows and her coauthors predicted in *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). Any knowledge we can apply now to reducing fossil fuel usage in our own lives will make it easier for us to manage as fossil fuel prices and availability spike and fall irregularly, taking the economy on a wild ride with them. Further, it will keep that much carbon in the ground instead of in the air, and thus provides us with practical actions to reduce our negative impact on the Earth that we can apply toward the requirements of AODA's Earth Path.

Greer's (2013b) book *Green Wizardry* offers a primer on applying some of the technologies from the appropriate technology movement to our daily lives and living spaces. Most of the technologies he discusses range from no cost to low cost, paying back quickly in reduced energy bills that can help to cushion the shock of rising prices in other areas. I have discussed some of the technologies I have used to reduce fossil fuel use on my blog, and I continue to work through the book to add others.<sup>7</sup> For druids and anyone else looking for practical ways to reduce negative impacts on the earth, *Green Wizardry* and the books it references include a banquet table full of them, from which you can pick and choose the dishes that suit your particular circumstances the best.

Greer devotes twelve of the thirty lessons in *Green Wizardry* to gardening practices, part of the toolkit of the appropriate technology movement. I and many other druids find in gardening spiritual solace and connection with nature as well as practical strategies to reduce our dependence on industrial agriculture, which also reduces the harm it does to the earth. My article on ecology

6 See O'Driscoll's blog, the Druid's Garden, <https://druidgarden.wordpress.com/>.

7 Living Low in the Lou, <http://livinglowinthelou.blogspot.com/>.



and spirituality in the vegetable garden in the 2016 issue of *Trilithon* (Schosser, 2016) describes how I have applied the golden plate of knowledge to my gardening practices so that they work more in tune with ecological processes. Another type of gardening practice based on ecological principles, permaculture, has been discussed in *Trilithon* as well (Robersmith, 2017; O'Driscoll, 2017). Other articles in *Trilithon* have introduced humanure composting (Rogers, 2017) and moon phase gardening (Herrington, 2018). Many other books and practices for ecological gardening are as near as your local bookstore, library, gardening organization, and internet connection.

Another type of knowledge that druidry makes available to me comes from discursive meditation. Using discursive meditation on the theme of the cauldron of renovation in the Second Branch provided me with three other meanings of the cauldron that apply to my druid practice in addition to the meaning I explore here. Taken together, these four meanings form the core of my druid practice, which I came to understand in the process of reading and meditating on the Second Branch and exploring those meanings further as I wrote my essay for the Companion degree. Had I not considered this theme through discursive meditation I would not have realized any of those four meanings nor grasped how they inform my druid practice and offer me a guide as I continue to walk the druid path. In addition, discursive meditation has uncovered some of the deeper levels of meaning that I have discerned in all of the readings I have done to meet the AODA curriculum requirements and in various readings beyond those. I have found that discursive meditation is the key that opens the treasure chest of druid and esoteric lore as well as providing deeper insight into more mundane works, insights that I can then apply in my life.

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After the battle near the end of the Second Branch, the few Welsh who survived went through a dreamlike period of partying and pleasantries before they reawakened to duty and returned to Wales to find that the men whom they had left in charge in their place had been murdered. It is at this point that the next tale, the Third Branch (Guest, 1877d), begins. In the Third Branch, recognizing that the shattering events of the Second Branch preclude a return to their previous lives, Pryderi and Manawyddan first acknowledge their loss. I suggest that we face this same need. The days of cheap fuel, and the giddy growth that they allowed, are past us. Until we acknowledge and accept this, we cannot know how to proceed.

Having accepted their situation, Pryderi and Manawyddan devised an alternative that worked within the limitations that they faced. Consequences of events from the First Branch, however, intervened.<sup>8</sup> Before long Pryderi and Manawyddan found themselves taking up the practices of peasants despite their royal blood. In the same way, faced with the ending of fossil fuel abundance, druids may find ourselves doing things we never dreamed we'd need to do. It is here where the silver staff of emotional resilience and the golden plate of knowledge of ways to

8 *Pwyll Prince of Dyved* (Guest, 1877b).

provide for our needs in a low-energy world will prove to be of great value. Among the other work we do, keeping the practices of druid spirituality and appropriate technology alive will make it more likely that those who come after us can benefit by them as well.

The resolution that Pryderi and Manawyddan finally experience at the end of the Third Branch required their utmost efforts, just as the path to the post-fossil fuel world will require of us. We can begin to live the story of the post-fossil fuel world through our druid spiritual practices and through practical changes that we make in our lives, changes that fulfill our pledges as druids to reduce our negative impact on the earth and thus help the Earth to begin to heal herself. The tales in the *Mabinogion* can offer us guidance in this effort.

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# Channeling the Awen Within

## An Exploratory Study of the Bardic Arts in the Modern Druid Tradition

*Dana O'Driscoll*

*Dana O'Driscoll spent her childhood in the wooded hills of the Laurel Highlands region of Pennsylvania, making mud pies, building brush cabins, and eating berries. Thankfully, little has changed, and she can still be found searching out tasty mushrooms, gathering herbs, and playing her pan flute for the trees. Dana is often covered with paint, dirt, or both. She is a certified permaculture designer and is working toward a more resilient, self-sufficient lifestyle through beekeeping, perennial agriculture, animal husbandry, food preservation, herbalism, and natural building. Dana joined AODA in 2007 and, after completing her first and second degrees, earned the degree of Druid Adept in 2013 and Bardic Adept in 2018. Dana currently serves as the Grand Archdruid in the AODA. Her writings on Druidry and sustainability can be found at the Druid's Garden ([druidgarden.wordpress.com](http://druidgarden.wordpress.com)).*

### Introduction

In the modern druid tradition, the bardic arts have a central spiritual role.<sup>1</sup> Traditional bardic arts include those practiced by the ancient bards of old: stories, music, poetry, and song. Contemporary druid practice includes many other forms of creative work: visual arts, fine crafts, design, and much more. Part of the contemporary druid tradition is the seeking and cultivation of Awen, or divine inspiration, which helps shape and direct creative practice. In the 10th Mount Haemus lecture, Letcher (2009) posed the question, “What is a bard?” He answered that question by exploring two different historical definitions of bards: ancient bards, who were professionals that performed stories, songs, music, and poetry to appease their patrons; and more modern “romantic bards” who, taking their cue from the legendary Taliesin, were seen as divinely inspired poets with Awen flowing within. As demonstrated through Letcher’s review of five druid courses teaching bardic arts, the modern druid tradition seeks to use bardic practice to support inner spiritual life and

1 This is an adapted version of Dana’s 2018 Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids Mount Haemus Lecture. The Mount Haemus series supports scholarship on the druid tradition; Dana’s work was selected as the 19th such lecture. You can see the full study at OBOD’s website (<https://www.druidry.org/events-projects/mount-haemus-award/nineteenth-mount-haemus-lecture>).

embraces the romantic view of the bard. Letcher argues, however, that a disconnection between these two bardic archetypes presents a conflict for the flow of Awen: specifically, what happens if inspiration doesn't come? Letcher argues instead that we should focus more on craft and skill, so that we can be a "better vessel" for the flow of Awen. Letcher concludes by arguing that the bardic arts could be a more public face for the druid tradition if we focused our attention on craft. From the perspective of history and public relations, Letcher's arguments make a lot of sense: why can't and shouldn't we embrace a more historical view of bards who were masters of their craft? And certainly, from one perspective, the druid tradition gains a great deal from this approach—including a more public face that is accessible to those outside the tradition.

But a historical lens is only one way of exploring the bardic arts in the druid tradition—this project takes a very different approach using learning theory as a lens to understand bardic practice. Letcher's discussion of historical and modern bardic practices raises a number of questions that are addressed by the present study: If modern druidry's goal is individual spiritual development, is that goal achieved? What, therefore, is the impact of the bardic arts on the lives of druids practicing bardic arts? What is the role of the community in the practice of the bardic arts? How are the perspectives of inspiration versus craft or skill reflected in the druid tradition? These kinds of questions are best answered through systematic study of the community itself, which is the purpose of the present article.

Before I begin discussing the specifics of the study, in order to frame the present work, I'd like to describe the tradition of research which I am drawing upon. This piece roots its theoretical orientation in learning research, which at its core is interested in how people initially learn (including their uptake of knowledge, skills, and/or strategies), how they transfer and adapt that learning in new circumstances, what individual and contextual factors influence that learning, and how people develop expertise over a period of time (National Research Council, 1999). As a learning researcher and social scientist, I use empirical inquiry—that is, systematic observations and interactions in the world—to gather and analyze data and draw conclusions. This kind of research may include quantitative methods (data in the form of numbers drawn from a larger group of participants, such as a survey), qualitative methods (data in the form of words, drawn from a much smaller group of participants, such as an interview), or, in the case of this study, a synthesis of both (mixed methods). Through gathering this data, we may look to specific druids' experiences to help represent larger patterns of learning in a community as a whole. I weave this professional knowledge with my own status as an insider in the druid community: as a Druid in the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD); as an Archdruid and Adept in the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA), where I oversee AODA's curriculum; and as a long-term member of groves, gatherings, and seed groups in the eastern United States. I also bring to this study experiences as a long-term bardic practitioner engaging in many forms of visual art, particularly watercolor painting, fine crafts, leatherwork, music, and design.



## About This Study

Since there are so few empirical studies on the modern druid tradition,<sup>2</sup> my goal for this study was exploratory. My research questions are:

- How do people develop bardic practices in the context of druid spirituality?
- What impact do these bardic practices have on their lives?
- What is the role of the community in the bardic arts?
- What challenges face those wanting to establish a bardic practice?

To conduct this study, I used a combination of survey and interview methods; surveys were designed to understand broader patterns of self-reported experience in the druid community, while interviews were designed to follow up and delve more deeply into the life experiences of a smaller number of druids. After undergoing an ethical research review (necessary for US-based research that has human participants), I designed a survey that addressed the above questions (see Appendix A) and distributed an invitation to take the bardic arts survey through social media to druid groups and forums.

Participants were 266 druids from nine different countries.<sup>3</sup> Participants represented diverse genders (28% male, 63% female, 2% transgender, 3% gender fluid/non-binary, and 2% preferred not to specify). Among respondents, 93.3% indicated that they considered themselves “druids,” while the remainder expressed an interest in druidry. A total of 141 participants were OBOD members (with 28 of those OBOD members also belonging to other druid orders), and an additional 61 participants identified as belonging to one or more other druid orders such as ADF, AODA, RDNA, and so forth. Of the OBOD members there were 64% in the bardic grade, 21.3% in the ovate grade, and 14.7% in the druid grade.

At the end of the survey, participants could choose to be contacted for a follow-up interview, and over 75% of the participants chose to do so. Interview participants were selected to

2 Empirical (data-driven) studies of the druid community are quite rare. In 2009, Cooper published a study of Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF) in the USA with a core question of what “converted” people to druidry, specifically, to ADF. Cooper’s 2010 book, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*, provided both historical and ethnographic research on the druid tradition, specifically OBOD, and explored core topics of life, death, the unknown, Stonehenge, ritual, and more. Kirner (2015) has explored more specific topics, including an understanding of the sacred as it relates to nature knowledge in the American druid movement as well as the understanding of health and well-being in the broader pagan community (Kirner, 2014). Further, Wooley (2017) conducted ethnographic fieldwork as part of his Mount Haemus research exploring the idea of druidry as a culture. These are the only empirical studies of druidry that I have been able to find; thus, I concluded that no previous empirical work on bardic practices in the modern druid tradition has been conducted.

3 Because the term “druid” is in use in multiple ways within the druid tradition, I will clarify my terminology usage here. “Druid” refers to participants in the study, all of whom have taken up or identify with the druid path. I distinguish between “creative practice,” which can happen more broadly in the world, and “bardic arts” and “bardic practice,” which are specific to the druid tradition (for reasons that will become clear in this article).

represent a wide range of bardic practices, levels of expertise, levels of experience within the druid tradition, genders, and locations.<sup>4</sup> Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted via phone, in person, or by video chat. After interviewing the first 10 study participants, I also chose to follow up with four more participants from one OBOD grove: Grove of the Oak and Eagle, located in the northern Virginia in the US. This choice was made because this grove holds regular eisteddfodau (bardic circles) as part of each of their eight druid holiday celebrations and has built up a bardic arts community that is unique compared to other groves.<sup>5</sup> As part of the interview, participants also shared examples of their bardic practices (writing, music, art, etc.) and some also shared examples of their workspaces where they engage in the bardic arts. Because I am an insider and have belonged to the AODA and OBOD community on the US east coast for almost a decade, I was also able to speak to some participants about experiences they had, which I had witnessed as a fellow participant at the eisteddfodau at druid gatherings. These gatherings included East Coast Gathering (ECG) and the Mid-Atlantic Gathering (MAGUS) of OBOD druids in the US.

I recorded and transcribed all interviews and then performed a systematic content analysis (Saldaña, 2009) to understand broader themes present in the interviews and surveys. This involves reading through the data carefully in multiple passes, noting key themes and patterns, and coding it systematically to capture those patterns. After concluding the analysis and writing, I engaged in “member checking” (Cresswell, 2014), where I shared my findings with all interview participants and ensured that I had accurately represented their perspectives.

In the first half of this article, I explore how people develop as bards as they enter the druid tradition. I also explore the intrinsic (psychological, spiritual) and extrinsic (social) impact of the bardic arts on participants’ spiritual practices and these practices’ relationship to the larger world. Through this, we’ll explore the benefits that druids experience as a result of framing their creative practices as spiritual and engaging in practices supported by community. The first half of this piece, then, explores modern bardic practices within Letcher’s “romantic bard” terms. In the second half of the article, I look at the key challenges that prevent some participants from beginning a bardic practice and the cultural baggage associated with these challenges. I also consider the role of craft and end with ways to better cultivate the bardic arts in the druid community in order to address Letcher’s “historical bard” category. The article concludes with a discussion of the bardic arts in the broader druid community. In the tradition of qualitative research and out of respect for those who freely offered their time to participate in this study, I have written these results and discussions in a way that privileges participants’ voices rather than offering summaries of their experience.<sup>6</sup>

4 Using criterion-based sampling (see Creswell, 2014).

5 Eisteddfodau (eisteddfod, singular) are a multifaceted tradition of bardic arts present in the modern druid tradition. As this article explores, eisteddfodau in the druid tradition are public displays of creative practices (typically stories, songs, poetry, music, dance, and so forth) at small or large events. As they manifest in the modern druid tradition, eisteddfodau are distinct from, but influenced by, the Welsh eisteddfodau (the largest of which is the National Eisteddfod of Wales, an eight-day poetry and music festival).

6 Please also note that participants had a choice between being identified by pseudonym, their real first

## Part I, Art and Spirit: The Bardic Arts in the Druid Community

Before delving into the rich stories and life experiences of people practicing bardic arts, an overview of participants' bardic practices is useful for framing broader patterns. Survey participants overwhelmingly felt that the bardic arts were an important part of the druid tradition (98.1% agree or strongly agree) and strongly felt that the bardic arts were an important part of their spiritual development (94.3% agree or strongly agree). Many participants felt that all druids should practice the bardic arts (69.7% agree or strongly agree). Most survey participants regularly (72.6%) or irregularly (4.9%) engaged in bardic arts, with 57.9% of respondents practicing every day or several times a week. In at least one bardic art, 46.0% of participants considered themselves "expert," 41.6% "intermediate," and 12.4% "novice." These statistics, while useful to understand the broader context of creative practice within the druid tradition, fail to describe the power of the bardic arts for participants. For that, we must turn to the participants' stories themselves.

### The Bardic Arts as a Transformative Journey

We begin with the most powerful and pervasive themes in the participants' stories: the transformational journey of the bard. The theme of the bardic arts as transformative was present in all interview participants' narratives, from those who had been on the druid path less than 2 months to those who had been on it for over 25 years, and frequently showed up in survey participants' open-ended responses. How a bard's transformational journey takes place, however, rests on and responds to the bard's previous relationship with creative practice. That is, a person's previous experience (or lack thereof) with creative practice shapes their relationship and journey into the bardic arts as a spiritual practice. Next I explore the different kinds of transformative journeys that bards in the study have taken to show the possibilities for integrating the creative arts into spiritual practices and to better understand the bardic arts from a developmental perspective.

#### *An Initial Journey into the Bardic Arts*

For some druids, creative practices were not a part of their lives prior to finding druidry. Mark, a druid living on the East Coast of the United States, described his experiences entering druidry through the eisteddfod hosted by the Grove of the Oak and Eagle: "I've always felt like I had the soul of the artist, but I'm very much an accountant and analytical person, so I don't feel like I have any talent, so it's kind of nice to now force myself to do stuff and put it out there and go with it."

Prior to finding druidry, in his adult life, Mark felt nothing was resonating with him and identified as an agnostic. After journeying to Scotland and investigating his ancestry, he took an interest in druidry. He found the Grove of the Oak and Eagle. "I went and talked with them, and . . . they started talking about the bardic arts. And then I thought, wow, that would be really cool. And after actually going to a ritual and seeing an eisteddfod, I'm like, okay, I like this. This is really resonating with me." At the next eisteddfod a month and a half later, he wrote a haiku and presented it with the support of the community. Then, he decided to tackle something bigger:

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name, or a name of their choosing. Their preferences are reflected in the naming conventions of this article.

I had been noodling about this other story idea, and I was like . . . I'm going to try to write a story and actually tell it like a storyteller. And so that was what I did at MAGUS [2017]. I told the story of the Hunt for the Awen. It was an amazing experience to perform that. I was so nervous for two days . . . but as soon as I stood up and starting reciting it, this whole calm came over me, and I was able to do it. It was this wonderful experience to do that. . . . The Awen flowed through me.

Through the discovery of druidry, Mark is now in the process of cultivating several kinds of bardic arts: poetry, storytelling, and, most recently, singing. He described this bardic practice as deeply woven within his spirituality:

To me they are almost intertwined and can't be separated now. That writing stuff, some of those poems that are written, that at points when you are having certain feelings, and you write it down and create something. I'm realizing that that's definitely part of my spirit coming out. I guess I'm realizing now that sometimes there are things that are telling you to get this down. I'm embracing that for what it is.

Despite expressing uncertainty and fear at the thought of performing and trying new things, particularly singing, Mark continues to pick up new bardic practices for sharing at the eisteddfod. Most recently, Mark is working on singing and pushing himself to sing publicly. The connection to the bardic arts, particularly through community and eisteddfodau, put him on a journey deep into his own creative practices that has become an important part of his life—practices that he did not have prior to joining the druid tradition.

### *Rediscovering the Creative Arts*

A second group of druids had one or more previous creative practices that they had given up for a variety of reasons. For some, their past included a professional practice and professional life rooted in a performing art (music, theater, dance, graphic design, etc.) that they had decided to leave years prior to finding druidry. Others had a personal practice when they were younger that they set aside. The transformational journey into druidry allowed them to rediscover, reframe, and rebuild a relationship with their love of their creative arts. Some picked up and renewed their previous art form. Others did not return to their original creative art but learned a new art form more befitting of their goals and needs as a druid.

Nicole is a druid in northern Virginia and is in leadership in the Grove of the Oak and Eagle and the MAGUS gathering. She described her complex relationship with the creative arts:

My mother is an artist and art school teacher; my sister is a graphic designer. It's always been something that was part of my life. . . . So naturally, I wanted to make

that a profession. I went to conservatory for theater, vocal, dance; there were 40 of us at first and only 15 who graduated. It gave me a lot of good tools, but it killed my love of the creative. You are burned out, disgruntled. You've been beat down and everyone expects perfection from you for four years or so, and the emotional—"Your art is crap"—and as an artist, it's the worst thing you can hear. For about seven years, I tried to make it as an actor. . . . One day, my agent called me in for a fitness video. It was one of the most horrible experiences that I had. I felt like a piece of meat. . . . When I was done, I went into my car and sat there and thought that this wasn't what I wanted to do. So I quit.

Then, at about 38, I discovered this thing called OBOD. And the first thing [in the coursework] is the creativity, spirituality, and the bardic journey. I thought, "Oh my god, I'm going to have to go and be that person again, the person that I left at 27 years old, so that I can obtain some sort of spiritual enlightenment?"

So I really reluctantly got back into the bardic arts. I hadn't sung in 15 or 20 years. I picked up a buffalo drum, a round frame drum with a beater. It's one of the most simple instruments you can play; it has two or three tones, and the rest is how you strike it and how you feel. And I started singing, and what came out of my mouth was angry, heartbroken, and poignant. I was crying—it was amazing.

And then I started realizing that my particular expression, which is tied to my spirituality, is to use all of this knowledge and training to express myself in a form that is true to myself, not an imitation to be a classical artist. And once I realized it—I don't have to make a perfect sound; I can make whatever sound that would come out of me that day and that was valid—that was a revelation to me. To pursue the creative endeavor without judgment.

As Nicole's story describes, the bardic arts, including the OBOD coursework, allowed her to rediscover her creative gifts—not as a professional seeking perfection, but as a human being engaged in a spiritual practice. Further, Nicole described how important it was that she rediscover how the music in her life ties to her spirituality: "I've had meditations where ancestors will come to me and sing, sing their sorrows, their wishes, things that they want to express. The songs will repeat in my head as I'm waking up from sleep in the morning or as I go to bed. My life has always been set to music, and that music has been silent for a long time. But now I hear it again."

Part of the rediscovery is the necessary transformation of a creative practice into a spiritual practice. What we see from Nicole's story is that her transformation took place in terms of her relationships both to her creative practice and to herself, her spiritual life, and her broader community. Also note that in both of these participants' stories, the Awen, or what druids understand to be the flow of inspiration, is a critical part of the journey.



### *Transforming the Creative Arts*

A third group of druids came into the bardic arts with an existing creative practice of a personal or professional nature at the time they found druidry. For these druids, transformative work usually involves not only reframing the creative arts as part of that work, but deepening it in some way (for community, clarifying purpose in life, etc.) For example, Oliver, a druid living in the western US, described integrating his existing arts practice into his spiritual life. Oliver had been drawing and painting since childhood and began making music seriously as a teenager. By the time he found druidry in his adult life, his creative arts were firmly part of his regular life. He explained his relationship between his art and druidry as follows:

I was commuting on the train every day to Salt Lake City for my architecture job when I decided to make my druid practice an important part of my life. I always wanted to try to integrate my art into it as much as possible. I also found that my art was competing with the little time I had for meditation or ritual practice. So I think that it's been an interesting journey to watch my life restructure and reformat in a way where my art doesn't have to be my druid practice or my art, but they can both be important aspects of what I do every day for a living. I think my life is refocusing around my spiritual practice, my creative practice, and what I can do to build a life for my family that is saner with regards to energy use and impact on the environment. And also to make artwork about that or related to that so that other people can be introduced to it or consider it or reconsider their own lives. To see that other ways are possible.

