



TOUCHSTONE

The journal of



THE ORDER OF BARDS OVATES & DRUIDS

May 2026 | Issue 345

This Issue

- Two Myths for the Climate Emergency by Liz Cruse
- Out of the Woods by Belinda Twigg
- Teach Allais: Gaelic Houses of Sweat by Silenos
- Plus Lots More!



Cover: "Beltane" by Josh Warren

Editorial

Welcome to May's edition of Touchstone, and Beltane blessings to you all!

There are some absolute treasures in the issue: Liz Cruse's article on myth and the climate crisis is essential reading, and Belinda Twigg's piece on Druidry in the school curriculum shows the power of quiet persistence. Silenos has written another fascinating article on sweatlodges and will be joining me on this month's *Touchstone Unbound* to discuss his ongoing interest in this area. That will be at 7pm UK time on Friday 1st May.

We have some beautiful artwork in this edition, with seasonal contributions from Nemie, Carolina Malim and Rhyannon Brightwater. And, of course, immense thanks to Josh Warren for another wonderful cover.

I also want to send thanks to our new in-house poet in residence, Essy Thorn, whose first of eight seasonal poems appears below. These poems are very different to Essy's usual form but are equally as wonderful.

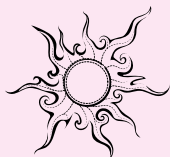
Enjoy!



Beltane by Essy Thorn

The sun is high up in the sky so at a glance I
can see
Summertime begins to shine; budding plants
will turn green.
Bunnies frolic while they vibe with the ro-
mance of the scene.
What a time to be alive, so fun and fancifully
free.

Colors vibrant intertwine within our dance
with the Sidhe.
Something primal is ignited and enchanted as
we
Jump the fire with a smile full of passion and
glee.
Come and try it if you'd like to. Take my hand
and just leap!



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Chosen Chief's Bit

Bandia daoibh a chairde. Beannachtaí na Bealtaine! Hello everyone, and Bealtaine Blessings to you!

“Bealtaine, the time of adolescent growth, where what was planted in the spring was given sustenance to grow. Where, just as plants, our souls are enriched with Light so that we may reach skyward toward heaven.” - L.B. Ó Ceallaigh

Summer is coming, but it is not quite here yet. *Scarbhín na gCuach* refers to the cold spell that can happen in the last two weeks of April and the first two weeks of May in Ireland. It is often welcomed as adversity in the weather at this time brings hardiness to the plants, so that they are stronger. And so it is that adversity in our own lives helps us to build resilience.

Each month as I sit down to write the *Chosen Chief's Bit*, another world atrocity has occurred, more war crimes committed, and I wonder how the victims of those situations survive and from where they get their strength and resilience to continue living.

I recently watched an interview on *YouTube* with Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon, who have written a book: *The Future is Peace*. I was in tears as I watched this conversation. When Aziz, a Palestinian, was ten years old, he witnessed the death of his older brother from injuries sustained while in an Israeli prison. He swore revenge and held on to that for years. When he was eighteen years old, he attended a Hebrew class. His teacher treated him with respect, and he experienced being seen as a human being by an Israeli for the first time in his life. This changed something within himself. Maoz Inon, an Israeli, lost both his parents during an attack on their Kibbutz on October 7th 2023. While he and his siblings were sitting Shiva (Jewish mourning period) for their parents, his younger brother suggested that they not look for revenge for their parents' death, and they all agreed. At this time, Aziz, who had previously worked with Maoz, reached out to him to offer his condolences. They met and decided to work together to turn their suffering into activism for peace and justice. They chose reconciliation over revenge in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was not an easy process; it required speaking and listening to the truth, having honest dialogue, facing painful stories, and visiting Holocaust and Palestinian sites. Their message is about how empathy can break the cycle of hatred, violence and war.

What struck me about this was the impor-

tance of facing the truth. I love this quote from Arthur Schopenhauer: “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” We can see how this pattern is occurring in the world right now. Speaking truth can be dangerous and unpopular - Truth against the World is a phrase coined by Iolo Morganwg. This phrase might be interpreted as aggressive, though my interpretation of ‘against’ in this instance is like having a ladder against a wall for support. The Irish version of this is ‘*An fhírinne in aghaidh an Domhan*’, which literally means ‘*The truth facing the World*.’

In the story of King Cormac MacAirt, High King of Ireland, a very wise ruler, akin to King Solomon, he goes on a journey to the Otherworld and receives the Four-sided Cup of Truth, which will help him rule justly. He is told that if three falsehoods are spoken over the Cup, it will break into pieces. However, if three truths are spoken over the fragments, the Cup will become whole again. What we need in the world right now are leaders who will stand up and speak the truth over the fragments. Though not only our leaders but we also need to find the truth and speak for it, both in our own lives and in the wider world context. Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Devotion to Truth is the sole justification for our existence”.

As Druids, we are invited to speak for truth and justice and the love of all existences.

“The wisdom of the tradition reminds us that if we choose to journey on the path of truth, it then becomes a sacred duty to walk hand in hand with beauty.” *John O’Donohue*.

Go leanaimid ar slí an fhírinne ‘is ar an áilleacht! May we all continue to walk on the path of truth and beauty!

