



TRILITHON

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OF THE ANCIENT ORDER OF DRUIDS IN AMERICA

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Trilithon

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Ancient Order of Druids in America



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Colophon

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“Between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life.”

- *John Muir*

Editor's Introduction

Dear *Trilithon* readers,

This year marks our eighth volume of *Trilithon*, and we are delighted to offer such a large and jam-packed issue for you. It has been wonderful to see *Trilithon* grow as our diverse membership in AODA grows. I'm particularly excited to see this year's issue released as we are offering a wide variety of interesting and engaging content—including seventeen original articles and stories as well as artwork—produced by the larger Druid community. Our first *Trilithon* was released in 2013 and it has been an amazing journey to see how far we have come!

Our eighth issue has several overarching themes. The first is a set of articles that work to build the Druid tradition through the Bardic, Ovate, and Druid arts. Within the druid path includes original Druid scholarship by Brigyn with his piece “The Kabbalah and the Secret of the Bards of Britain” exploring the connections between Iolo Morganwg's OIV letters and the Kabbalah. Mike Roberts examines deep connection in the context of meditation, sacred Druid texts, and the living earth. My own article, “Of Ancestors and Authenticity in the Modern Druid Revival Tradition” explores the sticky issue of authenticity of Druid Revival texts and offers some useful alternatives to making authenticity central in our conversations. Dave Ardrey rounds out our Druid-themed offerings with a detailed discussion of Hedge Druidry and ritual work. On the Ovate path, Jack Campbell explores three simple steps for cultivating reciprocity and Nate Summers also discusses baseline ecological knowledge, or the core knowledge that is useful to all Druids. Claire Schosser offers her insights on soil remediation through a scientific approach, reporting on her third degree Ovate Adept project. Finally, on the Bardic side, my own article, “Visioning the Future Through the Bardic Arts: Creating Vision, Creating Hope” offers one magical Bardic practice that can be used to help envision a better future. We also offer some bardic works: CJ Buys's poem “Mental Guidebook,” which was originally performed at AODA's 2022 Winter Bardic Circle event, and Elmdea Adams's “Hellbender Metamorphosis,” which explores the journey of an Eastern Hellbender salamander. We also offer the artwork of Alex White, Tim Grady, as well as my own artwork on the cover and throughout the journal.

The second theme is a set of articles that reflect on personal experiences and understandings of the Druid path, including experiences with the AODA curriculum and beyond. For example, Laura Keys shares with us how she turned an unused horse arena into a sacred garden and

celebratory space as part of her Candidate year. Tree offers insights into his long journey through the Candidate grade and the insights that such a journey offers from the Bardic, Ovate, and Druid paths. Procyon offers “Reflections on the Sun Path” and shares deep insights gained while exploring various aspects of AODA’s Sun Path and wheel of the year. Sam Nikerson reflects on a Druid’s relationship to waterways through “The Laughter of the River.” Jamie McMillin describes a fascinating journey to South America for a deep spiritual retreat in “A Visit with Ayahasca.” We also have two original works coming out of family or ancestral Druid traditions, including Lillian Wolf’s “Speaking to the Trees: An Introduction to the Greenworld Path” and Michiel Segart’s “Thundernails: Hidden Shamanic Daggers of the Bravest of All Gauls.” These materials are being published for the first time, making for some very insightful reading and opening up new opportunities for practice.

Finally, I have some news. Last year, AODA released the first *The Druid’s Book of Ceremonies, Prayers, and Songs*, and we plan to alternate releasing that book and *Trilithon* in the future, allowing opportunities for members and friends of AODA to share different kinds of work. We see a need for a place to publish both articles and more ceremonially oriented materials. Thus, on a rotating basis, we will be releasing these two publications every other year. I also want to acknowledge the work of editor Moine Michele, who was our chief editor on *Trilithon* volumes 5, 6, and 7. She did amazing work as the editor for three years. With Moine’s resignation, I have once again stepped into the role of editor (as I was for volumes 1–4 and now 8). Continuing on our publication team is Robert Pacitti (Grand Pendragon of AODA) doing layout and design and Karen Fisher (AODA Apprentice) doing copyediting, as well as Claire George (AODA Candidate) assisting with developmental editing. I am grateful for their service to this publication and to our order!

Blessings of the Alban Elfed upon you, wherever you may find yourself on life’s incredible journey. Soon, here in the Northern Hemisphere, we move into the time of deep winter and the quiet and stillness that that brings.

Blessings of the fire maples,

Dana O’Driscoll

Chief Editor, *Trilithon*

Grand Archdruid and Ollave Adept, Ancient Order of Druids in America

Three Steps to Reciprocity in Earth-Based Spirituality

Jack Campbell

Jack Campbell has been a part of AODA since 2017. He is the current Archdruid of Air and Candidate Curriculum Coordinator. He is also the Preceptor of the Gnostic Celtic Church.

Modern devotional religious practices are often heavy on reciprocity. Relationships with divine beings are like any other relationship. If you ask a person for something, they are more likely to help if you already have an existing, positive relationship. So, you talk to the divine. You learn about it. You offer it gifts, both material and service. You offer love and support. In exchange, you receive those things, as well. This simple mechanism exists in all relationships. In the case of divine entities or spiritual powers, what we receive is often much more than we give, based upon the relative potential influence and strength of the giver. This same spirit of reciprocity exists within your relationship to the living Earth and all it entails.

Looking at AODA's seven core principles, nature reciprocation is defined as "living in balance and harmony." We change our lifestyles and practice rituals that place us in a more balanced, mutually respectful relationship. This has become increasingly important given the effects of industrialized society and the imbalances it has created. Many come to druidry seeking a greater connection to the Earth. By creating a relationship with the living Earth, we can heal the Earth and ourselves along with it.

The rewards of a reciprocal relationship with the Earth are many. The Earth literally sustains your life. You thrive physically upon the bounty of this land. For those of us in druidry, the Earth is often a teacher, providing lessons that can be taken and used within our own lives. Meditation upon a stone may teach us lessons about strength and patience, for example. A stone, despite our perceptions, is always changing. Yet those changes take place on a timescale that is almost imperceivable to humans. Still, change comes, and even the stone cannot resist it. The powers of the living Earth can support you energetically, through the Sphere of Protection and other magical workings. Beyond that, when you consider cause and effect within the natural world, even small changes can have a large outcome. This world is one. Everything is connected. A single species can dramatically change an ecosystem.

You would be surprised at the strange way that things can work out when you live in harmony with the flow of cause and effect. Those small changes support you rather than hinder you. Coincidence seems to occur much more frequently and much more often in your favor. Ultimately, they add up to large, positive shifts within your life. Whether or not you choose to believe this is a result of your reciprocity or lack thereof may depend upon your worldview.

For those who see these coincidences as something more, this begs a few questions. How do we find this flow? How do we learn the lessons? How do we really unlock the potential of a reciprocal relationship with the living Earth? The first step is contained within our first-degree curriculum.

Step One: Get to Know Your Friends

Theologically, I am a devotional polytheist. If I want to work with a particular deity, my first step is to read the mythology and folklore associated with that deity. What is that deity like? What might they enjoy? What would they dislike? This isn't just a pagan thing. Religions all over the world have texts that teach the lessons that will bring followers in line with their powers. Again, using the friend metaphor, where are they from? What do they like? What do they hate? If I am going to come over to watch metaphorical football on Sunday, I want to know what teams they'll be rooting for and what beer they might want to drink.

In the candidate year curriculum, the AODA requires the reading of books about your local ecosystem. This is a great way to get to know the Earth as it exists within your area. What plants, animals, and minerals are native to your area? Which ones aren't native, but have become regular residents? For example, in Kansas, the Eastern Red Cedar (which is a Juniper, not a Cedar) has become a predominant species, but it was originally brought in by settlers to break the wind on the edges of the prairie. It's invasive, but it is also an indisputable part of my local ecosystem, and one that I had to get to know. Can you recognize your local flora and fauna? Do you know what they need to survive and thrive within this ecosystem? What did your ecosystem look like two hundred years ago? Two thousand? What threats do the flora and fauna face today and what is their outlook for the future? When you read natural history, you read the lore of the living Earth.

Step Two: Do Things with Your Friends

In religious practice, this may include prayer or pathworking. In a human relationship, this might be trips to the movies or hanging out around a pickup bed talking about life. In a relationship with the Earth, this is getting out and finding the natural world. For the privileged few of us, this can be extremely easy. We can step outside of our doors and be there. We can make a short trip and find a park, forest, or prairie. For others, this can be harder, but not impossible. In my experience, it requires a certain change in perspective, from civilization-focused to nature-focused. We are trained from birth to see technology and people. Media and advertisements point you to the televisions, to the trains, to the cluster of humans and their activities.

Yet, even in urban places, we can find little pieces of nature. When you shift your focus from the concrete to the green, you would be amazed at what you can find. The suburban area I live in contains many plants and animals that I never noticed when my days consisted of getting up, going to work, going home, and waiting to go back to work again. The suburban wild had become invisible to me. I had stopped listening to it. So, talk to the plants, smile at the clouds, listen to the breezes, and search for the signs of life that persist even in the densest human places. Those birds on that utility pole are a link to the living Earth, a sign that you have not been abandoned to the artificial world.

I list these as steps, but these first two steps intersect in important ways. Going back to the seven core principles, we find both “wisdom, knowledge, and growth” and “nature connection and wildcrafting.” Step One provides you with the knowledge needed to recognize important members of your local ecosystem and Step Two reinforces what you have learned and provides you with the experience that transforms knowledge into wisdom. We can read about nature all day, but the experience makes it concrete. This is a big part of the Earth Path books and their local focus. There are few things as rewarding as recognizing the things you’ve read about as you go through your day-to-day life. It takes the knowledge from a theoretical concept to a practical experience. It also reinforces the reality that druidry is not what you do in ritual or related practices but is a way of living your whole life.

Step Three: Do Things for Your Friends

In a human friendship, this is helping to clean out the rain gutters or move that heavy old dresser to the guest bedroom. It’s being there when your friend is going through some stuff. It’s not all that different for nature. When you go on walks, take a bag to collect litter. Leave the place cleaner than you found it. Donate to organizations that protect your local land or sustain it in some way. There are probably several places in your local ecosystem that would love volunteer support if you are able and willing.

Look at changes in your lifestyle and other ways that you can lessen the demands you place upon the Earth around your own home. Perhaps you can create a sustainable garden or herb bed. Plant trees or plants that support pollinators. Feed the birds and leave water for the wildlife. Even if you have a small yard or none at all, you may be able to find ways to support the life around your home. As you do these things, use sustainable practices wherever possible. Look to conserve and sustain the flora and fauna that share your life. We can be proactive conservationists no matter the scale we can manage. Whether you practice permaculture on your land or grow beneficial plants on an apartment balcony, there is always something to do to not only lessen your impact upon the Earth, but to give something back. The most valuable thing we can offer devotionally as modern Druids is time. Offer it, as you can.

Beyond mundane world support, a devotional relationship can build energetic connections as well. When you invoke the Sphere of Protection, use local landscapes, if possible, for your visualization. In that ritual, you reinforce a devotional, energetic link with nature. You are asking for support while honoring the land itself by acknowledging its importance. If possible, physically visit the places

that you use in your visualizations. If you are so inclined, make an offering to those places. Native seeds, herbal blends, and the like are great, but clean, clear water is a suitable offering to almost anything, particularly now that so many water sources are polluted and so many of our weather patterns are inconsistent. Notice that I don't mention gems, precious metals, or currency. Personally, I don't like to leave offerings that don't easily biodegrade or aren't beneficial in some way. What's a tree going to do with my silver dollar? Try the nwyfre exercises in *The Druidry Handbook*. The tree nwyfre exercise is a great way to build a reciprocal relationship with the a tree, as it is energetically beneficial to both you and the tree itself. In some cultures, trees are liminal figures. They reach both into the earth and into the sky. They are living beings and an ecosystem in themselves. Building a relationship with them as individuals can be an amazing experience.

The Universal Druid Prayer speaks of love to all existences, particularly the Earth. A loving relationship takes work to build and sustain. Putting in the work to know and sustain your local ecosystem can be a great way to build a reciprocal relationship. It can connect you to your lands in ways you may not be able to imagine. Beyond sustaining my physical form, I've found that having a reciprocal relationship with my local ecosystem increases the magical effects of my rituals, from the daily Sphere of Protection to more advanced workings. It helps me stay balanced emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Every time I leave my local ecosystem, I can feel it welcoming me home upon my return. Reciprocity with the living Earth, like the maintenance of friendships, is the work of a lifetime, but what a life to live!

I would like to offer you this blessing I've written. You can use it for meditation, for prayer, or in any way that might help you facilitate reciprocity with the living Earth in your life and your spiritual journey.

A Blessing of Kinship with the Earth

May you know the Earth as you know a friend,
Supporting your path with its green grace,
Inspiring you to pick up the pace
Then slowing you to the beauty of the place.

May you know the Earth as you know a friend,
An ear who will listen and share your fears,
And offer a warm embrace to dry your tears,
One to love you and yours all your years.

May you know the Earth as you know a friend,
And may you have great success
In cleaning up all this mess.
For a friend, can we do any less?

May you know the Earth as you know a friend,
There in the beginning. There in the end.
No matter where you are or where you've been,
May it receive you well at your journey's end.

References

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The Laughter of the River

Sam Nickerson

Sam Nickerson has been a member of the AODA since 2018. He lives with his family in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts, where he builds and manages energy-efficient housing and commercial spaces.

When I began visiting the banks of the Housatonic River in early 2018, I was very troubled about the pollution it contained. I wanted to spend time along the waterway, but knowing it was contaminated created a kind of dread, like going to visit a friend with a debilitating illness. You don't want to mention it, but you can't avoid it. It hangs in the air like a heavy cloud.

In this particular case, the pollutants are PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), highly carcinogenic chemical compounds that are engineered to have a half-life of approximately 1,000 years. I thought about that with a lot of regret. Faced with the river at last, I felt like I should apologize. It is a tragic situation because the toxic waste is unlikely to ever be cleaned up properly. Remediation would be too expensive, and it is embroiled in endless legal tangles with giant corporations.

With this on my mind, a funny thing happened when I returned the next week. If it were possible, I would say that the river laughed at me and welcomed me back. I stood there, feeling the power of all that rushing water, and I began to realize that the river was not quite what I thought it was. The pollution was there, no doubt, but the river was not dead or dying. The river was going to keep on flowing, PCBs or not, just as it had for a long time before the pollution, and would continue to do so for a long time afterward.

This isn't to say the pollution doesn't matter, or should be ignored, or shouldn't be cleaned up. It does matter. I care about it, and I strive in my own life to reduce environmental pollution in all its forms. For the foreseeable future, people are going to be living with a legacy of toxic pollution, and I grieve for that.

The vision I had, putting myself in the river's place, so to speak, was of immense time rolling by. The river is operating on something closer to geologic time than to human biological time. I could imagine it continuing to flow thousands, tens of thousands, or even millions of years into the future.

Is it ridiculous to put myself in the river's place, or to apologize to it, or to imagine I can hear its laughter? Isn't that committing the greatest of rational sins, to anthropomorphize the river? I'm not sure if it is possible for a person to relate to a river, or any other part of nature, in a sane way without doing so. Feeling awe at the roar of a massive flow after a rain isn't voluntary. It commands your attention.

The conventional alternative, the reasoned one we are all taught to follow, is to treat a river as just another lifeless stream of liquid. It might be pleasant, goes this thinking, but it is fundamentally just water—an inanimate object. That is a comfortable position, reinforced by scientific descriptions of matter and chemistry, and doesn't require any change in how we go about our business.

The problem is, that doesn't feel right when I stand there along the riverbank. A river has a presence you can sense, and I feel sad when I see a steel bicycle frame rusting on the riverbed. The fact that these things cause sadness or regret is not just malfunctioning brain software. Emotions are what make us human, and they are fundamental to how we relate to the world and each other.

Do I really see the world more clearly if I amputate the feeling part of my experience and only allow myself to think rational thoughts? All our sophisticated scientific understandings have given us amazing technological marvels, but they have also increased our alienation from the living world around us.

If I could model the turbulence of the river flow along the bank using elaborate mathematical models, fluid dynamics engineering, and particle physics, I don't think it would change the sense of wonder I feel in watching the endless variations of flows and eddies. I suspect I would be drawn even deeper into its mysteries.

So the problem isn't a technical one we can solve with fancier equations, better laws, or more precise logic. It is a conceptual problem having to do with the relationship we are in. We are in a relationship with the river, and it isn't possible to have a relationship, at least a very meaningful one, with something that is dead. It might only be possible to have a healthy relationship if we acknowledge that the river is a sort of being.

A few times I tried to define what exactly made it a river, and I found it wasn't so easy. It isn't the water, since the exact combination of water molecules flowing by at this moment has never occurred before, and probably never will again in the history of the universe. The river does not exist except in the context of its banks and tributaries, but that is not the river, that is the drainage basin.

Likewise, it is hard to separate the river from the hydrologic cycle of the atmosphere, cycling water from ocean to air to mountain to stream in an endless loop. So the river is a kind of ever-flowing *process* that continues to adapt to changing conditions.

Geologic and environmental conditions have changed a lot over time. It was only 50,000 years ago—a short time for a river—when this entire region was covered with a glacier more than a mile thick. Maybe the river had an ancestor 450 million years ago when this place had mountains higher than the Himalayas.

So without being able to adequately define it, or pin down its river-ness to a specific physical characteristic, maybe it is best just to sum it all up in a personification like Old Man River, the River God, or some other being-name. Our modern minds recoil from this, but that's exactly how our ancestors and predecessors related to the world in older, prescientific societies.

It's the closest approximate metaphor, and although it is less precise, it might be functionally superior in some ways. Scientific descriptions do not motivate us because they are abstractions. We are driven by our emotions and desires, and we are social creatures. Maintaining relationships over time might be one of the few ways in which we can reliably overcome our bias toward the short term. Put it this way. Which is going to make a person think twice, when no one is looking, before pouring something down the drain: knowing that they might get in trouble with the Department of Environmental Protection, or knowing that it is going down the throat of a partner, a friend, a member of the family?

So the idea of the personified river has its uses. But I'm not advocating a turn back of the clock to a utopian, "primitive" state of mind, and it would be a mistake to try to do so. The challenge is to face the limits of our scientific worldview, and the alienation from nature that comes along with it, in a sophisticated way that integrates technical understanding with our essential humanism.

If we recognized that a river is alive and has its own kind of consciousness, could we have avoided the destructive pollution? Do I have the bravery to talk openly about the river as a person whom I am responsible for helping? Of what use are regret and apology to a river?

I wish I had answers to these questions. One image stands out: as I stood there on the west bank of the Housatonic on a late October afternoon, I watched a single golden maple leaf fall from a branch and spiral slowly into the flow, where it was swept away like countless others.

Automatic Drawing

Alex White

Alex White is an interdisciplinary artist from Colorado who draws his creativity from music, painting, poetry, photography, and film. He's performed with The Boulder Laptop Orchestra, The Boulder Symphony, the Thornton Community Band, and improv punk group Black Market Translation. You can find his work on Instagram at @commoditycreature



Baseline Ecological Knowledge: Essential Understanding for Druids

Nate Summers

*Nate Summers has been studying and exploring druidry, nature spirituality, and related paths for over twenty years, along with a background as an instructor of survival skills, ancestral skills, natural movement, ethnobotany, foraging, and natural medicine. He is the author of *Awakening Fire* (Falcon Press, 2021) and *Primal: Why We Long to Be Wild and Free* (Falcon Guides, 2019). You can find out more about his work at Primal Nature (<https://www.primalnate.com/>) and on Instagram (@primalnate).*

As we navigate the complexities of the twenty-first century while exploring what it means to practice druidry, a key concept to really consider is our relationship with nature. After all, one of the distinguishing characteristics of druidry—whether it’s a reconstructionist tradition or not—is the emphasis on and importance of nature. Indeed, this may be the most important aspect of druidry for all of us, and as we continue to face both rampant disconnection from nature and wild changes in the climate and ecosystem of the planet, helping all of us reconnect to nature in healthy ways may be a vital role that practicing Druids play going forward.

But how and where does one start a practice of nature reconnection? How do we help others do the same? Why is it so important for this day and age? And what does it have to do with being a Druid anyway?

There are no easy or direct answers to these questions, and yet almost everyone drawn to the path of druidry has this sense that nature is innately important, and, without stepping on anyone’s toes, it’s safe to say Druids consider nature sacred in some sense (this is probably the one thing we can all agree on). After all, many people are attracted to modern forms of druidry because of its emphasis on nature, and while we do not know a lot about ancient forms of druidry, we do know that there was an emphasis on the sacred importance of trees, deities based on natural phenomena, and supposed worship of nature.

As part of the Ovate exploration for AODA, we study and connect with nature as one of the three key pillars of our unique path of being a Druid. For me, being an instructor of ancestral skills, survival, ethnobotany, foraging, and related arts was what led me to druidry, and it has remained a keystone of my practice and study. Spending time in nature, studying the bigger patterns of nature

and ecology, and really noticing the cycles of time in nature are all some of the common ways we engage in the study of nature. Another way to enhance our Ovate practice of nature study is to look at the concept of baseline ecological knowledge.

What is baseline ecological knowledge? Well, while it's a modern term that has grown in use in the last twenty years, the idea it represents is much older. Simply put, baseline ecological knowledge is the understanding, knowledge, wisdom, and connection *everyone should naturally have with the ecosystem they live in.*

While this may sound abstract, it's actually the opposite of abstract. Here are some examples of baseline ecological knowledge:

- Knowing what trees in your area make good firewood
- Knowing the edible plants in your bioregion for each season of the year
- Knowing the major predators of your area, their track and sign, and how to have a healthy relationship with them
- Knowing which birds stay year round in your area and which birds leave in migration and why

This is just scratching the surface, but notice that the list of things we could know as part of our baseline ecological knowledge are inherently connective, require observation and relationship, and are not necessarily things we can simply look up in a book.

Too often our study of nature is confined to just learning the names of things around us, learning very large, very abstract ideas, or learning about biology on an extremely small scale that requires specialized equipment that is hard to obtain and must be used indoors. As part of our nature connection study and practice in druidry, I would invite us all to consider much more connective practices related to nature that allow us to form long-term, intimate relationships with the many species and the bioregion around us.

Here is a list of practices to consider undertaking that reflect some of the key concepts above:

- Exploring deeply the ethnobotany (the indigenous use of plants and trees for medicine, food, and technology) of your region. This includes learning to ethically and carefully harvest plant foods and medicine, as well as learning other forms of plant technology such as fire making, cordage making, or fiber arts.
- Learning the common tracks, sign, appearance, and behavior of the top ten major mammals in your bioregion, especially for any large or dangerous mammals including predators.
- Finding out what are the major hazards of your area, including weather, animals, plants, climate, and others.
- Taking up the practice of birdwatching and in addition studying and learning about bird

vocalizations, language, and behavior and how they can tell you about what's happening in the natural world around you.

- Studying the flow of water in your landscape. Where does it come from and where does it go to? How does it change over time?
- Learning and developing a relationship with the trees of your bioregion, including ethnobotany, folklore, and practical knowledge of tree ecology. How are the trees doing where you live? How are they responding to climate change?
- Discover the insects, fish, amphibians, and reptiles of your bioregion. Where do they live? What do they do through seasonal changes? How could you catch them if you wanted?
- Take up the practice of foraging for mushrooms. Learn to safely identify and harvest them and about what role they play in the ecosystem.

Exploring these practices and the many, many more that are out there allow us as humans to reconnect to nature and bioregion in an intimate and practical way. It was not that long ago (possibly as little as two hundred years, depending on where you are talking about) that most of the people living in an area had this kind of knowledge, awareness, and connection. And let's not forget that currently there are people living in this way all over the world, and cultures that emphasize this kind of nature awareness and connection have a pretty great track record when it comes to the health of their bioregion and all the beings that inhabit it.

One of the amazing things about being a survival skills instructor, a teacher of ancestral skills, and a naturalist guide for so many years is to see what happens when people start this reconnection process through growing their baseline ecological knowledge. There's nothing quite like the joy, wonder, and even awe of people making their first fire with wood they've gathered and processed themselves (especially if it's using a friction-fire method)! I've seen middle-aged adults and even seniors behave with childlike glee after eating a handful of wild berries or cooking and processing some wild greens. Even just learning to recognize a handful of local birds, knowing their habits, and when they come and go can be transformative experiences for many people.

It's wonderful to imagine what the lives of Druids of the past and the cultures they were part of were like in regard to nature connection, awareness, and baseline ecological knowledge of the bioregion they were a part of. We can't really know for certain, but it certainly seems likely that a deep knowledge of and connection with the plants, trees, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, weather, and natural cycles and rhythms would have been widespread. It is also likely that skills like foraging, fiber arts, survival skills, using medicinal plants, and deep knowledge of place would have been commonplace.

As we reweave the threads of Druidry for the changing conditions of the twenty-first century we can do the same, as we take baseline ecological knowledge as a key way of knowing and understanding in our study and practice of druidry. Doing so might just be one of the most important facets of creating a vibrant future for ourselves, the natural world, and our descendants.

Mental Guidebook

CJ Buys

CJ Buys has been a poet and a witch since they were a small child wandering through the woods of Maine, talking to themselves and everything they met. Pretty much the only thing that's changed since then is that they now live in central Florida (unceded Seminole land) with their wife, two cats, several houseplants, and a small gaggle of ghosts. They have been a member of AODA since 2021, and can be found on most social media platforms as windupchickadee, where they post about disability/chronic illness, magic, and their cats.

This poem was first performed January 29, 2022, at AODA's bardic circle event.

the funny thing
about running away
crossing state lines
and growing zones
alike
is the moment you turn to the trees
and don't know them yet
pines were my best friends
growing up
catching me in needle piles
that were never as comfortable
as leaf piles looked
on the TV
their branches growing strong and curving
a ladder up to the sky
that even I
scared and grounded as I was
couldn't resist
in their cradle
I was a princess in a tower

a lookout
beloved and treasured and safe
free to dream and reach
free to grow
the maples lit on fire every autumn
turning every crested hill into a caught breath
filled our pails with sweetness every spring
and decorated the paths in between
with little whirligigs
spruces that ripped your hands open and firs that didn't
some kid from out of state tried to say
I had them backwards
my first year in college
I got so mad I could barely speak
and did start to doubt myself
oaks and their acorns
turning ankles on hiking trails
yellow birches and the wintergreen hiding under their bark
wild strawberries in the yard and blueberries on the spongy ground by the lakeside
blackberries and raspberries growing back thick
after the paper company took the trees
pickerel weed and lily pads in the quiet corners of the brook's mouth
scraping up against the sides of the canoe
and buzzing with bees and damselflies
cedar around the house
nasturtiums in the food garden
peonies in the flower garden
the oregano that started off in the border garden
then grew to cover half the front yard
until mowing made it smell like Italian food
even poison ivy
pointed out carefully
where it peeked out from between its friends
on the hiking paths and deer trails
unwanted but always noticed
I saw them before I saw myself
named and tended them before I had the words
to do the same
for me

I stand on new land now
land that knows me
has welcomed me
I only half-miss the land I grew up on
and not at all those I've left behind
on it
but looking at the woods
and not yet knowing the shape
of the trees
knowing I cannot reach up to touch a leaf
and know them
name them and see them
is the strangest
kind of homesickness
I've ever felt.



A Circle “Re-turning”: A Candidate Project

Laura Keys

Laura Keys lives in Cheshire, Oregon, on fourteen acres with her funny Irish husband and two college-attending daughters who were living on campus until a pandemic brought everyone back home. She works in health care IT for a local hospital system. With farm animals, cats, dogs, and other assorted creatures, it's never boring. Previously a bookstore owner, during a five-year sabbatical from the tech world she sold her store and came back to working in hospitals just before Covid hit. Clearly a book nut, as is evident in the books at home and book trips she takes when not gardening and hanging out with friends. Laura is an OBOD Bard and completed her AODA Candidate year in summer 2021. She is continuing her Druid studies.

Horses are beautiful animals, and they have a majesty about them that is deeply spiritual. Watching horses running can and has reduced me to tears of joy. Add in daughters and you have a hobby sport that quickly turns into an all-consuming lifestyle. Then life carries on and daughters go off to college, and left at home are horses, arenas, tack, heavy metal panels and pens, horse trailers, trucks, tractors, and barns full of gear. Depending on your land, horses and livestock often rely on hauling hay in if your pastures are not sufficient and then hauling your horses to places to ride if there are no good safe riding trails near your property. As our focus shifted from 4-H and Oregon High School Equestrian Teams and high school sports, and our daughters moved on campus, the horse arena and turnouts along with the horse trailer were no longer needed. Eventually (it takes a while to let go of loved friends) they sold their horses. The horse arena and turnouts we built for practice and training went from a project of love for our daughters and their horses to a big, lonely, desolate circle that I would walk out into and sit in, with vague feelings of needing to do something with it. Also, as parents, when you let go of the things that are tied to memories of raising your kids, it is like getting smacked in the head with the present. I had one thirty-four-year-old horse left who was a pasture pet, and we did not ride her any longer. As I would walk by the arena to feed her, I had glimmers of ideas and plans to reclaim the arena, but they had not completely materialized. The how, why, and especially the “what for” escaped me, but it would come along soon, as I happily discovered.

In summer of 2020, the solstice to be exact, I visited my daughter in Ashland, Oregon, where she was attending Southern Oregon University, and of course I hit every bookstore. I stumbled upon

(was led to?) a copy of JMG's *Druidry Handbook*. I was already working on OBOD's Bardic course and was so surprised to see this book on the shelf and the foreword by Philip Carr-Gomm. I had explored ADF, but it was not for me, and I was working through OBOD. The OBOD material, fundamentals, and beauty resonate with me; still something was missing. Place and time in the OBOD teachings are repeatedly touched on, but I kept asking myself how to do that here in Oregon. As I read on in *The Druidry Handbook* and found the AODA website and Candidate guidelines, I knew I had found the missing piece I was looking for. I joined AODA, and as I committed to a year and a day as a Candidate, I also recommitted to completing my OBOD Bardic year.

It was the first Covid surge. I work in health care IT, specifically in laboratory information systems, and that meant I was building Covid testing. It was chaos. And yet I found I could use the lockdown to care for the arena and renew it. In the *AODA New Candidate Guide* it said to plant a tree. We live on a tree farm, in the forest with ten acres of timber and three acres of farmland. One tree did not seem enough to honor the intention. I had moved seven cherry trees, which are doing well, to put in the arena, and we plant trees all the time. The glimmer of a plan that had been brewing was to create a tree circle out of the old arena. As I further developed the plan for my Candidate year, I proposed that as part of my Druid focus, I would not only recover the arena but would align a tree circle with the wheel of the year and use the Ogham to identify and plant as many native trees and shrubs as possible. The end goal would be a place for pagan celebrations and to have a space to mark the turning of the wheel of the year.

My Candidate project was accepted. I started planning and measuring. I dismantled and sold the arena to an equestrian team family, along with much of the gear. It was a special moment when I saw a mom and four daughters of middle school to high school age drive up in a truck and massive trailer to purchase the arena panels. Not only did it feel great—since I knew they were getting a really great deal on panels—it was also a way to give back and support reuse as well as equestrian sports. We had plenty of support when our girls were in Oregon High School Equestrian Teams and 4-H, and this fell right into place for so many reasons, including sustainability.

During the fall and winter of 2020, I studied and planned the layout. In spring 2021, I gathered material and searched for native trees. This was much harder than I anticipated. I had a specific list, and we were in lockdown.

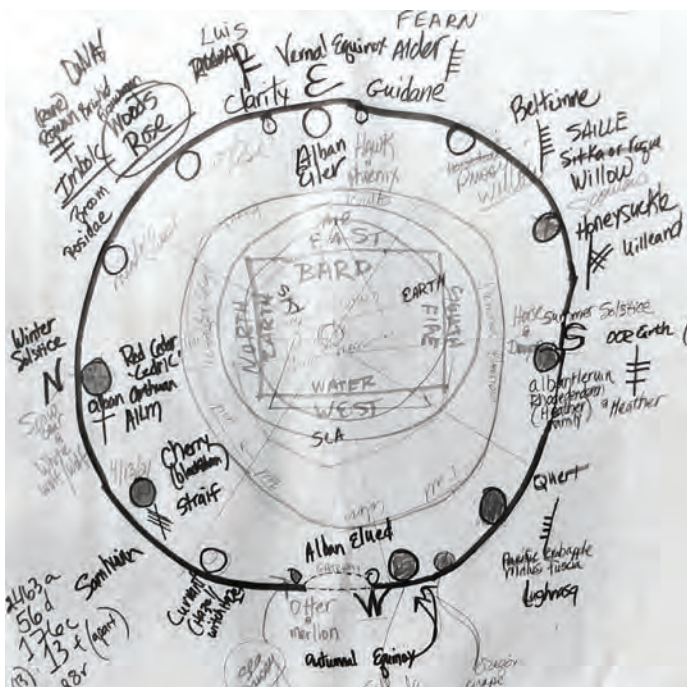


Figure 1: My plan, drawn on a big brown sheet of recycled paper.

The layout is based on the four directions with the wheel of the year including the cross-quarter days. The circle is 56 feet in diameter, the circumference 176 feet, with the center at 28 feet. The measurements and lines align to the east, where sunrise reaches the land, and sunset can be seen from the circle in the west. North and south are also marked and aligned. I used a string line and nontoxic chalk. At each season change while working in the circle, offerings were made as well as blessings for the land, the trees of the circle, and the intentions for its future use: a place of gathering, a sacred circle, natives and nature returned, and a beautiful space.



Figure 2 and 3: Locating sunrise and sunset to align the trees with the four directions and seasonal cross-quarters.

The soil here is heavy clay, with a thin layer of topsoil. We did use a tractor to dig the initial holes, which had to be fairly deep for the trees to survive. That was the only help received. All the rest of the work included moving the dirt, pounding the posts, and putting up fence to keep the deer out initially (once the trees are grown, the deer will not be able to destroy them, and the fences can come down).

Choosing and finding the trees, shrubs, and materials was a much more difficult task than I anticipated, again because we were in lockdown. My intention was that they should be:

- Natives (and noninvasive if moved to our location).
- Drought tolerant—we have a well, and we are very careful in the summer season.
- Aligned with the ogham and seasons, at least by plant family
- Met the intention of a sacred tree circle.
- Materials reclaimed, recycled, nontoxic, and earth friendly.

A surprise gift materialized when I was at the local Re-Store recycling center. The gate was way in the back, rusted and taken apart. The doors are made of leaves. It was a magical moment to find it and bring it home. I then added an old barbecue cover that we took down as a shaded place for an altar.

By late spring and early summer, holes were dug, and saplings, shrubs, and soil amendments were gathered. The earth was heating up. I would plant and dig early in the morning before work and

late into dusk. Each tree was blessed with the tree blessing from the *AODA New Candidate Guide*. I gathered watering lines and placed them and let our regular garden go wild to preserve water and to save time and energy for the tree circle.



Figure 4 and 5: The planting and the sun setting in the west behind the gate.

Summer hit full on, above 100 degrees many days, and we were entering fire season. I had planted the trees that I had, but some that I had looked for could not be found. Then a local nursery was having a closeout, and I was able to work with the owner to gather trees and shrubs that were of the same family, if not the same tree that I had been hoping to find. As I planted, I added northwest native pollinator seeds with the trees along the fence line. There were already bumblebees living in the soil, which I tried not to disturb, and the flowers would hopefully protect the baby trees and bring more bees.

While this work was happening, I was also completing my AODA Candidate year and OBOD Bardic grade. In studying, I came across a group called WOWNET (Women Owning Woodlands Network) and was able to attend a retreat to learn more about our local woodlands. Other baby trees came to us while we worked on the circle: four baby oaks, maples that needed homes, and shrubs. Our daughters are in plant groups, and word must have gotten out. I also planted these on a different part of the land we steward.

Learning about soil amendments and types of native trees and plants is hard reading. Digging in the dirt is hard work. This effort was by hand, except for the initial holes we dug with a tractor. We were very careful not to damage the land, and we used amendments from our compost pile. The compost pile is about thirty feet high in the back of our property, where we put used straw, old hay, manure from our horses and chickens, and property clippings. It's good stuff!

One morning I received a tough lesson when I woke up to check the plantings. I had thought the five-foot pasture fence would keep the baby trees and shrubs safe from deer, but I found out it didn't. It was so hard to see the shrubs and trees eaten to the ground and back to bare stems, so I had to step up the protection. I located bamboo fencing and used it around the outside of the circle. It was the most earth-friendly material I could think of and find. It worked and improved the circle as it gave shade to the baby trees around the edges.



Figure 6 and 7: Gate and outside of circle with bamboo fencing. The second image shows our maple tree growing strong.



Figure 8: There is a cedar behind these flowers and a weeping cherry here.

As the summer wound down, I was surprised to see I only lost two plantings and that giant clover started growing around most of the baby trees. Many doves decided they loved this open space and felt safe with the surroundings.

Another opportunity for personal and earth-based growth was to acknowledge there is no stopping dandelions naturally. I left them to grow in the center of my circle, and they kept what was not being watered from cracking and turning to dust. I thanked them, after a while.

Upon reflection, while writing this, my plan was to create a space for others to come to if they wish, but what also happened was that this project gave me a purpose during some of the darkest times I have experienced. The pandemic and the lockdown as well as other difficult events that occurred in 2020–2021, including the terrifying fires here in Oregon and in the Western states, coupled

with social and political unrest, took many of us down a dark path, focusing on what was wrong and what we could not fix or change. Joining AODA and committing to my Candidate year, and also reclaiming the arena as my project, transforming it into a sacred space, gave me hope, and it eased (at least a little) the powerlessness I felt to be able to make things better.

A circle re-turned, and the intention honored for it to be a place for pagan seasonal celebrations, weddings and handfastings, passing remembrances and celebrations of life, joyous welcoming and beginning of life, and a place to hang out with trees, shrubs, pollinators, and the elements. I can't wait for spring 2022 to start on the next phase.



Figure 9: Google Earth view showing the land, including over 500 baby firs we replanted by hand after it was logged, with the arena and barns, 2021. It's hard to see, but there is green all around the edge of the circle.

Visioning the Future Through the Bardic Arts: Creating Vision, Creating Hope

Dana O'Driscoll

Dana O'Driscoll spent most of 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 practicing permaculture, wildcrafting, and natural arts and is often covered with paint, dirt, or both. She is a certified permaculture designer and teacher. Dana currently serves as the Grand Archdruid of the AODA and is an Ollave Adept. She is also a Druid-grade graduate of the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids and served as the 2018 OBOD Mount Haemus scholar. Her Druid Adept project explored connections between permaculture and druidry, the end result of which was published as Sacred Actions: Living the Wheel of the Year Through Earth-Centered Sustainable Practices in 2021. She is also the author and illustrator of the Tarot of Trees, Plant Spirit Oracle, and TreeLore Oracle. Her writings on druidry and permaculture can be found at The Druid's Garden (druidgarden.wordpress.com).

I used to be a big fan of reading dystopian fiction. When I first read it, it felt like it described a distant world, a reality far from our own. But perhaps now, those books resonate too close to reality. As someone who practices magic, I have to wonder, would the concepts present in 1984 be as prevalent in our time if the book hadn't been so widely read? Did George Orwell manifest these concepts as a magical act, or were they already present, and he simply channeled what was already coming into focus? The same can be true of many such influential works: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Brave New World*, *Blade Runner*, and more. We also have seen how fiction can seed other kinds of ideas to become reality, such as Isaac Asimov's writing as science fiction in the 1940s and now a reality 60 years or more later. One might argue that despite the fantastical nature of these works in the time they were created, they have had a serious influence on present human culture.

At this point, our planet is facing both ecological disaster and many human challenges that grow more serious by the year. The media is producing a great number of chilling visions of dystopian futures—stories of darker, harder times. As it is clear to many that our modern civilization is on the downward slope, and that we need new visions and ways of living on a finite planet, the questions I'm left with are: How can we write a story now that creates a positive vision for our descendants and all future life on this planet? How can we be good ancestors for the future? And how might we influence what comes next?

As someone who practices magic, I certainly accept that our intentions and the directing of our will can help shape our realities. And we must have a vision before we can see that vision come to reality. If we accept this to be true, then, in turn, we can consciously harness intentions and bring visions to life that help create a better future: a future of life, ecological restoration, and care-oriented values for humanity. As bardic practitioners, Druids are in a very powerful place to do this work: create art that helps envision the future we want to see.

While there are many ways to vision a more positive, care-based, and ecologically balanced future, here I'm focusing on how the bardic arts may play a role in this work. Just as the science fiction of yesterday fueled the reality of today, we can create new stories and visions that help us seed a brighter tomorrow.

Creating a Sacred Vision

Bardic arts are wide ranging and include performative (dance, music, theater), literary (articles, poetry, novels), visual (painting, sculpture, drawing), or fine craft (blacksmithing, woodcarving, glassmaking) practices. Any of the bardic arts can be used to create a sacred vision of the future. Even if you don't practice them now, there is always time to learn.

So assuming you either have a bardic art or want to learn one, the next step is finding a vision that you want to share. The questions are: What vision are you putting into the world? What is the world you want to create? Since these are big questions, I have a few suggestions for helping you hone and refine some ideas. The most important thing you can do is spend some time in meditation and reflection about what vision of the world, what ideas and concepts, you want to bring forth. So here are a few things to consider.

You might start by thinking about the specific kind of bardic art you produce (or want to produce), the audiences you might want to reach, and what kinds of messages you can share. Also consider your specific art form: certain art forms are better at conveying messages than others. Will the work convey a message on its own, or do you want to share some information about the work in addition to the work itself?

- Consider presenting a general philosophy of your work. Messaging can come in a lot of forms, such as an artist statement that talks about what you do and why you do it. This is especially helpful for work that can be interpreted in many ways, or whose interpretation is not immediately clear upon examination (e.g., woodcarving). You can share these messages on social media, on your website, even with physical art that someone receives.
- Consider the specific messages or themes you want to convey. Perhaps you have a very specific message or a general one. Think about the thing you most would like to see in the world—write it down, and keep it in mind when you create.

- Consider the symbols you use. Symbols, whether they are intentional magical sigils or just broader images, also carry tremendous power.
- Consider who your audiences are and how your messages will be interpreted. Are you focusing on local audiences who might experience your works in person or more global audiences?
- Consider if you want to make a statement about something or a call to action. Calls to action encourage direct change, which helps make visions a reality.

Messaging and Visioning: Some Examples

Now I'll present visioning goals with some examples—I am sharing them both to demonstrate an example of the kinds of visions you can create and also to spark your own creativity about how bardic arts of all kinds (poetry, visual art, music, dance, fine crafts, writing) might support your own unique vision.

Vision 1: Presenting an alternative perspective and value of nature

One of the first ways I see us using art, writing, poetry, music, and other bardic arts is to present alternatives or ways of reseeing our present reality. We can show a different perspective on something, offer a new angle, or provide new insight through our work. I think you can do this with anything, but as a Druid who has my heart set on preserving the natural world, my focus is on nature and on providing alternative messaging and visions.

Living in western Pennsylvania is living in an ecological extraction zone; for the last three centuries, this land has been pillaged and stripped, which has led to very destructive attitudes toward nature. We have fracking wells, thousands of miles of acidic streams full of iron from mine runoff, mountaintop removal, boney dumps, large-scale logging, and coal-fired power plants—to name just a few of the many extreme environmental problems. Around here, most people view nature as something to exploit; a resource to be profited from, and a way to keep jobs in the region. Hunting and fishing are also big around our rural area; while I've met some hunters who have reverence, unfortunately, many shoot animals, birds, and rodents for sport. Thus, there is very little respect or love for nature. Thus, one of the primary visions I seek to share locally as an artist is to present a countermesssage.

A few years ago, our local art association invited me to hang some work at the regional hospital. It was a nice opportunity to have my work seen by a lot of people. I thought carefully about the content of my art and decided to present an alternative view of resource extraction. I painted trees with hearts in the ground, I painted the telluric currents of earth energy flowing, I painted regenerated landscapes. It's hard to say how these pieces of art touched those who saw them, but I envision that maybe a seed was planted that showed humans in a different relationship with nature. The more these kinds of alternative messages and perspectives can get into circulation, the more normalized they become and the more power they hold.