While Oliver had been an artist long before he chose druidry, he said druidry gave him a purpose for his artwork:

So I see my music, art, and sculpture as avenues, as injecting those same kinds of topics of conversation into my local community or the larger community as well. But, even with the community here, there is always tension between the illusion or glammers, as the artist as an archetype in our culture, and the roundedness of the spiritual path of druidry. It's been an interesting tension to engage in and an important part of finding a balance in that too.

The journey that Oliver describes is ongoing for each person who has an existing creative practice. In Oliver's case, his overall goal now as an artist is to get the many ideas about sustainable living, permaculture, earth honoring, and so forth that he believes in as a druid out to a broader audience with his art.

Meredith, a dedicated belly dancer who performs in a dance troupe and practices multiple times each week, had been a member of OBOD less than a year when I interviewed her for

this study. She described the influence of druidry on her existing practice of belly dance:

With the [OBOD] course, it was just occurring to me recently that one of the things that I could play with is just the different feelings and physicality of the different elements. That's something I am now intending to work with. There is this piece of music I've been wanting to perform to for a year and a half, but I haven't had the right idea for it. It just occurred to me to dance through different expressions to the qualities of elements. So this is my first real intentional druidic inspiration for a dance piece.

Each existing creative practice, as it transforms into a bardic and spiritual practice, takes on deeper meaning and significance. As druids continue on their paths, their understanding and relationship between their spirituality and their art also deepens.

### **Spirituality, Life, and Awen**

Once a bardic practice is established, it often becomes a central focus of druids' spiritual life. Survey and interview participants were very clear in how important the bardic arts were to their lives, including those who did not practice them very regularly. Druids used words like "critical," "vital," "essential," "indispensable," and "incredibly important" to describe their relationship to their bardic practices. This importance manifests in three key ways in participants' responses: as vital or essential to life, as a way to promote psychological well-being, and as a connection or conduit to deeper spiritual life.

Some participants believe that the bardic arts are essential to their everyday life. Aaron, a survey participant from the US, described his bardic practices as "essential. When I've been in situations where I couldn't practice one or the other, I feel myself diminished and grieving." Likewise, Thania, a druid from Canada, describes her relationship to dance as follows: "My bardic art is vital to my life. I would dwindle and die if I couldn't dance, and I am always happier when I find the time to paint." Dasyre, from the US, writes, "I can honestly say I do not believe I would be where I am today without my lyrics and my music. They have helped me through the marshes and the cold winters and they provide me clarity. In their lines lies everything that I am, and without them I do not know if I would have survived. My blood flows in their ink, and even if no one would ever hear them, I would write on." For these druids, the bardic arts are akin to living a healthy and happy life, and the loss of such practices would considerably lessen the joy of living.

Other druids hone in on the psychological benefits they experience. For example, Mary from Germany writes, "It is very important. It helps me to get past the restrictions by the mind and makes me whole again. Equilibrium. Connected to the divine." Jane from the United Kingdom writes, "My arts have always been a part of my life. I express myself, my creativity. They keep me sane when my health is worse than usual. They are an important outlet for me." Dave, also from the United Kingdom, writes, "They are very important as it helps me express my emotional world. Without it I found it impossible to explore my emotions and feelings. That lack of expres-

sion led to self-destructive behavior. Poetry is a powerful and positive way to explore and release pent-up emotion.”

Still others describe the key connection between their bardic arts and their spirituality. For example, Rodger, from the US, describes the bardic arts as feeding the soul: “Once our bodies are fed, we desire to feed our mind and soul.” Bob, a woodworker from the US, describes his bardic arts as “extremely important. It connects me to Spirit in ways not easily describable. I see the natural materials I use as a gift from Spirit to be shaped and finished to bring out the true beauty of Nature herself. I typically start off with a log, and I have an idea as to what it is telling me it would like to be.” Finally, Jason, also from the US, describes his poetry as follows: “Poetry for me is both prayer and spellwork in addition to art. I glean not just satisfaction and enjoyment from it, but I learn from it. I learn how to live. I learn how to look at the woods, and listen to the trees. The bardic arts, my bardic arts in terms of poetry, is part of the world. It’s the foundation for what I am doing spiritually. A lot of the discursive meditations I do are on lines of poetry.”

These participants’ experiences show some of the incredible potential for the bardic arts as a spiritual practice: the unlocking of creative gifts, cultivating a deeper understanding of the world, and deeply connecting to spirit and the flow of Awen. In this way, it seems that the romantic ideal of the bard, and the larger goals of the modern druid tradition as cultivating bardic arts as a form of spirituality, are not only present—but resonant—for these participants.

### *Conceptualizing the Flow of Awen*

As the transformational journeys above have already articulated, the flow of Awen is a critical part of the bardic practices of participants. There is a general consensus among all participants that Awen is something that happens and isn’t always very controllable. For those newer to their bardic practices, Awen seems quite uncontrollable and, in some cases, even abrupt or shocking. Those more experienced in the bardic arts, however, have a sense that the flow of Awen can be cultivated, even if it still has a will of its own. Adam, a druid from the eastern US, describes this:

It’s not something you can bargain for or ask for. It is just every so often, [if] you are open in the right way and you are in the right time, the sense of inspiration is able to flow. I think the power of Awen is always there. . . . I think that one’s openness to it, and one’s ability to move into it consciously, that waxes and wanes, it comes and goes, not necessarily on a predictable cycle. If we are too busy, if our minds are too full, if we are too anxious, it’s hard for that to come in and offer creativity, direction, or inspiration. But that—it’s not to say it can’t—it might break through.

Adam’s comments are very representative of the majority of the participants—Awen is partly uncontrollable, in the sense that participants aren’t sure when it will appear, but it is also

something that one can consciously prepare for and cultivate. As Dave from the UK explains, “Spiritual practices put you in a better space for it to happen. There’s a case of being prepared for that moment, and you can’t guarantee when that moment will happen, but the practice puts you in a better place of spiritual preparedness.” These responses make perfect sense given that cultivating spiritual practices that bring the flow of Awen into druids’ lives is at the core of the modern druid tradition.

Most participants saw the cultivation of Awen as a very individualistic practice. However, as a long-time facilitator of eisteddfodau in a wide range of settings, including the Grove of the Oak and Eagle, David North recognizes that Awen can be contagious:

The Awen of eisteddfod has a different character to it. . . . You know when you see people that have been sitting on the sidelines and being quiet as church mice and they go grab their cell phones and start looking things up. I’ve seen that so many times, [that] it’s a thing. That is inspiration—you’ve just inspired someone to do something. Twenty minutes before that they were terrified about or unsure, and now they want to go participate. It is contagious in that sense, and it is a shared experience in that sense.

### **The Power of Community and Eisteddfod**

For each of the participant stories, we see the community as having some function central to the development of the bardic arts. For many druids, the broader community is multifaceted. Oliver’s community includes his support network and friends, a local community of fellow artists and practitioners, and the broader public with whom he wants to engage through his artistic expression. Other participants described a variety of supportive communities: a supportive dance troupe who are like family, a group of artists who share work regularly, a knitter’s circle, or audiences who benefit from the work in some way. Even the most solitary druids engaged with people, shared their work with people, and had supportive mentors and guides on their journeys.

One other aspect of community, the eisteddfod, was central to how a number of druids in this study engaged with and enacted the bardic arts. The eisteddfod tradition of the ancient bards became an integral part of the Druid Revival tradition thanks to the work of Iolo Morganwg in his *Barrdas* (Ab Ithel, 1892). His work influenced the development of eisteddfodau in the modern druid tradition. Within OBOD, eisteddfodau are frequently performed as part of druid gatherings (50- to 100-person events held yearly) and occasionally within smaller, private grove events. An eisteddfod most typically involves song, dance, storytelling, poetry, music, and so forth, which may or may not be competitive. For every interview participant who experienced an eisteddfod, whether it was once a year or every holiday through their grove, the eisteddfod became critically important in their bardic and larger spiritual development.

Participants experienced eisteddfodau in three places: the Grove of the Oak and Eagle in Northern Virginia, as well as two larger druid gatherings, OBOD’s ECG and MAGUS. As de-

scribed through both Mark's and Nicole's stories above, many participants who otherwise would not have taken up bardic arts did so when they were exposed to the eisteddfod.

David North described the practice as follows:

It's part of our legacy, inheriting this druid thing. . . . I think it rounds out the spiritual experience in a very profound way, [an] outward way. A lot of what we consider spiritual is inward, even private; and even when we are in group ritual, people most of the time are looking inward, not outward. Here is something that is outward facing, expressive. I think it's an intermission analogy because it is a break in the routine. Maybe I'm more used to it because we do it six times a year or so. For many people, maybe that eisteddfod at ECG or MAGUS is the only time of year they get to do something like it.

And certainly, this "rounding out" and making the internal work of the bardic arts external is felt powerfully by those who have experienced regular eisteddfodau with the Grove of the Oak and Eagle. Jason, another member of Oak and Eagle, discussed how the eisteddfod helped him overcome the fear of trying something new: "In the last year, I picked up a number of skills that I never thought I could enjoy or do. And the eisteddfod has helped me do that." Likewise, Mark said the eisteddfod encouraged him to push beyond his boundaries: "I have sung once at the eisteddfod, and that's a huge and scary thing. I want to do more, and I've compiled a list of songs I'd sing. MAGUS might be [the] next time I have an eisteddfod I can do something at. So I'm trying to pick a song to sing there." For these druids, regular eisteddfodau (six to eight times a year) at grove events offer a powerful motivating factor that helps them push beyond their own internal barriers and engage in the bardic arts. After interviewing five Oak and Eagle druids to better understand the role of eisteddfodau in their creative practice, it is clear that the regular practice of eisteddfodau can cultivate and support a wide range of bardic practices and develop participants' creativity, confidence, and skill over a period of time as well as building community bonds. From a developmental perspective, it appears to be a critical component of how these druids have begun, engaged with, and sustained bardic practices over a period of time.

Even without regular eisteddfodau in a smaller grove setting, a single eisteddfod at a larger gathering can also be transformational. This experience was certainly felt by Loam, a singer-songwriter, who described her own transformational experience with the eisteddfod at ECG in 2016:

The whole drive to ECG, which was 12 hours, I was just thinking about burning everything I had ever written. I was feeling like I can't connect anymore. I'm dreading doing it. . . . I had really struggled with my writing in general since grad school. You go to school for this thing, and you are so cerebral from it, but it disconnects you from this generative place. I lost that. I had published some pieces in the meantime, but I hadn't



had a regular practice. . . . And then the stroke just threw a wrench in my regular life.

Once Loam arrived at ECG, she found herself interwoven with the broader community of druids. She says, “That’s where I wrote the nettle song. It just started when I was sitting on a blanket with Selene and Kristen, and we were looking at the Druid Plant Oracle and we were joking around about getting swatted with some nettles in the woods. . . . I thought maybe I should write this song about nettles.” During the gathering, a group of five or so people, including two herbalists and a nurse, ended up talking with Loam about what they knew about nettles. Loam wrote the song and performed it at the eisteddfod (which was judged that evening). She continued:

When that song won the eisteddfod, there was a weight to it. That song was community-sourced. Relationship with people in your community builds relationship with your art. That was the message from the gods I was really getting. . . . Get home, do some work, but don’t hole up. Find your community, connect, play, and have fun. . . . Stop waiting for things to be perfect. If you are sequestered all on your own, how are you going to be inspired? And if you must throw your work into the fire, throw it into the fire of community.

Since that time, Loam has developed more songs, also driven by experiences in the community, and is developing outreach and ways to share them.

Loam certainly wasn’t the only druid affected by larger gatherings and eisteddfodau. Brom, another participant at ECG, writes, “The community helped with my bardic expression, and I’m a part of something larger. Bardic arts are a service to the tribe and larger community. . . . Being around such wonderful, talented, creative people, being able to pull from that creativity—helps a lot to motivate me to change rather than just sitting on my butt watching TV. Basically, druidry is a good motivational tool.” Community, for these druids, is an integral piece of their bardic journey.

## **Part II, Challenges and Opportunities: Talent, Mind-Set, and Craft**

The bardic arts do not exist in a vacuum devoid of the pressures of modern consumerist civilization. Sometimes, those pressures come to bear on those who seek to taste the Awen’s brew. In fact, the cultural beliefs surrounding the idea of talent combined with the commodification of creative practice as an end product burden many who would seek to cultivate a bardic practice. In part I, we saw the transformative power of the bardic arts. To druids, the bardic arts offer ways of living more fully and consciously inhabiting the world, along with the power of transformation and relationship building, and establish the critical connection to community. But what happens to people who struggle with taking the first steps on the bardic path? Mark’s quote about “having no talent” resonates at the deepest level with some of the challenges that those new to the community, or those with certain kinds of experiences or mind-sets about creative endeavors, face.

## The “Got Talent” Problem

To some participants, and certainly to broader Western culture, talent is something that you either have or don't have, and the cultural narrative suggests that the “haves” should be producing while the “have nots” should not. Dave described this in his interview, saying, “When I was at school, basically, the schools I went to, if you weren't into cricket, football, or hockey and good at them, you were no good. Or art, if you weren't good at clay, sculpting, drawing by the age of 8 or 10, then you were no good. Then forget about it.” Similarly, Mark described problematic cultural influences: “Then you have all of the shows. *American Idol*, all of them, if you are really good, you have to be a superstar, and if you are really bad, we are going to make fun of you on the TV.” Leah, a druid from the eastern US, described her own family influence: “I was brought up in an academic family, and in a lot of ways there were very high expectations, and if you didn't meet those expectations, well, then don't bother. If you are going to be a novelist, why aren't you going to win the Pulitzer Prize? I'm not even going to try then, 'cause I'm not going to win the Pulitzer.” What these druids are describing are ways that broader Westernized culture frames and reinforces the polarized notion of the need to be talented (i.e., very good at something) or to not create at all.

This framing is part of the cultural identity of those entering the druid community and was reflected strongly in the small number of respondents in the survey who indicated they were not pursuing the bardic arts. Reasons why people did not take up a bardic art included fear: “An element of fear (of failure) also keeps me from pursuing the bardic arts”; and lack of talent: “I'd like to make an art journal, but lack of talent keeps me stagnant.”<sup>7</sup> For these participants who are not yet engaging in the bardic arts, there is also no mention of a community that could help them overcome this challenge. The survey included the statement, “I believe that you should have some innate talent to pursue a bardic art.” Responses varied: 20.7% strongly agreed or agreed, 20.3% of respondents were neutral, and 58.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, when asked to respond to the statement, “There are simply bardic arts that I will never be good at because I lack the talent,” 50.4% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed, 19.2% were neutral, and 30.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Putting these numbers together, for approximately 40–50% of the participants, even those who are proficient or expert in a bardic art, the idea of talent still has considerable influence.<sup>8</sup>

7 This is by far the most common response explaining why people were not engaging in the bardic arts. Other frequent responses included a lack of time and a lack of access (to the right tools or resources and to mentors or knowledge), or a combination.

8 Note that it is likely that what researchers call self-selection bias is present in this study. People who are afraid of creative practice or who feel untalented are much less likely to agree to participate in a study about the bardic arts. Even though a minority of participants did express such views, I suspect that these views may be more pervasive than my study sample indicates. One of the reasons for this suspicion is my experiences in mentoring and curriculum work for new druids in AODA, which asks druids to choose between bardic, ovate, or

A typical Western understanding of talent has at least two components: one, that you have a knack for it, that is, that you are good at it when you first start learning it; and two, that you are good at it in that you produce high-quality work. Psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) has long investigated the role that beliefs about talent and ability play in one's ability to learn. She calls this their "mind-set." Through her research, she has identified two primary mind-sets that are cultivated by a learner's prior experiences: growth and fixed. People holding a growth mind-set believe that they have the power to succeed, that intelligence and talent aren't static, and that hard work and determination can allow a person to improve. Those holding a fixed mind-set believe that their intelligence and talent will not change, and they will likely not try new things because of the fear of failure. Mind-sets are often affected by experiences, and Dweck argues that modern schooling and culture often teach people to hold fixed mind-sets (which is certainly reflected in the quotes that opened this section). Developmentally, for those engaged in learning a wide variety of subjects, the mind-set itself holds tremendous power. Dweck and colleagues investigated middle school math students and found that mind-sets strongly determined academic achievement and success. Those students holding a growth mind-set excelled over a two-year period, while fixed mind-set students stayed relatively static (Blackwell, Trzesniweski, & Dweck, 2007). My own longitudinal research on student mind-sets and writerly development at the college level demonstrated similar patterns—people with fixed mind-sets were unwilling to try new things, actively resisted challenges, and had limited growth as writers (Driscoll, 2016; Driscoll & Powell, 2019). The research here is clear: if you believe you have no talent, and you believe you are likely to fail, you will manifest that reality and be unwilling to take up the bardic arts. If you are forced into something new (such as in a school setting), you will not achieve the success that you would have if you held a different mind-set. Dweck argues that mind-sets aren't permanent—anyone can shift a mind-set given the right circumstances. Further, mind-sets may be domain specific; that is, you might have a growth mind-set toward one creative practice (like weaving) but a fixed mind-set toward another (playing an instrument).

As a learning researcher who has long studied how writers develop over time, what I find fascinating is that a number of factors in the druid community—internal and external—seem to encourage people who come in with the typical Westernized cultural baggage to shift mind-sets. In the stories we've seen in Part I, people who come into the druid community with commonly held beliefs about not being talented or being afraid of failure are able to become practicing, capable, and competent bards. A number of participants, certainly more than I have room to share about, experienced this shift. The practice of regular eisteddfodau was powerfully supportive of mind-set shifts. For example, Mark was an accountant without any creative practice who believed he had no talent, but now has transitioned into offering regular public performances of poetry and is taking up singing (something he was afraid to do). But for participants without access to eisteddfodau, there are still plenty of other ways to attend to and shift mind-sets rooted in spiritual practice.

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druid studies at multiple points along their journey through the curriculum. Very frequently, lack of talent and/or fear of failure affect the choice of whether to take up a bardic art.

For example, Rebekah, who was brand new to druidry and OBOD, takes an internal approach to shifting her mind-set using spiritual tools. Rebekah is in the process of rediscovering her love of the bardic arts after dropping them years before. Rebekah talked about the struggle she has faced in taking up the bardic arts:

It's a very hard thing for me to overcome, especially as an adult. As a kid, I could create without the judgmental aspect. You are creating, and you bring it home, and your mom is like, "This is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!" . . . As an adult, you are comparing it with your peers, friends. . . . It's difficult to create knowing what others create, knowing that it's difficult to be on that same level, like what you personally consider to be good art, and what you are putting on paper, it isn't the same.

Recognizing that this is a serious challenge for her, Rebekah is currently working to overcome it through shifting her own mind-set:

I think that overcoming my own negative mind-set as far as the arts are concerned is critical. I was feeling like I wasn't doing it correctly or as perfect[ly] as possible. That was my biggest push to dropping my arts practices in the first place. I was like, it's not good enough, so why even try? So now, I'm trying to enjoy my creating, and not worry about the end outcome. Getting more out of it personally, trying to embrace the process, not worrying about making it perfect for a viewer, and to, for myself, look at it with a non-judgmental eye.

To do this, Rebekah is gaining the support of her husband (who is also on the druid path) as well as using mindfulness practices and other forms of spiritual work to help her engage in this shift.

Rebekah's story illustrates a critical aspect of the difference between the bardic arts inside the druid tradition and creative practices more broadly. The outside consumerist world has a heavy emphasis on the end product—a product that is expected to have commercial value or appeal, good enough to be bought or sold or consumed in some way. The druid tradition, on the other hand, emphasizes engaging in the bardic arts as a process; that is, the goal of the bardic arts is to cultivate spiritual development, with the end product being secondary. In the study and teaching of writing, the importance for writers' development of emphasizing a writing process over simply a writing product has long been established (CWPA, NCTE, & NWP, 2011), and I believe this likely holds true for the development of any other creative practice. I am of the opinion that it is the particular emphasis on spiritual practice and process that makes the bardic arts so accessible to a wide range of people.

### The Role of Practice and Craft

A discussion of talent, process, and products, however, naturally leads us to consider the role of craft and practice in the druid tradition. In fact, a need for the druid community to attend to and emphasize craft was a core argument that Letcher (2009) articulated. Despite the druid tradition's clear romantic emphasis on bardic practices as spiritual and experiential, druids in this study overwhelmingly believed that practice was necessary. In the survey, 83.4% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I believe that regular practice is necessary for the bardic arts" and 20% of survey participants reported practicing their bardic arts several times a week, while another 38% reported practicing several times a month. The more expertise that a participant identified, the more likely they were to engage in regular practice—in other words, the better they were at their bardic art, the more they practiced.

Those bards with expertise—and in some cases, professional training—had much to share with regard to how to develop craft; unsurprisingly, practice and training were key components. Robert, an eastern US druid who played and taught music professionally, said, "I think that the most important thing that anyone can do about any bardic art they are pursuing is to pursue some training in it. . . . Some real technical training. . . . If you do that, you'll succeed or at least get better. Practice, do it every day. That's really it. You cannot learn bardic skills through osmosis." Adam, a druid and Unitarian Universalist minister in the northeastern US who has done professional storytelling and musical recording, said,

No matter how good you are at something, without practice, you will never fulfill the potential of it. I love playing the harp. I don't play as often as I should in order to be able to play with great comfort in front of others. I used to, but because of the choices I've made in my life and the work I do, it's not at the top of the list as it was before. If I sit down, I can move my fingers across the strings and it will sound lovely, and I can tune the harp. I have a good talent for how to build rhythm, chords, and structure, for how to make the harp sound beautiful. But without doing it regularly, my body doesn't know how to do that easily. There's a whole bunch of research about what it takes to become proficient at a skill. But if you do it for 10,000 hours at a time,<sup>9</sup> you will become an expert. . . . There's some truth in that.