Beannachtaí
agus Síocháin
(Peace and
Blessings)

Eimear 



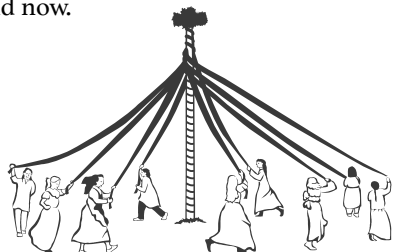
Image by Steve Harvey





A Blessing for the Turning: From Earth Day to Beltaine by A Pict Called Scott

May the work of your hands
become the tending of sacred ground.
May your numbers find their root in wonder,
and your grief give way to green.
May you rise from the weight of the world
and feel the pulse beneath your feet—
the old rhythm,
the firelit one,
that says:
Begin again.
May you trade despair for devotion.
Fear for flame.
Strategy for song.
And when the ash returns to soil,
may you remember:
the Earth was never asking you to save her—
only to love her,
wildly,
faithfully,
and now.



Water by Ella Moore

In the stillness
The water still flows
Through our blood our soul
Through us as a whole
Through our ancestors
Through the ancients
Through more and before
The essence of all
Unanimity ancient and real
We learn to avail and feel
Wisdoms infamous seal
Where dreams are surreal
Love inspiring tears
The ebb and the cleansing flow
Life's eternal know

Bealtainne by Susan Knox

Bales o' Bealtainne
Swarlin, bricht
Pit bleeze tae ma past
Redd ma shedda an gie
Licht tae ma loaning
Makin wey fur a caller stert.

Dew by Ann Beer

On May Day morning, just at dawn,
The girls and women walked the fields.
With quiet laughter, songs, and stories
They reached for what the first light yields —
Gently brushing with their hands
The leaves of clover — precious dew.
They bathed their faces, necks, and hair,
Their actions making all things new.
The celebration gathered pace
With birdsong sounding all around.
They formed a circle, joined the dance,
The energy of life unbound.
Then all turned to salute the sun,
With quiet grace, their ritual done.



Beltane by Nemie

The Druid's Love Song

by Valeria Iannini

Please stop searching for me among human
faces
I am not there
We are not there

I speak to you
with the song of the robin
I bring you wonder
in the flutter of the kingfisher's wings

Stop looking
for that wholeness elsewhere
I am in you
and I always will be

Do not long
for the time when we were apart
Now we are one
as we have always dreamed
in all the lives
made of meetings and farewells

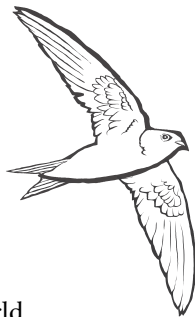
I am in the vibration of the water
where your dreams are reflected
Among the leaves you tread,
remember that everything returns
always

Stop looking
for that love elsewhere
I am in you
I am in nature
I am in the divine

We are water and wind
We are earth and fire
We are light and shadow
We are the breath of the world

We flow in rivers
We rise in flames
We drift in the air
We rest in the soil
We shine in the sun
We shimmer in the stars

We are the pulse of life
We are the song of the universe



The Dance of Life

by Caroline Malim

The Blessed Walk by Neridah

I am not alone when I walk among the living
for I have Bridget as my guide and those who
came before me are my companions.
They show me how to hold my head up high
and step over any obstacles in my way.
Smiling and giving assistance to others that I
am able and recognizing when to leave things
well alone.
For I have a life to live and have the birds,
bees, trees, mountains and streams to colour
my world along the way.
I am blessed.

Spring Wildflowers

by Jessica McGee

Dressed for a riot
the hillsides burst with color.
Stunning as it sweeps.



Bardic Tales

The Tale of the Grail and Cerridwen's Cauldron by Eik Hjarta

Hear now, a tale of a Seeker, one who wandered far across mountains and moors, through abbeys and halls of stone, in search of the Holy Grail.

The Seeker had heard that this Grail was the cup of Christ, a vessel of divine power, a source of everlasting life and wisdom. Knights before had ridden to their deaths for it, poets had dreamed of it, priests had prayed for it - but still, it was never found.

And so it was that one night, beneath a silver moon, the Seeker came to the shore of Llyn Tegid, where mists rose thick as breath from the Otherworld. There, on the shingle shore, was a cottage of crooked timber, smoke rising from its chimney. And before the door, a woman bent above a black cauldron, stirring.

The Seeker approached and bowed.

"Mother," they said, "I am searching for the Grail. Do you know where it lies?"

The woman lifted her head. Her eyes shone with a strange fire, green as oak leaves, dark as raven's wing. "The Grail?" she said, her voice both young and ancient. "Ah, child, you have come further than you know. For before ever there was a Grail in men's halls, there was my Cauldron. And it is here still."

She drew aside the lid. Steam curled upward in silver spirals, and within swirled waters that changed as the Seeker gazed: one moment golden with light, another black as pitch, one moment fragrant as meadows in bloom, the next acrid as burning flesh.

"This," she said, "is the Cauldron of Awen. From

it flows inspiration and wisdom. A sip may fill you with song and vision. Yet know this - when the gift is given, what remains is poison. Light and shadow dwell together in my brew, and you cannot drink one without tasting the other."

