Gwers: Druidry and Parenting

Letter

Dear Friends on the Druid Path:

Quite appropriately, I celebrated the first Imbolc of the Ovate grade while I was massively pregnant with my daughter. I remember lighting candles on a cold, silent night, creating a small circle of firelight, and thinking, 'Obviously I'm not doing any part of this on the floor.' I gave thanks that my long desire for a child would come true when the weather turned warm again.

Three years plus a few months later, here I am, still an Ovate, but one who has passed along some of the toughest parts of the path of parenthood. Although I had continued working with my druid learning and practice throughout these past several years, I'd had to set much of the formality by the wayside until recently. Upon returning to the gwersi and rituals in a more dedicated manner, I realized that I felt that parenthood itself had helped to develop myself as an Ovate. It was difficult, in fact, to separate the qualities that I had honed through practicing my druidry from those I had strengthened by raising a tiny daughter. In truth, parenthood has helped to create these skills in stronger and more authentic ways than practicing in a quiet room with fire and stones ever could.

I am a mother who doesn't have a mother to guide me – mine lost a powerfully fought battle many years ago already. Perhaps this is why I actively seek out wisdom and parenting guidance, and why I search for a place in the great family of the Earth. Often I feel like I'm twice my real age, which is 36. I've had twice the sorrows as many in my age cohort, but also twice the joy and twice the wise friends that one can reasonably ask for.

This gwers explores connections between druidry and parenting across centuries. Why pursue this topic? I hope that it will interest many members who may be fortunate enough to have both of these powerful strands running through their lives, now or in the past or future. I also know that, as a research librarian, the gift of organized, relevant, and interesting information dug up from many sources is one that I can share.

The piece begins by discussing connections between druidry, particularly the Ovate grade, and parenting in greater depth, based on my own perspectives. It follows with a discussion of practice adapted for those of us for whom time and privacy come at a premium. I discuss what a range of literature, both ancient and modern, tells us about the connections. And I end with an Eisteddfod.

Heartfelt thanks to my Ovate tutor, Caryl, who has become a beloved friend and guide through this time of change. It hasn't been a fast Ovate grade, but it's been beautiful.

Karen

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Living Druidry through Our Parenting

Many of us have experienced the Ovate grade and parenthood simultaneously. Others have been Ovates and parents during subsequent periods of our lives. When we've had a rare moment to reflect, some of the similarities and connections may have impressed us with their power. What qualities of parenthood and the Ovate grade overlap?

- When our first child is born, we move from focusing on strengthening the self to investing everything we have in someone we love. For me, this felt much like the move from the arts and poetry of the Bardic grade to the healing of the Ovate grade.
- We keep vigils on some dark nights. There is no prayer like the prayer for a sick loved one late at night. There is no love like love for the sick, or for the co-parent who checks in during the loneliest hours to make sure that all is [relatively] well.
- We instill peace. We work both in front of and behind the scenes to build foundations of love for our children. We hope that when they grow up, they will remember their childhoods with a sense of peace and laughter.
- We step into some difficult places, difficult both for us and for our children. We do this as the seasons, our children, and we ourselves, continue to grow and to change. We often do our duties at point of need, like the ancients. Sometimes we are afraid the first time, but not the second. Sometimes it takes five or ten tries before we cast off our fear.
- We heal. Our mental store of salves and solutions grows over time and through experience.
- We also care for the body in times of good health. All of the unglamorous maintenance we give our children for their first few years of life is a manifestation of our love. Diapers are only the beginning.
- We see some bizarre things in our day. None of the odd things that happen in Celtic myths can hold a candle to a day with a toddler.
- Perhaps we once imagined that the world held no such indescribable perfection as the one we found in nature. Then we fell in love with our child and found an even greater level of wordless joy. *Then* we got to watch our child fall in love with nature. Remember watching him toddle down a trail for the first time or point at the moon?
- Let's emphasize this one more time: We love. We are love. Over time, we find ourselves better able to embody love to our children, and to the world.

Whether or not our families participate significantly in our druid practice, druidry helps us to be better parents. We've covered the influences of healing and peace. What other positive connections have druid parents found?

Druidry reminds us to honor our devotion to the Earth. As the parent of a child who will live on this Earth for decades to come, I appreciate living a worldview with Earth and its entire range of living things at the center. Viewing Earth at the center is nothing new – Celtic mythology, shaped and retold by our druid ancestors, reminds us that humans are only one piece of a complex picture. Gwyn and Thomas Jones mention this fact in their spirited and highly readable introduction to *The Mabinogion*: "It is a world in which birds and beasts are as important as men, a world of hunting, fighting, shapeshifting, and magic" (Jones and Jones, xxi). In more recent times, even England's Prince Philip went so far as to say, "It is now apparent that the ecological pragmatism of the so-called pagan religions…was a great deal more

realistic in terms of conservation ethics than the more intellectual monotheistic philosophies of revealed religions" (Speech to the North American Conference on Religion and Ecology, Washington DC, 18 May 1990; quoted by Carr-Gomm and Heygate 482).

