

Speaker 1: So, hello everybody. Here I am with Dana O'Driscoll. Where are you, Dana, in the States? Whereabouts?

Dana O'Driscoll: I'm in Western Pennsylvania in the Laurel Highlands region.

Speaker 1: Oh lovely. So in the Highlands of Western Pennsylvania, and I'm in the lowlands of Sussex. And the reason why Dana is here is because she has just published a book called Sacred Actions, which she's going to hold up. Hold it up, let's see it.

Dana O'Driscoll: Here it is.

Speaker 1: Sacred Actions. That's fantastic, and it's a fantastic book. And the subtitle is living the Wheel of the Year through earth-centered sustainable practices. And that's why I wanted to talk with Dana because the Eightfold Wheel of the Year is this beloved scheme of Druids and pagans, and increasingly the general public. Stephanie and I bought a book on coastal walking around Britain, big, mainstream book, and there are suggestions for each of the eight festival times in the year. So it's becoming mainstream, but we as Druids love it because it's such a sophisticated system, and it's so filled with meaning and connections, and you can build your spiritual practice around it.

And the other thing that Druids love and are concerned about are nature and the state of the world, the state of the planet and how we need to be sustainable, and we need to take action, and we need to be sacred activists. And what Dana's done is she's brought these two topics together, which is just incredible. And so that's why I wanted to talk to her and why I wanted everybody to share in our conversation.

So first of all, let me introduce Dana, because it's not fair. She's sitting there, and I haven't even introduced her. And Dana is the Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America. And as such, I think it's fantastic because you took over from Gordon Cooper, wasn't it, about three years ago.

Dana O'Driscoll: Yeah, two years ago.

Speaker 1: Two years ago. And then last year, of course, OBOD, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, had a new chief, and I handed over to Eimear Burke in Ireland, and a while back, of course, Emma Restall Orr was very prominent in the Druid world, and she was a kind of co-chief with Philip Shallcrass of the British Druid Order. Ellen Evert Hopman has been leading, I think it's the Order of the White Oak. And so it's wonderful to see women in these leadership positions. So that's great. And I first met Dana at one of the OBOD east coast gatherings about probably, I don't know, five or six years ago.

Dana O'Driscoll: It was the 2012 or 2013 gathering.

Speaker 1: 2012, gosh. Yes, almost 10-

Dana O'Driscoll: It's been a while.

Speaker 1: Yeah. And she had published her tarot, The Tarot of Trees, which was great. And I seem to remember that you self-published it and that got you through graduate school.

Dana O'Driscoll: It did. It did. It's actually how I was able to join OBOD. Because I was a poor graduate student, and I self-published The Tarot of Trees and suddenly I had the funds to be able to afford the Bardic course.

Speaker 1: Oh, that's great. Fantastic, fantastic. That's great. And then you've also authored the Plant Spirit Oracle.

Dana O'Driscoll: Yes. That's a new one.

Speaker 1: Yeah, that's great. And Dana also was awarded the Mount Haemus award on the 19th Mount Haemus lecture in 20... Oh, sorry. I was going to say in 2024, but I haven't traveled into the future. That's because it's going to be published in the book, Volume Three of the Mount Haemus Lectures, in 2024, but you can go online to druidry.org and read Dana's Mount Haemus paper and download the PDF there, which is about the way in which the Eisteddfod tradition in Druidry has really changed and adapted, particularly with OBOD and with other Druid groups, perhaps, as well. So that's a really interesting example of kind of living Druidry. And in fact, it occurs to me that it follows your theme of where you've taken this very contemporary issue of the environmental crisis and married it with a traditional concept like the eightfold year.

And that's what you did in your Mount Haemus paper, I guess, is you took this traditional idea of the Eisteddfod, and then you said, "What are we doing with it in modern times?" And really this very interesting way in which the empowerment has sort of switched from the hierarchy in the old days where the Druid hierarchy would sort of judge people's artistic and creative contributions, and they still do in the Welsh National Eisteddfod where people submit songs and poetry and literature and so on, and then they're judged. Whereas the way it's worked in OBOD is it's become more about process rather than the end result, that it's all about the enjoyment of it and the stimulation of our creativity. And now, has your new book, has it come out yet? Has it been published?

Dana O'Driscoll: No, it's coming out on, I believe May 22nd.

Speaker 1: May 22nd. So that's next month. That's great. May the 22nd. And who's it published by?

Dana O'Driscoll: It's through Red Feather, which is a part of Schiffer publishing.

Speaker 1: Schiffer, Red Feather. That's great. Fantastic. I wonder what it is about red, because Weiser has Red Wheel, and Schiffer has got Red Feather. It's obviously significant in some way, signifies life and dynamism.