The Seeker trembled, yet stepped forward. "Then let me drink, Lady, for I would have wisdom, whatever the cost."

Cerridwen's laughter rang like waves on stone.

"Not so swift, child of dust. First, you must face what the Cauldron shows you. Look, and see!"

The steam rose about the Seeker, and in its vapors were visions:

of their own face, twisted with pride and folly,

of victories hollow and fleeting,

of wounds they had given and wounds received,

of hunger, fear, desire - all shadows they had hidden in the caverns of the soul.

The Seeker cried out, fell to their knees. But Cerridwen stood tall above them.

"Wisdom is not comfort. Inspiration is not safety. The Grail you sought was but a shadow of this. Will you still drink, knowing both light and shadow flow from my hand?"

The Seeker bowed low. "Lady, I do not seek to possess, but to learn. Teach me, that I may walk in balance."

Then Cerridwen smiled. She dipped a ladle and gave the Seeker but a sip. Fire coursed through their veins, and song filled their heart—terrible and beautiful, sweet and bitter, as though the



whole of life itself had passed through their spirit in a single breath.

And when it was done, they wept. For they knew: the Grail had never been a chalice of endless comfort, but the Cauldron of the Goddess, who gives both creation and destruction, who births wisdom in shadow as well as light.

The Seeker rose, no longer searching for relic or treasure, but carrying within them the flame of Awen, the breath of inspiration. And as they left the shore of Llyn Tegid, they heard her voice upon the wind:

“Remember, child: What you seek outside yourself, you must face within. The Cauldron is ever with you. Drink deeply, but wisely.”

And so ends the tale.



Phenology Wheel: May
by Alison Kirkham

Adventures in Nutopia, Series Four by David Bramwell

Adventures in Nutopia is a documentary series in search of new stories, radical movements, new systems, myths and ideas that just might steer us into a more inclusive, networked and ecological future. In Nutopia all are welcome. The series is back for its fourth series with six new documentaries:

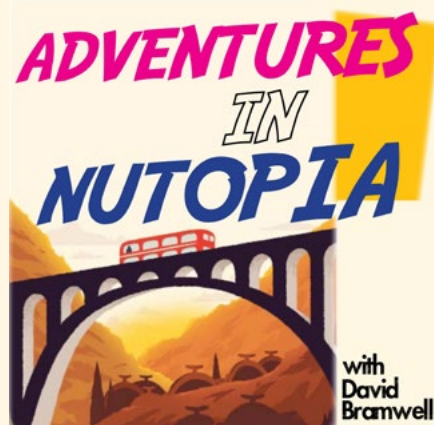
EPISODES 1 & 2. Viva Anarchism! With Robin Gray and Katherine Hallowell from the theatre show *Three Acres and a Cow*, Chumbawamba's Dunstan Bruce, Warren Draper and Cath Muller from *A Commune in the North*, author Sally Goldsmith, Mark Wilson and Marta Jachimowicz from *Rockaway Park* and Anarchism author Carissa Honeywell.

EPISODE 3. Animal Medicine. We'll learn just how much animals are medicine to us, psychologically and physically. With Jay Griffiths, David Hadrill and Tristan Gooley.

EPISODE 4. Panpsychism: The Quiet Dreaming of Atoms. Science has long wrestled with how consciousness arose out of matter. But what if we've been approaching the problem wrongly? With Anil Seth, Philip Goff, Peter Sjoestedt-Hughes, Mark Vernon and Hedda Hassel Mørch.

EPISODE 5. Biomimicry & the Internet of Animals. Biomimicry, the science of learning from nature's genius, is helping us in areas as diverse as architecture, pollution, air conditioning, clothing, robotics, fire-resistant materials, flooding and leadership. With Nicola Peel and Martin Wikelski.

EPISODE 6. The Magic Hour. A somewhat ambitious final episode attempts to cover the history of magical practise in the west – from Ancient Greece to present day. With Dave Lee, Eimear Burke, Susan Greenwood, Mark Wagner, Andrew O'Neill and Efa Lois.



Two Myths for the Climate Emergency by Liz Cruse

Can our myths help us navigate the world in which we find ourselves? On 27th November 2025, I attended an event in London called The National Emergency Briefing (NEB). I had been asked by OBOD if I would go on behalf of the order to attend this event under the umbrella of Faith for the Climate. This is an ecumenical coalition of faith groups – including non-Christians – which seeks to address the climate crisis.

The event had been brought into being by concerned citizen Simon Oldridge and others who were worried about the gulf between what science was telling us about the dangers of climate change and the laggard progress of government in dealing with it. They felt that the public should be receiving a national emergency briefing of the type that was so familiar during the COVID pandemic. They drew together a panel of scientists, all experts in their particular fields, to make brief presentations of the facts concerning the threat of human-induced climate change.

So it was that I found myself sitting in Westminster Central Hall, together with some 1,200 politicians, senior civil servants, leaders from business and NGOs, faith representatives, and others. As I listened to nine scientists giving their summaries of the way that an unstable climate threatens the natural mechanisms that, until recently (and still, just about), maintained a stability of climate within which life on earth could survive and thrive, I felt increasingly dismayed and overwhelmed. I found myself as daunted as young Culhwch must have felt faced with the threatening giant.