In addition to the Earth, druidry teaches us to honor our connection to the long stream of history. Perhaps those of us without a strong culture to belong to, or without close extended family, value these connections the most. We learn humanity's stories and themes in all their drama and humor. We finally learn how deeply an old, barebones myth that has been passed down through the centuries can touch us. We relish the delicious detail that has survived the centuries in *The Mabinogion*.

One thing that has interested me about druidry is the variety of faith-related and ethical viewpoints that we druids bring. I think I had expected that all of us would simply be those who feel inspired by the power of the forest, whatever that means to us as individuals. Perhaps that's the core, but the story isn't that simple. Whatever other values we bring, we as druids revere groundedness. Inspiration. Freedom of intellect. Wisdom.

As a new parent, I meditated on the value of groundedness and other qualities of the North most frequently of all. (Maybe I was too tired to feel the other three cardinal directions for that first year.) How many times as parents do we face a new, substantial, and emotional challenge? Every day. As druids, we have strategies to remind ourselves to face these situations with the wisdom of centuries, to apply our best judgment, and to stay calm.

When I made the choice to reach out to OBOD four years ago, I was impressed by the organization's gentle insistence that those under sixteen were generally too young to commit to this or other paths yet. This was in direct opposition to my childhood experiences being raised in the church, where I was told what to believe without questioning. Now that I have my own child in my life, I frequently think about the balance between my responsibility to teach my child morals in a complex world and her eventual right to choose her own ethical system. I deeply appreciate OBOD's respectful insistence on giving an individual the right to his or own free will at the appropriate developmental time.

Adapting Our Druidry

Becoming a parent may affect your druid practice in ways you'd never expect. Once your tiny beloved comes along, you'll have little time and even less privacy. You may develop an unexpected fear of leaving innocuous objects from nature sitting out, unguarded, in your house: a pile of rocks on the hearth? A vase with flowers and water? Do you know how much havoc a small child could wreak with those?! If you've been attending a grove, you may not be able to do so for a while, or you may not be able to do so as often as you'd like. Fortunately, most of us don't spend much money on our practice anyway, because you're about to spend all of your cash on your child, too.

You trade all of that for the greatest love of your life. That love is worth all this and more. Plus, other parents tell me that you eventually get your time and privacy back, although I haven't made it to that stage yet.

The qualities that you develop through parenting are powerful, and also align quite congruently with those of the Ovate in particular.

- First and foremost, you will mature in ways that you can't imagine and that I can't properly describe. You have to be the adult in the situation again and again and again. You learn to see the long view. You learn to better handle criticism, because both your child and plenty of other parents will heap it on you. After a while, you will notice that these qualities begin to shine through in other situations.
- As we've discussed earlier, parents get extensive practice in healing both physical and emotional wounds. If you haven't been the kind of person to jump in when you see someone get injured, you will be now.
- Your compassion will deepen, not just for your child, but for others. You will start to see the big picture of humanity. You will also cry at other people's stories if you didn't already. You will learn to support other people.
- You will develop emotional strength. Parenting is a blur of your emotions, your children's emotions, and other people's emotions, all playing together and clashing. You will find highs and lows and, ultimately, strengths that you never imagined.
- If you're fortunate enough to have a good co-parent or other parenting team, you'll learn to work together toward important causes, big and small.
- You'll learn all about fairness. Wait until your child gets bitten at daycare – and then bites someone else. After all these years, this is the situation that finally taught me how to balance justice and kindness for both victim and perpetrator.
- Finally, you'll join the Earth's long, long chain of parenting *and* the web of all of us who are parenting on this planet right now.

None of these are druid things. They make you a better druid, but they'd make you a better Methodist, Muslim, atheist, or anybody else as well. We're all for positive universal qualities.

Practicing your druidry while parenting a young child requires adaptations. I have the good fortune of having a supportive tutor who is a mother as well. She has helped me to continue and adapt my own practice, and to honor all of the qualities I've developed along the way.

