

Channeling the Awen Within:
An Exploratory Study of the Bardic Arts in the Modern Druid Tradition

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Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids

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ABSTRACT

This study applies learning theory to explore bardic practices in the modern druid revival movement. Through a survey of 266 druids and follow-up interviews with 14 druids practicing the bardic arts, the research explores how people taking up the path of the bard develop expertise, overcome cultural challenges, seek community, and embrace the flow of Awen (inspiration). Through the lens of learning theory, the study concludes by considering how the druid community can help individuals overcome barriers to taking up the path of the bard and continue to promote and cultivate the bardic arts for individuals, groves, and gatherings.

INTRODUCTION

In the multifaceted modern druid tradition, the bardic arts, or creative arts, have a central spiritual role. Traditional bardic arts include those practiced by the ancient bards of old: stories, music, poetry, and song. Contemporary druid practice includes many other forms of creative work: visual arts, fine crafts, design, and much more. Part of the contemporary druid tradition is the seeking and cultivating of Awen, or divine inspiration, which helps shape and direct creative practice. In the 10th Mt. Haemus lecture, Letcher (2009) posed the question, “What is a bard?” He answered that question by exploring two different historical definitions of bards: ancient bards, who were professionals that performed stories, songs, music, and poetry to appease their patrons; and more modern “romantic bards” who, taking their cue from the legendary Taliesin, were seen as divinely inspired poets with the Awen flowing within. As demonstrated through Letcher’s review of five druid courses teaching bardic arts, the modern druid tradition seeks to use bardic practice to support inner spiritual life and embraces the “romantic view” of the bard. Letcher argues, however, that a disconnection between these two bardic archetypes presents a conflict for the flow of Awen: specifically, what happens if inspiration doesn’t come? Letcher argues instead that we should focus more on craft and skill, so that we can be a “better vessel” for the flow of Awen. Letcher concludes by arguing the bardic arts could be a more public face for the druid tradition if we focused our attention on craft. From the perspective of history and public relations, Letcher’s arguments make a lot of sense: why can’t and shouldn’t we embrace a more historical view of bards who were masters of their craft? And certainly, from one perspective, the druid tradition gains a great deal from this approach—including a more public face that is accessible to those outside the tradition.

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

Before I begin discussing the specifics of the study, in order to frame the present work, I’d like to describe the tradition of research which I am drawing upon. This piece roots its theoretical orientation in learning research, which at its core is interested in how people initially learn (including their uptake of knowledge, skills, and/or strategies), how they transfer and adapt that learning in new circumstances, what individual and contextual factors influence that learning, and how people develop expertise over a period of time (National Research Council, 1999). As a learning researcher and social scientist, I use empirical inquiry—that is, systematic observations and interactions in the world, to gather and analyze data and draw conclusions. This kind of research may include quantitative methods (data in the form of numbers drawn from a larger group of participants, such as a survey), qualitative methods (data in the form of words, drawn from a much smaller group of participants, such as an interview); or, in the case of this study, a synthesis of both (mixed methods). Through gathering this data, we may look to specific

druids' experiences to help represent larger patterns of learning in a community as a whole. I weave this professional knowledge with my own status as an insider in the druid community: as a Druid in the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD); as an Archdruid and Druid Adept in the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA) where I oversee AODA's curriculum; and as a long-term member of groves, gatherings and seed groups in the eastern United States. I also bring to this study experiences as a long-term bardic practitioner engaging in many forms of visual art; particularly watercolor painting, fine crafts, music, and design.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Since there are so few empirical studies on the modern druid tradition¹ my goal for this study was exploratory. I sought to answer the above questions raised from Letcher's work using a learning research and human developmental framework. My specific research questions are, therefore, developmentally oriented:

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

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

¹ Empirical (data-driven) studies of the druid community are quite rare. In 2009, Cooper published a study of *Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF)* in the USA with a core question of what "converted" people to druidry, specifically, ADF. Cooper's 2010 book, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*, provided both an historical and ethnographic research of the druid tradition, specifically OBOD, and explored core topics of life, death, the unknown, Stonehenge, ritual, and more. The work of Kirner (2015) has explored more specific topics, including an understanding of the sacred as it relates to nature knowledge in the American druid movement as well as the understanding of health and well-being in the broader pagan community (Kirner, 2014). Further, Wooley (2017) conducted ethnographic field work as part of his Mt. Haemus research exploring the idea of druidry as a culture. These are the only empirical studies of druidry that I have been able to find, and thus, have concluded that no previous empirical work on bardic practices in the modern druid tradition have been conducted.