The scenario I found most frightening was that outlined by Tim Lenton, director of the Global Systems Institute at the University of Exeter. He described how, if the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) collapses due to melting ice in the Arctic and consequent huge amounts of freshwater going into the ocean, London could experience winters of -20C. Yet the summers would be hotter than we experience today. This would mean we would become completely dependent on food imports.

AMOC is responsible for what we know as the Gulf

Stream. It has not collapsed yet but it is weakening.

Kevin Anderson, Professor of Energy and Climate Change at the Universities of Manchester, Uppsala and Bergen said: “The choice is between deep, rapid and fair decarbonisation of modern society, and an organised-ish technical and social revolution; or ongoing rhetoric and delay as temperatures rise. And then we’ll have a revolutionary-style change that will be both chaotic and violent.”

In the old Brythonic story of Culhwch and Olwen, the young Culhwch is inspired to seek Olwen, daughter of Ysbyddaden Bencawr and take her as his wife. Wherever Olwen walks white trefoils spring up. She is the maiden of Spring and renewal.

The terrible giant, who requires his servants to lift up his eyelids with forks, sets Culhwch a series of impossible tasks. He must, for example uproot a wood, burn the trees for fertility, plough and sow the land with wheat so that it is ripe the following morning. As if this is not enough, Culhwch must get Amaethon, the great ploughman, to plough the land. If that can be done then the young hero must get Gofannon, the mythical smith, to forge the iron for the ploughing. These are only the first few tasks.

Goading Culhwch, Ysbyddaden Bencawr speaks of the impossibility of obtaining these things which, he says, will never be given freely. To each request, Culhwch replies, “It is easy for me to get that though thou think it is not easy.” And indeed, with help from a band of magically gifted comrades from Arthur’s court, and from Arthur himself, Culhwch obtains all that he needs.

What, you may ask, has all this got to do with the climate emergency? In the terms of the story, if we visualise those governments who wish to make change, to decarbonise, to prevent the worst catastrophes as Culhwch and his companions, then who is the giant who sends out the message that “though you get one thing changed, you won’t achieve the next thing that needs to be done”? In this role, I cast the corporations (notably the fossil fuel companies) and countries who are refusing to admit that drastic change is necessary. All this is



done in the name of the dominant system (I would say organism) which we call Capitalism, which demands endless growth and infinite extraction of raw materials at grave expense to the natural world.

Ysbyddaden Bencawr only had one head. The giant we face has many. His loyal servants are the climate deniers and those spreading false data to undermine the truth that science reveals. They prop open the eyes of this giant with many heads only to show him what he wants to see.

Unlike Culhwch, none of those pushing for change would ever say that it will be easy to achieve. But still, many are prepared to act in hope and try. The UK is, at the moment, the only “developed” country to commit to opening no new oil or gas fields. In April there was a conference jointly hosted by Columbia and the Netherlands for nations who wish to act in spite of the vastly inadequate outcome of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP) which this year saw the absence of an official USA delegation.

Culhwch has magical aid in his quest. His human companions have superpowers – Cai can breathe underwater, Gwrhyr can understand all languages. He also accesses the ancient enchantment of the Oldest Animals, the Blackbird, the Stag, the Owl, the Eagle and the Salmon. These creatures have access to the wisdom of deep time. Meanwhile, here we are, individuals and communities, dwarfed by the challenge outlined at the National Emergency Briefing. How can we find courage in these times? How can we create a vision for the future and seek it out? What magic can we summon?

To look at these questions, I invoke a modern myth cycle: Frodo's quest to destroy the Ring of Power. “I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Metaphorically, we have all been handed a Ring of Power. Will we enhance it by joining the consumerist race to possess more things, by travelling at whim to far-flung destinations? Or will we choose, where we are able, to set out on a quest for a more equal society, and limit our carbon output by, for example, insulating our homes and using solar energy. *The Lord of the Rings* teaches us that sometimes individuals have to undertake the seemingly impossible and the idea of the glorious, or even modest, hero who succeeds over daunting

odds is not helpful when we face reality.

In the end, on the brink of the fires, Frodo hesitates. The Ring is destroyed but not because Frodo turns out to be a hero of unimpeached moral virtue like heroes such as Culhwch. It is Gollum, in thrall to the Ring, spared due to Frodo's kindness (and Bilbo's), who bites off Frodo's ring-bearing finger and falls with it into the inferno of Mount Doom. There is, in the end, no return to the halcyon days of Middle Earth. The elves depart. The Shire is laid waste and much work is needed to restore it.

So with us. As the scientists at the NEB made clear, we cannot reverse the rising temperatures. But with effort, it is not too late to stabilise them. Weather patterns, however, will remain changed but maybe worsening extremes can be held at bay.

We can also prepare for what awaits us. One of the speakers who impressed me at the NEB was Lieutenant General Richard Nugee who spoke about national security in relation to climate change. He described how the military look pragmatically at the threat that faces them, no matter how grave, and then prepare the best they can. In the tales, both Culhwch and Frodo are helped to look squarely at the task and access helpers with magical powers.

I believe that humans need tales of such enchantments to lift their hopes and enable them to identify what qualities are needed and could be accessed in the mundane world. Even with magic the outcome is uncertain. But the protagonists set out regardless.

