

BEETROOT BOOKS AUTHOR Q&A

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Beetroot Books – Author Q&A

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Introduction

All of the following conversations in this sprightly little book took place during the last decade. In case you missed it, that was one that at the time that felt tumultuous and ever changing. Viewed from the rolling deck of a very different ship of circumstances here in the Spring of 2020 it seems almost sedate.

Nevertheless, the conversations I shared with the authors featured here were driven by an obvious desire to find solutions for change. One that encompassed our cultural, spiritual and economic life. But then, as now, we all knew what the answers were, but we were looking for a narrative to coalesce around – and still are.

Doing so is not so easy when the words we read and images we absorb celebrate failure as success and change as something only to be filtered through the established paradigm.

So, you could say these conversations about spirituality, alternative economics, psychedelic culture, the political landscape and the real landscapes we inhabit are, as yet,

unfinished. I hope that in offering out their insights we can talk a little more.

Dan O'Neill

June 21st 2020

Aranya

I met Aranya when I undertook my Permaculture Design Certificate in Dartmoor in 2015. He certainly knows his stuff when it comes to systems thinking and solutions-based ideas. Perhaps more importantly, he's as generous with his time as he is with his ideas.

Aranya teaches, writes books and blogs, offers advice and skills on Permaculture techniques through his You Tube channel and yet still he found time to talk to me about his work and how we might build a sustainable future.

BB: Thanks for taking the time to talk to BB. We love your book 'Permaculture Design' and can't put it down at the moment! Anyway, would you like to start by defining just what Permaculture is, or isn't, for those encountering it for the first time?

A: OK, so permaculture is put very simply, 'nature inspired design'. We humans have needs, which we seek to meet from our environment. Permaculture takes what we can learn from how the rest of life does that in a completely sustainable way and provides guiding principles for us to do the same.

Nature is always contextual; for anything to survive and thrive it needs to be well adapted to its environment and that included our not so distant ancestors. So first we need to understand, through protracted observation, where we are, its limits and opportunities. Then we can make choices that best suit where we are. We can start at a very simple level and add more detail, the more we learn. It's a very practical thing and one that we can all make use of to improve our lives.

BB: You mentioned elsewhere that learning about permaculture was the, single most important thing you did in your life. That's pretty amazing, what about the subject made you feel that way?

A: The fact that it can be applied so widely. I feel like I'll never run out of things to learn as we can apply nature's successful patterns to pretty much everything we do. I also found a strong network of passionate and inspiring people that really gave me hope for the future, probably for the first time. Permaculture is solutions focussed and we humans can be amazingly creative in that

department, especially when we are up against limitations.

BB: As well as write, you also teach Permaculture at many levels. In your experience what motivates your students to want to come along and learn about it? Are there any particular reasons that stand out?

A: People come to permaculture for many reasons, but a common theme is looking for answers. Some people are at a crossroads in their life, seeking something to give them direction, others just looking to be more of a part of a network.

BB: When you've had a chance to put on a pair of 'permaculture goggles' as in, look at the world through the lenses of some of its central ideas - it suddenly seems pretty obvious that a great deal of waste and inefficiency is built into the way we do things, do you think Permaculture is a method we could use widely to mitigate these problems?

A: Absolutely! I believe that permaculture provides us with the means by which we can identify the best ways to meet our human needs. If we are on an energy descent

pathway as many suspect, then it can provide us with a better way forward. However, while it's easy to learn it takes a lifetime to master. Such experience comes from getting on and practising it and the best time to start is always now.

BB: 'Business as usual' is still the mantra for many but there does seem to be increasing awareness of the need for change. What would you say could be the easiest permaculture principle for someone to apply to their own life, if they're willing to do so?

A: 'Integrate rather than segregate' - seeks out others of like mind, either locally or online, and collaborate, share knowledge and resources. Build a network around you, that's the only real security there is.

BB: Thanks again for the chat, before you go, and because we're obviously a fan of those juicy globes that are the humble beetroot, would you happen to have a favourite recipe for them?

A: In juice, with carrots, celery and ginger. Sometimes with a little apple (in season), but

it's already sweet enough really and a beautiful colour!

BB: Tasty!

