

Damh the Bard:

So we first met, let's go back to that Winter Gathering.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

First met at the Winter Gathering in Glastonbury 2019.

David Bramwell:

That's right.

Damh the Bard:

I think it was. And you did a presentation in the afternoon after a good half an hour of technical difficulties trying to get the PowerPoint to work where you did your presentation of The Cult of Water, a darkened hall, you were lit by candles, just telling this story of this sunken church and the connection to water and this journey you'd been on that just took everyone on this amazing journey. And at the end you got, I would say, a 10 minute standing of ovation for that. And I'd never seen that before at any of the OBOD gatherings. So that's where we first met but let's go back and tell us a little bit about David Bramwell and your journey that took you towards creating say, a presentation like that. I mean, were you a weird kid at school?

David Bramwell:

I wasn't. No, I wasn't. So The Cult of Water is about the River Don and the River Don for listeners outside of the UK at least, is a heavily industrialized river that was used for the steel industry in Sheffield, which was the biggest steel industry, one of the biggest in the world. And so the river was heavily polluted, artificially heated, and declared biologically dead by the 1960s and '70s. I was a little boy in the 1970s and I grew up with a family who loved to walk, and we would go walking in places like Derbyshire, which were close by to Doncaster, but we would never go for a walk by the river.

Damh the Bard:

Oh.

David Bramwell:

Never.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

I got into bird watching as well so I was a kid who was into nature, but the river that named the town was something that we avoided. So it was in my late '30s I started getting this itch to reconnect, well actually not reconnect to connect with the Don and I knew that a lot of environmental work had been going on with the river, and it was not the river it used to be and that fish were returning and red deer

had been found swimming, using it as a pathway at night. And so I decided to walk the river from my parents' house back to the source that was in parts, I didn't do it all in one go 'cause not that easy.

Damh the Bard:

So how old were you when you did that?

David Bramwell:

This would've been 10 years ago,

Damh the Bard:

Oh right.

David Bramwell:

I guess about 10 years ago now.

Damh the Bard:

Fairly recent in a way.

David Bramwell:

Yeah, yeah. And this was the beginning of The Cult of Water, this idea of wanting to tell this story, wanting to explore the history, the mythology, the symbolism of our waterways using the Don as sort of template for this, I discovered that the Romans named the town, Danum which became Doncaster. Danum came from Danu, or Darnu, I pronounce it Darnu, I think I probably should pronounce it, Danu. It's all stuck there now and this was the goddess affiliated with the river. This is the Hindu goddess of primordial waters and the goddess whose name became the Danube and the Dun and the Dane. And she was effectively killed by the pollution, by the steel industry.

And whilst walking the Don, I discovered that the tallest building in Sheffield, not now, but the tallest building used to be the town hall and on the top stood Vulcan, the Roman God of fire and forge the symbol of industry.

Damh the Bard:

Absolutely.

David Bramwell:

And I thought, oh, this is a story here. This is story of the battle of the sexes, this male God of fire, forge and progress in industry and destruction and the story of a forgotten goddess and a forgotten river.

Damh the Bard:

And a river that probably brought life and the town to that space.

David Bramwell:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And yeah, rivers, the way that we are reconnected with the river now is very encouraging but we also still have great problems with our water companies polluting our waterways. So I grew up in Doncaster and I grew up in a town with no bookshops.

Damh the Bard:

What?

David Bramwell:

No bookshops.

Damh the Bard:

Really?

David Bramwell:

Absolutely. There was the back was of WHSmith's, which where you could get whatever kind of novels, et cetera, but almost nothing.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

So my great act of rebellion in my teenage years was stealing, for want of a better word, books from the book cupboard at school, from the literary syllabus that have become defunct so books that were no longer being used that I could see were starting to peel and you know, go yellow.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

So my reading, yeah, my act of rebellion came from school, finding books like Lord of the Flies, Catch-22, Catcher in the Rye, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and these kind of books that I didn't have access to because how would I? We're talking early '80s here, so well before the internet. And so was I a weird kid? No, but I think the seed, the seeds were there, the interest was there, but I didn't have access to anything that would sort of spark a certain fire within me until I went to university. I went to Coventry Poly, the polytechnics existed back in the '80s, we don't have polytechnics now, but I essentially went through clearing. I didn't do very well with A Levels, and it was in Coventry, in the Walsgrave bookshop, the secondhand bookshop that I found shelves for Psychology and Magic and I was just drawn, and I was drawn, in a strange way, I'd never heard of Wilhelm Reich or Aleister Crowley or Carl Jung. Not at all. I probably didn't know who Freud was at the age of 18.

It just wasn't, I was pushed into the sciences and there was no access to the counterculture.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

There was no counterculture growing up. I listened to heavy metal music because that's what my peers did. The girls listened to new romantic and the boys listened to metal and that was what you did. And

you're a bit soft if you said, "Oh, I quite like one of the Duran Duran albums." You wouldn't tell your friends that.

Damh the Bard:

Oh, no.

David Bramwell:

Yeah, well, exactly. Yeah. So it was all Saxon and Iron Maiden and AC/DC and good music. Good music for kind of industrial towns, particularly an expression of that industrial age but I was really drawn to the occult and to sort of psychology and mysticism, I guess. I found out, I met a friend, I met someone who became a friend at Coventry who'd been to a Steiner school. And he was quite cynical about it, that he thought it was a little bit airy fairy, but I was really fascinated with the way that he had a real spontaneous creativity about him. He wouldn't think twice about sitting at home and writing poems and painting and drawing and just for the joy, the process of it. And this was novel to me.