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9 Adam is referring to the 10,000 hour statistic in Malcom Gladwell's (2011) *Outliers*, where Gladwell attests that 10,000 hours is the difference between a novice and true greatness. Gladwell's statistic was strongly based on research by Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993). While one of the original authors has critiqued the "10,000 hour rule," suggesting that Gladwell seems to have chosen that number at random and without strong research support (see Ericsson & Pool, 2016), plenty of studies attest to the fact that dedication and practice, over a period of time, is critically important (see, for example, Sloboda et al., 1996). In their 2016 book, Ericsson and Pool describe how developing mastery takes a lot of time regardless of field. For example, it takes an average of 10 years of study and practice to be a chess grand master; it takes 10 years or more for authors and poets to write their best work; and it takes 10–20 years of study for musicians to compose a masterful piece of music. So regardless of whether or not



Even prodigies, if they want to bring the fullness of what they are capable of, they have to keep doing it again and again to learn the nuances of what they are doing, to hear the possibilities that they weren't able to hear the week before. That's the part that takes practice and something that is not possible to do just because you can do it.

Certainly, research on learning supports the idea that one can drastically improve with deliberate practice. Dweck writes, "Just because some people can do something with little or no training, it doesn't mean that others can't do it (and sometimes do it better) with training. This is so important, because many, many people with the fixed mindset think that someone's early performance tells you all you need to know about their talent and their future" (2006, p. 70).

Beyond practice, developing craft is also tied to community, particularly to *eisteddfodau*. As Jason describes, "I've come to view the *eisteddfod* with great anticipation. Primarily since I've been involved with Oak and Eagle, the core group has been really constant. The same 10 people are there, and they have developed their skills, and all have gotten much better over the years. The quality keeps getting better and better, and I feel so proud of us, I really do. . . . It's not about being cocky or ego-driven, but it's about relishing our quality as a people." As we see through Jason's example, *eisteddfodau* (or other community) where work is shared naturally helps people attend to craft.

## **Conclusion: Taking Up the Path of the Bard**

Robert also described the difference between his bardic practices and his professional practice:

When I was in the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra, I was practicing tuba three or four hours a day. . . . When I was playing at that semiprofessional level, it was always about what's the next mouthpiece that's going to make my tone sound 2% better, or what is this book that's going to teach me to do these turns slightly cleaner. It was about refinement and technique, being the best professional technical player you can be. It was about everything but the *Awen* aspect. Whereas when you are working on the bardic aspect of things, it's really only about the emotion. I'm not so worried about everything being 100% technically correct as I am just about the overall feeling of it, feeling correct for me, and being able to communicate that in a larger group. With the bardic aspect, it's purely about the art. It's just about the connection to the art, the *Awen*, the inspiration, and to the people I'm sharing it with.

As Robert describes, goals of professional creative practice and bardic arts are inherently

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the popular "10,000 hours" rule is accurate, the need for years of dedication, practice, and commitment is well supported by learning research.

different. Robert's quote articulates perfectly what so much of this study is about: the heart of the druid mysteries focus on bardic arts as a spiritual practice, a feeling, expression, and the flow of Awen.

In fact, after over 100 hours of data collection, analysis, and writing on this project, my conclusion is that the emphasis on creativity as spirituality is one of the most important and foundational aspects of the druid tradition. The bardic arts offer druids a spiritual practice in the truest sense of the word. That is, they offer us a way to navigate very difficult times, both culturally and ecologically; to respond to those times compassionately; and to cultivate within us strength, grounding, and a sense of purpose. They also offer an embodiment of our spiritual practice in a form that is tangible and accessible to ourselves and our broader communities. The eisteddfodau, for those that have the opportunity to participate in them, function like the heartbeat of a community—not so dissimilar from eisteddfodau in ancient communities.

As the transformational journeys described in this research make clear, taking up the path of the bard also requires a tremendous amount of courage. For some, being willing to engage in bardic arts requires us to face, and set aside, some of the most dominant narratives of Westernized culture. For others, it requires us to face the long-held standards for ourselves or others which we feel we can never meet. For still others, it requires us to take a new look at practices that we thought we were done with forever. For those who have the courage to begin, the benefits of taking up the path of the bard are incredible.

I would also like to return to Letcher's central argument that the druid tradition should pay more attention to craft. This argument is sensible from the perspective of history, professional practice, and public relations. But from the perspective of learning research and developmental theory, shifting an emphasis to craft—which is, in part, an argument to shifting our tradition to focus more on product than process—presents serious challenges to those beginning bardic practices. In response to Letcher's argument that craft should be central, I'd like to instead propose a developmental understanding of the role of craft in the bardic arts. For those who are picking up a new bardic practice, particularly those who have never had one before or have abandoned a practice, craft should not be a central concern.<sup>10</sup> Experience, emotion, and spiritual connection to the bardic arts should be emphasized—as OBOD's and other druid curricula do. This is particularly important as a bardic practitioner is shedding fixed ideas about talent, creativity, and associated cultural baggage. At this stage in a bard's development, attending to the product would likely be developmentally disastrous and could prevent the bard from continuing. However, as one progresses through a course of druid study, develops one or more core bardic practices, and comes to a growth-oriented viewpoint of oneself and one's work, attention to craft can become more central. In this study, attention to craft—which is not deeply explored in OBOD or other druid curricula—seems to develop naturally for those who become dedicated practitioners and/or involve

<sup>10</sup> I say this with a caveat. Although this was not in the data that I collected, based on discussions with those with professional experience in bardic arts, particularly music, some bardic arts require an attention to craft from the beginning. Certain technical arts, like playing the violin, do require an individual to pay attention to craft from day one or a person may learn the wrong way to play and have great difficulty correcting the errors. But many bardic arts can certainly be explored without such attention to craft.

themselves in community through eisteddfodau. I'm not convinced it is something we need to attend to in the tradition as a whole—it seems like the developmental process itself tends naturally toward that goal. Those further along in their bardic journey can consider cultivating a dual emphasis in both craft and spirituality, and seek specific advanced training with craftspeople and schools that cultivate that kind of expertise.

Additionally, this study suggests several goals in helping new druids develop their bardic practices. First, we can encourage new bards to understand that talent isn't everything; that you don't have to be good the first time you try something; and to embrace this shift into a process-oriented, rather than product-oriented, approach. Sometimes, as this study has shown, we can do that work through eisteddfodau and the mentoring that happens within them. Other times, solitary druids may find their own way into this mind-set through finding other kinds of connections with other forms of community or within themselves, such as paying attention to negative self-talk and recognizing cultural challenges. Mentoring and support, which many participants describe having and engaging in, can also be a tremendous assistance to those new to our tradition and should be done regardless of their proficiency in the creative arts outside of our tradition. For new bards, especially, the last thing that matters is how good (talented) they are when they first pick up a new bardic practice. What matters for druids are the intrinsic benefits, how it makes one feel—both personally and in the presence of a community or eisteddfod—and the gifts the practice offers.

Paying attention to how we linguistically and culturally frame creative practice and moving beyond typical Western culture's obsession with end products and talent will also aid those new to the bardic arts in working to cultivate a bardic practice. Challenging the idea of talent (that not everyone has the capacity to create) and working to help eliminate negative self-talk surrounding creative practices can make bardic practices more accessible. And, as some participants in the study noted, seeing other druids engaging in the bardic arts can be intimidating, especially seeing the work of those who have been practicing a long time and have cultivated a level of mastery. In order to make the bardic arts truly an equitable practice, we need more examples in the druid community of how people develop as bards. We need bards with more proficiency being willing to share not only their successes but their struggles—to demystify that creative practice and the time that it takes to reach expertise. Generally, we also need to accept the fact that failure and struggle are regular parts of learning development and are, in fact, necessary for overall growth (Dweck, 2006; Driscoll, 2016). I hope the stories presented in this study will begin to open that conversation.

The power of the eisteddfod is also worth discussing. Even for new druids who had extreme experiences in the past that convinced them that they weren't creative or talented, or those who had firmly set aside previous creative practices, the eisteddfod was a unifying factor that helped them develop and cultivate a new relationship with their creativity. Given how critically important the eisteddfod was to all who practiced it, I would suggest that those in leaderships in groves and gatherings give it a central role and discuss it as a critical spiritual practice. For those druids who may not have access to a local grove or druid community, eisteddfodau can be

practiced at home with a group of friends on a regular basis, still allowing one to gain the benefits from such an approach. I also want to note here that traditional eisteddfodau focus primarily on performative arts like music, poetry, dance, stories, and song, which may lead those practicing more visually based arts to feel left out. To address this, at MAGUS 2018, the planning committee was offering both a traditional eisteddfod around the fire for performative arts as well as a visual eisteddfod for fine arts and crafts, allowing for a wider display of bardic practices.

However, it is important to recognize that eisteddfodau, particularly as they manifest in OBOD's druidic tradition, are distinctly different than those taking place in modern Wales. In describing eisteddfodau as a Welsh cultural tradition, Tufts writes, "The quintessential quality of an Eisteddfod lies in its competitiveness. It is a tourney, and the people, by the hundreds of thousands in Wales and throughout Great Britain, are concerned with the outcome of the various contests. . . . Several hundred groups, which add up to thousands of individuals, compete annually" (1962, p. 66). Kristoffer Hughes, an OBOD Druid and participant in the National Eisteddfod of Wales, says of the eisteddfodau of Wales, "The ultimate award within the movement is the Chairing and Crowning of the Bard, who is then transformed into the active Chief Bard for the coming year, and acknowledged as Chief Bard in perpetuity. Culturally, it is the Chair and the Crown, embellished with the Nod Cyfrin (the symbol of the Awen), that is of primary importance." Hughes clarified the difference between the conception of Awen in the National Eisteddfod and in druidry:

Whilst it is in essence a truism that the end product is of great importance, its excellence is always and directly associated with the expression of Awen. The Awen is center stage at the National Eisteddfod, in words, actions, symbology and expression, albeit the relationship that we have to the concept of the Nod Cyfrin is rather different in expression to the spiritual[ly] infused Awen commonplace in modern Druidic practice. In my opinion the function of the National Eisteddfod is the striving for Bardic excellence within a cultural framework that has its basis in the continuation of language and its expression. (Hughes, personal communication, March 8, 2018)

As this study has explored, in druidry, eisteddfodau are still public performances but are done in a spirit of either very lighthearted competition or no competition at all—and offer a very distinctive and different flavor from the eisteddfodau in Wales. Those developing an eisteddfod for a community of druids should recognize these key differences and support developing druids accordingly.

In conclusion, the bardic arts represent a key aspect of the modern druid tradition. As these participants' stories have resoundingly demonstrated, the practice of creative spirituality in the druid tradition offers tremendous benefit to any and all who are willing to take up the path of the bard and seek the flow of Awen.

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## Appendix: Survey and Interview Scripts

The following are the instruments used in the study. All study procedures and instrumentation were approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (for human subject research) prior to data collection. These instruments may be freely adapted by researchers with credit to the author. The first page of the Bardic Arts Survey contained a study consent form (which may be obtained by emailing the author at [dana.driscoll@iup.edu](mailto:dana.driscoll@iup.edu)).

### Bardic Arts Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study of bardic arts in the druid tradition. For the purposes of this study, the Bardic Arts refer to any creative practice that you engage in that you consider to be a bardic art: these might be traditional creative practices like visual arts, storytelling, dance, music, woodworking, and so on. But they also might be nontraditional bardic arts, like cooking or garden design. As long as you see it as part of your bardic practice, it is considered a “bardic art” for the purposes of this study.

1. Please indicate your answer on the following questions: (All based on a five-point Likert Scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

- a. I think that the bardic arts are an important part of the druid tradition.
- b. The bardic arts are important for my own spiritual development.
- c. I believe that you should have some innate talent to pursue a bardic art.
- d. I believe that regular practice is necessary for the bardic arts.
- e. There are simply bardic arts that I will never be good at because I lack the talent.
- f. I think every druid should practice at least one bardic art.

2. Do you regularly engage in one or more bardic arts? (Yes / No)

**(For YES answer to Question 2):**

3. Please tell me about your bardic art(s) that you practice: what it is, how you practice it, what you create/produce/display, etc.

- a. Follow up: How often do you engage in your bardic art? If you have more than one bardic practice, please answer for your primary bardic art.
  - i. Every day
  - ii. Several times a week
  - iii. Several times a month
  - iv. Several times a year
  - v. Currently not practicing

- b. Follow up: How long have you been practicing your bardic art? Again, if you have more than one, please answer this for your primary bardic art.
  - i. A month or less
  - ii. Six months or less
  - iii. A year or less
  - iv. Two years or less
  - v. Five years or less
  - vi. Ten years or less
  - vii. Over ten years
- c. Follow up: Please rate your current skill level with your primary bardic art:
  - i. Expert (I have been doing this for a long time and have acquired a body of knowledge and skill in this; enough that I would feel comfortable to share publicly and/or teach others)
  - ii. Intermediate (I have acquired some skill and confidence in my bardic art)
  - iii. Novice (I am new to this bardic art and am actively learning)
  - iv. Do you have more to add on this topic? (open-ended)
- d. How important is your bardic art to your life? (open)
- e. How important is your bardic art to your spiritual development? (open)

**(For No answer to Question 2):**

- 4. Why are you currently not engaging in a bardic art?
  - a. Are you interested in starting a new bardic practice in the near future? (Yes/No)
    - i. Follow up: YES: What practice are you interested in starting? (open)
      - 1. What is your timeline for starting this practice?
    - ii. Follow up: NO: What is preventing you from starting a bardic practice at this time?
  - b. What challenges have you faced with starting or engaging in the bardic arts?
- 5. For all participants: Is there anything else you'd like to share about the bardic arts?

**Demographics**

- 6. Do you consider yourself to be a druid? (Yes/No)
  - a. If not, what do you consider yourself to be? (open)

7. Do you belong to a druid order? (Yes/No)

a. If yes: Which one? (Select all that apply)

- i. Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (OBOD)
- ii. Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA)
- iii. Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF)
- iv. Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA)
- v. Henge of Keltria
- vi. British Druid Order (BDO)
- vii. The Druid Network
- ix. Druid Clan of Dana
- ix. Other: Please Specify

8. What is your age?

- a. 18–24
- b. 25–34
- c. 35–44
- d. 45–54
- e. 55–64
- f. 65–74
- g. 75 and older

9. With what gender do you identify?

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Transgender
- d. Prefer not to say
- e. Other (Option)

10. How long have you been on the druid path?

- a. A year or less
- b. 2–5 years
- c. 6–10 years
- d. 11–15 years
- e. 16–20 years
- f. 21–25 years
- g. 26+ years

11. Where do you live?

12. Do you regularly practice druidry with a grove/group of other people?

- a. Yes, regularly
- b. Occasionally
- c. Only at gatherings 1–2x a year
- d. I am a solitary practitioner

### **Follow-Up Study Questions**

13. As part of this study, I am interested in talking with those at various points on the bardic path in more detail. Would you be interested in talking with me in depth about your established and/or new bardic practice? (Yes/No)

14. If you are selected for a follow-up, I would like to interview you several times over the next three months (at a time that is convenient to you) for 30–60 minutes. I will conduct interviews via Skype or Google Hangouts. Would you be able to make this time commitment?

15. Please indicate your name, druid name (if you have one), and contact information (email and cell phone number) and I will be in touch with you soon.

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

The following are the general questions used in the interviews. As part of the interviews, I also used follow-up questions for clarification depending on participant responses. These follow-up questions might be asking a participant to expand upon their answer, to clarify their response, to connect their experience to something they said earlier in the interview, and so forth. Additionally, I spoke with participants about specific aspects of their bardic practices and experiences as revealed in the survey.

1. Tell me about your creative/bardic art(s) that you practice.

- a. How long have you practiced this art?
- b. One of the things I'm interested in learning about is how you dealt with any setbacks or struggles along the path. Can you describe your greatest struggle and what happened?
- c. What constitutes success for you in this practice?

2. Tell me about your druid path.

- a. What brought you into druidry?

3. What do you see as the relationship between the bardic arts and your spiritual practices/druid path more generally?
4. What do you think it takes to be good at a bardic art?
5. How does innate talent or natural talent play into your work?
  - a. How do you think this concept plays into the larger cultural consensus on who should create?
6. What has been the role of the OBOD coursework, if any, in your development of bardic arts?
7. What is your conception of the Awen?
  - a. What is its tie, if anything, to your own bardic practice?
8. What has been the role of mentoring/teachers/other community members in your bardic arts?
  - a. Have you helped mentor other bards in their practice?
9. What has the role of the community (however you want to define it) been in your bardic practice?
10. Have you participated in an eisteddfod? If so, what have your experiences been?
11. What advice do you have to people wanting to take up a bardic practice?
12. What could the druid community do to support people new to the bardic arts?





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# Druidry for the Twenty-First Century Practicing Nature Spirituality in the Age of the Anthropocene

*Dana O'Driscoll*

*Dana O'Driscoll spent her childhood in the wooded hills of the Laurel Highlands region of Pennsylvania, making mud pies, building brush cabins, and eating berries. Thankfully, little has changed, and she can still be found searching out tasty mushrooms, gathering herbs, and playing her pan flute for the trees. Dana is often covered with paint, dirt, or both. She is a certified permaculture designer and is working toward a more resilient, self-sufficient lifestyle through beekeeping, perennial agriculture, animal husbandry, food preservation, herbalism, and natural building. Dana joined AODA in 2007 and, after completing her first and second degrees, earned the degree of Druid Adept in 2013 and Bardic Adept in 2018. Dana currently serves as the Grand Archdruid in the AODA. Her writings on Druidry and sustainability can be found at the Druid's Garden ([druidgarden.wordpress.com](http://druidgarden.wordpress.com)).*

Druidry is rooted in relationship and connection with the living earth: the physical landscape and all her plants and creatures, the spirits of nature, the allies of hoof and claw, fin and feather. The land and her spirits are our primary allies and energies with which we work as druids. The questions I keep coming back to are these: How do I practice a nature-centered path in a time when those of the hooves, fins, feathers, and claws are going extinct? How do I practice druidry when everything that I hold sacred and love is under severe threat? How do I keep these connections open when it is likely that in my lifetime, I will witness severe ecological collapse in multiple ecosystems? How do I practice druidry with my “eyes open” to all of this, and honor nature and still stay sane? How do I live as a druid, given these challenges?

Let's start with the hard stuff. This is a challenging age, doubly so for anyone who is connected spiritually with the living earth and who cares deeply about nonhuman life. The Fourth National Climate Assessment, released toward the end of 2018, presents a dire picture for the future.<sup>1</sup> This isn't the only recent report from governing bodies globally—report after report contin-

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<sup>1</sup> *Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume II: Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2018), <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/>.

ues to outline in no uncertain terms what humanity is doing, and what we need to do to change. And yet it feels that change never happens and things worsen by the year. Scientists are clear that the world's sixth extinction-level event is underway.<sup>2</sup> "Biological annihilation" is the phrase used to describe what is happening—since 1970, at least half of the world's animals are gone. That means that we had twice as many animals living on this planet in 1970 as we do today. This isn't some far-off future prediction. It has already happened. It is continuing to happen as you read this. A 2017 study examined 27,600 land species and found that all species were showing huge amounts of population loss, even among species of the "lowest concern" on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's guidelines (which is the international body that tracks and reports on endangered species).<sup>3</sup> This same study suggests that 80% of the traditional territories of land mammals have been eradicated, making way for cities, people, and shopping malls—this is the "biological annihilation" of which they speak. The study also indicates that this trend will likely increase in the next two decades with the rise in population and continued increasing demands on the earth. Another piece of this comes from the work of Bernie Krause, who wrote *The Great Animal Orchestra* (Back Bay Books, 2013). Krause's work focused on recording nature sounds, and he demonstrates that the sounds of nature are simply vanishing, along with the life and species. This species loss is also not limited to vertebrate species—another study, released in October 2017, showed a 75% decline in insects in protected ecological areas in Germany.<sup>4</sup>

Whew. That was a lot to talk about, hard to think about, and hard for me to write. It was probably hard for you to read. When I talk to druids about their thoughts about this present age, and how they respond to material like what is in the last paragraph, I typically hear one of three responses. First, those who find the glass half empty are feeling extremely demoralized, looking at climate change reports and long-term forecasts and seeing the continued inaction by world leaders. They also have feelings that nothing we do now matters, and may wonder what is the point of even trying. Druidry for them is a means of coping, a means of connecting, even if they think it may all go down the drain. Second, those who find the glass half full are feeling concerned about the state of the world but also recognizing the great potential in this age—we must adapt or not survive. One of the core permaculture design principles is "the problem is the solution," meaning that if we can see into the nature of the problem, we can find solutions

2 Damian Carrington, "Earth's Sixth Mass Extinction Event Under Way, Scientists Warn," *The Guardian*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/10/earths-sixth-mass-extinction-event-already-underway-scientists-warn>.

3 Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo, "Biological Annihilation via the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signaled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines," *PNAS*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/30/E6089>.

4 Caspar A. Hallmann et al., "More Than 75 Percent Decline over 27 Years in Total Flying Insect Biomass in Protected Areas," *Plos One*, October 18, 2017, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0185809>.

within it. These eternal optimists feel that we can be the solution, and it's just a matter of finding out what to do and how to do it, and doing it well. Finally, the third approach is to ignore the glass altogether: some choose not to think about what's happening on the large scale, and instead respond by individual and local action that they can control. These druids are fed up with what is happening broadly and pay it no mind—but care deeply about what they can control (their own lives) and work to live in a way that honors and cares for all life.

Living in the twenty-first century is an incredible challenge for druids and any other practitioners of spiritual paths where nature is sacred and revered. The questions that I keep asking myself, in light of all of this, are: What does druidry do for us in the twenty-first century? What does druidry offer the future? How can we become good ancestors and create a world that is safe, vibrant, and stable for our descendants? How we might respond, spiritually and ethically, in this time? Thus, in the rest of this article, I'm going to tackle these questions from a few different angles. First, I'll explore what druidry offers us, including key tools to help us along the path from a human systems perspective; that is, what thinking and response tools it gives us for the present and future. Then, in Part II, I'll consider some direct responses to what is happening now from both esoteric and exoteric perspectives.

## **Part I: Druidry and Human Systems: How Druidry Can Help Humans Navigate the Anthropocene**

How do we, as druids, and as human beings, respond to the crisis of our age? Let us now consider this question from three levels: the level of the self, the level of the land, and the level of the community.