Participants were 266 druids² from 9 different countries. Participants represented diverse genders (28% male, 63% female, 2% transgender, 3% gender fluid/non binary, and 2% preferred not to specify). 93.3% of respondents indicated that they considered themselves “druids”, while the remainder expressed an interest in druidry. 141 participants were OBOD members (with 28 of those OBOD members also belonging to other druid orders), an additional 61 participants identified belonging to one or more other druid orders such as ADF, AODA, RDNA, and so forth. Of the OBOD members, 64% were in the bardic grade, 21.3% were in the ovate grade, and 14.7% were in the druid grade.

At the end of the survey, participants could choose to be contacted for a follow-up interview, over 75% of the participants chose to do so. Interview participants were selected³ to represent a wide range of bardic practices, levels of expertise, levels of experience within the druid tradition, genders, and locations. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted via phone, in person, or video chat. After interviewing the first ten study participants, I also chose to follow up with four more participants from one OBOD Grove: Grove of the Oak and Eagle, located in the greater Washington D.C. area of the USA. This choice was made because this grove holds regular Eisteddfodau⁴ as part of each of their eight druid holiday celebrations and has built up a bardic arts community that is unique compared to other groves. As part of the interview, participants also shared examples of their bardic practices (writing, music, art, etc.) and some also shared examples of their workspaces where they engage in the bardic arts. Because I am an insider and have belonged to the OBOD community on the US east coast for almost a decade, I was also able to speak to some participants about experiences they had and that I had witnessed as a fellow participant at the Eisteddfodau at druid gatherings. These gatherings included the OBOD East Coast Gathering (ECG) and the Mid Atlantic Gathering (MAGUS) of the US OBOD Druids.

I recorded and transcribed all interviews and then performed a systematic content analysis (Saldaña, 2009) to understand broader themes present in the interviews and surveys. This involves reading through the data carefully through multiple passes, noting key themes and patterns, and “coding” it systematically to capture those patterns. After concluding the analysis and writing, I engaged in

² Because the term “druid” is in use in multiple ways within the druid tradition, I will clarify my terminology usage here. “Druid” will refer to participants in the study, all of whom who have taken up or identify with the druid path. I will distinguish between “creative practice” which can happen more broadly in the world with “bardic arts” and “bardic practice” which is specific to the druid tradition (for reasons that will become clear in this article).

³ Using criterion-based sampling, see Creswell (2014).

⁴ Eisteddfodau (Eisteddfod, singular) are a multifaceted tradition of bardic arts present in the modern druid tradition. As this article will explore, the Eisteddfodau in the druid tradition are public displays of creative practices (typically stories, songs, poetry, music, dance, and so forth) at small or large events. As they manifest in the modern Druid tradition, Eisteddfodau are distinct from, but influenced by, the Welsh Eisteddfodau (the largest of which is the National Eisteddfod of Wales, an eight-day long poetry and music festival).

“member checking” (Cresswell, 2014) where I shared my findings with all interview participants and ensured that I had accurately represented their perspectives.

In the first half of this article, we will explore how people develop as bards as they enter the druid tradition. We will also explore the intrinsic (psychological, spiritual) and extrinsic (social) impact of the bardic arts on participants’ spiritual practices and these practices’ relationship to the larger world. Through this, we’ll explore the benefits that druids experience as a result of framing their creative practices as spiritual and engaging in practices supported by community. The first half of this piece then, explores modern bardic practices within Letcher’s “romantic bard” terms. In the second half of the article, we’ll look at the key challenges that prevent some participants from beginning a bardic practice and the cultural baggage associated with these challenges. We’ll also consider the role of craft, and end with ways to better cultivate the bardic arts in the druid community in order to address Letcher’s “historical bard” category. The article will conclude with a discussion of the bardic arts in the broader druid community. I will also note that, in the tradition of qualitative research and out of respect for those who freely offered their time to participate in this study, I have written these results and discussions in a way that privileges participants’ voices rather than offering summaries their experience⁵.

