

Compere:

He's going to do a talk about sacred animals refreshing connections, so give a big warm welcome for Gordon MacLellan.

Gordon MacLellan:

Good afternoon everyone. And I'm going to say there's now, because I'm very good at forgetting to say the sensible things. There's a book associated with this talk, it's called Sacred Animals. It will be available over there at the end, but it's not what the talk is all about. So let's just run away from that bit. As Kevin said, I'm Gordon Gordon. I'm Gordon MacLellan. I work as an artist and a storyteller called Creeping Toad. And in the pagan world, I'm more often known as Gordon, the Toad. This talk works its way around to sacred animals and relationships with animals, and in particular our relationships is pagans with animals. But let's start in a wider world because my day-to-day work is storytelling. It's creating celebrations more than anything. My work is about encouraging people as individuals and as communities to explore their relationships with the world around 'em.

For me, the underlying principle is that we live in a world that is worth celebrating and if we forget to celebrate, then almost everything else becomes a bit pointless. It's that classic that people will act from anger, but they'll act with far more conviction from love and from determination and dedication, and that's what a lot of my wider work is about. Over the last few years, I've also been very involved with how to say it, with revised approaches to the relationship between faith and nature and in particular, given my background between faith and nature through art. And that has come about as the big corp... or some, or no, some of the big conservation organizations have finally accepted that their strategies, the strategies that they've been working with for 50 years or a hundred years, haven't really worked on that faith and nature side of things and working with other organizations.

This is from what day is it Saturday? This is from 10 days ago. This is from the solstice. This was Solstice sunrise, the moment of sunrise up in Dumfriesshire. We had a gathering at a place called the Crioc Multiverse where the Open university and CROIC worked together to create a whole week around climate change. And I was brought in to do the sunrise, which meant we left our hotel at 3:00 AM and we delivered sunrise, and then we had to stay and do another ceremony at the moment of maximum tilt later on in the afternoon. The actual point of solstice, which isn't the sunrise, is that moment when the world is at its extreme edge of tilted ness. It made for a very strange ceremony. But I work a lot of the time in these sorts of spaces in places where I'm there as a pagan and generally as a pagan, you don't need to do anything just to stand there and you will upset people.

Well, people are very good at taking offense when we do nothing, so it's much more fun than to do something and give them a reason to be offended. But coming back to science and conservation and the relationships between conservation organizations and communities, if you look at things as environmentalists, we can win arguments with numbers. We can win the debates with the science, but it's only now after decades of environmental campaigning that the big conservation organizations are recognizing that it's emotion and spirituality or faith or religion or simply the emotional conviction of everyday folk that really brings change. I mean, some of us have been arguing for that cause for many of the decades when it hasn't been listened to. I mean, it seems obvious or it's obvious to me that profound change comes when both hearts and minds are engaged in a mission.

I hate to say I hate phrases like saving the environment, but that approach needs emotion. It needs commitment, it needs conviction, and for many people that means it needs to come from a place of faith. And as that awareness of the climate crisis and the challenges facing biodiversity finally, finally begins to really hit that understanding that we respond best to stories. Is also finally hitting home. In a very cynical way, you could say the advertisers, promoters, salespeople, the people who get your

subscriptions for said conservation organizations have known this for years and they know it's the big eyed, cute faced, fluffy creature that sells the subscription complete with cuddly toy and regular pup dates or egg dates or cub dates. But you don't often get larvae briefings or worm news. I mean, wouldn't that be the thrilling bit? If you can actually sell subscriptions based on earthworms, which being fairly brutal are far more important than lots of the big, lovely, cuddly, fluffy things.

I mean, faiths have known that too, and our own people included because large or small faiths share their teachings through stories and to really involve people with a renewed interest in and a commitment to the world around us. We may need more than traditional stories or folk tales or religious parables or moral fables. The stories that might be the ones that change people generally are the stories that grow from direct experience. Those are powerful ways of building connections, building a sense of belonging. And when we pair away the greenwashing, the jargon, the endless self-destructive news telling a lot of the current environmental anxiety can come down to connection, to renewing or refreshing that sense of really being part of the world.

We need to feel that we belong. As I said, I'm a writer and a storyteller and a creator of celebrations. Most of my work revolves around helping groups of people, as I said before, classes of school, children, families, wider community groups to find ways of exploring and expressing their relationships with the places where they live and work and play. And whether they have heard of locally declared climate emergencies or whether they care tuppence for biodiversity crises. That desire to explore, to touch, to feel both physically and emotionally is deep and ongoing. People want to feel that they belong. And for me that everyday work is very pagan. Most people never know that I'm pagan. It doesn't, it doesn't really matter. They don't need to know. They know me as the person who helps them go on that journey. They don't need anything else about me. I'm a technician, but people respond to the opportunity to simply enjoy the world around them. But I'm, I'm also a pagan, I'm an animist and I'm going to use pagan here in a very generous sort of way to embrace all of our diversity. And I always think of it as an ecosystem of communities. And you are entirely welcome to take offence if you don't like being labelled. But please don't take out me. You just abuse the person next to you verbally.