### **The Self: Tools and Practices**

In my work as Archdruid of Water in the AODA, I see a good number of applications from new members. As part of our application, people are required to write a letter that explores what encouraged them to join AODA, what made them come to druidry, and what they hope to gain. Most of them have key similarities: the need to reconnect with themselves through a spiritual path, the need to connect with nature, and the need to find balance in their lives. These needs bring me to one of the core gifts of druidry: helping us live in this age fully, powerfully, and sanely.

Modern Western culture, particularly here in the USA, has discouraged many things: creative practices, being outside, having any kind of thoughts or an inner spiritual life, being curious about the world. Druidry offers people a way back into these very human and fundamental practices. Druidry is ultimately a connecting practice (as my article “Connection as the Core Spiritual Philosophy in the Druid Tradition” in *Trilithon* in 2018 explored). This includes our connection with nature through the ovate arts, our connection with core spiritual practices that sustain us and allow us to cultivate a rich inner life through the druid arts, and our connection with our creative spirit through the bardic arts and the flow of Awen. Druidry offers us tools, strategies, and powerful metaphors to help us adapt, reflect, and ground. Again, in my role in AODA, I get to read our members' reflections at the end of their coursework. It's amazing to hear just how much a single

year of druid practice changes them: their healing from past trauma, their deepening appreciation and care for the natural world, their cultivation of a rich inner life, their cultivation of a creative practice, the radical shifting of lifestyle to more nature centered and nature honoring. These kinds of things get to the heart of what a spiritual practice can be, and offers druids a way forward in these dark times.

### **Tools and Practices for the Land**

Druidic practices don't just benefit us as individuals; they benefit the world around us. One of the great challenges of our age is that humans are radically disconnected from nature; our food comes from somewhere else, our products come from somewhere else; we don't know the names of plants or animals in our local ecosystem, and we don't know what a healthy ecosystem looks like. We could not survive in our ecosystem without modern conveniences in place, as our ancestors once could. Through nature study, wisdom, and experience, we learn how to be in nature. Once you begin seeing nature as sacred, you treat it as sacred. This manifests in so many diverse outward actions—we learn how to live more caring lives that support rich ecology and diversity; we learn how to nurture and tend the lands around us. Druids plant trees, tend gardens, do river cleanup, convert lawns to wildlife sanctuaries, and so much more. Druids make lifestyle changes to reduce their impact on the living earth and help sustain life. Ultimately, druidry, particularly AODA druidry, takes us from being potentially indifferent to knowledgeable and connected with nature—and that helps us do good in our land, rather than cause harm. This change in our inner selves has outward results that support our broader ecosystems.

### **Thinking and Paradigms at a Community and Cultural Level**

Druidry helps individuals, and those individuals can make some impact on ecosystems—but what about what is happening broadly? While the glass-half-full and the local-action readers are probably nodding and smiling at what I've written above, my glass-half-empty reader is probably reading this and saying sure, that's great, but we still have an unsolvable predicament on our hands. And thus, we begin orienting ourselves not only to the present, but to the future. As druidry develops in the twenty-first century, I think it will look inherently different than it did in the eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth centuries. It's a personal spiritual practice, yes, but it's also an alternative philosophy—druidry is in the process of developing new mental models for living and being and interacting in the world. Let's look at why this matters, and the power it holds.

The Iceberg Model of systems thinking offers us a way of understanding how change happens, and at what level change happens, and the role that mental models take.<sup>5</sup> The Iceberg Model suggests that if we want to change behaviors and actions, we must change the underlying mental models—the paradigms we live by. In this model, the top of the iceberg is events—things we react to, events that happen. That's what is sticking out of the water, what we can see. So something occurs, and we react to it. A lot of people get stuck here—reacting to events that

5 “A Systems Thinking Model: The Iceberg,” Northwest Earth Institute, <https://nwei.org/iceberg/>.



occur, not realizing that most of the iceberg (the cause of the event) lies under the water. The second layer down, just below the waterline, is patterns or trends. This is the series of events that are connected over a period of time and form larger patterns of actions and events. We don't always see the patterns, but they are often there. The third layer is the underlying structures: the physical world, organizations, policies, rituals (in the societal sense). These are the things that govern and support a lot of patterns, and thus, a lot of events. These are also the structures that make it detrimental to engage in certain kinds of activities (such as going fully off-grid).

The layer we are most concerned with today, however, is the final layer—that which underlies all else—the layer of mental models. This is where ideologies, attitudes, beliefs, expectations, values, and myths reside. These are the stories we believe and the stories we tell ourselves, both as individuals and as cultures. For example, our current prevailing story suggests that economic growth is the most important thing, what we need to value above all else. These mental models drive larger structures in society as well as individual actions. These are the myths we live and die by. If you want to change actions, the mental models themselves must change. And here's the thing: right now, Western culture has some incredibly destructive myths: to individuals, to communities, and to ecosystems. Druidry isn't just a spiritual path for individuals in the here and now. Druidry is a way to change the world. When individuals take up nature spirituality as a path, the practices lead them to shifts in thinking—to rethink and reframe mental models. Here are three such mental models that I believe druidry helps us address.

### *The Myth of Progress Versus the Cycle*

One of the core arguments that John Michael Greer has made about industrialization is that the myth of progress is a national, cultural religion (see *Not the Future We Ordered* [Routledge, 2013], among his other writings). The myth of progress insists that growth must happen always (economic growth, technological growth) and that progress will continue forever. That is, the idea of progress is so central to the way that humans think and act, and the decisions that we make, that this paradigm drives nearly everything else. This myth, like all good myths, is rarely questioned: to grow is good, and not to grow is bad. A housing development replacing a forest is progress. The myth suggests that humanity has progressed from the Stone Age to today, with today being the current pinnacle of progress, and tomorrow being even better. This myth also asks us to value efficiency, expediency, mechanization, and standardization.

Druidry asks us to confront this myth. Lessons of nature, of the wheel of the year, of the seasons, teach us that the world doesn't work in a straight, ever-upward-moving line. The land works in a cycle, with seasons of famine and of plenty, with light and dark times. Nature's lessons offer us key ways of reorienting our own philosophy away from the destructive myth of progress and into something that is more sustaining.

### *Infinite Growth Versus Balance*

Tied directly to the myth of progress is the myth of infinite growth, the idea that all growth is good, and the only way to have a stable society and stable economy is to grow. This is embedded

in any discussion of modern economics, and certainly is a driving force. Edward Abbey wrote, “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of a cancer cell,” and this very much rings true.

Druidry teaches us differently. Nature is certainly about growth, but like everything else, it is growth for a season. Nature teaches us that limits are real, and necessary, and that growth and limitation are always in balance. If trees grew too tall, they would blow over. If the summer never ended, pests on the land would grow and multiply to great numbers, harming plants. Strawberries are abundant for two weeks, and then they are gone. Nature spirituality teaches us the lesson of balance.

### *Harmful Consumption Versus Humans as a Force of Good*

In the permaculture film *Inhabit*, permaculturist Ben Falk talks about the challenge we face as humans who care about the land. So much of modern living is focused on doing “less bad” as though the only thing we can do is harm less, or be a little better than we were before. But, as he argues, if you follow this thinking to its logical conclusion, it almost seems better if we weren’t here at all, if we had never been born, or that the best thing we could do is end our lives rather than keep polluting and consuming. This, of course, makes us feel guilty just for inhabiting our earth, for going about our daily lives. I agree with him in that this thinking is extremely problematic because it defines our role only in a damaging sense.

Druidry and ecological approaches like permaculture offer us an alternative perspective: we can interact with nature in many other ways—we can be a force of good. Through tools of both spiritual and physical action, through the head, heart, and hands, we can regenerate and heal our lands. I suggest one such regenerative approach in the second half of this article. Druidry confronts more paradigms than just these, but I think these three are a good starting point. To go back to the iceberg metaphor, we can see how what happens (events) and patterns surrounding what happens are supported by underlying structures. But those structures exist ultimately because of mental models—that which we think, believe, and hold sacred. If we can change the mental model, we change everything else.

The mental models that have driven this world, particularly the Western world, into the twenty-first century are failing. They are failing humans, nonhuman life, and every ecosystem on this planet. And frankly, given how destructive they are, they need to fail. We are quickly approaching the time when a lot of people are going to be seeking new mental models. We are already seeing movement in this direction—the decline of traditional religions and the growth of ecologically oriented religions, the growth in other kinds of ecologically based thinking—it’s already here. We’re seeing this movement in the youth of many countries to demand action on climate change. The paradigms we learn from nature are being shared in many nature-oriented practices and communities: balance, wholeness, integration, connectedness to the land, cycles—lessons from nature.

If we can rewrite the culture’s mental models and paradigms using lessons of nature, and if that new myth can become a driving force, all of society will change as a result of it. And here’s the thing—people are looking for these kinds of new ways of thinking, doing, and being.

Mental models rooted in nature can offer us the next paradigm, the next society we build, one that is in line and honors nature and all life. As we grow in our understanding of what this tradition is now, and where it is heading, I believe that we druids are the forerunners of so much change. Humanity will either have to adapt and develop more ecologically sensitive models or go extinct. Thus, I think of us druids as the forerunners of that change. This is one gift we offer our descendants and the world—the mental models that precipitate new structures, patterns, and actions in the world.

## **Part II: Druidry and Nature in the Age of the Anthropocene**

In the first part of this essay, I've looked at internal aspects and human-centric aspects of druidry in the twenty-first century: mental models people hold and the ways that druidry helps humans begin to repair our own thinking and, thus, repair the world. But I haven't forgotten about the data I shared in one of the opening paragraphs, and the desire to do something now. Thus, the second part of this essay addresses this question: What can druids do about what is happening to all of nature? How can we respond to the ecological crisis of our age?

What is happening to our world is seemingly happening in silence, at least here in the USA. We hear lip service surrounding climate change, yes, but almost nothing about the extinction-level events. These are things our media refuses to cover. These are things overwhelming even to well-meaning people, people who love the land, people like you and me. These are things that bring tears to my eyes when I read them or think about them. But it is necessary that we honor and acknowledge those parts of nature that are no longer with us. To avert the eyes is essentially allowing a loved one to suffer alone. If your grandmother were dying in a hospital, would you ignore her, or would you go visit her? If your sacred companion on the druid path—nature—is suffering and dying, can you really pretend everything is okay? Given what is happening in the twenty-first century, I don't think I can just go into my woods and do some woo-woo and feel good surrounded by nature and call that druidry. Druidry is not a one-sided relationship. If we want to gain our strength, wisdom, peace, and healing from nature, we must also offer something in return. I believe that now, in the twenty-first century, in the Anthropocene, nature needs us just as much as we need her. Given that this is the reality, I believe that responding to the crisis of our age, physically and ritually, should also be part of our druid practice. So let's now consider a few such possibilities from exoteric and esoteric perspectives.

### **Exoteric and Outer Works: Refugia**

In terms of the outer world, there are so many things that you can do. All AODA members engage in three Earth Path changes, plant a tree, and learn about their local ecosystems. All of us are working to better our relationship with the world. All of us can attend to our ecological footprint, consumption behaviors, transit, energy use, and all of the usual things. I think that's part of just being a druid—particularly an AODA druid—living your practice.

To be more specific to the material above, however, I'll share what I consider to be my key method for responding to this kind of extinction-level event: building refugia. Refugia is a concept

discussed by E. C. Pielou in *After the Ice Age: The Return of Life to Glaciated North America* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). In a nutshell, refugia (also called “fuges”) are small pockets of life that were sheltered from broader changes that destroyed most habitats. Pielou describes specific isolated pockets of life that survived as a sheltered spot, a microclimate, a high point, and so forth, while the rest of the land was covered in ice. When the glaciers receded and left a bare landscape devoid of topsoil or life, it was these refugia that allowed life to spread outward again, repopulating areas in North America stripped bare by glaciers. Of course, refugia aren’t limited to North America—they are a worldwide phenomenon, and even our human ancestors, at various points in our history, have used them to survive challenging environmental conditions. In the twenty-first century, in the time of human-dominated land use, things are not as different as you might think from our glaciated prehistory. For one, the loss of biodiversity and essentially inhospitable landscape can be found in the 40,000,000 acres of lawns currently in cultivation in the US or the 914,527,657 acres of conventional farmland in the US. Many areas that aren’t lawns or farmlands are subject to other kinds of stresses that create inhospitable lands: pollution, resource extraction, deforestation, and so on. Refugia allow us to create small pockets of biodiversity—which is going to really, really matter in the next twenty to thirty years.

Refugia are all about individual action. While no average person has control over much of what is happening in the world around us, even in the landscapes around us locally, we can create refuges for life. Refugia are small spaces of intense biodiversity, critically important during this time of mass extinction and habitat loss. Cultivating refugia allows us to put more of the building blocks back into nature’s hands for the long-term healing of our lands. Refugia are little arks of life, that is, little places from which biodiversity and life can spring forth once again. A network of refugia created by twenty-first-century druids may be the difference between extinction and thriving for many diverse species. What you do can make an incredible difference—it could save a species.

To create your own refugia, focus on one kind of ecosystem that you can tend or create: a wetland, a forest, a meadow, and so on. And focus on one or more species that you want to assist: pollinator gardens that are specific for native bees or monarch waystations are likewise a good choice for much of North America. Clean wetlands for amphibians and reptiles are also always a good choice. If you are in the US, you will find your state extension office is a valuable resource—they typically maintain lists of endangered species, and you might find that you can create habitat for one or more such species. I have found it is easier to design with a specific species or goal in mind, so you can really focus your efforts.

I have two such refugia spaces. One is a forest garden, where I cultivate American ginseng, black cohosh, goldenseal, ramps, and other rare forest medicinal species. These species have been stripped from the broader ecosystem here in the Appalachian mountains due to overharvesting, and thus, I am working on keeping them alive on my property. The second refugia I have been tending for some years is a seed garden and pollinator corridor. For this, I am cultivating key native wildflower species that I then save seed from and spread to areas that are highly damaged to due strip mining. So, in this garden, I have plants like joe-pye weed, St.

John's wort, New England aster, several kinds of milkweed, and more. I also have bee boxes and plants with long bloom times, like several varieties of sage and motherwort to encourage pollinators. In both of these cases, I am responding to needs in my local ecosystem, in both forest environments and fields where strip mines and other mining practices have left little native plant life.

### **Esoteric and Inner Works: Honoring the Fallen Through Ritual, Shrine, and Sound**

Given what is happening, and that we practice a nature-oriented spiritual practice, I think it is necessary to directly honor what is occurring through rituals, shrines, moments of silence, psychopomp work, and other practices.

#### *Honoring the Fallen*

After reading the *Great Animal Orchestra*, I thought it would be very appropriate to honor the loss of life through sound. Since we are missing the sounds of that life, and the world is growing silent (or natural sounds are replaced by human sounds), I wanted to create space in my rituals to honor the loss of life. Anytime I open a solitary grove to do ritual, I have begun with a simple sound ritual to honor the life that has passed. I have a small singing bowl, and I go to each of the quarters and ring the bell in each direction. Sometimes I do this silently, and sometimes I say some simple words like, "Honoring those who have passed on in the east." I allow the bowl to resonate until it is completely quiet again, and then move on to the next direction. I've found that for AODA grove openings, this is best done just after declaring peace in the quarters. You don't have to do this in ritual; you can do it anytime. I like doing it in ritual because it is in ritual that I'm drawing upon the land and her energies, and I want to honor and acknowledge the suffering of the land before I ask for anything else.

#### *Shrines*

I also maintain two shrines—an indoor shrine and an outdoor shrine—to honor the many lives that have passed. I often do my sound ritual above and leave small offerings. One of these shrines is in the middle of my forest refugia project. These shrines are simple—a pile of stones outside on a stump. I add bones and other things as I find them on my walks. Indoors, I burn herbal blends that I make especially for this shrine, usually of rosemary (for remembrance), bay laurel (for passage), white cedar (for eternal life), and white pine (for peace), and I burn them regularly. I sometimes print out pictures of animals or other species and add other things of significance. Like most things, it is the intention of this shrine that is critical. I also think that these kinds of shrines should be drawn from the land with little or no impact—I don't like to place manufactured goods on the shrines, as they represent energies I do not want to bring in.

#### *Rituals*

At least once a year, if not more frequently, I also like to engage in ritual (group or solo) to directly honor and support the land. Joanna Macy and Molly Brown's *Coming Back to Life* (New Society, 2014) is full of great ideas for group rituals and group healing and processing of what is happen-



ing now. In her book is a ritual called the Council of All Beings. The basic premise of the ritual is that each participant dresses up to represent something in nature (plants, animals, rivers, etc.) and then speaks on their behalf, while other humans listen and respond. I like this ritual because it allows us to give voice to those who do not normally have it, and it helps all participants get into a frame of mind that acknowledges and honors the suffering of other life. I think it's important to engage with this not only for ourselves, but with others—talking about it, sharing what we do, and working on doing some things together.

## **Conclusion**

Druidry as a spiritual tradition is a response to our age, and through the ages, it has always been such a response. Revival druidry began at the dawn of industrialization, responding to that day. Modern druidry has gained speed as our ecological problems have increased. Revival druidry saw the beginning of industrialization, and I honestly believe it will see us through to the end of it. For those of us in the twenty-first century, druidry is our response to today. And what we offer our descendants, then, is hope. What we do today will help shape what our tradition—and our world—looks like tomorrow. Today's practitioners have much to contribute to this conversation: What are we currently doing? What will we do? Who will we become? I've shared some of my thoughts and practices, and I leave you with these questions to contemplate and to integrate into your own.

# Imbolc Corn Dollies

*Moine Michelle*

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Imbolc is commonly celebrated on the first day of February, one of the “Big 8” celebrations on the pagan wheel of the year.<sup>1</sup> Danahe’s *The Year in Ireland: Irish Calendar Customs*, notes that Imbolc historically marked “the first day of Spring, and thus of the farmer’s year” (1972, 13). More



recent Irish folk tradition recognizes the day as the feast day of St. Brigid, which is a Christianization of the practices venerating the goddess Brigid, along with the lengthening of days and the inevitable end of winter. (Imbolc is the midway point between the winter solstice and spring equinox.) The earliest references to Imbolc celebrations can be found in the Ulster Cycle, also known as *The Red Branch Tales*, a collection of songs, poems, hymns, myths, stories, and satires from tenth-century Ireland (Eickhoff, 2010). From the historical records, we know that celebrations in parts of Ireland, Scotland, and other areas of the UK entailed taking stock of the remaining winter stores, sweeping the winter cobwebs from the household, performing ablutions and cleansing rites, and making preparations for the lambing and planting to come. Woven corn dollies, particularly Brigid’s crosses and other goddess (and dolly) forms woven with dried straw, have also traditionally been central to this celebration.

For today’s druids, Imbolc is most often the season of cleansing rituals, reflection, and deep rest or retreat. Weaving traditional forms with straw is one way that I have celebrated the date, as the practice allows for and captures these moments of craft, reflection, and meditation, providing an immersive ritual that draws on the traditions of Ireland and Scotland. Not only do these tradition-

al straw favors provide a beautiful and unusual visual focal point over a threshold or on a hearth through the spring, but they make for eye-catching offerings to ritual bonfires at summer festivals—a reminder of the cycles of the year, the temporal nature of the work of our hands, and the ways our communities also weave together through the year.

Outside of the US, the word “corn” refers to various types of grain more generally. Corn dollies, traditionally made out of wheat or straw as noted above, can actually be made of any dried grass or long leafy plant. If you have a place to dry and store “corn” for weaving, you might collect and dry grasses from a neighboring field, sedges from a riverbank, cattails or rushes, willow or broom branches, and the more common corn husks. (A better-versed folklorist could undoubtedly make strong connections between the tradition of wheat weaving in Ireland and Scotland and the use of corn husks for doll making and basketry in the US.) The year the pictures in this essay were taken, I found two reasonably priced bundles of wheat (about twenty-five stalks each) on Etsy. In the past, I’ve purchased straw at a craft or fiber arts store.

This article provides a general overview of making corn dollies. For those interested in more information and tutorials, a number of resources can be found online and are available through booksellers. (A Google search will turn up websites with directions, Youtube videos, and pictures of the dollies others have made.) I tend to keep a few well-known books on my shelf



and have them handy as I begin a wheat weaving project so that I can check in on directions for weaves and plaits as necessary. But I also often find the books and patterns distracting from the joy of just following my own whims with shapes and patterns . . . so, unless I’ve decided to produce a shape that is already popularly recognizable, I will not typically follow a pattern or try to re-create the most iconic forms.

The whole process begins with separating the usable parts of the wheat from the larger stalk. The photo below is a little blurry, but you can see the pile of stalk refuse here. The wheat is then soaked in hot water until it becomes pliable. (Different types of dried materials take more or less time to soak for weaving. To discern whether the wheat is ready, crimp a stalk with your thumbnail. If the crease remains and the stalk does not break or crack, it is generally ready to weave.) Practiced wheat weavers do not typically use fresh sheaves for their forms, as the stalks tend to dry unevenly when crimped or bound (an issue resolved by first drying the stalks and then rehydrating them), to mold where bound, and to discolor where the stalks have been bent before drying. If issues of coloration and longevity are not a concern (you plan to burn or return your form to the woods in short order)—fresh corn can also provide the materials for beautiful forms that are the center of a ritual focus. One summer long ago, a friend and I wove a fan form

of fresh grass that we offered to a wetland during a celebration of Aphrodite. We loved having an offering that was ecologically sound as part of our other activities for the ritual.



Once the wheat is ready to weave, I pull out several similarly sized stalks and begin to work it. Typically a form begins with tying off or binding a few stalks together. To tie off the forms, a weaver may use string (preferably cotton), yarn, or heavy-duty thread. (I prefer natural fibers like cotton, hemp, and jute, particularly if I plan to burn the form at some point in the future.) Most forms use traditional plaits (similar to braids) and follow a pattern of plaiting and binding the stalks. The stalks themselves or the weaver's fingers hold the form in place until the final tie-off. One caution here is that once a stalk of wheat or grass has been bent, the crease will remain—so a little bit of caution and practice (with extra sheaves) can be helpful to those who are brand new to working with dried materials. Once you have the hang of a pattern, it becomes easier to anticipate where and how to fold or bend the stalks.