PART I, ART AND SPIRIT: THE BARDIC ARTS IN THE DRUID COMMUNITY

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

THE BARDIC ARTS AS A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY

We begin with the most powerful and pervasive themes in the participants’ stories: the transformational journey of the bard. The theme of the bardic arts as transformative was present in all interview participants’ narratives, from those who had been on the druid path less than 2 months to

⁵ Please also note that participants had a choice between being identified by pseudonym, their real first name, or a name of their choosing. Their preferences are reflected in the naming conventions of this article.

those who had been on the druid path for over 25 years, and frequently showed up in survey participants' open-ended responses. How a bard's transformational journey takes place, however, rests and responds to the bard's previous relationship with creative practice. That is, a person's previous experience (or lack thereof) with creative practice shapes their relationship and journey into the bardic arts as a spiritual practice. We will now explore the different kinds of transformative journeys that bards in the study have taken to show the possibilities for integrating the creative arts into spiritual practices and to better understand the bardic arts from a developmental perspective.

AN INITIAL JOURNEY INTO THE BARDIC ARTS

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

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

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

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

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

Despite expressing uncertainty and fear at the thought of performing and trying new things, particularly singing, Mark continues to pick up new bardic practices for sharing at Eisteddfod. Most recently, Mark is working on singing and pushing himself to sing publically. Through Mark's example, the connection to the bardic arts, particularly through community and Eisteddfod, put him on a journey deep into his own

creative practices that has become an important part of his life—practices that he did not have prior to joining the druid tradition.

REDISCOVERING THE CREATIVE ARTS

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

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

“My mother is an artist and art school teacher, my sister is a graphic designer. It’s always been something that was part of my life.... So naturally, I wanted to make that a profession. I went to conservatory for theater, vocal, dance; there were 40 of us at first and only 15 who graduated. It gave me a lot of good tools, but it killed my love of the creative. You are burned out, disgruntled. You’ve been beat down and everyone expects perfection from you for 4 years or so, and the emotional, ‘your art is crap’ and as an artist, it’s the worst thing you can hear. For about 7 years, I tried to make it as an actor...One day, my agent called me in for a fitness video. It was one of the most horrible experiences that I had, I felt like a piece of meat...When I was done, I went into my car and sat there and thought that this wasn’t what I wanted to do. So I quit.

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

So I really reluctantly got back into the bardic arts. I hadn’t sung in 15 or 20 years. I picked up a buffalo drum, a round frame drum with a beater. It’s one of the most-simple instruments you can play; it has 2-3 tones and the rest is how you strike it and how you feel. And I started singing, and what came out of my mouth was angry, heartbroken, and poignant. I was crying, it was amazing.

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

As Nicole’s story describes, the bardic arts, including the OBOD coursework, allowed her to rediscover her creative gifts—not as a professional seeking perfection—but as a human being engaged in a spiritual

practice. Further, Nicole describes how important it was that she rediscover how the music in her life ties to her spirituality, “I’ve had meditations where ancestors will come to me and sing, sing their sorrows, their wishes, things that they want to express. The songs will repeat in my head as I’m waking up from sleep in the morning or as I go to bed. My life has always been set to music, and that music has been silent for a long time. But now I hear it again.”

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

TRANSFORMING THE CREATIVE ARTS

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

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

While Oliver had been an artist long before druidry, he describes how druidry has given him his purpose for his artwork:

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

The journey that Oliver describes is an ongoing one for each person who has an existing creative practice. In Oliver’s case, his overall goal now as an artist is to get the many ideas about sustainable living,

permaculture, earth honoring, and so forth that he believes as a druid out to a broader audience with his art.