But for us as pagans, I find us in a very interesting situation and it's a useful challenge. It's almost a challenge for our personal integrity. We need to tread really carefully because quite often I end up in meetings where I feel pagans are standing on us a very slippery moral high ground. We're quite good at that. We are at saying we are in nature, religion, we understand, appreciate work with that sense of connection to nature all the time. We shouldn't get complacent. There isn't a moral high ground. We can't sit there and say, well, we are wonderful. You're not, no matter how much maybe we may want to, it's not a good way of promoting cooperation or collaboration. We shouldn't get complacent about our own relationship as pagans with the world that we have our spiritual relationships with. I think we should always be watching, listening, feeling for, waiting for, the moment we start taking that world for granted, thinking that we know how it works. If we really knew how it works, where would that leave our sense of mystery? If we really had any answers, then we have no mysteries left. And for me, the great bit of being pagan or one of the great bits is that belonging somebody, I have no idea what's going on most of the time, but that doesn't matter because I feel that I belong.

So there is, as far as I'm concerned, never any harm or there should never be any harm in just reviewing what we do, thinking about our own ways of engaging with and understanding the world around us. I mean, as an animist, I can't speak to the rest of you even if we are all pagans, but as an animist, I live in a world that's vibrant with awareness. It's more than just noticing that there are lots of bees, bees in the flower beds, birds in the park, flowers under the bees, and it's about relationships with place. I would hope that in our practice, whether that's as an individual or as a community or as a group, that we can

feel that sort of richness, that living vibrancy, it's like a color or a scent or a presence in the spiritual atmosphere of the world we work in and engage with.

It's really easy to fall into habits of familiar actions or comfortable thoughts. And I think it does us all good to stop to step back and bring new connections. There's never any harm in thinking again. And why did I put Goldstitch Moss up here? Why? Just because it's lovely. I live in Buxton, in Derbyshire and just down the road from us. Is this a dangerous question to ask? Do we have any heathens in our company? Yes, there's a few. There's a wonderful place called Goldstitch Moss that is a place for ravens, and it's one of those places where you sit on the rocks and you look down from the rocks, at the pools in the moss, and you can't walk across the moss without falling over it. It is a quaking bog, but you go through physical, none of this nice sort of, I went on a journey and I was profoundly changed.

No, this is, you go on a journey and you fall over in the mud and your wellies filled with water and you take them off and you have to leave them on the path because there's no point in squelching your way up to the rocks at the top, but when you get to the top, there's almost always ravens just sitting watching you and laughing. So that's why Goldstitch Moss crept in the way it does. But all of this is a very long way round to seeing, as I said at the start, I wrote a book, actually I've written lots, but this one, it's called Sacred Animals. Working with Green Magic Publishing who have already been mentioned today. We just released a new edition of this book that was originally published with Capall Bann. And this is not now meant to be a shameless pitch for the book, but it just helps set a context for me. Rambling at you. At this point I should also mention, yes, this, there's a new journal out called Homecoming. It's just come out, it's a journal of new animus writing from a little press Aurox, there's Flyers for it on the table. It's up at the end of the row at the front here. Please pick it up. I think it's retailing about five pounds. It's an A5 little booklet, but it's full of essays and poems and quite scholarly articles.

And Jack who edits it is trying to do something different as a journal. So please do take it, have a look. Let's go back to this thing. Oh yes, I like Beetles, which is why I have them tattooed on my feet. I think that that personal connection between self and world is vital. I mean, I think I would hope that for most of us, we'd recognize that as a key feature of a pagan belief system, whatever tradition you claim or practice, but for anyone, whatever their faith, whatever tradition, or even for the ardent atheist environmentalist who sees all spirituality is deceit for the gullible. Get that quite a lot. I think that giving yourself or ourselves just creative and personal time where the natural world is vital, just stop. Hence sacred animals. And animals, because for lots of people, they're the starting point. I know many of us have longstanding relationships with trees, with stones, with whole landscapes. For me, Goldstitch Moss. But rather than trying to embrace all the cousins at once I went for animals, if you like an easy route in or an easy wander in. And I like activities. I like encouraging people to do things that are personal and they encourage us as individuals to think, to feel and to develop our own languages for what we experience.

