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Damh the Bard:

So hello, Dan, we've known each other for a number of years.

Dan:

Yeah, quite a few now.

Damh the Bard:

I'm really happy that you agreed to have this interview on Druidcast. First of all, the first question is... We were going to do "Walking the Talk."

Dan:

We were, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

And outside, as you might be able to hear in the background, the wind is blowing down the chimney, in this absolutely amazing living room that Dan has. And the wind is blowing. You'll probably be hearing a strange whistle at some point, cause it blows through the window.

Dan:

Yeah, third floor flats. Very windy day.

Damh the Bard:

We were going to go for a "Walking the Talk" around Brighton.

Dan:

Yes.

Damh the Bard:

So maybe the first thing to do is to say, "Okay, where would you have taken me first if we were there?"

Dan:

Okay. So first of all, we would have gone to the fountain on the Old Steine.

Damh the Bard:

Okay.

Dan:

And there's a few stories around it. One is that the stones of the fountain were, there is a theory, I don't know how plausible it is, that they were part of a stone circle at one point.

Damh the Bard:

Oh?

Dan:

Yeah. The Druids Head Pub, which is a couple of streets away, talks about how it was named The Druids Head because a stone circle was found nearby. And so some of the theories are that those stones were moved and put under the fountain. There's other theories that it was part of the river bed of the Wellesbourne, which it was a river that was sort of an occasional winter river that would appear and go down the Old Steine, and that those stones formed part of the river bed. There's a ley line as well apparently, which runs up the spine of Brighton, which one of my friends had a colleague who was determined that it was the best place to go and decide on any decisions he had. So he'd go and walk up and down the Steine along the ley line and then the answers would come to him.

Damh the Bard:

Would arrive?

Dan:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Okay.

Dan:

And I've traced it a little bit on a map. I think a lot of it seems to be churches, which Brighton is littered with, so you can probably draw lines between them anywhere. Yeah, so there's a lot of belief around that and around the Old Steine. And it may be that the Wellesbourne, which is now part of the sewer, is a contributor to that feeling of there being a line going down there.

Damh the Bard:

Okay. And so, obviously, there's no photographic evidence or anything like that of any stone circle or any of those?

Dan:

No. This was a long, long time ago. So whether there was or there wasn't, or whether it's just a story that they decided for Druids Head, I think stone is quite scarce in Sussex, so-

Damh the Bard:

Well, that's the thing, isn't it?

Dan:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

That's the thing. Yeah. And I've heard a rumor. I kind of like the rumor, that part of the reason why Brighton is so weird is that part of Aleister Crowley's ashes were poured into the underground river.

Dan:

Oh, wow.

Damh the Bard:

It's still, his spirit is influencing Brighton.

Dan:

Sure, yeah. Or perhaps the weirdness inspired the ashes sprinkling, as well.

Dan:

But yes, another really nice memory that I have of that place in particular is that there was a ceremony there for the unveiling of the blue plaque of Doreen Valiente's flat.

Damh the Bard:

Yes.

Dan:

So yes, there was a massive Wiccan ceremony carried out on what's essentially a roundabout, which is quite-

Damh the Bard:

Which is amazing.

Dan:

Yeah, incredible. And then we sort of processed up to where the plaque was being unveiled and that was a really interesting thing because I'd always imagined Doreen Valiente having a sort of little flint cottage somewhere and sort of nice little garden and stuff like that. But she lived in a council flat in Kempton.

Damh the Bard:

Yes, yes.

Dan:

And it's a really interesting idea to have somebody who you've made such strong associations with the countryside.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

Dan:

And yeah, seeing the flat where she lived in it's quite a strange one.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah. You always imagine Doreen with her cauldron and spells and stuff like that.

Dan:

Absolutely.

Damh the Bard:

In the woodland and everything else, proper Hansel and Gretel type thing and there she is. But what is amazing is that that blue plaque, "Doreen Valiente Lived Here, Mother of"-

Dan:

Mother of modern witchcraft.

Damh the Bard:

... mother of modern witchcraft is on a council flat in Brighton.

Dan:

It's incredible.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah. I was over in America at PSG at that point when that was happening. So I wasn't there for that, but I was there for the Gerald Gardner one.

Dan:

Right, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Went to his house and things like that. So yeah. Okay, so the fountain and a stone circle, Doreen Valiente's blue plaque unveiling, and The Druids Head Pub, have you ever been drinking in there?

Dan:

Yeah, not as often recently, but yeah, I've been a few occasions. The last time I was there, they had a whole wall of green men. The people who were there were saying that they're being frequently stolen as well, people will sort of lift them off the wall and take them home with them cause there are so many.

Damh the Bard:

Right, okay. So we're back in the... We're getting in the car.

Dan:

Okay, yep

Damh the Bard:

Where are we going next?

Dan:

Okay, so the next stop is St. Ann's Well Gardens.

Damh the Bard:

Oh, okay.

Dan:

So that was a, it's named after St. Ann's Well, which is a chalybeate spring, which is in Hove. Nowadays, it's not much to see. There's a bit of a, sort of a stream of sort of fairly brown, muddy liquid coming out from under the bushes. And then a sort of brick wishing well. But originally, well, not originally, but when it was a pleasure gardens, there was actually a little grotto and a well pump and people would go there and take the waters during the Victorian period. It's a sort of yellow-y color. It's not as sort of red as the chalybeate spring in Glastonbury, but yes it's definitely got a fair amount of iron in the water.