Meredith, a dedicated belly dancer who performs in a dance troupe and practices multiple points each week, had been a member of OBOD less than a year when I interviewed her for this study. Within that time, she describes the influence of druidry on her existing practice of belly dance:

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

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

SPIRITUALITY, LIFE, AND AWEN

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

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

Other druids hone in on the psychological benefits they experience. For example, Mary from Germany writes, “It is very important. It helps me to get past the restrictions by the mind and makes me whole again. Equilibrium. Connected to the divine.” Jane from United Kingdom writes, “My arts have always been a part of my life. I express myself, my creativity. They keep me sane when my health is worse

than usual. They are an important outlet for me.” Dave, also from the United Kingdom, writes, “They are very important as it helps me express my emotional world, without it I found it impossible to explore my emotions and feelings. That lack of expression led to self destructive behavior, poetry is powerful and positive way to explore and release pent up emotion.”

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

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

CONCEPTUALIZING THE FLOW OF AWEN

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

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

Adam’s comments are very representative of the majority of the participants—Awen is part uncontrollable, in the sense that participants aren’t sure when it will appear, but it is also something that one can consciously prepare for and cultivate. As Dave from the UK describes, “Spiritual practices put you in a better space for it to happen. There’s a case of being prepared for that moment, and you can’t guarantee when that moment will happen, but the practice puts you in a better place of spiritual

preparedness.” These responses make perfect sense given that cultivating spiritual practices that bring the flow of Awen into druids’ lives is at the core of the modern druid tradition.

Most participants saw the cultivation of Awen as a very individualistic practice. However, as a long-time facilitator of the Eisteddfodau (bardic circles) in a wide range of settings, including in the Grove of the Oak and Eagle, David North recognizes that the Awen can be contagious: “The Awen of Eisteddfod has a different character to it... You know when you see people that have been sitting on the sidelines and being quiet as church mice and they go grab their cell phones and start looking things up. I’ve seen that so many times, it’s a thing. That is inspiration, you’ve just inspired someone to do something. Twenty minutes before that they were terrified about or unsure and now they want to go participate. It is contagious in that sense, and it is a shared experience in that sense.” The theme of the community, present in David North’s conceptualization of the Awen, is something that we now turn to in more detail.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY AND EISTEDDFOD

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

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

Participants described two places where they had experienced Eisteddfodau—the Grove of the Oak and Eagle in Washington, DC, as well as two larger druid gatherings—the OBOD’s East Coast Gathering (ECG) and the OBOD’s Mid-Atlantic Gathering (MAGUS). As described through both Mark’s “coming into the bardic arts” and Nicole’s “reclaiming bardic arts” stories above, many participants who would otherwise not have taken up bardic arts did so when they were exposed to the Eisteddfod.

David North describes the practice as follows: “It’s part of our legacy, inheriting this druid thing... I think it rounds out the spiritual experience in a very profound way, [an] outward way. A lot of what we consider spiritual is inward, even private; and even when we are in group ritual, people most of the time

are looking inward, not outward. Here is something that is outward facing, expressive. I think it's an intermission analogy because it is a break in the routine. Maybe I'm more used to it because we do it 6 times a year or so. For many people, maybe that Eisteddfod at ECG or MAGUS is the only time of year they get to do something like it." And certainly, this "rounding out" and making the internal work of the bardic arts external is felt powerfully by those who have experienced regular Eisteddfodau with Grove of the Oak and Eagle. Jason, another member of Oak and Eagle, discusses how the Eisteddfod helped him overcome the fear of trying something new, "In the last year, I picked up a number of skills that I never thought I could enjoy or do. And the Eisteddfod has helped me do that." Likewise, Mark describes how the Eisteddfod has encouraged him to push beyond his boundaries, "I have sung once at the Eisteddfod, and that's a huge and scary thing. I want to do more and I've compiled a list of songs I'd sing. MAGUS might be next time I have an Eisteddfod I can do something at. So, I'm trying to picking a song to sing there." For these druids, regular Eisteddfodau (6-8 times a year) at grove events offer a powerful motivating factor that helps them push beyond their own internal barriers and engage in the bardic arts. After interviewing five Oak and Eagle druids to better understand the role of Eisteddfodau with their creative practice, it is clear that the regular practice of Eisteddfodau can cultivate and support a wide range of bardic practices and develop participants' creativity, confidence, and skill over a period of time as well as build community bonds. From a developmental perspective, it appears to be a critical component of how these druids have begun, engaged with, and sustained bardic practices over a period of time.