I have been weaving for a number of years, so I simply let the process take shape organically—creating spirals, plaits, and knots in an intuitive fashion, adding pieces to the forms as I go. As I made the piece in the photos below, I knew I wanted to make a dolly and a house blessing.

I knew that I'd have leftovers to do a couple of Brigid's crosses. But other than that, I was just looking forward to the time away from the computer and other occupations. The smell and feel of the wheat is calming in itself. The opportunity to sink into the making is itself a blessing. I often chant as I weave, reciting the Druid's

Prayer or a prayer to Brigid to hold my focus on the work at hand. I call this deep meditative state "sink time," and for me it is a spiritual and emotional space of deep healing. I let go of my attachment to thoughts and stretch into being in the world as an entity of breath, craft, and presence.





Once the forms have been woven and bound together, they need to dry. Here are the dolly and house blessing set out to dry.

Once a form is completed, the wheat needs to be positioned exactly how you'd like it to look when it's dry—once the wheat has dried, it loses pliability, and the stalks may snap if they're moved. When dried, the piece is also fairly rigid, so it will hold the position it has been manipulated into when wet. Many skilled wheat weavers

lay their pieces out on a corkboard and use stick pins to hold the pieces in place until dry. (This process is not dissimilar from the blocking that knitters do when a pattern is completed.) Because the pieces photographed here were made to be burned in the summer months, I was less interested in perfection of form than in the organic emergence of a shape that could be charged and meditated upon.

On a side note, I woke this morning after weaving these dollies to an inch of snow on the ground. A lovely coincidental reminder of the season.

The dollies had dried out overnight and were ready to be decorated or hung. I clipped the ends of the stalks so that the pieces were even, put bows on the dollies, and blessed them as I had morning coffee. (I used a rafia ribbon, because it is natural fiber that will burn just like the wheat when the dollies are given for offerings.)

Traditionally, dollies would be hung in a kitchen, over a hearth, or near a front door. Goddess forms made of sheaves and plaits can still be found on the altars of many small churches in remote areas of the UK. Some traditions would place a corn goddess form, a repre-





sentation of Brigid, in a cradle near or on the church altar as a reminder that Brigid (goddess or saint) was the patron of midwives, birthing, and milking. Differing forms have different functions and meanings; some are still used as wards (a barrier to disruptive house spirits or energies), others as house blessings, favors (tokens of friendship and affection), and/or offerings. The dollies make beautiful centerpieces for altars and—because they are fast burning and eye catching—terrific offerings to the fire at any ritual celebration. In the past, I have left Brigid’s crosses and other designs at my favorite places in the woods and have made the burning of a dolly the central focus of a Lughnasadh ritual. Offering a plaited form to a summer fire is one way to honor and celebrate the lush summer months, the harvests, the plenty in our modern lives, and the intricate interconnections of our lives.



And here is a picture of the crosses made with the leftovers.



The night of February 1st, I gathered the dollies pictured here and laid them on my altar space. I whispered prayers over them and meditated again on the spiritual, physical, and house cleansings that are so much a part of this time of the year for me. The eve of Brigid’s Day, I always lay out my mantel for the blessings of Brigid’s passing and invite her presence into the house, using the tongues of my ancestors. Those interested in historical varieties of the prayers offered to Brigid in Ireland and Scotland will find versions written down in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the online versions of *Carmina Gadelica* and *The Religious Songs of Connacht* (Carmichael, 1928; Hyde, 1906). Both of these texts offer the original and translations of the Gàidhlig (or Gaelic). Dig a little deeper and you will find that a small handful of pagans with experience in the UK’s indigenous languages

have actively retranslated and rewritten the prayers, songs, and invocations in these texts to include pagan markers. Gods and goddesses, ritual workings, and place names have reappeared in Christianized prayers, poems, and songs to reclaim them for pagan practice.



My own prayers are often for social and ecological justice, for wisdom and peace to prevail in our national landscape, and for joy, calm, and balance to bless us all. I love speaking these prayers in Irish and Scottish Gaelic as a reminder of my ancestors' languages and the ways we may keep our histories and traditions alive.

An example prayer from my Imbolc celebrations (revised just a little; Carmichael, 1928):

### **An Invocation for Justice**

*Falbhaidh mi an ainme Spioraid,  
An riochd feidh, an riochd each,  
An riochd nathrach, an riochd righ:  
Caora meala 'na mo theanga,  
M' anail mar an tuis.*

I will travel in the name of Spirit,  
In likeness of deer, in likeness of horse,  
In likeness of serpent, in likeness of king:  
Dew of honey on my tongue,  
My breath as the incense.

May your Imbolc celebrations be restful, healing, and meaningful, however you celebrate them.

### **Notes**

Many people pronounce the “b” in “Imbolc,” which is an Anglicization and Americanization of the word. In Irish, when a “b” follows an “m,” this denotes an “aspiration” (or puff of air between the lips); this means that the letters are spoken as a “v” sound or go silent. In Ireland and Scotland, the “m” and “b” go silent in the word “Imbolc,” making the pronunciation “IM-Olk,” (without the “m” or the “b” being sounded).

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# Carl Jung and Druidry

## An Exploration of the Commonalities of Views

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In his introduction to *The Druid Magic Handbook*, John Michael Greer states, “Magic belongs in Druidry because the core principles of Druidry and magic are the same” (2007, p. xiv). Greer speaks of a world community, the weaving of connections and the “co-creation of our actions and the patterns of space, time and meaning that define the world around us” (p. xiv). He refers to the core practices of the druid path as daily “life lived in harmony,” rituals, and “meditation to unveil the secrets of our own nature” (p. xv). This line of thinking, and much else that appears in current druid practice and philosophy, is congruent with Jungian psychology. It is my contention that the core principles of Jungian theory, magic, and druidry are all iterations of the same pattern.

I am a latecomer to the formal practice of druidry, drawn both by its philosophy and by its symbols and ritual, which I find to be congruent with my own beliefs and training, both spiritual and professional. My familiarity with the theories of Carl Jung began several decades further back, although I put that theory into practice in maturity. But in another sense, I have been a Jungian and a druid all my life, using the symbols, patterns, and even words of both practices interchangeably, if not formally. Jung and druidry share so much, whether there is a direct connection or not, that I approach this work from the position of a pattern analyst both of human psychology and of history.

I was pleased to read Greer’s (2017) article on Jungian symbolism in relation to AODA’s Sphere of Protection ritual, which gave me a direction for this druid project. Greer’s detailing of

the geometric structure of the quaternios which Jung used to describe individuation (the process by which each individual develops consciously over a lifetime to fulfill as closely as possible his innate potential) makes a good circumstantial case for a direct connection between Jung and former Grand Archdruid Dr. Juliet Ashley's concept of the Sphere of Protection. Certainly, it seems plausible that the Sphere of Protection was modeled, consciously or not, on the alchemical symbol of the lapis quaternio. Stepping from Greer's conclusion that "the entire body of Jungian psychology becomes a resource for further expansions and developments . . . of theory and practice the AODA offers its initiates" (p. 7), then individuation could be considered a part of AODA practice. In this article, I explore some congruent, archetypal considerations that offer Jungian validity to the practices and symbols of the AODA in use today. Greer's article begins, "Alternative spiritual traditions tend to leave faint tracks in the sands of history" (p.1). Those faint tracks were the stuff of Jung's explorations, as they are of the AODA. To facilitate the project, I include a brief discussion of Jung's theory and his methods as they relate to the philosophy and practice of the AODA. It is my belief that the work of Jung, supported by the discoveries of the "new" sciences, specifically those dealing with quantum theories of time, space and connection, is an iteration of the same archetypal patterns and meanings that attracted the founders and guides of the AODA and inspired its choice of symbols and practices.

Jung (1973) was a self-defined empiricist, an observer of the behavior patterns in humanity, which he came to believe appear in iterations consistent throughout human history. His observations led him to describe universal patterns in symbols and metaphors, and in myths and beliefs. He referred to these universal realities as "archetypes". These were living realities in his own life through gnosis, which is a knowledge or insight into humanity's real nature in relation to the world and to itself, as well a formal study and scientific observation. Archetypes are forms representing common human experiences that all people can recognize across place or time, which parallels Greer's (2007, p. xiv) comment that human actions interact with the patterns of space and time to define our world and give it meaning.

No matter what your personal experience of "mother," whatever culture, time, or place you come from, you recognize the concept of "mother," the archetype. So it is with the archetype of the divine, the sacred, the numinous. Your personal and cultural experiences provide energy to a specific facet of the archetype (loving god, judge, single god, triad or many, none or unnamed, etc.), filling in the details and activating it. The source of archetypal forms is the "collective unconscious" or, in more modern parlance, the "objective psyche," a store of common human experiences from the beginning of our existence, to which we all have access (in varying degrees) and which we all recognize when we meet them.

An archetype exists as a form-in-potential, a loom prepared for weaving. It exists eternally without origin and is static until human interaction provides the specific iteration or facet of the pattern to be evoked. This specific iteration is a complex, a combination of behaviors and feelings that fill in details of the evoked facet of an archetype in a particular time and place. The complex "functions as a magnetic epicenter, creating the convergence of archetypal potentialities into a singularity, a highly patterned behavioral tendency, drawing to it one specific facet of an



archetype” (Conforti, 1999, p. 24). This creates a resonance with similar experiences in others—regardless of time, place, or culture—and within the individual.

When a pattern is woven on a loom, the loom is the container, the structure, the archetype, the potential waiting to be filled. The threads strung on the loom define the material of the pattern that will be woven (type of thread, underlying color, texture, etc.) This is half of the potential pattern, the general category, the complex. Its possibilities are limited by the loom it is strung upon. (You can’t weave a carpet on a potholder loom.) Within those limits, the expressed pattern forms in relation to the perceptions of the weaver. A flower may appear in psychedelic colors or damask fabric, but the loom, the archetypal pattern of “flower,” remains the same, unchanged by the specific manifestation.

To the right person, a weaver, the prepared loom is strongly attractive. It calls for energizing so that its potential can be manifested. The weaver moves the shuttles to create the actual variations of the cloth, the complex. This is the other half of the potential pattern, personal investment. The combination of the two fills the loom with a vibrant, viable tapestry and an archetype comes alive, or as Jung would say, is activated.

Every experience of the divine or the numinous, like every individual, is unique because of the personal investment of the participants. Every numinous experience, like every individual, also follows a pattern. AODA literature frequently mentions that rituals can and should be adapted to the private beliefs and practices of participants—names of deities in the Sphere of Protection, for example, or including other elements in ritual workings. Since no two individuals are identical in need, experience, or self, so no two individuals perceive and experience even one facet of the divine in exactly the same way. Druidry, Jung, magic, and even science (with its observer bias that takes into account the scientist’s personal input even in laboratory experiments) do indeed share the same core principles.

It is important to realize that the experience of the numinous is not a matter of faith and, therefore, not truly a matter of religion. Faith is believing in the numinous experiences of others. This discussion concerns direct, personal experience of the numinous. “Belief,” Jung wrote, “is no substitute for inner experience” (1959, p. 265), the gnosis on which understanding may be based. Similarly, the entire literature of the AODA focuses on personal experience and emphasizes that this experience, including rituals and discursive meditation can be a disturbing, even dangerous adventure. Jung agreed, using the terms ‘active imagination’ to mean the same process. He noted, “[t]his is a method that can only be used in certain carefully selected cases. The method is not entirely without danger because it may carry the patient too far away from reality. A warning against thoughtless application is therefore in place” (p. 49).

When an archetype is activated, it becomes an organizing principle for the lives of those in its field of influence, just as a magnet organizes iron filings in a typical pattern. However, archetypes are also impersonal. Individuals respond to archetypes—to symbols, to metaphors, to myths—with recognition, but the individual has no similar effect on the archetype. I may respond to a symbol of my beliefs, but the symbol is not changed by presence or belief, just as iron filings are moved by a magnet but the magnet is not moved by the filings.



Jung posited that the collective unconscious exists in all humans and is the repository of common human experiences throughout time, which are housed in archetypes as described above. “The existence of the collective unconscious means that individual consciousness is anything but a *tabula rasa* and is not immune to predetermining influences. On the contrary, it is in the highest degree influenced by inherited presuppositions, quite apart from the unavoidable influences exerted upon it by the environment. *The collective unconscious comprises in itself the psychic life of our ancestors right back to the earliest beginnings*” (Jung, 1959, p. 3, emphasis added). It is here that the “faint tracks in the sands of history” may be followed like a path, validating our experience in the footsteps of the many who have gone before.

We are moved by the same (or very similar) questions and rituals as our unidentified ancestors. This is the basis for the core values druidry and Jung share—not that one took from the other (although that also may be true), but that both are informed by the same archetypal source, the collective unconscious, and employ similar methodology for similar purposes, which Jung called individuation.

There is no more a way to experiment with and discover the origin of the collective unconscious than there is to experiment with the stars in the sky—neither will submit to being studied in a laboratory. The questions of where and how the original pattern forms have been addressed by many schools of study including systems theory (Laszlo, 1987; Bateson, 1979), biology (Sheldrake, 1988), biophysics (Mae-Wan Ho, 1993), physics (Hawking, 1988), and astrophysics (Mansfield, 1995; Peat, 1987). So far, the results are uniform, summed up by Jung in 1938: “Whether this . . . ever ‘originated’ at all is a metaphysical question and therefore unanswerable. The structure is something given, the precondition that is found to be present in every case” (1959, p. 187). Forms—symbols, metaphors, myths—can be traced back through history until they predate humanity. This is the wellspring that druidry and Jung share. To understand and bring an archetype into consciousness rather than simply to respond to its presence requires the observation of its meaning and the fields it activates over time (Conforti, 1999). Von Franz refers to the archetype as the “nature constants” of the human psyche and the patterns of the physical world. It is eminently conservative and, furthermore, it always eliminates impurities that have been added by individual problems” (p. 17). Essentially, archetypes remain the same. This allows Jung, druidry, and all other philosophies and religions to approach the same experiences, questions, and mysteries in their basic untainted form.

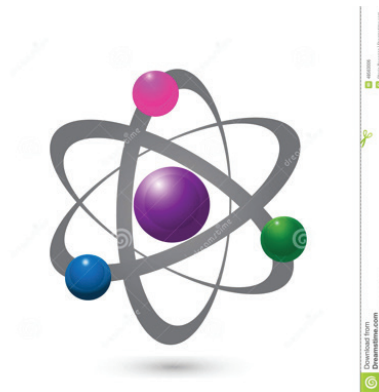
I offer the following support for the use and construction of the protective sphere (and some other patterns in current druid practice) as valid based on archetypal history and Jungian interpretation. This project is necessarily abbreviated due to time constraints and the amount of travel and research material that a more exhaustive study would require, but sufficient, to make the point that the Sphere of Protection has a strong archetypal base. Further, druidry and Jungian psychology share the symbols and ritual used to manifest iterations of the archetype that Jung called the *unus mundus*, a united universe, a “theory of everything.”

## Definitions

To begin, “sphere” has a general dictionary definition which includes not just the obvious “a solid that is bounded by a surface consisting of all points at a given distance from a point constituting its center” or the poetic “the apparent surface of the heavens of which half forms the dome of the visible sky” or the historic mechanical “any of the concentric and eccentric revolving spherical transparent shells in which according to ancient astronomy stars, sun, planets, and moon are set” (Merriam-Webster, 2017)—a usage that can be traced back to the fourteenth century, derived from the late Latin *spheara*, meaning “globe.” There are further definitions, no longer in common use, that use “sphere” as an intransitive verb meaning “to search; to pry; to ask; to inquire” and “to enclose or surround” (Fowler & Fowler, 1919), which are related to the Sphere of Protection.

“Protection” is defined as “a person or thing that protects someone or something” and “supervision or support of one that is smaller and weaker” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). In this simple definition is a wealth of implications. If something is protected, it is kept safe, sheltered by something stronger and defended by the supervision and support of that stronger thing or being. Protection, therefore, allows someone or something vulnerable to grow and develop safely. One definition of protection is a pass or safe-conduct guaranteeing safety while traveling through potentially dangerous places (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2016), whether those places are material, psychic, or spiritual.

A sphere of protection, therefore, is a form whose surface of infinite points are all equidistant from the center point, but which can be described as revolving transparent shells that mimic the movement of astronomical bodies (such as the sun, moon, planets, and stars). This form, when invoked, provides support and a sort of supervision (witness that an activity is being done correctly and safely [*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2017]) for someone smaller or weaker while they “sphere,” search, or inquire. This is the objective reality with which we begin, a three-dimensional circle that is powerful enough to support and protect us who are smaller—a Sphere of Protection. Other, more esoteric definitions for “sphere” are also used in mathematics and science, yet they are iterations of the same archetype. In physics, for example, Bohr’s 1913 model of the structure of atoms (particularly hydrogen, the most common atom in the universe) foreshadows models central to quantum mechanics, with a familiar pattern:



## Historical References to a Pattern of Spheres

Curious about whether today’s druidic understandings of sphere symbolism echoed with historical understandings of spheres, I explored texts from a diverse range of times and places that focus on psychological and archetypal concerns. Very quickly, I did indeed see a pattern emerge, reflected in the following examples.

- The Book of Ezekiel (c. 605–575 BCE): The earliest reference I found for the use of a circle or sphere that protected living creatures. It also had totem animals and four connected wings surrounding them within a set of wheels or circles, which provided protection for each of them while they heard the voice of their god coming from above—all elements similar to AODA's Sphere of Protection, but separated by nearly three millennia; an experience of an archetype entraining into an energized complex evoking the numinous.
- Parmenides (c. 485): The first to assert that the world is a sphere and the center of the universe. His work is fragmented poetry, however, and more concerned with the nature of reality than geometry. He wrote, "It is indifferent to me whence I begin, for there again shall I return and elsewhere equal from the middle." He describes the being of all—the *unus mundus*, everything in existence on this plane—as a sphere "ungenerated and indestructible, whole, of one kind and unwavering, and complete." It is present and timeless (Burnett, 1920)—in short, an archetype.
- Empedocles (c. 490–430 BCE): Considered the author of the cosmogenic (related to the creation of the universe) theory of the four elements. He also proposed forces he called "Love and Strife," which would mix as well as separate the elements. When these become unbalanced, chaos ensues. When mixed in balance, the contrasting elements result in a spherical being that he called "the most serene God." While Love and Strife occupy opposite positions inside and outside god, they could as easily be above and below as it is the tension of opposition or balance, not the placement or the qualities of the elements, that is important to the creation of the sphere. (Chisholm, 1911).
- John Ripley (c. 1415–1490): "By act of divine creation, a dark sphere is brought out of chaos . . . created from water, fire, and earth...the invisible and immovable God" (Ripley, 2015). Here is the concept of three elements and the bringing of order through activating an archetype by numinous experience: an alchemical description of individuation, a sphere of protection through ordering of the elements.
- *The Intellectual Repository and New Jerusalem Magazine for the New Church* (General Conference of the New Church, 1862): The author of this text writes, "A Druidic emblem was a crystal sphere 'shewing all things in one presence.'" that is, having elements of all classic forms—triangle, circle, etc—and therefore an omniform, encompassing all forms. And the *many colored vase in a sphere with radiated circles styled in the omniform. . .*" Many colors and a sphere surrounded by radiating circles sounds very familiar. If the "vase" is the human form around which the sphere is gathered with its multicolors (the primary colors used in the sphere of protection hold the potential for all colors in the visual spectrum), and the circles, triangles and arcs of basic forms creating a potential omniform, Using the three gates brings a significant similarity to the 19th century description While the druid ascription is ques-

tionable, the description is interesting and similar to present usage—a link to the Druid Revival of the time, using the same archetypal symbols.

- Marie Clair, Countess of Caithness (1887), described the druidic conception of the circles or spheres of existence. “The circle or sphere of Abred in which are all corporal and dead existences. The Circle (or Sphere) of Geynvyd, in which are all animated and immortal beings. The Circle (or sphere) of Cugent, where there is only God.” Whether or not this is truly a druid conception, it is a model of three spheres attributed to druids and predating the Sphere of Protection.
- John Savage (1875, p. 145), in *The Manhattan and DeSalle Monthly*, describes a contributor’s experience of the “mysterious sect in the south of Wales . . . believe[d] to be the very last remnant of the ancient Druidic religions. . . . They gather together only twice in every year—in the summer and the winter solstice . . . ascend a mountain called Englwysilan . . . headed by an ancient man who bears in his hand a long wand. At the top of this wand is a small sphere with three prongs, like divergent rays issuing from one side of it.” This occurred during the Druid Revival, but cited a much older ritual using a set of archetypal symbols.
- Chogyal Namakhai Norbu (born 1938): A “Total Sphere” is the translation of the Dzogpa Chenpo, that state of consciousness that has neither beginning nor ending, but is limitless and whole—like a sphere (Norbu, 1999).
- Wallace Black Elk (dictated c. 1930–1938): “The world works in circles and everything tries to be round. . . . Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, The west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. . . . Our tipis were round like the nests of birds these were always set in a circle, the nation’s hoop, a nest of many nests where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children” (Black Elk & Lyon, 1990).

In each of these definitions, patterns that we might name archetypal appear across culture, time, and place—each with consistently similar attributions of a sphere.

### **Commonalities in Theory and Application Between Jung and Druidry**

Of particular interest in this project is Jung’s interpretation of a dream in *Psychology and Alchemy*. Although Jung wrote of his own experiences and drew many mandalas (art being one path to individuation), it is in his description and analyses of the thoughts and dreams of others that his connection to the *unus mundus* archetype is demonstrated. In the dream, the dreamer draws “*three-leaved clovers or distorted crosses in 4 different colors; red, yellow, green and blue*. In connection with this dream the dreamer spontaneously *drew a circle with quarters tinted in the above colors*” (Jung, 1953, p. 164, emphasis added). He then drew “*the center of the circle which was described as blue*. The

wheel is an alchemical symbol for circulation: *circulatio*, which refers to the ascending and descending of the vapours and also the cycling of the year in which the work takes place” (pp. 164–165).

In his analysis, Jung stated, “It is Mother Nature. . . . The property of the wheel is life in the form of ‘four bailiffs’ who manage the dominion in the life-giving mother. These bailiffs are the four elements. . . . The fact is that the four colours in the dream represent the transition from trinity to quaternity” (1953, pp. 165–166). This represents the “squared circle” and the lapis, a blue substance Jung (1953, p. 167) believed functions as a symbol of awakened consciousness. Jung posits that this is a demonstration of an alchemical process, which is a metaphor for individuation, the creation of a whole, connected, “well-rounded” person (pp. 164–165).