And I became very interested in Steiner as a consequence because I didn't really rate my education or even the education system that I was in. I didn't learn a lot from the things that I was taught at university but I learned a lot from the people that I met and the activities that I got involved with. So occultism and magic were a draw and of course at that age, there's a degree of posturing and pretentiousness that goes with it. And the clothes are pretty good.

Yeah, you can look a little mysterious and trying to attract girls that way. So I was playing in bands as well. Music had always been a passion. So I was also playing in bands at uni so the world opened up. And so I'm incredibly grateful for what happened during those years. And then I meandered through England down to Brighton, and then Brighton was, back in 1991, was just this incredible secret that it felt like the whole of the country had just been keeping this secret because they thought if the secret gets out, everyone's gonna want to live here.

So having grown up, so I was born in Scunthorpe which is another depressed industrial town, born in Scunthorpe, raised in Doncaster, four, five years in Coventry. I stayed an extra year just kind of playing in bands and dicking around but all of these places were on the skids and quite violent and they weren't comfortable places to live at the time. You know, you would have to watch your back walking through the city center any night, particularly for a student in those places now. And so coming to Brighton was just what a bohemian, liberating kind of town I stepped into and one that seemed to welcome misfits and outsiders or those who identify and still does, I think now.

Damh the Bard:

Still does. Absolutely.

David Bramwell:

It was just a more expensive version of it's former self.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

That's obviously not the town's fault.

Damh the Bard:

I played a gig recently and this... One of the people came up when they were buying a CD and they said, "Where are you now? Where'd you live?" And I went, "Brighton." She just went, "Oh, of course you do."

David Bramwell:

I had that. I've heard that before. Yeah, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

You would've of course you live in Brighton. Yeah.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

So this quest, I like the word seeker. I was a big fan of, remain a big fan of the performer, Ken Campbell, who was someone who used to perform these amazing monologues. He could captivate an audience for two and a half hours just by talking at them, but with such enthusiasm and such arcane knowledge and such mischief and such grand stories. And he used to sometimes open his shows with the words, "Hello seekers." It's like, I like that. I think I'm a seeker, I'm a seeker. And so I found myself, over the years, and I'm sure you find this, and I'm sure listeners find this, you start to sort strip away the stuff that you thought was important. Those Alistair Crowley books, they went to the charity shops.

I realized that people like that and Gurdjieff was another one who I'd found the writing impenetrable and bit pretentious and people say, oh it is to keep the riff raff away, you know, have to do the work. You have to really... And I thought, I don't know, but I've been listening to this guy Alan Watts, and he... Alan Watts just has this joy about him and he's able to articulate mystical ideas, eastern ideas in such a playful, inclusive way. I don't think I need... I think I need this. And I don't mean to criticize other people who, for whom that stuff's important, but it just wasn't for me.

So I started finding that Joseph Campbell, the mythologist and Karl Young and Watts became important people to me in my '20s and '30s and keeping me on this path but there was always that desire, that striving for community, for something to join, for a group, to have us, to find this kind of secret group, a mystery school and engage with others, not just on your own individual path.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

So in Brighton I joined a group who were called the revolutionary Gnostic Shamans of the Light.

Damh the Bard:

That's fantastic.

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David Bramwell:

Is it?

Damh the Bard:

That sounds like something the KLF would come up with.

David Bramwell:

I know, of course. I found a flyer for this group in a cafe called The Mad Hatter.

Damh the Bard:

That is... That is brilliant.

David Bramwell:

So I joined.

Damh the Bard:

I'd join them.

David Bramwell:

Yeah, and Adam, who ran the group, was also our postman, which is classic. The classic thing about Brighton is my electrician is the didgeridoo player in the levelers. My other electrician Nick Pynn is fiddle player for Steve Harley and the... Or used to be Steve Harley-

Damh the Bard:

Oh right.

David Bramwell:

... and the Cockney Rebel, Stuart, Lee and many other people.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

And my plumber is the bass player in Peter and the Test Tube Babies. So it make complete sense that my postman would also be..

So I joined this group and I loved... The material was dense and we were studying Kabbalah and Gurdjieff, we did get into Gurdjieff for a while and tantra and we were doing some good meditation exercises, we're exploring lucid dreaming, had some amazing experiences with lucid dreaming as a consequence of this group. And I really felt like I was kind of growing and diving deep into a different way of relating to the world. I'd always had this deep dissatisfaction with both the religious and the scientific narratives that were sold to me...

Damh the Bard:

Either end of the scale.

David Bramwell:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

And I think as I got older, as I got older and generally mixed with... I wasn't mixing with people who would say identify as Christian. There weren't a significant number of those or at all really within my friendship group but lots of people who I would say would have identified with the kind of reductionist, materialistic, Dawkins, Richard Dawkins worldview, which I found myself struggling more and more and more with as I got older, but found myself quite isolated in that. And I'd have friends, good friends who just would say, "Oh, you're talking utter nonsense. What do you mean the universe is connected? Or what do you mean there's a possibility that consciousness might exist outside of the brain." There's all these stupid ideas because that challenges the orthodoxy and yet my own experiences and my own gut feelings about this sort of deeper connection with the world around us and this sense of disconnection.