Even without regular Eisteddfodau in a smaller grove setting, a single Eisteddfod at a larger gathering can also be transformational. This experience was certainly felt by Loam, a singer-songwriter, who describes her own transformational experience with the Eisteddfod at the OBOD's East Coast Gathering (ECG) in 2016:

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

Once Loam arrived at ECG, she found herself interwoven with the broader community of druids. She says,

"That's where I wrote the nettle song. It just started when I was sitting on a blanket with Selene and Kristen, and we were looking at the Druid plant oracle and we were joking around about getting swatted with some nettles in the woods...I thought maybe I should write this song about nettles."

During the gathering, a group of 5 or so people, including two herbalists and a nurse, ended up talking with Loam about what they knew about nettles. Loam wrote the song and performed it at the Eisteddfod (which was judged that evening). She continues:

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

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

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

In the first part of this paper, we explored how the bardic arts manifest in modern druidry: the transformative journey of the bardic arts, the influence that the bardic arts have on the lives of participants, participants' conceptualizations of Awen, and the role of the community. In exploring these themes, we've considered the first three research questions: How do people develop bardic practices in the context of druid spirituality? What impact do these bardic arts have on their lives? What is the role of the community in the bardic arts? We now turn to consider the final research question in the second part of this study: What challenges do those wanting to establish a bardic practice face?

PART II, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: TALENT, MINDSET, AND CRAFT

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

THE “GOT TALENT” PROBLEM

To some participants, and certainly to broader Western culture, “talent” is something that you either have or don't have, and the cultural narrative suggests that the “haves” should be producing while

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

This framing is part of the cultural identity of those entering the druid community and was reflected strongly in the small number of respondents in the survey who indicated they were not pursuing the bardic arts. Reasons for why people did not uptake a bardic art included fear, “An element of fear (of failure) also keeps me from pursuing the bardic arts” and lack of talent, “I’d like to make an art journal, but lack of talent keeps me stagnant.”⁶ I will also note, that for these participants who are not yet engaging in the bardic arts, there is also no mention of a community that could help them overcome this challenge. In the surveys, participants were asked to respond to the statement “I believe that you should have some innate talent to pursue a bardic art” and responses varied. 20.7% strongly agreed/agreed, 20.3% of respondents were neutral, and 58.5% disagreed/strongly disagreed. Similarly, when asked to respond to, “There are simply bardic arts that I will never be good at because I lack the talent,” 50.4% of survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed, 19.2% were neutral, and 30.5% disagreed/strongly disagreed. Putting these numbers together, for approximately 40-50% of the participants, even those who are proficient or expert in a bardic art, the idea of “talent” still has considerable influence⁷.

⁶ This is by far the most common response for why people were not engaging in the bardic arts. Other frequent responses include a lack of time and a lack of access (to the right tools/resources and to mentors/knowledge), or a combination.

⁷ I will note that it is likely that what researchers call “self-selection” bias is present in this study. People who are afraid of creative practice or who feel untalented are much less likely to agree to participate in a study about the bardic arts. Even though a minority of participants did express such views, I suspect that these views may be more pervasive than are present in my study sample. One of the reasons for this suspicion is my experiences in mentoring and curriculum work in the AODA, where part of my work is in mentoring new druids. AODA asks druids to choose between bardic, ovate, or druid studies at multiple points along their journey through the curriculum. Very frequently, lack of talent and/or fear of failure is present in these choices for why people may not uptake a bardic art.

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

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

For example, Rebekah, a person brand new to druidry and OBOD, takes an internal approach to shifting her mindset using spiritual tools. Rebekah is in the process of rediscovering her love of the bardic arts after dropping them years before. Rebekah talks about the struggle she has faced in uptaking the bardic arts,

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

Recognizing that this is a serious challenge for her, Rebekah is currently working to overcome this challenge through shifting her own mindset. She says,