Dana O'Driscoll: The fire, right? The alchemical fire descending from the heavens perhaps.

Speaker 1: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Maybe let's start off with a bit about you and why this theme really, why you wrote the book. Why did you write this book?

Dana O'Driscoll: Well, I think I'll start with a little about me, and then I'll talk a little bit about how I wrote it.

Speaker 1: Yeah, sure.

Dana O'Driscoll: So it's interesting because when I look at my own history and how I got into Druidry, it was really returning to nature. It was coming back. I had spent the early part of my adult life living a typical consumer's lifestyle. I went to school for a long time, played lots of video games, and there's nothing wrong with that, but when I found Druidry at the age of 25, it sort of signaled to me a profound, inner shift that I needed to make. But what became pretty obvious to me at that point was that it wasn't just enough to go into the woods and have a spiritual experience, but I really needed to find a way of sort of aligning my outer life, which really wasn't very nature-focused, with my inner life. And while I still think I sort of naively thought, well, this isn't going to be too hard to do. And turns out that's actually kind of a lifelong endeavor.

And so I started... I'm a lifelong learner. I really love learning, and I started studying different traditions that would help me do that. I took up homesteading and organic gardening and all of the associated activities and practices with that. I studied permaculture, I received my permaculture design certification, and my permaculture teacher certification, which actually is woven into this book quite a bit, and I can talk a little bit about that. Started herbalism. I studied natural building. I'm now studying bushcraft and survivalism. And it's just these different ways of thinking about how do we apply human activities and human knowledge to a sacred interaction, and to really come to a place where we can live in a way within our lives that aligns with our spiritual practices and that aligns with the things that we try to do.

And so to me, it was so important to be able to go find these things. But when I started digging into it, there was such a massive body of knowledge. One of the challenges we have, and I've been working in AODA as a volunteer in leadership in AODA for about six or seven years now. And for a long time, what I was doing is I was working with our new candidates as they were coming in, and one of the things that we ask candidates to do is make three lifestyle changes as part of their Druid practice to align with the living earth. And it struck me that that was actually a pretty challenging thing for a lot of people. They wanted to do things like donate money to a cause, but what it really is about is saying... Or they

wanted to do things like, "I live in an apartment; I want to go live off-grid." And we're like, okay, wait, let's just stop for a minute.

Speaker 1: Keeping it realistic.

Dana O'Driscoll: Yeah. What can you do that you can sustain over time? And so I really came to this understanding over a period of about 10 years that it's not always about these big giant actions, but it's sort of about making small changes in our lives incrementally over a long period of time, that allows us to sort of shift into that sustainable, regenerative living. And so that's really kind of where the whole idea for the book came in, and it really represents the decades of learning and experience that I went through to sort of be able to do that for myself. And then I started sharing that on my blog, which is The Druid's Garden. And over time, lots and lots of people started responding, and I realized that there was probably a market for something like this that could introduce people to a range of practices and do it in the context of sacred action and the Wheel Of The Year.

Speaker 1: That's great. That's great, isn't it? Because I guess we all try to do things like recycle and so on, but to sort of set that within the context of our spirituality just makes it feel more meaningful and complete in some way. What are some of your favorite ideas that you share in the book?

Dana O'Driscoll: Oh, there's so many different things. I mean, part of the way that I wrote the book is I wrote it so that it doesn't matter where you live, it doesn't matter what your lifestyle is. So you could be in the city, and you can learn about worm composting and how that aligns with sacred practice. You can learn about growing small things, sprouting seeds, things like that. And so I tried to write it in a way that there are pieces of this book that are accessible for every lifestyle, whether or not you're able-bodied or you have a disability. So it's trying to be really inclusive.

I would say probably one of my very favorite things in the book is this concept. I actually first talked, John Michael and I kind of worked this out as we were having discussions, this idea of refugia. So we have this ecological crisis. We know we're in the sixth great extinction. We have the Age of the Anthropocene. And when you get into these big concepts, people get really shut down. You feel like, what can I possibly do? How can I possibly make a difference? And that really is a stifling thing for a lot of people, so it's really hard.

We live in this catch-22. Here you are going into the trees, having these incredible sacred experiences as a Druid, as somebody practicing nature spirituality, and then you open up the internet and there's another species that has gone extinct, and it's like this crushing despair. And so what I tried to do is find things that were really impactful. And so refugia is one of those things. So this originally came out of this book called After the Ice Age, where this idea of refugia is that, this is back in the time of the glaciers, all these ice ages, where the glaciers essentially wiped life off of many parts of this planet. And what

happened is that there were these small pockets of life. That's actually how humans were sustained. And so we had these small pockets of life that survived for various reasons, and then that life was able to spread outward. So what if we take the idea of refugia and we apply it to a garden.