Figure 1: One of the pieces of artwork I displayed, which shows a love of nature.

These two examples show in two small, local ways how artwork can help create messages of change—messages reconnecting with the natural world and developing more care-oriented and meaningful relationships with her.

Vision 2: Re-enchanting the world

Once someone is willing to see nature as having inherent value, to understand it in a new light and break free from capitalistic understandings, then I can shift to the more magical and potent part of the message—the message of the world being an enchanted place helping re-enchant humanity’s perspective of the living earth. For my work, I see that new vision or new relationship with the land as step 1, then re-enchantment is step 2. The “dis-enchantment” of the world is the philosophical and

There are lots of ways into re-visioning relationships to nature through bardic arts. In another example, my neighbor plowed down a beautiful stand of Staghorn Sumac last summer without even knowing what it was or how it could be used. I was friends with this beautiful stand of trees, and I was really distraught when it happened. He gave me permission to come in and harvest as much as I wanted of the wood and roots. I did so, and at the holidays, I made him an ornament from the beautiful root wood, with a note that it was from the wood he let me harvest. Perhaps this beautiful wood will have him reconsider cutting down more trees, and perhaps he will see value in them. And certainly, this work honors the Staghorn Sumac that was cut.



Figure 2: Staghorn Sumac Yule ornaments

literal stripping of all magic and wonder from the world, which I believe has paved the way for some of the more egregious abuses of nature in the past three centuries. In order to create a new vision, re-enchantment is a necessary goal. Ultimately, if we see nature as sacred, enchanted, and having a spirit of its own, it is much more likely that humans of all kinds will behave in ways of reverence and respect. I think a lot of authors and artists have done a great job in showing that the world has an enchanted side.

One of my own artistic projects that most closely aligns with this goal is the Plant Spirit Oracle (which was my AODA Ovate Adept project). The goal of this deck was to portray common medicinal plants in an enchanted and personified way. I also paid special attention to plants that were often maligned, like Poison Ivy and Japanese Knotweed, as part of this work. Thus, Japanese Knotweed, which is widely hated, is presented in an enchanted light as a guardian of the waterways. Knotweed here performs this function, growing in thick patches between toxic fields and streams—so I painted him as I saw him, as an enchanted defender of the rivers. Poison Ivy, despite being a native plant, is obviously maligned and hated; so her card helps in teaching awareness and perspective. These plants have forms that can be viewed and interacted with, and offer guidance and wisdom. The work invites people into the enchanted world of spirits.



Figure 3 & 4: Poison Ivy and Japanese Knotweed images from the Plant Spirit Oracle

Enchantment can be found in many other works, as soon as you start looking. I point to the classes and works being produced by artists associated with the Vienna Academy of Visionary Art (<https://academyofvisionaryart.com/>), where artists are exploring the sacred and magic through art, including sacred geometry, channeling one's inner vision, and alchemy.

Vision 3: Offering new visions of the future and personal empowerment

A final aspect of visioning the future is the work of actually creating positive future visions. I don't know about you, but I'm very tired of the shared collective dystopian visions that we seemingly can't escape—they are all we see and hear in our national media, entertainment, and social media. I believe in the power of stories and rewriting our own stories in the present to create better stories for those who have yet to be born. We can create a better world if we put enough into the vision to get that out there.

For finding that kind of vision, music and writing are powerful forces. I look to one of my all-time favorite writers, Wendell Berry, as a source of inspiration in this regard. His poem "Work Song II: A Vision" is a prime example of a message that holds a vision of the future. When I first read this poem, I cried from the beauty of it, from the vision Wendell Berry offered, and thought about what we might need to get there. He speaks of the forests being cut and regrowing, of forgotten springs opening up, and of people singing in the fields. When I read this, it spells out such a clear vision for the future that I can see it clearly. I also see a vision of the lands where I live, so damaged by human extraction, singing into that more positive future.

Storytelling is another approach here—and this is the kind of thing that can be done powerfully among Druids in a community and around a sacred fire. In a simple visioning ritual, adapted from Joanna Macy and Molly Brown's book *Coming Back to Life*, you can ask people to tell future stories. Start with the present and the challenges, and then talk about how you and others moved forward, and then speak to the future. Move several hundred years into the future, sharing positive visions of future descendants and a future healed earth. As you share these stories, really lean into them, think about their connections, and feel them resonate. The more powerful stories we can tell now about a healed and regenerated future, the more hope we instill in ourselves, and the more that hope radiates out into the world.

Conclusion

I don't advocate that all of your bardic practices be in line with this deep visioning work—this is hard, and sometimes creating this kind of work can also be hard. But I do think that visioning is worth exploring as one form of spiritual practice that we can do for the world. In druidry, bardic arts are often expressed inwardly, in support of the spiritual path of the individual. Visioning offers one way of outer expression and one goal for your work. You might combine this with an artist statement about the kinds of work you do and share that along with your work.

Providing alternative perspectives, enchantment, and visioning for the future is certainly a magical act, one that many people who practice the bardic arts might build into their work. When you create something and put it out in the world, you have an opportunity to create so much more than just a piece of art—you have a chance to help build a vision of the world to come: to move people, to encourage them to think differently, to see the world as an enchanted place, and possibly to act. Because that is what good art does—it moves us. It gets us to think about our relationship to the world around us, and it encourages us to pause and reflect. While simple visioning work is only part of the task before us, however, it is an important thing that those practicing the path of the bard can do.

The Kabbalah and the Secret of the Bards of Britain

Brigyn

Brigyn is a member of several Druid Orders and is a Hermeticist. He is particularly interested in the spiritual and magical aspects of early Revival Druidry. He runs Birch Song Study Group from the Netherlands, with his wife and two cats, Birch and Willow, who he assures us are all excellent singers indeed. He is currently endeavouring to become a capable gardener and permaculture practitioner.

In Iolo Morganwg's *Barddas*, one of the foundational texts of the Druid Revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we are introduced to what is called the Secret of the Bards of the Isle of Britain. This secret lies in the letters O I V, which represent the name of God.

There have been many interpretations of the meaning of these letters. One of them is that they are jumbled, and ought to be arranged IOV, to refer to Iovis, or Jupiter, who is then identified with Hu Gadarn. In *Des Origines Paôennes de la Franc-Maçonnerie* (L'Ours, 2011), an argument is brought up in favor of this: a Gallic discus was found in France in 1843, dated to the first century CE, having the seven days of the week coupled to the seven planets. Each day on the disc is represented by three letters: lun(ae), mar(tis), mer(curi), iov(is), ven(eris), sat(urnus), sol(is).

Another beautiful example is found within Grand Archdruid Emeritus John Michael Greer's (2013) *The Celtic Golden Dawn*, where the letters OIV are presented as a guise for the sacred word Awen.

I offer yet another theory, one which ties in a new body of lore and practice within Revival Druidry, namely that they refer to the Hebrew Sefer Yetzirah, the Hebrew Book of Creation, and the Kabbalah that stems from it.

The Sefer Yetzirah (meaning "the book of formation") is the earliest Jewish mystic text that we know of. It describes how the universe came into existence, using ten "calibrations of empty space" (the Sephiroth), three principal letters, seven consonants, and twelve "ordinary" letters. The popular imagery of the Tree of Life is based on this text, and it is one of the cornerstones of what later became Kabbalah.

THE BARDIC SECRET

O I W are the three letters, and in very old books O I U, because U was used instead of W, in the olden times. It is the secret word of the primitive Bards, which it is not lawful to speak or utter audibly to any man in the world, except to a Bard who is under the vow of an oath. The letters may be shown to any one in the world we like, without uttering the vocalization, which, under the protection of secrecy, is due to them, though he be not under an oath. . . .

After the coining of Taliesin eighteen letters were used; and it was according to the art of the system of eighteen that O I U was appointed for the Name of God. Before that arrangement it was O I O according to the sixteen.” (Morganwg, 1862)

Mentioned in *Barddas* are several variant names of God: OIO, OIU, OIV, and OIW. I have come to believe that these names for God all refer to three Hebrew letters, namely the letters Ayin (O), Yod (I), and Vav (V). Supporting this idea is the fact that the letter Vav can represent W or V, as well as U and O, hence covering all the variant names of God in *Barddas* with these three Hebrew letters.

Aryeh Kaplan (1997), a Torah scholar, wrote a book about the Sefer Yetzirah, in which he calls it “The oldest and most mysterious of all Kabbalistic texts.” Aryeh Kaplan approaches the Sefer Yetzirah as a meditative and magical text, and cites many Talmudic traditions that mention the Sefer Yetzirah being used for magical purposes. Not only does the book describe the process of creation, it also imparts mystical powers to those who study it. The mysteries within the Sefer Yetzirah are attributed to Abraham, which places the system in the eighteenth century BCE. If so, this makes the text early and foundational enough to equal the Vedic scriptures. Aryeh Kaplan writes that the Sefer Yetzirah was a strictly oral tradition for many centuries, not written down until the time of the Second Temple and the Great Assembly, in the fifth century BCE.

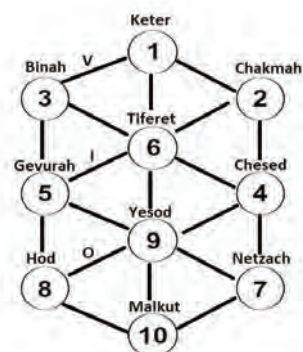


Figure 1. OIV as situated on the Tree of Life in the Vilna Gaon's writings.

The version of the Tree of Life in Figure 1 is called the “Natural Array,” or sometimes the GRA Tree. GRA refers to a Kabbalist known as the Vilna Gaon, or Elijah of Vilna, abbreviated GRA (“HaGaon Rabbenu Eliyahu,” meaning “the sage, our teacher, Elijah”). It is a special version of the Tree in that, unlike the commonly used Hebrew and Hermetic versions, this one directly corresponds to the text of the Sefer Yetzirah. The ten Spheres are called Sephiroth, Divine Emanations that ultimately result in Creation. Hence they are numbered 1 to 10. Their precise nature and interpretation varies between the various schools of Kabbalah.

Three attributions of Hebrew letters to paths between the Sephiroth are of interest to us. These are from Yesod to

Hod (9 to 8), the letter Ayin (O); from Tiferet to Gevurah (6 to 5) , the letter Yod (I); and from Keter to Binah (1 to 3), the letter Vav (V), giving us OIV on the Tree of Life.

There are two more connections we could make between *Barddas* and the Tree of Life. The first is that there are ten primary letters attributed to Einigan the Giant in *Barddas*'s creation myth—just as there are ten Sephiroth on the Tree of Life. It is said that the original symbols representing the ten primary letters were changed once the Coelbren (the Bardic alphabet) was adapted for common use as an alphabet, and turned into sixteen letters. The original ten letters as known by Einigan were kept a Bardic secret. These “original letters” that Iolo had in mind may well have been the ten Sephiroth.

Second, the Three Rays of Light of the Bardic tradition might correspond to the Three Pillars of the Tree of Life. The Three Rays of Light are often tied to Creation within *Barddas*. For example:

When God pronounced His name, with the word sprang the light and the life; for previously there was no life except God Himself. And the mode in which it was spoken was of God's direction. His name was pronounced, and with the utterance was the springing of light and vitality, and man, and every other living thing; that is to say, each and all sprang together. And Menw the Aged, son of Menwyd, beheld the springing of the light, and its form and appearance, not otherwise than thus, /| \ , in three columns; and in the rays of light the vocalization—for one were the hearing and seeing, one unitedly the form and sound; and one unitedly with the form and sound was life, and one unitedly with these three was power, which power was God the Father. And since each of these was one unitedly, he understood that every voice, and hearing, and living, and being, and sight, and seeing, were one unitedly with God; nor is the least thing other than God. And by seeing the form, and in it hearing the voice—not otherwise—he knew what form and appearance voice should have. And having obtained earth under him coinstantaneously with the light, he drew the form of the voice and light on the earth. (Morganwg, 1862)

The Hermeticist and Kabbalist Rawn Clark (2012) wrote a workbook about the GRA Tree, *Permutations of the Tree: The 182 Gates of the Gra Tree of Life*. In this book, these paths from the Middle Pillar toward the Left Pillar are referred to as the Earth Paths, due to the astrological earth signs being ascribed to them. These Earth Paths are said to be “informing emanations from the seat of awareness to the Pillar of Form.” As such, the aspect of the Tree that is seemingly being emphasized in the name OIV is the creative descent into manifestation, limitation, and thus form.

The three horizontal paths on the Tree of Life are traditionally seen as the points where one realm crosses over into another. This gives us the four realms, or in Revival Druid terms, the circles of Abred, Annwn, Gwynfydd, and Ceugant.



Figure 2. From *Barddas*

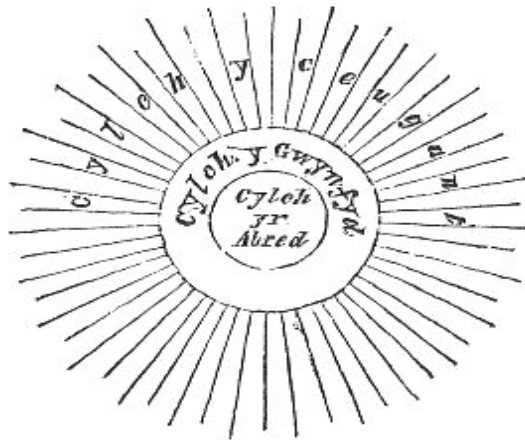


Figure 3. *The Three Circles of Manifestation, from Barddas.*

Looking at the placement of the three Earth Paths, or letters, each is placed in a different realm, or circle. As such, in their forms of O, I, and V, the Three Rays represent the three realms of Ceugant, Gwynfydd, and Abred (or alternatively, Gwynfydd, Abred, and Annwn), the realms of body, soul, and spirit. Yet the Three Rays also represent the Three Pillars of the Tree of Life, and as such the entirety of Creation. This matches the Three Rays representing the manifestation of divinity itself, as seen by Einigan. Additionally, the Three Rays also commonly symbolize Awen as divine inspiration, as seen in the story of Menw, who found the Three Rods containing all knowledge growing from Einigan's skull:

And at the end of a year and a day, after the decease of Einigan, Menw, son of the Three Shouts, beheld three rods growing out of the mouth of Einigan, which exhibited the sciences of the Ten Letters. . . . He then took the rods, and taught from them the sciences—all, except the Name of God, which he made a secret, lest the Name should be falsely discerned; and hence arose the Secret of the Bardism of the Bards of the Isle of Britain. And God imparted His protection to this secret, and gave Menw a very discreet understanding of sciences under this His protection, which understanding is called Awen from God; and blessed for ever is he who shall obtain it. (Morganwg, 1862)

As such, it seems to me that the Three Rays, or the Awen symbol, /|\ , represent various trinities all at once—or perhaps the abstract concept of a trinity itself.

An additional meaning for the Awen symbol can be found in the Druid Network article “A Short History of the Awen,” in which Angela Grant (2021) states that “the historian Nennius, on being challenged by an English scholar that the Welsh had no alphabet of their own, produced for his challenger an alphabet that bears a considerable resemblance to Coelbren, though more complex. It also contains an awen symbol (joined at the top) as one of its letters. This does not represent an individual letter but the Latin word ‘ego’ is ascribed to it: ‘I am that I am. . . .’”

On the GRA Tree, the Awen symbol would also represent Keter, the first Sephiroth. This is the most primal and foundational emanation from divinity: it is “to be” itself. As such, I propose that *Barddas’s Secret of the Bards of the Isle of Britain* might well be the Sefer Yetzirah and its Kabbalah.

As a more poetic addendum, indulging in a bit of rather fanciful, mythological history, we could even tie the Sefer Yetzirah to the ancient Celtic Druids: Like that of the Druids of old, this was initially an oral tradition, kept secret and associated with great magical powers. If dated back to the eighteenth century BCE, there was ample time for this knowledge to spread across the world. It could well be that this knowledge was initially Egyptian in origin (Franz Bardon [1957] states so in his book *The Key to the True Quabbalah*). Phoenician coins dating back to the third century BCE have been found in Britain, so we know there was contact between these regions in ancient Celtic times. Finally, the legendary Druid city of Dinas Emrys near Snowdon, of Vortigern and Merlin fame, was originally named Dinas Ffaraon Dande, or Fortress of the Fiery Pharaoh, according to the twelfth- or thirteenth-century Welsh tale “Ludd and Llefelys.”

After the fall of the Druids, this Kabbalistic knowledge may have been preserved in the Bardic schools right up to their closure in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its use may explain the wondrous powers attributed to many of the legendary Bards and Fili of later ages, such as Nede and Taliesin. The Kabbalah could be the “Secret Language of the Poets” mentioned in medieval Irish texts concerning the curriculum of the Irish Fili, or Bards (see, for example, Eugene O’Curry’s [1873] *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*). It then becomes a simple matter for Iolo to find his way to this lore, either in old Welsh Bardic manuscripts or even through conversation with a surviving, wandering Bard.

It is my hope this may add some extra magic the next time you don your druidic Egyptian nemys.

For those who want to work practically with the GRA Tree, I wholeheartedly recommend Rawn Clark’s (2012, 2019) books *Permutations of the Tree: The 182 Gates of the Gra Tree of Life*, and *Love Letter to a Dying World: A Handbook for Humanity*.

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Reflections on the Sun Path

By Procyon

Procyon is a central Massachusetts native and licensed mental health counselor, who recently became certified as a nature therapy guide. He loves to spend his free time kayaking, mountain biking, and walking the forests of New England with his wife and rescue border collie. He has always felt a great sense of comfort and connectedness in natural settings, and first joined AODA in 2017 after fortuitously coming across a copy of The Druidry Handbook. He is currently a Druid Apprentice and a Deacon in the Gnostic Celtic Church, and in his free time enjoys mountain biking, kayaking, and hiking across New England with his wife and border collie.

The Need for Following the Sun Path in the Modern World

Our knowledge of the historic Druids is incomplete, but from what we know, they acted as healers, mediators, and spiritual advisors. The world that they lived in was significantly different from our own, and the challenges that they faced within their society are different from the challenges that we face currently. We are currently faced with the crises of climate change, destruction of the natural world, and social unrest in addition to many more; and the societal institutions that are most familiar to the majority of people have failed to respond to these concerns. Our society has become increasingly self-centered and ignorant, and in these times, the need for knowledge, strength, and love of other beings is more important than ever.

How can we best carry on the traditions of the historical Druids while still remaining relevant to the modern world? This is a topic that I think must be revisited constantly, and the best solution for one Druid may not be applicable for another. For myself, I have tried to learn as much as possible about the natural world, have tried to live in accordance with my learning, and have tried to share my knowledge and passion with other people in a way that I hope is encouraging rather than intimidating. Since Druids historically played many roles in society, it is certain that each Druid had comparative areas of strength and weakness and that there were variations in the application of their learning, and I believe that everyone's personal journey should be honored as a reflection of these inevitable variations.

The Sun Path speaks to the priestly nature of Druids. While acting in this capacity, Druids take an active role in directing personal or group energy toward a common goal. Every seasonal

observation is also an exercise in mindfulness in which participants are encouraged to reflect on how their own personal experiences echo the rhythms of nature. Each path represents a trail that leads to the same summit, and while each path offers insights, any individual path cannot offer a complete perspective of the Druid experience. Without the Sun Path, the Moon Path offers opportunities to dive deeply within one's own psyche but may lack opportunities for group engagement. The Earth Path offers opportunities for deep connection with nature but may lack opportunities to engage fully with the human need for spirituality. All of these paths offer opportunities for insight, and theoretically can provide a complete spirituality, but when they are observed in unison as part of a larger system, they become even more powerful and effective.

In isolation, the Earth Path teaches us to observe and love the natural world. Druidry stands apart from other forms of spirituality due to its emphasis on the natural world—there are certainly other forms of spirituality that pay attention to the environment, but if Druidry were entirely removed from nature, I think it's safe to say that it would no longer exist as it currently does. The Sun Path mediates this love of nature with a love for society—for better or worse, we are people who engage with the world within a larger societal context, and we ignore this factor at our own peril. Seasonal rituals are personal at the same time, and we turn inward for reflection and meditation when we observe these rituals. In this way, the Moon Path is intertwined.

In isolation, the Moon Path teaches us to observe ourselves and our own thoughts and experiences. Druidry emphasizes self-knowledge and self-reflection more than other spiritualities and, in doing so, honors individual differences. Our personal worlds are influenced by our environments, and in this manner, the Moon Path is inseparable from the Earth Path. We are also influenced by the societies in which we interact on a daily basis, and in this manner, the Sun Path is intimately connected with the Moon Path, as well. Different people may feel a stronger or weaker affinity for pursuing any given path, but all of them are intertwined into the larger system of Druidry, and all paths are valid. In this essay, I more fully explore the Sun Path and the ways in which seasonal observations can help us to become more connected with the world around us as well as our own inner experiences.

Finding Structure in Our World

Repeated observation allows us to find consistency and predictability within our world. In his exploration of religion, Carl Jung (1938) stated:

Religion appears to me to be a peculiar attitude of the human mind, which could be formulated in accordance with the original use of the term “religio,” that is, a careful consideration and observation of certain dynamic factors, understood to be “powers,” spirits, demons, gods, laws, ideas, ideals or whatever name man has given to such factors as he has found in his world powerful, dangerous or helpful enough to be taken into careful consideration, or grand, beautiful and meaningful enough to be devoutly adored and loved. (p. 5)

Humans seek meaning from every experience they're exposed to, and when these experiences conform with certain predictable patterns, we feel a sense of comfort and stability. Our experiences are validated and reinforced through ritual experiences. For example, cultural values such as independence and freedom are reinforced when we observe the Fourth of July, and values such as community and gratitude are reinforced when we celebrate Thanksgiving. We commemorate the lives of significant cultural figures during holidays such as Martin Luther King Day and Presidents' Day. We formally acknowledge rites of passage when we celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and graduations. In doing all of these things, we reaffirm who we are as a society and what is important to us.

Celebrations can change over time to better reflect the values of society and to create more meaningful structure. For example, most people would agree that Halloween has its roots in the observation of Samhain, but the way that most contemporary Americans celebrate Halloween is far removed from the historical Samhain. In some ways, Halloween may still be an expression of our relationship with death and our reaction to the darkening of the year, but on a surface level, there are quite a few differences. As a more contemporary example, Patriots' Day has been celebrated in Massachusetts for over a century, but the emotional context of the celebration shifted for many people, including myself, after the Boston Marathon bombing on Patriots' Day in 2013. The ways in which we celebrate contemporary seasonal rituals may be different from how they were celebrated two millennia ago, but they still serve our need for structuring our experiences and honoring values that we hold as important.

Biophilia and Celebration

With all else being equal, humans prefer environments and stimuli that are familiar to them. When we're faced with a predictable situation, we're able to face this situation with greater confidence and able to rely upon our past experiences and insights into what worked for us and what didn't. The universe is a massively complex place, and we're not able to perfectly predict what will happen at any given time. Deference to important beliefs can help us to cope with this inherent uncertainty. If we believe in a universe that aligns with our values, we are better able to handle situations when our values are called into question or when our efforts don't produce results that reinforce these values. There is a fine line between optimistic thinking and denial of reality, and when ritualistic behavior is taken to extremes it can have a negative impact on our ability to interact with the world in an effective and positive manner. With that being said, it would be reductionistic to dismiss the importance of ceremony and ritual for our well-being, and people who dismiss this element of human experience do so at their own peril.

Ceremony and ritual have an important place within human experience, but why should celebrations of nature be more highly emphasized than, say, celebrating the latest technological achievements as a symbol of human ingenuity and potential? Simply put, humans are a part of nature, are adapted to live in nature, and suffer more and more as they are increasingly removed from the natural world. Paul Rhys Mountfort (2002) summed it up well:

The god and goddess of Nature need to reawaken in our hearts so that they can manifest their wisdom afresh in this perilous age. Their return to the stage of contemporary affairs through the revival of Paganism, ecological awareness, the Green movement, and techniques such as Ogam divination are all part of this process. They not only point us towards re-establishing our equilibrium with Nature, they are vivid reflections of our own higher natures. By partaking in the cycle of cultural regeneration they offer, we potentially bring healing and restoration not only to ourselves but to the world around us. (53)

Practicing nature-based spirituality is a form of self-care and an acknowledgment of our true nature as humans.

Works such as *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2008) and *The Nature Fix* (Williams, 2017) explore the concept of biophilia and the positive impact that the natural world has on our well-being. Biophilia is the idea that people inherently feel a drive to connect with the natural world and that being in the presence of nature has positive effects on our physical and mental health (Louv 2008, 43). Since we use celebrations and rituals as a way of reinforcing the values that are important to us, it makes complete sense to formally acknowledge the importance of the natural world by observing nature-based ceremonies. Without nature, we cannot survive and cannot live healthy lives, and we regularly celebrate things that are far less significant and far more banal than our survival on a basic level and the air, water, and other gifts that we are given every day to allow this survival. Rather than asking why we have elected to celebrate the turning of the Wheel of the Year, it is perhaps more appropriate to ask why we fell out of this practice in the first place.

In *The Well-Gardened Mind*, psychotherapist Sue Stuart-Smith more fully explores biophilia and the shift in human experience that took place over the last couple of centuries that resulted in us living an increasingly urban, industrialized life that disregards the natural world, stating, “people who were more attuned to nature and more predisposed to learn about plants and animals would have survived better. Because we no longer commune with the natural world on a daily basis, we don’t develop the same level of attunement, but still it lies latent in all of us” (2020, 100). She advocates for the importance of small rituals, such as tending a garden and forming personal connections with wildflowers as a method of reestablishing a connection with nature and regaining the benefits of nature-connectedness. Larger rituals, such as those of the Sun Path, are a logical extension of our biophilic tendencies. We acknowledge our connectedness with loved ones by celebrating significant events in their lives such as birthdays, marriages, and graduations, and by likewise celebrating significant events in the natural world, such as the solstices, we acknowledge the importance of nature in our lives.

Lore and Labels

In *Primal Awareness*, the effects of language and lore on our perception of nature and our place within it are explored in greater detail (Wildwood, 2016). Wildwood puts forth the idea that over time, we have sacrificed the deepness of our experiences for the sake of convenience. For example, when we label something as “tree,” we are very quickly able to develop a mental representation of what we’re referring to. At the same time, this mental representation often lacks the detail and nuance of an actual tree as observed in nature. The complex relationship between bark, leaves, insects, microorganisms, and the chemical interactions between the tree, soil, and atmosphere go unacknowledged in this representation, and the true nature of the tree isn’t fully realized.

When we examine lore, it is obvious that deities and heroes are often used as metaphorical representations for forces in the natural world that are difficult to describe in other manners. While this allows us to make partial sense of the world around us, it is also important to remember that the mental representations we form don’t describe reality in a comprehensive manner, and additional reflection is necessary in order to more fully understand the world around us. In this way, elements of the Moon Path make another appearance within the observation of seasonal ceremonies. Words such as Samhain and Cerridwen are of limited usefulness if they remain labels for concepts that we never explore in greater detail. If we only read about trees and never observe them firsthand, our knowledge will be incomplete. Studying lore and natural history is necessary but not sufficient for a greater understanding of nature-based spirituality.

As stories get written down, their meaning becomes fixed in time, and opportunities for adaptation and for clarifying misconceptions become limited (Wildwood, 2016). As we face the challenges of the modern world, it is important for us to continue to rely upon the wisdom of the past, but also to seek immediate and immanent connection with the natural world and to form our own lore and ceremonies. The fact that many Druid ceremonies as practiced today don’t have centuries (or even decades, many times) of precedence can be seen as an asset as a result of this, rather than being viewed as a limitation.

As I read old texts on the trees of New England, I see butternuts and chestnuts referenced somewhat frequently, though from my own experiences they’re quite rarely found due to the effects of diseases that were introduced to the region after these texts were written. The composition of the New England forest has changed, and as a result of these changes, the trees that I’m able to most personally connect with have changed from those of authors in years past. While I reference many trees in the New England landscape as part of my rituals, the chestnut and butternut are rarely if ever mentioned. As Druids in AODA, we are given the autonomy to adapt our rituals to the conditions that we all face as individuals, and this allows us to engage in rituals that are more immediate and more personally relevant.

Conclusions and Next Steps

I would love to wrap everything up in a neat little bow, with a couple of clear takeaways for readers, but when it comes to summarizing the Wheel of the Year and the place of seasonal celebrations within the context of druidry, how do you tackle such an immense topic? Likewise, my perspective on the matter is one of many different perspectives, including perspectives from people who are far more knowledgeable and experienced than I am. What can I say that won't come across as precocious in this situation? The Wheel of the Year keeps on turning and one season subtly changes into the next with no end, and growth, knowledge, and human experience constantly shift and transform over time. There is no definitive conclusion, but there are flashes of insight and growth that can be observed, especially when you look back to the past.

I do believe that a nature-centered spirituality is central to my own well-being and that by observing the cycles of nature we are able to gain insight into the cycles of our own lives—we are part of nature, and if we observe patterns in countless other parts of nature, it stands to reason that we will observe them in ourselves if we have the courage to look for them. Death strikes me as a prominent example of this phenomenon—as humans, we tend to hold death at arm's length and are able to acknowledge death when it occurs in nonhuman contexts. Most people have little difficulty acknowledging food webs and the fact that in order for ecosystems to endure for any length of time, death and decay are necessary to keep nutrients cycling between organisms effectively. At the same time, the idea of ourselves or our loved ones dying is something that most people tend to struggle with. The recognition that death, decay, and eventual rebirth (albeit perhaps in a different form) are parts of a natural cycle that should be observed and celebrated rather than avoided is something that can be more fully developed through the Sun Path and observation of seasonal rituals.

As you may have noticed, I largely avoided discussing gods, goddesses, and lore in this essay, and this is somewhat intentional. I believe that there is Something far bigger than humans in the universe, but I think you can follow seasonal celebrations regardless of your beliefs on this matter and still benefit from them, and I'm still in the process of exploring what this Something is. I can say unequivocally that following the Sun Path and writing this reflection has been a positive experience for me, and I hope that this article will provide others with positive opportunities for growth and development, as well.

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Hellbender Metamorphosis

Elmdea Adams

Elmdea Adams lives on a windy ridge near Berkeley Springs, WV, where dragon's-breath fogs rise from the valleys. Her previous adventures include Fortune 500 management and work as a past-life therapist, which are more related to one another than one might initially think. She is an OBOD Ovate and member of the pan-Druid Sun Spiral Grove. Her work can be found at Elmdea Adams (www.ElmdeaAdams.com).

About this tale: “Hellbender Metamorphosis” began innocently enough when a friend posted a picture of an old sycamore near the Shenandoah River. A week or so later, an article about the decline of hellbender populations showed up. The image of that sycamore with its gaping “mouth” came back to mind, and I knew it and the hellbenders had a story to tell. In 2018, “Hellbender Metamorphosis” won First Place in the West Virginia Writers Annual Writing Contest in the Emerging Writers Prose category.

Soft, padded feet gripping and releasing, the old hellbender, Durus, moved steadily across the smooth creek-bottom rocks. The water flowing past his side gills and over his back felt slightly different, as it had for many days. It was past time to check the eggs. They were likely the last hatching he would protect and raise.

He'd dreamed last night like he hadn't dreamed in years. Helpless and horrified, he watched water eat through a dam, sending poisonous coal ash into a tributary of Owl Creek. As Durus dreamed, he'd known with certainty he was watching an event that happened weeks ago. He'd seen the evidence and denied it.

Waters once clear were grayer by the day. The normal fresh tang of new grasses, old leaves, compact mud, and smooth stones were overridden by the sharp taste of coal ash. Safri-na, his egg partner, was no longer willing and lithe. He'd seen her a few days ago, her beautiful, orange-dappled skin stiff and still, her eyes dull and unseeing. Pressing his snout against her confirmed life was gone from her. Just as it was gone from all the others he'd encountered in the past few days. He was the last of his kind, the last of the Owl Creek hellbenders, until his hatchlings emerged from their egg sacks.

He slowed, laboring for each breath. The bottom rocks were daily more slippery with settling grit, the same ashy silt that clogged the pores of his skin and slowed the life-giving flow of air to his body. Even a sigh required more than he could give.

Owl Creek was dying. The surface skaters were few, as were frogs and fish. He wondered if tadpoles and minnows could live in these waters, let alone hellbender hatchlings. The green water mosses were dull gray, stiffening with the debris caught in their fragile tendrils.

He pulled himself into the egg hollow he'd used all his life. He was stunned when he saw the eggs. The clear round shapes were smothering under a dull gray blanket, the soft gold glow of new life in their centers hidden. He swung his head back and forth above them and was engulfed in a cloud of acrid waste. His mind reeled and went blank, then inched its way back, bringing with it the memories and sorrow as the water carried the silt cloud away.

One egg, one alone, still glowed golden among its nine and twenty suffocated siblings. Durus knew what must be done but doubted he had the strength. He shook his skin, sending another, smaller cloud down the creek. He opened his wide mouth and scooped up the golden, glowing egg, along with a few of its neighbors. He curled his tongue back toward the top of his palate, cradling the living and the dead, and closed his mouth.

He made his way down Owl Creek, using as many eddies and clear water spaces as he could. The pervasive load of coal ash in the water still settled on his air-breathing hide. He repeatedly shivered and shook it off. It was a day that ate time and stole strength and focus. He crept along, never pausing, ignoring his exhaustion. He knew where he needed to go.

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He'd been a young one, not more than a year or two out of the egg sac, when he first came to the coming-out-of-the-water place. Elder Scane had led Durus and three other curious younglings on the down-creek journey. When they arrived, Elder Scane gave them the "listen" look they'd learned to obey.

Elder Scane had been clear: "Our closest kin are the salamanders, who live also in the dry world. We're hellbenders. We once walked both worlds with ease, but water called us home. Let your body remember how to breathe dry-world air and walk in that heavy world."

Elder Scane paused, small bright eyes looking at them one by one, making sure they were listening. "When entering the dry world, you must stop and let your nostrils be parched tubes for dry-world air as your body rediscovers the breathing sacs that wait within your chest."

Young Durus had crawled up the muddy embankment, sticking his head through the surface of the water. He burned inside. He made himself stay, remembering what Elder Scane had just told them.

"Wait for the burning to stop. Then bring the rest of your body into the dry world, called land. Once you are on land, always be aware of the world above. There are large flapping ones who can grab you in sharp claws and carry you away. Be very still if one is near. Their names are hawk and eagle."

A second breath of dry-world air assaulted his body, and a third and a fourth. By the fifth breath, the burning and the craving for water-air diminished.

That was when the magic began. He padded beside the creek, intrigued by the weight of his slender, flat body. There were bright colors here he had no names for. There were small flappy ones above, but no large ones. He continued on, drawn to a large, tall object. The word for it filtered into his memory, memory passed down through generation upon generation of hellbender: tree, a Sycamore tree. As he looked up and up and up into its green moving spaces, it spoke to him, mind to mind.

Remember me. Remember this place.

Young Durus shook his head. There was a gaping mouth in the side of the tree, just above the ground. He shook his head again, and the mouth was gone. The smooth white bark gleamed. If he didn't know better, he'd have said it winked.

###

Old Durus recalled that journey of his young self many times during the long day. The voice of the Sycamore was louder every time he reached that part of the remembering. His body wanted to just stop and rest. The tree voice wouldn't let him. It had added words: *I am the refuge, the place of remembering.*

Durus wasn't sure if that was wishful thinking or real. It didn't matter. He kept going. Evening was coming on when he reached the coming-out-of-the-water place. His weary body was craving more air than he could absorb from the murky waters. He shambled and stumbled into a small pool. There was less ash floating in this small oasis. He rested as his water air craving was satisfied in this cleaner water. He doubted he could continue, but knew he must.

He raised his head and watched the rising of the quarter moon, its soft light sparkling and moving across the surface of the water and breaking up in the ripples. It was time. He took one last water-world breath and began his ascent of the coming-out-of-the-water place. When he was half in water and half in the dry world, he stopped.

Just as he remembered, his nostrils and the chest sacs burned as dry-world air entered. The skin of his upper body rippled and tightened and his sense of smell diminished. Through it all, he focused on the gentle pulsing of the gold, glowing egg in his mouth telling him it still lived. He kept his jaw muscles as limp as he could, despite the strong urge to clamp down at the dry agony. He was grateful for the wisdom teachings of Elder Scane. Durus knew the progression of changes his body would undergo.

After the fifth breath, the burning stopped, as it had those many years ago. One moment it was there, the next it wasn't. He pulled his body fully into the dry world. He wondered again if he could do what needed done. His legs quivered as the overworked muscles bore his now-weighty body. The joints of his legs, knees, and ankles twinged and creaked, crying out deep aches that had been mere whispers in Owl Creek.

He built a wall in his mind, a wall of river rock. Green water moss filled the gaps and bonded with stone, waving the water around and over the wall. He put the pain, the ache, the exhaustion, the doubt, on the other side. Another step, then another. With steady, painful steps, he walked beside the creek, to the Sycamore, his skin dryer and dryer.

A dark shadow passed overhead. Durus dropped and melded into the ground. *Not now, not so close to Sycamore!* rose the silent scream in his mind. The shadow sketched lazy circles above. He closed his eyes, so nothing could gleam in the dark, thankful his skin had shed its water glisten. His exhaustion took over and he napped.

He woke with a shudder. The eggs? Were they still there? He carefully moved his tongue and felt the pulse of the living egg. He tapped one short finger on the ground beneath him. Yes, it was there. He was awake and alive. He remembered the big flapping thing. He tilted his head, cautiously opened one small eye, and looked up. The quarter moon brushed the star-pricked sky with a faint glow, its weak light casting faint shadows on the ground. Durus watched the shadows shorten as the moon crawled up the sky. All he saw were moon, stars, and cloud wisps.

It was safe to move again. His muscles had stiffened while he napped, and the pain was greater than any he had ever known. So great it dropped him back onto his belly. That was the moment when he almost gave up.

His mouth began to clench, and he felt the pressure of the eggs. All this for one? What was the good of that? There'd be no mate for this one, ever. No matter. He had to shelter and protect it. He again rose from the ground. He would continue. He put the pain, the doubts, the fears behind the rock wall in his mind. Just one more step. Just one. Then another.

Smell had returned while he napped, but he knew little of what any of it meant. When he thought he couldn't take even one more step, there was a moistness that invited, that was familiar. He drew in another breath. Yes, it was the ancient Sycamore. Relief rippled up and down his body as he followed the scent to the base of Sycamore.

I am here, Revered Elder, with the last of my kind, unborn and protected in my mouth, he mind-whispered, keeping the strength that using his voice would require.

Who? Who's that? The rumbling voice rose through Durus's feet and entered his head, filling the world.

It is me, Revered Elder. Your small hellbender brother, Durus. We met long ago. You told me to remember this place, and I have remembered. He was grateful mind whispers couldn't tremble.

There was long silence. The last threads of strength left Durus's legs, and he collapsed in front of Sycamore. He had had to try, even if it came to naught.

Hmmmmmm. I remember now. You are the last of your kin, you say?

I am, except for one small precious egg I carry in my mouth, Durus said.

Ah. Get yourself back into the far corner here, quickly.

As Durus watched, the tree opened a hole at its base, like a frog grinning wide to catch a fly. Gathering his last shreds of strength, Durus took one step and then another. He kept the agonizing pain behind his mind wall, and moved his legs again, and again, mindless and driven. Soon, he could rest. Death held no fear now that he was here.

A rippling, deep pool appeared at the back of the tree hollow. Durus gratefully slipped into it and settled on the bottom. His muscles whimpered relief as his skin sucked in the water air his body craved. Lying there, resting as he hadn't rested in many a year, he reveled in the clear sweet flow of clean water. Until that moment, he hadn't realized just how long Owl Creek had been dying.

He opened his mouth a crack, letting this water move across the precious egg. He watched, amazed, as rocks arranged themselves into a sheltering hollow perfect for his soon-to-be hatchling. Energized with hope, he crawled across the firm sands and water-smoothed rocks of the pool bottom. When he reached the hollow, he opened his wide mouth, uncurled his tongue, and gently pushed the still glowing gold egg and its dead companions into the sheltering basin.

Darkness swept through him.

There is one thing more for you to do.

Durus could barely shake his head, he was so tired. *What?*

Call to your kin. Show them the way.

I am the last from Owl Creek. There are no others.

Your call will go beyond your home waters. Call. They wait.

Durus expanded the ruffled fringes running down his sides between front and back legs, taking in more water air. He sent out the call. *Hellbender kin. Your eggs will perish in the dying creeks and rivers. Bring them here, to this place of clear water and protection.*

In his mind, he was Owl Creek and the eddies and hollows leading to the coming-out-of-the-water place. He was the journey to the Sycamore and safety. He sent the images as he had sent the call. He sent a final flash of carrying the eggs in his mouth and then fell into the blank dark, taking the memory of that one glowing, living, egg with him into near-dreamless sleep.

###

How long he slept he never knew, exactly. He did know it had been lifetimes upon lifetimes of his kind. Flashes of dreams faded before he could grasp them. Cracking open an eye, he saw gold, glowing eggs. He nodded and fell asleep again. Sometime later, his body twitched.

Eggs? He'd only brought one. He was dreaming. His eyes snapped open. No, no he wasn't dreaming. Eggs glowed with golden life, near to hatching. He lifted his head and saw a hellbender, and another, and another. They, too, appeared to be awakening from a long sleep.

Revered Elder, I, his mind faltered, then he continued. I do not understand what I am seeing.

You have slept long and well. These are your kin who heeded your call. They came with their eggs. Here you all slept, outside of time.

Durus took in the widened eyes and extended side ruffles of the seven hellbenders.

"Do you hear something?" he asked them.

They nodded.

"It's the voice of our Revered Elder, who has sheltered us through the turnings of the world and time," he said.

You have rested well. All is well. The Revered Elder's voice was softer, and there was, perhaps, a tinge of amusement in the lilt of her thought.

Durus stretched his body, noticing it felt young and lithe. From the surprised looks on the other hellbenders' faces, they were having similar experiences.

A definite chuckle reached their minds. *Feels good, does it not? I, too, have been doing some stretching.* The Revered Elder paused. *Go look at the world outside.*

Our eggs. Our hatchlings. They are safe here?

They are safe, Durus. They are safe. As are we all, she said.

Durus stood, reveling in the ease of movement. His skin rippled up and down his body. He loosened and contracted his muscles, settling the folds and ruffles in accustomed order, and climbed out of the pool. Halfway to the opening of the great hollow, he stopped midstep. There hadn't been the painful transition from water to land, not even a twinge. Shaking himself in wonder, he continued.

Once outside, he curled his legs under him and settled to the ground, taking in a world crisp and brilliant through clear, sweet air. The chitter of insects, slither of snakes, whisper of grasses, canticle of birds, breath of animals, clatter of hooves, rustle of leaves, gurgle of creeks, welcomed him to a world reclaimed and renewed.

He rose and turned to look at Sycamore. It was majestic, covered in flakes of white and brown bark. The hollow at the base belied the cavernous space it led to. What was confusing was that the tree seemed smaller, younger, than when he'd staggered into it, dreamtimes ago.

I am the keeper of memories, memories of stone and water, of earth and root. I am the one who unlocks what was locked, in the time when Earth was dying. I am the one who revives the sleepers, who awakens the memories of living, of life. Rest a while longer, here in the air and sun.

Durus felt the sun soak into his hide, his bones. His eyes closed. Sometime later, he woke up, surprised to find himself on land, in sunshine.

The eggs! Durus stumbled and lurched in his hurry to return to the pool in Sycamore's hollow. He needed to see the eggs.

The Revered Elder chuckled. *Wait, Durus. Step back a little.*

Reluctantly, stomach churning, Durus did.

Movement flashed at the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw a congress of hellbender hatchlings, flipping their tails, wide mouths spread wider in excited grins, prancing from behind Sycamore. They were the colors of all the hellbenders Durus had known: rich browns dappled with bright oranges, greenish tans with dark brown spots, dark reddish browns with dark smudges, grays sporting black patches, and one rare solid black. Their small round eyes glittered on the sides of their wide snouts. The ruffles on the sides of their flat bodies bounced as they rushed forward.