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

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

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

THE ROLE OF PRACTICE AND CRAFT

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

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

“No matter how good you are at something, without practice, you will never fulfill the potential of it. I love playing the harp. I don’t play as often as I should in order to be able to play with great comfort in front of others. I used to, but because of the choices I’ve made in my life and the work I do, it’s not at the top of the list as it was before. If I sit down, I can move my fingers across the strings and it will sound lovely, and I can tune the harp. I have a good talent for how to build rhythm, chords, and structure for how to make the harp sound beautiful. But without doing it regularly, my body doesn’t know how to do that easily. There’s a whole bunch of research about what it takes to become proficient at a skill. But if you do it for 10,000 hours at a time⁸, you will become an expert...There’s some truth in that. Even prodigies, if they want to bring the fullness of what they are capable of, they have to keep doing it again and again to learn the nuances of what they are doing to hear the possibilities that they weren’t able to hear the week before. That’s the part that takes practice and something that is not possible to do just because you can do it.

And certainly, research on learning supports the idea that one can drastically improve with deliberate practice. Dweck (2006) writes, “Just because some people can do something with little or no training, it doesn’t mean that others can’t do it (and sometimes do it better) with training. This is so important,

⁸ Adam is referring to the 10,000 hour statistic in Malcom Gladwell’s *Outliers* where Gladwell attests that 10,000 hours is the difference between a novice and true greatness. Gladwell’s statistic was heavily drawn from research by Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993). While one of the original authors have critiqued the “10,000 hour rule” suggesting that Gladwell seems to have chosen that number at random and without strong research support (see Ericsson and Pool, 2016), plenty of studies attest to the fact that dedication and practice, over a period of time, is critically important (see for example, Sloboda, et. al. (1996)). In their 2016 book, Ericsson and Pool describe how developing mastery takes a lot of time regardless of field. For example, it takes an average of 10 years of study and practice to be a chess grandmaster, it takes 10 years or more for authors and poets to write their best work, and it takes from 10-20 years of study for musicians to compose a masterful piece of music. So regardless of whether or not the popular “10,000 hours” rule is accurate, the need for years of dedication, practice, and commitment is well supported by learning research.

because many, many people with the fixed mindset think that someone's early performance tells you all you need to know about their talent and their future" (p. 70).

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

CONCLUSION: TAKING UP THE PATH OF THE BARD

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

When I was in the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra, I was practicing tuba 3-4 hours a day...when I was playing at that semi-professional level, it was always about what's the next mouthpiece that's going to make my tone sound 2% better, or what is this book that's going to teach me to do these turns slightly cleaner. It was about refinement and technique, being the best professional technical player you can be. It was about everything but the Awen aspect. Whereas when you are working on the bardic aspect of things, it's really only about the emotion. I'm not so worried about everything being 100% technically correct as I am just about the overall feeling of it, feeling correct for me, and being able to communicate that in a larger group. With the bardic aspect, it's purely about the art. It's just about the connection to the art, the Awen, the inspiration, and to the people I'm sharing with it.

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

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

As the transformational journeys I described in this research explored, taking up the path of the bard also requires a tremendous amount of courage. For some, being willing to engage in bardic arts

requires us to face, and set aside, some of the most dominant narratives of Westernized culture. For others, it requires us to face the long-held “standards” of ourselves or others which we feel we can never meet. For still others, it requires us to take a new look at practices that we thought we were done with forever. For those who have the courage to begin, the benefits of taking up the path of the bard are incredible.

I would also like to return to Letcher’s central argument that the druid tradition should pay more attention to craft. This argument is sensible from the perspective of history, professional practice, and public relations. But from the perspective of learning research and developmental theory, shifting an emphasis to craft—which is, in part, an argument to shifting our tradition to focus more on product than process—presents serious challenges to those beginning and entering bardic practices. In response to Letcher’s argument that craft be central, I’d like to instead propose a developmental understanding of the role of craft in the bardic arts. For those who are picking up a new bardic practice, particularly for those who have never had one before or have abandoned a practice, craft should not be a central concern. The experience, emotion, and spiritual connection to the bardic arts should be emphasized—as OBOD’s and other druid curricula do. This is particularly important as a bardic practitioner is shedding “fixed” ideas about talent, creativity, and associated cultural baggage. At this stage in a bard’s development, attending to the product would likely be developmentally disastrous and prevent the bard from continuing. However, as a bard progresses through a course of druid study, develops one or more core bardic practices, and comes to a growth-oriented viewpoint of himself/herself and his/her work, attention to craft can become more central. In this study, attention to craft—which is not deeply attended to in OBOD or other druid curricula—seems to develop naturally for those who become either dedicated practitioners and/or involve themselves in community through Eisteddfod. I’m not convinced it is something we need to attend to in the tradition as a whole—it seems like the developmental process itself lends naturally towards that goal. Developmentally, those further along their journey as bards can consider cultivating a dual emphasis in both craft and spirituality, and seek specific advanced training with craftspeople and schools that cultivate that kind of expertise.