So if I look outside my home, so we have a five acre homestead here in Western Pennsylvania, I am literally surrounded by a sea of monocropped corn and soy and wheat fields. That's essentially no real difference than a glacier, right? It's essentially a wasteland of life, right? There's not a place for bees or butterflies, but what if I take a small piece of my land and make it really intensively, intensively-

Speaker 1: Biodiverse.

Dana O'Driscoll: Biodiverse, yes. Thank you. I was looking for that word. Biodiverse. And I work especially to cultivate things that I know are endangered. So we're doing that a lot here with rare woodland medicinal species on our land, because we have things like American Ginseng, Trillium, all of these plants that have been traditionally over-harvested and that are no longer found in the Appalachian Mountains. We've got them here, and if we can cultivate a small place like that, we're actually making a difference because we're cultivating a place that then life can later spread when we're past whatever this age is. So this idea of refugia could truly be a monumental thing. We could save all sorts of life if we can just create small pockets of life. And then suddenly you're doing something that it's not just ecologically makes sense, but it's a spiritually rich place where you can connect and you can engage.

Speaker 1: It's a fantastic idea, isn't it? It reminds me, of course, refugia is from the word refuge, and in the Dharmic traditions, I take my refuge in the Dharma, the Buddha, the Sangha, and so on, and it's used in Jainism as well. And this concept of taking refuge, it's lovely to bring. So it's not just in the classical way that you think about it. It's in terms of the self, the individual, I take my refuge in the teacher, the teaching, and the community of followers, and so on. But this brings it into the world, and it's part of the work of an embodied spirituality that cares about the earth, and so that's lovely.

And it's empowering too, because as you say, if you're surrounded, I mean, we're all surrounded by wastelands in all sorts of ways, and it can feel so easy to feel overpowered by it. But if you take this idea that you've just articulated, it's very beautiful because even in a little garden you can create this refuge and it's full of, teeming with life, just as within a sort of intellectual wasteland or a spiritual wasteland, you can perhaps foster.

Dana O'Driscoll: Can I take it one step further? So then let's say you create this refugia, right? And whether that's on your balcony, in your city garden, whether that is with a community of people in a public space, whether that's on your own property. So then you start growing things. You grow things maybe that are no longer

abundant on your landscape, or maybe that are in need. So we have refugia here, and one of the things that we're growing a lot of is milkweed. Here in North America, milkweed sustains the monarch butterfly, and because of intensive farming practices and some of the new farming practices that have come out in the last 15 years, monarchs are in serious danger. So what do we do?

So this is another technique in the book. So you gather those seeds, so in this case the milkweed seeds, maybe other seeds, New England aster, St. John's wort, other plants that used to be that are native, that are really important to especially insects, which are one of the big areas that we're having a lot of trouble with here in North America. And then you take soil, and you take clay, and you mix them all together, and you make these little magic seed balls. And then you carry them with you in your crane bag. And when you go hiking and you see a good spot, then you toss them. Suddenly then you're spreading, and part of the book, it's like, it's not just the physical action, but it's the magical work of empowering this with a blessing that then you send out into the world. And then suddenly now your little refugia, you're spreading seeds, you're spreading joy, and you really are making a difference. Some of the places I've thrown these things, you're driving down the side of the road. Oh, there looks, that's a good ditch.

This is the kind of stuff I'm talking about. It's this idea of thinking about... So I create the sacred garden. I do my spiritual practices in this place. I gather the seeds from the sacred garden. I give them to others. I create a blessing of these when I've made them in the fall. Maybe I do a ritual surrounding them, and then I spread that into the world. That's just such an empowering thing. It's directly in line with sacred activity, sacred practice, the Wheel of the Year. And so those are the kinds of things that I've tried in many, many ways in this book to bring to bear and try to find some things that were less common, like what I'm describing. I mean, everybody can recycle and there's stuff about recycling in the book too, but these are the ideas that are-

Speaker 1: These are common ideas.

Dana O'Driscoll: I tried to bring in a lot of less common ideas that would give Druids and people practicing other nature-based spiritual practices some really cool and interesting things that would be fun to do and that would be empowering.

Speaker 1: That's great. So who should read this book? Is this a book just for Druids?