I think we should challenge ourselves to stop

And to learn by walking, feeling by experiencing the world that we share with animals or animal spirits. If you're that way inclined rather than always accepting information, learn from human teachers, doesn't necessarily, or this doesn't necessarily grow stories in a traditional sense of plots and beginnings, middles and ends. I said that stories are important. The stories that grow out of this sort of work are stories that are so personal, they're often not told. And the story that unfolds for us as individuals is personal. It's our relationships with the world around them. And it might be a story told with words or with scribbles. It might be a story told with hammers and nails and burnt boxes, but it becomes about our personal relationship with the world around us. We celebrate, or my work celebrates the world around us. We took this whole principle, just tell us what matters.

Think about what matters, feel about what matters. And out of that, we got drawings, sorry, this was during the first of the covid lockdown years, and we got people wandering in our woods when you were allowed out for an hour and then the door police came and chased you back into your house and locked in. We had visitors to the woods in Buxton just leaving us messages about why the woods were special. And then they drew pictures of what was special about the woods. And out of those grew two, they wouldn't fit in here. Two four meter tall tree puppets.

And with the puppets came one set of words which were the words of people saying to the woods, this is why you matter to us. But a reverse, not even a reverse, just another set of words that still came from our community were the words of the trees looking at the people. So suddenly we've gone way deep into animist worlds. We had people just sitting down going, well, it's not thinking if I was the tree. It's just sitting there thinking, what does this tree want to see? And out that we grew an enchantment of a forest. And for me, those are the things that bring people and place, whether they're the wider community, whether there are a specific sort of pagan, magical communities closer together. But then all that just appreciate your local Boggarts. If you don't already, you really should. And I've got to say, it's good to sometimes work with pagans. I don't often get a chance to, I don't often get a chance often to talk to 'em. I'd often be doing a talk like this to a group of bishops and I stand there thinking, I don't actually need to do anything. I offend them. I could just stand here without my shoes on and I offend them. I can stand here and somebody will Google and say

He's pagan. Yes, and he's gay. Yes. And you can almost watch them leave. You're too late. We have breathed the same air. You are now contaminated. So wait, thank you all for being here. It's really nice to talk to Pagans. It's so much easier to work. We give ourselves, so we'll give yourselves a round of applause for being wonderful. It's so much easier to work with people who accept I hope consciousness is other than human and who are not necessarily going to label me as mad, misguided, possessed. I've had that one too for talking about spending time with spirits. But whether we are a pagan audience, whether we are a group of uptight bishops, whether we're a quiet group of school children in a field somewhere, the principles remain the same and the challenge remains the same. Challenge remains the same. Give yourselves time to stop, to let an idea or connection grow. It's simple really. And hence it can get really difficult to do. We need to remember to listen, to take time to just be in our world, not talking, not planning, not doing ceremony, not just going out because it's a Sabbat coming up

Not expecting anything, just being and paying attention to the smaller cousins and to heed what they might show us and to learn by being and not by expecting a lesson. The world around us is happening. It's not all about us. You get very tired of people saying, I saw a Beetle on the step. What does it mean? And you thought you really want a sensible answer to that. I turn those things into jokes, but that comes endlessly.

We are very good at expecting the world to be telling us things. Why should it? For goodness sake, we are part of it. It expects us to feel the answers. If certainly out of my tradition, if something wants to tell you something, it will turn up and hit you with it. I don't live in a world of polite spirits. I don't live in a world of neat spirits. I live in a world of spirits. Just shout at you. And if they're not shouting at you, then you think, okay, hopefully I'm doing the right sort of thing. And all that isn't to dismiss tradition. And it's not to throw away the shared principles of imagery systems, but often the shared understandings that go with a set of teachings are often more about the teachings than about let's stick with animals then about the animals. So stop for a moment and think,

Do you use correspondences in your work? The connection, if you're looking well in your practice, would you expect to find a bull at the north of the world or maybe in a circle? There might be an image of a lion at the south. Why? I mean, why not a polar bear, a wolverine, a lemming? I mean, if you want the animals that governed northern environments, lemmings - more important than anything else because

the rise and fall of their populations affects everything else in the area. Or if you turn over a card in a pack and find a wolf, is there a definite set of stories that would run with the card? And there's nothing necessarily wrong with that, but it's good to step back and remember that those are stories too. A lot of our teachings, the stories, the image or the story is not the animal. And that story is not necessarily the animal story or not the animal's only story. I mean that lion in the south of somebody's circle might embody strength or courage or the fires of the Southern watchtower. But if I come in, so my formal background is zoology. I'm an ecologist, but if I come in as an ecologist, I would look at that and say, oh yeah, lion could be any of those things. Lion could also embody ruthlessness