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

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

The power of the Eisteddfod is also worth discussing. Even for new druids who had extreme experiences in the past that convinced them that they weren't "creative" or "talented", or those who had firmly set aside previous creative practices, the Eisteddfod was a unifying factor that helped them develop and cultivate a new relationship with their creativity. Given how critically important Eisteddfodau was to all who practiced it, I would suggest that those in leaderships in groves and gatherings give Eisteddfodau a central role and discuss it as a critical spiritual practice. For those druids who may not have access to a local grove or druid community, Eisteddfodau can be practiced at home with a group of friends on a regular basis, still allowing one to gain the benefits from such an approach. I also want to note here that traditional Eisteddfodau focus primarily on performative arts like music, poetry, dance, stories, and song, which may lead to those practicing more visually-based arts feeling left out. To address this, at MAGUS 2018, the planning committee is offering both a traditional Eisteddfod around the fire for performative arts as well as a "visual" Eisteddfod for fine arts and crafts, allowing for a wider display of bardic practices.

However, it is important to recognize that Eisteddfodau, particularly as they manifest in the OBOD tradition of druidry, are distinctly different than those taking place in modern Wales. In describing the Eisteddfodau as a Welsh cultural tradition, Tufts (1962) writes: "the quintessential quality of an Eisteddfod lies in its competitiveness. It is a tourney, and the people, by the hundreds of thousands in Wales and throughout Great Britain, are concerned with the outcome of the various contests...several hundred groups, which add up to thousands of individuals, compete annually" (p.66). Kristoffer Huges, an OBOD Druid and participant in the National Eisteddfod of Wales, describes the Eisteddfodau of Wales as follows, "the ultimate award within the movement is the Chairing and Crowning of the Bard, who is then transformed into the active Chief Bard for the coming year, and acknowledged as Chief Bard in perpetuity. Culturally, it is the Chair and the Crown, embellished with the Nod Cyfrin (the symbol of the Awen), that is of primary importance." Huges continues to clarify the difference between the conception of the Awen in the National Eisteddfod and in druidry, "whilst it is in essence a truism that the end product is of great importance, its excellence is always and directly associated with the expression of Awen. The Awen is center stage at the National Eisteddfod, in words, actions, symbology and expression,

albeit the relationship that we have to the concept of the Nod Cyfrin is rather different in expression to the spiritual infused Awen commonplace in modern Druidic practice. In my opinion the function of the National Eisteddfod is the striving for Bardic excellence within a cultural framework that has its basis in the continuation of language and its expression” (Hughes, personal communication, March 8, 2018). As this study as explored, in Druidry, Eisteddfodau are still public performances but are done in a spirit of either very lighthearted competition or no competition at all—and offer a very distinctive and different flavor from the Eisteddfodau in Wales. Those developing Eisteddfodau for a community of druids should recognize these key differences and support developing druids accordingly.

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dana Driscoll is an Associate Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in the United States where she teaches doctoral courses in writing pedagogy, research methods, learning theory, and writing centers. As a learning researcher, Dana's scholarly research has long explored how people learn, "transfer" that knowledge to new contexts, and develop long term expertise as writers. Dana is a Druid in the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids and is a Druid Adept in the Ancient Order of Druids in America, where she also serves as the Archdruid of Water. Dana is a dedicated bard, practicing many arts including watercolor painting, leatherworking, pyrography, writing, and panflute. She is the artist and author of the *Tarot of Trees*, a bardic project integrating watercolor painting, writing, and divination. Her writings on druidry, nature, and permaculture can be found at the Druid's Garden Blog: druidgarden.wordpress.com.