And I'd hear Graham Hancock just saying the line, we have severed our connection with spirit. And those words, they hit you and you go, yes, and I want to reconnect with spirit, whatever that means but... So the revolutionary Gnostic Shamans of the Light, which is a mouthful, was a group that I was with for two or three years I'd say. And we'd meet regularly and we'd go off and kind of do little quest and journeys together. And the group was quite clean, was sort of a clean living ethos, let's say. Adam who was running it, had been part of a darker group called Thee Temple of Psychic Youth associated with the musician, Genesis P-Orridge, the Band Throbbing Gristle and they were into, it was a movement that became known as modern primitives in the 1980s. So ritual tattooing and scarification and sex magic and a lot of drug magic stuff going on.

And I have no issues with any of that, but not something that I sort dived into and Adam had got tired of it and got into gnosticism and so he would sort say to us, oh, we should be practicing a very pure path and no drugs and kind of meditate every day and make sure they only eat this and he was actually quite particular about sexual practices as well, which I struggled with because I sensed that there was judgment as I discovered later on down the line there was. I mean, this is where he gets weird. So he found..

Damh the Bard:

I love that. 'Cause the scale of weird is so interesting, isn't it?

David Bramwell:

It is weird.

Damh the Bard:

We're all along this scale of weird somewhere and you've just told me all this stuff that for some people would be all... But no, this is where it gets weird that brilliant.

David Bramwell:

Well I should say that I was making a living as a part time music teacher in a school for 20 years in Brighton so I kept all of this obviously kind of secret and for my family as well, who wouldn't have understood or been interested but Adam had found a group in Dorset who were also a kind of revolutionary, Gnostic Shamans of the Light bunch of people, but they were drinking ayahuasca. Now this would've been 2000, I think, around that time, way before ayahuasca became a known thing and

certainly before it became illegal so it was just being brought over from Columbia in flasks as a herb and being made, 'cause ayahuasca is the vine that's mixed with another plant that gives it its potency I think, and releases the DMT if I'm writing that, it could be slightly wrong in that, but-

Damh the Bard:

That was South America.

David Bramwell:

South American, south American, psychedelic, yeah and well to cut a long story short, which I clearly haven't done.

Damh the Bard:

No, that's fascinating. You keep going, everyone will be loving this.

David Bramwell:

Well, so this group down in Dorset were run by a guy called Chris and Chris, I don't know how this came about, but Chris encountered two Colombian shaman in Dorset, I don't know what they were doing there and they hardly spoke a word of English. Their names were Radarani and Fasiday, they were a couple. And they started doing these ayahuasca ceremonies with Chris's group and our group were invited down. And so we all started doing these ayahuasca ceremonies in this cottage. I don't even know whose cottage it was, it doesn't matter does it? Just somebody's got a cottage so for quite some time we were doing these every fortnight.

Damh the Bard:

Wow.

David Bramwell:

And-

Damh the Bard:

Wow.

David Bramwell:

... the experiences were profound and at times troubling and difficult and grounding and there came a point where the last time I drank ayahuasca, the cottage roof set alight and the police and the fire brigade came. And when you're high as a kite on this...

Damh the Bard:

Okay, that actually happened.

David Bramwell:

Yes.

Damh the Bard:

That wasn't a vision.

David Bramwell:

No, no, it wasn't a vision.

Damh the Bard:

Oh, oh right.

David Bramwell:

And at the time. I was having a nice time in the garden, just feeling utterly connected to everything around me. I could see the energy of life, shimmer, shimmer in the air, shimmer, shimmer in the vegetation and shimmer through myself and it was just beautiful and then of course the bat is thrown at you. Authority and sirens and men in uniform.

Damh the Bard:

You can't just switch it off.

David Bramwell:

You can't just switch it off, no so I just went and hid in the woods until other people sort it out but I also was growing apart from the group and finding that there was some troubling dogma for me around judgements of alternative forms of sexuality. And it was time to leave and it was certainly the right thing to do. So I found myself adrift again and I had been in a long, long relationship for many, many years and this relationship came apart and I knew that I had work to do on myself in terms of compromise, living with other people, sharing, being a good listener, kind of stuff, all that stuff that certain types of men struggle with.

And so after the relationship fell apart, I decided to go on a journey. I was given sort of compassionate leave from school 'cause I was absolutely broken and I went off on a journey around the world to study alternative communities. So I took myself off to Christiania in the anarchist community in Copenhagen. I went to Damonhur, this spiritual community in Italy. I went over to America, I spent time in Esalen in California, went to co-housing groups, I went to ashrams and I went to Arizona where the [inaudible 00:20:48] city is being built called Arcosanti, this city driven by community and environmental aspects, ethos, I should say.

And I had the most amazing time and part of it was to ask myself the question, would I rather live in a community? Would I rather live with a group of people with this shared interest, a shared passion? Because what I was seeing around me within Western culture and within my own behavior was just this cult of individualism.

Damh the Bard:

It's exact opposite isn't it?

David Bramwell:

Yeah, and you go to these places and you think, my God, these people are so much happier.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

And they have a cause and they have a purpose and they have this shared love and sense of community, which is never without its problems. We know that when you are thrown into the lives of other people in such a close way, there's always going to be conflict but that conflict can be something that you can learn from either, whether it's your own or coming from somebody else. So I had an amazing time, was hugely inspired and of all those places, the one that I went back to again and again was Damanhur which-

Damh the Bard:

Which the... Where is that?

David Bramwell:

... that' in the foothills of the Alps.

Damh the Bard:

Okay.

David Bramwell:

Near Turin.

Damh the Bard:

Okay. Yeah.

David Bramwell:

And these were-

Damh the Bard:

The Italian.

David Bramwell:

... it's the Italian one.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah. Is that where they've got underground-

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

... temples-

David Bramwell:

Yeah, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

... and things?

David Bramwell:

Yes.