Dana O'Driscoll: Oh, no. I mean, I kind of hope everyone will read this book. I'm sort of targeting... There's some really interesting crossover. So on one hand we have Neopagans, Druids, people who practice shamanism, anybody who has a spiritual practice that is in some ways rooted with nature. I think that most people who are practicing any kind of Pagan path, my friends in witchcraft, all of those folks, Heathenry, all of us are finding ways of connecting deeply with

nature. And we're all facing that same problem we talked about earlier. So there's that group.

But I also think that there would be a second group of people that maybe have come into it from places like permaculture designer or herbalism that are looking for a sacred connection with nature. And so they might be familiar with the practices, but the book could give them that sacred connection. And I got that idea because when I lived in Michigan, we had a really long standing permaculture meetup that I helped create and a couple of my friends and I started, and we started getting like 40, 50 people coming to these meetups, learning how to start seeds, or how to bake bread from home or whatever, how to build an earth oven. And what was really amazing is that sometimes if I was hosting, they would wander to the back of the property where our stone circle was, where our Grove would meet. And this is just a homesteader, they'd never heard of nature spirituality, and they're like, "Hey, Dana, I noticed you have a stone circle in the back part of your property. Tell me about that."

And so it's interesting how I really feel like there's a lot that the communities of Druidry and Neopaganism can learn from the people that are doing the organic gardening and homesteading and herbalism and vice versa. So I'm hoping that this book creates a space for those communities to come together and recognize just how much we can share with each other and how much we can grow together.

Speaker 1: That's fantastic. How specifically Druidic is it? I mean, how does it relate to your Druid path? Is it something that you could say is essentially about nature spirituality, or was there a particularly Druid kind of aspect to it?

Dana O'Driscoll: Well, there's obviously the entire book is laid out in the structure of the Wheel of the Year. So any Druid, I mean, there are very few Druids I know that don't at least practice the solstices and equinoxes, if not the fourfold wheel. And so if you had an existing Druid practice, and you were practicing each of these wheels, you could read this book over the course of a year, and there are rituals and there are activities, and there are rituals and there are practices for each of those. So it'd be very easy for a Druid to pick this up or anyone who practiced the Wheel of the Year, really, and say, okay, I'd like to build in another aspect of my sustainable practice. What could I do? What rituals could I do? So in that way, it absolutely aligns. And I'm a Druid, so many of the experiences in there, I talk about Druidry.

The other thing that I think is very aligning with Druidry is I actually draw upon the permaculture ethical system, which essentially is people care, fair share, and earth care.

Speaker 1: Say that again. People care-

Dana O'Driscoll: People care, fair share, and earth care. And it's the idea that if we care for people, we make sure their basic needs are met. And there's lots of people in the world who have professions that are people care, there are lots of people in the world whose professions are primarily earth care, and then of course we have this idea of fair share. So if we bring these together, they provide a really fantastic ethical system for saying to yourself, okay, how does this align with the three ethics? And of course it's a triad, which is exciting.

And so it really provides sort of a robust way of looking at existing Druid practice and thinking about... Because we don't have an inherent ethical system within Druidry. We have the idea of nature as good, and there are things that we all agree, and certainly your book, *What Do Druids Believe*, you outline many of those in really nice detail. But I think that this gives us an additional level. It almost gives you a rubric or a meditation that when you come into a situation you can use. And so that has really enhanced my own Druid practice. And the Druids that I've shared this with, we've had a lot of conversations about this. So I think there's just so much stuff in there for anyone practicing nature spirituality, but certainly for Druids. And obviously I'm coming at this, I am a Druid. That is my life path. So I'm coming at it absolutely from that angle.

Speaker 1: Yes. That's great. And kind of woven into it is this idea of sacred action, isn't it? That presumably all... I mean, all of the book is encouraging you to actually act in the world, which it makes me think about magic. Spirituality can so often be taken as a way of self-development, and all very valid, way of finding union with the divine, of developing the self, of deepening relationships and so on. And often that can be characterized as what you might call mysticism. But the interesting thing about Druidry, I think is it's both mystical in that sense, helping us to achieve union with all being and so on, but it's also magical, it's also a magical path.

And then if you say, well, what do you mean by magic? Well it's about acting in the world. It's about accepting the fact that we're here, the fact that we can influence things and people and the earth is a responsibility that we need to accept because we do it, whether we like it or not. And how can we do this with consciousness and with a deep sense of sort of ethical guidance and so on. So am I right in saying your book is all about sacred action?