For a short while, there was a tangle of hatchlings and full-grown hellbenders, cavorting in the grass, slim bodies slipping under and over, around and back. Then they just lay as they were, entangled piles of gleeful life.

Catching his breath, Durus had to ask. "Revered Elder, what happened while we slept?"

Remember. I hold all memories of land, root, and rock. We breathe now the air of long ago, of time before the blood and bones of Earth were scraped and sucked from Her. We are now come full circle. For many ages, I waited to greet you, Durus, that I could ask you to remember, when you were still a youngling. I had met you, eons before, in this time we now breathe. You, and these with you, are your own ancestors. For you to be there in what is now the future, I had to bring you to this past. There are few humans now. Their time will come later. You and yours will have many generations of beauty and health. She fell silent.

Durus waited. Then waited some more. His curiosity won out over respectful waiting for the Revered Elder to speak again.

“How did you move us back in time?”

Revered Elder shook her branches in the windless air. *Magic. Earth magic, life magic.* She paused, leaves still rustling. *I tapped the power of water and sun, of soil and air, weaving, intertwining, merging, and releasing.* At her last word, leaves and branches stilled.

In the silence, Durus knew that was as much explanation as he would get. He realized he didn't really care if he ever knew more. He was alive, surrounded by his kin, playing and moving.

He and the seven older hellbenders were very busy for many years, exploring the lands, ponds, creeks, and all that grew in and on them. They taught the impetuous young ones what was needed.

There were two differences in this ancient world that never grew old. Hellbenders now moved easily from land to water and back again without pain or effort, at ease in both. They also heard all the things in the world: plants, animals, rocks, trees, bugs—everything. In the time they had come from, they had heard the susurrations of water-world beings, but not the words. Now all spoke to each other, in one joyful language of community, love, and unity. It got a tad noisy at times, but that was preferable to the silence that had almost swallowed them all.

Thrice Through the Woods: My Decade as a Candidate in the AODA

Tree

Tree is currently working on his second-degree studies with the AODA and is pretty sure it won't take him another ten years. He lives in northeastern Illinois, where he is self-employed and spends most of his time outside. He can usually be found in the woods taking photos or playing disc golf.

When you're on an eleven-mile hike through ice- and snow-covered woods with sheer drop-offs marking one edge of your path and dense forest marking the other, you can pretty much only think about one thing: where to place your next step. There are significant consequences for doing anything else.

Over that type of terrain and distance, something interesting happens to your mind. Part of your brain is on high alert. It's constantly scanning for danger. Potentially lethal falling icicles, ankle-twisting loose footing, and detour-inducing swaths of slick ice are just a few of the hazards to be wary of.

The hypervigilant part of your brain that keeps you from dying is also sending signals to all the nonessential areas—specifically, the segments of your brain that are normally filled with ridiculous chatter, the ones that are always yammering on about really important things like wondering why no one noticed you wore new shoes to work yesterday.

Aside from simply being out in the woods (which is where I'd *always* rather be), this is one of my favorite things about long hikes. And even though I didn't always realize why, it's the reason I've been going on long hikes for as long as I can remember. There's almost nowhere I'd rather be than deep in the woods, camera in one hand, trail map in the other.

I've carried a camera regularly ever since I chose photography as a spiral of study (now called an exploration) for my Candidate curriculum. The trail map is there largely so I don't get lost in the woods and die, a genuine possibility considering my complete lack of a sense of direction.

Most good trail maps have several other things in common. They always try to give an idea of how difficult each route is, they clearly show the trailheads (the beginning and end of each route), and they also usually have at least a few little camera icons scattered along each trail. These icons indicate the scenic overlooks or areas of interest along the way.

When I joined the AODA a little over ten years ago, my tremendous love of the outdoors was the driving force. Over those ten years, it's during those long hikes that I've made the most meaningful amount of progress on my path as a Druid. During those hikes is also where my biggest challenges presented themselves. In fact, it's in how I approached both the hikes and my druidry that has taught me one of my most valuable lessons along the way.

Over the last ten years, the frequency with which I hiked and the attention I paid my AODA studies ebbed and flowed in tandem across several long cycles. As in nature, there were both fertile and fallow periods. So even though I joined the order over ten years ago, it wasn't until recently that I finally asked for and passed my first-degree exam.

When I look at my hiking alongside my druidry, I think I get more out of both now than I ever did before. The hiker I was ten years ago is not the hiker I am today. The Druid I was ten years ago is certainly not the Druid I am today.

Ten years ago, my approach to hiking was marked by a ravenous desire to hike every path and trail I could find. I searched the internet, bought hiking books, and asked park rangers where the best trails were located. I compiled a list, put checkboxes next to each trail, and proceeded to hike each one with enthusiasm.

And check them off I did—one after the other, trail after trail, hike after hike.

At that time, I cared most about the trailhead markers. My primary concern was how quickly I could get from the beginning to the end. How quickly could I complete each loop or trail, and how fast could I hike all the trails on my list? That was my goal, and I enjoyed it.

Then I ran out of checkboxes and nearby trails to hike. I lost my interest in hiking and spent far less time outside. Instead, I found myself spending more time inside in front of the TV. The quality of my life, slowly but surely, changed.

Before I knew it, I was feeling unfulfilled and listless. I wasn't hiking. I wasn't spending time outside. Worst of all, at the time, I couldn't connect those two things together. I didn't realize that my happiness and fulfillment correlated to my time outside. I didn't consciously realize that hiking made me happy, and I certainly couldn't have told you why it had that effect.

This is almost exactly how I started on my path with the AODA. I found the curriculum online and was immediately drawn to its call to spend dedicated time outside. I instantly related to the connection with nature. I felt very deeply that something about druidry was right for me and my life. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I knew it was something I wanted to pursue.

So, in the same way I had approached hiking, I made my list of the things I'd need to do to advance within the AODA. I put checkboxes next to each item on that list: eight books, three lifestyle changes, daily meditation, weekly time outside, and chosen spirals of photography and divination. I then came up with a list of activities related to each and put checkboxes next to them. Looking back, that list looked eerily similar to my original list of hiking trails.

Eagerly, I went to work. I was excited and enthusiastic about this new thing called druidry that I had found and what it might bring to my life! I had high hopes that the path laid out in AODA would pull me out of the funk I was in and back into a more meaningful life.

So over the next ten or eleven months, I completed each item on my list. I did all the

things. I read all the books. I completed all of the prescribed activities. One after another, I checked off each and every box.

And then, the same thing that had happened with my hiking happened with my druidry. I had checked all the boxes and run out of things to cross off my list. So I stopped. It wasn't a conscious decision; I just kind of faded away from it.

I went back to my couch and my TV and a big bag of Doritos, feeling just as unfulfilled as I had before I started. While I'd picked up some amazing habits along the way (I continued to meditate daily and pursue photography, for example), not much of the druidry stuck with me. Not much of my life was changed. I certainly didn't feel the fulfillment or the spiritual enlightenment that I thought I would have once all those little boxes were checked.

Without putting too much thought into it, I relocated druidry to the back of my mind (right next to my love of hiking), still percolating just beneath the surface but truly out of sight for the time being. I went on about my life.

A couple years later, I found myself still on the couch but longing to be outside again. Truly desiring to go back to the hiking trails again. But instead of hiking a long list of trails with checkboxes next to them, I went back to my list of trails and tried to think about the ones that I really enjoyed. The ones where I could take my time. The ones where I could hike and look around and truly enjoy nature and being outside instead of being in front of the TV.

It was on one of those hikes that I realized my initial mistake in my approach to both hiking and druidry. Standing under an immense oak tree, trying to figure out how old it might be, the reason just kind of popped into my head.

I had just been trying to get through to the end of things where I thought the payoff would be. I was trying to check things off a list and get to a destination. The problem came once I arrived. The destination, that completed list of checked-off boxes, meant that my journey, as I was defining it, was over. I was walking right past all these cool old oak trees, for example.

I realized that I hadn't taken time along each journey to look around, see what was around me, and truly enjoy being on the path. This was true of both my hiking and my druidry.

So I picked back up with both. This time I was intent on stopping along the path. I was determined to look out at nature and enjoy it, learn from it, and see it as it truly was. This time I would not quickly speed past everything on a mad dash for the finish line as I had done before.

For a while, this made me happy. This brought some sense of meaning and enjoyment to my life that had been missing while in front of the TV. I felt like I had found something. That I had discovered the meaning of the often-overused maxim "It's all about the journey, not the destination."

This was both an important time and an important lesson in my life. I wasn't getting any younger after all, and figuring this whole life thing out was beginning to be more and more important to me. I really felt that my time spent in the woods





hiking and my time spent with druidry would help me figure things out.

This marked the beginning of a time marked by a completely different approach to things. This was when I would stand in nature, looking out upon it and truly trying to learn the lessons that it was showing me. What could the trees teach me? What could I see from those scenic overlooks along the way? What could I learn by standing in the natural world and taking my time to observe it?

I really thought I had figured things out. Unfortunately, while this was a great start to my second go-around at this whole druidry thing, it didn't end up keeping me engaged for very long.

Instead of looking at my map and trying to get through to each trail's end, I paid attention to where those little camera icons were instead. I hiked to those camera spots, stopped, and looked around. I took my time. I told

myself that I was enjoying the journey and not worried about the destination.

I made a concerted effort to find the little camera icons that appeared not only on the hiking trails but also along my path with the AODA. I looked hard for the things I had blown past before, the things I should stop to take more time with this second run through.

I was certain I had figured it out. I mean, surely I was about to experience the epiphanies that I kept reading about online, right? I would have spiritual moments in the woods where I was touched by gods and talked to by animals. Those moments should have been waiting for me at the little spots marked by cameras on the map, right? Especially if I made a point to hike to each of them and stop to look around.

Nope. Didn't happen. And I hiked to a lot of those little spots marked with cameras. I went back through the AODA coursework and took my time making sure I earned each box I checked off my curriculum. Again, I did a lot of things, but I was still unfulfilled and uncertain of the path I had chosen.

I see now that I didn't realize that the little camera spots were simply more destinations. The arbitrary points I'd picked within the AODA curriculum were just more goals. *I still wasn't enjoying the journey.* At that time, I didn't even fully understand the difference between journey and destination. That was a lesson I wouldn't learn until much later.

So after a second go-round of intense and regular hiking and study on my path in the AODA, I slowly faded from both. I found myself on the couch more often and outside less. I found myself still unfulfilled and continuing to seek answers. Maybe I'd find them if I binge-watched just one more season of *Merlin*? It couldn't hurt to try, right?

I found myself puzzled and wondering why it was that I knew that I *should* be hiking and studying druidry, yet I didn't really want to. I told myself that I wanted to, but my be-

havior was speaking for me. I wasn't making the time for it in my life. And I wasn't making it near as important as I knew deep down inside it should be. I was more than a little upset with my lack of "progress."

Internally frustrated and unfulfilled, I pushed druidry to the back of my mind once again. To percolate. To simmer. To marinate. And little did I know, to mature to the point that would finally bring me to where I am today.

The pandemic has certainly affected everyone differently. For me, it wasn't nearly as bad as for some others. One of the things that I had kept since my earliest days with the AODA was photography. It was a chosen spiral and a course of study that I loved. It's a rare occasion that you'll find me outside without some type of camera in my hand.

So when the restaurants and movie theaters closed and our ability to go out and spend the day doing social things ended, I headed out with my camera. I went out to the woods, wetlands, and forest preserves. Anywhere I could go to take pictures, I went.

And it was there that I rediscovered my love of hiking. It was also there that I rediscovered my druidry. And this time, I was coming from a completely different place for both of them.

I remember distinctly walking along the path by my house, not going anywhere in particular. No destination in mind, just walking. I needed to get outside, so I had just started walking.

The sun's rays were cutting through the clouds (crepuscular rays, my girlfriend tells me they are called). The last vestiges of winter's cold were stinging in my face and turning my nose numb. I was enjoying myself. I had a smile on my face and nothing to do that day but simply be. Out of nowhere, without explanation, the Sphere of Protection ritual came to mind. I had an unexplainable yet overwhelming urge to perform it. Right there, as I was walking.

Even though it had been years, it came back surprisingly easily. Almost too easily. It wasn't exact. It wasn't on script, according to JMG and the *Druid Magic Handbook*. But it was the SOP. It was me acknowledging the elements and energies of spirit and Awen around me. It was me invoking the qualities of those elements that I wanted in my life and banishing the qualities of those elements I could do without. It was crude and rudimentary, but it was still the SOP!

Where'd that come from? What prompted that? I didn't know. But what I did know is that I wanted to continue. Not because there was a checkbox. Not because it was me trying to pursue a degree. But because it felt right. It felt comforting. It put me at peace, and it centered me in the world around me. It was just something I knew that I needed and wanted to do.

This became a daily practice. Every morning, I would get up, get dressed for whatever the weather was, and I'd head out along the path that starts right across from my home. I'd walk through the wetlands, across the field behind them, and into the woods to a spot by a small stream. I didn't know it then, but this would become my anchor spot, the spot that I returned to day after day after day.





Again, not because it was a checkbox, not because I was trying to study druidry, but because I needed to be here. I needed to stand on this spot with the stream in front of me and the forest behind. I needed to stand here watching the birds. Watching the sandhill cranes fish in the stream. Watching the ducks swim. Watching the frogs bask in the sun, each on their own little rock. This is where I needed to be.

As the days and weeks progressed, I added a little more to each hike. I started to learn the names of the birds along the way. I began to learn the names of the wildflowers that were blooming in the spring and summer. I started to learn the types of trees that were in the woods. I began to truly learn about the local ecology around me: no checkboxes, no specified courses in druidry, just a driving need to know. I wanted to become closer to the things that I was hiking and walking through.

If you'd asked me at the time what I was doing, I couldn't have explained it. I couldn't have articulated why I was taking these walks every morning. I couldn't have explained why I started studying the world around me more closely. It was just me finding my way in the world. It was me finding my place. And the more I did that, the more I felt at home.

It's been a little over ten months since that first hike, that first spontaneous SOP, and I haven't missed a day since. Not a day. Rain, snow, sleet, ice, nothing has kept me inside on a single day. Not because I'm trying to check a box, not because I'm trying to complete a path, but because that's where I belong.

You see, when I first started hiking, I was simply trying to hike all the nearby trails. I was trying to complete each one and check the box next to it. That's what I had also done with my druidry. I was just trying to complete the steps. I wasn't actually getting much out of them. I was only doing them for the sake of doing them. For the sake of getting to the end and hoping something magical awaited.

The second time I picked things up, a sense of subject and object permeated both my hiking and my druidry. Here was me. There was nature. I wanted to go and get something from it: two separate things, one observing the other. One with a sense of dominion and control over what the other would reveal.

While this is an okay way to hike, it is not an effective way to try and become closer to the natural world around you. It's certainly not an effective way to get much out of the path of druidry. Quite the opposite.

This is why my third attempt, my third walk through the woods, my third time standing among the oaks, has been so meaningful.

I am not a person walking through the forest. I am part of the forest. I belong there. The water in the stream is the same water that lives inside of me. The air that softly bends the treetops is the same air that fills my lungs. The same solid stuff of earth that makes up the rocks and soil beneath my feet are the very building blocks of my body.

I do not need to seek out a spot with a camera icon to find beauty. There are an infinite number of those little camera icons, and there is beauty in and around us at all times.

The most important place I found one of those icons was inside myself. Just as the trees and the woods and the animals and the birds and the flowers around me are made of all of those things, so am I. I am not separate from the natural world around me; I'm a distinct and integrated part of it!

So here I am, on an eleven-mile hike, a sheer drop off to my left and dense woods to my right. Step after step after step. Each of those steps an infinity of possibility. Each of those moments more than I ever need in a lifetime. Here I am hiking in the woods, a Druid. Here I am pursuing my path not because there's a path on a map or a series of checkboxes in a book but because this is where I belong. This is where I feel most at home. This is where I am discovering exactly who and what I am in the world. This is me, finally on my path for the right reasons and staying there because of them.

I write this not from a place of trying to boast of my spiritual growth or to show how clever I am that I've figured out some small part of my life. I don't write this to show what a bright and shining example of a Druid I am. This is my path. It's unique to me. Your mileage will certainly vary.

I hope that by sharing why it took me ten years to get here, maybe I can shave some time and possibly some anxiety from other people's paths.

I hear and see so many people talking about checking off boxes. Then I hear and see those same people wondering where the spiritual epiphanies are supposed to be or where the moments of beauty are hiding. I'm here to recommend that we all stop living our lives to check off boxes. To stop worrying about how short or long our paths are.

Do I wish it hadn't taken me over ten years to get here, just finished with my first degree and slowly starting on my second? No. I love the place I am today, and the only way to get here was the rough and rocky trail I see behind me. Every step played a part. Every delay served its purpose.

How do we stop the worry? How do we stop looking at how long we've been on the path and wondering why we aren't further along? We must first truly grasp why we are on the path in the first place. It wasn't until I found my why (really, it found me) that I finally made any "progress." It wasn't until I let go of my quest for a destination that I finally found one. Get out there and put one foot in front of the other. Be open to the experiences around you and enjoy each step along the way.

When it comes to the AODA and its curriculum, everyone will progress at their own pace. And that pace is what's right for them and their path. It shouldn't cause any stress or anxiety.

So here I stand at the trailhead that marks the beginning of my journey as an apprentice within the AODA. Will this leg of my journey take ten years? I don't know. And I honestly don't care. What I care about is the journey. I'm excited about each step that's to come, out in nature, a tiny part of a larger and ineffable whole.



The Way Things Are

Mike Roberts

Mike joined the AODA in 2016, after several years of dabbling with seasonal ceremonies and a life-time of sensing sacredness in nature—mostly from the comfort of the indoors. He has tried to remedy that chiefly in his Berkeley, California, backyard, growing vegetables, making medicine, talking to bees, and hugging the local live oaks. He is currently an Ovate Companion in AODA. A musician and father of two, he tries (with varying degrees of success) to incorporate his Druid practice into his writing, his family traditions, his Christian roots, and (obviously) his affinity for Taoism and mindfulness meditation. He can be reached at mike@hotmike.com.

The Tao is the way things are,
which you can't depart from even for one instant.
If you could depart from it,
it wouldn't be the Tao.

Before sorrow, anger,
longing, or fear have arisen,
you are in the center.
That center is the root of the universe;
that harmony is the Tao,
which reaches out to all things.
—Chung Yung, I (ascribed to Tzu-ssu, c. 483–c. 402 BCE)¹

The center abides within me at all times. It's called the breath.
A thread connects me to all living beings, at all times. It's called the breath.
I am, right now. I honor what is, right now, through the breath.

I became a Druid, first and foremost, in order to know and to honor nature. I came for nature in the sense we would typically associate with druidry: trees, birds, mountains, rivers, and the ecosystems that bind them together. But as my practice has deepened, my under-

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From *The Second Book of the Tao*, adapted and translated by Stephen Mitchell (Penguin, 2009), 2–4.

standing of Nature has broadened to encompass its more fundamental sense: Nature as *What Is*. Nature as *The Way Things Are*.

To know Nature is to know what is eternal—Awen, the Tao, the All—while remaining awake and alive to what is constantly in flux: the ceaseless ebb and flow, the tension and release, the constant motion. Unceasing, just like the breath. In these turbulent times, can we find peace in knowing that change is the only constant, and always has been? Can we feel the eternal and the flux in harmony, hand in hand?

Can we connect with *this* world—not the one we want, but the one that *is*—right now?

I self-initiated as an AODA Candidate at about the same time I decided to get serious about meditation. It wasn't so much the curriculum requirements that motivated me, nor my long admiration of Eastern philosophy. The real reason was much more mundane: I felt anxious. Pretty much all the time. The disruptions occurring in the world, from political upheaval to climate change, were more than my nervous system could handle. I needed help.

Mindfulness meditation—the simple act of being aware and connecting with the breath—has been a lifeline. Not a panacea, by any means; the world is still crazy and I still worry. But as a means to maintain some equilibrium in a way that is both simple and incredibly profound, I know of nothing better. And for a Druid who loves the Tao, the subject of breath offers a long and rich history in both philosophy and ritual practice, with myriad connections to natural history and ecology. As I engaged in my second degree reading, exploring works like *The Kybalion*, *The Druid Revival Reader*, and *Basic Ecology*, as well as Druid texts like *The Dolmen Arch*, I discovered some amazing parallels with my favorite Taoist works. For a humble meditator, it's a treasure trove of insight. Breath, it would seem, is fundamental to everything.

Let's explore.

I grew up with a Judeo-Christian understanding of God. But that classic image of a big, bearded dude sitting on a cloud never quite felt right to me. Maybe it's my many viewings of the Star Wars franchise, but my instinct has always tended toward a belief in a singular, all-powerful force that pervades everything—us included—and is essentially incomprehensible to the human mind.

So when I encountered the Tao, I thought, *yes*:

The Tao is called the Great Mother:
empty yet inexhaustible,
it gives birth to infinite worlds.

It is always present with you.
You can use it any way you want.²

And when I encountered The All in *The Kybalion*, I again thought, *yes*:

The ALL is Infinite Living Mind—the Illumined call it SPIRIT!³

And in *The Dolmen Arch*, this explanation of Awen:

Awen causes the Cosmos to arise from chaos—it causes manifestation to arise from the unmanifest—it causes everything to arise from infinite nothing. . . . Greater than the galaxies, this same principle is at one and the same moment present to each individual being within the universe as a source of inspiration and insight.⁴

Yes. God, Awen, the Tao, the All—different names, same essence. Ever-present, pure spirit.

I want to connect with this spirit. I want to feel it, to know it on whatever level I can.

But I am a creature of flesh and blood. I am small, I am ignorant, and I am mortal. How can I possibly touch the divine?

The ancient Romans left us a wonderful clue. The Latin word *spiritus* means both “spirit” and “breath.” Our breath connects us to the spirit within; practitioners of meditation have known this for millennia. As the Tao and others tell us, that spirit within us is divine spirit. Our breath literally connects us to the divine.

As we tune into our breath, nwyfre—the life force also known as qi or prana, among many other names in many cultures—flows through us, and through everything, like the lifeblood of the All. We have the opportunity to connect not only with the divine, but with all of creation: animals, plants, waves and tides, the turning of days and seasons, the revolution of the planets, and larger rhythms we can’t see or fathom.

Our breath moves in circles. Circles, it would seem, define our cosmos. In *Basic Ecology*, Ralph and Mildred Buchsbaum describe the “circular pathways” that are omnipresent in nature, “repeated in endlessly repetitive cycles.”⁵ Druid and Hermetic texts find these same circular pathways in the spiritual realm. Iolo Morganwg, in his ahistorical but inspired *Barddas*, outlines the Circles of Creation that “God caused every living and animate being should pass through,” from the cauldron of Annwn—the source of all that is—to the circle of Abred (incarnate life), to the circle of Gwynvydd (spiritual life), and on to Ceugant, the circle “which God alone could endure and traverse.”⁶ *The Dolmen Arch* defines an immutable Law of Circularity, and in so doing echoes Iolo’s description of a soul ascending through the Circles of Creation: “Everything moves in circles or spirals. Worlds, nations, peoples, and individuals travel in circles—the wise convert the cycles into spirals, and rise and rise by the same law that binds others to rise and fall.”⁷

3 William Walker Atkinson (writing as Three Initiates), *The Kybalion*, edited by Philip Deslippe, 87.

4 John Michael Greer, *The Dolmen Arch* (Azoth Press, 2020), 52.

5 Ralph Buchsbaum and Mildred Buchsbaum, *Basic Ecology* (Boxwood Press, 1957) 21.

6 Iolo Morganwg, “The Bards of the Island of Britain,” in *The Druid Revival Reader*, edited by John Michael Greer (Starseed, 2011), 71, 73.

7 Greer, *The Dolmen Arch*, 65.

The Kybalion specifically recognizes circularity as the breath of the divine: “Beginning with the manifestations of Spirit—of THE ALL—it will be noticed that there is ever the Outpouring and the Indrawing; the ‘Outbreathing and Inbreathing of Brahm,’ as the Brahmans word it.”⁸ Likewise, Owen Morgan, in “The Gods and Goddesses of the Druids,” relates how the goddess “Ced’s influence from below was supposed to be exercised by exhalations—the breathings, as it were, of the great Mother.”⁹ And when *The Dolmen Arch* goes on to describe the Cosmic Day and Night, an unfathomable span of time in which “Nwyfre emerges, strives, fulfills itself, and rests, in cycles beyond the reach of our present imaginative powers,”¹⁰ it sounds a lot like the breath of Awen: nwyfre in, nwyfre out, very long, very slow.

We breathe in waves—essentially, slow vibrations. Everything in the cosmos moves in waves, in vibrations fast and slow. “Nothing is at rest,” *The Kybalion* observes:

The differences between different manifestations of Matter, Energy, Mind, and even Spirit, result largely from varying rates of Vibration. From THE ALL, which is Pure Spirit, down to the grossest form of Matter, all is in vibration—the higher the vibration, the higher the position in the scale.¹¹

Science agrees. The author of *The Kybalion* observes that light waves move at different frequencies, one spectrum of which our eyes can perceive. But light vibrating at lower or higher frequencies—infrared and ultraviolet light—is invisible. We can’t see it, yet we accept that it exists. It’s not a big leap to consider that there may be something higher up the scale of matter that is likewise invisible to us, vibrating at such a tremendous rate that it ceases to be matter altogether and becomes what we might call spirit. Increase that vibration to an infinite rate, and what do you get? THE ALL:

THE ALL, in itself, manifests a constant vibration of such an infinite degree of intensity and rapid motion that it may be practically considered as at rest, the teachers directing the attention of the students to the fact that even on the physical plane a rapidly moving object (such as a revolving wheel) seems to be at rest.¹²

In its perfection, in its eternal nature, THE ALL alone transcends the motion that is fundamental to the universe it creates. As human beings, we can’t ever hope to achieve this transcendence. And yet, we still can connect with it on a level attainable to us. How is that?

The key can be found in the Principle of Polarity:

8 Atkinson, *The Kybalion*, 146

9 Owen Morgan, “The Gods and Goddesses of the Druids,” in *The Druid Revival Reader*, 140.

10 Greer, *The Dolmen Arch*, 153.

11 Atkinson, *The Kybalion*, 66.

12 Ibid., 131–132

The Hermetic Teachings are to the effect that the difference between things seemingly diametrically opposed to each other is merely a matter of degree. . . . They illustrate the Principle by showing that Heat and Cold are identical in nature, the differences being merely a matter of degree.¹³

The All, a single-celled organism, us: we all exist on the same scale, separated by degrees of vibration. Matter and Spirit, Above and Below, Known and Unknown: all fundamentally the same. I think about this as I follow my breath in meditation. My breath moves in a wave: up and down, in and out. I am vibrating at a very slow frequency—much slower than the spiritual plane, infinitely slower than the All. The spirit world vibrates far too fast for my usual senses to apprehend. But the more I practice, the more I believe I can feel this spiritual plane using senses entirely different from the usual ones.

The Kybalion further describes the wavelike motion of the universe with the Principle of Rhythm:

There is always an action and a reaction; an advance and a retreat; a rising and a sinking. This is in the affairs of the Universe, suns, worlds, men, animals, mind, energy, and matter. This law is manifest in the creation and destruction of worlds; in the rise and fall of nations; in the life of all things; and finally in the mental states of Man.¹⁴

Indeed, as we have noted previously, rhythm manifests all around us in nature, from tides and seasons to our own breath. Circular pathways are a fundamental aspect of this universe. So in connecting with the breath, we can connect with all that is. The Kybalion puts it right on the nose: “The ancient Hermetists use the word ‘Meditation’ in describing the process of the mental creation of the Universe in the Mind of THE ALL.”¹⁵

Eastern mindfulness meditation emphasizes awareness. We’re not trying to accomplish anything, really—certainly nothing so ambitious as “the mental creation of the Universe.” We’re simply trying to be, and be aware. That can feel mundane, but these texts remind us there is so much more beneath the surface. *The Kybalion* sees this:

In the degree that Man realizes the existence of the Indwelling Spirit immanent within his being, so will he rise in the spiritual scale of life. This is what spiritual development means—the recognition, realization, and manifestation of the Spirit within us.¹⁶

13 Ibid., 139–140

14 Ibid., 70

15 Ibid., 111

16 Ibid., 109–110.

In this, I consider mindfulness meditation to be one of the pillars of my Druid practice. Everything moves in circles. Everything moves in waves. In short, everything breathes. And as I undertake my morning meditation, the breath—*spiritus*—is my circular pathway to divine spirit: in, out, rest, repeat. Lately I have become fond of walking meditations. I walk very slowly around our kitchen island. In a circle. I may never understand exactly what the Indwelling Spirit is—as The *Kybalion* tells us, “The essential nature of The All is Unknowable”¹⁷—but I can know that it is there. I can feel its presence and its power within me. And I can bring that power to the Druid rituals and practices that further connect me with the divine and all that is: my daily Sphere of Protection, my seasonal ceremonies, my gardening practice.

Rudolf Steiner, in his essay “The Sun Initiation of the Druid Priests,” recognizes a fundamental connection between breath and ritual:

As the priest stood before his place of ritual, observing the nature of the sun, his breathing changed even as he observed. . . . He, with all that he was as a human being through his breath, lived in the influence of the sun. And the outcome was not abstract knowledge of some kind, but something that worked in him like the circulation of the blood, pulsating inwardly through him, kindling the human part of his being down to the physical level. Yet this penetration of the physical was spiritual at the same time, and the inner stimulation he experienced was really his knowledge.¹⁸

The knowledge we seek as Druids is not mere information. It is awareness of the divine within us and all around us. As William Stukely writes in “The Theology of the Druids”:

That there ever was one eternal, self-existent, unoriginated being, is the very first and most necessary truth, which the human mind can possibly, by contemplation and ratiocination, obtain.¹⁹

In *The Book of Druidry*, Ross Nichols shows how the great stone circles of the ancient Celts were really roots tapping into the Source:

Did not the World Ash have three roots? Avebury, with its wide layout and hill above, is our air-root; Stonehenge, with its deep mystique is the other-world root and Glaeston is the root of holy and eternal water.²⁰

17 Ibid., 84.

18 Rudolf Steiner, “The Sun Initiation of the Druid Priests,” in *The Druid Revival Reader*, 154.

19 Ibid., 11.

20 Ross Nichols, *The Book of Druidry* (Aquarian, 1975), 219.

We need these ways to bring the eternal down to earth—to connect to the divine through our material bodies and surroundings. “As above, so below,” states the Principle of Correspondence.²¹ Ritual is a wonderful way to accomplish this, but there is also tremendous potential in the more mundane aspects of our daily lives: growing and eating food, moving around, using energy. I can see why so many Druids find such satisfaction in the practice of permaculture. Central to permaculture is the concept of closed loops: self-sustaining natural systems where energy is generated and regenerated on-site, where nothing is wasted. Circular pathways—right in our very own homes! I’ve found that once our family started discovering ways to close the loop, we didn’t want to stop. We built raised beds to grow vegetables; we planted apple trees and many blueberry bushes: some of our food, at least, comes from right here. We started a worm composting bin for all those carrot tops and apple cores: the worms feast, and the castings go back in the garden. We installed a laundry-to-landscape graywater system: water stays on-site. We electrified our major appliances and put solar panels on the roof: homemade, 100% clean energy. It is imperfect—hardly a fully closed loop. But it’s a step in the right direction.

And highly addictive. Why? I think because it just feels so good to move the way the world is built to move—you guessed it: in a circle. Our Grand Archdruid Dana O’Driscoll hit the nail on the head when she gave the title *Sacred Actions* to her book on sustainable living. When we tune in to the fundamental character of this living world, we create harmony between ourselves and every Circle of Creation. In traveling these circular pathways—growing and consuming food, feeding and watering our gardens, breathing in oxygen from plants and breathing out carbon dioxide in return—we literally exchange energy with the world around us. As *The Kybalion* explains, “Matter is but a form of Energy.”²² By implication, everything is energy, vibrating at different rates and constantly in motion. I imagine energy like liquid light: ever flowing, ever changing. What appears solid—rocks, trees, our bodies—is collections of energy changing at a rate simply too slow for us to perceive with the naked eye. Like mushrooms, the fruiting bodies of a vast fungal network connected by gossamer filaments of mycelium, we are the fruiting bodies of a vast network of energy, connected by threads we can’t see but can certainly feel: gravitation, intuition, love. As I connect with my breath through meditation, I take that energy into my body; I imagine it flowing into every cell. I try to feel those energetic mycelia connecting me with all that is.

Thus, whether through meditation, ritual, or everyday sacred actions, connecting with divine creation is an active process. We must seek if we wish to find. We must take the time to feel the breath, and the divinity within the breath. However small, frail, and perishable we may be, we are part and parcel of the All—or Awen, the Tao, God, or however we choose to define the divine—and we have the power to connect and channel this spirit.

21 Atkinson, *The Kybalion*, 65.

22 Ibid., 120.

In short: we have agency. *The Kybalion* tells us:

You are dwelling in the Infinite Mind of THE ALL, and your possibilities and opportunities are infinite, both in time and space. And at the Grand Cycle of Aeons, when THE ALL shall draw back into itself all of its creations—you will go gladly, for you will then be able to know the Whole Truth of being At One with THE ALL.²³

The *Tao Te Ching* agrees: eternity is not only within reach, it's actually something we can practice:

Seeing into darkness is clarity.
Knowing how to yield is strength.
Use your own light
and return to the source of light.
This is called practicing eternity.²⁴

This speaks powerfully to me as a meditator. Returning to my breath, over and over again, is using my light to return to the source of light. Yielding to What Is, without attempting to control what I can't control, is my constant goal, and—when I manage to achieve it—a deep source of strength and calm. If we strive at all, it is to find timelessness within the present moment. It is in this moment—and only in this moment—that we can connect with the divine, with the source of all things, with what is eternal and sacred.

Yet in our search for what is eternal, we may find ourselves stumbling over that ironclad law of a living, breathing world: change is the only constant. The Dolmen Arch reminds us:

Throughout the Cosmic Day, until its close, there is constant change of form, shape and degree of substance; constant change in manifestation of motion; constant change in manifestation of consciousness.²⁵

In *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold draws it perfectly:

Do not return for a second view of the green pasture, for there is none. Either falling water has dried it out, or rising water has scoured the bar to its original austerity of clean sand. But in your mind you may hang up your picture, and hope that in some other summer the mood to paint may come upon the river.²⁶

23 Ibid., 64.

24 *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 52

25 Greer, *The Dolmen Arch*, 69.

26 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*.

“Hope” is right. We know it has ever been thus, but I must admit: in these times, change feels more constant than ever. The path forward feels murkier, the ground underfoot less firm. We may not be wired to accept this much change, this quickly—at least not with equanimity. Being a Druid in the twenty-first century is hard. And for me, what makes it harder is the feeling that all of this change is *wrong*, that things *shouldn’t be this way*. The tension between what is and what I think *should be* produces an anxiety that stands between me and my practice—as a Druid, as a meditator, as a creative person, as someone who loves this divine creation I inhabit.

It helps to be reminded that ecology as we know it has always been a snapshot. *Basic Ecology* tells us:

The communities we observe and describe today, with their particular composition of plant and animal species, are not the communities of yesterday, geologically speaking. . . . Some communities are better insulated from changes in the physical environment than are others. . . . These are the exceptional communities. Most are subject to all kinds of short-term and long-term changes.²⁷

The Kybalion agrees:

[Man] sees that nothing really IS, but that everything is BECOMING and CHANGING. Nothing stands still—everything is being born, growing, dying—the very instant a thing reaches its height, it begins to decline—the law of rhythm is in constant operation—there is no reality, enduring quality, fixity, or substantiality in anything—nothing is permanent but Change. And if he be a thinking man, he realizes that all of these changing things must be but outward appearances or manifestations of some Underlying Power—some Substantial Reality.²⁸

This is our chance to square the circle. Within a sea of change, at the center of the Way Things Are, there is an island—that Underlying Power we might call God, or Awen, or the All, or the Tao. In meditation, we can rest on that island and try our best to simply observe the waves crashing around us, knowing that while we are of this world—flesh and blood and incredibly fragile—we are also part of what is eternal. In the book *The Journey into Spirit*, Druid author Kristoffer Hughes writes that the word *soul* comes from the proto-Germanic word *saiwalo*, which means “belonging to the sea.”²⁹ Diving below the waves, we can find the deeper, slower currents beneath the turbulent surface. We can return to our source.

27 Buchsbaum and Buchsbaum, *Basic Ecology*, 98, 84.

28 Atkinson, *The Kybalion*, 81.

29 Kristoffer Hughes, *The Journey into Spirit* (Llewellyn, 2014), 219.

Our breath moves in and out; the tide rolls in and out; the universe expands and contracts. Our lens can widen just enough to give us some perspective on how small we are, and yet a small part of something infinite:

You are dwelling in the Infinite Mind of THE ALL, and your possibilities and opportunities are infinite, both in time and space. And at the end of the Grand Cycle of Aeons, when THE ALL shall draw back into itself all of its creations—you will go gladly, for you will then be able to know the Whole Truth of being At One with THE ALL. . . . And in the meantime, rest calm and serene—you are safe and protected by the Infinite Power of the FATHER-MOTHER MIND.³⁰

There is no more comforting sentence in any of these texts. Safe and protected, resting at the center of the circle, we can—with practice—find the space to live this very moment with joy, reverence, and love.

30 Atkinson, *The Kybalion*, 95.

A Visit with Ayahuasca

Jamie McMillin

Jamie McMillin lived in an imaginary world as a child, filled with magical animals, gods, ghosts, and fallen angels. But then she went to college at a military academy and learned how to stand straight, march straight, and think straight. She's been trying to find her way back to magic ever since. Jamie, currently a Druid Companion, has been a member of AODA since 2012. She lives in central Oregon with her husband and loves to hike, explore, read, and learn about everything.

“Don’t worry about throwing up in front of the Maestros. They love that. It’s what they are hoping for.” This is what our guide Jen was telling us in our introduction session. Somehow, I felt even less comforted by this information. Our group of twenty seekers sat on mats in a circle inside a large circular timber-framed thatched-roof structure called a maloca. We had all traveled from around the world to this little retreat center in the Costa Rican jungle to experience the plant medicine known as ayahuasca.¹ All but one of us were complete newbies and more than a little nervous. We listened intently to every word the guides said. They explained that after we had all taken the medicine and returned to our mats, the Maestro and Maestra, both indigenous Shipibo healers from Peru, would circle around the room and sing to each one of us. The healing song, called an icaros, is different for every person and every time because it is guided by the plant spirits themselves, not just ayahuasca but other plants the healer has worked with. They explained that it is good to bring an intention to the ceremony but to let go of any expectations because the experience is different for everybody. The plant spirits decide what each of us needs the most.

I had been thinking about ayahuasca for a long time. I don’t even remember where I first heard about it, but when I first started researching plant spirit medicine and plant communication, stories about ayahuasca seemed to pop up everywhere. It seemed so terrifying and unreachable but fascinating—I just knew I had to try it someday. The belief in plant spirits is very real to me. I’ve read books, attended workshops, and experimented on my own with some success, but I don’t seem to have any natural talent for communing with plants. I wondered if this sacred ayahuasca spirit, who seemed to be so interested in helping humans, would be interested in helping me. I didn’t expect all the answers, but I hoped for something, just a peek, at the true nature of the world around me. I wanted to feel that interconnectedness that I mentally believed to be true.

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Soltara Healing Center; for more information, see <https://soltara.co/>.

Ayahuasca is traditionally a combination of at least two plants found in the Amazon jungle, the ayahuasca vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the chacruna leaf (*Psychotria viridis*), which contain the psychoactive substance known as dimethyltryptamine or DMT. The plants are ritually gathered and prepared with great care and respect, and the resulting brew should always be used in a sacred context. The word “ayahuasca” translates to “vine of the soul” or “vine of the spirits,” and master healers devote years of training and apprenticeship to become a conduit for the healing energies of the plants. It is not meant to be consumed lightly.

I knew this before I signed up. I knew this was not a recreational drug and was by all accounts a very difficult experience, but that’s what I wanted. I wanted the sacred. I was prepared to be vulnerable and open and afraid—and just hoped it would be worth it. Our first challenge was a diet we were given to follow in the weeks leading up to the retreat—no drugs of any kind (not even prescription if possible), no alcohol, no pork or red meat, oils, dairy or sugar, no sex or high-adrenaline activities. No caffeine! The idea was not to deprive us but to eat clean whole foods that prepared our bodies, opening the channels for the medicine to work.

Our group was picked up at a hotel in San Jose, and we traveled by shuttle van across a ferry to the Nicoya Peninsula and then down rough dirt roads with no names through the jungle. I still do not know exactly where we were on the map, but it was a lovely location with a view of the ocean below. Howler monkeys frolicked in the trees around the pool deck. We were given keys to our assigned rooms—all very clean, comfortable, and serene. After some time to get settled, we met for our first gathering to learn about the retreat center and meet everybody. A healthy dinner was served in an open-air pavilion. We sat together at wooden tables and got to know each other. Everyone was nervous!

Monday

Early the next morning, before breakfast, we gathered outside the maloca for something called the Vomitivo, an important cleansing preparation before taking the medicine. Our guides removed the top rail from three sections of fence so that we could take turns vomiting over the side into the bushes. We were given cups of lemongrass water and directed to keep drinking until we literally overflowed. They filled our cups again and again. We gulped it down until it hurt, but we couldn’t stop drinking until the purge overtook us. It was horrifying at first to think about throwing up in front of twenty-some strangers, but everyone was very supportive. Sometimes it took a lot of time and water to induce the vomiting, but when it finally started everyone would clap and cheer. When we were all empty, it was time for breakfast and the opening session. Here we met the Maestro and Maestra and learned what to expect at our first ceremony that night. Later, we had another plant-focused lunch and a flower bath. The Maestra poured cold pitchers of a specially prepared flower water over our heads and swimming suits, leaving bits of leaves and flower petals all over us. This was another cleansing, and we were told not to shower it off before the ceremony.

We gathered in the maloca at 6:30 p.m. for yoga. It was twilight already, but the space was lit with soft amber lights. Small mattresses circled the room like flower petals, and one group of six mattresses was assembled in the center for the guides. We filtered in and found the mattress labeled with our name. We each had sheets, a blanket, a couple of pillows, a bucket, and a little basket with our shot glass, lighter, ash tray, and a roll of toilet paper. That mattress became my best friend that week. We spent a lot of quality time together. One of the guides led us in 45 minutes of delicious yin yoga. It was exactly what our bodies needed to stretch out and relax after all the travel to get here. At the end, lying on that mattress in the gathering darkness, listening to the insects in the jungle and the sound of waves crashing on the beach below, I thought, "This is all I need. If this is all I ever get, it will be enough." It felt so perfect. We had about 15 minutes to use one of the little bathrooms lined up outside and then wait for the Maestro and Maestra to arrive, accompanied by three other guides. They arranged themselves in the center, and the lights were turned off. We all waited in the darkness, wondering what was going to happen. The guides lit special cigars made of mapacho, a sacred tobacco from the northern Amazon, and diligently puffed to cleanse the maloca with smoke. We learned later that tobacco is an important adjunct to ayahuasca. Finally, after some quiet signal, it was time. One after another, we each went up and sat before the Maestra, and she filled our shot glass with a dark brown thick mixture. We paused for a moment to acknowledge the plant spirit and set our intention, then drank it down. It wasn't terrible, but it wasn't delicious either. One of the guides gave us a cigar to use as needed (I never could figure out how to light it). We went back to our mattresses and settled in for the evening. It took about 30 minutes for every participant to receive their dose, then the Maestro and Maestra each took their own. We waited in the darkness, listening to the sounds of the night. The medicine generally starts to take effect in 30 to 45 minutes, but I had not yet noticed anything. I simply relaxed and enjoyed the peace. When the Maestro began to quietly chant and sing, I shivered with the magic spiraling into the space. The Maestra's higher-pitched voice joined his, but they each sang their own songs as the plant spirits spoke to them. Their voices gathered strength and wove a protective bubble around the maloca. When they were done, each rose from the center and went to opposite sides of the circle, sitting on the wood floor in front of a participant. They sang for each of us as the ayahuasca spirit told them what we needed; other plant spirits sometimes joined in and wanted to work on us, so it was a different song each time. When they came before me, I sat up as straight as I could and tried to think about being open to whatever was happening, but I didn't feel much that first night. They moved on from me, and I lay back down wondering if I would ever see or feel anything. Finally, the Maestro and the Maestra returned to the center of the room and rested a bit before departing the maloca. The guides told us the ceremony was over, and we could return to our rooms or stay as long as we wanted. I opted to walk up the hill in the moonlight. It was 1:30 a.m. when I returned to my room, but I had a hard time falling asleep—I seemed to be buzzing with energy.