Damh the Bard:

Yes, I've seen pictures of that.

David Bramwell:

So they built, this is a bunch of people who built the world's largest underground temple the size of St. Paul's Cathedral in secret at night over 23 years.

Damh the Bard:

Wow.

David Bramwell:

And it shows you what we're capable of doing. And you go and you talk to some of those people that were part of that, and a lot of them living in this community, 45 minutes say away from Turin, they were working full time as doctors or architects.

Damh the Bard:

So they just essentially lived there, but run relatively normal.

David Bramwell:

Some, yeah, well do. I mean there's about, let's say 500 to a thousand people living communally in these houses called nucleos but there were people who were going and doing regular jobs and then working through the night.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

The whole night.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

Digging.

Damh the Bard:
Digging this stuff.

David Bramwell:
And then going back to back work and do this for two nights in a row and thinking I need to get some sleep now. So they were hugely inspiring these people. So I came back after this year and came back to an empty house and again-

Damh the Bard:
Such a shock.

David Bramwell:
... it is a real shock. It's a real shock to the system.

Damh the Bard:
It's quietness and no one else.

David Bramwell:
Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Damh the Bard:
Yeah.

David Bramwell:
And so sort had to pick up my life after this.

Damh the Bard:
And how many people lived in this community did you say?

David Bramwell:
Oh, in Damonhur, there was, I'd say up to a thousand.

Damh the Bard:
So going from that to back into...

David Bramwell:
Well, from all the places, those places that I went to.

Damh the Bard:
[inaudible 00:23:32], yeah, yeah.

David Bramwell:

It was just connection and community. So I came back to Brighton and I got in, I started to get involved with community events, obviously and one of the consequences of this was setting up a night called The Catalyst Club, which has been running almost as long as your podcast.

And this is a night where people from all walks of life get up and they give talks about something they love and I was doing this last night, and I do it in Shoreham, which is near to Brighton and Lewes, which is also near to Brighton, and other people have set these events up around the south coast. So we kind share-

Damh the Bard:

There's sort of a TED feel about it. Is that the kind of model?

David Bramwell:

Well, yes and no. In terms of length, yes.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah. Yeah.

David Bramwell:

TED is driven by ideas and TED is a thing that you have to be invited to and of slightly groomed, not in a sinister way, but to give a proper TED talk.

Damh the Bard:

Right. Gotcha.

David Bramwell:

And these are people with our night, the only premise is it has to be something that you love.

Damh the Bard:

Ah, okay.

David Bramwell:

And it's an open platform. So I don't veto, if somebody comes to me and says, as they did recently, I'd like to give a talk about Bigfoot.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

Brilliant, brilliant. I've got no idea whether the guy believes in Bigfoot or just wants to tell the story.

Damh the Bard:

That's incredible. So people just tell that to you and then they turn up and they do their 20 minute. Is it one talk a night or-

David Bramwell:

It's three. Three a night.

Damh the Bard:

Three talks a night.

David Bramwell:

It's three a night.

Damh the Bard:

I mean, ropetackle is, I can't believe... I keep forgetting even on.

David Bramwell:

It was last night.

Damh the Bard:

It was last night. And friends of mine go there and start 10 minutes down the road. I love the RopeTackle Center.

David Bramwell:

Yeah, me too.

Damh the Bard:

And that's once a month?

David Bramwell:

That's once a month.

Damh the Bard:

And once a month in Lewes as well, is it?

David Bramwell:

That's right.

Damh the Bard:

Every two weeks for you kind of thing, or?

David Bramwell:

Yeah, once a month in Brighton so...

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, right.

David Bramwell:

It is.

Damh the Bard:

Wow. Wow.

David Bramwell:

So let's to give an example of the eclectic nature of it. So last night there was a woman called Elaine Lavery who gave a talk about an artist called Hazel Lavery, same name, but coincidental, who became the first Republic of Ireland bank notes has her portrait on it and it's the story of how she came to be the woman on the bank note. So it's a lovely story.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

And she did a great job in sort of like, she said, imagine if Hazel Lavery was around today, what kind of woman would she be? Well, she'd be on Instagram for sure.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, yeah.

David Bramwell:

She'd be hitting social media so she did this beautiful portrayal of her as the kind of character that she was.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

I gave a talk on the Portsmouth Sinfonia, which was an experimental orchestra that Brian Eno produced and helped promote and it was constructed of people who couldn't play the instruments that they chose for the orchestra. So you could imagine it was a cacophonous row to go and see them live, but also very joyful and very liberating and it was taking a punk ethos to classical music-

Damh the Bard:

Classical music.

David Bramwell:

... which is, there's not elitist and po-faced, it's just like if you've got a sousaphone come along, as long as you can't play it.

Damh the Bard:

Oh my word.

David Bramwell:

And they ended up playing the Albert Hall and so I told a story of the Portsmouth Symphonia, which is, I don't give talks very often, but somebody dropped out so-

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, yeah.

David Bramwell:

... I gave this and it's a story that I love and then the final guest speaker is a writer called Jerry McGuire Thompson, who talked about rewilding your garden, gave tips on that, talked about how he had long COVID, and this meant that he spent a lot of time just sitting at home and looking at the wildlife in his garden, getting to know those individual sparrows and their personalities so that, I say that's a typical night. And I love these nights because-

Damh the Bard:

And they came back, they came about because you came back from this journey and just sort of, was it kind of like, we need community, or I need community, or both?