As Druids, we will find moments in our journey that remind us that beauty and wonder still exist. On the edge of Mordor we may rest in Ithilien. If we cannot win Olwen, the Spring maiden, forever, occasionally, we may still walk with her.

For more information about the National Emergency Briefing and follow-up see <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yUXINjZL6t5FDQElrBexQLyfhSyPUrpD3w8uuZrHdtA/edit?tab=t.o>

You can find recordings of all the presentations on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rI8z6Aoc5Q4>

Out of the Woods by Belinda Twiggs

Strange, isn't it, where we find ourselves at this moment — the one right now? What choices did we make to reach this point? Am I living according to my soul's path? How different could my life be if I had chosen this and not that? Was I somehow guided to make those choices? Do I have free will? Am I an arbiter of my destiny, or merely a participant in a much wider pattern of causes and conditions?

These are not abstract questions for me; they are ones that have accompanied me for decades. OBOD plays a role here, certainly, as does my propensity to talk, to reflect aloud, and to seek or create spaces where experiences can be shared and explored.

After a few decades of quite literal wandering in the woods, and the metaphorical wandering that so often accompanies a spiritual life, I found myself, somewhat to my own surprise, out of the woods. I found myself holding a quiet but persistent yen to be a teacher within the British education system. A degree, followed by a specialised PGCE, eventually led me to teaching RE in a Primary School. Not a path I had planned in any linear or strategic sense, but one that now feels both inevitable and entirely right.

And here I am. A “highly skilled professional educator” (a phrase that still makes me smile wryly) standing in a room full of extraordinary individuals with wildly diverse needs, capacities, backgrounds, and inner lives (haven't we all?). On a given morning, my task may be to persuade them that using fronted adverbials are genuinely important, that punctuation has meaning, that words have power. It is necessary work, and often joyful, but also deeply grounded in the practical realities of schooling.

Then, an hour later, after lunch, in come Bo and Alby, my Grove companions, bringing with them that unmistakable glow of Druidry, and a certain grounding sanity that feels almost medicinal. “Would you mind if you wear your robes?” I had asked beforehand, with some trepidation. They changed in the tiny disabled loo next to my classroom and then, upon entry, utterly transformed the space. My classroom, usually a kinetic tumble of what I affectionately call “squirrels on elastic,”

fell into an amazed, reverential silence as they swept in, cloaks a-floating, presence unmistakable.

It was Imbolc. They showed the children the Four Directions, spoke the words of Peace, “for without Peace can no work be,” and then invited them into gentle, creative response: to make Bríde crosses, to write poems of Spring, or to draw pictures that expressed what renewal and awakening meant to them. This was not performance. It was not spectacle. It was an authentic encounter with a lived worldview, an example of pagan practice and philosophy embedded naturally within a Religion and Worldviews lesson in 2025.



I am deeply proud to be able to say that, as a result of my work and the sustained work of many others over years and decades, paganisms are now treated with the respect accorded to the six main institutions of faith: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism. They sit alongside more marginalised religious and non-religious spiritual philosophies such as the Bahá'í Faith and Humanism, not as curiosities or footnotes, but as meaningful lenses through which human beings understand existence, ethics, and belonging.

At the time of writing, around the Full Moon on Wednesday 5 November, an “incendiary” paper was published that swept through the curriculum currently taught in British schools with something of a stiff broom. How appropriate, methinks; a cleansing fire, a clearing of old debris. Within it sits a strong and long-awaited rationale for RE to join the National Curriculum, moving, at last, from the cinders to the ball. RE: our beautiful, unruly, often-misunderstood subject, which reveals the astonishing diversity of people's spirituality and explores how we respond to the world and to one another. After more than 80 years of curricular relegation, it is finally being recognised for what it truly offers.

The report promises full consultation with all stakeholders, including groups like the Pagan Federation, and, astonishingly, somewhere in that process, me. I have had the honour of being consulted on my Druidry worldview for lessons that are not theoretical or aspirational, but are actively being taught in classrooms today. At a

recent conference for RE teachers, a colleague told me that her class of Y8s (12–13-year-olds) had said, with some excitement, “That was our RE teacher! That’s Mrs Twiggs.” “You are famous,” she laughed.

That may be, but fame is not the point and, frankly, it is a deeply uncomfortable concept for most teachers. What matters is that alongside Wicca and, more latterly, Heathenism, Druidry is now being brought to pupils in the classroom. For some children, this is the first time they have seen something of their own home worldview reflected back at them with seriousness and respect. For others, it is an encounter with a way of seeing the world that challenges assumptions, expands empathy, and unsettles easy binaries. That recognition (I exist, and my way of understanding the world matters) is profoundly empowering.

Beyond the classroom, I sit on a Local Education Authority committee that decides what and how RE should be taught. The questions we wrestle with are not merely about content, but about purpose. How do we enable pupils to think critically? How do we teach them to question well, to navigate the smoke and mirrors that distort truth in our multi-platformed digital and real social worlds? These questions are not reserved for older students. Philosophical enquiry begins early. Even five-year-olds ask:

“Miss, who is this ‘God’ fella?”

“How did we get here?”

And, perhaps most poignantly, “Why are there bad people?”