Dan:

The water table has since changed quite a bit because people, as houses were being built wells were being dug and so the water table has shifted to the extent that it's not running as fully as it used to. But yes, it's a beautiful park and it's really nice have a stream of spring water, however small. The other interesting thing about the area is that there was a burial mound near Palmeira Square, which was excavated, well, excavated is probably the wrong word for the time it was happening, where it was dug up.

Damh the Bard:

Torn apart basically.

Dan:

Absolutely. And in it they found an oak... a coffin that they believed to have been a hollowed out Oak tree. And one of the grave goods was a cup, about the size of a tea cup with one handle that was made out of very, very red amber.

Damh the Bard:

Wow.

Dan:

And that was in Hove Museum, but they've moved it to Brighton Museum and it's still on display. The last time I saw it you'd press a button and there was a light inside it so that you would press the button and the light would turn on and you'd see the whole thing sort of illuminated from within, which is a really beautiful way of displaying it.

Damh the Bard:

It's hard to imagine a burial chamber in that area now.

Dan:

Yeah. It's-

Damh the Bard:

It's so built up.

Dan:

It is, yeah. I think one of the, it's not.... one of the houses is now built on top of it. It's not in Palmeira Square itself. It was a little way away. But even at the time, there were times earlier on where people would congregate around it, I think at Easter, I'm not quite sure. And people, children would play a sort of specific, I think it was a kissing game on the mound after church on, on maybe Easter or some time of that.

Damh the Bard:

Wow.

Dan:

And, yeah, and then Hove got bigger and Brighton got bigger and it got...

Damh the Bard:

People got fed up with kids running around, playing kissing games around the house. I don't know if it's kind of Chinese whispers or anything like that, but I've heard that it was really big.

Dan:

Yes, as a mound.

Damh the Bard:

It was like Newgrange or maybe not quite that, but sort of Knowth or something like a very, very big mound, it wasn't a little Tumuli, yeah.

Dan:

Yeah. I don't know the dimensions, but certainly large enough to sort of, to make something of it even late into sort of pre-Victorian times. It was something that you would congregate around rather it just being a lump in the ground.

Damh the Bard:

And do you have any personal relationship with kind of St Ann's Well, do you go there for anything particular?

Dan:

I used to live quite close by and so St Ann's Well was where I would sort of, in a similar way to the guy walking along the lay lines, St. Ann's Well would be where I'd sort of go and sort of sit when I needed to think about something. Also, for things like Imbolc then I'd take a little sort of tea light up there and leave it on the well overnight. And then pick up the remains in the morning. So it was very much the sort of... Also being in quite an urban area, you need a bit of park space to sort of get in touch with the trees and things like that.

Damh the Bard:

Sure.

Dan:

So, yeah, so that was pretty much my space to go and sort of ground and also to connect with the trees and with the surroundings. And some of, for some of the that, I was doing on the course, you'd need a bit more of a wild place. So I'd go to Stanmer park and things like that. But for some of the lessons, it would be suitable to sort of just go out at night into the park and just find somewhere to sit quietly and meditate on certain things. So that was-

Damh the Bard:

So whereabouts are you in your journey through the OBOD courses at the moment?

Dan:

I'm in the Ovate grade still. It's been quite some time now. The Bardic grade I swept through, but I think my circumstances were quite different then, I was living out in the country and it was very easy to have that sort of portion of time every day. Nowadays I've got a lot better. I've got myself into a nice routine. So yeah, I'm getting through it, about seven Gwersi left, I think.

Damh the Bard:

Oh okay, yeah.

Dan:

So far but for 10 years I think it's been, has it been that long? Maybe at least eight, definitely, that I've been doing the Ovate grade.

Damh the Bard:

Well, we always say it's the journey that counts, not the arriving at the end.

Dan:

Yeah, it's not a race and if I wanted it to be there's corners I could have cut, definitely. But it feels much better to make sure that you properly feel like you've had the experiences that you need to before going to the next one.

Damh the Bard:

Okay. So your seven or so Gwersi away from the end of the Ovate, right?

Dan:

Yes, yeah yeah.

Damh the Bard:

What was your route into Druidry?

Dan:

Okay, well, I grew up in Wales and the Welsh Druids are very different from the ones that I associate with now. There's a very big culture of Druidry there, but it's very much about the preservation of the Welsh language. I do speak Welsh, but I'm nowhere near as fluent enough in order to write poetry, which is another really, really big part of the Druids there and the Eisteddfod

Damh the Bard:

Yes, connected to the National Eisteddfod

Dan:

Yes.

Damh the Bard:

... and the choosing of the Chief Bard and all that kind of stuff.

Dan:

Yeah, there's the Gorsedd of the Bards. And so a lot of that I saw as, at the time I saw it as lip service. It seemed to be sort of a lot of ceremony without much feeling to it. But now looking back at the videos, hearing the Druid's prayer said in Welsh as a call and recall where they say the first bit, and then everybody, and sing it as well, they sing the first bit, everybody sings it back to them. They sing it, the second bit and it's beautiful. But growing up in Wales, I went to Sunday school and all of that, but my parents were very much atheists. They'd read "The Golden Bough" and "The White Goddess" and things like that. So I was sort of, it trickled in at quite an early age.