Here are a selection of practical ideas that help us to continue and adapt our practice through time- and privacy-strapped years:

- Try meditating your way through rituals. Performing rituals at my living room altar became complicated when I became a parent. Sometimes I found the time and privacy – but it wasn't nearly as often as I'd like. Instead, I started doing a ritual in person the first time, and then going through it in my mind when I wasn't able to find sufficient time or space. It's very peaceful to do this first thing in the morning or at bedtime.
- Nimue Brown's *Druidry and Meditation* has many other thoughtful ideas for druid meditations. Her ideas have become an important part of my practice.
- Try finding simple, small ways to make your ritual time and space special. Put a special candle and stones, for example, in your bedroom so you can work with them in a few space moments. Have a special piece of clothing or jewelry that you can wear during your ritual time. Make sure it's one that won't hold you back if you have to run and get the baby! I knitted a mossy-colored woolen shawl that I wear to mark my ritual time now.
- Focus on the aspects of ritual that mean the most to you. If it's greeting the morning with gratitude, make sure you get to do that. If it's telling your ancestors that you love them every night, make that a part of your day. Do a "light body" exercise at bedtime if that speaks to you. You might not get to

celebrate Beltane on the right day or as extensively as you'd like, but you'll still feel that your practice connects you with the universe in the ways that are most heartfelt to you.

- Read *Touchstone*. Listen to *Druidcast.*
- If you have a little time to read, even if it's on the train to work, spend some of it reading up on the druid topics that interest you the most. This may be the time when you focus on reading interesting bits and pieces about weather, geology, and so on.
- Spend time in nature with whoever else wants to join you. Help your child look forward to time spent outside every day, whether it's a short excursion to the porch or a hike.
- When you're outside with your child, build some "druidy" things into your time together. Pick up rocks. Comment on the current phase of the moon. Rub bark and leaves. Press flowers from different seasons. You'll feel like a proper druid, and both of you will engage more deeply with the Earth.
- Keep in touch with your druid friends.

For better or worse, this time of your life doesn't last forever. At least that's what they tell me. Do your best to practice in ways that are meaningful to you.

The Goddess

For many druid women I have met, the Goddess, be she Brigid, Ceridwen, or another, forms a major part of their practice. Reverence for a Goddess fits smoothly with other aspects of druidry. It gives practitioners a meaningful way to add on a layer that focuses on women's perspectives and concerns. Goddess veneration or worship, particularly in groups, often reflects a feeling of community of women: women supporting each other through the challenges of life. Few of those challenges are as complicated, important, or heartfelt as motherhood. The Goddess is portrayed in terms of those three well-known stages of womanhood: maiden, mother, and crone. As moving between stages is often challenging and unsettling – as well as exciting – for women, it's powerful to honor those stages current, future, and past.

Besides the powerful role that Brigid plays for many practicing druids, she has the distinction of being the daughter of a druid. Susa Morgan Black's wonderful article on Brigid, written for OBOD (see list of references), discusses two possible stories of family origins for Brigid. In one, Brigid is the daughter of a druid, Dubthach, and a bondsmaid, Broichech. In another, Brigid is "fostered and raised" by an unnamed druid. Either way, druidry played a powerful role in shaping this generous woman who, in turn, played major roles in both druid and Christian philosophies and faiths.

I have to admit that the Goddess plays only a small part in my own practice. I have an intense relationship with Nature, capital N, in a fairly nontheistic sense. Yet when I see the moon each night, that symbol of the Goddess, I do feel the divine.

After performing quite a bit of reading on questions of druidry and parenting, I started to understand many women's attraction to the Goddess more. Or rather, the need for something that was specifically feminine in their druid practice. In my worldview, Nature is balanced in terms of gender. The modern druids I meet tend to be open minded and forward thinking. Yet druidry still has a masculine image, at least on the surface. This sense intensified for me as I read Ronald Hutton's *The Druids* and then T.D. Kendrick's *Druids and Druidism*. Kendrick points out that there are only two instances in historical literature where women take part in druid events. He points out that we cannot even be sure from the

text that the women are were in fact druids (Kendrick 95-96). In one of the instances, Vopiscus's *Aurelianus*, English-language versions use the word "druidesses" in reference to women that Aurelius consults regarding his heirs' futures as royalty. However, Kendrick remarks that the term used in the original text is *dryades*, which could actually refer to other types of fortune tellers, too (96). Both Kendrick and Hutton discuss an exciting scene in Tacitus's *Annals* in which both men in classic druid garb and black-clad women with streaming hair defend the druids' island, Mona (Kendrick 91-93; Hutton, *The Druids* 1-6). While it's highly tempting to leap to the conclusion that these women were druids, both authors remind us that we cannot make this assumption. It's no wonder that many modern women desire a specifically feminine addition to druid practice or spirituality.