ABSTRACT FOR MT HAEMUS PAGE

Dr. Dana Driscoll, Associate Professor of English, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (US) has long explored how people learn to write and develop as writers over time. In this study, she applies learning theory to explore bardic (creative) practices in the modern druid revival movement. Through a survey of 266 druids and in-depth interviews with 14 bardic practitioners, the research explores how people taking up the path of the bard develop expertise, seek community, reap spiritual benefits, and embrace the flow of Awen (inspiration). A key finding is the role of the Eisteddfod (bardic circle) in the development of the bardic arts. Also considered are the challenges new bards face including overcoming the myth of talent and addressing cultural conditioning. Through the lens of learning theory, the study concludes by considering how the druid community can help individuals overcome barriers to taking up the path of the bard and continue to promote and cultivate the bardic arts for individuals, groves, and gatherings.

Appendix : Survey and Interview Scripts

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

BARDIC ARTS SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study of bardic arts in the druid tradition.

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

1. Please indicate your answer on the following questions: (All based on a five-point Likert Scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)
 - a. I think that the bardic arts are an important part of the druid tradition.
 - b. The bardic arts are important for my own spiritual development.
 - c. I believe that you should have some innate talent to pursue a bardic art.
 - d. I believe that regular practice is necessary for the bardic arts.
 - e. There are simply bardic arts that I will never be good at because I lack the talent.
 - f. I think every druid should practice at least one bardic art.
2. Do you regularly engage in one or more bardic arts? (Yes / No)

(For YES answer to Question 2):

3. Please tell me about your bardic art(s) that you practice: what it is, how you practice it, what you create/produce/display, etc.
 - a. Follow up: How often do you engage in your bardic art? If you have more than one bardic practice, please answer for your primary bardic art.
 - i. Every day
 - ii. Several times a week
 - iii. Several times a month
 - iv. Several times a year
 - v. Currently not practicing
 - b. Follow up: How long have you been practicing your bardic art? Again, if you have more than one, please answer this for your primary bardic art.
 - i. A month or less
 - ii. Six months or less
 - iii. A year or less

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

For No answer to Question 2:

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

Demographics

6. Do you consider yourself to be a druid? Yes/No
- a. If not, what do you consider yourself to be? (open ended)
7. Do you belong to a druid order? (Yes/No)
- a. If yes: Which one? (Select all that apply)
 - i. Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (OBOD)
 - ii. Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA)
 - iii. Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF)
 - iv. Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA)
 - v. Henge of Keltria

- vi. British Druid Order (BDO)
- vii. The Druid Network
- viii. Druid Clan of Dana
- ix. Other: Please Specify

8. What is your age?

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

9. With what gender do you identify?

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

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

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

11. Where do you live? <country listing>

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

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

Follow up study Questions

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

14. If you are selected for a follow-up, I would like to interview you several times over the next three months (at a time that is convenient to you) for 30- 60 minutes. I will conduct interviews via Skype or Google Hangouts. Would you be able to make this time commitment?
15. Please indicate your name, druid name (if you have one), and contact information (email and cell phone number) and I will be in touch with you soon.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

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

1. Tell me about your creative/bardic art(s) that you practice.
 - a. How long have you practiced this art?
 - b. One of the things I'm interested in learning about is how you dealt with any setbacks or struggles along the path. Can you describe your greatest struggle and what happened?
 - c. What constitutes success for you in this practice?
2. Tell me about your druid path.
 - a. What brought you into druidry?
3. What do you see as the relationship between the bardic arts and your spiritual practices/druid path more generally?
4. What do you think it takes to be good at a bardic art?
5. How does innate talent or natural talent play into your work?
 - a. How do you think this concept plays into the larger cultural consensus on who should create?
6. What has been the role of the OBOD coursework, if any, in your development of bardic arts?
7. What is your conception of the Awen?
 - a. What is its tie, if anything, to your own bardic practice?
8. What has been the role of mentoring/teachers/other community members in your bardic arts?
 - a. Have you helped mentor other bards in their practice?
9. What has the role of the community (however you want to define it) been in your bardic practice?
10. Have you participated in an Eisteddfod? If so, what have your experiences been?
11. What advice do you have to people wanting to take up a bardic practice?
12. What could the druid community do to support people new to the bardic arts?