John Michael Greer

John Michael Greer is prolific author, independent scholar, historian of ideas, cultural critic, Druid leader, environmentalist/conservationist, blogger, novelist, and occultist/esotericist. If you're reading this, you need to find his work at Ecosophia – if you haven't already done so that is!

In this chat from 2013, we discussed issues surrounding his work and his unique view of the world:

BB: Thanks for taking the time to talk to Beetroot; we're very enthusiastic about your work - particularly the weekly Archdruid Report and now Ecosophia.

JMG: Thank you!

BB: You've written much on the apparent decline of industrial society and provided many examples that illustrate the shocking point that this process is now underway. Could you summarize one or two of the ones you deem undeniable?

JMG: Well, "undeniable" is hardly the right word, as denial is one of the few growth industries the industrial world has left. The

ongoing frenzy in the US media, insisting that the trickle of petroleum coming out of shale deposits marks the beginning of a new age of US energy independence, is a case in point. Still, it bears remembering that ten years ago, predictions that the price of crude oil would rise about US\$100 a barrel and stay there, landing most of the world's industrial nations in permanent economic crisis, were widely disparaged in the media as ridiculous.

BB: In *'Not The Future We Ordered: Peak Oil, Psychology, and The Myth of Progress'*, you discuss our current paradigm as one underpinned by an unwavering belief in progress. Could you talk a little about how we express that on a societal scale?

JMG: Literally every plan for the future made in industrial societies, from the smallest to the largest scale, presupposes growth. Pension funds assume that economic growth will allow their assets to make money; local and national governments plan for new housing, new roads, and increased population; business assumes that a year-over-year increase in gross income and profits is normal -- well, I could go on for pages. Nobody, anywhere, is making plans for a future of

long-term contraction, and yet as fossil fuels slide down their depletion curves, long-term contraction is the future we're certain to get.

BB: How unaware do you think most people are of the predicament facing us? Certainly it's not in general discussion in the media.

JMG: "Unaware" doesn't even begin to touch the depth of our collective blindness to the future staring us in the face. The most basic assumptions we absorb from our culture make it all but impossible for most people to think about the possibility of decline, and I suspect that most people will continue to insist that prolonged decline and contraction can't happen for decades after it's become an inescapable fact.

BB: Do you think this notion of progress is disempowering, that perhaps we've been deliberately encouraged to believe that someone else, some clever scientist or whatever, will inevitably 'come up with something' to solve our myriad crises or might there be something else behind our seeming inability to act?

JMG: It's certainly disempowering, but I think it's simplistic to assume that that comes out of a deliberate decision by somebody or other. During the heyday of cheap fossil fuel energy, it really did make sense to rely on technological progress to solve collective problems, as a lot of collective problems did in fact get solved that way.

The difficulty is simply that we became dependent on that sort of thinking, and remain dependent, even as the cheap energy that made such thinking adaptive has begun to go away. As so often happens, overreliance on a set of strategies that worked in the past has become the primary barrier to finding new possibilities for a very different future.

BB: Much of your work has a spiritual element, and anyone who's familiar with it would also know that you've been involved in many Western mystery traditions, do you believe that any possible solution to these crises should recourse to spirituality in some form?

JMG: I'm going to take issue with the way this question is stated, because there are no solutions to the present spiral of converging

crises. Nothing, that is, can make the crises go away, or keep our current lifestyles intact as we pass through them. Adaptations, not solutions, are what's needed at this point -- that is, ways of adapting ourselves and our lives to the implacable changes breaking over industrial civilization now and in the future.

Spirituality can play an important part in those adaptations, but it can't do the job alone; we also have to change our lives on the most practical, nitty-gritty level. You can meditate or pray to Gaia all you want, and if you still insist on driving an SUV and living an SUV lifestyle, you're going to be on the wrong side of the changes as they hit.

BB: Finally, are you personally optimistic or pessimistic about our immediate prospects - as in do you see an easy transition as a possibility?

JMG: We tossed the prospect of an easy transition into history's dustbin at the time of the Thatcher- Reagan counterrevolution, when all the hard work toward sustainability that had been done in the 1970s was scrapped in the name of a vacuous free-market ideology that put short term profit and

political advantage ahead of the long term survival of industrial civilization. As the Hirsch Report pointed out in 2005, preparations for peak oil would have had to begin twenty years before the peak of conventional petroleum production in order to prevent massive discontinuities.