"The Literature"

Druids have appeared in literature, both fiction and nonfiction, for centuries. For millennia, when we count oral tradition (as we should). What do we know about druidry and parenting from all of this wealth of information, then? The short answer is, almost nothing. If you're looking for definitive, detailed answers, skip this section. In summary, the best clue we have is a couple of references to druid parents and grandparents in Irish myths. That's it. Skip forward to the present day again, and you'll find literature on a range of pagan parenting strategies and philosophies, which I briefly outline.

You'll notice that I've focused on ancient and medieval sources, and then on modern sources, while skipping the wealth of druid materials from the eighteenth and nineteenth materials. This was a conscious choice. Ancient and medieval materials are scanty, but they come the closest to working with original source material, biased though that is. Nonfictional works on druids from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are available in great quantities, but the historiography – the methods for telling history – are terrible. As the market for buying printed literature became larger and larger, authors of nonfiction embellished freely in order to sell, sell, sell. (Ronald Hutton discusses this phenomenon in detail in *The Druids*.) Fiction from those periods is even more entertaining, and even less related to any facts. Again, turn to the Hutton for fascinating commentary, as well as images from publications and performances from the 18th through the 21st centuries.

Modern pagan literature encompasses a much wider range of viewpoints and commentary. The pagan parenting literature that I surveyed came primarily from Wiccan and eclectic points of view. In fact, I have not yet found any explicitly druidic literature on parenting. I hope that one of us writes it one day.

This section doesn't provide many answers. However, it will connect you with fascinating threads from millennia of history and literature.

Ancient and Medieval Sources

These days I work as a librarian at a university, and I frequently talk with students about "scope creep": the tendency to include things that are interesting but irrelevant to the topic at hand in a paper. Right now, though, I'm going to let myself enjoy a little bit of scope creep, because I uncovered incredibly cool things while learning about ancient and medieval accounts of druids. If you'd prefer to stick closely to the topic of druidry and parenting, please skip to the next section, "What Mythology Says," which does actually focus on druid parents.

I was fortunate as an undergraduate to take a series of Celtic history courses in which we read the works of many British and Irish chroniclers, among other things. Fifteen-ish years later, my memories of the details had faded so much that I imagined there were plenty of scenes of druids and their flocks of children. Not so. In fact, none of the ancient or medieval sources that I have read or seen cited mention druids as parents. Neither does it mention them as being celibate. In fact, these sources show an interesting distancing from the druids' personal lives.

Much of this probably relates to *who* wrote accounts of ancient druids. I was fascinated to learn that our most extensive early accounts of the druids come from Julius Caesar, who personally wrote these texts, and who wasn't much for descriptions of people's personal lives. Unfortunately for this project, most of the other Roman writers who gave us insights on the druids had similar preferences: Tacitus, Lucan, Diodorus, and more. We can be thankful that Pliny took a different route in some of his writing: with his interest in nature writing, he recorded druids' relationship with the oak tree (*Blood and Mistletoe* 45).

If you would like to learn about ancient and medieval accounts of druids, you can of course turn to the original texts, which will help you to place them in context. T.D. Kendrick's book *Druids and Druidism* provides a particularly clear guide to accounts of the druids. One section of the book provides every one of the relevant Roman excerpts, and you can either choose to focus on those excerpts or track down the full works.

To gain a broad picture of scholars' perspectives on these accounts of the druids, it can be helpful to read works by authors from different disciplines. Ronald Hutton is a historian with a deep interest in druids, as well as close connections with OBOD. Miranda Aldhouse-Green and Stuart Piggott are both archaeologists, although they take their writing in very different directions. T.D. Kendrick managed the British antiquities collection at the British Museum from the 1930s to 1950, and had a special interest in druidry. If I had to recommend works to read, I'd suggest either Hutton's *The Druids*, a highly readable popular work distilled from his research, or Kendrick's *Druids and Druidism*, which is beautifully eloquent and full of useful excerpts.

One very relevant thing that all of these works cover is the fact that we really have no idea what role women played in druid societies. As I mentioned in the section on The Goddess above, we see women alongside male druids, and we see druid terminology being used in reference to women, but we really don't know what roles they really played. In fact, none of the modern scholarly authors claims to know. I jumped with enthusiasm while reading the index of *Blood and Mistletoe* (librarians do that) when I saw a reference to druidesses as druids' wives (186). Unfortunately, Hutton further explained that this was the work of eighteenth-century clergyman John Smith, who he uses as an example of poor methodology and the blending of fact with wishful thinking.