Religions and Worldviews is probably the only subject taught in Britain where pupils are explicitly encouraged to form opinions, articulate them, listen to opposing views, and disagree well. Perhaps it is precisely because of this, because of the challenge it poses to passive learning and unquestioned authority, that RE has been so persistently sidelined. As one eminent religious educationalist said to me recently: “Look at the big picture. Politically, do they want children to grow up and question?” Food for thought indeed.

Many academics in the theory and philosophy of education argue that we are increasingly inhabiting a system designed to produce knowledge machines: students trained to accumulate facts, pass exams, and feed the vast assessment industry

that has grown around schooling. Whilst there is, of course, a place for knowledge and rigour, this approach risks hollowing out education’s deeper purpose. We should instead be practising a pedagogy that enables children to become responsive, reflective individuals — people capable not only of understanding the world, but of acting within it.

Gert Biesta, a prominent educational theorist, argues that education must attend not only to qualification (knowledge acquisition) and socialisation (learning to function within society), but also to subjectification: the process through which a child comes to know themselves as a moral, responsible agent. Education, in this sense, is not about producing compliant citizens, but about nurturing persons who can think critically, make choices, and take responsibility for the consequences of those choices. Dangerous stuff and all firmly located within the realm of Religions and Worldviews.

When I was a child, my wonderful mother used to say that we should “learn how the machine works, so that we know exactly where to put the spanner in.” I feel that, in a small but significant way, this is precisely what we are doing.

As paganisms gain increasing standing in British culture, the introduction of pagan (and other philosophies) into children’s education enables them to begin seeing through cultural norms and inherited prejudices. It opens up possibilities for broader, more inclusive ways of understanding the world and one another. It fosters empathy without erasing difference, curiosity without appropriation. This is not, I recognise, a mainstream revolution. It is, however, a strong and persistent evolution. There will always be children whose home cultures and lived experiences drown out the message of independent thinking. But my belief, grounded in years of classroom experience, is that even one or two pupils each year may carry these seeds forward, effecting change for the greater good as they move into adulthood. I know I risk sounding pompous or overly proud in writing this. Yet I understand this work as an act of service, both as a teacher and as a Druid. Teachers do not enter this profession for fame or glory. We do it, quite simply, for the love of it.

May the world come to understand the abundance of enough, and may we be honoured to play but a small part in shaping what comes next.

Teach Allais: Gaelic Houses of Sweat by Silenos

Ireland's green countryside is gifted with a wide array of stone ruins and abandoned stone structures. One kind of stone structure often found seems to resemble a beehive chamber of stacked drystone, with a low entrance. Inside the chamber is black with soot. Many archaeologists feel these were lime kilns. Lime kilns made quicklime by firing limestone in a hot peat fire, and hard-working farmers often built lime kilns to make money off-season by producing quicklime for market.

Another possibility is the lime kilns were primitive saunas called Teach Allais, which means "House of Sweat" in Gaelic. There is a lot of documented evidence about people in Ireland using hot-air vapor baths for rheumatism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Several methods were used, but the best known seems to have been building a large peat fire inside one of these little dry-stone chambers, letting it get good and hot, then, after the peat burnt down, sweeping out the hot embers and lining the hot floor with green rushes. The hot air bathers would crawl inside the tiny dark stone chamber and sweat until they felt better. "In some cases it is stated that a pool of fresh water, if in the immediate vicinity, was utilized as a plunge-bath for the perspiring bather who, having remained in the heated interior as long as practicable, would then cool himself in the water, and again return." (Woods-Martin)

Thermotherapy is scientifically proven to benefit the effects of rheumatism and it also has performance enhancing benefits for the joints and circulation. This is exactly what the ancient Gaelic inhabitants of Ireland used the Teach Allais for, to treat their rheumatism and make them feel invigorated.

Contemporary traditional saunas in Russia and Scandinavia were built in a similar way, build-

ing a big fire around a stone heat sink inside a cabin. When the fire burnt down the embers were swept out and the bathers would go inside the soot filled cabin. These traditional saunas are known as a Black Banya, banya being the Russian word for sauna. Today modern saunas use smokeless fireplaces, but the original method involved sweeping out the burned embers. It is entirely possible Irish people learned about saunas and banyas from North Sea sailors from Scandinavia or eastern Europe and adopted it to a lime and peat environment.



Image by Julianna

There seemed to be three types of Teach Allais which have been in use in Ireland. First the durable drystone structures, mentioned above. Second was a structure dug into a hillside and roofed with poles. As Mason writes:

"Among the mountains, the country people make use of sweating-houses in several cases of sickness. These small hovels are partly scooped out of the side of a hill, and finished with rods, with a very small entrance. In one of them, when heated like an oven with charred turf, the patient stretches himself upon some straw, and the entrance is closed up. He there lies in a state of violent perspiration, caused by the close heat, so long as he or his physician thinks proper. This operation is, as usual, among the ignorant, considered a sovereign remedy against almost every disorder, but is chiefly used for rheumatic pains."