Tuesday

The next day at breakfast most of us shared our experiences, curious what everyone else thought of the evening, even though we were advised not to compare our experiences with others. Most people experienced something interesting though, and I was a little disappointed with myself. After breakfast we were scheduled for individual debriefs in the maloca. When it was my turn, I removed my shoes, walked in, and sat on a cushion in front of four guides, the Maestra and the Maestro arrayed in a semicircle before me. It felt like I was going to be on trial! They were all very kind and quiet, though, as they asked me about my intentions and reason for being there. It felt foolish to say I was mainly just curious. So many others here had significant physical or emotional issues they needed help with. I wondered if I was wasting ayahuasca's time. However, I did share a long-ago vision I have had of being inside a black egg, knowing that I needed to break out of this egg. They asked me what the egg was made of, and I had never thought of that. Perhaps emotion? I have always been a more logical person than emotional, even as a child. I am not aware of suppressing emotions, but maybe I do it without realizing it. I told them that I felt breaking out of my egg was something I needed to do myself without any help, just like a chick, but they replied that sometimes it's okay to ask for help, and they would see what they could do.

That evening, the ceremony followed the same routine. This time I asked for a double dose, as did many others. I sat with my back against the wall and watched the others around the room. I felt so close to them already. Something about that shared space and our shared vulnerability made me love everyone there. After about 30 minutes, my body started to feel disjointed. I looked down at my hands and saw them glowing a brilliant blue in the darkness. I felt so much energy coming out of my hands! The rest of my body seemed to glow with a soft orange light. I remember thinking, "This is it! Finally, I know what a hallucinogen feels like." I had a few moments of feeling that I could not move, but that passed, and I was able to lie down on my back. Images of sticks and foliage passed close in my vision, too close to even see what it was, as if my face was rubbing against the jungle. I felt myself being lifted up to meet the gaze of a single impassive eye. She looked at me with no emotion, her serpentine yellow head partially obscured by vegetation. I was thrilled, but it was over in a moment. She pulled away. I then saw repeated ugly images of yellow slime dripping off cartilage, like some kind of alien horror movie. I felt the urge to get rid of it, like it was inside of me, and I was being told to get rid of it. The ceremony had barely started, but I opened my eyes and found that I was able to get up. It was as if the visions could be turned off or on just by opening or closing my eyes. I tiptoed to the door and out to the bathroom and purged as best as I could. I felt so sick. Throwing up did not make me feel any better, but I tiptoed back to my mattress and lay in the darkness. The wild visions seemed to be gone, and I found myself thinking of nostalgic childhood memories. This distracted me from my tender swollen belly and nauseous agony the rest of that very long night.

Wednesday

Wednesday was a day off from the medicine. We had another sharing circle after breakfast, and it seemed that I was not the only one who had experienced a rough night. The facilitators explained that purging can take many forms: vomiting, crying, shaking, singing, diarrhea, laughter. We could hear each other across the dark room each night, hear the retching and sobs, but it only brought us closer. Somehow the embarrassment of being heard was overcome by the empathy of hearing others. We spent the day as usual exploring the beach and chatting by the pool until the afternoon thunderstorms rolled in and we scattered to our various napping spots.

Thursday

For Thursday night's ceremony, I was determined to wait as long as possible before throwing up. I wanted to see more visions and thought that allowing the ayahuasca to stay in my system longer would help. I took another double dose, but after an hour I still wasn't feeling anything, so I pointed my red flashlight at my chest and waited for one of our guides to come to me. I whispered to her that I needed one more half-dose, and she took me over to the pitcher and filled my shot glass. That was the push I needed. I felt disoriented and dizzy for a bit and then saw visions of large serpentine bodies moving all around me, so close that I couldn't even see what they looked like but not close enough to touch me. I saw alien faces, sharp pointy things, and images of raw meat. I stood on the deck of a treehouse overlooking the jungle, and a family of people who looked like walking stick insects peered at me like I was the strangest thing they'd ever seen. I was conscious of all of this and kept wondering why I was seeing these things. What did any of it mean? The visions didn't last long, though. The Maestra came to sit before me, and I sat up, feeling sick again. Her song swirled around me, building heat. I could feel strange things moving inside of me, or perhaps it was only that I noticed how my internal organs felt for the first time. I put my bucket in my lap. The more she sang, the more I wanted to throw up. It was closing in on me, all my attention on the bottom of that bucket, feeling utterly miserable. I could feel parts of my body opening up, a sense of lightness or emptiness piercing my shell. My slumped shoulders and arms were prickling with heat by the time she finished her song and slid across the floor to the next person. When her song began again, I was finally able to let go and purge. But it was not a relief. I set the bucket aside and lay down, still feeling intensely uncomfortable. I rocked my legs back and forth and waved my arms in the darkness. Fidgeting is not something I would normally do, but it felt like I had no choice. It was the only thing I could do for the rest of the night.

Friday

The next morning, nearly everyone was ready to be done. We were exhausted, physically and emotionally. Tonight would be the last ceremony, and the guides suggested that we finish the week with a gentle session. No one argued with that. We were told that the Maestro would be sealing in the medicine's energy through the top of our heads. We would need to wear hats outside for the next few days to protect our vulnerable energy field. The medicine accumulated in our system after every ceremony, and we were told it could linger for weeks afterward. In conversation with some fellow participants, we wondered what we were doing to ourselves. Why did we ever think this was a good idea? Were we poisoning ourselves? Entering the maloca that night took all of my willpower. I felt sick before it even began, and during the yoga session I started to feel the telltale pricks on my arms that felt like flea bites. As soon as the lights were dimmed, I lay down and felt the room shimmer before I'd had any dose at all. I could have skipped the last dose, but decided that this was my last chance, so I asked the Maestra for one small glass. The smell made me gag, but I set my intention again and forced it down, trying to be respectful to the ayahuasca spirit. As the evening spiraled open, I tried to remember every detail of that sacred space, remember the sounds of my friends and the ocean and the jungle, remember the close overpowering smell of tobacco smoke. I listened closely to every icaros sung by the Maestra and Maestro as they traveled around the room. There were more quiet sobs, but this time I heard occasional laughter. I was acutely aware of everything. My senses seemed to reach out in all directions. Despite my nausea, I felt grateful to be in that place. When the Maestra came before me, her sweet voice rippled and quavered around and through me. I pulled the bucket onto my lap and purged again. She truly didn't seem to mind and just moved on around the circle. I lay down and began rocking my legs back and forth again. At one point it occurred to me that since I was dancing my hands around, I might as well make a qi ball the way I've been taught to do in qigong. I gathered the energy from the space around me and the jungle behind my head, and gathered it together into a solid-feeling ball between my hands. A golden light appeared to my left, and I moved the ball into the light until it turned a glowing yellow. A yellow ball. "I know where this goes," I thought, and pushed it into my belly. That just felt like the right thing to do. A little bit later I made another ball, but it remained dark, and I didn't know what to do with it. I held the ball between my hands and slowly moved it along my body up above my head and then down just below my belly, where it immediately glowed orange, so I popped it in place. My body just knew where that belonged. This may sound unremarkable, but for me it was entirely new. I don't remember ever communicating with my body in this way. When the Maestro came to sit before me, I could feel his icaros working on me more than ever before, building up heat in my arms and chest, and then finishing with my crown chakra, which felt like raindrops hitting the top of my head. I was startled to be able to feel it so clearly. He moved on, and I lay down again. The last ceremony was almost over. I was relieved but also disappointed not to have witnessed any amazing visions. But I came to realize that ayahuasca had given me a revelation after all.

My intention for going to this retreat was to hopefully experience a sense of connectedness with the reality outside my ordinary senses. I had thought to connect with plant spirits or the living earth around me, but what ayahuasca showed me was how to feel the energy within my own body. My own humble, fragile, miraculous body. I had heard about human energy fields, and it seemed like a reasonable theory, but this experience made it real in a way I had not expected. I have been blessed with good health all my life and really took my body for granted. I try to take care of myself, but I've always lived in my head. My body was just a vehicle for carrying my head and soul around, a vehicle that will someday return to the earth from which it was made. Ayahuasca taught me that my body is a wonder all on its own and has important things to tell me if only I pay attention. I can't always look for answers outside myself. This is my challenge now, to listen to my body every day and be more present when I work out or take a walk, rather than distracting myself with thoughts of work or podcasts. Though I can no longer see the blazing blue energy coming out of my hands or the glowing balls of qi, I remember that they are there and marvel at the mystery and privilege of having a body to live in at all.



Explorations into Home-Produced Soil Amendments for Vegetable Gardens

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Overview

For my Ouate project for the Adept degree in AODA, I sought to determine if three home-produced materials, namely worm castings, wood ashes, and urine, could replace, in part or in whole, the cottonseed meal, phosphate rock, and potassium sulfate that I would otherwise need to fertilize and remineralize the soil in my vegetable garden. Using home-produced materials reduces the negative impacts on the Earth of using depleting mined minerals and fossil fuels to fertilize and remineralize garden soil and also saves money. In addition, using materials to produce food that would otherwise enter the waste stream, reconnects my garden to the Earth's biogeochemical cycles, which connects me more deeply to the food that I eat and the land on which I grow it. It also honors the other beings who also depend on those cycles. Finally, through a correspondence with the Sphere of Protection and its Jungian associations, using urine on my garden also opens me more fully to the Great Mystery.

Background

I began a vegetable, small fruit, and grain garden in my backyard in suburban St. Louis, Missouri in 2004. As part of my record-keeping process, I record the weight of each variety of each crop that I harvest during the growing season. At the end of the season I add up the harvested weights to obtain the total weight harvested in pounds for each variety, then divide that by the area in square feet that the variety occupied in the garden to obtain the total weight per square foot of that variety for that season. Multiplying that number by 100 allows me to compare the yield I obtained with the possible yield in pounds per 100 square feet that is listed in the Master Charts of John Jeavons's book *How to Grow More Vegetables* (Jeavons, 2012, pp. 133–179). This popular book on backyard garden-

ing is the only source I know for possible yields of crops in units that are relevant for backyard gardens.¹ Jeavons suggests using the lowest figure listed in the possible yield column as a guide if you are a beginning gardener, the middle figure if you are a good gardener, and the highest figure if you are an excellent gardener with exceptional soil and climate.² I also record other pertinent observations, such as general weather information, including rainfall amounts, unseasonably cold or hot conditions, and last spring and first autumn frost dates, along with any pests or diseases that attack the crops, and my husband's and my perceptions of the taste of each crop. I plot each year's garden on graph paper so I know the area in square feet for each crop variety that I grow, taking care to rotate crops to eliminate disease and pest problems that can occur when crops of the same plant family are grown in the same place in the garden in successive years. During the winter I review all of this information and compare the yield for each variety with the range of yields for the crop as a whole as given in the appropriate Master Chart as well as with my best yield so far for that variety. Putting that information together with the other records I keep allows me to understand the story that the yields, weather, pest or disease presence, and taste reveal about the garden and my efforts as a gardener.

By the end of the 2012 growing season, I noticed a troubling story: variety yields had been trending downward for the past few years for varieties that had been reliable performers before, and the yield losses could not be explained by weather patterns. To understand what this meant and how I might address it, I read two gardening books by Steve Solomon (2005, 2013), *Gardening When It Counts* and *The Intelligent Gardener*, and began applying them to my gardening practice. The first book taught me the importance of timely weeding and of spacing plants more widely than Jeavons's book recommends. I explored the ecological reasoning behind these practices in an earlier article in *Trilithon* (Schosser, 2016). The second book described a method of remineralizing garden soil to address its particular deficiencies as revealed by a soil test. I had had the garden soil tested only once when I first began gardening on it, and for the past few years I had not applied any soil amendments other than compost. Solomon suggested that compost made from plants grown on mineral-deficient soil would also be deficient in the same minerals, and not only would growing food crops in mineral-deficient soil result in lower yields but the crops would be less nutritious as well. To determine if my soil was mineral deficient, in the spring of 2013 I had the garden soil tested and followed the method in Solomon's book to determine the pattern of mineral deficiencies and excesses in the soil. Following his directions, I worked out the kinds and amounts of soil amendments needed to remedy the deficiencies, added them to the soil, and proceeded as usual to plant, harvest, and record harvest weights and pertinent observations and to analyze the results each winter. I have continued that same process every growing season since then. These amendments include cottonseed meal, rock phosphate, and potash (each described below). In my blog, *Living Low in the Lou* (<http://livinglowinthelou.blogspot.com/>), I have been reporting on what I've learned in the hope that other gardeners could apply what I have learned to their own garden practice.

1 All other yield sources I have found give yields in either pounds per foot of row or on a per-acre basis, such as bushels per acre.

2 Jeavons (2012, p. 177); endnote 9 refers to the range of numbers given in the possible yield column.

As I have continued to remineralize the soil, tested different varieties of crops and learned how to grow them well, and learned how to direct-sow plants for autumn crops, I have found that my yields using Solomon's methods compare favorably to the possible midrange yields reported in *How to Grow More Vegetables* (Jeavons, 2012, pp. 133–179), even though I grow fewer plants at wider spacings. Pest and disease pressure is low and taste has remained the same or improved as yields have improved. I am convinced that the ongoing soil remineralization program is a major factor in the improvement of my gardening practice, with contributions as well from general improvements in garden technique and varieties grown during this time.

While the soil remineralization program has proven its worth, it comes at a financial and ecological cost to me and to the earth. Solomon recommends that gardeners use agricultural seed meals as sources of nitrogen (the N in N-P-K fertilizers)³ because the compost that most gardeners make does not provide enough nitrogen to support good yields. My observations of decreasing yield over the years when I applied only compost supported his recommendation, so I have used cottonseed meal, a by-product of cotton farming, as the nitrogen source for my garden since I began remineralizing the soil, continuing to add compost as well for its other benefits.

Nitrogen

While nitrogen in the air is more than sufficient for the needs of all life on earth (air is about 78% nitrogen by volume), it must be converted from its gaseous form in air into a form that plants can use. Before the development of the Haber-Bosch process, the major way for nitrogen in the air to enter the nitrogen cycle was through nitrogen-fixing bacteria and algae (lightning also fixes nitrogen into a suitable form, but its contribution is much smaller)⁴. Nitrogen-fixing bacteria on plant roots oxidize the nitrogen in air to nitrates, which enter the soil solution. From there plants take in nitrates through their roots and use them to make proteins; when we eat the plants, or animals that ate the plants, our bodies use that protein. The nitrogen locked up in the proteins is released back into the soil by decomposition of dead plants and animals (this is where the cottonseed meal that I apply to the soil enters the cycle) and bacterial action to form ammonia (Odum, 1971, pp. 87–91). Separately, the urea in urine that is deposited on the soil enters the soil solution and reacts with water to form ammonia.⁵ Nitrite bacteria convert ammonia to nitrites, while nitrate bacteria convert nitrites to nitrates, which can be taken up by plants to complete the cycle.

Because nitrates dissolve in water, what plants do not use will move into groundwater and from there into streams and rivers. Excess nitrates in water bodies stimulate overgrowth of algae, the green scum we may see on ponds and lakes at times, which causes unpleasant odors when it builds

3 Commercial fertilizers denote the amount of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) that they contain as a series of three numbers printed on the packaging that indicates the percentage by weight of each. As an example, a 10-10-10 fertilizer contains 10% by weight of nitrogen, 10% by weight of phosphorus, and 10% by weight of potassium.

4 "Haber Process," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haber_process.

5 "Urea," Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urea>.

up. That overgrowth of algae (algal bloom) can release toxic substances into the water and air, which harm aquatic life as well as the animals and humans who drink from or live near the water body. The bloom also reduces the amount of sunlight that can pass into the water, reducing the production of dissolved oxygen through photosynthesis in aquatic plants. These processes result in fish kills and death of other water-dwelling animals that need dissolved oxygen.⁶ Any remaining nitrates that do not get bound up into algae, plants, or animals enter the ocean; a portion reenters the cycle via birds and fish that feed on ocean plants, while the remainder is transported to deep sediments and lost to the cycle. Thus I should apply only as much of any nitrogen source as the plants can take up, to avoid excess nitrate runoff into my watershed.

Until we had the Haber-Bosch process to artificially fix nitrogen in the air into ammonia, agriculture depended on nitrogen-fixing bacteria and on the return of crop residues, urine, and feces to soil to provide enough nitrogen to grow crops year after year. While nitrogen in the air is for all practical purposes unlimited, natural gas, which provides the hydrogen for the Haber-Bosch process, is a limited resource with a host of other important uses. As the supply of natural gas peaks and declines, farms are likely to compete with me for cottonseed meal and other agricultural by-products that bacteria can convert into the nitrates that plants need.

Phosphorus

One mineral that has been deficient in my garden most years is phosphorus (the P in N-P-K fertilizers). The most convenient organic source of phosphorus is phosphate rock, which is the form I have applied to my garden. Because the amount I've needed most years has been relatively large and its source is far away (Florida leads the US in the mining of phosphate rock)⁷, it is expensive to buy and have shipped to me.

The primary reservoir of phosphorus is phosphate rock formed in past geological ages and other deposits such as guano. Phosphate rock applied to gardens dissolves into the soil solution, where the phosphates are taken up by plant roots and used to build their bodies. When we eat the plants, or animals that ate plants, our bodies incorporate the phosphorus. Phosphorus is a key component of bones and teeth and is part of DNA and cell membranes. Upon death, bacteria break down plant and animal bodies; some of those bacteria release phosphorus as phosphates into the soil solution, where it again becomes available to plants. In addition, urine and feces contain phosphates that can enter the soil solution directly when applied to the soil (Odum, 1971, pp. 88–92).

Excess phosphate will move into groundwater before it can be absorbed by plants, thereby entering streams and lakes, and causing algal blooms with the same consequences as excess nitrates.

Phosphate in our waterways travels into the oceans and then into ocean sediments. While birds and fish take up some of it via the marine plants and animals that they eat, which can then reenter the phosphorus cycle, most of it remains in ocean sediments, where it is lost until geolog-

6 “Algal Bloom,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algal_bloom.

7 National Minerals Information Center, “The Mineral Industry of Florida,” USGS, <https://www.usgs.gov/centers/nmic/mineral-industry-florida>.

ical processes once more bring it to the surface. In 1971, Eugene Odum wrote that “the means of returning phosphorus to the cycle may presently be inadequate to compensate for the loss” (p. 91). Peak phosphorus continues to be of concern.⁸ As with nitrogen, my goal is to provide only as much phosphorus as the plants can use in order to avoid contributing to algal blooms.

Potassium

Another mineral that is sometimes deficient in my soil is potassium (the K in N-P-K fertilizers). Plants require potassium to carry out many of their energetic and enzymatic processes. Potash deposits under the earth’s surface or within brines of dying lakes or seas are processed into the source of potassium that I add to my garden, potassium sulfate.⁹ Potash must be obtained from distant sources in the western and southern US, and it too is used by commercial agriculture.¹⁰ Like the other minerals, potassium sulfate dissolves into the soil solution from which plant roots can absorb the potassium ions, with any excess escaping to groundwater and then into water bodies. Unlike nitrogen and phosphorus, excess potassium does not lead to algal blooms, but once it enters the ocean, only a limited amount reenters the food chain through the rain cycle. The remainder of the potassium enters the ocean sediments. Some potassium also escapes from plants via organic aerosols, entering the atmosphere, where it can return again to the land through rain.¹¹ As with nitrogen and phosphorus, I apply only the amount of potassium needed to eliminate a deficit.

Beyond the concerns discussed above, a good deal of energy in the form of diesel fuel is required to bring each of these materials to me. As we approach and then pass worldwide peak oil production (it may have occurred in November 2018),¹² continuing to rely on these materials for gardening carries dangers. Thus, beginning in 2018 I sought ways to continue to supply the nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium that my garden soil requires for good yields of nutritious food by finding and using just enough locally sourced materials to avoid the problems caused by overapplication.

As our energy sources decline further, and during pandemics such as COVID-19, home vegetable, grain, and small fruit gardens will become more important as sources of nutritious food as well as for solace and a way to participate with the natural world when social activities with other humans are curtailed for various reasons. Anything that aids in growing such gardens, while reducing our need to import materials from elsewhere, reducing our additions to the waste stream, and reconnecting our gardens with biogeochemical cycles, will be of great value to us as humans and as

8 Energyskeptic, “Phosphate: All Hopes Rest on Morocco with 75% of Remaining Reserves,” July 1, 2020, <http://energyskeptic.com/2020/phosphate-production-and-depletion/>; Julia Rosen, “Humanity Is Flushing Away One of Life’s Essential Elements,” *The Atlantic*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2021/02/phosphorus-pollution-fertilizer/617937/>.

9 “Potassium Sources,” Mississippi State University Extension, <http://extension.msstate.edu/content/potassium-sources>.

10 “Potassium for Crop Production,” University of Minnesota Extension, <https://extension.umn.edu/phosphorus-and-potassium/potassium-crop-production>.

11 “Potassium Cycle,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potassium_cycle.

12 The Energy Bulletin Weekly, 28 December 2020, <https://energybulletin.org/the-energy-bulletin-weekly-28-december-2020/>; note the graph showing that world liquid fuels production (oil) peaked in the fourth quarter of 2018

Druids. Because many Druids already garden, and more may choose to do so as the consequences of peak oil bite harder or during periods of social isolation, this work is of general interest to current and future gardeners in the Druid community and beyond. Hence, I carried out this work as my Ovate project for my Adept degree.

2018 Experiment: Worm Castings and Wood Ashes in Corn Beds

The project began in spring 2018, around the time I received my Companion degree.¹³ Since my husband and I use a woodstove for supplemental heat in winter, with an eye to greater use as natural gas depletes, we generate wood ashes each winter that we must use or dispose of. About 3% by weight of the wood ashes is potassium; another 25% is calcium.¹⁴ The calculations laid out in *The Intelligent Gardener* (Solomon, 2013, pp. 298–299) combined with analysis of the garden’s soil before the growing season showed that I could supply one bed’s 2018 potassium needs with about 7 pounds of wood ashes. This is within the 5–10-pound range that the Missouri Extension Service recommends for adding wood ashes to garden beds. If the wood ashes proved to be a good source of potassium or calcium (another mineral that is sometimes deficient in my garden soil), using them would turn two problems (disposing of wood ashes and purchasing potassium) into one solution (using wood ashes for soil remineralization). Because the use of wood for heating is likely to increase as natural gas depletes and electricity becomes more expensive or less reliable, wood ashes should become available to more gardeners over time.

Because I have not been using the castings from my worm bin as fast as the worms make them, I have an excess and need a way to put them to use. Like other manures, they contain nitrogen, which suggested that I could substitute them for some of the cottonseed meal I have been buying. Worm castings on average contain about 1% nitrogen and 0.5% phosphorus by weight, so they could supply some phosphorus as well.

I did not want to make either substitution without testing to see if the castings would work as well as purchased materials. Hence, I devised an experiment for the three popcorn beds in the 2018 garden.

My experiment would require four beds of popcorn: the control bed, with the same remineralization mix as the other beds in that year’s garden; one bed with worm castings substituting for the cottonseed meal but all other ingredients in the mix the same; one bed with wood ashes substituting for all of the limestone (my calcium source) and potassium sulfate and some of the phosphate rock, but all other ingredients the same; and one bed with both wood ashes and worm castings and enough of the other ingredients to make up the remaining deficiencies. But I planned to grow only three beds of corn and did not have room to add a fourth. Furthermore, one of the three beds was newly formed and had been planted in previous years to asparagus or raspberries and, most recently, had contained weeds for a few years. I hadn’t taken a soil sample from that bed, so I didn’t know how similar or

13 Claire Schosser, “Corny Work: A Garden Science Experiment and What I Learned from It,” *Living Low in the Lou*, April 1, 2019, <http://livinginthelou.blogspot.com/2019/04/corny-work-garden-science-experiment.html>.

14 David Trinklein, “Recycling Wood Ashes,” University of Missouri, February 2, 2018, https://ipm.missouri.edu/MEG/2018/2/recycle_ash/.

different it was to the rest of the garden. After much thought, I decided to remineralize the reclaimed bed as if it had the same set of deficiencies and excesses as the grassy areas surrounding the beds, which I sample each year as controls along with the garden soil. In that way, I could test it against the control bed. In the remaining bed, I intended to use worm castings, wood ashes, and enough of the other ingredients to make up the remaining deficiencies.

In retrospect, I realize the flaw in my design: if the yield in the last bed were different from that of the control bed, I would not know which of the two substitutions was responsible for that change. Rather than using both wood ashes and worm castings in that bed, I should have used only wood ashes.

In carrying out the experiment, I found that the worm castings were so wet that I couldn't spread them evenly across the surface of the bed. I applied the castings to only about one-sixth of the bed before I gave up on the effort as requiring far too much time to be practical. Nor could I mix them evenly with the wood ashes and other minerals that I applied to the bed that year. A further blow to their use is that their concentration of nitrogen is so low that about 50 to 60 pounds of material would be required to provide all of the nitrogen one 100-square-foot bed needs, compared to 6 pounds of cottonseed meal. My small worm bin does not produce enough worm castings in a year to supply even one bed.

The yields of popcorn I obtained for the three beds were as follows:

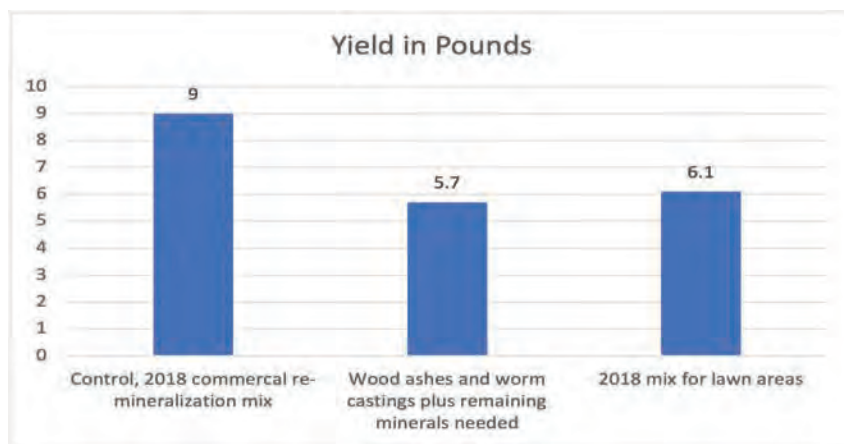


Figure 1: Vegetable Yield in Pounds in 2018

I can't do statistical analysis on the data because I didn't set up the experiment to allow for that. But based on the results I obtained, it appears that the yield of the control bed was higher than that of either of the other two beds. Hence I decided that a better use for excess worm castings is in my compost piles, where they can be mixed with the dry leaves that I use as the carbon source. I also realized that I would need further experiments to examine the effect of using wood ashes as a remineralization material.

2018-19 Experiment: Wood Ashes in Allium Bed

In one bed that I planted in 2018, I used the full 7 pounds of wood ashes that provided all of the potassium and about one-third of the phosphorus needed for the crop. I also added the appropriate quantities of cottonseed meal for nitrogen and other materials to eliminate the remaining mineral deficits. This was the bed growing potato onions and garlic, which was planted on November 5 and harvested in mid-June 2019. Using wood ashes resulted in close to the same yield of the three crops as in the bed harvested in 2018 when wood ashes were not used (22.3 pounds per 100 square feet harvested in 2018, 27.2 pounds harvested in 2019). In this respect, the experiment was a success.

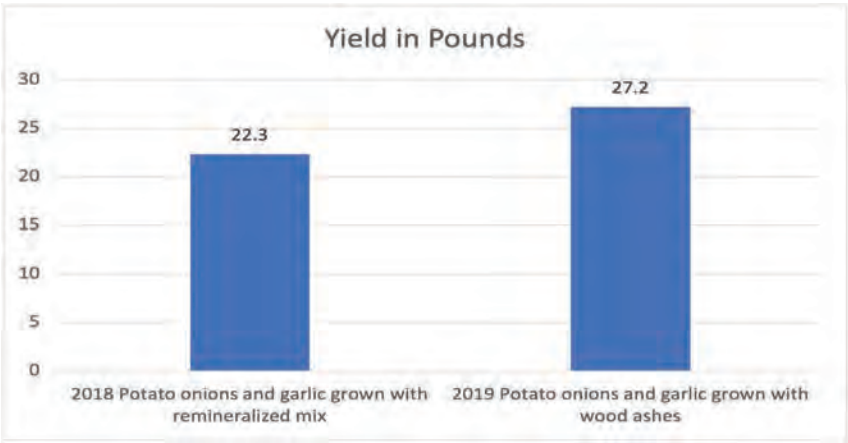


Figure 2: Potato Onions Yield in Pounds

Mineral Deficits (pounds per acre), garden					
	Spring 2013	Spring 2019	Allium bed	Spring 2020	Spring 2021
TCEC (millieq)	6.91	7.17	9.24	8.62	7.22
pH	6.4	6.2	6.8	6.7	6.5
Organic matter %	3.99	2.98	4.42	3.54	2.91
Mineral					
Sulfur, S	82	27	17	11	15
Phosphorus, P	72	excess	excess	20	10
Calcium, Ca	198	176	67	excess	excess
Magnesium, Mg	excess	excess	excess	35	20
Potassium, K	excess	excess	excess	93	excess
Boron, B	0.6	0.9	0.7	1.3	0.3
Iron, Fe	excess	excess	excess	excess	excess
Manganese, Mn	excess	36	14	excess	excess
Copper, Cu	7	excess	0.28	2.5	excess
Zinc, Zn	8	2.2	excess	12	0.9

Table 1. Excesses and deficiencies of necessary minerals in my garden soil, for the garden as a whole in spring 2013 (when the remineralization program began) and in spring 2019, 2020, and 2021. Also included are the results for the allium bed in July 2019 following harvest.

However, other possible effects of using this quantity of wood ashes are of concern. The wood ashes could raise either or both the pH or the calcium level too high. Hence, after harvesting the alliums, I tested the soil from that bed. Surprisingly, it was deficient in calcium, due to an increase in TCEC (total cation exchange capacity, a measure of how many of the positively charged minerals are available in the soil for plants to use) compared to the spring 2019 soil test for the garden as a whole.¹⁵

Based on the variations in TCEC from year to year, I am not convinced that the test is accurate enough to conclude that the TCEC is truly higher; thus calcium may not have been deficient after all. But the results for TCEC and calcium do suggest that even a factor of 50 excess in calcium added to my garden soil was not enough to cause the formation of caliche (a layer of calcium carbonate in the soil that prevents good drainage) (Solomon, 2013, 203). I believe this is because it rains sufficiently during the entire year to leach all of the excess calcium into the groundwater.

The pH also rose compared to the spring 2019 soil test, but not above the highest pH value measured in previous years. The Missouri Extension suggests that Missourians can apply as much as 5 to 10 pounds of wood ashes per year to a 100-foot garden bed, but that the soil should be tested every two to three years and checked for a buildup of pH above 7.0. I have a loamy soil; to raise the pH by 1 unit (say from 5.5 to 6.5), I would need to add about 8 pounds of lime.¹⁶ Twice as much wood ashes as lime are required to make the same change in pH, or roughly 16 pounds of wood ashes, which is more than twice the amount of wood ashes that I added. Thus I conclude from this experiment that I can add as much as 5 pounds or so of wood ashes every year to each 100-square-foot garden bed to supply all or most of any potassium deficiency as well as some to most of any phosphorus deficiency, so long as I monitor the pH level of the soil in early spring before planting and avoid adding wood ashes in any year that the soil pH exceeds 7.0.

Potassium tested in excess by about a factor of 2 in the allium bed following harvest. Excessive potassium in the soil relative to calcium and phosphorus causes the carbohydrate content of the crops grown on it to be about 25% higher and the protein content about 25% lower than crops grown on a balanced soil (Solomon, 2013, pp. 66–67). In theory, the allium crop should have used all the potassium I added. However, different crops require different proportions of the various minerals; onions, a member of the allium family, in particular require less potassium than most other crops (Reinheimer and Solomon, 2014). The potato onions and garlic may not have used all the potassium supplied in the wood ashes. Thus I will use a smaller amount of wood ashes on the allium bed than on the other beds in future gardens. On the other hand, phosphorus was at a balanced level within the testing error, suggesting that the amount in the wood ashes was enough for the alliums. Onions require a midrange amount of phosphorus. This suggested that I could supply some, if not all, of the garden's future need for phosphorus from wood ashes if we burn enough wood during the previous winter.

15 Claire Schosser, "More Fun in the Garden in 2020," *Living Low in the Lou*, March 24, 2020, <http://livinglowinthelou.blogspot.com/2020/03/more-fun-in-garden-in-2020.html>.

16 Reannan Raine, "How Much Lime Do I Need to Use to Raise the pH of My Soil?," eHow, https://www.ehow.com/info_8393010_much-use-raise-ph-soil.html.

2019 Experiment: Urine in Corn Bed

During the 2019 growing season, I tested the possibility of replacing the cottonseed meal that provides nitrogen for my plants with the urine that I generate each day and that would otherwise be lost to sewage sludge.

There are sound arguments against thoughtlessly and carelessly applying urine to the garden. The first is a health issue: urine can carry pathogens that cause serious diseases. Carol Steinfeld (2007, p. 49) writes that urine, unlike feces, transmits only a few significant diseases: leptospirosis, schistosomiasis, and salmonella. Of these, she says that the first two are rarely encountered outside an aquatic tropical environment, and the last is typically inactivated shortly after excretion. I live in the temperate zone, unfavorable for the first two. The third seems like more of a threat, considering that we hear of outbreaks of salmonella from contaminated foods from time to time. But those outbreaks usually arise from high densities of livestock, which is not the case in my yard. Furthermore, I did not suffer from any of these diseases, so I could not pass them in my urine.

Joseph Jenkins (1999, p. 153) adds yersiniosis to the list of diseases that might be caused by pathogens in urine, along with *Escherichia coli*, another pathogen that occasionally makes news headlines and is often linked to issues with high-density livestock facilities. But, again, I did not become sick from either of these.

An excess of nitrogen in surface waters can cause algal blooms that lead to fish kills, as noted previously. It can also lead to blue baby syndrome (Steinfeld, 2007, p. 3). Thus it is imperative to apply urine only to land well above the water table and far enough from any surface waters that it cannot enter them, and only on a scale at which the urine can be absorbed and used before it reaches groundwater. Also, the soil should be well aerated, so that it supports the bacteria that convert the urea in urine to nitrates and make it available to plants. Since my garden is near the top of a hill and on very deep and well-drained soil, and because I garden organically and add compost to encourage healthy soil microfauna, I can fulfill these conditions. If there is any standing water in the garden, I don't apply urine until the soil can again absorb what I apply. This is rare, occurring only when heavy rains have saturated the soil and then more rain falls.

In 2020, we added COVID-19 to the list of pathogens that might be passed to others from urine. I did not experience symptoms of COVID-19; no one told me they had exposed me to it; therefore I did not get tested for it.

My garden beds are surrounded by an unfertilized mix of grasses and weeds; beyond the garden is more unfertilized grass-weed mix in our own yard and the yards next to ours, along with young oak and pecan trees just past the east lot line and bamboo, mulberry, and shrubs on our property to the west before encountering the grass and weeds on our neighbor's lot to the west. Thus I do not expect that any excess nitrogen escaped to the larger environment; the plants will use any nitrogen that the vegetables did not.

A psychological issue also arises from the known health hazards of feces and our association of urine with them: many, if not most, people consider urine dirty and dangerous and won't want to

eat anything grown with it. Neither my husband nor I were hindered from eating any of our garden produce, since I collected urine in a manner that excluded the more dangerous feces.

However, before applying urine to the entire garden only to discover some unforeseen difficulty, I wanted to try using it on just one crop, with a control bed to check it against. Hence, I applied the usual remineralization mix, formulated to address deficiencies found in the March 2019 soil test and including the usual cottonseed meal as the nitrogen source, on one of the three beds of dent corn that I grew in 2019 as my control bed. For each of the other two corn beds, I made one change in the planting conditions compared to the control bed: for the second bed, I replaced the cottonseed meal with urine but kept all the other components in the remineralization mix the same; for the third bed, I used the same remineralization mix as the control bed but planted it three days later.¹⁷

Cottonseed meal contains 6% nitrogen by weight (Solomon, 2013, p. 184). For nitrogen, I apply 6 pounds of cottonseed meal to each bed before planting. Thus the amount of nitrogen in the cottonseed meal applied to one bed is:

$$6 \text{ pounds} \times 0.06 = 0.36 \text{ pounds of added nitrogen to a 100-square-foot bed}$$

Adult humans produce about 11 grams of nitrogen in a single day's urine (Steinfeld, 2007, p. 93). Since there are 453 grams in a pound, dividing 11 grams by 453 grams per pound yields the amount of nitrogen in a day's urine in pounds:

$$0.024 \text{ pounds of nitrogen excreted in urine each day by one adult}$$

To determine how many days' worth of urine to collect, divide 0.36 pounds by 0.024 pounds per day. The result is 15 days' worth of urine.

To collect the urine, I urinated into a urinal, then poured the urine into a 2 quart/2 liter bucket. I collected urine only when I was not also defecating. I also collected it only during daylight hours. Thus I collected somewhat less urine than I actually produced in a day.

To apply the urine, I poured a day's worth of collected urine into a 2 gallon/8 liter sprinkling can, added water to fill the can, sprinkled the diluted urine onto the corn bed that I had designated to receive it, and followed that with another full can of water. In total, I applied 13 days' worth of collected urine to the bed. If I had collected all the urine I produced on each of those 13 days, it would add up to about 0.31 pounds of nitrogen (13 days times 0.024 pounds of nitrogen per day), a little less than the 0.36 pounds of nitrogen I applied using cottonseed meal. In actuality it was less than 0.31 pounds, probably about two-thirds to three-quarters or so of that amount, based on the collection details discussed above.

When I harvested the corn, I kept the corncobs from each bed in separate locations and shelled each pile of corncobs separately, so that I could measure the yield of corn that grew in each bed. I also observed the plants and cobs in each bed during the growing season. This allowed me to assess the effect of that single change on the yield and on any other observable changes among the plants in each bed.

¹⁷ Claire Schosser, "What the 2019 Garden Told Me," *Living Low in the Lou*, January 23, 2020, <http://livinglowinthelou.blogspot.com/2020/01/what-2019-garden-told-me.html>.

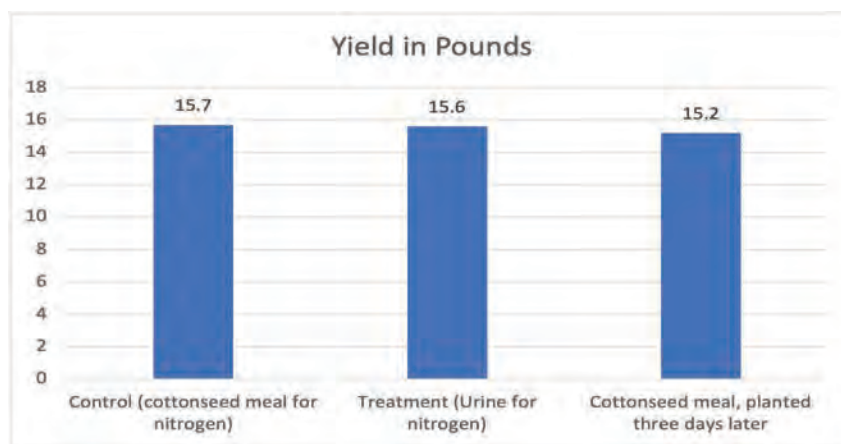


Figure 3: 2019 Experiments in Corn Bed

Within the precision of the scale that I used to weigh the seeds, the result for all three beds was the same. The corn in the bed planted three days later was shorter than the corn in the other two beds early in the season. By August 11, as shown in Figure 1, there was no discernible visual difference between the corn in the three beds. From then on, there were no visual differences between the three beds.



Figure 4. The three dent corn beds on August 11, 2019. The bed with urine is the two rows to the left; the control bed is the two middle rows; and the bed planted three days later is the two rows on the right. There are no visible differences between the plants in the three beds.

I conclude from this experiment that urine successfully replaced cottonseed meal as a source of nitrogen for growing 'Blue Clarage' dent corn in 2019. But what about other crops? That experiment required another growing season.

2020 Experiment: Urine and Wood Ashes on All Vegetable and Grain Crops

In 2020 I did not have enough wood ashes on hand to remedy the full deficiency of potassium, and I had an excess of calcium. However, the soil test indicated that magnesium was deficient. Wood ashes contain about 3% magnesium.¹⁸ Therefore I added enough wood ashes to the remineralization mix to supply 10% of the magnesium deficiency, as suggested in the current revision of the Acid Soil Worksheet (Reinheimer and Solomon, 2014). This avoids the risk of having too much magnesium relative to calcium in the garden soil. I made up the remaining potassium and other mineral deficiencies in the usual way.

Based on the success of the 2019 garden experiment, I applied urine to all of the vegetable and grain beds in 2020 to replace all of the cottonseed meal I would have used. This meant I had no control beds to compare to the beds using urine. I would have needed to expand the garden into areas now covered with grass and weeds and unprotected from rabbits to have space for control beds. This would have introduced variability in newly gardenized versus previously gardenized soil; variability in pest pressure; and a reduction in the time I spent on each garden bed compared to past years, which would have made it harder to compare the 2020 yields to those of previous years. Instead, since I had grown mostly the same varieties of crops in the same way for the previous six years, I compared my yields in 2020 to the yield, and especially the best yield, for each of the varieties over the previous six years. The only exception was soybeans, because the last time I grew them before 2020 was in 2011. Hence I compared the soybean yield with a different variety grown in 2011 using the same spacing between stations but more seeds per station.

I began collecting urine using the same system as in 2019. However, within a few days and for the remainder of the growing season I used a camp toilet to collect the urine, which proved much easier.



Figure 5. The camp toilet. There is a valve, normally closed, between the top and bottom chambers. I urinate into the top chamber, then open the valve to drain the urine into the bottom chamber. Then I rinse the top chamber with a small amount of water, which drains into the bottom chamber, and close the valve. To empty the toilet, I make sure the valve is closed, then release the latches on each side of the bottom chamber and remove the top chamber. I pour out the mix of urine and water in the bottom chamber through the port seen on the left.

18 J. D. Ovington, "The Calcium and Magnesium Contents of Tree Species Grown in Close Stands," *Nature Conservancy*, March 6, 1958, <https://nph.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1469-8137.1959.tb05348.x>.

Each morning, I poured the urine collected the previous day into the sprinkling can and proceeded as described earlier. As in 2019, I collected urine only when I was not also defecating, and only during the day, because the camp toilet was in our basement, and I had no desire to go down there when I had to urinate during the night. Thus I collected perhaps two-thirds to three-quarters of the urine I produced in a 24-hour period, but I calculated how much urine to add as if I had collected all of the urine each day.

To calculate how much urine to apply to each bed, I proceeded similarly to the calculation shown for the 2019 corn bed experiment. I began with the 0.024 pounds of nitrogen excreted in urine each day, as above.

My growing season is about 180 to 200 days long. If I collect urine every day for 180 days and apply all of it over the course of the growing season:

$$180 \text{ days} \times 0.024 \text{ pounds of nitrogen per day} = 4.3 \text{ pounds of nitrogen}$$

Cottonseed meal is 6% nitrogen; I apply 6 pounds of nitrogen to a 100-square-foot bed (twice that for potatoes). Thus the amount of nitrogen in the cottonseed meal is:

$$\begin{aligned} 6 \text{ pounds} \times 0.06 &= 0.36 \text{ pounds of nitrogen added to a 100-square-foot bed} \\ 12 \text{ pounds} \times 0.06 &= 0.72 \text{ pounds of nitrogen added to a 100-square-foot bed of potatoes} \end{aligned}$$

Dividing the 4.3 pounds of nitrogen from all the urine I produce in a 180-day growing season by 0.36 pounds of nitrogen needed per bed, we find that that amount of urine will supply all the needed nitrogen for twelve 100-square-foot beds.