There's some irony in criticizing Smith for mixing fact and fiction, because that practice had been perfectly normal in the past. Think of the myths that bards (druid or not) reciting stories of the past through poetry and stories. We really have no idea whether Déirdre and Cathbad, the various Merlins, and even Arthur were real. Yet they are wound tightly with history through legends.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, author of the *History of the Kings of Britain* and the *Life of Merlin*, wound history and myth together so tightly that we often cannot tell one from the other. Hutton kindly refers to him as "the twelfth-century composer of romanticised history" (*The Druids* 26). The *Life of Merlin*, often referred to by its original Latin title, *Vita Merlini*, took the life of Merlin – or lives, if "Merlin" is a

conglomeration of multiple people – and turned his relationship with Arthur (who may or may not have existed) into a cohesive tale. In using this creative historiographic method, Geoffrey may have created more confusion than he alleviated. For the record, Merlin is not a parent in this volume. Geoffrey provides a good segue into Celtic mythology, which finally provides evidence, if not facts.

What Mythology Says

Celtic mythology gives us little detail about druids as parents. It does, however, tell us that some druids *were* parents, at least in stories. Irish mythology provides more relevant details than its equivalents from Britain. Of course, we cannot assume that myths reflect reality. We can take them as hints but not as facts.

Cathbad, teacher and seer of the future, is one of few druids besides Brigid's father Dubthach that I have come across portrayed as a parent – and grandparent – in Celtic mythology. He's best known as Cú Chulhainn's grandfather (Nichols 50). The Irish story "Déirdre of the Sorrows and the Sons of Uisneach" also mentions that Cathbad the druid was also the father of Ebhla. Ebhla gave birth to famed athletes Ainle and Ardan (O'Farrell, 75). Unfortunately, the Déirdre legend veers off in another direction after mentioning this enticing detail. From the tone of the language used to mention Cathbad's status and a father and grandfather, however, we can infer that the speaker finds nothing unusual about a druid being a parent.

The Mabinogion, the classic collection of Welsh tales, does not have any druid characters at all. Merlin does not even appear in the four Arthurian stories in the collection ("Culhwch and Olwen," "The Lady of the Fountain," "Peredur," and "Gereint Son of Erbin.") This is despite the fact that druids likely passed iterations of the tales down the centuries orally. There are a handful of references to "wise men," although, given individual contexts, the only one that could plausibly refer to druids occurs in "Pwyll Prince of Dyfed": "So Rhiannon summoned her teachers and wise men" (*Mabinogion* 19). Interestingly, this takes place in a context related to parenting: Rhiannon's struggle with infertility. Unfortunately, we receive no additional detail on the wise men and cannot safely declare them to be druids.

A handful of additional characters in Irish mythology who are parents but not druids do own druid accessories. These objects imbue their owners with powers, which they may or may not be able to control. Perhaps this is a statement on the need to have the training in order to control the power. The Irish character Cian, father of Lugh, owns a "druidic wand" in some versions of his stories. He accidentally enchants a pig, and has to draw in his son to handle the aftermath (O'Farrell 93). Bódearg accidentally turns his foster-daughter into a Morrígan with a "druidic rod" (O'Farrell 19). Thus, it's only Cathbad, the sole druid of the group, who keeps his magic under control. Note that this fact does not have a direct connection with his status as a father.

Both Irish and Welsh mythology do provide us with plenty of information on family relationships and family structure in Celtic communities. (Remember that you can't trust information gleaned from myths to be factual. Sometimes, as with ancient history, however, it's the best you've got.) We learn that Celtic families were just as complicated as families today. In fact, read through any collection of Celtic mythology, and most themes will seem familiar: birth and parenthood; jealousy among siblings, spouses, and others; domestic violence; and riches and poverty, to name a few. Some additional themes

are notable, though: many, many characters are fostered, including Arthur. They also contain far more infanticide and child abuse then many of us are comfortable reading about for entertainment now.

The Brehon Laws

One of the most productive sources of information on druid society and families in ancient times is the Brehon Laws. As with many threads of Celtic societies that have survived centuries, the origins are unknown. Historians believe that judges in early Irish society began to solidify them, and that later societies in Ireland wrote them down. We are fortunate in that parts of the Brehon Laws survive, and that the guidelines that they provide give us many tantalizing clues about the societies that they came from. They are readily accessible and easily readable. My reading focused on the "Leges Minores" section of the laws, which is divided into "Marriage," "Fosterage, "Contracts and Wills," "Artisans," and "Oaths;" the divisions give you some idea of the content. Other sections of the laws cover, for example, capital punishment, laws pertaining to "non-free" people, laws discussing the clan system, and many more aspects of society. As you read, you will see subtle clues as to the time periods when these laws evolved. It's well worth exploring the laws. *The Brehon Laws: A Legal Handbook,* an 1894 book by Laurence Ginnell, an Irish lawyer and nationalist politician, which is now freely available online. As Philip discussed, the laws (neatly summarized by Ginnell) really do provide interesting clues about the society the ancient druids lived in. (Note that the ebook version is unpaginated, but the chapters are short enough that you can find information easily within them.)