Finally, at a pinch, a vapour bath was made by heating bricks until they were red hot in a fire, rolling them in a creel, or basket, and then sitting on the creel while wrapped in wool blankets. By creel, we probably mean lobster trap, not a tiny fly-fishing basket. It would take something the size of a lobster trap to keep one safely above some red-hot bricks. Woods-Martin writes that "Special herbs were placed under the creel, in some places, to give the patient the benefits of inhalation and fumigation." The

Creel and Blanket method shows how well the practice was known. There was a workaround for when a proper Teach Allais was unavailable.

The Teach Allais were reportedly more popular in the North of Ireland and County Tyrone. They seem to have been in use only among the Gaelic speaking Irish and so perhaps that is why they stopped being used. "In the localities where the English and Scottish settlers were in the majority it fell into disuse; but amongst the Irish -speaking inhabitants its value was fully known and appreciated." (Woods-Martin) Clearly the thermotherapy cure for rheumatism was known only to the Gaelic community of rural Ireland.

The use of thermotherapy for health and relaxation was known to traditional Irish healers, but due to forces of modernization it fell into disuse. Hopefully everyone can rediscover the benefits of thermotherapy known in old Ireland.



Image by Julianna

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Full Moon Prayer for Peace Zoom Circle by Silenos

*Deep within the still centre of my being, may I find
peace.*

*Silently within the quiet of the grove, may I share
peace.*

*Gently within the greater circle of humankind, May
I radiate peace.*

Starting in September 2025 once a month, near the full moon, a few of us gather online to pray for peace together. We take a moment to ground, visualizing peace in our own way, sharing intentions at the same time around the world. We send that peaceful energy outward. Then we join in a simple 15-minute ceremony of familiar and cherished words, praying together for peace, united in the inner grove.

We use the magic of Zoom to connect. Cameras may be on or off, voices spoken or silent. A natural rhythm often arises during the prayers.

We share a simple ceremony drawn from Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids tradition. The shared talky bit lasts for about 15 minutes. Some speak, some listen, as they feel called. People are welcome to come and go freely. No experience is needed.

If you are an Order member not on the Hearth and would like to join us, please reach out through the contact form to request an invitation: web-of-light.com/contact.html. If you are on the Druid Hearth, join the "Druids for Peace" Hearth Circle or the "Web of Light Seed" Group Hearth Circle.

We usually meet on or about the Full Moon every month at 3 PM EST, 8PM GMT. You are very welcome to join us and add to the web of Full Moon Prayer for Peace

*We Swear by Peace and love to Stand
Heart-to-heart and hand-in-hand.
Mark, O, Spirit and hear us now
Confirming this, Our Sacred Vow*



Open Forum

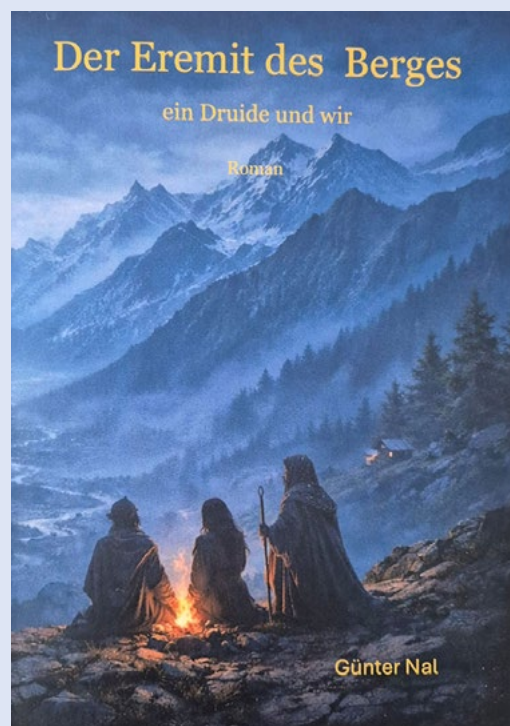
The Hermit of the Mountain by Günter Nal

I wanted to share a small milestone with you: after several years of work, my new novel *The Hermit of the Mountain – ein Druide und wir* is now approaching publication. As you might guess, it has grown very much out of the themes that have accompanied my work for years — the quiet thresholds between inner and outer worlds, the testing ground of real life, and the kind of spirituality that has to prove itself in the village as much as on the mountain.

The book will initially appear in German, but it will be available from March 10th 2026 via the usual online retailers in the UK and the US. An English edition may well follow in time.

ISBN: 9783695712953

E Book; ISBN: 9783695703036



Reviews

Whisper Along the Wind – Gifts from Crows featuring Gordon McLellan (aka ‘Gordon the Toad’)

Recently we had the great fortune to listen to local trio *Gifts from Crows* at a community centre in Chester. We treated to a glorious evening of wonderful and ethereal soft jazz inspired soundscapes, keyboards, sax, flute and drums. In many ways their music defies description and needs to be experienced to be understood, but I will do my best. The trio consists of pianist and composer Richard Laurence, multi-instrumentalist Helen Southall and her husband Garfield on drums, the keyboards providing the trunk and branches of each piece, with saxophone or flute the leaves, flowers and fruits, the music suggestive of colours, seasons or landscapes, with all of these underpinned by strong and gentle rhythms from the drums.