David Bramwell:

It was, well, it was from a selfish point of view, I need it but also just, you know, you get a good feeling from doing these things when that you've made a difference in people's lives. So that's always, I think the kind of work that I do is I've always tried to be mindful of, you know, you ask yourself, who benefits from this? I'm doing this job if I'm pushing bits of paper around, is anyone I'm gaining anything from this? And if the answer's no, it's like, can I justify doing this? I mean that probably sounds a bit, we all have to earn a crust and we all find ourselves-

Damh the Bard:

Yeah of course.

David Bramwell:

... in situations where we've got families, et cetera, to support and it's not easy to make decisions but I've tried to be mindful of...

Damh the Bard:

Well that thing that Rupert Sheldrake, in one of his books I read, said, "We search and yearn for happiness, and happiness is elusive and happens are moments, and that's it. And you can't find a moment in..." It's almost impossible to just say, I'm now happy and I'll be happy forever.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

But what actually gives life the opportunity for happiness to happen is meaning.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

And you know, it's possible to go out and have a factory job during the day, but there has to be something in your life that gives meaning to it. If it's not the work you're doing, there's got to be, everything, it might be the way you bring up your children. It might be your relationship or your connection to the natural world or all these things. But if you have meaning in your life, you will find those happy moments and I think what the things that The Catalyst Club does for you, it says this is helping other people. Those people are going there, they benefit from listening, it's changing lives. Some of the talks are inspiring and people go off and puts that into their lives. And that's probably the meaning, you know-

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

... it gives the meaning-

David Bramwell:

Yeah, you're absolutely right.

Damh the Bard:

... to your life you know? That's it.

David Bramwell:

But also great that you mentioned Sheldrake, because Sheldrake, there was something that Rupert Sheldrake said said, so I also do events during May time. Brighton has a festival and a fringe, which you know, and I put events on in the Spiegeltent complex. So the Spiegeltent and another one called the Bosco Tent and I just get to think about who would I really like to see?

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, yeah.

David Bramwell:

What would I like to put on? And Rupert was someone who came and spoke for us in 20-

Damh the Bard:

Oh wow.

David Bramwell:

... 2019 I think it was and he'd done the books, Science and Spiritual Practice.

Damh the Bard:

That was the one that was [inaudible 00:30:01].

David Bramwell:

Which is a great book.

Damh the Bard:

Great book, yeah.

David Bramwell:

And he says, this really connected with joining OBOD. So hopefully I can go from this to OBOD.

Damh the Bard:

Okay. Okay.

David Bramwell:

I can answer your first question and maybe there will be time for two. So Rupert said, he said, "We've all had that experience where..." And he used the Taj Mahal as the experience, I've never been to India, but he said, you know, "You go to India, you go to see the Taj Mahal because you're expected to go, but it's part of the package of going to India." And he said, "What most of us do, we go to these buildings, these beautiful buildings that were designed for ritual, and we do everything but that. We go and we read the guidebook and we wander around and we take photos and we count the bricks and we talk about the little bit of design up here and ooh, who did that? But the one thing we don't do is engage with the building for the purpose of which it was built."

And he said, "You don't need to be religious, you don't even need to be spiritual. You can go in there and light a candle for somebody, and then you've turned it into a pilgrimage. You've turned it into a ritual and you've engaged with the building." And I thought, that is so beautiful and so simple. And that really... that helped remind me about how I could make those kind of changes in the way that I relate it to journeys that I went on and places that I visited and then in 2019, in the winter of 2019, I came and gave *The Cult of Water* and I think that will remain one of the highlights of my life, that I'm not very good with praise. When people come and they say, "Oh, I really love your book, or I loved your..." It's like, I never know what to say and I'll end up just sort of defaulting to some self deprecating comments, but I mean that was amazing.

And maybe the performative height of my life in terms of audience appreciation and I had such a wonderful time that weekend. I met some amazing people. I'd got to know Philip and Steph through Lewes because they started coming to the Lewes Catalyst Club and Philip came and gave a talk. He's given a couple now, and I'm hoping to get him to come and do an event for me next year, do the history of the druids with Philip and do the history of the Kibbo Kift with an author called Bella Pollen. I think those two together.

Damh the Bard:

Oh yeah.

David Bramwell:

Would be a lovely event. So I got to know Philip, and so I was lucky to be hanging around with Philip and Steph and Eima. I was in the same B&B as Eima, that amazing kind of a cult themed one, which got some amazing artifacts.

Damh the Bard:

Covenstead. [inaudible 00:32:39]

David Bramwell:

Yeah, the [inaudible 00:32:40].

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

And I had such a nice weekend and I thought I found my people here and I think it had been staring me in the face for years because ecology, nature, spirituality, ritual, the honoring of the seasons, these were things that had always been important to me and so there was a sense of coming home and then lockdown hit. And so I had the time to really spend the mornings. I'd get up early and sit there and go through. I was going through the Bardic Gwers] with the Bardic grade and I loved it. I absolutely loved it. So I still struggle to think of myself as a druid because people, friends say to me, "Are you a druid?" It's like, I don't know what point, I guess it's no different to are you an artist? It's a state of mind isn't it?

Damh the Bard:

It's like are you a Christian? You know, you don't have to be a priest to be a Christian. It's a way of life and it's up to you. Labels are funny old things anyway.

David Bramwell:

They are.

Damh the Bard:

Essentially I use that term and I use pagan. I use all types of things to describe myself as well. And sometimes words like Druid, mean it comes with a history behind it.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

It's got an archetype energy behind it. You've got Merlin and you've got Taliesin and all these figures. Am I worthy to actually say-

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

... that "I'm a druid." And at the end of the day, it's a word.