I grew a total of nine beds of vegetables and grains, two beds of small fruits, and one bed of herbs and flowers in the garden. The latter three beds were not remineralized. Since the potato bed needs twice as much nitrogen as the other beds, I needed to apply urine to the equivalent of 10 beds. I had 12 beds' worth of urine for the full growing season. Thus I began collecting urine on April 1 and applied it to one of the beds the next day. That day's collected urine was applied to a different bed the following day, with this rotation continuing until the potato bed had received two days' worth of urine and all the other beds one day's worth. I applied the next day's urine to the subtropical trees and shrubs I keep in containers. Then I began again with collecting and applying urine to the first bed, and so forth. When the soil was saturated, I did not apply urine, waiting until the soil drained to resume the application sequence. During the growing season I kept track of which bed and therefore which crops received urine on which days.

By June 2020, as I observed the slow growth of the cabbages compared to previous years, I began to suspect that rotating applications of urine across the entire garden meant that I had not applied sufficient nitrogen to shorter-maturity crops like cabbage. I also wondered if applying urine before I planted a crop meant that the urine applied before planting did not contribute to growth of the crop. I thus hypothesized that for crops which received 0.36 pounds or more of nitrogen from urine *while they were in the ground* (0.72 pounds for potatoes), the yield would be about the same as

for the best previous year, and that crops which received significantly less than this would yield lower than the best previous year.

When I analyzed the yields I obtained in 2020 the following winter, I found that overall, yields for each crop were comparable to or lower than the best previous year. The total weight of the crops harvested in 2020 was 560 pounds, bested only by 2015's total of 687 pounds and considerably exceeding 2016 and 2018 (about 390 pounds each). When I examined how much urine I had applied to each crop when it was growing and compared that to the yield for each crop, I learned that as I had hypothesized, those crops that received well under 0.36 pounds of nitrogen from urine yielded well under the best previous yield, while crops that received about that much nitrogen yielded close to the best previous yield (except for the crops whose bed I neglected to weed over the summer, in which case the weeds competed with the crop for the nitrogen). In the case of the crops I planted in late summer for autumn harvest, all of which received more than 0.36 pounds of nitrogen from urine, the bok choy and Chinese cabbages that I grew for greens yielded much better than their best previous yields, while the turnips and radishes I grew for their roots yielded less than their best previous yields. The difference in performance of the greens compared to the roots could mean I did not thin the roots in a timely manner, causing the roots to compete with each other for nutrients. It could also mean the larger amount of nitrogen stimulated leaf growth at the expense of root growth.¹⁹

In general, for crops that received enough nitrogen through urine while they were actively growing, the crop yield was about as good as, in some cases better than, when cottonseed meal provided nitrogen. Taste remained the same, and pest and disease pressure remained low. With this success in hand, I next considered the possibility that wood ashes could replace all of the phosphate rock as a source of phosphorus.

2021 Experiments with Urine and Wood Ashes

The soil test data for spring 2021 was similar to that for spring 2020, as seen in Table 1. In particular, the amount of phosphorus needed to remineralize the 2021 garden was low enough that I could meet it by applying about 2.5 pounds of wood ashes to each bed, a small enough amount that it would not measurably affect the pH, and I had enough wood ashes on hand for the entire garden. Using wood ashes would eliminate the magnesium deficit as well. This allowed me to test the effect of using wood ashes for all of the phosphorus on many of the 2021 garden beds, and also to use both enough urine to provide all the nitrogen and enough wood ashes to eliminate the phosphorus deficit on one bed.

When I analyzed the yields, I learned that, making the usual allowances for cool and dry spring weather and hot and dry autumn weather, yields were about as expected for all crops for which I replaced all the phosphate rock with wood ashes. Yields were excellent, on par with the best previous yields, for all the eggplants, peppers, and tomatoes except for the 'Old German' tomatoes,

19 A full discussion of the experiment, the collected data, and my analysis of it may be found at "What the 2020 Garden Told Me," *Living Low in the Lou*, January 25, 2021, <http://livinglowinthelou.blogspot.com/2021/01/what-2020-garden-told-me.html>.

all of which were grown with urine providing all of the nitrogen and wood ashes providing all of the phosphorus.²⁰

My results over the past four growing seasons indicate that urine can supply the nitrogen needs of the vegetables and grains that I grow with attention to applying the proper amount when the crops are actively growing. They also indicate that wood ashes can eliminate phosphorus, potassium, and/or calcium deficits in my soil without adversely affecting the pH and thereby the availability of other minerals. Thus I conclude that these two home-produced materials can replace, in part or in whole, the corresponding purchased materials for supplying nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and calcium. Using urine and wood ashes in the garden reconnects them to their appropriate cycles, turning two potential disposal problems into two garden solutions.

As Below, So Above: Esoteric Considerations of Using Urine in the Garden

The urine I apply to garden crops participates in the nitrogen cycle. If it's not applied to the garden, it will enter a sanitary sewer and be removed by a sewage treatment plant. The sewage sludge will be landfilled, and the nitrogen will not reenter the cycle until geological processes expose the landfill sludge to the elements.

Applying the Hermetic principle “as above, so below,” there may be a corresponding cycle in the nonphysical realm whose disruption could cause problems like the disruption of the nitrogen cycle on the physical plane. What might that cycle be?

The Dolmen Arch course teaches that all beings in the Cosmos participate in three major currents (Greer, 2020, pp. 53–56). In the first current, beings pass from the limits of Ceugant down into Annwn. These beings are not individuated in the sense that we are: they borrow bodies from various manifestations of the physical world, such as forests or streams, thus enlivening them with the spirits described in many folk tales, and some Druids sense and interact with them. In the second current, the one we belong to, individuated beings manifest out of Annwn upward into Abred, undergo a series of lives as different kinds of beings to integrate their lessons, and then pass into Gwynfydd after learning all the lessons needed in human form. The third current, Ceugant itself, is where the beings we call gods and goddesses reside.

Suppose that either of the first two currents are disrupted by diverting the beings back toward their starting point. If beings of the first current pass up rather than down, eventually the forests and the streams will lose their animating principles, the lives that many of us can sense in them. If beings of the second current move down toward Annwn, they are failing to learn the lessons that incarnating in an individual body supplies. A being who does that long enough may lose incarnation altogether, de-manifesting back into Annwn.

I suggest that depriving the plant world of our urine corresponds to disrupting the first current. After urine passes out of our body, it is no longer part of an individual being, but it participates

20 A full discussion of the experiments, the collected data, and my analysis of it may be found at “What the 2021 Garden Told Me,” *Living Low in the Lou*, January 19, 2022, <http://livinglowinthelou.blogspot.com/2022/01/what-2021-garden-told-me.html>.

in a process that enlivens the soil as the urine decomposes into its chemical constituents. Just as removing urine from the nitrogen cycle means less nitrogen for plants to share among them and eventually fewer plants, so removing urine from the spiritual downward cycle leads to poor health among the beings that collectively enliven the soil. If their health declines, beings of the second current such as plants and animals will take less spiritual nourishment from the soil, and their spiritual health will decline.

My garden has its own animating spirit, a being of the first current whose body is my garden. Depriving it of the urine that I produce upon eating the beings of the second current that grew within it (the vegetables, roots, and grains) reduces its liveliness, which in turn reduces the liveliness of the plants that I eat and my own liveliness as well. Returning that urine to the garden so that it can complete its cycle back into Annwn and become raw materials for plants to grow from keeps the garden's spirit alive, which improves my spiritual health.

I can also apply an alchemical model to suggest why it is important to return my urine to the soil that grows the plants that I eat. Following Selene Blackwell (2020), I'll begin with the alchemical stage of calcination, where the material is heated carefully to the proper temperature to produce ash.

Consider what happens when I eat a plant from the garden. Digestion, a process that combines the chewed plant with first saliva and then stomach acid, takes place at a constant temperature and results in certain products. Analogous to the ash in a calcination, the life-giving products of the digestive process become the nutrients, the earth, from which my body sustains, renews, and repairs itself. These nutrients must diffuse through the walls of the small intestine (separation) and enter the bloodstream in order to become available for my body's various processes that require them (dissolution). Now the nutrients can be combined with each other and with other materials within the body to effect the sustaining, renewing, and repairing that keeps me alive (conjunction).

However, my body cannot utilize everything in the garden food that I eat. The indigestible remainder is combined with waste products from ongoing body processes to become the urine, feces, and other products that I eliminate. As Blackwell points out, the process cannot end here. If it did, urine, feces, and other waste products would build up to the point that life could not continue. Hence the next alchemical stage, fermentation. Urine that is discharged into the soil, as when I water my urine onto the garden beds, is worked on by soil-dwelling bacteria in successive stages, finally to result in nitrates that plants can absorb back into their bodies; here the agents of fermentation are bacteria, and since it takes place in the body of the earth, it carries the subtle energy of the telluric current. In the next stage, corresponding to distillation, the plant roots distill out of the soil mixture the nitrates that resulted from the previous stage, along with other nutrients they can use. The energy the plant gains when absorbed sunlight kicks off photosynthesis (with the solar current entering the plant through the same process) pumps the nutrients upward so that the plant can use them to sustain, renew, and repair itself: the final alchemical stage, coagulation. In this process, the solar and telluric currents combine to form the Green Ray, the growing tips of the plant (Greer, 2006, p. 73). When the coagulation process is complete, the plant matures and I eat it. Thus the cycle begins again.

When we discharge our urine into a toilet, it cannot participate in the fermentation stage. Instead, if untreated, it contaminates the water with excess nitrogen, causing algal blooms and leading

to fish kills. Even if the water is treated to remove the urine, since the urine did not enter the soil to complete the alchemical fermentation stage, the soil is less fertile than before and thus less plant and animal life can thrive.

Rather than collecting and returning all of our urine to agricultural soils, as some other cultures have done, the industrial agriculture of our time shortcuts the alchemical process by taking nitrogen from the air and reacting it with hydrogen from natural gas to form ammonia. Upon injection into the soil, the ammonia ferments into nitrates, which the plant distills into its roots via solar energy and then combines in various ways to form its body.

In physical terms, this means fewer plants are needed to keep the same number of humans alive, since fewer plants have to die and decay to form ammonia to keep the nitrogen cycle going. That works as long as natural gas is plentiful and cheap. However, there is a finite amount of natural gas; eventually, and most likely before long, it will deplete to the point where less is available for producing ammonia for agriculture, and thus less food is available for all of us.

In spiritual terms, shortcutting the alchemical nitrogen cycle sets up an intentionality of shortcutting in all of our life processes. This may make it easier for us to take shortcuts in other areas of life: to buy and eat convenience foods rather than cooking from basic ingredients, to watch TV and video rather than learning how to entertain ourselves, to consume music or art rather than making it ourselves. If we have gotten into this habit it is more difficult than otherwise to dedicate time for our Druid practice, as it must undergo the full alchemical cycle described by Blackwell to ripen in ourselves and our lives.

Blackwell understands the fermentation stage as corresponding to Spirit Below which, in turn, corresponds to the personal and collective unconscious, to put it in Jungian terms. A refusal to engage with the contents of our unconscious amounts to a refusal to integrate their transformative power with our conscious mind: in other words, a refusal to fully mature as human beings. This holds danger for us physically and spiritually (Caplan, 2009).

As Blackwell points out, there isn't anything comfortable about the fermentation stage; it can be messy and has dangers, just as collecting urine can be messy, and improperly applying it can be dangerous to ourselves and others. We keep what we are doing to ourselves in both cases and allow it to quietly transform ourselves and our garden. When we eat the plants, we incorporate the lessons of the fermentation stage into ourselves, just as we do when we sit with the contents of our unconscious in meditation.

William James (2010) suggests that we access the Divine through our unconscious processes. If this is so, then a refusal to engage in the fermentation stage cuts us off from whatever we consider to be the Divine or, as I like to call it, the Great Mystery. Returning urine to soil, when done with intention, then becomes the physical grounding of an act of magic to connect with the Great Mystery.

Conclusion

My results over these four growing seasons suggest that urine can replace seed meals as a source of nitrogen for vegetable and grain gardens, as long as the proper amount of urine is applied while the crop is actively growing to provide all of the nitrogen the plants need. They also indicate that wood ashes can replace some to all of the phosphate rock, potassium sulfate, lime, and magnesium sulfate that I would otherwise need to apply to eliminate deficiencies in phosphorus, potassium, calcium, and magnesium respectively in garden soil. Replacing purchased materials with home-produced versions not only saves money and reduces negative impacts on the Earth; it also returns two materials that would otherwise enter the waste stream to biogeochemical cycles, reconnecting my garden with these cycles that it participates in.

Anyone who wishes to use urine as a source of nitrogen for a vegetable garden must consider their own situation carefully. Can urine be applied so that it does not enter surface or underground waters before it can be used by growing plants? Can a means of applying just enough for the plants' needs be devised and followed for the entire growing season? Does everyone who will be eating the produce from the garden know that it was grown with urine, the potential hazards and the steps to mitigate them, and are they comfortable with eating that produce? If, and only if, yes is the answer to all of these questions is it appropriate to use urine on vegetable gardens.

Urine may also provide shrubs, trees, nonedible perennials, and container plants with nitrogen during the growing season, thereby reconnecting it with the nitrogen cycle and to the plants that need it. To do this, urine is diluted with water and poured onto the root zone of the plant. Before applying urine, make sure that the plant needs it. If the plant shows signs of too-rapid growth (a flush of leafy growth that is weak and sappy, spindly and frail stems, yellowing or browning leaves)²¹, it has already received too much nitrogen; do not apply urine in this case. Estimating the square footage of the area of the root zone and using the mathematics given above to decide how often to apply urine is probably the safest approach. Only apply urine when the soil can absorb it and runoff does not occur.

Gardeners who garden on acid soils (pH less than 7.0) can use wood ashes to replace some to all of the lime that they would otherwise apply to increase calcium and/or pH, as long as they monitor to ensure that pH stays at 7.0 or less so that other minerals remain available to plants (Solomon, 2013, pp. 201–202). Wood ashes can also replace, in whole or in part, other sources of phosphorus, potassium, and magnesium, as long as the importance of keeping pH to 7.0 or less is heeded. Gardens east of the 100th parallel of longitude in the United States, where there is usually enough rain to prevent buildup of excess calcium in the soil, will benefit the most from wood ashes. The semiarid and arid regions west of the 100th parallel aren't favorable for tree growth, and the soils often have high calcium; most gardeners probably won't have access to wood ashes and probably would not want to add them to their soil if they did have them.

Some gardeners east of the 100th parallel garden on soils that have pH above 7.0 but with a deficiency of calcium. This can happen when conventional fertilizers have been applied to the soil for

a number of years. This type of soil is best addressed by applying agricultural lime and gypsum to the soil for as many years as it takes to lower the pH and bring the calcium level up. At this point, when the soil pH is 7.0 or less, the gardener can start applying wood ashes in small amounts to replace other minerals for remineralization, monitoring its effect by soil tests. Other gardeners, most often those who live in prairie country, have pH above 7.0 but excesses of calcium and magnesium. Gardeners in these areas should not apply wood ashes unless and until the pH drops below 7.0 and the excesses no longer exist (Solomon, 2013, pp. 207–212).

Solomon discusses another target for soil remineralization, if agricultural lime has been added to soil for a number of years. At some point the soil solution becomes saturated with calcium; no more of the lime can dissolve. Such a soil now has free (undissolved) lime in it. The soil can be highly fertile, but soil testing will produce erroneous results because the standard tests don't account for the presence of free lime (Solomon, 2013, pp. 213–218). A gardener who applies 5 to 10 pounds of wood ashes to a 100-square-foot bed every year for several years could bring the calcium level high enough for free lime to be present. This hasn't happened to me yet, so the best advice I can offer to anyone who thinks there may be free lime in their garden soil is to read and meditate on Solomon's discussion.

By returning urine and/or wood ashes to garden soil, gardeners reconnect their gardens with biogeochemical cycles that keep soils fertile and full of life energy. That life energy enters the plants and then ourselves when we eat the plants. Reconnecting to biogeochemical cycles also connects us more closely with the processes that ferment within our unconscious, and thus connects us more closely with the Great Mystery.

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Of Ancestors and Authenticity in the Modern Druid Revival Tradition

Dana O'Driscoll

Dana O'Driscoll spent most of 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 practicing permaculture, wildcrafting, and natural arts and is often covered with paint, dirt, or both. She is a certified permaculture designer and teacher. Dana currently serves as the Grand Archdruid of the AODA and is an Ollave Adept. She is also a Druid-grade graduate of the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids and served as the 2018 OBOD Mount Haemus scholar. Her Druid Adept project explored connections between permaculture and druidry, the end result of which was published as Sacred Actions: Living the Wheel of the Year Through Earth-Centered Sustainable Practices in 2021. She is also the author and illustrator of the Tarot of Trees, Plant Spirit Oracle, and TreeLore Oracle. Her writings on druidry and permaculture can be found at The Druid's Garden (druidgarden.wordpress.com).

A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths ... are coins which have lost their image and now can be used only as metal, and no longer coins.

—Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense”

There seems to be a preoccupation with authenticity and truth within the Druid community (and outside of it). Time and time again, people have asked about the history of the tradition, the truth of the Druid Revival material, the lack of knowledge about the ancient Druids, and how we can be a legitimate religious or spiritual tradition. Most recently, I had to put out a flame war on one of my social media pages after sharing a piece of Awen artwork, when someone attacked the Awen symbol as not being an authentic Druid symbol. Questions about authenticity often come from outsiders as well as Druids, including new folks that start digging into the history of the Druid Revival. As soon as one starts reading on either the ancient Druids or Revival Druids, truth and authenticity seem to be a never-ending focus. For example, from the back cover of *A Brief History of the Druids*

(Ellis, 2005): “Finally, a book that separates fact from mythology, telling us what we can and cannot know about the ancient Druids.” In the same book’s opening pages, Ellis says, “The simple truth is that one person’s Druid is another person’s fantasy. The Druids have been conjured in a wide variety of perceptions, as to who they were, what they believed and what they taught, since the sixteenth century” (11). In 1927, Kendrick (2013) wrote of the “prodigious amount of rubbish” written on Druids in *The Druids: A Study in Celtic Prehistory*. These scholarly sources, of course, have their own bias situated within the realm of what is acceptable scholarly work. However, even within our own Druid orders, similar conversations occur.

From the viewpoint of historical accuracy, the legitimacy and authority of our tradition are challenged from outside of the Druid Revival community. For example, Ellis (2005) writes of the present Druid Revival with disdain: “With the onset of the 1960s ‘Hippies’ and ‘Alternative Religions’ the Druids were fair game again” (277). Ellis is quick to dismiss current druidic spirituality as a “quick fix on spirituality; because people, in the quest for truth and meaning in life, which seems the perennial human drive, prefer simple answers. It is easier to accept the cozy pictures of non-existent romantic Celts and Druids rather than ponder the uncomfortable realities” (280). Clearly, Ellis has not dug very deeply into our own rich traditions as a teaching order to understand the kinds of work that a modern Druid does. Druidry is not a passive spiritual path but rather one in which Druids must engage both the difficult questions surrounding our colorful past and the ecological and spiritual realities of the present. I think that these kinds of perspectives and challenges will likely always be with us—but they are no different than the challenges faced by other religious traditions.

All of the above leads many Druids to have a basic question: Is this druidry an authentic tradition? From where does our truth derive? Is it real, even if some of what we base our practices on is historically suspect or created by our spiritual ancestors?

These are very good questions to ask, especially concerning the rather colorful past of the Druid Revival tradition. This questioning typically comes from two sources. The first is that we have so little left of what the ancient Druids actually did, believed, and practiced, less than twelve pages in total, written mostly by the Romans, who were enemies of the ancient Druids. The second is that the origins of the Druid Revival are in part based on elaborate “creative repurposing” by its early leaders (like Iolo Morganwg’s *Barddas*). *Barddas* is many things to many different people—and while it is a foundational text in the Druid Revival, it is also subject to much academic scrutiny of its dubious origins. Further, the question of authenticity is the basis of one of the larger rifts within the modern Druid community in terms of the source of our practices (Celtic Reconstructionism versus the Druid Revival).

In this article, I’ll first situate the early Druid Revival period in its appropriate cultural history—both in terms of creative repurposing and textual borrowing and in terms of industrialization—to show how it is inappropriate to levy modern criticisms of plagiarism against these texts. In the second half of this article, I’ll explore ways we can put the authenticity debate to rest by honoring the ancestors of our tradition, recognizing modern druidry as a living tradition, and reframing the authenticity debate through lived experience. Through this, I hope to help us all reclaim our honored ancestors of the Druid Revival.

On the Industrial Revolution and Changing Ecological Realities

The other piece of this puzzle, of course, is the relationship between our spiritual ancestors and the crashing force of the Industrial Revolution. Two hundred and fifty years ago, our spiritual ancestors faced a radically changing world: a stable agrarian society, where the common people had access to common lands for grazing, foraging, and sustenance, and people made their own home-crafted goods, was quickly disappearing. Their society was being quickly replaced by an exploitative society that forced rural people into factories, that filled the skies with pollution and the rivers with poison, that undermined traditional ways of life, and that pillaged the natural world for raw materials. Our spiritual ancestors looked upon this emerging dystopian world and decided to respond by offering alternative perspectives to what was unfolding before them.

Edward Williams, known as Iolo Morganwg, was born in Wales in 1747 and died in 1826. Most accounts of the Industrial Revolution point to the beginnings of rapid industrialization in the British Isles in the 1760s (when Iolo would have been a teenager), and with mechanized spinning in the 1780s, when Iolo would have been his thirties. According to Stearns (1993), the drive to put people to work in factories was heralded with a series of Enclosure Acts in Great Britain that ended common land ownership by the people in favor of private ownership. Rural peoples lost the right to use their ancestral lands to produce food and graze their animals. A great deal of land was seized by the wealthy, the rural people now being forced to work in factories to survive. Conditions in early factories were brutal—in 1832, a British parliamentary investigation revealed that children as young as six were employed in the factories, worked 70- to 90-hour weeks and 16-hour days, possibly with a short lunch break or no break depending on the level of production.

These were the conditions Iolo Morganwg experienced firsthand. He grew up in a small village with a father who was a stonemason. Iolo, who had a love of old things, watched the old world give way to the new. He was an antiquarian who collected medieval Welsh literature. He began publishing in 1789 and founded the first Welsh Gorsedd in 1791. His most influential text on the Druid Revival, *Barddas*, was not published during his lifetime—it was published posthumously in two volumes in 1862 and 1874. While it is hard to know when it was written, there is no denying the cultural backdrop of this text.

Further, while taking the time to understand the cultural conditions that influenced Iolo Morganwg's life, it is useful to draw parallels to today. What kinds of work would you do, now, to save our planet from the sixth mass extinction during the Anthropocene? I think about these questions as I compare Iolo's cultural context to my own. I, too, live in a region, a culture, and a civilization that continues to perpetuate the myth of progress and whose ultimate aims are profit and exploitation. I wonder what any of us would have done during Iolo's era—and I am grateful for the work that these spiritual pioneers did, so that today I have the tools and knowledge to thrive in these difficult times, to connect with the living earth, and to heal and regenerate the land. (And if you see my other article published in this issue of *Trilithon*, you'll get some idea of my own response to this question!)

On the Changing Nature of Text and Text Ownership

So now, let's move to the text of *Barddas* and other related early Revival texts themselves. There is little doubt that the history of the Druid Revival is clouded with many inaccuracies, misunderstandings, and downright fraudulent texts. Iolo Morganwg, like his contemporaries, claimed to be working from ancient lost texts, and in some cases, they certainly were. But while their texts might include ancient knowledge, gaps were filled with material that was creatively repurposed, heavily adapted, or simply original. For a while, it was accepted that much of what Revival Druids believed was a carefully constructed fable perpetrated by Iolo Morganwg; now, some recent scholarship (such as John Michael Greer's work on the Coelbren) shows that it might be based on more original material than previously believed.

One of the most important issues to understand within the Druid Revival tradition is the radically changing definitions of history, accuracy, and plagiarism. In the twentieth century and today, we are very concerned—one might say obsessed—with copyrights and originality. I'm a writing professor by trade, and I can speak from direct experience at the near obsession our current academic culture has with plagiarism: a plagiarizing student is subject to severe academic sanctions that can, in certain cases, lead to the student being permanently expelled and losing their invested tuition money. If I were caught plagiarizing a professional academic publication, I would lose my job and be permanently ostracized from my field. These extreme responses to plagiarism are by-products of capitalism.

Historically, this matters if we are to examine Druid Revival texts in their cultural contexts. Plagiarism and the ownership of ideas such as we have today simply did not exist in Iolo Morganwg's time. In "What Is an Author?," Foucault (1977) describes the rise of ownership of texts and ideas—this ownership itself is a product of the commodification of goods and of rising consumerism. Foucault explains that before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when writing was commodified, writing was an act, not a product or thing. As consumerism began to be a driving force, and as things like the printing press modernized the distribution of ideas, our more modern notions arose. This is to say that the very ideas of authorship and ownership—ideas that we so highly prize in our materialistic and postindustrialized world—were nearly nonexistent through most of human history. They were largely unknown when Iolo Morganwg was writing *Barddas*, and therefore applying them to *Barddas* is not appropriate.

When examining figures like Iolo Morganwg who developed original works based on earlier manuscripts, we often apply current academic standards, viewing them as frauds or fakes, as committing serious crimes against history and accuracy. But a deeper examination of the changing historical ethics at the time they were writing paints a different picture. Copying and creative expansion were used as teaching tools and often were considered the highest form of flattery for most of human written history. Consider a work like Virgil's *Aeneid*, which is a near-copy of Homer's *Odyssey* (and Homer himself was almost certainly several storytellers who based their work on still older works). Despite the plagiarism, Virgil's work is still lauded as a masterpiece in its own right. Even William

Shakespeare, considered one of the greatest playwrights, borrowed extensively from predecessors and contemporaries for his plays, including his famous *Romeo and Juliet*. Ronald Hutton writes in *The Druids*, “Ancient historians simply did not work according to the same priorities and conventions as their successors in the twentieth century. They were less concerned to establish the exact truth of the past than to propose lessons from it, of utility to present to future readers” (2007, p. 5).

And so, we have a long-held historical and literary tradition of adapting material to suit a common purpose—often with cultural significance. Hutton (2007, pp. 7–16) argues that much of the renewed interest in the ancient Druids during the Druid Revival did just this: Druids were resurrected in the minds of the Germans, then the French, then the Welsh and Irish, and finally the British. For example, John Seldon, a politician living in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, said that Druids were the foundation for free assembly and the British Parliament, while Thomas Caius in the same time period claimed the Druids were the intellectual ancestors of Cambridge University (Haycock, 2002).

I think part of the reason that the Druid Revival materials are suspect, in ways that we don’t criticize Shakespeare or Virgil, is simply a matter of time. Shakespeare and Virgil are older, established in the canon, and read in English literature classes, and therefore not subject to the same criticism as Iolo Morganwg and his contemporaries. If Morganwg’s writings were from 1,000 years earlier or weren’t about an alternative spiritual system, I doubt there would be much, if any, criticism or suspicion. And because of the long historical and literary tradition behind many ancient texts, it is likely that many sacred texts, from all around the world, were probably created in the same way that Iolo Morganwg created *Barddas*. It’s just that those mysteries are lost to time in ways that *Barddas* and others are not.

This is all to say that I don’t believe it is ethical or productive to hold Iolo Morganwg or his contemporaries who founded the Druid Revival to the academic plagiarism standards we have today. Instead, we can read these texts in the spirit of their own cultural context and recognize the long literary tradition that these texts emerged from.

At this point, I’ve offered two key arguments that help us shift our understanding of the origins of the Druid Revival and Iolo Morganwg’s texts. First, Morganwg and his contemporaries were responding to the beginning of an ecological and social crisis—the same crisis that continues in our present age and threatens all life on this planet. Second, Morganwg and his contemporaries that helped found the Druid Revival tradition were working with very different cultural and scholarly values, and it isn’t appropriate to hold them to our standards of today. If we accept these two arguments, the question now is, what do we do with this information? I see at least three pathways forward: reclaiming our history and honoring the ancestors, recognizing druidry as a living tradition, and reframing authenticity as direct experience. We’ll now explore each of these in the second half of this article.

Reclaiming Our History and Honoring Our Ancestors

To address external challenges to our own legitimacy, I believe we first must begin with our own hearts and minds, as we are the spiritual descendants of the Druid Revival. At the outset, we can seek peace with our history and our ancestors. We can begin to honor those founders of the Druid Revival tradition as ancestors—for that is very much what they are. It is highly likely that, without Iolo Morganwg's work, we might not have a modern Druid spiritual tradition in any sense of the word. Iolo and his contemporaries were pioneering spirits whose work and inspiration continue within our tradition.

Each time we invoke Awen, say the Druid's Prayer, draw upon the three currents, or declare peace in the quarters, we are drawing from the Druid Revival. These are core parts of our practice, and the Awen symbol is the symbol of modern druidry. We use these symbols and concepts, in good faith, while attacking and holding in disregard those who helped bring us these practices. So, within our communities and Druid orders, I believe it is important to honor them with the due respect given to any other ancestor. This ancestral work may include offerings and prayers at Samhain, acknowledging them in rituals (e.g., honoring ancestors of tradition), in shrines to the ancestors, and in our own communities. But I also think acknowledgment involves learning more about our tradition's ancestors, honoring these ancestors publicly, and defending them if needed.

Recognizing Druidry as a Living Tradition

A number of years ago, I was able to attend a workshop with Penny Billington, who published *Paths of Druidry* and edited OBOD's magazine *Touchstone*. When asked about the colorful history of the Druid Revival and the issue of forgery, she gave one of the best answers I have ever heard. She said that we were lucky, as Druids, not to have any ancient sacred texts holding us back. She said that because druidry is a living tradition that we are coconstructing, it can adapt to the rapidly changing world. Nature is our text and our greatest teacher. And so, we cocreate this tradition as we grow, both as individuals and as Druid orders and as participants in the broader movement of reconnecting with the earth.

I have found a lot of peace in Penny Billington's statement. When people ask me things like, "Well, how old is druidry anyway?" I know it's often an underlying challenge to the authenticity of this path. But, as I've meditated on her statement over a period of years, I think it holds tremendous value and wisdom.

While other traditions struggle to address and interpret ancient wisdom and ancient texts in a very different day and age, our tradition is on the forefront of adapting. In AODA, for example, we recognize that nature-based spiritual practice is rooted not only in rituals and energetic work but also in our own connection and path to walk more lightly and kindly upon the living earth. This is not something a text of 1,000 years ago gave us. It's something that we know to be inherently true when we look outside our window or read the news—we know if we are to align with the living earth

spiritually, especially in these times, we must also change our physical actions. And this is something our spiritual ancestors clearly also knew and experienced in their day. They were anticipating us and writing us and our tradition into existence at a time when it was needed most.

Just as our ancestors envisioned us as part of their future story, so too do we now think about our descendants and all future life on this planet. Druidry is helping us lay the groundwork for what is to come if the human race is to survive. We are rediscovering ancient ways of knowing, living, and doing in the world. Nature teaches us this through her own rhythms, cycles, and truths. Our ancient ancestors around the globe learned all they needed to know from constantly observing and interacting with the living earth; and as we return to these practices, we uncover wisdom lost. It might turn up in a different form, but it will turn up again—because we are getting it the same way our ancestors got it—from the sacred book of nature.

Our tradition has room to grow, to adapt, to change—just like nature herself. By learning from nature, by heeding her voice, we are putting ourselves, and by example others, on a more earth-centered path.

Of course, there may be a lingering discomfort with the idea that we can create a personally valid and meaningful practice that works for us and that isn't based on millennia of religious understanding or a holy book, that one can, essentially, call upon nature's divine inspiration and craft something that works. The question, to me, isn't whether or not 2,000-plus years of previous human history validates my practice—the question for me is, Does it work? Is it meaningful? And the answer is, resoundingly, yes. We are working from ancient understandings, even if those understandings are fragmented. We are also working from a 300-year-old tradition that has grown and evolved, and is stronger today perhaps than ever before.

Reframing Authenticity Through Experience

Directly stemming from the acknowledgment of druidry as a living tradition that adapts much like nature herself, one more critical piece that seems to be at play in the discussion of authenticity is the role of direct experience, personal knowing, intuition, and heart-centered experiences.

The idea of certainty (and to some degree, authenticity) stems in part from the rise of modernism: a philosophy rooted in rationalism and the development of the scientific method of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was through the rise of modernism and the Industrial Revolution that we moved to a head-centered culture. This displaced the idea that the core of being human was in feeling, experience, emotion—centered in the heart (this has been discussed in various sources; one of my favorite treatments of the topic is in the opening of Stephen Harrod Buhner's *Sacred Plant Medicine*). In a head-centered, rational culture, we live with the not-always conscious assumption that what is certain or authentic is what can be empirically validated, measured, or assessed.

Some of druidry's core practices and practitioner experiences simply don't fit within these head-centered boundaries. They are in the realm of personal experience, emotional knowing, intuition, and inner experience; they are in the realm of the heart. I can't empirically validate many of

my experiences as a Druid, but that doesn't make them any less meaningful. As a social scientist and methodologist, I am well versed in the scientific method, and thus I know how very inappropriate many scientific methods are for my inner spiritual life. There are questions that empirical researchers can answer, and there are questions that are unanswerable with these methods. Most deep spiritual truths fall into the realm of unanswerable questions—and that is why it is in the realm of spiritual understanding, rather than the historical or scientific, that I seek my own inner truth. We seem to forget, as a society, that there is more than one way of knowing—but remembering this and balancing it is critical for the development of a fulfilled spiritual life. I strive for a balanced worldview where scientific knowledge of the natural world lives side-by-side with experiential ways of knowing and experiences in spirit, and that each of these have relevancy and power.

In the end, druidry is a living spiritual tradition that works. If it didn't work and it wasn't meaningful, so many people wouldn't be seeking it out, going against the grain of the broader religious and cultural traditions, and persevering with it.

Conclusion

Revival Druidry, as a phenomenon and as the forebear of the AODA, OBOD, and other Druid organizations, has much to teach us and how issues surrounding truth can, in themselves, be a source of inspiration and education. Druids might consider treating our knowledge of the Druid Revival (and ancient Druids) in the same manner that we treat our many fables, tales, and stories. It is not the truth that we cannot possibly know for certain that is important. Rather, the Druid Revival provides us with something more valuable than a simple historical fact—it provides us with a rich history and framework that today can be used for teaching and reflection. And like all great works (of fiction or of fact) the story changes as the tale is told. The story morphs into what is necessary for that era and time. Our Druid Revival predecessors offered us much in the way of their own wisdom, their own truths—and we can honor them as the rightful ancestors that they are. They also left much up to us, to find our own way in our living tradition, seeking direct wisdom and experience from the living earth. We are living in the future they helped write, and we are now continuing that story for future generations.

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Hedge Druidry

Dave Ardrey

Dave Ardrey is an Apprentice in the Ancient Order of Druids in America. He practices Druid ritual magic, Hedge Druidry, natural magic, and, over the past year or so, chaos magick. Dave studies occultism including esotericism, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, mythology, legend, lore, and spiritual paths from all cultures over the course of time. Comparative mythology and religion are among his top interests in addition to digging into the origins of unexplained phenomena. Dave's druidry can best be explained as a philosophy, lifestyle, and practice that has incorporated in itself an emphasis on knowledge and science married with magic and spirituality.

One way I have found of working with Ancestors of the Land, Ancestors of the Blood, and Ancestors of the Spirit is accomplished in the liminal space between the physical world and the otherworld called the Hedge, which is also between our conscious and unconscious, depending how one wants to contextualize it. More specifically, in that Hedge I can access a World Tree, which is a pathway that connects the Lower World, the Upper World, and the Middle World. In this article, I provide an overview of the Hedge and how to connect with the World Tree. I introduce some core concepts for conducting Hedge Druidry, exploring what myths and legends have to say about the otherworld and the Axis Mundi, applying Jungian psychology and defining liminal space and the active imagination. Afterward I provide rituals and meditations to work with spirits, gods and goddesses, powers, archetypes, and ancestors, using the World Tree to travel between the Lower, Upper, and Middle Worlds.

Background: The World Tree

The World Tree is part of the mythos of several Eastern and Western religions and philosophies. Like AODA's Sphere of Protection, Hedgework involves a cosmos and personal symbolism unique to every individual that is unveiled over time. For the purposes of communicating these uncommon themes, I have opted to use a mix of philosophy of the AODA, psychology, and some of my personal unverified gnosis.

In the philosophy of AODA druidry, the roots of the World Tree would reach deep into Annwn, toward the heart of the earth. Its branches reach to Gwynfydd, toward the sun symbolically

at zenith high above. The Upper World connects to the Lower World through the trunk of the tree. This may bring to mind the Hermetic aphorism “As above, so below; as below, so above.” In Hinduism, Shiva is absolute awareness; Shakti is absolute energy. In a more philosophical sense, they are the absolute and the void. One cannot exist without the other. In other spiritual and philosophical traditions this corresponds to Nuit and Hadit of Thelema, Tao and Teh of Taoism, Shunyata and Bodhicitta of Buddhism, Ain Soph and Kether in the Hermetic Qabalah, and many, many others. In a general sense it is the absolute and the void merging together to create the One Life, which sets in motion the Cosmic Day.

The two currents or forces when combined make three, which in this case places Abred in the center. Abred is where we live and breathe and have our being. Abred is the Axis Mundi, called Bile in Irish, where the Upper Realms and the Lower Realms converge. The Axis Mundi sits at the center of the world and acts as a point of contact between different levels of the universe. In most traditions, this is personified as a mountain such as Indian mythology’s Mount Meru or Mount Kailash depending on the text, Mount Kunlun in Chinese myth, or a World Tree like Yggdrasil in Norse mythology, Irminsul in Germanic mythology, Ashvatta in Hindu mythology, or the oak tree in Slavic, Greek, Finnish, and Baltic myths. In Greek mythology the Omphalos, a stone artifact, as well as an olive tree, represented this Axis Mundi. In Sumeria and Babylon it was a ziggurat, a stepped pyramid with seven levels. Other examples include Jacob’s Ladder in Genesis, the beanstalk in “Jack and the Beanstalk,” Maypoles, totem poles, world pillars, or the Celtic Tree of Life. The list is long, and many cultures had multitudes of Axes Mundi throughout the ages.

The Sphere of Protection ritual places the practitioner at the very center of everything in the cosmos at this Axis Mundi point during the Elemental Cross, as do many other banishing rituals like Thor’s Hammer, the Qabalistic Cross, and the Greek Cross variations of the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram.

In Celtic myth and lore, Abred or the Middle World is both the physical world and the other-world. These two intertwine and interpret each other, but they rarely interact as they do in myths. This may bring to mind the Hermetic aphorism “As within, so without,” which basically means the outside world is a reflection of the inner world. Psychologists have proposed these two worlds as our unconscious, the other or inner world, and our conscious, the physical or outer world, both existing within the same being. Spiritual philosophies and magical traditions for the most part have emphasized the solar/celestial current of knowledge, teaching students about heavens and ascension from lower to higher levels of being. Light is typically an attribute of the most knowledgeable and highest of beings. A few spiritual philosophies and magical traditions have taken an opposite approach, emphasizing the telluric/chthonic current of power, teaching students about underworlds and deeper levels of existence and understanding. However, these two currents balance each other out, and at the point of balance, the Axis Mundi point, potential, freedom, and effective action can be found. From a psychological viewpoint, this motif of above and below pitted against each other can be symbolic of the chthonic and celestial struggle within ourselves, between the drives of our biological instincts and lower aspects of human nature such as love, passion, and power, uncovered early in our rise to conscious awareness, and the higher aspects of human nature like imagination, abstract knowledge, and interpersonal emotion, uncovered much later in our rise to conscious awareness.

However, below or lower means worse only from a biased view that the above or higher is a better place or perspective. These aspects of the self and the lower world are just lower in the way a building's foundation is lower than the structure it supports, or a tree's root system is lower than the trunk where the nutrients and water are brought up from the depths of the earth. Instead of pitting above/solar/celestial and below/telluric/chthonic against each other, we can instead place them in a balanced, combined fusion. This causes the new force of the lunar current to be formed. This is the entire idea behind the Sphere of Protection ritual and most AODA workings. Because the lunar current cannot exist naturally in the individual or in the world, it must be made by the balanced fusion of the solar and telluric currents. "When the lunar current awakens in an individual, it awakens the inner senses and unfolds into enlightenment. When it awakens in the land, it brings healing, fertility, and plenty" (*The Druid Magic Handbook*, Greer, 2007).

Background: Understanding the Unconscious and Conscious Through Jungian Psychology

In Jungian psychology, Carl Jung coined the term "individuation" for the process of combining the unconscious with the conscious. I am bringing this up here in an effort to make my thinking more accessible to individuals that have a view of the cosmos devoid of deities and spirits. Additionally, Jung used visualization techniques like those presented in this article to conduct his own personal individuation. Third, some have and still do use terms like "shamanic journeying" to describe a concept Jung called active imagination, which we will get to later. Altogether this interconnects within the ideal of Hedge Druidry.

The purpose of this individuation process is to increase an individual's consciousness. With greater consciousness, individuals can heal the splits in their mind between the conscious and unconscious, bringing them to wholeness in their psyche. The first half of life is mainly external as we make our way through the world, doing our best to develop a healthy ego as we seek to meet our basic needs. In Jung's outlook, the second part of life can bring a turning inward toward a deeper part of ourselves. This inward turn starts the individuation process.

Jung observed that some people favor using thoughts to make judgments while others follow their feelings. Some individuals experience the world through their senses while others intuit intentions, potentials, and hidden relationships. Thinking types approach life with little regard for their emotions. They arrange things with logic and order. They have firm codes of what's right and wrong. Feeling types understand what something is worth. Compared to thinkers' clear categories of thought, feelers embrace disorder. They appreciate the infinite gradations of value and meaning. Intuiting types are more interested in future possibilities than in things as they are. Intuitives see similarities where most people see differences. Sensing types most accurately interpret information through their five senses. They are the ultimate realists, accepting the world as it is.

We like to do things we're good at and avoid doing things that make us feel inadequate. And so we develop specific skills while undeveloped talents remain in the unconscious. Jung grouped these four functions into pairs: thinking and feeling, sensing and intuiting. Of the four functions,

Jung found that each person has one dominant or superior function. The opposite function is the person's inferior function. This inferior function remains mostly unconscious to the individual. For example, for people who rely on thinking to interpret information, feelings are their inferior function. For people who trust their senses, intuition is their inferior function. Remember that the goal of the individuation process is to integrate the conscious with the unconscious. Our superior function is conscious—we know our strengths. Our inferior function is unconscious because, in the course of our development, we've avoided it. And so the key to individuation, according to Jung, lies in developing our inferior functions.

This ties in well with the four material elements traditionally:

- Air in the east, in yellow, corresponds to thinking.
- Fire in the south, in red, corresponds to feeling.
- Water in the west, in blue, corresponds to intuiting.
- Earth in the north, in green, corresponds to sensing.

Jung also introduced the concept of archetypes. In Jungian psychology, the shadow is the unconscious aspect of the personality that the conscious ego does not identify in itself. This shadow archetype represents the personal traits we have ignored, denied, or cut off from ourselves. Make no mistake here, this is not just our darkness or our undesirable traits: these are the traits we have not developed in ourselves for various valid reasons. Some have helpful or neutral traits in their shadow like adaptability, compatibility, determination, compassion, patience, stability, moderation, self-control, and so on.

The anima/animus is at work in every instance of extreme love or fantasy or entanglement. The anima/animus wants intensity of experience. Like all archetypes, this may come upon us like fate—meaning it can be something extraordinary or something terrible. Either way, the aim for the anima/animus is to wake us up. To recognize the anima/animus means throwing away our rational ideas of how life should be lived and instead admit, as Jung puts it, “Life is crazy and meaningful at once.” Jung, C.G.; Aniela Jaffé (1965). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Random House. p. v.