One of the many highlights of the evening were the tracks they played from their album *Whisper Along the Wind* a collaboration with pagan poet Gordon McLellan, who many of you will have heard speak, either at talks or poetry reading and sometimes, if we're lucky, both! The collaboration arose from a chance encounter, serendipity at its best. Sometimes things are just meant to be. The trio were playing a gig at Buxton Festival, Gordon was in the audience and approached them afterwards to suggest they do something together, combining his poetry and their music. Gordon duly sent Richard a number of poems, recorded on his mobile phone whilst out walking or visiting sacred sites, so needing significant cleaning before they could be mixed into the recording. The result is this wonderful album, not something to be put on in the background and only half listened to, but deserving of focussed concentration. Just close your eyes and let the poetry and music take you on a journey.

For more information, visit: <https://giftsfromcrowsmusic.com/trio> and <https://giftsfromcrows.bandcamp.com>

The video for Night Charm can be found at <https://youtu.be/eLLpVZ64tU4>

by Jem Warren

Andrew's Bit At The Back

"I used to know my name. Now I don't.
I think a river understands me.

For what does it call itself in that blessed
moment when it starts emptying into the
Infinite Luminous Sea,

and opening every aspect of self wider than
it ever thought possible?"

Hafiz

At the end of March, I was asked
to attend a very special event, a
"living memorial" to celebrate
the life of JJ Middleway. JJ was re-
cently told by his oncologists that
he had "a few months.... Maybe
a year" left to live ("I might have
plans to hang around" JJ noted,
"although I'm very content to pass through the
veil and back to the source"). Unfortunately,
I wasn't able to get there in person but lives-
treamed the whole, beautiful event from St Lau-
rence, the Stroud Centre for Peace & the Arts.



What unfolded over the next few hours was an
event which was completely joyful. There was
something which felt absolutely right about
celebrating JJ's life while he was there. It made
me reflect on funerals and memorial services
I'd attended in the past, all of which happened
after the person had passed. They were all,
without exception, mournful, contemplative
affairs. Even the inclusion of *Bring Me Sunshine*
by Morecombe and Wise as the final song at my
Father's funeral, didn't stop it from being a sad
goodbye. What, I wonder, would it have been
like if he'd actually been there with us?

As you would expect from an event honouring
JJ, there was plenty of drumming throughout.
Two of JJ's trademark velvet coats hung from the
archways at the back of the stage, meaning that
he was a constant presence through the events,
even when he couldn't be seen. Of course, he ac-
tually was present, receiving a standing ovation

at the start of the event and appearing regularly
throughout. Adrian Rooke was first on stage
to speak of his best friend. "The testimony of a
man's life is the friends he's accrued along the
way" Adrian said "and the joy he spreads in the
world. And I think JJ ticks both of those boxes."

What followed were a series of short speeches
by people who knew JJ (the story told by his sis-
ter, of how their parents met and of their child-
hood in Birmingham was a particular highlight,
as was the poem, written and read by his Niece,
to her beloved "Uncle John") along with plenty
of songs and performances. There was a star-
tlingly moving moment about half way through,
where JJ was covered in rose petals and buds
by a team of Rose Priestesses, while a
song about the power of roses was sung:
"Sweet rose you soothe my heart / You
light a candle in the dark". Damh the
Bard rounded off the event with a rous-
ing rendition of *Wild Mountain Thyme*,
which had the whole congregation
swaying and singing along.

There was something so completely and abso-
lutely right about this celebration. It was unlike
anything else I've ever been to. It left me feeling
that this is what a death ceremony should be: it
should be funny, warm, and hopeful, just like
life. And far from feeling like an ending, it felt
like springtime. There was a definite sense of
continuation. "Avalon awaits" JJ told us, "It's the
next part of the journey." As he was swept away
down the aisle on a wave of love, his drum was
symbolically left in the middle of the stage as a
reminder of where he had stood.

This is not JJ's eulogy but this is a reflection
on the beauty and potency of a celebration of
which he was the centre. "It's not about me"
JJ said. "I'm the excuse, the catalyst. But I want
this to be a vortex, a cauldron of love to offer out
to all existences." That in itself was the most JJ
thing about the event. Thank you, JJ, for yet an-
other wonderful gift you have given this world.

*Until
next time, Andrewiii*



To find Events from OBOD members and friends throughout the year, check the events page on the Druid Hearth: <https://hearth.druidry.org/events>

Upcoming Events

Bardic Gorsedd: 24-26 July 2026, Noddfa Retreat Centre, Penmaenmawr. For more Information, email bardicgorsedds@obod.org

Summer Gathering: 6-7 June 2026, Strode Theatre, Street (some introductory activities on 5 June)

Winter Gathering: 12 December 2026, Strode Theatre, Street (some introductory activities on 11 December)

SHOBOD Assembly: April 29th - May 2nd 2027, Adelaide, Australia

Weaving the Web: 22.-25. July 2027, Herbstein/Fulda, Germany. for more Information, email weaving@obod.org or www.weltderlinden.de/weaving

Social Media



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<https://www.facebook.com/druidry>



TikTok:
<https://www.tiktok.com/@oboddruidry>



Instagram:
<https://www.instagram.com/oboddruidry>



Threads:
<https://www.threads.com/@oboddruidry>



*As the air softens
the pear tree's white flowers bloom
against the irised sky.*

Poem by Jessica McGee

Photo by Rhyannon Brightwater