The peak of conventional petroleum production, by an interesting irony, happened in 2005, right as that report was being leaked to the press. Thus we're at least 27 years too late, and the massive discontinuities are already baked into the cake. Individuals, families, and communities can still take constructive steps to prepare for those discontinuities and get through them with as little suffering as possible, but one way or another it's going to be a very rough road down from the peak.

Andy Hamilton

When we first talked, Andy's Booze for Free was gaining popularity (it still is) and his deft talents for making self-sufficiency as fun as it is intoxicating (in all the good ways), were just catching on.

He's still coming up with ways to ferment and combine commonplace ingredients into far from ordinary food and drinks. This is the way of the future for culinary expertise, in my opinion. He has a great recipe for Beetroot too!

BB: Much of your work in your books and your website Theotherandyhamilton.com is centred on making use of what you have in inventive, unexpected, and might I add damn tasty ways. What gives you the ideas? Are they the result of successful experiments or are you passing down older recipes?

AH: It's a mixture of both really, often I'll see a recipe and think, "That looks good, I wonder if it will work with x ingredient instead". Then there are some old recipes that just work and are (as you say) damn tasty, it would always be a shame not to include these. Sometimes if the recipe is old it will need bringing up to date, the addition of yeast nutrient or cold tea can make all the

difference. I also work by finding things whilst out foraging and knowing that I enjoy the flavour of them I then try and work out how they would work as a drink.

BB: I've made your nettle beer recipe quite a few times with amazing success – very popular and a great mixer with cava to make hedgerow cocktails (dead posh!). However, on a last occasion I added too much yeast and the brew became pretty volatile, blowing the corks out of the bottles gushing it everywhere. What the worst mishap you've had with home brewing?

AH: I suggest that you bottled too early with that one, rather than added too much yeast. A mistake that I made with elderberry wine a few years back when we lived in a rented house. Our then landlord, in his infinite wisdom, decided to paint the kitchen white. We protested as the house was damp and knew it would only be a matter of time before it looked grotty again.

Well, that time arrived sooner than we thought. The day after it was painted I'd stacked 6 fresh bottles of my finest elderberry on the top of our shelves. We sat in the living

room watching some telly and heard pop followed by a pouring sound. We ran into the kitchen to find a bottle had spurted its contents all over the ceiling and down the freshly painted walls, wine was dripping out of our cookbooks and my bread machine, which became a right off!

Other disasters have happened when I haven't sterilised properly, if there were any two bits of advice I could give to new booze makers it would be to bottle later and to sterilise everything.

BB: With the success of River Cottage, What to eat now, wild food and similar, ideas about foraging natural foods and cooking up home grown recipes seem very popular at the moment. Why do you think that is?

AH: I think it depends on what you mean by popular, people do love reading about wild food, going on wild food courses and even sometimes eating it in restaurants but even people that come on my courses don't always apply the knowledge. There is still an idea that all wild food is poisonous or is covered in wee from a fictitious dog with a massive bladder.

The thing that many people don't realise is that they are foragers and have been all of their lives, think about blackberries, I bet you have picked them and have done for years. If so then you are forager. I'd like to see people getting braver and perhaps foraging just some of the weeds in their gardens or allotments and using them in meals. Of course you do need to make sure that you know what you are doing but there is a lot of info out there.

BB: Have you plans for another book? If so, can you share hints?

AH: I have plans for many more books! I am currently writing just one of them, *Brewing Britain - Search for the perfect pint**. It's due for release in the Autumn 2013. Its very different than anything I have written before and will have a lot more of me in it. Over this summer I have been sampling some of the best beer made in this country and believe me there is a lot of it around. This Autumn I am to become a Dad and so this is my final bout of freedom before I turn all responsible.

Once our boy is born, being housebound I'll be brewing on an almost daily bases. I'm building a small brewing area onto the side of

my house and I'll be brewing up beers using knowledge gained from some of the best brewers in the world. As for hints, well I'd suggest that any beer brewer should do exactly as I have and try out as many beers as possible. Beer is amazing right now and it looks like it continues to do so. Don't go for fancy labels but do your research and look out for great artisan beer. What I'm discovering also is that its all about the yeast but you'll find out more next Autumn!