Carl Jung's worldview was based on stereotypical masculine and feminine forms, meaning the anima was a man's inner feminine aspects and the animus was a woman's inner masculine aspects. This has led many to reject the concept altogether and metaphorically throw the baby out with the bathwater. In our modern day, it can still be of value if the anima and animus concept are viewed as more like the traits we do not consciously identify with, rather than what we were assigned at birth, as opposed to a strictly masculine or strictly feminine stance—for example, the “boys don't cry” and “girls don't lead” narrative that was dying off after the Women's Rights Movement. Since we as a society have moved toward individuality rather than a polarity of gender, men can be intuitive, compassionate, or empathetic on a conscious level, and women can be rational, heartless, or apathetic on a conscious level.

Pulling it out of gender stereotypes, the anima or animus would be viewed as our opposite conscious counterpart, regardless of gender. The yin-yang symbol fits in very well here, but only if yin or yang is not identified with a particular gender, as there is a bit of both in each that can be accessed. Now I want to clear up that toxic masculinity and toxic femininity mostly belong in the shadow, but can manifest in the anima or animus as something extraordinary or terrible.

The self is the archetype of wholeness and self-transcendence. A wise old man, woman, or non-gender-binary entity often represents this universal image. This archetype is also personified in other traditions as the holy guardian angel, our future magical self, and so on. Many other archetypes exist, and all can be interacted with. There are thousands of them, and they all have something to teach us. Characters from myths, legends, and stories, if you think about it, can reveal to us something about ourselves. This is the kind of knowledge and power one can obtain from the Hedge or liminal space between the powerful currents that set the actions of the worlds into motion.

There are more than just Ancestors to interact and work with in the Hedge. Once inside the Hedge or equally in both worlds, one can receive guidance and work with plants, animals, nature spirits, the Fair Folk, gods and goddesses of the wild wood, and so much more.

There is a lot of baggage associated with the words “shamanism” and “mysticism,” but I have no better terms to convey that Hedgework is the work of both the shaman and the mystic simultaneously without abandoning one for the other or pitting the two against each other.

Hedgework can be used for healing the self, healing another, or healing the land, to conduct spirit rescue work, psychopomp work, or individuation, to spread peace, to search for knowledge, for divination, to seek guidance and assistance in magical and spiritual work, to do magical work, and probably other things I have yet to discover. What one can do in the Hedge is only limited by one’s knowledge, power, and peace.

These are techniques I learned and modified from Joanna van der Hoeven’s (2018) book *The Hedge Druid’s Craft*. Although I’m not willing to share my personal prayers and invocations, I took the time to craft some inspirational ones similar to mine, given below in the ritual section, based on the Elemental Cross and the Circulation of Light. The Calling of the Elements is not included in these rites, though one could add it or change the invocations entirely to something more evocative using one’s personal symbolism.

Background: Liminal Space and the Otherworld

Liminal space is any area between two points. The liminal space provided by a ceremonial grove can be used as an access point into the Hedge, among many other liminal spaces. The sandbar between the lake and the grassland is a liminal space. The grassland between the sandbar and the tree line is a liminal space. The tree line between the grassland and the forest is a liminal space. The forest between the tree line and the next feature is a liminal space, and so on. The top of a mountain or hill is the liminal space between earth and sky.

If you believe humans are spiritual beings and experience a transmigration of the soul after body death, then your own earthly existence is liminal. Yet we have been conditioned not to perceive the spiritual realm, the otherworld that Celtic myth and legend say intertwines and interprets the everyday mundane world we are bound to. And because of that, we have to shift ourselves into a different state of consciousness in order to perceive, be receptive, interact, and be active within the otherworld.

This state is not much different from the state our consciousness gets into during focused meditation, or even the state our mind gets into during our daily commutes from house to class, from house to work, from house to garden. Liminal space is even located between every single word in this article. Liminal space is encountered when we perform the Elemental Cross or the entire Sphere of Protection ritual. Just as with nature, the more mindful one becomes of liminality, the more one understands it is always all around us and within us.

The spiritual realm, the otherworld, may call to us in art, in music, and even in our dreams. It beckons us—maybe the same beckoning we answered when we chose the path of nature spirituality. Throughout history, some of our Ancestors of Land, Blood, or Spirit answered this call and traveled the nether regions of consciousness, striving to align themselves with a greater understanding of the world around them. They can be your guides in the Hedge if you choose to go and seek them. There are many guides that can also provide you with sage and wise advice for your spirituality or everyday life, if you keep them separate. There are many spirits that won't guide you or will give terrible advice. If advice comes from any of these guides that will destroy your practical existence, hurt your relationships with your family, cause trouble for you at your school or job, or cause power struggles with everyone around you, you have both the duty and the right to answer back and present your ethical alternative. Never forget they lived and live in a different time and space than you do. They perceive or don't perceive our world in much the same way we perceive or don't perceive the otherworld. Never forget you are in charge of your own life, your own actions, your own thoughts, and your own feelings.

Background: Ritual and Active Imagination

The basic ritual of entering the Hedge can be thought of as allowing access to the area between the physical world and the otherworld. Hedgework is all exercises of active imagination.

Active imagination is something we do all the time without noticing. Practitioners simply noticed it and developed ways to use it. For example, you may have experience with imagination where you imagine the heart of the earth deep below and the sun at zenith high above, the Circulation of Light, and so on. This type of imagination could be thought of as consciously imagining. Active imagination relies more upon the unconscious because you are not forcing the images. The unconscious part of the mind is thought to be responsible for dream imagery and communicates mostly with symbols. Let's look at an exercise to show what I mean.

I want you to imagine a tree. Don't close your eyes. Let it just be there in your mind's eye. Just let it be there and notice what your unconscious mind adds to it. Don't force the image to go one way or another; just let the imagination play. What is under the tree? What season is it? What is the time of day? How's the weather? How fast is the wind blowing? And if it is blowing, from which direction? What lies beyond the tree? What else do you imaginably see?

This works by thinking of simple ideas and noticing what your unconscious mind adds. Your unconscious is attempting to communicate with your conscious. There is a whole wealth of symbolism to unpack in just that short exercise. I feel like it's comparable to the symbolism of dreams because of how the additional details come into the vision in an unconscious and very surreal way. Discursive meditation on these symbols and visions can unlock the symbolism of what is seen or encountered, to put it in rational language the conscious can understand. Altogether, this process can bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious parts of mind, to craft the bridge between our outer and inner worlds.

Ritual: Entering the Hedge

In order to enter this liminal space called the Hedge, begin by standing in or near a hedge or liminal space looking away from civilization. Take the same pose as Lugh when he gave his speech to the Tuatha Dé Danaan before the great battle with the Fomorians. That is, close the nondominant eye and raise the nondominant foot off the ground. I call this the Hedge Pose.

Hold this pose for a few moments while breathing rhythmically, until a shift in consciousness happens. This shift is a state of reverie or trance like that which falls over us before sleep.

Move into and perform the Elemental Cross, using the same words, visualizations, and motions as you do for the Sphere of Protection ritual. At Step 6 in AODA's New Candidate Guide, Making these changes; when you cross the arms over the chest, right over left facing forward while visualizing twin rays of light shooting out at an infinite distance in front of and behind you, say words like:

"May the powers of nature bless and protect me as I travel the path between the worlds."

Lower your arms to form the Awen symbol with your hands and body.

Concentrate on your left hand and say: "May my Ray of Knowledge be strengthened."

Concentrate on your right hand and say: "May my Ray of Power be strengthened."

Concentrate on your midline and say: "May my Ray of Peace be strengthened."

Continue, saying:

"In protection and strength I travel between the worlds,

To speak in the languages

Of air and fire,

Of water and earth,

Of Spirit Below, Spirit Above, and Spirit Within. Ah-oh-en.”
Perform the Circulation of Light.

You are now equally in both worlds. Here you can interact and receive guidance from plants, animals, nature spirits, the Fair Folk, gods and goddesses of the wild wood, ancestors of the land, earthbound spirits, other archetypes, and much more—if they happen to be in the area and wish to speak with you, that is. You can also practice stillness or focus. Journeying can be accomplished physically, or in the mind with active imagination, while standing, kneeling, or sitting in place.

Ritual: Leaving the Hedge

Return to where you began, looking toward civilization. Assume the Hedge Pose, closing your nondominant eye and raising your nondominant foot off the ground. Say words like:

“I return from walking between the worlds.
I honor my time spent in the Hedge and seek to bring its wisdom into my being.
May my Ray of Knowledge be strengthened.
May my Ray of Power be strengthened.
May my Ray of peace be strengthened.

In all my endeavors:
As I work to balance my self;
As I work to balance my life;
As I work to live in peace and harmony with the worlds, gods, spirits, and powers
that are always all around me.
Ah-oh-en.”

Clap your hands three times, pat the ground three times, say your name three times, or do some other action to ground yourself back into the physical world. Make entries in your journal about what you experienced. Devote time to meditating on these experiences.

Background: Working with the World Tree and the Ancestors

If one wants to access the Hedge and travel to an area more broad than one can reach with the physical body, such as the Lower World, the Upper World, or the entire spectrum of the Middle World and otherworld, a type of pathway needs to be used. In Hedge work, this is the World Tree. The World Tree is both a symbolic tree and a physical tree in the same space, just as we have a physical body and a magical body in the same space, or a conscious and an unconscious in the same body. For the purpose of this article and my understanding of what I have seen and how I choose to view

the cosmos, I have split the Ancestors into three groups based on the elements Iolo Morganwg wrote about: calas, gwyar, and nwyfre. Ancestors of the Land, of the Blood, and of the Spirit. The Ancestors of the Land (calas) are around us. The Ancestors of the Blood (gwyar) are within us. The Ancestors of the spirit (nwyfre) are those that took up the path of druidry before us, and they are within and around us.

When I honor the Ancestors of the Land, it allows me to be more aware of where I am, to feel the history of the place, and to acknowledge the presence of those in the area. When I honor the Ancestors of the Blood, it allows me to be more aware of the long line of humanity which I am a part of, the simplicity of our lives and deaths as we cycle around the wheel of the year, living and dying, feeding the land and being fed by it. I know the strengths and the weaknesses of my bloodline, and I draw courage from that. When I honor the Ancestors of the Spirit, I am aware of my gratitude for those who teach me, thankful that throughout history there have been those whose souls are woven into the land, those who transcend the boundaries and limits of life. Through this work I am able to understand my place among them as a student and as a teacher.

Make no mistake here: I do not believe one needs to possess ancestors of Celtic blood to take up the path of druidry, any more than one needs to live on the land where ancient Druids once lived. As a Druid, I work with my Ancestors of the Land upon the land I live with. My Ancestors of the Blood are based upon my personal ancestry and bloodline, which is a mix of Irish, Welsh, English, and Cherokee. I have found the Ancestors of the Spirit will respond and work with all who consciously choose a pursuit of the Druid path.

I've found that this veneration of ancestors is sometimes misconstrued as the worship of the dead. This mostly comes from the worldview of people that pit the solar current and telluric current, described above, against each other. However, when I honor or revere the ancestors, I am acknowledging those of my own blood, those who have lived on the land where I live, and those of my heritage whose teachings I now seek to comprehend. I don't see them as heroes to be worshiped, for they are as flawed as I am. The reverence is based upon the perception of where or how they are. It is through them that I find a way to experience connection to nature and the living earth.

To connect with ancestors and other archetypes that are more bound to the Circles of Manifestation, find a tree or several trees in your area that are willing to work with you. To clarify, the World Tree is both a physical tree and a symbolic tree within the same space. The tree you planted in your Candidate year and are caring for is a great one to work with. Any that you have a close, symbiotic relationship with will work as well. Trees that are older have different things to reveal than trees that are younger. Just as a human child can give an elder sage advice and deep wisdom at times, so can a sapling or being give it to you. And just as a human elder can give very unhelpful and outdated advice to a child, so can a large, mature tree or being give it to you. I want to reiterate a point made earlier. If advice comes from any of these guides that will destroy your practical existence, hurt your family relationships, cause trouble for you at your school or job, or cause power struggles with everyone around you, you have both the duty and the right to answer back and present your ethical alternative. Never forget they lived and live in a different time and space than you do. They perceive or don't perceive our world in much the same way we perceive or don't perceive the otherworld. Never forget, you are in charge of your own life, your own actions, your own thoughts, and your own feelings.

The last three elements of the Sphere of Protection ritual are invoked in the order of Spirit Below, Spirit Above, and Spirit Within. So I present them in the same order connecting with the Lower World, Upper World, and Middle World. It will be up to you, the individual, where archetypes or entities reside or are assumed to reside in the areas connected to the World Tree, based on your personal view and understanding of the cosmos.

One example of this view of the cosmos is the three spirit realms which contain the three great families of Welsh myth, as outlined in *The Druid Magic Handbook* (Greer, 2007).

Plant Annwn is in the realm of Spirit Below, the children of Annwn, the realm of the dead and the source of all life, previously ruled by Arawn. In this age its rulers are Gwyn ap Nudd and his wife Creiddylad ferch Ludd. Lakes are also gateways to Annwn, and maidens called Gwraedd Annwn come from beneath the waters bearing strange gifts. One such maiden gifted Arthur Excalibur. More lore can be found in the First Branch of the *Mabinogion*.

Plant Don, the children of the goddess Don, are in the realm of Spirit Above, previously ruled by Math son of Mathonwy. In this age its rulers are Gwydion son of Don and his sister Arianhod daughter of Don. Plant Don are the regents of the sun, the Star Logoi of Western occult tradition. Their homes are in the stars. Caer Gwydion, the castle of Gwydion, and Caer Arianhod, the castle of Arianhod, is what the Welsh call the Milky Way. More lore can be found in the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogion*.

Plant Lyr, the children of the goddess Llyr, are in the realm of Spirit Within, previously ruled by Bran ap Llyr or Bran the Blessed. In this age, the rulers are Manawyddan ap Llyr and his wife Rhiannon Ferch Hefeydd. Plant Llyr are the archetypal forms of humanity, and their struggles, triumphs, and tragedies echo the fundamental pattern of human existence. They represent particular energies within the human body that can be encountered and awakened by a variety of magical practices. More lore can be found in the Second and Third Branches of the *Mabinogion*.

Ritual: Connecting to Annwn

To work with guides of the Fair Folk, Ancestors of the Blood, and other archetypes associated with Spirit Below, go to the hedgerow and assume the Hedge Pose.

Hold for a few moments, rhythmically breathing until a shift in consciousness happens.

Move into and perform the Elemental Cross using the same words, visualizations, and motions as you do for the Sphere of Protection ritual. At Step 6 in the New Candidate Guide, Making these changes; when you cross the arms over the chest, right over left facing forward while visualizing twin rays of light shooting out an infinite distance in front of and behind you, say words like:

“May the powers of nature bless and protect me as I travel the path between the worlds.”

Lower your arms to form the Awen with your hands and body.

Concentrate on your left hand and say: “May my Ray of Knowledge be strengthened.”

Concentrate on your right hand and say: "May my Ray of Power be strengthened."
Concentrate on your midline and say: "May my Ray of Peace be strengthened."
Continue, saying:
"In protection and strength I travel between the worlds.
To speak in the languages
Of air and fire,
Of water and earth,
Of Spirit Below, Spirit Above, and Spirit Within.

I walk between the worlds with the World Tree as my guide.
May my roots reach deep.
May my leaves reach toward the sky.
May my core be strong and centered.

I now venture into Annwn
To understand my deepest shadow;
To seek the roots of any difficulty;
To find my Spirit Below guide.

In the realms below I search out
My deepest truth;
My deepest strength;
My deepest wisdom;
To bring back into the world. Ah-oh-en."
Perform the Circulation of Light.

In the Hedge, approach the tree you wish to form a relationship with or already have a relationship with that is symbolic of a World Tree. Honor it, and ask permission to come closer, to share in its wisdom.

If it answers yes, proceed forward and touch the trunk of the tree.

If it answers no, seek another tree.

Always ask permission of the tree to share its wisdom, even if it has done so in the past. Never assume it is okay every time. If the tree gives its consent, proceed forward and place your hands on the trunk of the tree. Feel the nwyfre of the tree flowing upward from the deepest root and downward from its highest branch or leaf. Feel where those two currents meet, and connect to that energy.

From here, the journey is one of active imagination. Imagine a door or portal opening in the trunk of the tree, revealing a staircase that leads downward, then descend. The silver and green light that radiates from the heart of the earth illuminates Annwn. Orient yourself to this Lower World, seeing it as clearly as you can, feeling it as clearly as you can, letting the imagery

rise from your unconscious. At the bottom of the staircase, you will be standing next to a tree of the same type as above.

If you want a guide, request an ancestor, Fair Folk, or some other archetype of Spirit Below with invocations. Do not choose consciously what this being will look like, say, or do. Let that come from your unconscious.

Take your journey through Annwn.

To return back to the world: Place your hand upon the trunk of the tree and open the doorway, revealing a staircase leading up to Abred. Say a prayer of thanks to the World Tree. Return to your starting point where your physical body is and enter it. While looking toward civilization, assume the Hedge Pose.

Say words like:

“I return from walking between the worlds;
I honor my time spent in Annwn and seek to bring its wisdom into my being.
May my Ray of Knowledge be strengthened.
May my Ray of Power be strengthened.
May my Ray of Peace be strengthened.
In all my endeavors:
As I work to balance my self;
As I work to balance my life;
As I work to live in peace and harmony with the worlds, gods, spirits, and powers
that are always all around me.
Ah-oh-en.”

Clap your hands three times, pat the ground three times, say your name three times, or do some other action to ground yourself back into the physical world. Make entries in your journal about what you experienced. Devote time to meditate on these experiences.

Ritual: Connecting to Gwynfydd

To work with the Mighty Ones, the Ancestors of the Spirit, or other immortal entities and archetypes associated with Spirit Above, this is for the most part the same process as connecting to Annwn, but instead of pointing out its differences, I provide the whole ritual with the differences in bold.

Go to the hedgerow and assume the Hedge Pose. Hold for a few moments, rhythmically breathing until a shift in consciousness happens.

Move into and perform the Elemental Cross using the same words, visualizations, and motions as you do for the Sphere of Protection ritual. At Step 6 in the New Candidate Guide, Making these changes; when you cross the arms over the chest right over left, facing forward while visualizing twin rays of light shooting out an infinite distance in front of and behind you, say words like:

“May the powers of nature bless and protect me as I travel the path between the worlds.”

Lower your arms to form the Awen symbol with your hands and body.

Concentrate on your left hand and say: “May my Ray of Knowledge be strengthened.”

Concentrate on your right hand and say: “May my Ray of Power be strengthened.”

Concentrate on your midline and say: “May my Ray of peace be strengthened.”

Continue, saying:

“In protection and strength I travel between the Worlds.

To speak in the languages

Of air and fire,

Of water and earth,

Of Spirit Below, Spirit Above, and Spirit Within.

I walk between the worlds with the World Tree as my guide.

May my roots reach deep.

May my leaves reach toward the sky.

May my core be strong and centered.

I now venture into Gwynfydd

To understand my highest potential;

To seek the seeds of knowledge;

To find my Spirit Above guide.

In the realms above I search out

My highest truth;

My highest strength;

My highest wisdom;

To bring back into the World. Ah-oh-en.”

Perform the Circulation of Light.

In the Hedge, approach the tree you wish to form a relationship with or already have a relationship with that is symbolic of a World Tree.

Honor it, ask permission to come closer, to share in its wisdom.

If it answers yes, proceed forward and touch the trunk of the tree.

If it answers no, seek another tree.

Always ask permission of the tree to share its wisdom, even if it has done so in the past. Never assume it is okay every time.

If the tree gives its consent, proceed forward and place your hands on its trunk. Feel the nwyfre of the tree flowing upward from the deepest root and downward from its highest branch or leaf. Feel where those two currents meet, and connect to that energy.

From here the journey is one of active imagination.

Imagine a door or portal opening in the trunk of the tree, revealing a staircase that leads upward, then ascend.

The golden light from the sun illuminates Gwynfydd. Orient yourself to this Upper World, seeing it as clearly as you can, feeling it as clearly as you can, letting the imagery rise from your unconscious.

At the top of the staircase, you will be standing next to a tree of the same type as below.

If you want a guide, request an ancestor, Fair Folk, or some other archetype of Spirit Above with invocations. Do not choose consciously what this being will look like, say, or do. Let that come from your unconscious.

Take your journey through Gwynfydd.

To return to the world: Place your hand upon the trunk of the tree and open the doorway revealing a staircase leading down to Abred. Say a prayer of thanks to the World Tree. Return to your starting point where your physical body is and enter into it. While looking toward civilization, assume the Hedge Pose.

Say words like:

“I return from walking between the worlds;
I honor my time spent in Gwynfydd and seek to bring its wisdom into my being.

May my Ray of Knowledge be strengthened.

May my Ray of Power be strengthened.

May my Ray of Peace be strengthened.

In all my endeavors:

As I work to balance my self;

As I work to balance my life;

As I work to live in peace and harmony with the worlds, gods, spirits, and powers
that are always all around me.

Ah-oh-en.”

Clap your hands three times, pat the ground three times, say your name three times, or do some other action to ground yourself back into the physical world. Make entries in your journal about what you experienced. Devote time to meditate on these experiences.

Ritual: Connecting to Abred

To work with animal guides, the Ancestors of the Land, the spirits of the land, of nature around you, yourself, and archetypes associated with Spirit Within, go to the hedgerow and assume the Hedge Pose. Hold for a few moments, rhythmically breathing until a shift in consciousness happens.

Move into and perform the Elemental Cross using the same words, visualizations, and motions as you do for the Sphere of Protection ritual. At Step 6 in the New Candidate Guide, Making these changes; when you cross the arms over the chest right over left facing forward while visualizing twin rays of light shooting out an infinite distance in front of and behind you, say words like:

“May the powers of nature bless and protect me as I travel the path between the worlds.”

Lower your arms to form the Awen symbol with your hands and body.

Concentrate on your left hand and say: “May my Ray of Knowledge be strengthened.”

Concentrate on your right hand and say: “May my Ray of Power be strengthened.”

Concentrate on your midline and say: “May my Ray of peace be strengthened.”

Continue, saying:

“In protection and strength I travel between the worlds.

To speak in the languages

Of air and fire,

Of water and earth,

Of Spirit Below, Spirit Above, and Spirit Within.

I walk between the worlds with the World Tree as my guide.

May my roots reach deep.

May my leaves reach toward the sky.

May my core be strong and centered.

I now venture into Abred

To understand my true potential;

To seek the strength of my center;

To find my Spirit Within guide.

In the realms within I search out

My inner truth;

My inner strength;

My inner wisdom;

To bring back into the World. Ah-oh-en.”

Perform the Circulation of Light.

In the Hedge, approach the tree you wish to form a relationship with or already have a relationship with which is symbolic of a World Tree.

Honor it, ask permission to come closer, to share in its wisdom.

If it answers yes, proceed forward and touch the trunk of the tree.

If it answers no, seek another tree.

Always ask permission of the tree to share its wisdom, even if it has done so in the past. Never assume it is okay every time.

If the tree gives its consent, proceed forward and place your hands on the trunk of the tree. Feel the nwyfre of the tree flowing upward from the deepest root and downward from its highest branch or leaf. Feel where those two currents meet, and connect to that energy.

From here the journey is one of active imagination. Instead of opening a doorway or portal in the tree, sit or stand with your back against the tree, similar to the receptive Spirit Within exercise, and engage the active imagination. See it as clearly as you can, feel it as clearly as you can, letting the imagery rise from your unconscious.

If you want a guide, request an ancestor, Fair Folk, or some other archetype of Spirit Within with invocations. Do not choose consciously what this being will look like, say, or do. Let that come from your unconscious.

Take your journey through Abred.

To return to the world, say a prayer of thanks to the World Tree, return to your starting point where your physical body is, and enter into it. While looking toward civilization, assume the Hedge Pose.

Say words like:

“I return from walking between the worlds.

I honor my time spent in Abred and seek to bring its wisdom into my being.

May my Ray of Knowledge be strengthened.

May my Ray of Power be strengthened.

May my Ray of Peace be strengthened.

In all my endeavors:

As I work to balance my self;

As I work to balance my life;

As I work to live in peace and harmony with the worlds, gods, spirits, and powers that are always all around me.

Ah-oh-en.”

Clap your hands three times, pat the ground three times, say your name three times, or do some other action to ground yourself back into the physical world. Make entries in your journal of what you experienced. Devote time to meditate on these experiences.

Conclusion

In Jung's paper "The Transcendent Function," the theme was the method he later came to call active imagination. He defined two parts: letting the unconscious come up and coming to terms with the unconscious through the starting points he describes, mainly moods, images, bodily sensations, and some of its many expressive forms such as painting, sculpting, drawing, writing, dancing, weaving, dramatic reenactments, inner visions, or inner dialogues. In this essay he links his method to work with dreams and the therapeutic relationship. The term "transcendent function" encompasses both the method and its dynamic function that unites opposite positions in the psyche.

Jung linked active imagination with the processes of alchemy, just as the AODA teachings link alchemy with the combined fusion of the solar and telluric currents to form the lunar current. When combined in the right relationship, they become the Grail. Among many other things, the Grail urges that we must realize or discover our own inner healer in order to help ourselves, others, and anything else through the gift of freedom our consciousness provides from our biological and instinctual drives. But this is something that we must take action toward, as we cannot wait to have this awakened on its own within us. The Grail also symbolizes our path to the truth, and it tells us to find our own inner truth, our integrity, our true nature.

The conscious task each of us have is to think independently and clearly. We must listen carefully to hear the truth that is hidden behind the cries and urgings of inner voices. Refine that truth to something more humane, more bearable, more balanced to be integrated into our ordinary life without destroying it. And toward this truth, we must all find our own individual ethical stance and respect the ethical stances of others. May these journeys, encounters, and experiences inspire you to find your place in your environment, and to guide you in your work.

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Thundernails

Hidden Shamanic Daggers of “the Bravest of All Gauls”

Michiel Segaert

Michiel Segaert (born in 1985 in Bruges, Belgium) has a master's diploma in Latin, ancient Greek, and biblical Hebrew, but his specific love for Celtic culture and lore led him firmly to the druidic path. While he holds the Ovate grade in the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, he's mostly active in the small community around his oral lineage tradition. Michiel loves birds, marshes, stories, the two little rascals that are his offspring and the woman they call their mother. He made a career as a statistician, telling stories with numbers.

“We’re going to make traditional Thundernails.” This phrase was lost somewhere in a page-long chat message on Belgae Druidry containing some practical instructions my teacher sent me years ago with regard to our next get-together. Never before had I heard of Thundernails, but I already felt a tingle of anticipation. Little did I know at the time that they would very soon grow to become some of the most trusted instruments for my druidic practice.

A Thundernail is a druidic shamanic power object that comes from my particular tradition, the Belgae tradition of druidry. These power objects are magical and/or meditative tools which enable their wielder to perform shamanic tasks on a level that, in principle, can’t be reached without the initiation and support provided by creating, obtaining, and handling them. In the case of Thundernails, one may say that their main use is as a shamanic piercing dagger, breaking through obstacles, barriers, and self-denying compromises. Like most power objects, Thundernails are strongly connected to their keeper: one should be wary of letting another person even touch them; for another to wield them is simply out of the question.

In their outer form, Thundernails might be nothing more than pointy sticks, about the size of a large fist. Despite this modest appearance, their inner mysteries run so deep that Thundernail practices are interwoven with basically all aspects of my particular tradition of druidic shamanism. Through this article, I hope to provide a general overview on basic Thundernail practices as taught in our tradition. Before diving into specifics, it might be useful to elaborate on the nature of this local

tradition and how shamanism fits into this context. Next, it's essential to build a better understanding of the hidden nature of the Thundernail teachings: Why is this tradition shrouded in secrecy, and how am I able to write anything about it nonetheless? In this regard, I'll also take a closer look at the phurba, an equivalent power object found in certain eastern shamanic traditions. After this essential background is provided, we'll be able to take a closer look at what Thundernails actually are and how they are created. Last, we'll cover some basic uses of Thundernails.

Before all that, however, I would like to end this short introduction on a cautionary note: through this article, I serve only as a medium providing information that will allow interested readers to create and use Thundernails for their own druidic practices. Anyone who decides to wield one is accountable for the consequences thereof. This is especially the case for those performing heavier shamanic work using a Thundernail. Working with Thundernails can support your striving for balance but can also challenge it along the way. Anyone who is not willing to face these challenges should leave these power objects alone. Some of the more meditative practices connected to Thundernails can, in my opinion, be performed without creating a live power object.

But regardless of which way you choose: to all interested readers, I think it's about time I introduce you to the tribes of the brave.

Belgae Druidry and Shamanism

Horum omnium fortissimi sunt Belgae, propterea quod a cultu atque humanitate provinciae longissime absunt, minimeque ad eos mercatores saepe commeant atque ea quae ad effeminandos animos pertinent important, proximique sunt Germanis, qui trans Rhenum incolunt, quibuscum continenter bellum gerunt. —Caesar, *Commentarii de bello Gallico* 1.1.3–4

The Belgae are the bravest of all [Gauls], because they are farthest removed from the culture and human civilization of the [Roman] province and rarely come into contact with merchants trading luxuries, which soften one's character. They are also closest to the Germanic tribes that live across the river Rhine, with which they are at constant war.

In 1830, a small territory of about 30,000 square kilometers split itself off from the Netherlands to form an independent country. It was named Belgium in honor of the Belgae tribes that once inhabited those lands. While a lot could be said about the connection (or lack thereof, as some argue) between the Belgae territories and modern Belgium, one historical constant is that, due to its central position in western Europe, these lands have always found themselves at the fault line between cultures. Belgium borders the Netherlands, Germany, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, and France and has a close overseas connection to the United Kingdom. It has three official languages, two of which (Dutch and German) are Germanic, the other (French) Latin. It's no coincidence this linguistic fault line still corresponds with the region described by Caesar as being basically stuck between Gauls (which were Romanized later on) and Germanic tribes.

Present-day Belgium is at the heartland of these territories. Although 2,000 years have passed, we can still see the echoes of Caesar's description of the region as a melting pot of western European cultures. Belgian culture is sometimes described as not quite French, not quite Dutch, and not quite German either, but something in between. The regions just across the border are also often spotted with Belgian dialects and habits. In much the same way, the Belgae are described as having a unique and distinct culture, fluidly mixing their Gaulic nature with cultural elements from the neighboring Germanic tribes to an extent depending on locality. We can imagine that the Belgae would also have incorporated elements from their druidic training in the British Isles and from interactions with Druids from all kinds of spheres, who exchanged teachings with the Mediterranean mystery schools.



Figure 1: Map of Belgium and the former Belgae territories. Created by author based on OpenStreetMap (<https://www.openstreetmap.org>).

The druidic tradition to which I refer has an oral transmission that claims to have its roots in this Belgae druidry. From a historian's point of view, however, it's quite difficult to trace exactly what became of these tribes. The borders of what used to be the Belgae territories have often been redrawn. It's regularly said that this is the region where all of Europe came to wage its wars. Europe's warlords, kings, queens, and emperors have made these counties the center of international and political intrigues, often resulting in buffer states being created and disappearing through the conflicting interests of, for the most part, Germany, France, England, Spain, and Rome. Even before that, however, the lands were overrun by Germanic tribes in the third century CE and by Huns in the fifth century CE. And Caesar's claims of what he did to tribes like the Eburones would be nothing short of genocide.

Nonetheless, the claims of oral transmission should not be discarded so easily because the Belgae have disappeared. Historical and archaeological evidence shows a strong Gallo-Roman society in these regions during the Pax Romana, which suggests continuous occupation by Belgae. Although these settlements were raided by different waves of invaders throughout the millennia, this doesn't mean that there's no cultural continuity. This is still observable in the Celtic origins of

place names of rivers, towns, and villages. Even if foreign conquerors could change certain cultural overtones, tenacious cultural subcurrents are not easily erased. In this context, it's unlikely that the specific vein of Gaulic druidry practiced in the Belgae territories was extinguished early. There's no reason to believe that the situation changed under Germanic rule, especially since the Belgae culture already carried many Germanic elements. And if not wiped out in an early stage of European history, it's not difficult to imagine an oral tradition of Belgae druidry surviving to the present. In other mystery school and/or occult traditions we can see the stubbornness with which oral traditions can cling to their existence (as with folk tales, for instance, which can be passed on for ages). Furthermore, in the specific case of druidry, structural transmissions of oral tradition are attested up until the recent past, creating a context in which other druidic traditions are more prone to survive.

In our tradition of Belgae druidry, shamanic work is one of the cornerstones of druidic training and practice. In many cultures all over the world, even if they don't appear to have any contact with each other, shamanic practices occur and often share quite similar concepts and traits. But what is shamanism? While entire books have been written about this subject, for my purposes I will address two aspects of shamanism. Sandra Ingerman, a forerunner in what is called core shamanism, describes modern Western shamanism as follows: "In our modern-day technological world we have been led to believe that what we see, touch, hear, smell, and taste with our ordinary senses connects us only to the world that is visible around us. Conversely, shamanism teaches us that there are doorways into other realms of reality where helping spirits reside who can share guidance, insight, and healing not just for ourselves but also for the world in which we live" (Ingerman and Wesselman, 2010, p. xi). In other words: shamanism implies entering a different state of (observing) reality on the one hand and using this state to contact spirits on the other.

Thus shamanism implies adopting different states of consciousness and training yourself to make purposeful use of them. In fact, it's not very difficult for a person to enter a trance state. This can happen spontaneously: the steady rhythm of riding on a train is often cited as creating a trance-like state. In neurological terms, a state of trance often corresponds with the lower frequencies of alpha brain waves—approaching the thresholds of sleep, but still well within the realm of the waking world. As such, it's quite natural for anyone to achieve a trance state on a regular basis; lack thereof can even lead to serious health issues.

It's only when someone consciously enters a trance in order to interact with what is known in druidry as the Otherworld that this trance can be called shamanic. Successfully navigating between an ordinary state of consciousness (OSC) and a shamanic state of consciousness (SSC) is a skill to be learned and practiced. The goal is not to achieve SSC on a permanent basis, but to be able to deliberately switch between OSC and SSC as necessity dictates. As Michael Harner so aptly puts it, "Both personal realities of the shaman, the nonordinary and the ordinary, have their correlative states of consciousness. Each reality may be coped with successfully only when one is in the state of consciousness appropriate to it. Thus, if one is crossing a busy city street, the proper state of consciousness is different from that to be employed in entering the shamanic Lowerworld" (1982, p. 59).

In interacting with the Otherworld, soon practitioners come into contact with spirits. They may be (demi)gods and heroes from the Celtic and Germanic pantheons, or ancestors, or the spirits

of animals, plants, landmarks and landscapes, objects, and so on. From an animistic point of view, not only does everything have a spirit, but there are also spirits for parts or groups of conceptual unities. The willow in my backyard is a spirit, which is a specific representation of the spirit of Willow, which in turn is a specific representation of the spirit of Tree, and so on. At the same time, every branch and every leaf of this willow is also a spirit. This dynamic is still commonly present in terms like “team spirit” or “Zeitgeist” (literally, time spirit), which imply a conceptual unity created by the sum of the sometimes diverging individual minds (or spirits, if you will) that make up its parts.

The concept of spirits raises questions: What kind of beings are they? Do they interact with our material world? And if so, how? (Or maybe even: why?) Depending on personal inclinations and struggles, every individual may try to find answers to these questions in scientific, philosophical, psychological, spiritual, and/or intuitive explorations of the subject. It's not in the line of shamanic work to find a definitive answer to these types of questions. Even though these questions can lead to interesting debates, and an individual's answers to them (or lack thereof) can be very charged, it's best to keep in mind the old saying that one can't judge and learn at the same time. While it's necessary to be able to stay (self-)critical and rational in all things, openness to new experiences and insights is equally important. Thus, the best way of delving into a shamanic experience is through suspension of disbelief. If you want to, you can always come back to these important questions at a later time without having to try to resolve them during the experience. To borrow another pointed remark from Michael Harner: “The effective way to learn the shamans' system is to use the same basic concepts they do. For example, when I speak of ‘spirits,’ it is because that is the way shamans talk within the system. To practice shamanism, it is unnecessary and even distracting to be preoccupied with achieving a scientific understanding of what ‘spirits’ may really represent and why shamanism works” (1982, p. xxi).

As in many cultures, Belgae Druid shamanism uses power objects, such as Thundernails. These objects exist in this world, but one or more spirits also actively engage with or inhabit them. Power objects are necessary tools for practitioners of a certain level, because their wielders can perform practices in the Otherworld that would be impossible to achieve without them. Since power objects are considered to have a mind and purpose of their own, their wielders are considered their keepers rather than their owners. However, this can only strengthen the bond between a power object and its keeper (who is often the creator of the object as well) since this implies a conscious alliance rather than a forced submission. It's recommended to avoid touching power objects that are not in your keep.

The fact that power objects and spirits are deemed to have their own life, purpose, and by consequence sensitivity is but one of the reasons why practitioners should be careful not to betray their trust. Paradoxically, through this publication, I'll try to shed some light on a hidden tradition surrounding power objects. It goes without saying that this requires a delicate balance between what can and cannot be revealed through these pages. Thus, before turning our attention to the description of the nature of Thundernails and the practices surrounding them, the next section briefly elaborates on how this balance is achieved, and thus how this description should be read.

Piercing the Veil: On Hidden Traditions and Family Recipes

The breaking of an initiation oath is a serious matter, and a thing that I, for my part, do not care to do; but I admit of no authority that debars me from collecting and collating all available material that has been published upon any subject, and interpreting it according to the best of my understanding. ... If, from the information here given, and as a result of pursuing the methods described herein, anyone is able to work out for himself the keys ..., as he well may, can any dispute that he is entitled to them?

—Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah*, chapter 4, para. 10; chapter 9, para. 13</EPI>

There are two main reasons for secrecy in hidden traditions: prudence and respect. These domains can overlap at certain points. A third possible reason, namely to create an aura of mystery for personal gain, doesn't really merit discussion here.

Secrecy can be very justified if there are safety concerns. From a shamanic point of view, wielding a power object—especially one as potent as a Thundernail—is a direct and sometimes forceful intervention on a spiritual level. It sets things in motion in the Otherworld, to which the Otherworld can react with its own intervention toward the person in question as well as their environment. These interventions can be mutually beneficial but can quickly turn into conflict if the wielder is inexperienced, ill-informed, or generally malevolent. By consequence, it's ill advised to share powerful techniques without assurances that the pupil will use them responsibly. In this sense, secrecy is the shamanic equivalent of a “keep out of reach of children” label. This is also the main reason for the cautionary note above: I will openly share certain insights into the tradition, but readers deciding to wield a Thundernail based on the information given are themselves responsible for the consequences thereof.

As I said, maintaining secrecy can also be a form of respect. If a person confides personal information to you, it's disrespectful to break that trust and be indiscreet with the information. The same applies for spirits granting you access to teachings that are part of a hidden tradition—and yes, providing the circumstances for you to train under an initiated teacher counts as granting you access. Hidden traditions also often imply a form of respect toward the tradition itself, including initiations that need to be experienced rather than described, which can only occur through live oral transmission. These insights are not readily apparent and thus can't coldly be put into writing or narration (which could never do them justice). They require the breath of life created by interaction and sensory experience, by which their real meaning reveals itself slowly and cumulatively, as if through osmosis. There's also a common concern with fragmenting traditions, if someone who is only partially initiated (but is unaware of that or neglects to clarify it) shares incomplete insights with others as if it's the whole tradition (which in turn may lead to undue dogmatism, etc.). In these cases, secrecy is also kept out of respect for people with whom you might share an incomplete teaching, since this may hamper their own path.

Precisely for this reason, it's important to understand how I go about describing Thundernails in the next sections. First, it's self-evident that these pages do not contain a complete initiation in this tradition. Complete initiation is also not required to create and wield a Thundernail. It's said that complete initiation comes at a high price, since it requires the complete deconstruction of your identity. I am myself but partially initiated and so is my teacher. (Any mistakes or errors in judgment throughout my description of these oral teachings are, of course, entirely my own.) As I clarify this fact before turning to any detailed descriptions of Thundernails, so did he during my training.

But what information can be written down and what is omitted? I'll indulge in a metaphor. Suppose I wish to share our family recipe for Flemish stew, but I'm bound by certain oaths of secrecy. In this scenario, however, I'm quite allowed to compare it to a published recipe for a Tibetan curry dish and describe the equivalent techniques and ingredients for our stew. If the curry recipe contains the same basic steps, I'm free to tell you to sear beef (with apologies to vegetarian readers, but traditional Flemish cuisine is often meat-based) and chopped onions in a buttered pan until slightly brown, to add chopped carrots, two bay leaves and a bottle of strong brown beer (not stout!) and to let it simmer for at least an hour with the lid on top. This would, in fact, leave you with a pretty decent Flemish stew.

Unfortunately, if the Tibetan recipe doesn't mention an equivalent step for providing texture, I may have to leave out the part where you put in some slices of spice cake topped with mustard. Of course, this secret would also bring you closer to perfecting the authentic Flemish stew flavor but has to be omitted at this point. It's not unlikely, however, that you may find out about this secret ingredient yourself, if you work with the recipe and happen to be sufficiently knowledgeable about Belgian cuisine.

Of course, the example of a Tibetan curry was not chosen at random: phurbas, shamanic power objects from (mostly) Tibetan traditions, are the equivalent of Thundernails in our tradition. Unlike the Thundernail, however, a lot of the basic teachings concerning the phurba have been made public knowledge. Although their hidden tradition remains, following a strict lineage of oral teachings, sacred texts involving their usage have also appeared as well as publications revealing some of the inner-circle teachings. For better or worse, they have been studied scientifically as cultural objects and put on display in museums all over the world, opening some understanding of the hidden lore to the outside world. For all teachings on Thundernail lore that have already been revealed, possible reasons for secrecy no longer really apply. Indeed, we might even conclude that the phurba or Thundernail finally piercing through centuries of silence may indicate they provide an answer to a need manifesting in our era.



Figure 2: Photograph of a 16th century phurba (Daderot 2012, Creative Commons CC01, University Public Domain).

The phurba tradition served as a general guideline for what to reveal here. However, it's not really my place to introduce you to phurba lore. My focus remains within the realms of Belgae druidry, not Buddhism or Bönn. For those interested in studying the phurba tradition (especially Westerners who struggle with certain cultural gaps), *Vajrakilaya: Heart of Light, Blade of Thunder* by Stephen Hayes may serve as an interesting starting point, since it tells the tale of how Mr. Hayes studied the phurba tradition for twenty years. Of course, studying phurbas can deepen your understanding of Thundernails as well, but note that (1) these writings often include some of the same cautions I include here, and (2) while phurbas and Thundernails are essentially equivalent, Buddhism and druidry embed them in a different cultural and philosophical framework.

Before we finally get to describing Thundernails, however, one final question remains undressed. If the phurba and the druidic Thundernail are equivalents from different traditions, how are these two traditions related? In other words, what's the link between Gaul and Tibet? For those who are interested in these connections, I've added an appendix at the end of this article.

Powers of the Blade: Creating and Empowering a Thundernail

Maybe there are times when gruffness is more benevolent than appeasement? Is it possible that sometimes no compromise is kindness, and the most compassionate thing to do is out-bully a bully?

—Hayes, *Vajrakilaya*, p. 29

The basic outer form of a Thundernail is a tent peg with a three-sided point. For practical reasons, it's often the size of a dagger. In principle, any material will do for creating a Thundernail,

although in druidic tradition they're often made from the wood of one of the twenty Ogham trees. Since they are shamanic tools and not meant for physically pinning something or someone down, the sharpness of the sides and point is relative. A good rule of thumb may be that it should be sharp enough to grab your attention when pushing the tip to the skin, without being so sharp that you might risk wounding someone.

Of course, this basic outer form has a hidden inner meaning. The three surfaces of the Thundernail tip represent the shadow form of a triad that is a basic Druid concept. In just three words: in, out, and balance. In their dark form, the words refer to the lifestyle of a single-celled organism, which reacts solely to what it wants to ingest (in) and what it shields itself from to avoid damage (out). The entire universe of things that are neither in nor out (and thus achieve a balance between the two), doesn't register for this organism.

Druids, the people of the duir (oak or door—the door between this world and the Other-world, the keepers of liminal space), are the guardians of healthy balance: they accept the attachments we form in life (in) but do not let them grow into greed; they accept the aversions we experience as a form of self-protection (out) but do not let them evolve into excessive hatred or fear; and they accept the necessity of all perspectives (balance) but do not allow any perspective to be unaware of its own blind spots. While this is an important triad connected to the surfaces of the tip, the tip also represents the triads of past, future, and present and of the realms known in shamanism as Upper World, Middle World, and Lower World.