Dan:

And I was told about the green man, for example, about the idea of the green man being a sort of hangover from paganism that found its way into churches. And that fascinated me about the idea of there being this sort of other layer of religion and something that was a lot older than Christianity and a lot more tied to the land. But at the time, as a child, there wasn't much that I could do about it. There wasn't... You can believe things, but the actions that you take about them, I didn't know what to do. And then I found Wicca as a teenager in the late 90's, early 2000's, and Wicca had the structure that I needed, it had the Wheel of the Year. It had what to do when, in order to relate to these gods.

Dan:

And it was great. It was a really, really wonderful thing for me. And, but with it came a lot of sort of cosmology, there was a lot of.... It's a difficult thing to say dogma, because everybody gets very, very upset about the idea of dogma.

Damh the Bard:

Catma, Instead of dogma. Very important beliefs are true all the time they're useful.

Dan:

Sure, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

But yeah, no.

Dan:

But one of the things about dogma is it doesn't feel like dogma if it feels right for you.

Damh the Bard:

Yes, true. Yes.

Dan:

So there was the idea that all gods were one and all goddesses were one and, one goddess rather, and all gods were one God. And that God and that Goddess were in a relationship. And a lot of Wicca was about that relationship between one God and one Goddess. The Wheel of the Year, for example, was very much about their sort of birth mating, reproduction, and then death of these two figures, which were sort of the ultimate of deity. And that, at first, I was absolutely on board with that. Everything was either part of the God or part of the Goddess or had bits of both in them. I gendered everything right down to electrons.

Damh the Bard:

Oh, right!

Dan:

Electrons and protons were male and female. And my dad was like, "Yeah, but neutrons and photons". But everything would fit into this sort of this binary idea of complimentary opposites. And so I believed that, and patiently waited to become attracted to women as I was supposed to be. And yeah, so that didn't happen. And there was nothing obviously in Wicca to say that was wrong. There was a very much emphasis on sort of balance of male and female and balance being good and imbalance being bad. But eventually it sort of, as I sort of became more and more into the realization that I am gay, it didn't seem to fit as much for me anymore. I trolled through a lot of the books and most of them weren't most of them weren't very open towards gay people.

Dan:

But straightness was celebrated whereas gayness wasn't. So because of that, I liked the structure, but I didn't really get on with the idea of the stories around it. So through university, I carried on with that a little bit and then eventually we moved to Brighton and I started hanging out with the Anderida Gorsedd and from there, I saw an entirely different side of Druidry to what I'd seen before. It was a lot more... There was a lot less of the sort of pomp and ceremony. It was a lot more down to earth, but there was also a lot more feeling to it, as well as it being words, there was genuinely this sort of desire to really, really connect with all the things that I wanted to connect to.

Dan:

But another of the benefits of Druidry was that it was a lot more open in terms of ways of seeing the divine. So you can be any religion and also be a Druid. To me, it's like a technique almost that you use in order to practice your faith and the really wonderful thing about Druidry and about the Gorsedd is that you can be standing next to somebody and believe two completely different things, but you are both doing the same actions and that's a really beautiful, important thing for me.

Damh the Bard:

And so you found a place that... Did you just feel more at home there? Were you welcomed more? Or what was it that was different for you?

Dan:

I didn't feel unwelcomed. I think I felt freer, I think, to do my own thing, to put my own beliefs behind what we were doing collectively as well. Yeah, it felt a lot more like, you can turn up, you can do this thing, we can celebrate this time of year, and, but you don't have to sign up to specific beliefs.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, yeah.

Dan:

So it's a lot more open in that sense.

Damh the Bard:

That's certainly one of the things that drew me to Druidry as well, back in the day as well. I mean, I came from ceremonial magic.

Dan:

Sure, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Which is very prescriptive. I was thinking the other day, how could I describe magic? And I thought it's like dance, you know what I mean? It's like ceremonial magic is like ballroom dancing. It's like, there are just strict patterns and ways of dancing that are even judged and voted on as being the correct way of doing things. And I thought, "Okay, well, what's shamanism? What's shamanism to me?" And it's probably heading off, down to the rave and just losing your absolute mind to the music with no kind of... and just opening up to everything. I thought, "Well, what is Druidry? What is witchcraft and Druidry?" I thought, "Well, Morris dancing."

Dan:

Yeah?

Damh the Bard:

It's like, there are recognized patterns to dance, but no one gets too upset if you don't do it correctly, you just have to avoid the big sticks hitting in your head. And they often revolve around a pub and beer and folklore.

Dan:

Sure.

Damh the Bard:

And I thought well that's to me. It's a stupid analogy, but I thought that kind of works. And that's part of what I loved about it. I loved the folklore. I loved the connection with the natural world. I loved the ceremony. I still love ceremony. But what I also loved is that there was no, "You shall believe this and this is the way things are." And there's a lot of openness of interpretation of the path, particularly in the Gwersi and that kind of thing. That's fascinating. So, you went from the Gorsedd and then you joined the OBOD, right, from there?