David Bramwell:

It is.

Damh the Bard:

Do you know what I mean? But a powerful word nonetheless.

David Bramwell:

Yes. Yeah. Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, yeah. And so you started working with the Gwers, and here you are.

David Bramwell:

And here I am.

Damh the Bard:

And we've just, crikey, that was a long answer. Fascinating.

David Bramwell:

Good luck editing.

Damh the Bard:

So no, I'm not going, I'm not getting nothing, that was fantastic. I was just [inaudible 00:34:28]. So the second question, so you've obviously got music involved in your life as well.

David Bramwell:

Yes.

Damh the Bard:

Got Oddfellows Casino, is that a band or is that mainly you? Is it a bit like a nine inch nails where you are the Trent Reznor and other people?

David Bramwell:

It's a great analogy. Yeah, maybe that's a fair comment.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

So the songs, this is a band we formed in 2001, released our first album in 2002 and so 20 years have passed and we're still going.

Damh the Bard:

Right.

David Bramwell:

And we don't gig very often. We gig about once, twice a year. We're playing a psychedelic festival in Lewes in a couple of months time and it's... You know, people say, "What kind of music is it?" And it's, that's always a tricky one, but I will settle with pastoral psych folk.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah. Yeah.

David Bramwell:

With a bit of electronica is thrown in there as well. So pastoral because there's a love and a connection, a mystical connection, I'd say, with landscape, with place, with nature, within the music, within those songs and despite having lived in Brighton for 30 years, it's the north of England that kind of shines out of those songs.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah right.

David Bramwell:

It's the crags and the mountains and the wilderness, which I love the south, we don't have that, it's a more...

Damh the Bard:

It's a big garden.

David Bramwell:

It is a big garden.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

It is a big garden. And I do, I love it, but I'm...

Damh the Bard:

Very gentle but it's like, yeah, I have the same relationship with Cornwall. I was born in Cornwall.

David Bramwell:

Right, right, right.

Damh the Bard:

And so part of me yearns for the Atlantic and the crashing waves and the moors and all that wildness that the Downs is too, is beautiful and so it's very different. So yes, you feel it's the same wavelength.

David Bramwell:

Absolutely.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah. Yeah.

David Bramwell:

And there's a psychedelic, there's an element of psychedelia in there and an electronica. Well, and another thing that that happened in 20...

In 2018, was I was invited to take part in a winter solstice ritual and by a group of people I knew. I knew a couple of them, I didn't know the rest and we met at a car park at, I think about of 4:00 AM, it was pitch black, and we walked over the Downs to this sacred forest and watched the sunrise and did these incredible rituals and lit a fire.

Damh the Bard:

Kingley Vale was it, by any chance?

David Bramwell:

It wasn't Kingley Vale.

Damh the Bard:

Oh, okay.

David Bramwell:

But that was before I joined OBOD. That had a profound effect upon me because whenever I'm in those kind of situations, there's something that just comes alive in me and I don't want to leave. And I ask myself, when was the last time I sat by a campfire and smelt the fire and shared stories and had this communal experience, and I crave that. So that was another draw-

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

... of OBOD.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah. Yeah. So...

David Bramwell:

I've moved away from Oddfellows for saying that. Sorry, sorry. The reason I was thinking of that was because I ended up writing a song called Sol Ra and it was the first time I think I'd really properly addressed writing a song that was directly about a ritual experience that had a profound effect upon me. And I wanted to express it in a powerful musical way. In a way. Oddfellows can be quite, at times the music can be quite soporific, quite gentle and other times it can kick arse, but not, it's not a full on... Yeah, it's music you can do the dishes to.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

And I thought I wanted to really express this with that song and have some screaming with Eliza, who's one of the band members, doing some sort of guttural, primal screaming at the end and really let rip with this honoring, this honoring of the return of the sun. Which in a weird way, which doesn't quite fit with what I'm just saying, but in a weird way, fits in with my love of the book Moominland Midwinter which is not quite so guttural and primal.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

But it's also a book.

Damh the Bard:

Well, you say that.

David Bramwell:

Well, so I've given, I give a talk at the gathering this year.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

On the Pagan symbolism-

Damh the Bard:

Of the Moomin.

David Bramwell:

Of the Moomin's and it draws largely on Moominland Midwinter, which I read it every year.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

I think it's like somebody did a book about the Tow of Pooh didn't they?

Damh the Bard:

Yes, that's right.

David Bramwell:

And I'd say Moominland Midwinter, there's a ritual fire that happens in the heart of the book. It is very pagan in its symbolism. There's a lot of magic in there and there's a lot of darkness in there and I think it is an incredible book. It's the kind of book you could give, if you had somebody who had someone who had prejudices, let's say, even if you got family members and they're teaching their kids things that you think, oh, kids are going to grow up with horrible prejudices towards this, that and the other. Give them a copy of Moominland Midwinter, it'll slip below the radar. They won't see it, but there's some great subversive kind of pagan and it's going to liberal bohemian ideas in that.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

It might just work its magic. So that's been an influence on Oddfellows as well. I've written songs inspired by...

Damh the Bard:

Fantastic. Do you know, I wasn't into the Moomins, but I think the equivalent for me of a children's cartoon series or book series that allowed me to really connect to mythology and to other worldliness was weirdly enough, Rupert the Bear.

David Bramwell:

Oh, right.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, because Rupert the Bear, that's the first time I met the Willow the Wisp, was in Rupert Bear and he always went onto these other worldly journeys. Strange, magical journeys so that's probably it really. Yeah.