Dana O'Driscoll: Yeah. And I think that you're really getting to the heart of part of what I'm really trying to argue in this book, is we have lots of books that give you the mystical pieces of Druidry, right? They give you the what to do, how to meditate, but there's a real benefit, and it's an entire different layer that you get. So I'll give an example here. Maybe 10 years ago, I started learning how to worm compost. And Vermicompost is the term. So you can do this anywhere in the world. I've actually taught, sometimes I teach sustainability classes, and I've obviously done community organizing and stuff. You can literally get a three gallon bucket, a set of two, and then create a worm composter. It could literally sit in a dorm room. So it's a really awesome practice.

And so I'm doing my meditations, I'm doing my rituals and all of those things, and I'm like, yeah, I'm going to try this worm composting thing. And this is when I lived in an apartment, and I start doing the worm composting. And about six months after you start your worm composter, you can actually harvest the compost and then restart the whole thing, put the worms back in and everything. It's quite a process to do this, and I remember pulling the compost out, and I realized that I had missed things, like I had put a banana peel in there and there's a little plastic film over the label. So the worms ate everything but the plastic film, and I'm starting to pull this out and I'm like, my goodness, I didn't even realize all this plastic was in here.

So now what am I going to do with it? So now I make eco bricks. That's a different thing. That's also in the book, but it struck me that this gave me a really deep meditation on what is this plastic that I'm using? How am I doing it? And it actually enhanced my understanding of my own relationship to the world. And it was just this really... I know it sounds kind of crazy to sit with this worm composter and have this fundamental sort of shift in my awareness, but it led to all sorts of interesting spiritual insights.

So what I'm trying to say is that the sacred actions, it's kind of like, it's as above, so below. As within, so without. We gain experiences through our mystical experiences, but we can also gain incredible experiences through these kinds of daily sacred actions, and they can feed each other, and they can build in really powerful ways. And then I think the more that we're able to do that, the more we're able to really align with the most basic understanding of Druidry, which is that we and nature are not separate. We're together. We're part of this, and that's just such a powerful thing.

So now I have a responsibility because I've got this piece of plastic that I didn't even know was there, that I didn't even know I consumed. So now I can stick it in an eco brick, and I can use it for a natural building project, or I can donate it to a zoo or a community that's going to use it for good, rather than it end up in the ocean. And now I feel great, and I've really thought about what that cycle is, and I've tied back to that Druid idea. So there's just so much to it. It's just really fascinating.

Speaker 1: That's great. Dana, I'm so glad you've written this book, Sacred Actions, and we're going to stock it in the OBOD bookstore, definitely, and encourage people to buy it and to read it and to engage with it and really work with it.

There's a lovely story. I don't know, I'm sure you know it. You know the one of the girl with the starfish? An old man goes down to the sea and he sees a little girl throwing the starfishes into the water. And he says, "What are you doing?" And she says, "Well they get washed up on the beach. And if the tide doesn't come back in high enough, they die. So I'm throwing them back in to save them." And he looks along the beach and he sees thousands of them. He says, "Well, you can't possibly save all these. They can't make any difference." And

she just looks at him and says, "Well, it sure makes a difference to this one," and then throws it in.

And when I read that story, that kind of resolved a kind of despair I have been suffering from for some time, was that there was nothing I could do. There was nothing I could do, and I was feeling overwhelmed by it. And I read that story and it just lifted... In a way it's an interesting, from a Druidic point of view, it's an example of the power of story, isn't it? The power of story. I read that story, and it's certainly made a difference to that one. And it's a similar idea with your idea of refuges as well.

Dana O'Driscoll: Yeah. I also think, too, there's a lot of us these days. I don't know, I think the last time we talked maybe 30,000 OBOD Druids, AOD has got about-

Speaker 1: I think there are 26,000 members of OBOD.

Dana O'Driscoll: 26,000. I mean, I don't know how many ADF members we have. I don't know all of the Druid orders. We've got about 1500 now in AODA. So if you think about that, those are not small numbers of people. You know, I was telling this to AODA members. One of the things we do is plant the tree and make three lifestyle changes. If you do the math, now we've got 1500 more trees, and most people plant more than one. That's 3000 more trees. I do think we always have to think about the power of, if each of us just do something, there's a power of collective action. And if we can bring that together and share, suddenly it doesn't look like such a small thing. And that's important too, and I think that's one of the benefits of Druid orders and getting involved in some kind of Druid order or some kind of other organization that ties to a spiritual path.

Speaker 1: And we all need encouragement, and we all need... We all need guidance, and we need people to say, "Hey, why don't you do this? And try this." And we might half know it already. We might fully know it already, but need to be reminded about it, but this is all needed. So thank you so much. Thank you for telling us about your book, Dana. And I hope it goes really well, and good luck with it.

Dana O'Driscoll: Thank you so much.