The Thundernail concentrates all awareness and balance of these dynamics into one focused point, a singularity that allows its wielder to pierce like thunder through all misconceptions, weaknesses, and self-denying compromises and transmutes them into a form that contributes to the highest good. Despite the fact that this is liberating, this unstoppable force can take on a terrifying aspect from a perspective that is enthralled by its ego, that completely identifies with its attributes and aversions and perceives as irrelevant what is not within those realms. Even if such perspectives can exist for reasons that are entirely understandable and relatable, Thundernails bring you tough love: although they're benevolent, they're not soft in delivering this benevolence.

Imagine, for instance, that for years, you've identified as someone with clinical depressions, an addict, or (more innocently) someone who bites their nails. What if suddenly you're "liberated" from the affliction you actually perceive as a cornerstone of your identity? Do you still know who you are without it? Imagine you've been the victim of an injustice. What if your anger—although understandable—is not unavoidable? What if there's no real reason why the trauma that befell you in the past should afflict your present or future state of mind? Do you still know how to exist without the anger and grief? Imagine you're simply shy or procrastinating. What if you run out of excuses to keep yourself from the projects you actually feel called toward? Would you be tempted to use these attributes themselves as excuses for not following your calling, framing yourself as biologically programmed for self-sabotage? In other words, if all of the forms into which you've shaped yourself

dissolve, wouldn't you at first imagine this void—this pinnacle of free potential that holds you entirely responsible for your own domain—to be frightening? Few people wouldn't.

Whoever wields a Thundernail to deliver this balance needs a certain strength of disposition. They need to be aware of their own position in this dynamic. This awareness is sometimes described as living in accordance with six principles. They aren't an oath as much as a logical extension of undertaking the practice. These principles are:

- Awareness of how you affect everything around you, not remaining blind to what's small from your perspective.
- Accepting your own perspective and living by its principles.
- Accepting that others have different perspectives, not taking opposition personally but patiently.
- Manifesting your ideas by being decisive and involved.
- Occupying the liminal space of the here and now, aware of your current presence.
- Orienting yourself toward higher perspectives: there are many truths; there's no reason why yours should stand out.

These principles set impossible goals: if you think you've succeeded in one, it's probably due to a lack of awareness in another. They are, however, principles to strive toward. If you're unwilling (not unable, since everyone is able) to respect them, the practice is best left alone.

Carving a Thundernail is in itself a ritual reflection on this dynamic. It can best be done in a ritual setting (in other words, after creating a sacred space). You then take the piece of wood (or other material) you felt drawn to for creating a Thundernail, focus yourself on the here and now, and start deliberately and consciously sharpening the three-sided blade with a knife. With every cut, you meditate on how the dynamics of the corresponding surface are reflected in your life:

- In what ways am I greedy or overly attached? Are there things (possessions, relations, experiences) I think I can't exist without? Am I overly attached to life itself, or would I be at peace with my death?
- In what ways am I hateful or excessively fearful? Are there ways in which I am paralyzed with revulsion or aversion for persons or challenges? Is there anything I'm kept from feeling or experiencing in the present because of a trauma in the past?
- What are my blind spots; where do I lack awareness? Am I mindful of my experiences in the here and now or do I sometimes pass through life like an automaton? Do I appreciate small things and yet see the bigger picture? Can I distance myself from my own perspective?

When carving the Thundernail, you take an objective look at how these dynamics—that are a natural part of the human condition—are active in your own life. The goal isn't to judge but to observe. From this objective view on your own perspective, you transfer an insight on these dynamics in general to the Thundernail itself. Once you've sufficiently sharpened the point in this manner, you're done creating your Thundernail in its most basic form.



Figure 3: A set of one empowered and three inert Thundernails (basic form with ribbons). Created, kept and photographed by author.

Once you've carved a Thundernail, you can decide to leave it inert or—if you feel the calling—to activate it. Most practitioners have at least four Thundernails, three of which remain inert. But what does it mean to have an inert or active Thundernail (or object in general)? From a shamanic perspective, all objects are in a sense alive: they are imbued with their own spirit, with which you can communicate. If you just leave those objects as they are, this spirit remains dormant. If however an object is consecrated for shamanic work, this spirit is awoken and will start taking up an active role in your druidic practice. Even if you don't deliberately activate and wake an object, frequent use for shamanic work in time will slowly start activating it. At this point, confirming their active state by consciously awakening them for this work is still an option. The more you follow a shamanic path using Thundernails, the more you'll need an active, empowered one. If however your druidic practice is not oriented toward a shamanic path, inert Thundernails can still be a focus of meditation.

Activated objects should not be forgotten in a kitchen drawer somewhere, but treated with the proper respect. They're often kept on an altar or other designated storage for power objects and are usually reserved for the use of their keeper. When their keeper passes on, either they're buried with the keeper or passed on to the next generation. If for some reason their keeper needs to part with them, they are returned to Mother Earth by burying (or sometimes composting) them. If they decide to part from their keeper to find a new life somewhere else (from the keeper's perspective, the object is lost, or shamanic communication indicates it needs to be passed on to someone else), that's their right. Despite these general rules, the main principle of shamanic work is, of course, communi-

cation with the spirits in question. That means that for every rule, exceptions are possible depending on the conclusions you draw through authentic spirit interactions.

If one is well acquainted with Belgae druidic shamanic practices, the process of activating and/or awakening an object is actually relatively simple and can be done quickly. Of course, this process is done within a sacred space. Since it requires an intervention from the Otherworld, you start by calling on your personal guiding spirit. This spirit is sometimes called “the Caller” because it called you toward your druidic path. (You usually meet your Caller early on when beginning your shamanic work in earnest. It’s one of the spirits with whom you’ll share a very intimate connection, since it is, among other things, responsible for placing the necessary encounters on your radar to enable you to perform your Druid calling. Free will is always respected: the Caller provides openings, but it’s up to you to decide to walk through them or not.)

With your Caller present and the object in your hand, you charge your Light Body in a specific manner: first you open yourself to Awen, which you allow to fill you. Next, you pull in *nwyfre* from below and finally *nwyfre* from above. Once these three Light Bodies are intermixed as one within you, you concentrate its light in your heart and blow it into the object in question, thereby bestowing upon it the breath of life. Beforehand or afterward, power objects are often anointed with an oil mixture of hazelnut (for experienced wisdom) and Saint John’s wort (the sun as an expression of the original Light of the Source).

While this basic process can be used for activating a Thundernail, there’s a specific trance journey that can be undertaken to fully empower it. To undertake this journey, however, formal training in the Thundernail practice from someone initiated in the method is needed. Without it, there’s really only one way in which you may hope to learn of this process: if no teacher from this world is available for you, it’s always possible to request the necessary keys directly from the Otherworld. If you are called toward Thundernail practices and are considered ready for them, you can perform a trance journey to the Wroth White Face, the supreme guardian of the Thundernail (see below) who’s able to initiate you in the necessary keys and teachings.

At this point, by communicating with your Thundernail, you can begin the process of elaborating its outer form to reflect some of the deeper Thundernail mysteries. This can take years or even a lifetime, depending, among other things, on the ambition you share with your Thundernail and your artistic ability. Two main elaborations can be manifested on the Thundernail: sculpting further triads and decorating with ribbons.

While we’ve already seen the triad represented by the tip of the Thundernail, this tip is itself part of another triad, which is implied even if the Thundernail has only its most basic form: every Thundernail consists of a point (which represents the element of Air), a handle or “corpus” that allows you to wield the Thundernail in this world (which corresponds to the Thundernail’s manifestation in the world of the element of Earth) and, finally, a pommel on top that opens it to the Otherworld (which corresponds to the element of Water, the gate between two worlds). When you wield a Thundernail, you do so with a manifest intention. You bring this to the Thundernail by gripping it with your hand on the corpus. This intention receives its power from the Otherworld through the pommel, which also embeds it in the workings of the Greatest Good. Thus empowered, the inten-

tion then becomes concentrated into the point, in which it becomes an unstoppable force, piercing through all obstacles.

If this triad is to manifest in the Thundernail's outer form, it is sculpted into a triad of triads. The triad of the tip is already manifest. That of the corpus is usually a relatively simple pattern of three vertical bulges on the Thundernail, sometimes decorated with weaving or knotting patterns. The pommel traditionally takes the form of three faces, which together are the personification of the central druidic triad described above and/or the triad divinity.

Since active Thundernails are considered to be live objects, it goes without saying that no sculpting is done without their consent and, indeed, a form of anesthetic. If the physical integrity of a power object is going to be modified, the active spirit within it is temporarily relocated into a different house. Traditionally, rocks are considered ideal temporary lodgings for this purpose. You take a rock, put it next to the object, and, by shamanic trance, invite it to relocate. Once the spirit is safe, you can work on the original power object and afterward, invite the spirit to return in the same manner.

Apart from this sculpting, Thundernails often have ribbons attached. The nature of these ribbons is a bit ambiguous. Ribbons are often clooties (pieces of cloth imbued with prayer), which would mean the Thundernail is further empowered through prayer. On certain power objects, however, ribbons may represent nekkers (see below) for protection and balance. There are traditions surrounding the colors of Thundernail ribbons that may not be quite relevant to share here. Shamanism is all about communication, which means that through these interactions, you may arrive at a far from traditional appearance for your Thundernail. The best tradition that could be mentioned for sculpting and decorating Thundernails would be to let the Thundernails themselves decide.

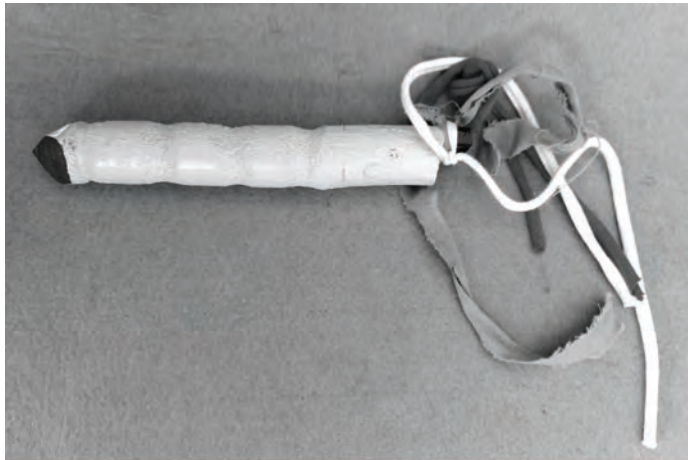


Figure 4: The partially empowered “Thundernail of Otter” (traditional decorations in progress, yet painted without a traditional basis).

Created, kept, and photographed by author.

Who's Who

It's hard to discuss Thundernails, which are each specific, individual spirits, without also shedding some light on certain spirits or spirit types that are strongly connected to Thundernail practice in general. When working with Thundernails, it's highly unlikely that you won't come into contact with them in one way or another.

The entire Thundernail practice is personified in the Wroth White Face. This spirit is actually considered a god, in fact an appearance of the Horned God. The fact that in Welsh literature the Horned God Gwyn ap Nudd has the epithet of "blackened face" while his name itself means "white" betrays more than one duality connected to him. While duality is inherent to the horned principle, by which the highest unity observes itself through the manifestation of a multitude of perspectives, the principle itself is manifested in a different way through the forms of the Gracious Black Face or the Wroth White Face.

The Black Face personifies the divine principle of decisiveness in ways that can be pleasing for the ego: the joy of taking action. The blackness absorbs the warmth of summer's abundance and frivolity. In astrology, he takes on the form of Orion, the hunter and bearer of the staff. The Wroth White Face, however, glares at us with the paleness of winter's cold introspection, reflecting our own position back to us in an unembellished way. While at his core he's the very same Horned principle, he uncompromisingly realigns all things with the perspective of universal unity (multitude in unity and unity in multitude), which makes personal ego a very relative notion. While the wroth principle actually represents peace and harmony rooted in the perspective of the greatest good, he can appear to us as the very opposite, depending on how much we identify with our egos and attributes. And as long as we are human beings, no matter how enlightened we are, we need a certain measure of ego to function within this world. The confusing nature of the wroth principle is an important reason for the secrecy behind the Thundernail practice. If your awareness of the underlying principle is wavering, acting with the barrier-breaking properties of the Thundernail may actually feed the ego and remove you further from the actual wroth principle.

As he is, among other things, the personification of the Thundernail practice, this article of course involved shamanic communication with the White Face. He requires justification for revealing aspects of the secrets he guards. While the revelations through the phurba traditions gave me a much-needed guideline, the White Face had the final say on what could and couldn't be included in these pages.

While I know "wroth" to be an archaic term (its Dutch equivalent, *toornig*, is as well), it's well suited for describing this aspect of the Horned principle. It's uncompromising to the extent of becoming unstoppable: it cuts and pierces through all illusions and excuses, going straight toward your essence, which is but one expression of an all-encompassing unity. Along the way, it breaks all obstacles that keep you from living in accordance with this essence, even if those obstacles are self-imposed. This may seem aggressive, but is actually an ultimate act of kindness and mercy. Sometimes the greatest act of love involves being brutally and uncompromisingly honest.

While the Wroth White Face is the general personification of the wroth principle, the wroth appearance may take many forms, teaching us valuable lessons on a variety of subjects. In our Belgae tradition, it's said that if the sacred space in which a Druid operates is protected by the wroth appearance of the guardians of each direction, even gods must justify themselves if they wish to enter. Certain power animals also represent a wroth principle, sometimes in unexpected ways. Otter, for instance: a power animal known in druidry for his playfulness, which nonetheless allows him to catch the Salmon of Wisdom. As a power animal, Otter is wroth. A playful approach can be completely disarming, to the point where it breaks through tensions and barriers that were only conjured up because people took things or themselves much too seriously. In astrology, the Wroth White Face is Orion's counterpart, the sign of Scorpio. In this manner, Scorpion is considered to be the wroth appearance of Stag (the power animal of the south and the Horned principle) and is sometimes called "Stag of the North."

As a final note on the White Face, I may say that he is still very well known in present-day folklore, albeit in a very distorted and tamed manner. In the old tradition, the Wroth White Face is the commander of the Wild Hunt, in which the wroth principle is unleashed upon the world and hunts for "lost souls" accompanied by a horde of psychopomp spirits (the undead, Valkyries, etc.). Again, despite the frightful imagery, an act of mercy is performed here: lost souls, those trapped within the illusions perceived through identification with their attributes, are reconnected with the perspective of the highest unity, even if in their confusion they have to be dragged kicking and screaming.

Through historic evolution and connections to other concepts from folklore, this image of a stern figure delivering his gifts to the world became Christianized through the figure of Saint Nicholas, evolving into the Sinterklaas of the Low Countries and the Santa Claus of the Anglo-Saxon sphere. In recent years, the folklore surrounding Sinterklaas has come under scrutiny because, just like the Wroth Face, he has a black-faced opposite in the form of his assistant (now friend) Black Pete. Unfortunately, the representation of Black Pete is largely based on nineteenth-century views and attitudes toward black people, which can only be interpreted as racist. In the public debate involving these festivities, some have voiced the opinion that the old traditions surrounding Pete's appearance should be maintained, sometimes referring to Pete's "ancient roots." However, these ancient roots are about as far removed from this nineteenth-century caricature as Santa Claus is from a fearsome, snow-white warrior wielding a mighty three-sided dagger in a flying sleigh pulled by giant scorpions. I can't imagine genuine comprehension of the White Face and Black Face would leave people to cower behind tradition in order to hide from their faults, much less deliberately maintaining a hurtful practice. This is why we can only strive both to reconnect with (actual) tradition and to eradicate these forms of racism from folkloric festivities.

As I already mentioned, the central triad of attraction, aversion, and balance also has a personification. The names under which they are known to us are attested in Arthurian legend. These are Viviane, Morgana, and Myrddin respectively. While earlier we focused on the shadow form of this triad, they seem more connected to its base form:

- Viviane as a creative, nourishing, and binding principle, providing and comforting;
- Morgana as an emancipating principle, casting off and destroying what is no longer necessary to make room for new dynamics; and
- Myrddin as a principle of balance and higher perspective, aware that a healthy dose of both of the other principles is necessary.

Within this triad, the Myrddin principle synthesizes the whole triad to some degree. By consequence, he is the image of the Archdruid, the blueprint for the essence of druidry. Since this triad as a whole corresponds to a major aspect of the Thundernail, these three spirits are intrinsically linked to the practice.

A spirit type that is indirectly linked to the Thundernail practice is called nekkers (with which readers may already be familiar through their counterparts from the East, the *naga*). Much could be said on the subject of nekkers, but for my purposes here, we should focus only on some essentials for understanding their meaning in this context. Nekkers are often regarded as water demons, which in no way does them justice. Human dislike of nekkers is a logical consequence because nekkers personify balance. Human existence excludes the possibility of ever fully achieving a perfectly balanced way of life, which means that untempered nekkers, true to their nature, leave no room for humankind. Even the principle of Myrddin does not imply the achievement of balance to the extreme level imposed by the nekkers. Contrary to, for instance, Buddhism, in which the main spiritual goal is to become one with the greater unity, druidry approaches our distance from this unity as a dynamic on the earthly plane. Its goal is to build the bridges that reconnect existence in this world to its essence in the Otherworld, not to leave existence in this world behind. This is why Druids choose to interact with nekkers, despite the tensions between our species. Being progressively less balanced in their impact on the environment however, humankind's relation to nekkers seems to worsen over time.

Despite this aspect of nekkers, they are involved with Thundernails because they are traditional healing instruments. Nekkers have the shape of snakes, whose venom can be used to poison as well as cure. Even though they can be harsh, they can teach us valuable lessons that are beneficial to us and can be protective of anything or anyone that restores or maintains forms of balance. While they can be difficult to interact with on a shamanic level, when it comes to shamanic healing—especially in a druidic tradition—you can't really go without them. Besides the possibility of including nekkers in the outer form of a Thundernail through ribbons, they are also sometimes sculpted as coiled around the corpus.

Being water spirits (the element of the West), the unforgiving attitude of nekkers toward humanity is tempered through the workings of the winged ones (Air being the element of the East). The queen of nekkers is herself a winged serpent, representing this even higher form of balance, and is considered to have befriended the Bird Man, who despite this friendship is sometimes considered to wage war on the nekkers. While I haven't seen or heard from connections between druidic Thundernails and the Bird Man myself, through teachings I've been assured that they exist. In the eastern

traditions in any case, we can sometimes come across a phurba which includes the image of Garuda, the Bird Men who wage war on the naga (nekkers) in this spiritual framework.

Before turning our attention to examples of Thundernail practices, there's one final spirit type to be discussed in relation to Thundernails: hungry spirits. They're the ones who, unfortunately, can find themselves on the pointy side of the blade. While this wouldn't be a good format to discuss the finer points of ethics in our line of druidry, suffice it to say that when striving for a perspective of higher unity and balance, it becomes increasingly difficult to judge the actions of whatever or whoever opposes you as evil. To quote the protagonist of one of my favorite science fiction shows, *Doctor Who*, "Hardly anything is evil. But most things are hungry. Hungry looks very like evil from the wrong end of the cutlery. Or do you think your bacon sandwich loves you back?" (Moffat, 2017). Indeed, from a shamanic perspective, hunger is the "evil" we need to worry about.

In this world, what we call hunger is a natural part of the circle of life: eat or be eaten, and in the end everyone serves as food for the worms. Hungry spirits experience hunger in quite a different way. Perhaps the easiest way to describe them is by saying that they've gone so far into the shadow side of the triad of attraction, aversion, and balance that they can't find their way back on their own strength. They've become so identified with their greed, hatred, or lack of perspective that they can no longer exist without them. We can't really think of them as evil, since they are themselves the victims of their egos. Nonetheless, in their own troubled state, they risk pulling others along the same path. Traditionally, they're seen as the spirits who become the creators of imbalance, the obstacles the Thundernail has to overcome: they manifest as disease or pain, lack of energy or will power, fear, or in extreme cases may take on the demonic forms you see in horror movies.

Usually, the actions of a hungry spirit are essentially vampirism. Despite the fact that they're on a path that leads them further away from fulfillment and peace, they keep walking it in the hopes of reaching some ultimate goal or destiny. To do this, they try to maintain whatever is the focus or consequence of their greed, aversion, or ignorance at all costs, even if it means tapping the energy of others (represented in folklore by vampires drinking the blood of their victims). Even if through this means they become extremely powerful, they're still trapped in a cycle they're not strong enough to break themselves. This is why in folklore you "defeat" (liberate) a vampire by piercing their heart (reaching their essence) with a stake (the wroth principle as represented by a Thundernail).

Here we come to explain one of the main confusions about Thundernails: if (Belgae) druidry, the tradition in which they are used, is pacifist in essence, why then do they need these spiritual weapons? This is the reason: they're actually instruments of liberation, only appearing as weapons in the eyes of souls too lost to understand their true purpose. If nothing else works to help a spirit that can no longer pull itself from the path toward its own shadow existence, the highest act of mercy—for them and for those they threaten to pull with them—is to grab the blade of thunder. When an obstacle is conquered—spirit is pierced—by the Thundernail, they're reset, so to speak. Having lost their hungry form, however, they seem to disappear. This doesn't mean they were destroyed in the process. They're liberated from the need to identify with the forms and illusions they tied their own hands with and brought back to a point of absolute potential, free to follow a new path and become something or someone else. Thundernails are not about the battles we see in their outward form, but about the peace we find in their essence.

Thundernail Practices

Certain secret rites use the power of the phurba dagger-spike to nail and overpower obstructions to enlightened goodness. What opposes progress? Obstacles can manifest as internal afflictions like illness, mental confusion, or emotional distress. Obstructions can also appear as external blights like plague, invasion, drought, or famine. Obstacles can sometimes appear in the form of problem entities we might call demons or ghosts.

—Hayes, *Vajrakilaya*, p. 19

Now, knowing what a Thundernail does, let's take a look at how it can be used by a practitioner. As said, usually practitioners have at least three inert and one active, empowered Thundernail. While there's no theoretical limit to how many Thundernails a person can keep, it's said that the more you use a Thundernail, the stronger it becomes. In other words, more isn't necessarily better.

Although Thundernails are mainly used as daggers, for stabbing and cutting, their oldest core form is a tent peg, thus used for fixating. For logical reasons the dagger aspect is reserved for active, empowered Thundernails. For the fixating aspect or if you use Thundernails as a tool for meditation rather than shamanism, inert Thundernails may be sufficient. Of course, the further you go into their shamanic uses, the more complex and subtle the practices become. At a certain point, formal training in Belgae druidic shamanism and Thundernail lore becomes a necessity, which can't be provided in an article like this. As far as possible, however, I'll try to describe some of the main uses for Thundernails, progressively moving toward the more complex shamanic domains of the tradition.

In their core, Thundernails are the instruments of anchoring an equilibrium in the triad of attraction, aversion, and balance. By consequence, their first uses are oriented toward the wielder itself, stimulating this equilibrium. This helps the wielder (despite their own challenges and obstacles) to achieve sufficient stability to help other beings. If you have a nomadic lifestyle, Thundernails are literally used as ritual tent pegs. When you make camp (which is of course done with the permission of the spirit of the place), you break the earth with your nail in order to pin down your space. The purpose is to create a place that's anchored, that provides you with the peace and stability needed to find the necessary balance. For those with a sedentary lifestyle, this specific practice of the Thundernail has its equivalent in placing it (for instance on your altar) upright with its pin in a bowl of soil from the place you call home. Thus serving as an anchor, the Thundernail becomes an axis mundi if you will, the axis of the world that serves as a steady orientation point for shamanic trance journeys. However, even on a purely psychological level (through meditation on its aspects), this simple use of Thundernails can help bring more peace and balance in your life.

Another simple use for Thundernails, which I think can be done in a meditative as well as a shamanic way, is a general severing of connections around you. This doesn't mean we try or want to sever all relationships (whether they be with people, possessions, places, or even concepts), only the hold they have on you which doesn't contribute to your essence. For instance, just because you're

having a stressful time at work doesn't mean you should quit your job. It does mean, however, that in order to reorient yourself to your core essence and find peace and balance there, you may want to find a way to keep the stress from gripping you emotionally or mentally. In relationships, an example can be the difference between joyful social interaction and oppressing social rules; in mental activity, the difference between productive thought and fruitless circular brooding.

By consequence, the following exercise helps keep you centered and balanced. During stressful times, it's a good way to help you find calm before going to bed. The exercise only involves visualizing the threads that caught you in an unhealthy way through the simple act of living your daily life. These threads are general. Even when feeling especially caught up in a specific theme, there's no need to try to visualize them leading to somewhere specific. Knowing the Thundernail to be the protector of healthy borders between all perspectives in order to serve a higher unity, you then proceed to cut these threads with its tip, which releases you to return your focus to your own essence.

There's a specific meditation using Thundernails, which, despite a simple appearance, can be an extremely powerful way of guarding your balance during troubling times. While it's essentially a meditation, the effects on a shamanic level can be significant if performed with an empowered Thundernail. For this exercise in its basic form, you hold the Thundernail in your left hand and place your thumb on one of the surfaces of the tip. You then proceed to slowly rotate the Thundernail, in turn placing your thumb on every surface and starting over at the first surface for as long as you consider necessary.

With every touch, you reflect on the way the shadow side of its domain affects your life. On the first surface, you reflect on how greed manifests itself in your life. You then let these shadowy elements flow into the point of the nail and perceive how they are transformed into the joys of desire—not replacing the darkness but transforming it into light. Your personal challenges become the source of your spiritual growth. On the second surface, manifestations of hatred or fear turn into the principle of focus on what is important to you; on the third surface, your personal blind spots become a deeper awareness of your own consciousness. Slowly but surely, the activity on each of the three surfaces comes together to be perceived as the dynamics which make your life, with all its personal circumstances and contexts, an unstoppable force of the greater good manifesting itself in our world.

While these techniques are applied with regard to the wielder, some of the Thundernails' more potent uses are directed toward clients receiving shamanic healing. We now arrive at purely shamanic practices, which means that I strongly advise against performing them without any formal training in druidic shamanism and Thundernail usage. The main reason why this should not be attempted without proper training is of a spiritual nature: your actions may have unexpected consequences in the domain of the Otherworld, which you would be ill equipped to handle. Even if the client (or maybe even the practitioner) has no concerns about the spiritual level, there may be psychological damage if the wielder tries to bite off more than he can chew. Another, more prosaic concern is of a legal nature: in most countries, there are laws determining the relations between regular and alternative medicine that will most probably apply to you if you practice shamanic healing techniques on another person. Present-day shamanic training usually involves at least some basic warnings about this legal framework, which should prevent you from making honest mistakes that would render well-meant actions or statements illegal. Of course, one golden rule which applies for

the spiritual, psychological, and legal domains alike is that nothing should be done to another person without their explicit consent.

All techniques that are part of a shamanic healing should be performed in a safe, sacred space. When using your Thundernail in this manner, it's advisable to stick its point into the earth afterward and leave it for at least a day. This way, any hungry form that gets pinned down by it can only flow into the earth, the womb of the Great Mother, where it can return to its free potential and be reborn.

Earlier, I already described a simple liberation technique that can be performed on a client: cutting unhealthy connections. Let's proceed, however, with a more elaborate technique which can be used to focus on a specific issue. Just like the cutting of unhealthy connections, in principle this technique can be used on the wielder as well. (For instance, I once used this technique on myself for to treat a sleeping disorder, with wondrous results.)

For this liberation technique, you make a shamanic journey to meet the hungry spirit that represents what's causing the client to suffer. Beforehand you prepare some light material (for instance, a piece of paper) on which you draw a protective circle of the same nature as the circle drawn to create sacred space. Please be aware that this material also contains a living spirit and act accordingly. Around the circle, you place three inert Thundernails pointing toward it to fixate anything you pull in. When you find the hungry spirit, you force it inside the circle, thus trapping it. The zone outside of the circle can be touched safely without fear of contamination from the trapped spirit. Of course, you don't just leave it there, but place the material on the earth and use an active Thundernail to stab the zone inside the circle, liberating the spirit. Leaving the Thundernail pinned to the earth for some time, you can dispose of the remaining material by burning it, which sends it to the Otherworld.

Further liberation techniques for clients that can be supported by using Thundernails are difficult to fully describe here, since they require the cooperation of helpful spirits to whom practitioners are introduced in the course of their training and initiations. These techniques include extractions (pulling out a hungry spirit that has attached itself to the client, causing harm) and in theory dismantling a geiss (an incursion of the client's free will) or performing a depossession (pulling out a hungry spirit that inserted itself as an attribute of the client). While, strictly speaking, Thundernails aren't necessary for these techniques, they come in handy. Last time I performed a depossession, I was in fact unaware that I would be treating a case of possession, but had my Thundernail at the ready. Without it, I would've been perfectly able to help my client. With it, I was able to help the unfortunate soul possessing her as well.

This brings us to a final use for a Thundernail for shamanic purposes: just have it with you when performing shamanic work. You never know the kinds of adventures you may find yourself in.

Conclusion

As the mysteries of the phurba have started revealing themselves to the outside world, it stands to reason that those of the druidic Thundernail should follow the same track. Nonetheless,

sharing insights on Thundernails is a difficult exercise. Much more is left unsaid than could be written in these pages, and the Wroth Face strictly and uncompromisingly monitors how to go about revealing what is ready to be known, while respecting the secrecy of what isn't. I could only aspire to be a worthy vessel in creating a coherent text, which enhances understanding on the subject in light of the greater good.

In our current times, the challenges of the dynamics of attraction, aversion, and balance are severe. The pace of life and the complexity of our globalized societies have reached levels that leave more people than ever feeling confused and powerless, looking outward instead of inward for a sense of identity. If this is the era in which the wroth principle chooses to start revealing itself more openly—be it through phurba or Thundernail—it's my sincere hope humankind can benefit from its harsh mercy in order to achieve a higher form of peace and balance.

Appendix: An Indo-European Connection?

As a final note, for those interested, I'd like to delve into the subject of historical roots connecting Thundernail and phurba lore. In objective terms, if we consider Thundernails and phurbas to be equivalents from cultures half a world apart, there are three basic possibilities to explain this phenomenon: either one of these cultures introduced them to the other, or they were introduced (directly or indirectly) to both cultures from a common source, or both cultures (coincidentally) developed the same concept in parallel. From an esoteric point of view, universal truths can always be considered a common source in these matters, regardless of the manner in which they develop through cultural means. Without dismissing this aspect, it may still be interesting to treat the question from a more historical perspective as well.

Let's first state the known facts: Because of the hidden nature of Thundernails and phurbas, it's difficult (if not impossible) to trace their spread geographically or historically. While it's unlikely that Thundernails are limited to this Belgae lineage and corresponding territories, I have no idea to what extent Thundernails are used in other Celtic or Germanic/Nordic traditions across the European continent or the Isles. In the same vein, I don't know if the same concept exists in some form in other mystery schools in which I haven't been initiated, such as (but not limited to) the old Slavic or Greco-Roman traditions (although I have strong suspicions with regard to some of them). Besides Tibetan Buddhism, the use of phurbas is also attested in Mongolian, Bönn, and Indian Vedic traditions.

Contrary to the Tibetan phurba tradition, my own Belgae lineage is unfortunately much less concrete with regard to putting names to the lineage of teachers, which means I can only objectively retrace Thundernail usage back to the first half of the twentieth century. The Tibetan phurba tradition is recorded to the eighth century CE. The Khön family Sakya Vajrakilaya practice is said to retrace its lineage back to the teachings of Padmasambhava, the yogi who assisted Abbot Shantarakshita by using a phurba when the latter encountered resistance while founding the first Buddhist structures in Tibet. In this context, the phurba is believed to have still older roots. Besides the oral traditions, an important fifteenth-century discovery of terms related to the phurba was at the source

of a tradition that also (at least in part) is based on written transmission. Despite these attestations, however, it's only from the 1950s onward (when a new Chinese presence in Tibet was asserted) that the basics of the secretive phurba teachings became accessible to outsiders to an extent worth mentioning. These are, briefly, all the facts we can state with relative scientific certainty.

Can we derive some ideas on a historical link between Thundernails and phurbas within this framework? First off, while the idea of coincidental parallel development is always possible in theory, it doesn't seem likely. Both in outer form and in lore (and the fact that in both cases the tradition is a hidden one), some resemblances are too striking to be realistically attributed to coincidence. At best, we could suppose a parallel development of two similar practices which at some point exchanged influences in order to reach their current similar form.

If we suppose a transfer from one culture to another, it's difficult to identify a point in history when such cross-cultural influence may have taken place. From the eighth century CE onward, the logical assumption would be that if such an exchange had taken place, the source would be Tibetan rather than druidic. Even though in the circles of mystery schools some individuals may have traveled and learned lore in a way that escaped the general unfolding of history, the general historical trends show this to be unlikely. During most of this period in history, very few intercultural exchanges between East and West resulted in inserting Eastern cultural notions in Western thought that went beyond superficial (and often prejudiced) interpretation. Only in the nineteenth century did we see the early dawn of a more positive perception of Buddhism in the West, but this would still leave us far from realistically assuming that any Westerners were initiated in this secretive tradition.

The only period in which such a transfer might realistically take place is from the second half of the twentieth century onward (at which point Westerners had indeed learned of phurba lore), but this is after Thundernail lore was already present in the Belgae druidic lineage. Furthermore, while Thundernails and phurbas are each other's equivalents, they interact in a very distinct manner with other spiritual notions from their respective traditions. In the Tibetan tradition, for instance, the phurba is intrinsically connected to the dorje, which has no real druidic equivalent I'm aware of. Some of the hidden lore on the druidic Thundernail, however, is interwoven with old Ogham and wand lore, among other things, in a manner that's unlikely to have developed this recently, even if someone wanted to counterfeit a druidic form of the phurba only to keep it a secret from everyone but a handful of pupils. At this point in history, if a foreign element were integrated in this druidic lineage, it would be more likely to be openly attributed to its tradition of origin.

If we assume that the Thundernail-phurba link can be explained by a cultural exchange or common source predating the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet, there are several historical contexts in which exchanges between East and West may have taken place in a less prejudiced manner than was the case in the last millennium. Still, cultures so far apart would've considered each other very exotic, which raises the question if this would be a realistic context for extensive initiation into each other's secret traditions. By this point, a common source would seem more likely than a cultural exchange.

We could assume a common source foreign to both cultures, for instance, during a time frame somewhere in the first centuries before the establishment of Tibetan Buddhism. However, if we're looking at a tradition that we already know has spanned more than a millennium, why not

assume it could've survived an indefinite amount of time before that? If we retrace Western European and Indo-Aryan cultures to their origins, eventually we arrive at the point where all these lineages merge into one common origin: the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) culture. The PIE probably lived during the fourth millennium BCE, although they are sometimes dated as far back as the eighth millennium BCE. While the PIE is a very early ancestor of our cultures, this common origin still manifests itself to this day through mostly linguistic similarities, but also cultural and religious notions and concepts that appear to have been passed on to all cultures that stem from this early civilization. If the PIE language could survive in unbroken lineages to this day, might the same be true of a secretive esoteric notion, such as an archetypical shamanic tent peg that we now know as a Thundernail or phurba?

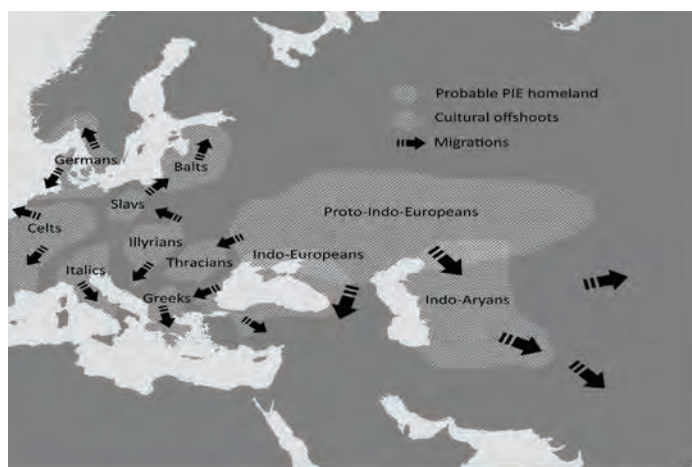


Figure 5: Approximate overview of PIE territories and migrations. Created by author based on OpenStreetMap.

Such an idea is, of course, conjecture and unlikely to be ever proven by scientific means. It does, however, resonate with a curious aspect of our druidic lineage. The PIE culture would've had a lifestyle similar to that of the proto-Mongols, whose territories may have bordered their own. Mongolian shamanism is held in very high regard in our lineage and considered as one of the roots of phurba as well. On the steppes, the traditional ways of the Mongols have survived throughout the millennia, leading to very old authentic forms of shamanism. Do you want to know the oldest roots of our traditions, I was once taught, the roots that predate even what we call druidry? Look at Mongolia!

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Speaking to the Trees

An Introduction to the Greenworld Path

Lillian Wolf

Lillian Wolf is the chosen name of an AODA Apprentice who is the source of the Greenworld Path material. She has adopted this name to provide an arms-length distance between this work and closed portions of her family.

Trees are integral to our work in multiple ways. As humans we have worked with trees for millennia. They are a part of our natural, cultural, and spiritual histories. The knowledge they can share could be studied for a lifetime. In fact, some may be drawn toward that very thing. This is where we start. Trees are familiar to us, and we are familiar to them. They are the safest spirits to learn to work with, but before running with our teachings, we must learn to stand, walk, and crawl. This takes time and practice. The trees understand this, and give us patience, correction, lessons, guidance, and their friendship. In the following exercises, our focus will be to interact with a tree as we would with a person.

The Greenworld Path is one path in a nature-based, spiritual, and magical tradition passed on through my family. I hail from Northern Ontario, and am a mixed-ethnic Indigenous and a Registered Métis of Ontario. The Ojibwe side of my family held these teachings, yet, due to centuries of oppression of Indigenous cultures, the teachings became highly secretive, even within the family. To ensure that these teachings endure, I have decided to share and adapt some of them for use in the Druid community.

Today I would like to invite you to take a peek at one portion of the Greenworld Path: communicating with the spirit of a tree. This teaching is complete in its own right. Additional information has been provided to allow the most complete instruction possible. Anyone who is interested is invited to study and practice the teachings provided here.

About the Greenworld Path

The Greenworld Path is a nature-based spirituality and magical tradition from the animist perspective. It recognizes that all things in the world around us have a spirit, soul, and life. The primary focus of this path is to build respectful, ethical, healthy, positive connections and bonds with

spirits of the Greenworld (trees and plants). By using a combination of practical and magical exercises, ritual, meditation themes, and shadow work, we learn about the balance and connection that we, and all things, share with the greater world around us.

We work to bring balance within ourselves, so that we can bring that balance into our active and spiritual lives. By bringing ourselves into this inner balance and harmony, we create the potential to connect with the greater spirits of the land. This connection allows us a deeper relationship and understanding with the land we walk, work, play, and live on. We become open to more lessons and experiences we could not have imagined previously.

Working with Spirits: Basic Principles

Sometimes the path we wish, or need, to take is overgrown and difficult terrain. We can cut down the obstacles on that path, or instead we can travel slowly and carefully, choosing to see these challenges as a learning opportunity. Working with spirits often presents us with a range of challenges. In this introduction I discuss an approach to work with spirits. Before each exercise you are given specific instructions, and guidance on the language to use. It is important that, if you are going to practice the exercises given in this article, these instructions are taken to heart and used unaltered. They are not only the guidance to respectful behavior with the trees but will help you break free of the challenges our society creates.

One of the biggest challenges is the perspective that most of us have been trained to have since we were children: that unless it has a physical brain or meets a set standard of qualities and characteristics, something cannot be alive, and it certainly doesn't think, feel, or speak. We see not only inanimate objects this way, but even trees. In Western modern culture we are taught that trees and plants are living things, but not that they are sentient. This teaching removes their individuality, identity, and their voice. It both blinds and binds us in our dealings with them.

Yet, despite this, the knowledge that things live seems to be instinctive. Children still naturally involve inanimate objects in their activities and consider this normal behavior. As children age, they are taught that these things have no life, that their time talking, playing, and entertaining inanimate objects was simply their imagination. Chances are we've been told this very thing as a child: "It's only your imagination" or "Aren't you getting a little old to talk to your toys?" To undo the learning of our modern mentality, we need to connect with the childlike aspects of ourselves and make a conscious effort to be open and inclusive in our thinking.

"We Are children"

Human beings as a species are very young compared to other species. Therefore, spirits of nature see us as young, and as a result they tend to address us as "child," or something similar that implies a very young age. This is their perspective, and we accept it. Because we are children in their eyes, they do not expect us to be perfect. We will stumble, make mistakes, miss steps, and not always understand

a message. They expect nothing less from children, but what truly matters is that like all “good children,” we recognize and acknowledge these moments, and simply apologize before trying again.

This also means we’re expected to play, to laugh, to enjoy ourselves in the moment. Embrace this aspect of the teachings. Like all caring elders or relatives, they love to hear the children laughing, and see them simply being children. Remember to enjoy the work you’re doing. Take the time to simply laugh and enjoy the space. There’s no need to rush. For people interested in the Greenworld Path, specific lessons on working with our inner child are provided in the course material.

Breath Versus Spirit

A spirit is the part of something that provides it with consciousness and sentience, despite the lack of a physical brain, as we understand it. When we speak of a spirit, we are talking of a thinking, feeling being that we can interact with. All things have a spirit. It makes no difference if it’s organic, living, inactive, human-made, or an emotion or idea, the spirits embody everything.

By contrast, the breath of something is its soul. All things have a soul, not only us and animals. *Everything*. The soul is the spark that gives all things life, that piece of the divine, creative flow that all things stem from. Yes, this means your toaster, phone, and coffee table (literally everything around you), have spirits, and souls as well, but we’ll save that particular rabbit hole for another day.

In the Branching Path, the soul is understood to be the part of ourselves that is reborn, again and again. By contrast, the spirit is the part of us that is experiential, the part in this moment and life where we currently find ourselves. In order to bypass language and other barriers, we communicate with spirits of the Greenworld by connecting to their breath with our own. This is a vulnerable process for both parties. Always be aware of this and maintain respectful practices. It’s not only the tree that needs to be able to trust; you do too. These connections are powerful—do not abuse that trust. If a spirit feels you’ve misused your connection to them, they can, and will, sever it.

Etiquette

Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines etiquette as: the conduct or procedure required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be observed in social or official life (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/etiquette>). Our use of this word is no different. When we interact with spirits, it’s important to behave in a polite, and respectful manner. What’s considered polite, however, may change depending on what we’re doing and who we are inter-

acting with. Always pay close attention to the etiquette instructions during an exercise or lesson. Following the appropriate etiquette is critical. This behavior separates us from all others. It is the key that unlocks the door to deeper communication and understanding. By using the correct etiquette in our interactions, we show the trees and plants that we are different from others who were discourteous, or even our previous self.

Actions speak for themselves. If you do these exercises the way you are meant to, you will be seen as the polite child, eager to learn. If you do not, you are the child who hasn't quite learned enough yet, and true communication (in the way we understand it) will be virtually impossible until you do.

Think-Feel-Speak

Whenever we speak aloud to spirits, we use the think-feel-speak triad. When Lillian's family lost their native language, they learned that it was possible to speak to spirits, so that regardless of the language, they could understand. This is one method—one of very few—that we use for all spirits.

We think of what we want to say, and our intentions behind it. We feel that intention, that sensation or emotion that we feel in that moment during our work; we feel *why* we want to have this interaction. Then we speak the words out loud and let our voice carry those thoughts, feelings, and words to the spirit. This is how they understand us, and how we communicate. This triad links our mind, heart, and physical self into one unified communication. By creating unity within ourselves and giving it a voice, we communicate more than mere words. All that we've done is carried by those words. Be sure your intentions and emotions match what you say. They will know.

Expressing Gratitude

Even though we dedicate time, effort, even literal blood, sweat, and tears, we must still express gratitude for the interactions we have. Everything has a cost. There is always a trade or exchange happening. Everything comes from something. When we seek out a spirit, we are asking for their time, attention, knowledge, wisdom, and their secrets. In return they expect to receive our time, attention, effort, and dedication to the relationship. They have the right to ask for this in trade. When that trade has been made, we get what we've been looking for. Be grateful for that.