David Bramwell:

I remember the Rupert books as a kid, but I don't remember them. I must have been too young.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, maybe. I mean, it's not every one, but every now and again you go, oh, there's something weird going on. I like this. So we've been talking for nearly five hours.

David Bramwell:

Have we?

Damh the Bard:

And we haven't even mentioned your podcast.

David Bramwell:

I know. [inaudible 00:40:52]. We've got two questions that are about...

Damh the Bard:

So your new podcast, Adventures in Nutopia. What's Nutopia.

David Bramwell:

And Nu and Utopia.

Damh the Bard:

So maybe the answer to the question is, what is Nutopia and how did that idea of Nutopia come about? Let's see if we can do that one.

David Bramwell:

Keep it... Are you saying keep it short?

Damh the Bard:

No, not at all.

David Bramwell:

Well. So Nutopia was a word coined by John and Yoko in the '70s.

Damh the Bard:

Oh, was it? I didn't know, okay.

David Bramwell:

It was and when they were struggling to find somewhere to live, I think they were having some problems with visas and passports and all the rest of it and so they conceived this idea of a place free of boundaries.

Damh the Bard:

Okay.

David Bramwell:

And very much tying into the ideas and the song Imagine.

Damh the Bard:

Yes.

David Bramwell:

And they declared that the national anthem for Nutopia was four minutes of silence. I was inspired by a bit of John Cage as well there.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, yeah.

David Bramwell:

And there's an organization called Journey to Nutopia who do live events at The Cockpit Theatre in London and they were an inspiration as well and some of the people involved in that were interviewed for one of the episodes. So there's a great connection with those guys.

The idea essentially for the podcast was to look at ideas and movements and organizations that will steer us into a better future, into a more connected future, into a future of sustainability and re-enchantment, an ecological future so future thinking really is the... But that's not a very sexy term that I realize. "What's your podcast about?" "Future thinking." "Oh, right." So I find it a bit hard to sum it up in a few words but the first episode, which is Myths to Live By, maybe that kind of explains it. We're looking for the new stories and narratives, and I think we live in a culture which sometimes we forget that it is its story that drives us. It's a story that you were saying, talking about meaning earlier on. Story gives our lives meaning, metaphor gives our lives meaning. Everything is driven by story metaphor, even the things that wish they weren't. Like science is driven by metaphor. Are our genes selfish? Or is that just a metaphor?

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

That maybe is a misplaced metaphor nowadays we look back on those kind of ideas. So the podcast is, it's a documentary style. So I've had the pleasure of working for the BBC in the past and making documentaries with them so that that's been an inspiration in how to create the stories for these episodes, which is labor intensive, but it's very rewarding. There's Oddfellows music that sort of peppered throughout and some incredible guests and I'm hoping you'll be a guest for series two and we've had Philip and Kristoffer Hughes. Kris is in the episode on Ritual, and he's just incredibly eloquent and so wise.

Damh the Bard:

And George Monbiot?

David Bramwell:

And George Monbiot, so the activist and journalist we had in the first one. So the themes are, I'm looking at ritual and pilgrimage for two of the episodes. There's an episode called Soul Medicine and looking at ways away from our kind of obsessive pill popping culture into things like social prescription, narrative-based medicine, but also things like VR. So this is future narrative so how might we use VR for helping people with say, addictions or anxieties or PTSD and there's some good work being done there. So that sits side by side with a guy called Peter Debon who talks about Yang Sheng talks about the Chinese thousand, 2000, 3000 year old system of preventative approaches to health, which we don't have in our culture.

Damh the Bard:

I thought that was one of my favorite episodes.

David Bramwell:

Right, right.

Damh the Bard:

The Health episode.

David Bramwell:

Right, right. Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Phillip's vision.

David Bramwell:

Yes.

Damh the Bard:

Of what... If you have a visit to a GP in the future might be like.

David Bramwell:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Yes. Yes.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

And in fact, that was my response throughout. We listened to all six episodes on the way to Bala. We were, myself and Perry were heading up to a camp on the bank, the banks of Llyn Tegid.

David Bramwell:

Right.

Damh the Bard:

Run by Christopher and the ADO and we just listened to all six episodes on the way up to and we were both just going, yes, that was it. Yes, that's it, that's it. I mean, we were talking about meaning earlier and what do you hope is the inspiration of people listening to the podcast? What would you hope that they would get from listening to the podcast?

David Bramwell:

Well, ultimately that there are... Every day we are bombarded with toxic stories in the news and many of those stories are necessary stories, we need to know if we're going into a recession, if there's a war going on, if there's conflict, we need to know these things. But it was Joseph Campbell who I remember said that we've forgotten that the news is the exception to the rule. We take... I go home and I see my mum and goes, "Oh, isn't the world a terrible place? Aren't there terrible things going on?" And I say, "Well mom, you lived through the Second World War. I mean, I think it was a bit worse then." She goes, "Oh, but what's happening with Russia?" It's like, well, no, but that aside, we're still living in one of the most peaceful times. So we forget. It's easy to fall down that rabbit hole of pessimism.

Underdog socialism is one phrase that's been used where you just all go, everything's shit and what's the point? And so I think because it's so easy to be subjected to conspiracy theories to the news, and these are our daily mantras. So what do you want to wake up to? Do you want to wake up to bad news and stories of division and conflict, or do you want to wake up to something else and something that gives you hope and the feeling that you can make a difference? And I don't know what I can do to make a difference in the conflict in Ukraine, but I can make a difference in the street that I live in and in the town that I live in, and the people that I talk to and the stories that I share and what I think about and how I say it.