And the killing of any offspring that are not your own. A lion could mean the bloody death of your prey or the long slow decline of yourself through a face full of porcupine quills. I would invite you or maybe challenge you to separate teaching from animal and then reach out to find what that animal or its associated spirits may want to share with you. I went for red deer just because they're very British and we've actually got quite a lot of people wearing antlers today. So that feels very intuitive. I think for me, it is being quite clear about where we are drawing our learning and our understanding from. And we might draw as a storyteller and draw on ancient stories. And I know that the power of ancient stories to inspire people, but equally I know the child or the person like me who can just manage to sit down on a rock and watch and wait

And whatever it is that you see, that's the story in itself. And that's the personal one, that's the one that matters. And being shameless, again, that's what sacred animals is about. It's about how do you take those moments of inspiration? What do we do with them? Do we turn them into poems? Do we turn 'em into chants? Do we scribble them down on a bit of paper as a picture or as a mandala or whatever? Or does it inspire us to do other things? I write and lead activities and tell stories that are about the personal. My work encourages people to find their own path through the forests of the world. The bigger map of that world may belong to a spiritual tradition or a cultural tradition. But these paths are your own, if you like. They're your own little track through the woods of the world. And they might, as I said, they might be poetic, they might be masks, drawings, meditations. They might be bird boxes, they might be litter pics, they might be dances. They could be absolutely anything if that's how you can express your relationship with the world. They might be shared with a group

Or a community like the big trees.

Those activities might be solitary. They might be deeply private and personal and never spoken of in public. And again, coming back to my work, I always find really interesting the people who will have gone out. There's an image way back of a little boy sitting under a tree with a postcard just writing himself a postcard. And I can watch a group and know that they're all doing it. Some of them will come back and share. Some would come back and tell everyone what they've written down. Some people will come back and they might tell their best friend or more likely will come and tell me, just show me about this. And some people just will not share it at all. And I find that really interesting, really important, really valuable. The most intriguing ones is when somebody came back and spoke at us and the whole group was going, what? He said, well, I was sitting under a tree, so I wrote a poem in tree. I thought, alright, just keep an eye on him for later. It's obviously one of ours.

None of that matters. It's more, it's giving yourself time to do things. And what does matter is finding your way of making connections, renewing connections, refreshing other connections, or simply finding a novel way of spending time with old friends who are not necessarily human. Those bird boxes, our boxes should be in there as well. I'll mentioned that bird boxes, litter picking, sowing seeds for butterflies, writing a letter to the local counselor, lying down in front of a bulldozer. It's all spiritual action. If you're enchantment, if the enchantment of your practice stops at the bedroom door or the temple door, think again. Doesn't mean that you need to be insane like me, but take your relationship

with the world. Take your relationship with sacred animals out of any temple that is hiding in and take them for a walk and do whatever it seems they want you to do within reason.

But it's all valuable. People are very good at being quite judgmental about environmental action. If you haven't chained yourself to bulldozer and hung off a cliff, then you're not really committed and you think you've got to do what works for you. And writing letters is actually probably more impactful than handcuffing yourself to a bulldozer I speak to someone who's done both and who got arrested for chanting in B and Q car park in Manchester. And the police was sort of, why? What's that incense? What's that? It's a drum? What are you doing? We're praying to the trees that they've been cut down and asking their forgiveness. Why? Because they've cut down illegally. And why are you doing it here? Well, I'm doing it here because my job is to distract you while my friends are taking the wood out of the B and Q store. And you'll find it's being delivered as stolen property to the local police station because it's here illegally. So I have a mixed background, shall we say? All of that coming to just explore nature, explore the world around you, enjoy the world around you, find ways of engaging with it, and hopefully any action encourages reflection,

If not actual change. When we act from our spiritual connections, whether we are doing the bulldozer thing or rescuing toads in a bucket. And I hope that's, yeah, there we go. That's my spring is always wandering about in a ditch with a bucket. We should remember that we are not only doing a good deed, we are acting on behalf of family. They're our cousins. So we live in a world full of environmental disaster stories. So it's quite good to spend time just watching to being open to moments shared in other beings lives. The rare bumblebee doesn't know that it's rare. It doesn't even know that's a bumblebee. It knows that it is itself, and it goes on being itself to the utmost reaches of its life. If you want an animal to learn from, look at almost any animal. They will keep living. They will keep fighting for their lives until they're over. You can learn as much about courage and bravery from the mouse that's just run across the grass out there, because that's the braver thing to do than the lion that's sitting around under a tree looking noble or the wolf that's loitering in that very sort of, I'm too cool for anything else way that wolves have.

Enjoy the little cousins and learn from them and just watch, listen, feel. And behind the disaster stories, the anxiety, the worry, and the anger, recognize joy and wonder and the passion of a world that is still bringing with life. Thank you.