In a section of the book titled "The Druids," Ginnell sets down the many roles that druids played in their societies. He shows deep respect for their expertise and wisdom, although not for the religion they represented. Despite discussing the druids primarily as priests and comparing them to their Roman equivalents, he does not give us any clues as to their family status.

We do, however, learn many relevant things about the societies that the druids and brehons lived in and mediated. In the section of Ginnell's book titled "Marriage," the author discusses the fact that Celtic families were by no means nuclear. Rather, he explains, a "family" was more like a "small private circle." It's interesting to compare marriage laws that seem modern and foresighted with a few that seem pretty awful. Ginnell explains that divorce was easy to come by, and that in practice, it was often more like separation. Women seem to have had an easier time than men in filing for divorce. When a couple divorced (or separated), a woman took with her the possessions she had brought to the marriage. She also took belongings shared by herself and her husband, based on the circumstances of the divorce and how hard she had worked during the marriage. All of this sounds relatively modern. However, Ginnell goes on to discuss ways in which wives could be obtained. He explains that, in both England and Ireland, men could purchase or "abduct" a wife. Purchasing a wife, he notes, was the more common practice in England, but abduction was more common in Ireland.

In an interesting and somewhat offhand note, Ginnell says that marriage laws retained pagan overtones even once Ireland became primarily Christian.

For all of us who have read folktales and myths involving fosterage and wondered just what was going on, the Brehon laws provide significant insights. Ginnell's book includes a chapter called "Fosterage," which explains the relevant laws in detail. Fosterage was extremely common during Celtic times. Ginnell explains that we don't really know why this happened. He theorizes that, after generations, fosterage may have just become a "habit" for the Celts.

Ginnell tells us that wealthy and powerful people sent their children, both boys and girls, out for fosterage more than people with less power or money did. Children were typically fostered within a family's "fine": five degrees of separation from the parents. Most fostered children stayed with their fostered families from about the age of one year to the age of fifteen for girls and eighteen for boys. The foster relationship could only be broken if the child was married off, or if someone in the relationship died or committed a crime.

Ginnell says that the original Brehon laws laid down details of many different fostering relationships with plenty of detail. The only one for which he provides significant detail is that related to the ollamh. Ollamhs were druids who worked as teachers. Occasionally, a family would ask an ollamh to foster their child. In this case, the fosterage would work more like an adoption: the birth family would break its ties with the child, which was not typical in other foster situations. An ollamh who fostered a child would continue to teach other children alongside the foster child. This connection between teacher and foster child demonstrates that druids could indeed serve the role of parent – and a special kind of parent at that. While we do not know why ollamhs provided a more permanent situation than other foster parents did, it's provocative. It shows that some birth parents sought out druids to perform the parenting role. We can only imagine the qualities that the parents hoped the druids would instill in their children. Though we shouldn't use our imaginations too much while interpreting history (Ronald Hutton would remind us of that!), as parents, we can imagine the heartrending choice to give your child over to a druid and his wisdom, knowing that the child would no longer be yours.

One of the most important and revealing components of the Brehon fostering laws, in Ginnell's interpretation, is the focus on laws relating to what happened after a foster child came of age. The child would then leave his or her foster parents. If foster parents lacked their own biological children and were short on money, their former foster children were required to care for them.

What Modern Major Druids Say

Written works of major modern druids do not provide references to parenthood either. When I reread our own Philip Carr-Gomm's *The Book of English Magic* (a tremendously engaging book, and a treasure trove of magical miscellany), I was amazed that, in over 500 pages, there were no explicit connections made between druidry or other magical streams and parenting. Around the time that I reached a state of mild desperation about finding any references at all, I read through the book's several sections on John Dee. Dee and his wife had eight children – parenthood (Carr-Gomm and Heygate 268)! But actually, if you read between the lines of that biography, John Dee's fatherhood had no explicit connections with his status as one of the greatest magical figures in history. Dee's worldview and behaviors toward his family were doubtlessly affected by his experience with magic. It was still probably pretty weird living life as John Dee's child – I'm just using my imagination here. However, perhaps he and other magical figures throughout history have always respected their children's right to choose their own worldviews and religions upon reaching adulthood.