This well-roundedness is not perfection. It is not possible to square a circle. If perfection were possible, then man would become God, a concept that presents many difficulties. However, the blue center, in alchemy the lapis, is analogous to the place in the Sphere of Protection that the work is done. It is “created by man yet more than the creation of his experience,” an evoking of the experience of the presence of the numinous.

The number three represents change and movement, according to Jung. It refers to birth, life, and death or beginning, middle, and end. Four represents stability, grounding, and commitment. The transition from trinity to quaternity is an example of the constant shift between movement and rest, action and contemplation, conservation and change that is necessary for the equilibrium of humanity and the universe, according to Jung. Both are required for the individual and the universe to evolve in a balanced fashion. Together, the numbers are the “hands of god,” the original impetus for all that is.

The Sphere of Protection ritual also begins with a cross shape created by arm movements that could be described as “clover shaped,” followed by the calling and banishing of the elements in the four colors mentioned in the dream of Jung’s patient. In the dream, this is followed by the creation of a *circulatio*, which mimics the ascending and descending circulation of the “vapours” analogous to the calling of the druidic currents. The four elements, represented by the four colors, are placed in a circle or wheel representing the transition from trinity to quaternity—from unstable to stable; from spiritual to physical (Jung 1953, p. 169). This transition expresses the goal of analytic psychology: to bring stability to instability (p. 27), which appears to be a fair description of the purpose of the Sphere of Protection as well. Jung also acknowledged that there is a fluctuation between the two states of spiritual and physical, the wheel turning to create ascending and descending (p. 165) phases of spiritual and physical focus into consciousness, again reminiscent of the Sphere of Protection.

Although the Sphere of Protection in current use was created in the 1970s by Dr. John Gilbert, and we cannot know what may have guided his hand, the archetypal similarities to the dream analyzed by Jung some thirty years earlier are fairly clear. Both Gilbert and Jung clearly drew from the same well of inspiration that also fueled the alchemical studies introduced into Europe in the twelfth century and the development of sacred geometry centuries before that. Their inspiration was already there, already available, already part of the fabric of the world around them—a loom strung and waiting for a pattern to be woven upon it.



Jung's method of interpreting dreams in terms of archetypal symbols included not only material presented by clients, but also his studies of cultures and the current events of his time. In myths, rituals, religions, cultures, and individual cases, Jung found explanations of current behavior and of the process, if not always progress, in becoming conscious and approaching answers to the great mysteries of life. He attempted to explain the *unus mundus*, which would shed light on the connectedness of everything. This seems to be the parallel for druidic processes as well.

### **Jungian and Druid Meditation: Similarities of Technique and Purpose**

Between 1913 and 1916, Jung developed a meditation technique he called “active imagination,” a process very like druidic discursive meditation. Active imagination is a method for visualizing unconscious issues and letting them act themselves out, which is similar, in technique at least, to shamanic journeying or astral flight. Active imagination can also use automatic writing, or artistic activities such as dance, music, painting, sculpting, ceramics, crafts, and so on. Jung considered that “the patient can make himself creatively independent through this method. . . . By painting himself he gives shape to himself” (quoted in Stevens, 1999, p. 109). In active imagination, the individual enters into a dialogue with figures, symbols, or ideas that seem to be outside himself. The person challenges the “imagined other” and is challenged by the envisioned responses. The result is a dialogue that allows the participant to expand understanding and to recognize in the responses parts of the self that have been unconscious (i.e., of which the individual was unaware). With practice, the process can support increasing self-awareness and, by extension, awareness of the world. The more often the process is repeated, the more proficient the individual becomes. Awareness of hitherto unknown qualities allows the individual's “shadow” (rejected or untended) contents to become conscious and metabolized rather than acted out. This is in essence a dynamic, creative process that, when made conscious, inevitably is compensatory (seeking equilibrium between disparate ideas—transitioning between trinity and quaternity). Any assertion generates alternative assertions. June Singer wrote, “Coming to terms with the other . . . exposes aspects of a man's inner nature. . . . By accepting them into consciousness and integrating them, he is able to add new and deeper dimensions to his functioning personality” (2000, p. 121). Further, she notes that this awareness leads to a need to reconnect with nature. “Every man should have his own plot of land so that the instincts can come to life again. To own land is important psychologically, and there is no substitute for it. . . . We need a relationship with nature. . . . I am fully committed to the idea that human existence should be rooted in the earth (Jung quoted in Carol, 1977, p. 202). While ownership of land is a thorny concept, the sentiment that people benefit from meaningful and consistent contact with nature is clearly druidic.

Similarities between druidic practices and active imagination are obvious: Adar (2006) wrote about discursive meditation as “contemplation,” which they define as “a quiet opening to God [which Jung called, less specifically, the numinous]. . . . It may be helped by the use of words, such as by repeating a single word or a short prayer, or by images . . . but it aims for a communion with the Divine that transcends such things and the limited understanding they embody.” They suggested that in the Western magical tradition, “meditation refers to ‘thinking’: disciplined, di-

rected thinking about a chosen topic. It's a way of unpacking the meaning in a tradition." Greer describes imagination as the mind's way of experiencing the life force (the numinous) and perceiving its patterns working through others' minds, while Hillman says that active imagination opens a dialogue between the individual and his experience and between the individual and the universal (Hillman & Samdasani, 2013, p. 18).

The AODA study program states that the three aspects of focus include sciences related to the natural world; arts and crafts; and philosophy, religion, and spirituality as methods or paths, as I understand it, to bring individuals to better awareness of themselves and their processes and into better balance with nature and the aspects of the infinite that resonate with them. Each of these three aspects is reiterated in Jungian theory. Jung's understanding of the need for a safe space—a sphere of protection—and of the inherent dangers in the work of self-awareness is reiterated in AODA ritual. Jung's concept of a collective unconscious that informs human behavior and experience from before the beginning of recorded time validates the druid/Druid Revival/modern druid pedigree in light of historic precedent, while his collection and interpretation of symbols in his work on dreams and alchemy is mirrored in the symbols chosen by the AODA.

While there is no evidence that Jung took a particular interest in the beginnings of the AODA or in the Druid Revival in general, his work was readily available and was widely read and studied at that time. His research led him through ancient texts (he cites several of the ancient references noted above). He also visited India in 1937 (Bair, 2004) and the United States in 1924–1925 and 1936–1937, then commenting on the cultural, psychological, and religious patterns he experienced and researched in both places and their relations to European traditions. Numerous articles and letters attest to Jung's interest in the “new sciences” of which Bohr was the herald. More important to this thesis is that Jung had access to this information and that he published his results and commentary in a time frame that would have made them available to the organizers of the most recent incarnations of druid practice. In the same way that Gnostic Christianity can be referred to as Platonic while Roman Christianity is Aristotelian, druidry may be called Jungian. Based on time frame, commonality of archetypal reference, and presentation, like two points on the same sphere, they are equidistant from the same numinous center, from the *unus mundus*.

A direct connection between Jung's work and druidry may never be proven. Jung's work was couched in Christian European thought with a strong overlay of paganism—as European Christianity obviously is as well. While it is entirely possible that druids of the time read or studied with Jung or that Jung corresponded with druids, no hard evidence is available. Nevertheless, each reached similar interpretations of the same mysteries. Many of these sibling belief systems exist in confluence with a repetitive historical *zeitgeist*, as over and over humanity has sought to find balance with and a place within the reality of the natural world. This reiteration provides evidence of an archetype rising from the collective unconscious to organize human perceptions of eternal mysteries. Depth psychologists today (and many practitioners of the other new sciences and traditional alternative healing methods) have the same basic goals as the

priestesses and wizards that Greer noted “wove nature and humanity into a single fabric that kept both balanced and whole” (2007, p. 4). The activation of an archetypal field, whenever it occurs, is strong and vital, pulling in minds and spawning rituals (or complexes) for its sphere of influence as surely as magnets create magnetic fields and draw iron filings into the same eternal pattern. In the common archetypal pattern is evidence of connection.

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# What Do You See When You Look at a Tree? Myth, Meaning, and Mental Maps for the Twenty-First Century: Reviews of Three Recently Released Books

*Lisa D. Jacobs*

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*When They Severed Earth from Sky* by Elizabeth Wayland Barber and Paul T. Barber, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004

*What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* by Daniel Chamovitz, New York: Scientific American/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012

*Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* by Matthew Hall, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011

What do you see when you look at a tree?

Imagine an oak standing in a field, broad branches stretching to the sky, sturdy trunk joined to the ground by roots sunk deep into the soil, green leaves rustling in the wind. How would your heart describe it? Is it the ancient symbol of druidry, the home of a dryad, 2,000 board feet of lumber, a wildlife habitat, a great place for a tree house, a carbon sink, a producer of delicious acorns? What do you see when you look at a tree? What mythic stories do you tell about it?

The three books in this review offer the druid a number of road maps for answering these questions. In *When They Severed Earth from Sky*, Elizabeth Wayland Barber and Paul T. Barber examine myths of the ancient world, finding in the work of these “bards” not moralistic fantasies but densely compressed information about actual events in the natural world and how to interpret



and react to them. Volcanoes explode, stars move though celestial calendars tens of thousands of years long, and cultural shifts remain memorialized for millennia. Learning to translate the ancient myths is fascinating in its own right and essential for understanding the bardic tools for constructing modern myths that will serve our society well now and last into the future.

In *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses*, Daniel Chamovitz describes the scientific community's slow recognition of plant perception. In six very readable chapters, he outlines our current understanding of what a plant sees, smells, feels, hears, knows, and remembers. Chamovitz chronicles scientific advances in understanding the perceptual experiences of plants, while his clear descriptions of experiments allow Ovates to observe direct evidence of plant senses in their home lab. Finally in *Plants as Persons*, Matthew Hall seeks to understand how different societies have related to plants and, by extension, the greater natural world. Different cultures have wrestled with the theological implications of eating and using plants for human needs, Hall writes. Radically different social mores evolved as plants were viewed variously as resources to be exploited, living entities not to be harmed, or parts of broad kinship networks to whom reciprocity is owed. Taken together, these three books offer inspiration for the multifaceted work of reenvisioning the West's mental maps of right relations with the natural world and creating the myths to reinforce that new vision.

Druids often grapple with the myriad ways that the stories of the Bard and the knowledge of the Ovate can blend together to create mental models. Each of these authors makes clear that humans swim through a sea of myth—even those who are expanding scientific knowledge. Our brains have evolved to weave information and experiences together into compelling stories for ourselves, for our families, and for our broader societies. Our understanding of the natural world is steeped in these cultural and mythic sensibilities. Our shared narratives help us interpret the vast complexity of the world around us. Like AODA Archdruid Dana O'Driscoll, who writes that these “mental models [are] where ideologies, attitudes, beliefs, expectations, values and myths reside . . . and they drive larger structures in society as well as individual actions,” these books offer us tools for understanding the deep work of Druid practice.<sup>1</sup>

Every day our shared cultural myths help us frame our decisions, make value judgments, and take action. Myths pass on cultural codes and expectations. These stories have guided humanity's relationship with the world around us for at least 100,000 years. Writing of the prehistoric lifeways of California Indians, M. Kat Anderson states that the “motivation [to live in balance with the natural world] is fostered within the culture itself—through art, legend, kinship systems, ceremonies, and its overarching worldview. The beliefs and values reinforced by and expressed through these elements of culture define human ways of being with and in nature, and they go hand in hand with actual individual behavior acted out on the land.”<sup>2</sup> Can

1 Dana O'Driscoll, “Druidry for the 21st Century,” The Druid's Garden, January 13, 2019, <https://druid-garden.wordpress.com/2019/01/13/druidry-for-the-21st-century/>.

2 M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Cultural Resources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 361.

we twenty-first-century Druids develop a modern mythos that speaks to our lifeways today and that can help our culture adapt to the changes and challenges posed by global climate change?

In the West's dominant mythos, for instance, a tree is timber for building, a carbon sink for climate change, shade for a house, and beauty for a yard. The tree exists to serve humanity's destiny to grow ever wealthier from the natural resources of the insensate earth. In contrast, the AODA teaches us first just to look, to understand plants, animals, and the natural world on their own terms. Watching a tree over the years, we come to appreciate its independence and agency. Through close study and close relationships with the natural world, we begin to question a mythos of human dominance and materialistic use of the natural world and instead imagine ourselves as an integral part of a self-sustaining network of human and other-than-human beings built on mutually beneficial reciprocal responsibilities. For such a radically different vision to be adopted, however, we must begin by changing our mental maps so that "the motivation to live in balance with the natural world is fostered within the culture itself."<sup>3</sup>

As the Barbers argue, myths only remain relevant if they illuminate the listener's direct experience. Most Westerners have become separated from the natural world, coming to view plants as a three-dimensional backdrop to an anthropocentric life. The Barbers, Chamovitz, and Hall each offer us a new language of twenty-first-century myths.

Taken together, these three books offer inspiration for the multifaceted work of reenvisioning the West's mental maps of right relations with the natural world and creating the myths to reinforce that new vision.

### **Translating the Songs of Ancient Bards: When They Severed Earth from Sky**

What do you see when you look at a tree? Yggdrasil, the Norse world tree, "with heaven above, our earthly living space midway, and another more mysterious realm below, or Zeus's oak carrying the star mantle"?<sup>4</sup> A finger pointing to the sky's great celestial calendar?

Ancient myths, argue the Barbers, carefully document historical events and critical observations about the natural world and transmit them to descendants down the ages. Zeus's oak, supporting the sky cloak, held the stars aloft. In turn the stars, plants, sun, and moon moved across the heavens in predictable ways. A society that could translate those movements knew when to plant and harvest crops, could calculate north for navigation, could predict when the planets of their gods might meet each other in the sky, and could measure the changing of the celestial eras spanning millennia into the past and future. Ancient bards and storytellers of the oral tradition compiled complex technical information in packages dense enough to be contained in a single human brain and interesting enough to be remembered even to the present day. To decode these ancient tales and to begin to develop our own, the Barbers propose four broad structures inherent in myths that allowed them to perform this herculean feat: silence, analogy, compression, and restructuring.

3 Ibid.

4 Elizabeth Wayland Barber and Paul T. Barber, *When They Severed Earth from Sky* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 193.

First the Barbers warn readers of the pitfall of silence. Myths had to transmit large quantities of information in as memorable a form as possible. They did not waste time reiterating shared cultural knowledge. Glossing over these details kept the story interesting but, once forgotten, left the myth incomprehensible to future listeners.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, future listeners from a different culture tend to dismiss the factual information in a surviving myth because they do not accept the cultural explanations for the facts.<sup>6</sup> In Greek mythology, Ouranos the King of the Sky is overthrown by his son Kronos the Titan of the Sky, and Kronos is in turn overthrown by his son Zeus, who became the God of the Sky but remains eternally anxious about his hold on power. The story reads like a Greek soap opera, because it left in silence the knowledge that each of these beings aligned with a constellation of the zodiac and that the location of north within those constellations moves from one to the next over the course of 2,160 years.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, we realize that one layer of this foundational Greek myth encodes changes in the sky chart important for navigation over the course of some 6,000 years.

Next the Barbers turn to analogy in myths. The changing constellations of the zodiac are like the rise and fall of earthly kings. The changing character of the divine beings associated with the zodiac accounts for changes in character of cultures through time. The human brain inherently draws parallels between two similar things and uses the comparison to clarify meaning. Not only does it make for a great story, it helps the listener visualize the observable events in the natural world more clearly.<sup>8</sup> The confusion of north moving from one zodiac sign to another is like the confusion of one king conquering another.

Moreover, analogy of behaviors opens the space for analogy of personhood.<sup>9</sup> Clearly only a god or Titan has the power to move the stars so that north is in his house and not another's. In the myths the Barbers discuss, the human and nonhuman actors all have agency and form relationships with each other. The Barbers argue in favor of materialist explanations for observable events, as befits academic historians. The tree fell down because of rot, wind, and gravity, not because a raging forest spirit sick from climate change pushed it over.<sup>10</sup> As druids, however, we are freed to hold both explanations in our mind: the materialist's explanation of gravity and the mystic's ailing forest spirit. In constructing a new mythos of interdependence and reciprocity, analogy offers an opportunity to reassess our observations of the world around us and create new, cinematic interpretations based on collaborative, reciprocal relationships with other nonhuman persons.

Indeed, the Barbers describe these different interpretations as the "Mismatch Effect: The same real event reported by two different sources may be reported in wildly different forms,

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5 Ibid., 18–19

6 Ibid., 27.

7 Ibid., 207–208

8 Ibid., 35.

9 Ibid., 42

10 Ibid.

which may therefore seem unrelated at first glance.”<sup>11</sup> Those who view a tree as a piece of wood stuck in the ground with leaves on top will tend to mythologize it as a nonliving natural resource to be consumed. Those who notice the same tree turning its leaves to the sun and its roots busily chatting with nearby trees will tend to mythologize it as a living entity whose consciousness and agency must at least be contemplated. Depending on the teller’s and the culture’s perspective, either of these stories could become the dominant myth, with significant implications for the way the society develops over the centuries. As we internalize new, heterogeneous analogies, our culture will begin to reinforce actions that move in balance with the natural world, rather than exploitation of it.

As myths evolve over decades, centuries, and millennia, the Barbers note that stories that were once separate begin to be assigned to single archetypal individuals, places, or times.<sup>12</sup> A great feat of strength in ancient Greece? It must have been done by Herakles. Something magical happened in old Cornwall? It must have been during King Arthur’s reign. Such compression allows a lengthy catalog of ideas to be remembered and organized for retrieval based on essential characteristics like strength or location. As druids build new myths for the twenty-first century, we may judge their success in part by the way they evolve and are compressed and reorganized in the retelling.

Indeed, restructuring is the final element necessary to the Barbers’ understanding of myth. Good stories and good characters get repurposed when connections to their original meaning fade. As cultures change and people move to new locations and climatic zones, the old myths no longer describe and illuminate observable reality, and oral history can become just another campfire tale.<sup>13</sup> Warning myths about the spirits of volcanoes throwing rocks become strange humanoid monsters hurling stones. Myth continues to evolve and to be shaped by the experiences of the myth-making culture, especially cultures facing significant, unsettling change. The myth-making druid may find inspiration and archetypes in the ancient tales, but compelling modern stories must relate to current, observable experiences if they are to resonate and reshape our culture. Understanding the structure, function, and ongoing evolution of ancient myth offers druids the tools to begin considering the new mental maps of the twenty-first century. Listening to Western culture’s silences, finding resonant analogies, and building compelling stories through compression and restructuring of older human themes offer a framework for reenchanting the modern world.

### **The Ovate in the Lab: What a Plant Knows**

What do you see when you look at a tree? A living organism of an ancient line? A being conscious of the world in its own way? Many AODA members join because they feel a soul-deep kinship with nature and seek a spiritual path in which they can explore and develop that connection. Thus, during the candidate year, new druids spend time observing the natural world and establishing a foundation of direct experience upon which they can build the mental maps necessary to a mean-

11 Ibid., 71.

12 Ibid., 113

13 Ibid., 139.

ingful, earth-centered spiritual life.

The underlying, dominant myths and mental maps of the West, however, draw profound distinctions between “high-order” animals and “lower-order” animals.<sup>14</sup> Westerners live more or less divorced from the natural world around them. Even botanists who study plants directly bring with them the Western scientific myth of detachment and a subconscious bias that plants cannot perceive the world because they lack the sensory organs of an animal. The our cultural constructs shape the questions that we think to ask and the ways that we interpret what we observe. As a result, until fairly recently, plants were viewed by the scientific community as living automata responding in preprogrammed ways to external stimuli.

Over the past century, small cracks have appeared in this paradigm. In *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses*, Daniel Chamovitz takes up the scientific community’s changing understanding of how plants experience the world around them.

While those called to druidry intuitively sense the life force of plants and instinctively use the Barbers’ concept of analogy to develop deep connections to nature, science has relied on a different analogy to distinguish plants from animals: because plants lack animal-style organs to see, smell, taste, or think, by definition, they can do none of these things. It took a visionary thinker like Charles Darwin to begin to test these assumptions.

Following Julius von Sachs’s discovery in 1864 that plants react to blue light, Darwin and his son attempted to reproduce his work. They placed a pot of canary grass in a dark room for several days, and then exposed it to the dimmest possible light. Within hours, the blades of grass bent toward the light. The Darwins then attempted to determine what part of the plant perceived light. By covering different parts of five seedlings, they discovered that it was the tip of the sprout that “saw” the light, but the movement toward the light occurred almost an inch farther down the stem. Published in 1880, the Darwins’ work continues to be cited in scientific papers today.<sup>15</sup>

Using Chamovitz’s narrative, the curious Ovate can reproduce the Darwins’ work and directly observe a plant seeing light with the photoreceptor on its growth tip. The greatest strength of *What a Plant Knows* is its vivid descriptions of experiments in action. While some research projects require specialized equipment, others can be comfortably repeated in a home lab. Great examples include Darwin’s mapping of spiraling plant movement, dodder’s marked flavor preference for tomato plants over wheat, and de Moceau’s upside-down plant that reoriented itself right side up.<sup>16</sup>

From simple to high-tech research, Chamovitz demonstrates that plants observe and respond to the world in ways that improve their survival:

14 Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, Kindle edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), location 73.

15 Ibid., loc. 14–16.

16 Ibid., loc. 130–131, 38–43, 117.



Plants are acutely aware of the world around around them. They are aware of their visual environment: they differentiate between red, blue, far-red and UV lights and respond accordingly. They are aware of aromas surrounding them and respond to minute quantities of volatile compounds wafting in the air. Plants know when they are being touched and can distinguish different touches. They are aware of gravity: they can change their shapes to ensure shoots grow up and roots grow down. And plants are aware of their past: they remember past infections and the conditions they've weathered and then modify their current physiology based on these memories.<sup>17</sup>

Plants can even transmit their experiences to their progeny.<sup>18</sup>

From Chamovitz's extensive discussion of plant senses and memory, the druid may move beyond analogy to recognize the possibility of plant consciousness without a central nervous system and complex brain. Indeed, throughout the book, Chamovitz repeatedly posits that plants can sense and respond logically to the physical world, while using radically different organs to do it. "Plants don't have eyes, just as we don't have leaves. But we can both detect light."<sup>19</sup> Likewise, if smell is defined as "the ability to perceive an odor or scent through stimuli," [then] plants are indeed more than remedial smellers."<sup>20</sup> Still, faced with the question of plant consciousness, Chamovitz balks.