Dan:

Yeah. I mean, it took a little while. It might have been a couple of years that I was going to the Gorsedd before I joined the course. And that was really just get to know people there and sort of see what they were about and stuff like that. There was also a message board at the time, I don't know whether that's still...

Damh the Bard:

Yes, it's still going. Actually, to be honest, with the way Facebook is, the message board is growing again.

Dan:

Oh that's good. Yes, that's good to hear.

Damh the Bard:

It feels a bit more of a safer space to just express, and you can follow threads and all that kind of thing. So yes, it is starting to come back a little bit.

Dan:

Yeah, that's good. I like the design of that. So on that, there were lots of people talking about the course as well. And I had always wanted to do a course. I was thinking about the "Servants of the Light" course for a long while. But the thing I liked about, or certainly what I was hearing about, the course was that the expectations were a little bit less strict, I think. So my main worry was, "Do I have enough time? Will I fail at this?", really.

Damh the Bard:

You know, you're not the only one who has said that to me over the years.

Dan:

And the answers back were, if it takes four years or 400 years, it doesn't really matter. It's how you fit it in with your life and you do what you can when you can, which I really appreciated. And it sort of took the pressure off as well. I think there's also very much in OBOD, there's the idea that if the bus isn't going in the direction, you want it to be going, you can get off at any time.

Dan:

Rather than signing yourself up to something that you'd really have to go all in on what's essentially, a lot of it isn't revealed straight away. You can, you can go as far as it makes sense to, and if it stops making sense to you, then no harm. You can move off and if your guides take you somewhere else then, that's fine.

Damh the Bard:

But sometimes getting on the wrong bus is an important part of the journey.

Dan:

Sure, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

And as well as getting on the right one, so yes, absolutely. And so you started the course. How did you find it?

Dan:

Good, yeah. I mean, I think a lot of it, because it's constructed for the most part so that you can follow it with any religion. So I follow it as a Pagan and I am a Pagan. And so I will see things from a Pagan point of view, but a lot of it is written to the point where you can see it from other sides. And so there isn't the things that I was worried about with sort of the Wiccan one sort of framework of ideas. There is some influence from Wicca, obviously, and also very much influenced by Jung, which has, the Jung in psychology, has a very big idea of masculinity and femininity and trying to find the balance between the two.

Dan:

So there is some of that in there. For the most part, it doesn't really matter most of it in order to... It doesn't matter what gender you are or what your sexuality is when you are relating to a tree. It has no bearing on that. The only times Druidry tends to, for me, tends to get a little bit, has a little bit more of a sort of celebration of heterosexuality would probably be around Beltane. And that was the only point where I sort of thought, "This doesn't really relate to how I see Beltane personally or how I would celebrate it normally." The first year I was very determined to do everything as it was written. So I did it, I did it to remember my parents and how I am born and how most people are born, but it didn't really reflect the ideas of sexuality and that I practice in my daily life. There is also a hesitance to use the word sex, a little bit, when people are talking about things like Beltane, and they use the word fertility instead.

Dan:

And for the most part, that's not why most people have sex. Most people don't have sex in order to have a baby. They have sex to connect with each other and to be in a really, really... as intimate as you can with somebody else. And that's what Beltane is for me. It's about that sort of connection, coming together, intimacy in the same way as Samhain is about separation and loss. And that for me is where the sort of the two poles are.

Damh the Bard:

It's interesting, because we've had this conversation.

Dan:

We have, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Because we developed.... Nobody wants anyone feeling excluded an open ritual for any reason and we've been running the Gorsedd for 22 years now. Wow, that's amazing. So we've done 22, well 21 Beltanes, and we did used to split off into male and female groups and the men used to do the 'stag hunt' and everything like that. And then it started to feed back to me that some people like yourself might not have been felt included in that. And so we got our thinking caps on how to change it. And we basically made it more about still the interaction of two forces, but we made it about Nwyvre and Awen. And so the kind of like the Quickener and the Gestation, maybe, or something like that.

Dan:

Yeah, or the sort of the idea and then the drive to make it happen.

Damh the Bard:

Yes, to make it happen, yeah. And the thing is that, Beltane, when I go back 20 years, Beltane was far less about human sex and far more about what sustains us in a harvest sense.

Dan:

Sure.

Damh the Bard:

And over those 20 years, it became more and more about human sex and less about the bread on the table.

Dan:

Sure.

Damh the Bard:

Or the meat on the plate or whatever. And I remember having a conversation with an old business partner of mine that shows how long ago that was. But he was a staunch atheist and he said, it makes sense. The only thing that makes sense to him is to revere the thing that keeps you alive. And that's how I always viewed the Wheel of the Year as revering and giving thanks for the thing that gives keeps me alive.

Dan:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

And you're absolutely right. Most heterosexual relationships are actively avoiding fertility.

Dan:

Absolutely! Yeah, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

They really are absolutely avoiding it. Fertility is not part of that. So again, that made it absolutely nothing about human sex to me.

Dan:

Sure.

Damh the Bard:

And more about the forces that come together that create a seed that create the corn in the field that creates the bread that I eat that keeps me alive.

Dan:

Sure.