There are only two substantial categories of reference to children (and none to parenthood) in *The Book of English Magic.* The first encompasses J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (Carr-Gomm 233-5 and 245-7, respectively). These tales don't come from a druid perspective, per se, but they have certainly opened up the world of magic to interest – and public scrutiny. The major

child characters all adopt magical practice well before OBOD's age guideline of 16 years. However, all of them inhabit notably magical universes and have magical situations thrust upon them. They also either have no parents (Harry Potter and Lyra Belacqua, more or less), parents who allow significant level of physical and mental autonomy early on (Hermione Granger and Will Parry), or parents who approach magic as a magical affair, perhaps out of circumstance and necessity (Ron Weasley and family).

The second category of references to children in *The Book of English Magic* occur in the mini-biographies of individuals with connections to the spirit world. Some, such as Lorrie Coffey O'Connor, began to have their experiences during childhood (Carr-Gomm 419-421). None of these people, however, were guided to or otherwise influenced by parents' practices.

Nuinn's (Ross Nichols) *The Book of Druidry: History, Sites and Wisdom* outlines and discusses numerous historical sites associated with ancient druids, as well as with the Druid Revival. I find it genuinely fascinating that so many of the sites are associated with fertility, birth, or rebirth, but not with the actual life of a family. Why would this be true? Fertility was just a major, ongoing concern throughout history, period. It still is. In the cases of birth and rebirth, the historic sites symbolize them in conceptual senses; they do not commemorate the literal birth or birthday of an individual (or the rebirth, which cannot be literal). We also do not know exactly where important characters in Celtic history were born or raised. If we knew exactly where Arthur lived with his foster father, Sir Ector, for example, of course we would flock there. I would.

We can also intuit that parenting may have been less of a concern among ancient peoples than it is for us, which sounds pretty awful. We don't have reliable statistics on how many people lived together in ancient Celtic homes, or on the sizes of Celtic families. These questions are especially complicated in this society since so much fostering went on. However, we can take educated guesses that most people grew up surrounded by siblings, foster siblings, or other children from their villages. They took part in the business of child-rearing beginning in their own childhoods. The majority of people married relatively young and began a busy life of parenthood shortly thereafter. They also, sadly, expected that some of their children would die; infant and child mortality across the ancient world was high. All of these things came together to create a culture of parenthood that was tremendously different from ours.

Nuinn spends a great deal of time discussing my personal favorite Celtic site, the Avebury and Silbury Hill complex. (I had a magical experience with a raven there as a university student.) He believes that the West Kennet Long Barrow, part of the complex, honors the Mother Goddess. He also notes that the Mother Goddess connects with both life and death (Nichols 164-5). He also later refers to the Mother Goddess as the "deity of the hill" (173). One does not need to have personal experience as a parent to intuit that there's a lot between birth and death, and that the Mother Goddess has a hand in quite a bit of the dirty work.

Nuinn later discusses a site near Teltown, Ireland. Teltown's features include a long barrow, which commemorates Lugh's foster mother (Nichols 249). Foster parents certainly symbolize making an active choice toward parenthood. The woman who took on raising Lugh, in addition to her own children, certainly made a contribution to Celtic mythological history with her hard work.

The Book of Druidry also relates the familiar tale of Ceridwen, Gwion, and Morda (159-161). Something that interests me about this story is that it contrasts parenthood among the willing (Ceridwen and her

first son Avagddu; Elphin and his unnamed wife and Gwion/Taliesin) with parenthood among the unwilling (Ceridwen and Gwion/Taliesin). Ceridwen's awful pursuit of Gwion aside, the story celebrates those who enact dedicated parenting. For once, a tale does give us some detail: Ceridwen desperately tries to improve the unfortunate Avagddu's life. He is ugly, which in the context of a Celtic myth implies that people would have assumed that he had poor character as well. Yet his mother loved him and acted on that love. Elphin rescued Gwion from a bag in the river, and, along with his wife, raised this poor, persecuted child. Their love helped shape Gwion into perhaps the greatest druid of them all.

What Modern Pagan Authors Say

In contrast to the ancients, the chroniclers, scholars, and major modern druids, the expansive collection of modern pagan literature has a lot to say about families. It also provides wisdom that can help guide all of us, parents or not, who need help applying our druid worldview to a modern world. Pagans following paths outside of druidry have contributed quite a lot to the literature on living a pagan life, both openly and privately. It all depends whether you're interested in advice from other paths. I believe in reading widely and absorbing the information that applies to you.