"Plants do not suffer," he writes. "They don't have, to our current knowledge, the capacity for an 'unpleasant . . . emotional experience.' . . . If suffering from pain necessitates highly complex neural structures and connections of the frontal cortex, which are present only in higher vertebrates, then plants obviously don't suffer: they have no brain" (emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> In an earlier chapter, he notes that some researchers, calling themselves plant neurobiologists, suggest similarities "between plant anatomy and physiology and the neural networks in animals."<sup>22</sup> Other scientists counter that these plant neurobiologists anthropomorphize plants in ways that do not advance the cause of science. It is certainly true that preconceived notions can cloud scientific observation, but one wonders if the scientific community denies the possibility of plant consciousness in part because of the underlying mental maps of Western scientific thought.

### What a Druid Knows: Plants as Persons

To answer this question, we turn to the first chapter of *Plants as Persons* by Matthew Hall, who argues that Western scientific views on plants evolved from Aristotelian philosophy of the fourth

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17 Ibid., loc. 169–170.

18 Ibid., loc. 161

19 Ibid., loc. 27.

20 Ibid., loc. 35.

21 Ibid., loc. 172.

22 Ibid., loc. 168.

century BCE. Aristotle, he notes, was a brilliant philosopher but a poor botanist. His research into humans and animals left him with a zoocentric bias. “Because plants do not have the discernible brain tissue of most animals, Aristotle deems them incapable of perception.”<sup>23</sup> Aristotle had additional reasons for devaluing the potential abilities of plants. On the one hand, the new rational philosophers sought to distinguish their work from the animist myths of “old-fashioned” Greek culture in which plants talked and turned into humans. On the other, they were trying to explain a social hierarchy dominated by male Greek citizens at the top, women and children below, slaves lower still, then animals, and finally plants at the bottom. This mental model of a patriarchal hierarchy continued through Roman culture and has remained an underpinning of the Western civilization until the present day. Combined with biblical passages such as Genesis 1:28–29 in which God grants Adam and Eve “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth . . . [and] every plant yielding seed . . . and every tree with seed in its fruit,” the myths of Western civilization explicitly stated that the natural world was a resource for the most powerful humans to use as they wish.<sup>24</sup>

Hall then reviews a broad cross-section of world religions as they grapple with plant consciousness, personhood, and human needs to use and to kill plants. Hindu and Jainist traditions broadly encourage nonviolence toward plants. Jainism in particular emphasizes avoiding all harm to any living thing, including plants.<sup>25</sup> Buddhism, by contrast, has several schools of thought on the personhood and relationality of plants. Tibetan Buddhism copes with the inherent conflict of harm to plants by backgrounding plants as nonreincarnating things outside of the Wheel of Life. Japanese Buddhism, on the other hand, celebrates the stillness of plants as an example of the Buddha mind and finds that they seek enlightenment, like any other sentient being.<sup>26</sup>

Indigenous traditions offer an even richer understanding of plant and human relations. Without conflating radically different cultures and theologies from groups as disparate as Australian Aborigines and the Oglala Sioux tribe of North America, Hall points to common narrative themes and practices that respect plants as living, vital members of the community. In particular, “personhood is a crucial, all pervading concept—for as persons, plants are recognized as volitional, intelligent, relational, perceptive, and communicative beings. . . . This acknowledgment of plants as persons is based on and in turn strengthens the recognition of plants as kin. . . . Crucially, however, in animist cultures, the recognition and acceptance of plant personhood and specific kinship coexists with predatory relationships.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, predatory relationships are one essential way of relating to other-than-human beings. Predation becomes not a source of guilt, but part of a “network of mutual responsibility, where life ‘is for others as well as [one-

23 Hall, *Plants as Persons*, loc. 370.

24 Ibid., loc. 845.

25 Ibid., loc. 1002.

26 Ibid., loc. 1343.

27 Ibid., loc. 1386

self].”<sup>28</sup>

Surviving fragments of pagan European spirituality from Greco-Roman myths, the Norse Eddas, and even medieval spells hint at similar concepts of other-than-human personhood. Returning to the Greek and Roman myths explored by the Barbers, Hall points to “pagan Europe’s placement of plants and people in a relational heterarchy rather than a human-dominated hierarchy, [and] demonstrates that a tradition of kinship and connection is not restricted to non-Western cultures.”<sup>29</sup>

These themes have reappeared in the modern pagan revival, and Hall devotes a portion of his sixth chapter to exploring the ways Revival Druidry has begun to develop new patterns for connection and collaboration with other-than-human persons. He describes a range of behaviors to reduce violence toward plants, including avoiding food and paper wastage, leaving wild patches in gardens, expressing gratitude and making offerings to plants and animals when their lives must be taken, and helping to replant wild lands. All of these actions are driven by a sense of “a heterarchical natural world closely [mirroring] the depiction of consubstantiality and relatedness found in old pagan texts. . . . But just as important as incorporating ideas from old texts, are visceral experiences of nature, direct experiences of nature’s autonomy.”<sup>30</sup> Our actions as druids stem from our belief in our connection to the natural world. This sense of connection stems, not from sentimentality, but from narratives derived from directly observing and experiencing the world around us.

Hall closes his book with a reevaluation of plant science, recognizing the underlying Western biases toward passive plants. Like Chamovitz, he discusses the field of plant signaling, but while Chamovitz suggests that “plant neurobiology” does not expand plant research, Hall embraces the analogy and explores the possibility of a decentralized nervous system. Indeed, “the eminent animal physiologist Denis Noble has recently argued that network-style interactions like those found in plants, actually organize and direct the activity of all living beings. . . . From a systems viewpoint, mental properties such as intelligence, reasoning, and choice are thought to emerge from the interactions of physiological networks of signaling and communication.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the analogy that druids should consider is not whether plants’ brains are like animals’, but whether humans process multiple signals like plants.

### **What Do You See When You Look at a Tree?**

Mythic stories convert observed phenomena into meaning. Aristotle observed plants as stationary things producing goods for humanity. His myth of plants as sisal beings at the bottom of the social hierarchy and the biblical myth of the natural world created for human dominion underpin our anthropocentric, consumer-driven Western culture. Continued observation of living plants reveals that they are active, living beings who sense the world and react to it in intelligent ways. These observations and a recognition that, as plant predators, we rely on the green world for our

28 Ibid., loc. 1555.

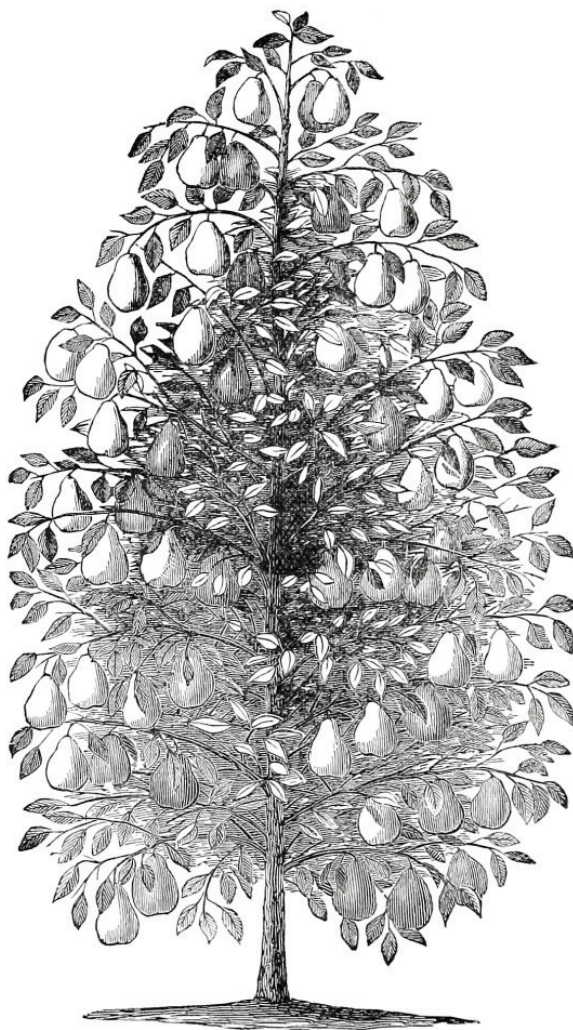
29 Ibid., loc. 1708

30 Ibid., loc. 1818–1819.

31 Ibid., loc. 2044–2045.

entire survival open a new vista of meaning making for druids in the twenty-first century. What if our myth-making, animist ancestors of the ancient world were right? We are directly related to plants; the sky holds the secrets of time and navigation; and the stories we tell can keep our people safe from harm. What if we can use the skills of our ancestors to create a narrative to survive and thrive in the coming millennia? What if that story begins:

What do you see when you look at a tree?



# Crossing Communities:

## An Interview with H. Byron Ballard, Author and Village Witch of Asheville, North Carolina

*Each issue of Trilithon offers an interview with a pagan leader from a different tradition or emerging conception of “paganism” within our larger communities of practice, whose writings or community work expands or deepens our understandings of the range of practices claimed by pagan and druid practitioners in the twenty-first century.*

*Members of the AODA may be familiar with the work of H. Byron Ballard, who has had essays featured in several pagan anthologies and who formerly blogged and wrote a regular column for Witches and Pagans magazine. Her first book, Staubs and Ditchwater: A Friendly and Useful Introduction to Hillfolks’ Hoodoo, released in 2012 by Smith Bridge Press (and reprinted in 2017), was followed by Asfidity and Mad Stones: A Further Ramble Through Hillfolks’ Hoodoo in 2015. She published Earth Works: Ceremonies in Tower Time, in 2018. As the titles of her first works make clear, Ballard draws on Appalachian traditions of witchcraft and energy work, but her concept of Tower Time is a crucial reminder of the turbulent times in which we currently live and practice. “Tower Time,” according to Ballard, acknowledges that “we are living in times when these massive, ancient, and toxic systems that have both created civilization as we know it and doomed it, are crashing under their own weight of history and grief. It is the death throes of the patriarchy that we are experiencing, and it will die as it has lived—in violence and oppression and injustice and death” (Ballard, 2017, 2).*

*More info about Ballard and her work in Asheville can be found at My Village Witch (<http://www.myvillagewitch.com/>).*

*Byron graciously agreed to an interview while she was presenting workshops and talks at Hallowed Homecoming, a Samahin retreat in northern Virginia. Many thanks to Jamie McMillin and Mat Hopp for transcribing this interview. (For their volunteer work, they will receive a full set of copies of Trilithon releases.)*

**Trilithon:** You’re the special guest at Hallowed Homecoming [a regional weekend retreat] this year. I understand that you are doing a workshop on carving turnips.



**Byron Ballard:** I'm doing a workshop on land spirits, ancestors, and ghosts, and I want to carve turnips because that was traditional in Ireland.

**T:**—And in Scotland as well.

**BB:** Yep, where they're called "swedes."

**T:** Swedes? Wow—I've heard them called "nips" but not swedes. Why do we carve turnips this time of year? How do you prepare to teach others to carve turnips?

**BB:** The carving of turnips is really a little bit of a parlor trick, because a lot of people haven't seen anyone do that before. I'm going to give you a little bit of a backstory. When my daughter was in preschool, I picked her up one day, and her preschool teacher, Miss Debbie, pulled me to one side and said, "Now, your daughter today said something ugly and we wanted to just let you know. She said her mommy was a witch, and we said, 'No, no, that's not a nice thing to say about your mommy,'" and I went, "Oh Debbie, come on, let's sit down." So we sat down, and I talked to her about modern neopaganism. I talked about traditional Appalachian witchcraft, and I talked about how I and five generations of my family back self-identified and were identified with the word "witch." So, we had that whole conversation, but what it made me realize is that if my daughter was going to be in the public school system, I needed to be proactive about it, and not wait until something nasty happened. So, I created a booklet called "Back to the Garden: A Guide for New Pagans and Their Families and Friends." And it's the kind of guide that every religion has for converts, that just sort of gives a basic overview of what the religion is, a little bit about "language," and then a list of resources for more information.

And I printed that, and then every year until she got to high school, I handed it to her homeroom teacher. And they would read through it and I would say, "Please, if you have any questions at all, please don't hesitate to pull me to one side in the morning or the afternoon, and say, 'I'm confused about this,' or call me or email me," because I didn't ever want to have to deal with the very Christian teacher who is appalled that they suddenly now have a pagan kid in their class. Well, her K through 2 teacher is a remarkable woman, whose work in public education was to create this classroom environment where the older kids basically instructed the younger kids on how to behave, what the classroom ethics were, what you did do, what you didn't do. And so she had created a culture in her classroom that was all about accepting everybody exactly as they were and where they were and loving everybody.

At the beginning of the school year, they would have a list of words that they were not going to use all year because it hurt somebody's feelings. And it would be something like "stupid." They couldn't say the word "stupid" all year long, and they would have the list in a prominent place. So, this teacher said, "I would like it if you would come in and talk about your holidays with the kids." So, we decided that I would come in at Samhain, I would come in at the winter solstice, and I would come in at Beltane, because they already had a tradition of the

younger kids. They put a maypole in the yard and they all danced to the maypole, so they got May Day, and I couched it in very cultural terms.

So, this time of year I would come in and they called it the Turnip Show, and it was the ancient Irish origins of the American Halloween festival, and so I talked about Samhain. I almost never talked about paganism or anything like that. I just talked about the holy day and what we did on the holy day, and sometimes I would make soul cakes and we would eat soul cakes and sing about that. I always carved a turnip and left them a turnip. And I did that for years and years and years. And after the first year, the other K-2 classes said, "Could you come and do that in my class?" and I was like, "Absolutely!" So I did it all over and then I would branch out to friends' kids' schools and did the same thing. So I did that for a long, long time, and what that did, was make what we do seem less scary. Because, I mean, carving turnips is a little weird, but it's not scary.

When turnips are carved, they look pretty creepy, but they're not scary. I'll do that today—I will scoop out the inside of the turnip [Ballard used a knife to do this, ed.], cut it up, and I'll pass it around so anybody who has not eaten turnip can try turnip, and the kids were so cute because some of them were like, "I don't like that, I don't like the way it smells, I'm not going to taste that." And others would taste it, and you know raw turnip is really sweet, and they go, "Oh no, don't smell it, just eat it!" So it just became something I loved to do.

And the class I'm doing this afternoon is called the Spirit-Haunted Landscape. We talked about ancestors yesterday. We'll talk a little bit more about ancestors, but we'll mostly talk about ghosts. We'll also talk about the land spirits that I call the "cousins" and we'll talk about the good neighbors, the good people. And I'll talk about my personal experience in dealing with all those groups, and then we'll sort of open the floor and hear what other people have to say, because this is a pretty high-level group.

I did my basic ancestor veneration yesterday, and I felt like these people, they are already doing that. And they were a little shy about sharing what they do, but what I hope yesterday did was to encourage people to go home and at least dip their toe into ancestor veneration. So, this is going to be more of the same thing, and I'm going to be very adamant about land spirits and working with them and calling them in as allies, because it is so important, so important. So, it is less about carving turnips than it is about weaving the community of all these people into a place where next year, or maybe when they go home from this, they'll carve their jack-o-lantern or their pumpkin, and maybe they'll pick up a big fat turnip and go, "This looks so weird I gotta see what this looks like." Because it does look, I mean it's just creepy. And one year I carved a carrot. It was an especially fat carrot, so I hollowed it out as far as I could and did little eyes and put a tea light in it, and that guy was creepy, too. And have you seen the pineapples carved? They're pretty cool too.

**T:** One of the things that is just incredibly impressive about your work is that it isn't something that you are trying to reconstruct; in fact, you've actually lived it. It's a way of life that has been handed to you from the generational work of your family, the women in your family.

**BB:** Yeah, and I come from a living tradition. And that's unusual.

**T:** The "everydayness" is central to it. Your work makes clear that these practices that we think of, as today's pagans, as historical, were really kitchen practices, were really hearth practices . . .

**BB:** Yes!

**T:** . . . Were really garden practices. They were about not just worship or spirituality or religion and praying in a special once-a-week or holiday sense. They were about the sustenance of ourselves, our families, our communities. All of it was integrated. It was an integral part of people's lives. And so, I'm wondering, if you can speak to some of the ways that you perhaps have talked and written about that yourself.

**BB:** Well, one thing that is very important and I talk about everywhere I speak is that in a festival setting, and this happens again and again, people come in and at the final day, people say, "Welcome home, welcome home," and for that five or seven or nine days, people feel like they can be fully themselves. And what one of my goals is, is to eliminate the concept of the mundane world. Because if you can be in a magic world in here [at a festival], you can be in a magic world everywhere. And however you define "magic worker"—and I'm very open about however you want to define that—you can be the best cashier at the bank, you can be the best car wash attendant, you can be the best high school math teacher, and still be 100 percent walking your talk. Because being a pagan doesn't require you to walk through the world in a black cloak and a pentacle the size of a goddamn salad plate.

What it requires you to do is to walk your talk. And so, if you honor the earth, honor the earth. Do everything you can to live as green as you can. Everything you can. And that's not everything you can do that's convenient, it's everything you can do. And I expect people who tell me that they love the earth and they worship the earth, every time they get settled into the place where their lifestyle is like this, I want them to find one more thing they can reduce, one more tiny thing.

So, my daughter is now twenty-seven. When she was born, two weeks after she was born, our clothes dryer stopped working, and we never replaced it. So, in the world of diapers, we did, we do still have a washing machine, but we have not had a dryer since then. And people go, "Oh my god how do you do that?" Well, you do that by—if you're me, you wear all black all the time anyway, so it doesn't matter, but you have to think ahead. If you want to wear that really nice tunic and those really nice pants together on Thursday, you're going to have to wash them Monday or Tuesday, and you're going to have to give them time to dry. Now if it's the summer and it's sunny and it's something you put outside, easy, wash in the morning and they're dry by afternoon. But if it's weather like this, and it's going to have to dry inside, you're going to have to be thoughtful about that. And it's a thing I strive all the time with, with students and with friends and everyone, is for people just to be sensible.

There's a bumper sticker right now that says, "Common sense is the real national deficit," or something like that. And we get so involved—I'm going to look around before I say this—we get so involved with LARPing our religion that sometimes we forget what our religion is. So, "I gotta have . . . oh my god, I gotta have that piece of jewelry. Oh my god, did you see those cool pants? I gotta have those. I've got to . . ." Oh, right now pirates are hot, so there's lots of pirate paganism. Okay, fine, but if you're spending more time figuring out what your costume is than what your relationship to your land base and the divines are, you're not doing it right. And I'm not afraid to say you're not doing it right. And I think, as a movement, we have been so open to so many things and so many people that we really want to say, you know, however you do you it's perfectly fine, and it is perfectly fine. But if you're going to call what you do a spiritual practice, it has to have spirituality in it, or it's not. It's you playing at being a witch.

And the thing I've been talking about lately is—and I'm doing this because I know Mom is sneering right now—is eyeliner. I mean, I've been wearing way too much black eyeliner since 1975. It's just what I do. In fact, I have a trans friend who said, "Girl, you need to re-do your look," and I said, "Girl, I've had this look since before you were born." So that was a big thing for all of us, you know, "guyliner" a lot of folks call it. Well now the thing is, you need to dress in leather with animal parts and bones, and that's what makes you a real witch. What makes you a real witch is practicing witchcraft, and that's all. And so *you* can be a real witch, and *you*, and you can dress just like you are, and practice witchcraft because that's what makes you a witch. It doesn't matter how dreaded your hair is, it doesn't matter how supercool you are, it doesn't matter that your blog has really nice photos, if you are not practicing witchcraft you are not a witch. Full stop.

Now, the exception I make for that are High Church Wiccans, British traditional Wiccans who refer to themselves as Witches with a capital W. Some of them don't practice any witchcraft at all, because they're not that kind of witch, and they're really clear about that. They're not generic pagans who are afraid to practice magic because the only training they've ever had is every new Llewellyn book. That's all the training they've had. They haven't had anybody say to them, "This is how you leverage energy." And I've been teaching now for eighteen months a class called Simple Practical Magic. And I say to people, "You know, if you are really experienced it's a fun class," because inevitably I love to take those 101 classes, because there will be something and I'll go, "I remember that. I used to do that, totally, twenty years ago. Why don't I do that anymore?" So, I can really get back to a beginner's mind place.

But the other thing about it is that so many modern pagans and witches, they don't have any idea how to practice witchcraft. None. And so, I'm a folk magician, I'm real kinda down and dirty and practical. And I'm terribly, terribly grateful that the show *MacGyver* is back on TV, because I talk about *MacGyver* magic and I don't have these shiny young folks go, "Oh is that a Scottish tradition?" And I'll go, "No, it's all about what's in your pockets . . ."

So, I'm really glad about that. And I talk a lot about energy, and using energy, and accessing energy. Because we've got people out here who are practicing what I call "sphincter magic," and it's what we all do when we are eleven or twelve years old. When you go, "Okay, I'm going to do some magic now," and you tighten down your feet, you tighten up your thighs, you tighten up

your ass. Everything is tight, like this: “I’m making magic—ahh!” And that is exactly the opposite of how anybody can make magic. It hurts you. It’s ineffective. And you look stupid.

So, 50 percent of any group of people taking that class, that’s how they do magic, and they wonder why their magic isn’t successful. And it’s because they really aren’t practicing it. They haven’t figured [it] out. No one has taught them that the earth is a constant source of energy. The moon, the sun, the sky, the trees are a constant source of energy. And if you are using your life force to do magic, you are doing it wrong. And you are shortening your life. It’s as simple as that. So, does that answer what you were talking about?

**T:** Can you say more about the sources of energy you and others might draw upon?

**BB:** I’m Wiccan, that’s my spiritual tradition. The crucible that is the wheel of the year is beautiful, two solstices, two equinoxes, [an] actual scientifically verifiable phenomenon. But in between, we create this space for planting, tending, harvesting, and preserving the rest of it. For anyone who simply wants to have a magical life and follow the cycle of the agricultural year, Wicca is perfect, because it gives you the crucible to work in. But there are plenty of people, of my coreligionists, who are never able to do magic because what they are, are pagans with a small “p,” they are garden-variety pagans, and they follow and honor and celebrate the cycle of the agricultural year. And every major religion on the planet is based on that, whether they will acknowledge it or not. Because that’s what we had to know. We had to be in such deep communion with the planet, whether we were nomadic hunter-gatherers or we were finally settled enough to begin agriculture, we had to know that.