Damh the Bard:

And I find it very hard to take that out of Beltane because that's what drew me to paganism in the first place, if I'm very honest, is the fact that I felt so separate from those wheels and from those things that this gave me a route in and it gave me a metaphor, I think, is the thing I'm not seeing it as a truth but as a metaphor to reflect that kind of thing. So how do you, how, how do you experience the Wheel of the year?

Dan:

The Wheel of the Year is very much like a human life. So we can imagine birth and growing up during the spring time and then coming to your own into the summer and then declining and then dying in the winter. That is pretty much the same for everyone. There are points where I suppose if you hold it too rigidly, then you can imagine that, "This has to happen here. This has to happen here. This has to happen here." And because of that, you can start to create a structure where, there's only, there's this sort of ideal life pattern. And then there's the not ideal. So I see the Wheel of the Year as being a life cycle. I do also appreciate the sort of planting and the harvesting aspect of, "You plant in the spring, you harvest in the autumn."

Dan:

Those things are the same, regardless of sexuality or gender or anything like that. There's times in the life cycle where straight lives can be slightly different from gay lives or where, in fact, now we're getting to points where the idea of the nuclear family and the one way of straight people to be, is very, very different. People will get together, people will divorce, people will re-get together at different parts of their lives. People will decide to have children, people will decide not to have children. All of those lives are valid and all of those lives are equal in the way that we should be sort of perceiving them. For me, Beltane is, on the one aspect it's about adolescence in many senses. So it's when you're sort of on the cusp of adulthood and that's when you are figuring yourself out.

Dan:

And so one of the personal ceremonies that I've done as a sort of solitary ceremony that I sort of worked out, for me Beltane is about coming into yourself and self expression, and also about desire and about your physical body. So I like to use the "Cauldron of Poesy" as a symbol of three aspects of how that's expressed and the way that I've divided it is you have the base Cauldron, which is for the genitals and also desire, and the chest Cauldron for love, your relationships, and then the head Cauldron for your sense of self and your expression and how you relate to others because of it. And that's a really useful

thing, because it can change. You can check in every now and again say, "How do I feel about this? How do I feel about these three aspects?"

Dan:

So I start off with the head Cauldron and I think about how I perceive myself and how I perceive my gender and how I display that to other people. And this can be very personal for me. So, I see myself as male. I express that through my clothing, through my hair and through the way that I talk to people. Then I bring my focus down to the chest cauldron. And I think about the relationships that I have, the relationship that I currently have with my boyfriend and also the relationships in the past that have influenced me and have molded me into the person that I am. All the good parts, bad parts have all brought me to the place that here at now with the person that I love. And then move down to the base where I think about my physical body, how my physical body relates to perceptions of me, my sex as it were. And also my desire, how, what I did desire, who I desire and recognizing that that desire can also be a sacred thing.

Damh the Bard:

There has to be a place where human experience comes into that. It can't be, and maybe that's why Beltane has been the thing that has been very much humanized out all of the festivals. That's the one, and of course that leads to the complications of, that we've had and also, but complications lead to learning, don't they?

Dan:

Sure, sure.

Damh the Bard:

And that's why we're here talking right now. So, let's leave it there for a time being and we'll head off on our Walking the Talk thing.

Dan:

Okay. Yeah, yeah sure.

Damh the Bard:

And you were going to take us to, I think, one other place?

Dan:

Yes, to the Goldstone.

Damh the Bard:

The Goldstone.

Dan:

So the Goldstone is a large piece of, it's flint and sandstone conglomerate. Great, big at 20 tons I think it is. It's a great big stone in the Hove park. And it was in the 19th century. People got the idea that it was a Druid altar and because of that, they would visit it. And the farmer got very annoyed that people were

stomping all over his crops. And so he buried it and it stayed buried for about six years until one of the members of the council who was very much interested in Druidry and believed that it was a Druid altar found the stone, dug it up, and moved it about 300 yards from its original place and placed it in Hove park, which, which then became.

Dan:

And it's there with some smaller stones around it, which were believed to be standing stones at one point. And there's a plaque there saying what it is and what it was believed to be. And in 1929, the Ancient Druid Order visited and planted an oak tree there as well. So even though the Goldstone itself may not necessarily have been a Druid order, it's now a sanctified Druid space by the Ancient Order.

Damh the Bard:

And the oak tree, is the tree near the Goldstone?

Dan:

Yeah. It's been planted near the Goldstone.

Damh the Bard:

Oh, I didn't know that. I knew they'd visited, but I didn't know they planted an Oak.

Dan:

They had, yeah, they planted an oak tree. It was in celebration of a certain milestone in the life of that order.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

Dan:

And they had a banquet there and it was June 3rd, 1929.

Damh the Bard:

Fantastic. And it's still there, this big rock.

Dan:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Damh the Bard:

You can see it from the road as you drive past it?

Dan:

Quite a busy road, unfortunately.

Damh the Bard:

And that farmer's land wasn't where Hove park is, I guess.

Dan:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

It was?

Dan:

Yeah, it was. It was Goldstone Bottom as it was called then. And then obviously as the land got built upon. So it was originally farmland and then Hove Park got, kept built on and the rest of it was houses and industrial estate.