Public libraries often have surprisingly strong collections of popular pagan literature. Try searching the catalog for: pagan AND parenting, or experiment with other words to describe your interests, such as "festivals," "altars," and so forth. Don't hesitate to ask a librarian for guidance; librarians are some of the most open-minded people on this planet.

Here's a small sampling of modern pagan works from my own reading. My favorite piece of modern druid literature, Penny Billington's *The Path of Druidry: Walking the Green Way*, contains many ideas for actively bringing druidry into a normal ("normal") adult life. Ms. Billington states her ideas as such:

> "That is exactly how Druidry fits: in the middle of mundane activities, it reminds us that we are not the center of the world, just a part of it. A world rich in complexity which can induce a state of wonder in a flash – even if tomorrow we take a duster to the cobweb" (xix).

When Billington writes about druidry at home, she's nonspecific about the people who share our lives. They might be a spouse or partner, children, or parents; or we might live alone. Her ideas apply to all of us, whatever our life situations. She gives us ideas for interacting with the nature that we have in our weekday lives: trees in our neighborhood; twenty minutes in front of our window during lunch time; a ritual nightly walk (and believe me, she does not let you get off easy for bad weather). Penny Billington brings mindfulness, beauty, and druid practice to the situations we have available to us. Many of these apply easily to those of us who want to teach our children to love and to continually observe the nature around them.

Your preferences in literature relating to pagan family life will depend on your personal philosophies about exposing your children to religion. Personally, I believe in setting up an environment where my child will develop love for and a deep relationship with nature, and a belief in conservation. I'll give her the worldview of a druid without pushing her toward that path. Whether she chooses to become a druid, or to adopt other religious or spiritual beliefs later in life is her choice. (This is, in part, informed

by my childhood in the Church. I was given a set of doctrines to believe in, and received plenty of chastisement for all of the questions I asked.)

My favorite book on pagan parenting comes from a Wiccan author with a lot of common sense, as well as a good sense of humor. Deborah Blake's *The Goddess is in the Details* talks frankly and joyfully about living as a family with pagan parents. She gives her children privacy in the book, and does not detail what they believe. However, she does place emphasis on enjoying pagan festivals as a group, with family and friends. Blake acknowledges that her family's holidays make them stand out in some ways, and does her best to build bridges both inside and outside the pagan community. Her book is a joy to read. It can also be helpful for those of us who may feel "closeted" but who have the desire to begin to open up.

Other pagan parents believe in giving their children more spiritual and religious guidance from a young age. A quick search at your public library or online brings up many. Ceisiwr Smith's *The Pagan Family: Handing the Old Ways Down* focuses on celebrating the wheel of the year, family milestones, and even the phases of the moon as a family. It provides ideas for helping children grow up with the pagan festivals without heavy-handed religious instruction. Others, such as *Pagan Parenting: Spiritual, Magical & Emotional Development of the Child* suggest a more intensely pagan upbringing. The book focuses on questions and situations that children bring to their families, and how to handle them in ways aligned with a broadly defined pagan faith.

Today's pagan authors are clearly in touch with the range of situations and questions common to their readers. If you read widely enough, you'll find writing that speaks to your own style of parenting. You'll also probably find some pieces that you dramatically disagree with. Seek out answers to the questions you have, and keep exploring the materials that are out there.

Final Words

In the end, it's our embracement of modern druidry that builds us up as parents. That's not a surprise. We like the ancient druids; we find them fascinating; we treasure the bits and pieces that we know about them (there really are lots of interesting bits and pieces – read Hutton or Kendrick!). It's their legacy rather than specific advice that has stayed with us.

We've chosen this path. Out of all the paths in the world, we identify with this one that honors the Earth and the stream of human history. We appreciate peace and gentle strength. Those are the qualities that guide us as we raise our children.

Eisteddfod

Modern druid reading materials often mention the fact that many of us can identify druid inclinations that surfaced in our early lives. An excellent English teacher introduced me to this poem when I was a teenager who desperately wanted to escape my miniscule mid-Atlantic town. Although "Lucinda Matlock" represented everything that I wanted to leave behind at the time, paradoxically, Lucinda's life spoke to me.

I don't believe that we can ever really explain why we love a poem. Here's a little piece of magic from Kansas, in the center of my lovely country.

Lucinda Matlock, from Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915)

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,
And played snap-out at Winchester.
One time we changed partners,
Driving home in the moonlight of middle June,
And then I found Davis.
We were married and lived together for seventy years,
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
Eight of whom we lost
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.
I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the garden, and for holiday
Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,
And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,
And many a flower and medicinal weed —
Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.
At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
And passed to a sweet repose.
What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you —
It takes life to love Life.

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