So, there are plenty of people who do that and never do any magic at all. By all the mothers of all the gods, if you are going to call yourself a witch in front of me, you better be practicing witchcraft, not reading about it, and not wearing witchy clothes ‘cause it’s cool. You need to be fucking practicing witchcraft, and if you’re not, don’t use the word. And it’s as simple as that.

And so, because I come out of a folk magic place, it’s simple to do. It’s not like I’m asking you to practice nuclear physics. I’m just saying tap into the energy all around you and use it.

**T:** One of the things I love about your website and your identification as the “village witch” is that I think it strikes me as a move to be a warrior, you know, an advocate.

**BB:** And I love that word. I use “advocate” rather than “activist.” It originates from radical self-care. I encourage people to have agency. If you are heartbroken by what’s happening at the southern border, the answer to that is to ask, “What do brown children need that I can supply?” And to call an organization, such as the Coalition of Latin Americans (COLA), and to say, “What do you need?” And they will tell you exactly what they need: “We need backpacks, we need this, we need that.” And you can have agency where you can have agency, instead of just spinning your wheels and going, “My god, that is so infuriating! What can I do about that?”



**T:** That's one of the reasons why I just adore the village witch as a sort of iconic way to think of the work that you do.

**BB:** I'll tell you a little village witch story. So, a friend of mine knows Cassandra Latham-Jones in Cornwall, who is the village witch of St. Buryan, and he said, "The two of you should know each other. I think you've got a lot in common." So, he did a Facebook introduction and she was like, "Huh . . . so you're the village witch, are you? What do you do?" And I was like, "Well I . . . bless babies and I clear houses and I bless cornfields and I pour cider on apple trees and, you know, I celebrate the new moon and the dark moon and the full moon and I practice witchcraft." And she visibly relaxed and she said, "Oh, so you are a village witch."

So, the notion of being a village witch is an old one, a very old one, and certainly in the British tradition. That there was somebody and she passed down her knowledge to a daughter or a granddaughter or niece or just an apprentice. But it was really practical knowledge, it was birthing babies, and finding water, and all that stuff. There wasn't an aesthetic about it. It's just that you did the work at hand that you were called to do. And you did it for the people around you. And I just function that way so that the people in my neighborhood know what I do and who I am. Several years ago, I was going to a Halloween luncheon, and I dressed as a witch. And my neighbors, who are not terribly sophisticated people. . . . I came back and a neighbor caught me as I got out of the car in the driveway as I was going in, and he said, "I see you've got on your work clothes." And I was like, "Yeah, kind of!" And he said, "Momma and I need to ask you about something. We think there is something in the house." And I said, "Well would you mind if I just go in and drop this stuff, and I'm going to change into some jeans, and I'll come on down." And he said, "Oh that would be really good."

So, in his mind, when he saw me dressed like that, it was like I was open for business. And so he felt . . . safe . . . or confident to say, "We really need you to do that." And it happens again and again with people who are not pagan or Wiccan or any of that. But they are people who need something occult done or out of the ordinary done, and I do then. You know, I used to do weddings and funerals for people who don't have a particular spiritual tradition. Because I move freely between all of those worlds pretty confidently, so they feel safe asking me.

**T:** I personally love it that you are using the term "advocate" in relation to the idea of the village witch, you know, really highlighting how women's rights are central to that work and are in effect central to healthy communities. You've been part of a number of projects that work on that interconnection: the Women's Travel Log, the Traveling Uterus, the Venus of Willendorf book. Your work consistently embraces the notion of the village witch as a feminist force—not just a force that is aware of history but where you've come from, the local and everyday sense of it, particularly what women need.

**BB:** My focus has always been what women need. Ma'am, I am a second-wave seventies feminist,

so it's all about what women need. And I am a person who . . . I am perfectly fine with people self-identifying however they do, but I will never be able to think of a man as a witch. So witches are women, and men can be other things. And I know—I have a good friend who is a necromancer and another who is a sorcerer. All of that is fine with me, and it's perfectly fine for men to call themselves witches, but in my heart of hearts, I think of a witch as a woman who has the forces of the universe at her beck and call.

**T:** In your book *Earth Works: Ceremonies in Tower Time*, which just came out recently, you use the term “resilience.” Would you speak a little more about why this term is so important right now, particularly to the magical concepts in *Earth Works*?

**BB:** I am a very beginning student in permaculture. The concept fascinates me, and I think it can lead us into a place of better, more resilience. But we used to talk in terms of doing things sustainably, but we've crossed the line now. We no longer can think what we are doing now is sustainable, because nothing at this point is sustainable.

So until we can address sustainability again, we have to be tough, we have to be cunning, we have to be clever, we have to be strong. But none of that can happen at the monolith (ed.: *here, Ballard refers to the tower, itself*). It can't just be you being all those things, and me being all those things, and her being all those things. We have to figure out how we weave the community basket, the crucible of this new time that we are creating where all of that is true for all of us. So, we are as strong as the weakest member—the most vulnerable member of our community.

So we have an obligation to look at what that vulnerability is and to say, “Here's a place I can cover you,” or, “Here is a piece of something I can teach you.” And what's happening with us now in the pagan community, and within the larger community too, is that we have a culture based in—I want to say this exactly right—people are easily triggered by things that really should not be triggering because they haven't experienced them. But because the culture tells you this thing that was just said or done is a bad thing, and so there is this triggering across the board. And that is the opposite of resilience.

So if we are having to be so careful of our language and all of that because there is a sense of imminent pain, chances are it's . . . We never felt that pain before and we aren't going to feel it now. But sometimes . . . we can't have a culture that is wrapped in cotton wool because that is the opposite of resilience.

We have to have cultures where we look after each other. And when you can't be tough, I can be tough, and when I can't be tough, you will do that with me. You will stand with your arm around my shoulders and hold me up until I can be on my feet again, rather than changing everything about our conversation so that you can continue to be wrapped in cotton wool.

I don't know how we get there. But I know right now there are so many things we simply can't talk about in social media at all. And it's hard to even have this kind of conversation here except in a very limited and private way. So we have to get past that if we are going to get to a place of resilience.

Resilience also has to do with growing food. It has to do with knowing your water source. I talk about this in the *Earth Works* book. It used to be you could tackle an issue head on. But what's happened for us is that . . . There used to be these things called Bobo dolls. And they were inflatable plastic cones with a clown face on them and you punched them and they would come back up because they were weighted on the bottom. So we are in a place where we are doing the Bobo, but there's another one here, and another one here, and we can't just keep hitting at the Bobos and think we are going to get anywhere, because we're not. They won't fall down.

And we are people, for the most part, with such big hearts, and we want to change the world. All of us do what we do because we want the world to be a better place. What is happening for us, because everything is so chaotic and there are so many issues, is that I'm seeing good strong people just shut down. It's like, "You know what? I'm not even going to engage with any of that. I'm getting off of social media. I can't look at Facebook anymore."

But the answer is not to shut down—if you have to do that, do it for self-preservation, do it absolutely. The answer is to pick three things, the things that when they roll across your Facebook feed, your gut clinches and you go, "This will not stand!" Then, work on those three things and let everything else go. And work on the faith and assumption that somebody else is going to take over the things that you aren't doing.

The example that I give is my friend Calvin. Black Lives Matter is his thing; it's his big thing. So that is not one of my big things. But if Calvin says on social media, "We're going to have a rally at the county plaza. We're going to have a candlelight vigil," I will immediately contact him and say, "I will bring two boxes of candles. I'm going to leave them there. I'm not going to stay for the vigil, but I'm going to leave them there. It's going to be my contribution." So, I stand with him and I help where I can, but it's not really my primary issue.

And, if you take on *one issue*, if your issue is water, which is a huge issue, you can be the expert on water. You can't be the expert on a thousand different things, on #MeToo, and #Time'sUp, and Black Lives Matter, and all the other things. You can only stand in abject terror in the face of all the things that are confronting us.

But if you pick water, you can be the expert on what's happening with water where you are. You can say very clearly, "Here is parts per million of this and this and this. This is where my water comes from. These are vulnerabilities of our water supply." And you can become an advocate for water so that if anybody is dealing with a public housing project where suddenly the water is all brown, then the person they call . . . first they call the Metropolitan Sewerage District, which is our thing, and then they call you. Because you are going to know who to call and how to organize.

It's what we have to do. It has to be on the ground. We can't wait for somebody up the pyramid to give us the information, because they are not going to. But if one person takes on water, then any average citizen can say, "Who knows about water in this area?" And they can contact the person who knows water and say, "I've got this problem with water." And that person can say, "Yeah, don't call the water company or the sewerage district or any of these people. This is your go-to guy."

**T:** Thank you so much for answering my questions.

### **Reference**

Ballard, H. Byron. (2017). *Earth Works: Ceremonies in Tower Time*. Asheville, NC: Smith Bridge Press.

# The Last Butterfly

*William Herrington*

Down a forest path winding,  
through oaks and near ash,  
deep, deep in the trees,  
where few folks ever passed.

In a small glen open,  
to the once blue of the sky,  
seven cowled druids held vigil,  
round the last butterfly.

Heads bowed in mourning,  
issued forth silent prayers,  
seven faces shadowed,  
hiding unknown despair.

A small matter most thought,  
hardly worthy of note,  
but the seven knew different,  
seeing what was foretold.

Wings beating slowly,  
finally became still,  
a gift of beauty once given,  
would not be again.



# Endlings

*Jason Stieber*

I imagine I'll cry vinegar  
like rain when the last snail  
inscribes his dewy maxim  
on the hard keratin of a leaf  
then dies and dries inside  
his whorled caramel shell,  
when the last gull hobbles  
on a spike of loneliness  
along the beach, a goddess  
combing for wet fossils,  
and the builder holes up  
in his high stone tower  
to leave a message in the  
light of a hissing lamp.  
Or maybe I'll laugh like  
a drunk at the funeral  
who startles the mourners  
and reminds them that grief  
belongs to the living,  
dancing to the dead,  
and every ending is just  
a quarter rest in the measure.

# Trilithon Credits

**Moine, *Editor***

Moine is a contemplative Druid (AODA Candidate), writer-poet, and Scottish Gaelic learner who lives in southwest DC. In her free time, she can be found talking to rivers, trees, stones, and mountains.

**Karen Fisher, *Copy Editor***

Karen M. Fisher is an Druid Apprentice in the Ancient Order of Druids in America and has been a pagan for over 30 years, most of which were spent on a Wiccan path. She is a professional freelance copyeditor for several academic publishers. She enjoys hiking and foraging and lives in a big old house in Pennsylvania.

**Robert Pacitti, *Layout***

Robert Pacitti is a druid and magician from western Pennsylvania. He is a member of several druid orders and has been a member of AODA since 2013. He enjoys spending time with flora and fauna, especially his fanciful guinea hens.

# About the AODA

Founded in 1912 as the American branch of the Ancient and Archaeological Order of Druids, AODA is a traditional Druid order rooted in the Druid Revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, offering an opportunity for modern people to experience the teachings and practices of Druidry in today's world. We don't claim direct descent from the original Druids—the priestly caste of ancient Britain, Ireland, and Gaul, which went extinct around 1,200 years ago—and to be honest, we're skeptical of any group that does make that claim. Instead, like other modern Druid groups, the AODA evolved out of a 300-year-old movement, the Druid Revival, that found the fragmentary legacy of the ancient Druids a powerful source of inspiration and insight, and drew on a wide range of sources in shaping a nature spirituality to meet the challenges of today.

AODA understands Druidry as a path of nature spirituality and inner transformation founded on personal experience rather than dogmatic belief. It welcomes men and women of all national origins, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and affiliations with other Druidic and spiritual traditions. Ecological awareness and commitment to an Earth-honoring lifestyle, celebration of the cycles of nature through seasonal ritual, and personal development through meditation and other spiritual exercises form the core of its work, and involvement in the arts, healing practices, and traditional esoteric studies are among its applications and expressions.

Its roots in the Druid Revival give the AODA certain features in common with esoteric societies such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. It offers an initial ceremony of reception into the order, followed by three degrees of initiation—Druid Apprentice, Druid Companion, and Druid Adept—which are conferred upon completion of a graded study program. Its members have the opportunity to meet in local groups of two kinds, study groups and groves, and a Grand Grove oversees the order, charts study groups and groves, and manages the study program.

In keeping with the traditions of Revival Druidry, the AODA encourages its members to pursue their own spiritual directions within a broad common framework, and its approach to spirituality is personal and experiential rather than dogmatic. The initiation rituals and study program are prescribed, and AODA members are expected to keep four traditional Druid holy days, the solstices and equinoxes. Creativity and the quest for personal Awen—the inner light of inspiration—are among the AODA's central values.

The Gnostic Celtic Church (GCC) is an independent sacramental church of nature spirituality affiliated with the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA), a contemporary Druid order. Like many other alternative spiritual groups in American society, AODA—which was originally founded

in 1912—developed connections with a variety of other compatible traditions over the course of its history. One of these connections was with the Universal Gnostic Church (UGC).

For more information about the AODA's study program, please visit:  
<http://aoda.org/curric.html>

# How to Join the AODA

The Ancient Order of Druids in America welcomes applications for membership from people of all spiritual, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, age eighteen or older, who wish to create and follow a personal path of nature spirituality in the traditions of the Druid Revival.

**By Mail:** Send a letter of application to AODA, P.O. Box 1002, Indiana, PA 15701, USA. The letter should include your legal name, Druid name (if you have one), postal and email addresses, date of birth, an outline of your previous Druid studies if any, and anything you may want to say about why you wish to join AODA and what you hope to get out of it. Include a check or money order for US\$50, payable to AODA.

**Electronically:** Please send a letter of application via email to [info@aoda.org](mailto:info@aoda.org). The email should include your legal name, Druid name (if you have one), postal and email addresses, date of birth, an outline of your previous Druid studies if any, and anything you may want to say about why you wish to join AODA and what you hope to get out of it. Your membership fee of US\$50 may be paid via PayPal; please have payment made to [payment@aoda.org](mailto:payment@aoda.org).

## How to Contact the AODA

### *Trilithon Journal*

Contact the editor, Moine Michelle, at [trilithon@aoda.org](mailto:trilithon@aoda.org)

### *Contact the AODA*

Contact the AODA Grand Grove at [info@aoda.org](mailto:info@aoda.org)

### *Mailing address:*

AODA  
PO Box 1002  
Indiana, PA 15701



# AODA Groups Contact List

## AODA supports three kinds of groups:

**Groves**, which perform initiations and provide regular ritual, ceremony, and support for members. They are led by a Druid Adept in the AODA and are officially chartered.

**Study Groups**, which perform introductory initiations (the candidate grade and first degree) and engage in regular ceremony. They are led by a Druid Companion in the AODA and are officially chartered.

**Home Circles**, which are able to be led by any AODA member. The principle of the home circle is simple: it is a group of people who meet regularly, learn from each other, and engage in a number of activities surrounding druidry. See the *Home Circle Manual* for more information (release forthcoming).

## AODA Groves

### **Delsarte Grove, Bremerton, WA**

Led by Gordon Cooper, Druid Adept and Grand Archdruid Emeritus.

Contact: [nwlorax@gmail.com](mailto:nwlorax@gmail.com)

Open to new members, performing initiations.

### **Grove of the Wise Fox, Greater Hartford area of CT**

Led by Adam Robersmith, Druid Adept and Archdruid of Water.

Contact: [druid@oakandthorn.com](mailto:druid@oakandthorn.com)

Grove of the Wise Fox is currently not accepting new members, but is available for initiations.

### **Hemlock and Hazel Grove, Indiana, PA**

Led by Dana O'Driscoll, Druid Adept and Grand Archdruid.

Contact: [danalynndriscoll@gmail.com](mailto:danalynndriscoll@gmail.com)

Open to new members, performing initiations.

### **Three Roads Grove, Springfield, OH**

Led by Lady Oceanstar, Druid Adept.

Contact: [ladyoceanstar@gmail.com](mailto:ladyoceanstar@gmail.com)

Three Roads Grove is currently not accepting new members, but is available for initiations.

### **AODA Study Groups**

#### **Kawartha Study Group, Peterborough, ON, Canada**

Led by Dennis Delorme, Druid Companion, [sarezrael@yahoo.ca](mailto:sarezrael@yahoo.ca)

Open to new members and performing initiations.

#### **Ocean's Mist Study Group, Warwick, RI**

Led by David P. Smith, Druid Companion, [duir@cox.net](mailto:duir@cox.net)

Open to new members and performing initiations.

#### **san Fhàsach, Greater DC**

Led by Moine Michelle, Druid Companion, [mlfpoet@gmail.com](mailto:mlfpoet@gmail.com)

Open to new members

### **AODA Home Circles**

#### **Home Circle, Minneapolis, MN**

Led by Marcus Baker, AODA Candidate, [animasaru@gmail.com](mailto:animasaru@gmail.com)

#### **Home Circle, Sacramento, CA**

Led by Jose Esparaza, AODA Candidate, [anzuya312@live.com](mailto:anzuya312@live.com)

#### **Purple Coneflower Study Group, Spanish Lake, MO (north of St. Louis)**

Led by Claire Schosser, Druid Companion, [cschosser@yahoo.com](mailto:cschosser@yahoo.com)

#### **Home Circle, Oakland, CA**

Led by Adam Milner, Druid Apprentice, [carmiac@gmail.com](mailto:carmiac@gmail.com)

#### **Circle of the Seven Spirals, St. Augustine, FL**

Led by William Herrington, [vdc9119@aol.com](mailto:vdc9119@aol.com)

#### **The Circle of the Great Aspens and Reeds, Kaysville, UT**

Led by Brenda Holmes, [brenda0951@yahoo.com](mailto:brenda0951@yahoo.com)

#### **Awen, Oak, & Sage Home Circle, Salt Lake City, UT**

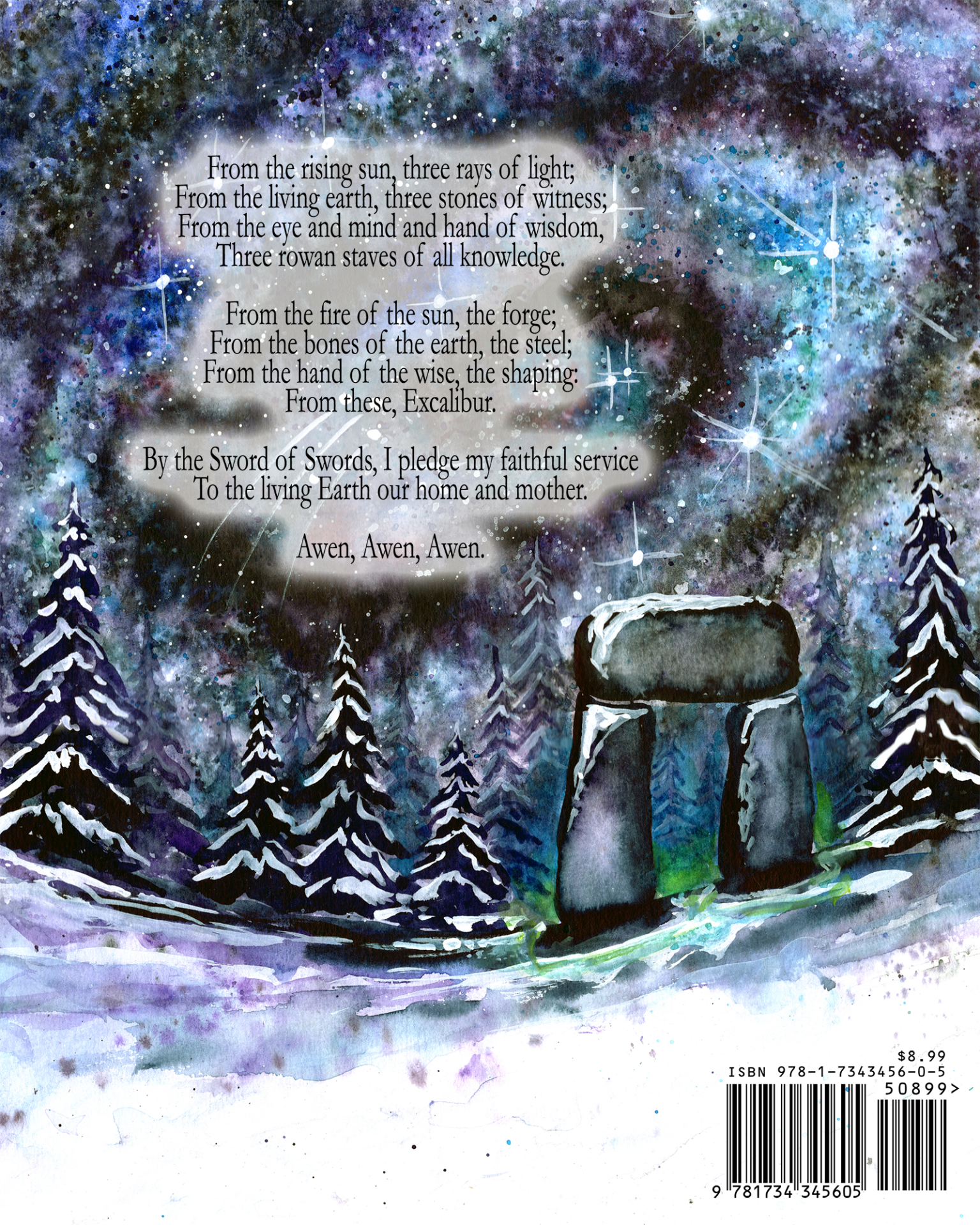
Led by Daniel Cureton, [danielcureton@gmail.com](mailto:danielcureton@gmail.com)











From the rising sun, three rays of light;  
From the living earth, three stones of witness;  
From the eye and mind and hand of wisdom,  
Three rowan staves of all knowledge.

From the fire of the sun, the forge;  
From the bones of the earth, the steel;  
From the hand of the wise, the shaping:  
From these, Excalibur.

By the Sword of Swords, I pledge my faithful service  
To the living Earth our home and mother.

Awen, Awen, Awen.

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