Damh the Bard:

And have you done any ceremony by the stone there? Have you done any work there?

Dan:

In terms of work, at places, its often a little bit difficult. I sometimes feel a bit self conscious when you are in the middle of a park next to a busy road. It's difficult to sort of properly tune in. What I tend to like to do is I like to visit a place and then get a good feel for it. Maybe take a few breaths with the land beneath me, the sea and the sky, feeling what it's like to be there in that place. And then I'll go home and then visualize myself there. And then that way you've got all the time in the world, no distractions, you don't have to worry about people walking their dogs, thinking, "What's that weirdo doing?" And then in order to sort of reinforce that connection with that place, I then take an offering there.

Dan:

So I've gone and sprinkled wine there, or rose petals or what have you as a sort of two parts thing. So you do some of it as much as you can without drawing too much attention and without drawing you out of being yourself and into seeing yourself through other people's eyes, which is always a problem when you're working on your own in public. So I do as much subtlety as I can, go somewhere more private and do the sort of full visualization of what it is now, what it might have looked like, all of those things, and then come back and then make offerings to it.

Damh the Bard:

The Goldstone at Hove Park was one of the places we considered starting the Gorsedd. We had the Long Man, we had Chanctonbury Ring.

Dan:

Sure.

Damh the Bard:

And the Goldstone, but you can't imagine the Gorsedd meeting there every six week weeks, would've been a very different experience.

Dan:

The trouble is I think by, at the time, in the sort of 1920s, there was a big gathering there, of Druids and a big banquet and all the rest of it. But the road had a lot less traffic on it. It's a little bit, in terms of how it's placed, it's very much on the road-

Damh the Bard:

Really?

Dan:

... very much viewing pets at home and some other very large shops and car parks on the side of it. So yeah, it's not the most picturesque of setting.

Damh the Bard:

It's not, absolutely. And I can't talk about the Goldstone. You know, I went to Haywards Heath School and at Haywards Heath School, that was at the time when, of course Brighton and Hove Albion were in the Premiership, or what was league division one at the time and Brighton and Hove Albion ground was called the Goldstone ground.

Dan:

Sure.

Damh the Bard:

It was the only football ground named after a monolith. I always loved that back in the day.

Dan:

Right.

Damh the Bard:

And it used to be in what is now Goldstone retail park, across the road where "Pets at Home" there's a "Nando's"-

Dan:

Oh right okay.

Damh the Bard:

... and that's where the Goldstone ground used to be.

Dan:

Yeah, I was wondering what was there before the "Nando's."

Damh the Bard:

That was it was, it was Brighton and Hove Albion ground. And I know some of the people listening won't be interested in this stuff but I love this story because to me it shows real grit. Because Brighton and

Hove Albion were in the league division one, then over the years, they just got worse and worse and worse. And they ended up, at one point, holding on by the skin of their teeth to the very bottom of league division four, dropping out to the conference. It was the last game of the season against Hereford, right? I remember it so much. Last game of the season against Hereford, the owner had run the club into the ground and had sold the ground for the development of the retail park.

Dan:

Oh, okay, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

So not only were they dropping out of the league, they were losing their ground. And they won and Hereford went down and no longer exist. And Brighton, for years had no ground.

Dan:

Wow.

Damh the Bard:

They played at Gillingham, they played at Withdean or whatever, but they had no ground at all, but they kept at it. You know, they didn't lose out, right. And then, their new owner got permission to build the Amex stadium, where it is now, and they're back now, years later in the Premier League and I know it's football, but that story, if ever, they were to make a film-

Dan:

Right.

Damh the Bard:

... about a football team, it has to be Brighton and Hove Albion. Cause not only were they named, their ground was named after a pagan monolith, but they also showed that grit and determination to never, ever give up. And I love that about that little club.

Dan:

Wow, okay.

Damh the Bard:

So that's where my... I love the Goldstone because of its history with Druidry, but I also love the Goldstone with its connection with that story. Totally off the path.

Dan:

No, I'd heard of the Goldstone stadium, but I didn't know whereabouts it was, but that makes sense.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, that is where it was. So, okay, we left the Beltane thing because I wanted to get that last Walking the Talk set place, because if people listen to this, they come to Brighton, it gives them something really, really cool to visit, I think.

Dan:

Yeah, absolutely. It's definitely worth a look, I think, to have so many sort of little bits of history sort of embedded in a town is really, really interesting. And I think also sort of, we don't, as Druids, all live in some little house surrounded by trees somewhere, many of us do live in towns. And so to find places, points in a town or a city where you can say right, this is a sacred center of this place, even though there's Nando's over the road, there's still a connection here to the ancestors and to the land and to the pagans that were here before. And I think that's really important. And London has obviously got lots and lots of spaces that you can do that. And the Ancient Order have, have used quite a few of them for their ceremony.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, absolutely. I think one of the knock on effect of the pandemic and not being able to drive to places to get out in the countryside is a lot of people have found those little places within their square mile, for instance, I've found that Shoreham Harbour has been my go-to place for nearly two years now with my dog. And I've found such a lovely... It's only a strip of land right by foreshore. But there's a bank there that's got so many wild flowers I could spend a lifetime trying to learn which ones are there and that's a road away from my house. I think sometimes we can think that we have to get out to sacred sites. We have to go to Avebury, Stonehenge, even the Downs, but actually nature is everywhere isn't it?