And so to make a podcast series in which I hope can reach out to thousands or tens of thousands of people and offer alternative narratives, narratives of hope, narratives that may join together where, you know, you realize that something that you believed was just kind of small and insignificant and yet actually there's a whole movement out there.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

So I make a joke in the very first episode that things like votes for women and vegan sausage rolls, Gregg's vegan sausage rolls, we'll start with one dissenting voice but when I visited Christiania, the anarchist community in Copenhagen, I remember one of the members taking me on a tour and I said, "What's this over here?" And he said, "Oh, this is where we sort out all of our recycling. And over here is where we go around the city on a Monday morning and we collect things that have been left or dumped. And we have a warehouse here where we give this stuff away, we sell it, whatever, it's our version of Ikea", he makes some jokes and I said, "That's amazing." And he said, "Well, yes, but we began this in 1969 and we were ridiculed for recycling." And then Peter Deadman, in that episode on medicine said, "I set up, I co-founded one of the first health food shops in the country and we were really keeled for the idea that food can be medicine, that food can make a difference."

And we need to be reminded. I think of those stories of those dissenting voices and people going, well actually I feel this. I feel this in my soul, in my heart. So I hope that the podcast offers those kind of stories as well, that something might appear niche or small right now, but it has the possibility of growing. And then in 50 years' time, when we're all long gone, but in 50 years' time, these things will become the norm so Jeremy Lent, one of the interviewees in the first episode, Jeremy Lent, who's a very inspiring author and thinker, is part of this movement called Ecological Civilization and he talks about that and what the principles of ecological civilization are. It's like, imagine if we lived according to principles, which we see in an ecosystem, because an ecosystem has to live ultimately in harmony. We

might focus on conflicts between certain species within that, but ultimately things coexist and they coexist beautifully.

And they have done for, they evolve but this is a very highly functioning 'cause nature's way smarter than we are and so what can we learn from this? Can we create systems? Can we create economic, political, social systems that borrow from ecosystems around us and actually aren't toxic, aren't going to self implode, aren't built on perpetual growth and you know, you can listen to those ideas and go, well that's a nice idea, yeah, wouldn't we like that but that isn't the world that I see around me. What I see around me is a bloody disaster. But imagine, I think to myself, well imagine if I was part of the suffragette movement back in the 1910s or '20s, or if I'd been living in Germany and it was 1943 and I hated the Nazis and I could not see, I couldn't imagine a future without the Nazis and I couldn't conceive that within 30, 40 years the Reichstag would become a tourist attraction.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

We can't... When we're in it, we can't...

Damh the Bard:

No, you're just in it.

David Bramwell:

Yeah, so I hope that these are the things that we want, I want, and I hope the listeners want, that might steer us into a better future. So does that answer?

Damh the Bard:

No, it does. Absolutely. I think when you do watch the news now, I think it was Russell Brand who said it should be, instead of when it starts, they say, here is the news. It should be here is some news because it's not the news.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

There are great things and different things happening all over the world. I remember 1983, I went to Glastonbury Festival. I think Ian Dury was headlining, Elvis Costello was there and it was full of vegetarian food and I, so I thought, I'm going to live on a vegetarian diet this weekend and I managed it and I thought, wow, I can be a vegetarian 'cause I love animals and I can be a vegetarian. This was 1983. I came home and there was nothing.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

I mean there was Sosmix and some cardboard burger mix that put an egg in-

David Bramwell:

I remember Sosmix.

Damh the Bard:

... and Beanfeast. I think those were three things.

David Bramwell:

Yeah. I remember living off those [inaudible 00:51:52].

Damh the Bard:

And I was living with my mum and dad so they would literally cook me, my mum would cook us a roast dinner and I'd have the roast dinner without the meat and I quickly realized it was very difficult to do that right there. It was impossible for me but now we are talking about the changing of life and veganism, oh my God, that was completely off the wall.

David Bramwell:

Yes. Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

That was crazy. What the? Nothing? No cheese? Are you insane?

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Whereas now, you know, look at the way that vegan diet and plant-based food is becoming absolutely the norm now but that is a key example of what you are talking about in the podcast may seem strange to some people now, but as you say, in 10 years' time, hopefully some of this will become the norm.

David Bramwell:

Yeah.

Damh the Bard:

Well we've been talking for an hour.

David Bramwell:

It's flown by. It really has.

Damh the Bard:

No, it really has. It's been fascinating to talk to you. Season one of Adventures in Nutopia. We're halfway through, I think episode three came out this week.

David Bramwell:

That's right.

Damh the Bard:

Episode four will come out Monday, which is probably when this episode of Druidcast is out but even if you're listening to this in the future and you're working your way through Druidcast, look up Adventures in Nutopia and the season will still be there.

David Bramwell:

And currently working on season two.

Damh the Bard:

On season two. Well... Which is fantastic.

David Bramwell:

Which is extraordinary to have the chance to make another season.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, yeah.

David Bramwell:

And dive into other subjects.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah, yeah. Well, so long may it continue.

David Bramwell:

Thank you.

Damh the Bard:

You're a fascinating man, David. I could actually sit and talk to you for hours and come back on the show at some point.

David Bramwell:

I'd love to.

Damh the Bard:

I'm sure I will play Sol Ra on this-

David Bramwell:

Oh excellent.

Damh the Bard:

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... to illustrate what you've said and good luck with everything.

David Bramwell:

Thank you.

Damh the Bard:

Yeah.

David Bramwell:

Thank you.

Damh the Bard:

All right.