Always remember, though, that this is not a mere transaction—this is a relationship. We are learning intimate knowledge about them. We will gain experience, knowledge, secrets, practices, and insights. Our spiritual and mundane lives can be enriched through our interactions. This is not simply worthy of respect, but also our gratitude. We must learn to express ourselves in this way in order to continue our relationships and gain new ones. We must never take the trade for granted, or as a simple transaction.

The Spirit of a Tree

The Druid's Tree

The Druid wanders down the path through the forest. They admire the lush greenery, the new and old growth, the sunlight shining through a brilliant green canopy. The path leads them to a tree standing tall and strong in a small clearing. The Druid stands under its canopy and admires the beauty of the tree.

They know this species well. They've learned much about it on their spiritual journey. The Druid smiles up at the tree, thinking about its beauty and all that it must have witnessed. They feel their hope, yearning to learn, and the love of the new possible friendship they will gain.

"Friend, may I sit under your canopy?" The Druid stands waiting for the response. They feel the "yes" given, a sensation of affirmation, consent, and invitation. They move closer to the tree and sit comfortably on the ground, slightly more than arm's length away. Their eyes close as they listen to the sounds of the tree.

The earth hums her melody as the trees around breathe along. The Druid is still and listens. A musical note seems to be emanating from the tree itself, coming and going as if the tree itself is breathing. The musical breathing does not reach the Druid's ears; instead they experience the sensation of sound. The Druid understands that for them, this is what the breath of the tree sounds like.

With the sound clear in their mind, they stand facing the tree, and bow their head, thinking and feeling, before speaking their gratitude.

"Thank you for sharing your sound with me today, Friend." With those words, the Druid leaves the clearing, and heads back down the path.

A few days later, the Druid returns to the tree. They smile as they step under its canopy. They take a moment to simply appreciate the tree, before bowing their head to think, and feel.

"May I rest my hand on you, Friend?" A sense of acceptance, familiarity, and warmth comes over the Druid. They sit close to the tree, where the Druid rests a hand against the trunk. They meditate on the physical sensations of the tree. They feel the rough bark, sense the flow of sap beneath it. The sensation of liquid flowing and running fills the Druid. They are reminded of the blood circulating within their body, and the vibration of it. They realize this is how the breath of this tree "feels" to them.

The Druid stands, facing the tree, and bow their head. They think, feel, and speak their gratitude.

"Thank you for sharing your feeling today, Friend." The Druid leaves the clearing once again.

After several days, the Druid returns to the tree for a third time. They pause and consider what they're about to attempt. They have heard the sound and felt the physical sensation of the breath of the tree. They have meditated with gratitude and respect in their minds, their hearts, and in their speech.

"May I connect with you, Friend?" The Druid feels a pause. The tree is considering this request. They wait patiently until they feel the same "yes" as before. They walk up to the tree and sit comfortably with their hand on the trunk.

The Druid hears the musical note and feels the flow causing gentle vibrations of the tree in front of them. They allow the sensations to flow through them, and harmonize with the sounds and sensations with their own breath. The vibration and notes of both Druid and tree blend in perfect unison until it is one experience. At that moment it clicks, as if a latch is undone, and a door swings wide open between the Druid and the tree. They can communicate now.

Over the next few months the dialogue becomes deeper, meaningful, insightful. The Druid expresses their heartfelt gratitude to their new friend, who offers wisdom and words of encouragement in return.

Learning to Communicate with the Spirit of a Tree

To learn how to interact with the spirits of nature, we must first learn the proper etiquette and gratitude expected of us by spirits. The best type of spirit to practice this interaction with is a tree. They are their own entity, unique and individual. They grow together and alone. They provide food and shelter for all manner of life, and they communicate with the other plants around them with great efficacy and wisdom.

Much like people, trees can heal, be expressive, talk, share, be grumpy, traumatized, and even be a bit gossipy. Try to keep in mind the season of the year in relation to the tree you approach. If you approach a Hazelnut in winter, it may be sleeping and reluctant to connect. However, conifers are more than chatty during cold seasons. Domestic trees such as Apple, Cherry, and Pear tend to be easier to connect with, as they have a long history with humans. All living, healthy, mature trees are acceptable to connect with using these exercises.

The goal of the first step is to hear a sound connected to the breath of the tree. These exercises will take time to complete. Everyone will progress at different rates and get stuck, or experience difficulties with different portions. The work below could take months to complete, or as little as one week. This is normal, and no matter the difficulties we experience, we *will* make progress! You will learn how to connect to the breath of the tree and communicate through that connection.

Only attempt these exercises with a mature tree, which is one that has gone through its reproductive cycle, at least one season prior to attempting this work. For example, an Oak tree must have developed acorns at least once before you attempt this exercise. Trees "soften" with maturity; the mature tree has a softer tone that emanates maturity and wisdom. Adult trees tend to be less delicate and impulsive, and tend toward being more considerate and thoughtful.

Exercise One: Finding Your First Tree

We do not simply walk up to a tree and begin our work—this would be rude. The first thing we need to do is attempt to gain a sense of which tree potentially wishes to work with us for the first time. Regardless of our previous experience with trees, or working with them, we must take this step. Before we have learned to communicate, it is easy to pick a tree that may not welcome your attention. When we try this for the first time, we are looking for a tree that wants us to learn.

Instructions

Stand in a place you hope to work, such as your yard, or a local park or forest. Think of what you wish to accomplish. You are looking for a tree that wants to communicate with you. What do you hope to gain from this? Stand for a moment with these thoughts. How do you feel? Are you nervous? Excited? Hopeful? Skeptical? Feel these things. Don't bury them. Accept them, acknowledge them. Hold these things in your mind and heart, while you say out loud, "Is there a tree who is willing to communicate with me?" Then wait. This can take a few minutes, so be patient.

You may feel a range of possible sensations. A tug in a particular direction is most common, but you can also experience the following sensations:

- A beckoning, or invitation—like seeing someone waving you over toward them.
- A sense of hearing something like, "This way, over here."
- The feeling someone is calling your name.

Once you have experienced one or more of these signals, follow it toward the tree it came from. If it did not come from a tree species, apologize for misunderstanding, thank it for the invitation, and politely state you meant to find a tree. Try again. Once you have found the tree calling to you, move on to Exercise Two.

Exercise Two: Learning

Always research the species you plan to work with first. Remember, this is about building a relationship. We can't build a deep, meaningful friendship with someone we know nothing about. The tree spirits are no different. Books such as field guides, mythologies, and magical systems related to trees (like the ogham) are excellent resources for this.

Even if you do not know of, and/or cannot find any mythology, folklore, or histories regarding a specific tree, the information in a field guide is always available. Always ensure you have properly identified the species of your tree before you begin working with it. Attempt to answer the following questions about your tree:

- What are the species and genus of your tree? Is it native?
- What is your tree's preferred habitat?
- When does it bloom, leaf, reproduce?
- When does it rest? Does it go dormant during the year? Does it tend to experience more growth during a certain time of the year than others?
- Are there stories written about this tree?
- What problems or parasites is this species combating in your region?
- What can you learn about the physical and historical aspects of the tree?

Exercise Three: The Sound of the Breath

Now that you've learned about the tree you wish to communicate with, it's time to begin learning how to speak to a tree. Often the best way to earn someone's friendship is by simply listening to them. The trees are no different. By simply sitting and listening, we demonstrate our willingness to pay attention, and our determination. We take that first step toward trust. In this exercise, you listen to your tree, to hear the sound its breath makes.

This will not be a physical sound, but more the sensation of one. It can be a musical note, song, or any other sound. It's also possible to get the impression of a color.¹ It purely depends on how we tend to perceive these events or experiences, but at this point in time, there should be no physical sensation associated with it.

Step One

First go to your tree and start by asking permission to be under its canopy by using the think-feel-speak process: Think about the extended hand of friendship you are about to offer, and what you wish to gain from this. Feel the hope of friendship, the love associated with friendships, the hope you carry. If you feel any anxieties, acknowledge and accept them. Speak the words, "Friend, may I sit under your canopy?" Wait for the "yes" or similar affirmative, consenting response.

Now that you have the tree's permission, sit under the canopy of the tree. Do not touch the trunk or large roots of the tree during this phase. It would be considered impolite, much like hugging a complete stranger only minutes after being introduced. Feel free to use a chair if needed, or sit on the ground under the tree with your legs on the earth. Sitting in any way you are comfortable is perfectly acceptable.

¹ Colors can be experienced at any point in this work regardless of which sense we are attempting to use. Because of our vast associations with color, people often perceive it alongside other sensory experiences

Step Two

Now that you are sitting comfortably, your next task is to meditate on sound. This will allow you to “hear” the breath. You will not physically hear the sound you’re looking for, but by meditating on the sounds specific to your tree, you *will* hear it.

Watch the way its limbs move in the wind. If your mind wanders during this exercise, that is natural; simply bring it back to the sounds of your tree. Allow your mind and ears to follow the sounds. Simply allow yourself to flow with it, much like a leaf is carried on the wind. By flowing with and following the sound of the physical tree, you will become aware of a sensation of sound, something you hear in your mind, or perceive rather than hear with your ears.

To everyone, the sound of the breath is different. Some hear an actual breath, some hear music, some hear a particular musical note or frequency. People sometimes gain the sensation of a sound, but they also get the impression of a particular color. This is one possible connection you can use to the sound of the breath. The impression of color is as valid as the impression of a sound. Do not expect one thing, but be open to whatever comes your way from the spirit of the tree you are connecting with.

Step Three

When you are done, always remember to thank the spirit of the tree, and say a word in parting. Respect and gratitude are key traits of this tradition. With every interaction, this tree is actively choosing to work with you. We should always be thankful for our interactions with a spirit. *We* have ventured out here to learn from this specific tree—it did not seek us. We should be mindful of this with every interaction we have. Even if we did not hear the sound of the breath during our attempt, it doesn’t mean we won’t; it simply means we need patience.

Stand facing your tree, with your head bowed slightly. Start with thinking of your thanks, gratitude, and respect. Then feel your thanks, gratitude, and respect. Speak your thoughts and feelings out loud. Once this is done, say a word of parting before you leave.

It is important to note that “word of parting” is not the same as “say goodbye.” In this tradition, “goodbye” is forever. If you plan to continue working with a spirit, do not say goodbye to it! Instead say something along the lines of “Until next time, Friend.”

Take at least two days to reflect on this experience before moving on to Exercise Four.

After each exercise you will be expected to meditate on this experience at least twice. In these meditations, recall the experiences of the sound and feel of the breath and reflect on the sensations you heard and felt, to see if you can find these sensations within yourself.

Exercise Four: The Feel of the Breath

Once you've reflected on the sound of the breath, you are ready to move on to the feel of it. When we meet new people, we often need to get a feel for the person before we are comfortable becoming friends. This is why, when we first address the tree, we simply sit under its canopy.

We have sat, and listened, and now we sit to feel by making physical contact with the tree. As with the sound, we will not experience a literal physical sensation (although we do sometimes feel a corresponding physical sensation).

Step One

When you approach the tree for this exercise, you will ask to sit under the canopy and to lay your hand on it. As always, start by using the think-feel-speak method. Think about what you are there to do, what you are going to say. Feel what you are going to say, how you feel about the work you are about to attempt. Again allow yourself to feel these emotions honestly and fully. Unify your thoughts and feelings into your question: "Friend, may I sit under your canopy, and lay my hand on you?"

Wait for the response as you did previously. You will get a sense if the tree will allow it. If you've done the previous exercise fully, you should have no problem gaining permission.

Step Two

Approach the tree and sit so that you can comfortably rest a hand against its trunk, or a large root. Place your dominant hand on the trunk or a root and meditate on the feel of the tree. As you did for sound, allow your meditation to flow with the physical sensation of the tree under your hand.

The feel of the breath may be different for each Druid. Some may feel a vibration, some a movement in the tree itself, or the flow of energy under the bark, and so on. Allow your thoughts or impressions to flow with the touch. Touch brings the breath into our physical awareness. It moves the Druid toward understanding that unique spirit and being able to communicate with it.

When you experience the feel of the breath, at that moment you know you are ready to move on. It may take several meditations for you to feel the breath. This is normal and should not be rushed. Feel free to do this meditation as many times as you need, and take as much time as you need.

Step Three

When you've completed your work for the day, remember to express respect, gratitude, and thanks. Stand facing your tree, with your head bowed slightly. Think of what you want to say, feel it, speak it. Remember to say your words of parting before you leave (*not* goodbye).

Additional Information

Sometimes feeling the breath of the tree can happen suddenly. Some may find this alarming or uncomfortable. This sometimes happens when working with spirits. It is not intentional, and the tree is not attempting to hurt or harm you in any way. This is more common with old growth trees, but can happen with any tree spirit in the Greenworld.

Attempt to remove your hand (if you didn't already by instinct) and take a moment to breathe slowly. People sometimes panic because they feel stuck to the tree, or that their hand has melded with it. Steady your breathing, and simply think "please let go." If you would like to take more time to collect yourself and reflect, then do so. Use the think-feel-speak triad to express your thanks. Despite the jarring nature of your shocking experience, you did achieve what you set out to do, even though it did not go as expected. It's important to recognize that and express your thanks.²

If you have stayed with the tree and collected yourself, ask the tree, "Be gentle, Friend," and try again. If you've taken a break and are returning, go through the steps again, but this time as you lay your hand on the tree, think "gentle," feel a gentler contact this time around, and then simply say, "Be gentle, Friend." This should allow for a much more comfortable experience.

Take at least two days to reflect on this experience before continuing to Exercise Five.

Exercise Five: Connecting to the Breath

The final part of the tree meditations takes the experiences from the first lesson and the second lesson and blends them in a new way. This blend happens by attempting to find the link, or unifying factor, between the sound and feel of the breath. Discovering that link will allow you to merge your previous experiences into something new, different, and maybe even a little wild feeling.

This takes time and experience (in the form of trial and error), and success shouldn't be expected on the first attempt. In order to connect to the breath itself, we combine what we experienced for both the sound and feel of the breath. This will likely take a few attempts, and it can sometimes be discouraging. However, there will be a link between them, something that unifies the two experiences. This link will be unique to each of us. There are always similarities between experiences, but there will be many differences.

Your experience may depend on your own perceptive orientation. If you are more visually oriented, then perhaps you will have the sense of seeing the breath, possibly in the form of colors or shapes. The exchange may vary depending on you, the tree, the weather, and the time of year.

2 There's nothing wrong with expressing, "Thank you for this experience, but it startled me." It's your honest reaction, but remind yourself it wasn't intentional. Try to let it go like an accidental scare and laugh about it when you've collected yourself. The tree doesn't want you to be afraid of it, so attempt to let the fear go.

Step One

When you approach the tree, take a moment to think about what you're about to attempt. In order to communicate with the spirit of a thing, we must connect to the breath that we've heard and felt. This can sometimes be intense and challenging. If you have anxieties, acknowledge them. When you are ready, ask the tree, "Friend, may we speak/talk/communicate/etc.?"

At this stage, you may be forced to wait. It simply may not answer. That's okay. It's not a rejection. It simply wishes to see what you will do. Wait for a time, and when you're ready to stop for the day, simply say, "Until next time, Friend."

Keep trying until you have gained that "yes."

Step Two

Once you've gained your "yes," sit near your tree, so that your hand can touch it comfortably. Think back to the sound of the breath. What did you hear? What did you experience? Hold that in your mind. Think of the feel of the breath. What sensations did you experience? Did you feel anything specific?

Attempt to combine these two experiences in your mind. Feel and hear these things in the tree as you do so. Try to match the tree.

Step Three

When you've matched, you will feel a click. There is no other way to describe the sensation. It is often described as the click of a latch opening. This is the portion that can be intense or a shock. Take a moment to settle into the new sensation. If you are able, calmly and softly say "gentle" until the sensation has softened to a comfortable level.

That click was the sensation of a connection being made. This connection allows you to truly communicate. The first thing you should do at this point is simply express your gratitude. A heartfelt, sincere "thank you" is all you need to say. This connection happened because the tree allowed it, and it's important to honor, respect, and be grateful for that.

At this point you are free to converse with your tree. It is common for trees to make a request before any deep communication happens. The request may not make sense at the time, but if you set out to complete the task, you will learn something, either about that particular tree, a specific area, or any number of vast possibilities.

Step Four

As you finish your first conversation/interaction with the tree, stand facing the tree, bow your head, and think-feel-speak your thanks. Earlier you thanked the tree for the connection; now thank

it for the interaction you had. It is more crucial than ever at this point to maintain proper etiquette. When you are ready to leave, remember to say your words of parting to the tree: “Until next time, Friend.” You should never leave this tree without saying your parting words.

A Word of Caution

Now that you have established communication with your tree, it is vital to continue communicating. There is mutual benefit in deepening this relationship. This exchange allows not only us to gain insight or spiritually evolve, but the tree as well. As we grow and evolve, so does it. Later our trees will become more than simple conversationalists or teachers, but not if a bond or relationship has never been established and maintained. Simply learning how is not enough. We must learn to communicate and express ourselves fluently.

First Experiences in Communication

Communication with trees is an individual process. Experiences will vary from person to person, and spirit to spirit. The abstractness of this can be daunting at first, but there are patterns we learn to recognize and experiences we learn to associate with specific activities and spirits.

Our very first communication is often a task. The task can seem menial, mundane, or even confusing. Any attempts to communicate with the tree will result in it simply repeating the instruction it gave you. It can be a frustrating situation, especially if we don’t understand the nature of it. Below are a couple examples of my own interactions with trees. Hopefully these examples will help you understand the sometimes confusing or unclear nature of these instructions.

“Dig Through My Roots”

I had recently moved into my husband’s home and had slowly been developing a relationship with the various plant spirits who had long been neglected. I’d been working with a very large Pine in the front yard at the time, when I decided to put a flower bed in. Around the same time, I was ready to establish communication. The tree simply indicated I was to “dig there by the shed.” The spot was a pristine lawn beside the building. “Dig through my roots,” it insisted.

I did not want to damage the tree, and where it wanted me to dig was close, with large roots running through the spot. Yet the tree insisted: “Dig through my roots.” It would say nothing else. Despite my concerns, I decided to heed the tree and gently started digging.

Almost immediately, my shovel encountered something hard. I did not find the larger roots as I feared, but instead I found bundles of shingles buried in the ground. They were only a few inches under the dirt—buried garbage from a previous owner. The more I dug, the more shingles I pulled out of the hole. Eventually I had pulled two bundles of shingles, and numerous scraps, out of the earth near this tree. They had filled a space almost eight feet long and a foot deep.

In the end, I did encounter thin, small roots that had attempted to grow around and through the shingles. Damaging these roots was unavoidable in order to remove the bundles completely. When I approached the tree again, I apologized for any pain I had caused while working. The response it gave me was, “I feel better, and now you have a flower bed!”³

“Hold On, and Watch”

Trees were some of the first spirits I communicated with in training as a child. There was a very large maple that stood in a gravel pit that had been unused for years. It was as tall as the old three-story schoolhouse nearby. I loved to climb it, and one day I climbed all the way to the top—something I was told never to do, because it was dangerous. As I stood there admiring the view of sprawling treetops around me, the tree said simply, “Hold on, and watch.”

I tightened my grip, ensured my footing was secure, and watched the forest top around me. The treetops were gently swaying, and reminded me of waves lapping on the shore. My maple swayed gently with them, a motion I was used to. Then the trees suddenly swayed with a great wave of wind, and my maple’s top rocked from the gust as the wave hit us. Had I not tightened my grip, I would have fallen. When I thanked the tree, it said, “Climb to admire the view, but remember to watch for waves.”

Additional Information and Practices

Using the exercises provided above, you can safely begin working to communicate with trees, but there are many possible scenarios that we may encounter. Since interactions and experiences can vary from person to person, and tree to tree, it is important for us to understand the different methods and situations we may find ourselves in.

In this portion we discuss things such as the importance of recognizing the different personalities and needs of trees, forming natural bonds with trees, trades and offerings, information regarding sick, dying, infested trees, potential concerns or challenges, and finally, expanding on this exercise to communicate with a wider range of trees.

The Personality of a Tree

As children we often form natural bonds with a wide range of objects, plants, trees, places, people, animals, and so on. As adults we lose that fanciful habit of simply including them in our everyday life. Maybe we read to our toys, plants, or pets. As children, this was considered natural, normal even. Our toys had personalities, names, likes, and dislikes. Each was unique in its own way. We will often encounter spirits with a variety of personality types. Some trees will be happy, welcoming, and want to gossip, but not all of them. Some trees will have less friendly personalities. When we first search for a tree, we often encounter a tree that is happy to communicate. As we expand the

3 Roughly eight years later, the tree and flower bed are both healthy and thriving!

number of trees we work with, we will encounter trees that are standoffish, grumpy, nervous, and any number of options. They may even flat-out reject your requests to connect.

Whether you're dealing with a rejecting, standoffish, grumpy tree, or have encountered nothing but happy, chatty trees, there is benefit in the following exercise. The relationships you develop will have a depth that is hard to match in other ways. Quite simply, a natural bond is more powerful than anything intentionally sought after. So why not learn this first?

It's important for us to see, experience, and interact with trees as living, thinking, feeling beings. We need to have that experience, to understand that there is a consciousness, not simply life. Once we have that understanding, we can start to recognize the importance of forming these kinds of bonds naturally, outside of intentional conversation.

The Natural Bond

The natural bond is a way to develop an emotional connection to a tree without connecting to the breath. This will eventually allow basic communication (often in the sense of impressions or images). As children, many of us naturally engaged in this behavior without even thinking about it, and chances are we still do.

While this practice is the best way to establish a healthy relationship with a tree who doesn't wish to speak to us, it is also beneficial for us to use these practices with any tree. They help engrain the perspective that we are dealing with a thinking, feeling, opinionated entity—not simply a growing thing.

Suggested Practices

Be sure to follow all the etiquette provided, as skipping steps could lead to a longer process! Spirits will often wait to see how we react when they first deny us connection or behave in an unfriendly way. These activities will show the spirit that, even though they are unwilling to connect or communicate, they have value to us. That we will still attempt to include them in our lives regardless, because simply being with them is enough for us.

Ensure you are far enough away, that you are not under the tree's canopy. For the time being, consider the canopy its "arm's length." Every so often (after a few days, for example), pause for a moment and see if your tree feels a little less resistant. As you feel the tree warming up to you, simply move a little closer.

- Always remember to greet the tree and say a parting word when you leave. But don't wait for any kind of response. You should use a casual greeting ("Hello, Friend"), and parting phrases such as "until next time, Friend." It is critical never to say "goodbye" as our parting phrase. When we are speaking to spirits, goodbye is forever. Saying goodbye means you will never speak to them again, and they will never speak to you again. Should you change your mind later, the tree will not respond.

- Do anything you wish near your tree: reading, writing, art projects, homework, work brought home, exercise, and so on. At first, simply do any activity. Do not talk to the tree or acknowledge it outside of the greetings and parting words. Simply allow it to adjust to your presence.

Eventually, if you have the sensation that the tree has become less grumpy, ask to be allowed under the canopy, and then do nothing more, but continue as you have been doing. Continue doing activities and moving slightly closer as the tree warms up to you. Once you are within arm's reach of the tree's trunk, you should try the following types of activities. Do not make physical contact with the tree yet.

- Continue to spend time with your tree, but now speak to it while you are doing your activity. Whatever that might be, there are usually moments when we may stop and say something to a person watching us.
- Talk to your tree while you work. If you're working on an art project, show the tree what you're doing. Try reading out loud. Many trees genuinely enjoy hearing stories!
- It's important that you do not speak in a way that requires a response. Imagine trying to coax someone out of their room. Be gentle, positive, respectful.
- Comment on and point out the things you see or do, like a child might. "Did you see that bird? I bet the world looks fascinating from there." Children do not always expect us to answer. Sometimes they simply want us to listen to their musings. We are children. Let the tree listen to your musings about the world.

If you have been struggling with connecting to the breath of the tree in any way, when you reach this point there may be a sensation that you've been accepted. That sensation of acceptance is a signal to make another attempt. Go back through the exercises above to connect to the breath exactly as instructed. If you have not felt that acceptance, continue with the suggestions below.

- Treat the tree like a shy, introverted, or nervous person. Once it warms up, it becomes more of a curious onlooker.⁴
- The tree may suddenly respond to one of your not-really-a-question comments, or ask you a question about what you're doing. Do not question or remark on this sudden participation. Simply answer or respond to what the tree said, and nothing more.

⁴ These interactions are typically experienced as the sensation of conversation rather than a literal conversation. The forms of in-depth conversations and exchanges that we are striving for can take years using the natural bond. To have direct conversations, we require the connection to the breath.

- When your activity is complete for the day, and you are leaving, thank the tree for speaking to you, and tell the tree how happy it made you. Do not use any language to imply you'd been waiting, giving up hope, or language like "finally, you decided to join me."

Because trees are as unique and individual as people, it is impossible to know how long this process will take. Some trees will immediately be happy and content with the attention they've been given. Some will take much longer, possibly months, seasons, or even years. They are all worth the time and effort of going through this process. The tree who dislikes humans has as much value as the one who sees humans as friends.

Tobacco and the Trade

If you receive a message, lesson, or knowledge of any kind, you should offer a pinch of tobacco at the base of the tree in thanks. While our relationship with this spirit should never be transaction based, trade is necessary even in the spirit world. Much as we would want to trade with our friends and loved ones fairly, we do the same with the spirits.

Knowledge isn't free. There is always a trade, whether we are conscious of making it or not. Our work with tree spirits in particular focuses around this concept. The most basic offerings are time, effort, and tobacco. Many cultures hold tobacco as sacred, and the spirits feel the same way. Almost every spirit we work with will accept this as an offering, when the circumstances or spirits call for it. To make an offering, we typically only use a small pinch of tobacco, but the size of the offering may change depending on the situation. Offerings could be no more than a few small pieces or a whole pouch.

Tobacco offerings need to be good, fresh tobacco, meaning it's never been burned, and it isn't old, dry, or crumbling. It should have a good strong scent. Where that tobacco comes from matters less. It can be a small pinch from the end of a fresh cigarette or cigar, a pinch of pipe tobacco, or tobacco you grow yourself specifically for this use.

"I'm Uncomfortable Using Tobacco"

Some people are uncomfortable with the idea of having tobacco around for any use. There's nothing wrong with that. Regardless of whether this is a political stance, being an ex-smoker, or any reason you may have, it is perfectly acceptable to offer a different herb or plant-based offering. While tobacco is the traditional currency, it is not the only one, and often we can find alternatives, if we're willing to seek them.

Meditate on this statement/question: "I am uncomfortable using tobacco as an offering. What can I use in its place?" Generally, people will begin to think of various herbs or plant offerings. One will stand out from the rest. That's your plant. People often find mugwort comes to mind, for exam-

ple. Others have used a mixture of flower petals from their garden.

If you are unsure if the plant you wish to use is a suitable offering, please reach out, and discuss it with me!

“I’m a Smoker—Doesn’t That Make Tobacco Less “Sacred”?”

That’s a matter of perspective. I was a smoker for years, and I was taught to make my offerings from my pack of cigarettes (always from *my* pack of cigarettes), a fresh one that’s never been lit, and roll a pinch of tobacco out of it. It was important that as a smoker my tobacco came from this source, and no other. This would be my offering. Is it “less sacred”? Nope.

While smokers undeniably have a nicotine addiction, this also gives tobacco a very real value to them. They will lose some of their tobacco to make the offering expected. To give it up willingly makes that tobacco not only a gift, but also a sacrifice. This is a potent aspect that we do well not to overlook. An offering that is both a gift and a sacrifice is a powerful offering, and always well received.

It is important to note that it does not matter if you smoke cigarettes, cigars, pipes, cigarells, or any other form of tobacco (vapes do not count).⁵ The same process applies. Always make the offering from your current supply, and always a fresh pinch.

How to Make an Offering to a Tree

- Take a small pinch of your offering between your thumb and index finger. On average, this is a standard amount to use.
- Put it in the palm of your other hand. Gently clasp both hands together tightly, or close your hands flat together, and bring them up to your mouth (prayer-like position).
- Using the think-feel-speak triad, speak your reasons, intentions, and thanks into the offering.
- Using a fingertip, gently push the offering into the ground at the base of the tree. It should only be just slightly into the earth. Cover it lightly with dirt.

Young, Sick, and Dying Trees

While trees are absolutely the safest spirits to work with, there are dangers in any work with spirits. Sometimes the danger comes from us, and sometimes it comes from sources we do not expect. Below you will find information on why we do not work with young, sick, or dying trees. While this information is selectively pulled from the material, it is vital to know while working with trees. Be sure to read and consider the information provided carefully.

⁵ E-cigarette vaporizers are not considered tobacco by this tradition’s standards. Since there is no physical tobacco in this product, you must carry tobacco for offerings. Your “vape juice” is not a tobacco offering.

The Young Tree

A young tree is one that has not experienced a reproductive cycle for at least one season, cycle, or year. In the case of a bonsai tree, young is defined as a tree that you are still actively growing or heavily shaping.⁶ Young trees can be very similar to human children and teenagers in terms of the “behavior” they exhibit, and their emotional and psychological development. They tend to be sensitive to our moods, energies, and many other types of interactions. It is incredibly easy to damage these young spirits.

These young trees are as magically able as mature trees, but they are also exceptionally delicate. If we connect to the breath of these trees, we will very likely interfere with their breath. No matter how careful we are, we cannot control how they will respond, and young trees tend to be eager to make friends. Even though we have every intention to be gentle and cause no damage, that cannot and does not prevent a young tree from attempting too much, too soon. Be the more responsible party, and simply do not make the attempt to connect to the breath.

A young tree will suffer very real consequences if we do. If their breath is interrupted at this delicate stage of their development, trees can become dependent on the presence of humans—not in the sense of requiring our physical care, but for our very presence, the physical nearness of the person who connected with them. The young tree we connected with will develop a very real dependency on us and on the connection itself. If we decide to stop connecting, we potentially scar the spirit emotionally, and even magically.

This doesn't mean we can't enjoy relationships with our young trees—quite the contrary! In fact, enjoying natural bonds with young trees can lead to amazing discoveries. Forming natural bonds with these trees through simple actions like caring for their physical development and spending time near them creates a powerful bond. Early connections with trees can create very powerful bonds that can last a lifetime and survive great distances.

The Sick, Infested, or Dying Tree

It is paramount never to connect in this manner with sick, infested, or dying trees for several reasons. Disease and pest infestation are physical things the tree experiences. This means these things also have a breath and a spirit. While disease and infestation are natural aspects of the world, that doesn't mean we want to connect with them.

That tree is fighting a literal battle for life, and we do not connect with the sick or infested for the same reason we do not connect with the dying tree. We should not magically connect during that battle, much like we wouldn't attempt to approach a deer when it's being hunted by a hungry wolf. Some situations simply put us at risk as well.

In the battle for life, living things are concerned with self-preservation, protection of the young, continuation of the species, and so on. Our safety is not what the tree is concerned with right

6 Some bonsai can take ten years or more to mature. Please consider carefully whether yours has reached this stage.

now. It will, however, grasp the hand reaching out, hold tight, and not wish to let go. This doesn't mean we have to leave the tree to its own devices, or write it off completely. If we are able to help the tree in a mundane, natural way, then we should consider what is within our power to do. Ultimately, in the worst-case scenario, if the tree is lost, it's best to let it go. It's sad, and we will mourn the loss of this tree, but this is also a natural act. Possibly we can preserve a piece of it. If the tree is lost to disease or pests, the goal at that point would be to minimize loss and attempt to prevent other trees from meeting a similar fate if possible.

Potential Concerns, Challenges, or Problems

The following topics are situations that you may encounter, including moving away, having a transient lifestyle, doing this work in public locations, being hearing impaired, and the loss of a tree. The suggestions and discussions here are not meant as directives, but as a way for you to consider your options.

There is often more than one solution to the problems and challenges we are facing. The ways listed below are not the only way. Take the suggestions, consider them, and think how you can overcome your problem.

Moving Away or Transient Lifestyle

Sometimes spirits, and other entities that live around them such as fae,⁷ become accustomed to our presence and will react emotionally when we are absent. In our work to connect with trees, various entities and spirits often observe. Our time with the tree and our efforts to form a deep meaningful bond with it impact the other entities and spirits. We become a part of their lives, their cycles. Even though we did not intend it, we have ultimately impacted their lives. It's important to acknowledge this, to accept it, and do what's needed to ensure you leave a positive impression.

It's important to tell the tree (and by extension any entities or spirits that have been observing) that you're leaving, moving, traveling, and so forth. Be honest. If you're not returning to the area, say so. If you won't return for a year, tell them! Distance means very little to a tree. Later in the Greenworld Path we will work with the connections we've established, and those connections do not disappear simply because we've left a region. The connection to your new friend will not vanish, and you can even maintain interactions, despite large distances. Simply because you are moving away or leaving the region does not mean that the bond needs to be severed. Connections are not controlled nor contained by physical distance.

If you're not returning to the area, or will be away for an extended length of time, consider giving a gift. Gifts are loved by all creatures. Give a pinch of tobacco as a blessing for the relationship you had. Think of gratitude, feel the gratitude, and speak the gratitude as you give your pinch of tobacco to the tree's base.

⁷ This tradition acknowledges and accepts the existence of the fae. They are not considered spirits but are a separate and unique race of beings. While we do not work with them, we acknowledge and respect them.

Working with Spirits in Public Spaces

If working in a public space is your only option, this can seem daunting. Stigma is real, and actively speaking out loud to a tree can appear to be bizarre behavior. But there are ways we can camouflage this! We can sit in a public park and talk to our friend the tree, and no one will think anything of it.

Humans tend not to look very closely at someone else's behavior, if there is an apparent reason for it that makes sense to them. If you want to have a conversation with a spirit in public view, put an earphone in your ear, turn your phone on mute, and talk! When someone looks at you, you point to your ear, or your phone. They will assume you're having a conversation with someone—and you are, just not a person on the phone. They may think it's a phone call, but it lets you hide in plain sight. They may overhear one side of a strange conversation, but they will think nothing more than that.

But what if you're first starting, and need to listen to your tree? I suggest using either something that does not completely cover both ears, or leaving one ear open. If you can hear background noise, you're good. It's important to remember that the sounds you are listening for are not physical sounds. The physical sound simply helps carry you to it. The conversation you're hearing is not a physical sound. Once we've established a connection, we don't need ears to hear our friends.

Losing Our Friend

The unthinkable happens. A tree that we've been connecting and communicating with for an extended amount of time is falling to sickness, or human hands. Losing a tree where there is already a connection can be like losing a family member. It is painful, it hurts, and we grieve the loss of this friend. Even though death is a natural part of the cycle, it can be difficult for us to cope with it at times. It is good to mourn a lost friend, and a ritual or ceremony to honour your time together in the material world is often helpful.⁸

We mourn the change, the loss of those interactions, but not the loss of the spirit. Death isn't final in this tradition. The tree you've developed this connection with may not be physically standing, but its spirit also hasn't vanished into the ether. Our connection to the breath of a tree gives us so much more than communication; it allows that connection to travel with the spirit itself. Our ritual or ceremony is often a way for us to consciously recognize and accept that we simply cannot access our friends in the physical world any longer. That stage of our friendship has passed, and has been altered. Mourn that passing, that ending. It's okay to grieve for that loss, but know that you haven't lost your friend. It is still there, waiting for you to communicate.

8 The Greenworld Path material includes a ceremony for this event. A version will be submitted for the next Druid's Book of Ceremonies, Songs, and Prayers (scheduled for 2023).

Adaptations for Persons with Communication-Related Disabilities

If you have a disability, you may feel that these practices are not for you. However, anyone can use them. If you are hearing impaired or deaf, this does not prevent you from doing this work. While you may not be able to hear sounds well, or even not all, other senses are remarkably sensitive. If you can't hear, smell or taste the air around the tree. Place your hand on the earth (*not* on a root—be careful of this) and feel for the vibration of a sound coming from your tree. Much like the feel of the breath, this is likely not going to be a physical vibration but rather something that reminds you of the sensation.

If it is easier to use sign language for greetings, requests, and parting words, teach your tree. The first few times, say it out loud while you sign the words. Once you've established communication, try leaving out the verbal parts, speaking only in sign.

It is important to note that while you first establish connection with any tree (the sound, feel of the breath, and working up to full communication), your requests for permission, expressions of gratitude, and parting words should always be spoken out loud if you are able. It's the physical sound of your voice that carries your thoughts and feelings, not the clarity of your voice or words.

Expanding Your Communications

Once you have established communication with one tree, you can use these techniques to communicate with others. Always remember that you should maintain communication with any tree you've started working with, and to complete the steps as you did with the first tree. This is our basic etiquette for working with these spirits. Simply establishing a relationship with one tree does not give you access to all. They are all individuals and need to be approached as such. If you wish to attempt to speak to a tree at random (after your first) you can, but be aware that some trees will reject you, ignore you, or even be quite rude. Consider starting by trying the suggestions in *How to Form a Natural Bond*.

There is no limit to how many trees you can establish relationships with, but be cautious that you do not attempt too many, too fast. Our relationship with trees is not a matter of quantity, it's about quality. More is not necessarily better. Deep connection and relationship with one or two trees is more potent than a forest of passing acquaintances. In the *Greenworld Path* material, it is recommended to establish communication with up to six trees during your work through the course.

How Long Does This Take?

This exercise can be completed in little over one week or could take several months. It literally depends on the tree you're working with and how long you meditate on your experiences between attempts. It is important not to rush through this. These are relationships that can last a lifetime. They are as individual as we are. You will hear and feel the breath with some trees the first time you try. For others it could take multiple attempts at each step. This isn't resistance, it's a test. Keep up

with it, and you'll get that connection to the breath. Often when we encounter trees that resist and even flat-out reject us, putting genuine time and effort into that relationship (with no foreseeable gain or benefit to us) opens the way for a deeper understanding of that spirit and the surrounding area.

Closing Thoughts

The material here is not only the product of my experiences, and work within the AODA, but also comes from my grandfather, his friends that gave me teachings he did not possess, and generations of my ancestors. I hope that many who read this will try the exercises provided. There is a world out there to discover and learn from. The spirits of trees have been some of humankind's longest friends, and teachers. As a child, I didn't question hearing the voice of a tree in my mind. It simply happened, and I made friends. I was fortunate to be trained and taught, and now I wish to share that.

Trees will not only teach us about themselves and the land around us, but they will also help us grow. They will often provide comments that seem obvious on the surface, but can have massive implications as we mature. As a child, being told to climb to admire the view but to watch for waves seemed an obvious lesson—if I'm going to climb all the way to the top of the tree, I'd better pay attention! Yet as an adult, this lesson has appeared in my professional life, my spiritual life, and my day-to-day life. It's not the awareness of possible danger per se, but situational awareness. Waves can be concerns, challenges, problems, confrontations, and such. They come and go. We can allow them to pass by, divert them, prevent them, correct them, but there are always waves—so we must always be aware.

I've carried this lesson with me and as a result have experienced a wealth of learning experiences and inner growth. Do not discount the seemingly random nature of our interactions. Their wisdom is often hidden behind obvious statements. Explore these relationships thoroughly, meditate on your interactions, and play beneath your tree! Find the joy in this experience, and simply feel it. All too often we feel the need to be mature and rational, but we also need to laugh.

Laugh at your mistakes and stumbles. Let your inner child out to play. Tell your tree a joke, laugh at the ridiculous antics of the wildlife, jump in a puddle, smoosh your toes in the mud, and then see what happens with your tree. Childlike joy is one of the purest things to witness. It's hard to be grumpy when we see children giggling in delight at a new discovery, and remember we are *all children*. Find your joy in this work, and amazing relationships will be forged.

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Helen is an editor from Britain. She loves helping writers to communicate their ideas. She also enjoys walking in the countryside and observing nature. Helen values AODA for its open minded approach to spiritual growth and its emphasis on ecological learning.

Tim Grady, *Interior Art*

Tim lives in New England and has spent most of his life exploring its rivers and mountains. Though working as a full-time teacher, Tim began making art 7 years ago after a near fatal car crash. With strong contrasts and clean lines, Tim's work seeks to capture ideals, forms, and the architecture of the spirit.

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. 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.

How to Contact the AODA

Trilithon Journal

Contact the editor, Dana O'Driscoll, at trilithon@aoda.org

Contact the AODA

Contact the AODA Grand Grove at info@aoda.org

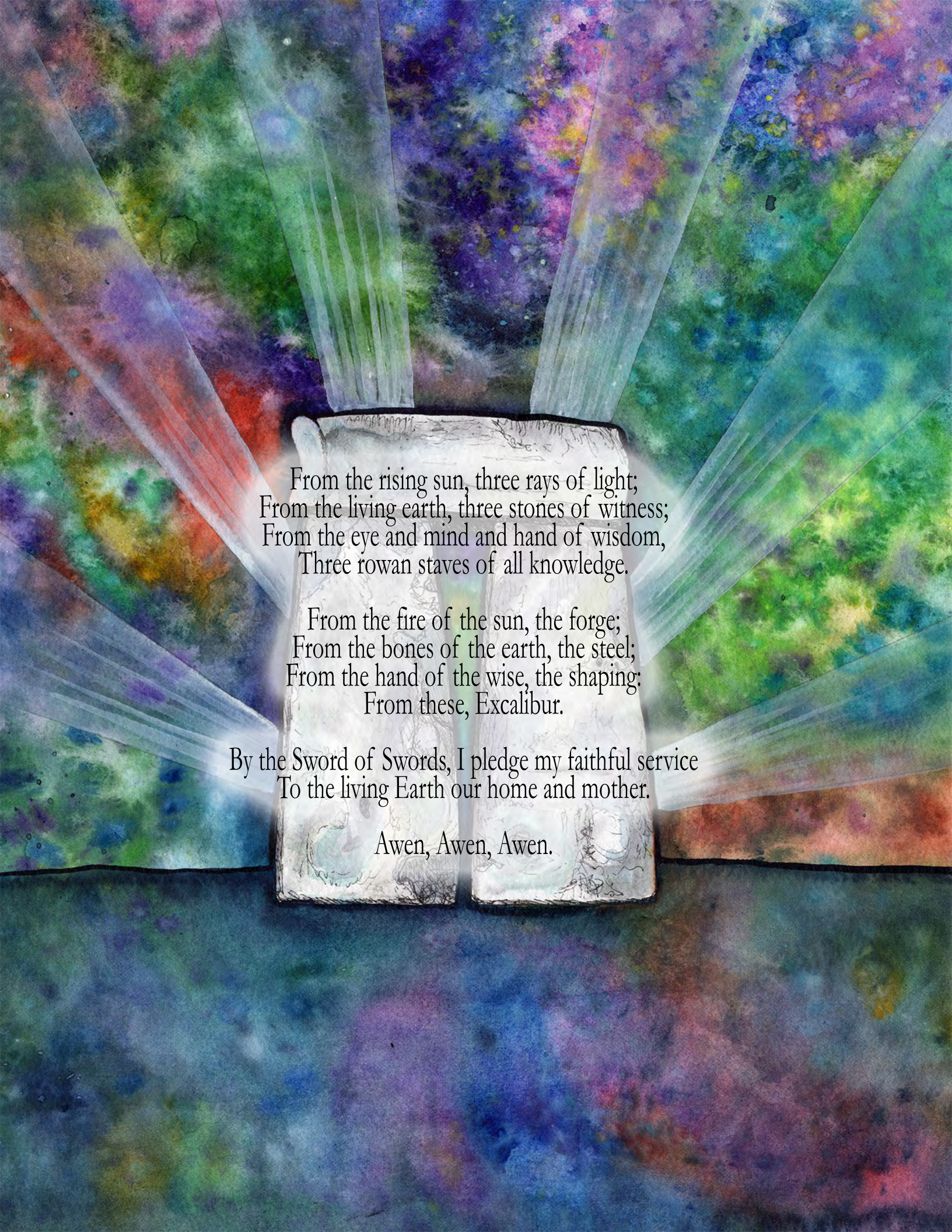
Mailing address:

AODA
PO Box 1002
Indiana, PA 15701



ANCIENT ORDER OF DRUIDS IN AMERICA

WWW.AODA.ORG



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.