Dan:

Yeah, yeah and even like just a little park, just going around and seeing what's there and seeing how it changes in the seasons and things like that that can be really valuable to sort of connect you to the earth and to your Druidry.

Damh the Bard:

So before we headed off to Goldstone, we were talking about Beltane.

Dan:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

And the Wheel of the Year, and the course, and you've experienced the course, you've experienced most of the Ovate grade, you've experienced the OBOD gatherings-

Dan:

Yes, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

... you've been to those. There may be people listening to this who are gay or they're members of the LGBTQA+ community who might be interested in Druidry or OBOD. Do you have any kind of thoughts of what you might tell them if they were listening to this podcast? I know there's such a vast, I mean, it's why it's called a rainbow, isn't it, it's an image.

Dan:

Well, speaking on behalf of every single person in the LGBT community-

Damh the Bard:

Can you do that? Would you be able to? Haha!

Dan:

I would happily try.

Damh the Bard:

But I've spoken to people from the community who say that their sexuality has no input at all into their paganism.

Dan:

Yeah, and that's fair. I mean, in terms of a lot of what we do, it's not really in the sort of the majority sort of 90% of Druid practice doesn't really have very much to do with that. I think there are also lots of people who very, very validly say well, as whatever I get up to in terms of my personal relationship, the way that babies are born and all of that is what we're celebrating at this time. That's what we should be doing. And because that's where we all come from and that's, that's a sacred thing. And it is a sacred thing. And especially, I mean, I think certainly with regards to, a lot of shame has been heaped onto straight people for sex as well.

Dan:

I think there's a lot of a need for, in paganism to re-sanctify a lot of the things that had been taboo and thought of as unclean and things like that. So I think there's definitely a sense that things should be celebrated and should be made sacred. I like the idea of holding things lightly though because it allows for other influences to get in as well. Sorry. I've gone on, off in a tangent now.

Damh the Bard:

It was a great tangent.

Dan:

In terms of the course, I think for the most part you can make it relevant to you in most ways. I think there are bits where there is a bit of a hangover where things are unnecessarily gendered, but for the most part, I'd say, because there isn't the theology that you have to sign up to as well, you can bring whatever else you like into it. The ceremonies that it suggests are suggestions. The only ceremony that I know of that's particularly orientated towards anything sort of from the straight point of view, I'd say is Beltane. And in which case, if it feels right for you to do it, then do it. If it doesn't feel right to you, then do something else, find something that you can either, if you are gay rather than straight, then you can find something that celebrate that union that coming together.

Dan:

Or if you are asexual, you can completely desexualize it. You can make it about flowers or you can make it out about an aspect of spring time. So it's very much you're given the ingredients, but if any of them, you don't really like the taste of you can them.

Damh the Bard:

Add or take away.

Dan:

Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

The course has already been edited once entirely to go in and to address those things. We all know that Druidry, Wicca have inherited a lot of stuff from the hermetic traditions and Dion Fortune we were talking about earlier, where some of books are very much of the case of even a circle has to have male, female, male, female, around the circle.

Dan:

Yeah and I think there was a time when, when paganism in general was very sort of a lot more fluid in how lots of queer people were very much inspired by paganism when Christianity was the dominant religion, because, especially in the classical literature, they could read stories about people who loved a lot more freely than they did.

Damh the Bard:

Yes.

Dan:

And so many more options in terms of gods and ways of seeing the world and in occultism as well, you had people like Aleister Crowley who were using their bisexuality as part of their magical process, but then you had a reaction to that as well, where Dion Fortune, for example, was trying to make occultism respectable. And one of the ways that you make things respectable is by distancing yourself from anything that frankly, at the time, was illegal.

Dan:

So Dion Fortune asserted that homosexuality, for example, was a highly contagious mental illness, which was the opinion at the time, but when you have that belief embedded into then you don't allow for accommodations of it. So reading about Dion Fortune's ideas on polarity recently has been quite interesting because there are actually lots of forms of polarity that she talks about rather than just male and female. Her favorite is male and female, obviously. And also because of this sort of, and a lot of it was the ideally a sort of unrequited attraction between male and female would create the biggest charge for her. But there was also the polarity that you could have between teacher and student. If there was a sense of admiration between two people, then that could also create a charge.

Dan:

So she wasn't as fixed in her ideas about two people, the people sat opposite each other being male and female as was originally interpreted. I think Gardner then when he created his version of witchcraft, really embedded his own tastes into that. And a lot of those tastes are being now worked out of that as well, as well as him being very much a straight guy. There were other aspects to his ceremonies, which now we would look back on and think, "Okay, yeah, that's fairly specific, in regards to his ways of raising energy." I think also because it was his own group and he liked women and the idea of being in a group

of naked people, you will see it in most places where naked men outnumber naked women in most nude beaches or anything like that, it's just a thing.

Dan:

So I think it made sense for him to control the membership of his club by saying, "Couples Only," sort of thing.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, right.

Dan:

But then when that gets translated into it being a religion for everyone, there are parts where those things just don't fit. There's parts where people cannot be tied up. Like there is... People have aversions to the things in some of Wiccan ceremonies, which are perfectly understandable and which have been cut. And in the same way, there are some people who the polarity between men and women isn't how they function in everyday life. And so we still have that literature and we still have those points of view which then come into the rest of our paganism. Wicca is obviously the loudest voice in paganism, so we're bound to inherit some of those things,

Damh the Bard:

But I'm really pleased with how the Gorsedd, Beltane change happened.

Dan:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Because addressing those things, but without taking the teeth out of the ceremony, I guess you'd call it.

Dan:

Sure, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

And what that change enabled was that we no longer separated into circles of men and women, but we acknowledged energies of creation of any kind be that a poem or an art or-

Dan:

Absolutely.

Dan:

... or the food on your table. And then that opened up possibilities too because then the women took part in the stag chase.

Dan:

Sure, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

And then the men took part in opening up to the gestation that was part of nature as well. And I really loved... that result was a beautiful thing to come out of that discussion that in some areas is difficult for people.

Dan:

Yeah, absolutely.

Damh the Bard:

But that was a really positive thing to come out of that, and that was with your help-

Dan:

Oh, thank you.

Damh the Bard:

...I have to say, so thank you for that.

Dan:

Well, I think there was also an interesting thing with the Beltane ceremony as it was. There was, you'd sort of separate into circles of men and women, which some people are non-binary. And therefore that puts them in an odd position as to, "Where do I go?" So there was that issue. And then the men would have a conversation and a preparation to go a stag hunt, which involved running over a very, very uneven field, down a great big hill into some trees, into some nettles.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

Dan:

It was...yeah. And then the women would be in a separate circle and they would decide amongst themselves, who would be the May Queen. But I remember even sort of fairly early on, I remember one of our friend's daughters asking their dad, "Why can't I be in the stag group"

Damh the Bard:

I know.

Dan:

And that's a very, very difficult question. When you bring up a girl to say, you can do whatever you want, you can do absolutely whatever you want, except at Beltane. Then you have to be a girl and do the girl thing. And yeah, it's an odd thing to, I think there is a temptation with, with a lot of ritual to sort of see gender norms and then project them into the past into a sort of just-

Damh the Bard:

Wow, yeah.

Dan:

... A lot of sort of evolutionary biology theories come from, what are we doing now? And now let's imagine cave people doing it. And that's not necessarily how-

Damh the Bard:

No.

Dan:

... We've no idea. Even modern hunter gatherers are modern hunter gatherers. They live in the 21st century, just like we do. We have no idea how prehistoric society was structured at all. We don't know what the division of labor was. Our assumptions about the division of labor come from much later ideas about who should be doing what. So it was really good to open that up to everyone so that everybody could, if they were able to, they could do the stag run and they would personify the idea of Nwyvre which is the life force, the drive, the what gets things done.

Dan:

But before that, everybody would be part of a meditation where we would go deep into the earth, deep into Annwn. And we would go to that place where ideas are formed, and we would take our inspiration and our Awen from that place, bring it into ourselves and then represent the drive to get those things out into the world, through the stag run, which I think works really well. And that idea could be, "Let's make a baby," or it could be, "I'm going to write a poem." Or, or anything between.

Damh the Bard:

Really personal isn't it.

Dan:

Yeah, absolutely.

Damh the Bard:

I think that was a really, really wonderful thing to come out of that. And I think these kind of conversations will continue and more and more we'll be talking about this kind of stuff and magic, paganism, Druidry will develop.

Dan:

Absolutely, yeah. And I think it's good in that it has the capacity to develop because we've seen it change in the past as well. Druidry especially, we've seen when Druidry was monotheist, for example, where most Druids believed that the ancient Druids thought that there was only one God. And now we've moved through to a Druidry where it can be practiced by anyone because we've had those influences from the past. We know that Druidry can be done differently, by different people. And so you can be a Wiccan Druid. You can have incredibly... You can use Druidry as a tool to how you practice your Wiccan beliefs, or you can be a polytheist, pantheist, monotheist, you can see the God however you want to. And also you can see you can do the same thing with different people, how having different beliefs all at the same time, which I think is wonderful.

Damh the Bard:

That's what I love about when we do the Druid prayer together.

Dan:

Yeah. I was going to mention that

Damh the Bard:

"Grant oh" And then it's a complete mess as everybody calls out what it is, God and Goddess for some, God for others, spirit for others, great spirit for others, whatever it is and then you come back and you join again, "your protection".

Dan:

Yeah because we all want the same things. Regardless of who we're talking to. When I first heard that as well, I was like, "Nobody told us what to say!" Nobody told us in advance, how we were supposed to be perceiving the divine. And but then of course no one did because why would they? Because that's not important.

Damh the Bard:

Exactly, yeah. Well Dan, thank you so much for this talk. This has been such a wonderful time to spend with you.

Dan:

Oh, thank you.

Damh the Bard:

I've known you've years, but we've never sat down and chatted like

Dan:

Yeah, it's an experience, isn't it?

Damh the Bard:

Yeah it is.

Dan:

Cause we're normally doing something.

Damh the Bard:

These are the things that are happening behind the scenes [inaudible 01:03:15] Anyway, thank you so much.

Dan:

Oh, thank you.