BB: Finally, what's your best original recipe?

AH:

Sloe Whiskey

You might have tried sloe gin, but most other spirits can be used and the final results can transform that neglected Christmas present left at the back of the drinks cabinet. This recipe uses Whiskey.

Ingredients:

450g Sloes

225g Sugar

1 litre Whiskey

1 drop of almond essence

Put half the sloes and half the sugar into a sterilized kilner jar – ensuring that the sloes have been left in the freezer overnight. Pour over half a litre of the whiskey and the drop of almond essence and shake vigorously. Place the jar in the tea cupboard and shake every time you make a cuppa. Repeat until the sugar has completely dissolved. Then shake every couple of weeks for three to six months.

After this time decant back into the bottle and try and leave until this time next year by which point it will be delicious.

Michael Goodwin

Author of Economix, a graphic novel that gives the history of the economy (including its myths, magical thinking and inconsistencies), here, Michael Goodwin talks about his latest works.

This excellent [graphic novel](#) blows away the fog that surrounds this dense subject bringing clarity and humour and making it accessible to anyone. Recommended.

BB: Congratulations on Economix, with it you seem to have abridged the complex and opaque world of Western economic principles into a manageable format that is actually as fun as it is enlightening.

MG: Thanks!

BB: It's a timely piece of work; do you think the apparent failures of our economic model have made more people interested in learning about its machinations?

MG: Certainly they have. Back when I started on this project (long before the 2008 crash) a lot of people thought that the people in charge of the economy understood it in the same way doctors understand medicine. Now

we've learned that the people in charge don't know what's going on, which raises the question: what **is** going on?

BB: You wrote much of the work whilst overseas in India, although it's a country that seems to be avidly adopting capitalism, did stepping out of your own country give you a clearer view on what's going on?

MG: Being somewhat isolated certainly helped; when you're cut off from the news cycle, you still get the essentials of what's happening, but without the day-to-day distractions. You wind up getting less information while being much better informed. And India is practically an econ text made real; you can see serfdom, entrepreneurship, giant industries, high-tech startups, sometimes all on the same block.

BB: Author Charles Eisenstein in his work 'Sacred Economics', likened today's economists to the priestly castes of the Middle Ages; a sect with their own beliefs, doctrines and specialized lingo incomprehensible to the uninitiated. Was lifting the veil on economics part of your motivation for writing the book?

Absolutely. Although one of the big surprises of my research was that the field of economics is far broader and more nuanced than I'd thought. Still, there are far too many who set themselves up as smug wizards, and another of the big revelations of my research was that the smugness is an almost infallible sign that the economist in question actually knows *less* about the economy than you or I do.

BB: In a blog post (about economist Steve Keens kickstarter campaign), you mentioned that 'the entire idea of economic models, as currently practiced, is flawed'. Would you care to say a little about why?

MG: That ties into your last question. Basically, since the early 1800s most economists have imitated Euclid; they start with a few principles and build logically on those until they have a model of the economy or a part of it. Some models become very subtle and elaborate.

So far, that's fine. But then economists "test" their model by checking whether it's logically and mathematically consistent with the original principles. But these principles are, at

best, oversimplifications. What they should be doing is checking whether their model works in the real world. But all too often they don't, so they wind up "knowing" something that's not actually true, and they're smug about it to boot, because the math and logic they used to reach their error is beyond the layperson's grasp.

Here's an analogy--heavy things are harder to transport, right? Everyone agrees on that. But then, doesn't adding wheels to a piece of luggage makes it heavier, and therefore harder to transport? That's logical, but it's also absurd. Too many economists stop after they've reached a logical conclusion—or worse, they keep building on it—and wind up believing absurdities.

BB: We hear a lot of talk about sustainability, but is it possible in our current paradigm? What would be the best economic model for a society which wishes to base itself on natural limits such as an ecosystems carrying capacity?

MG: Well, our current paradigm can be defined as leaving people free to make their own choices but within a context of rules. So

today, I'm not free to dump my garbage in the street or to hire eight-year-olds to work in my factory, and that's good. So if we changed the rules to encourage sustainability, we could keep the essentials of our current paradigm—our ability to make free choices—while ensuring that our grandchildren could enjoy it too.

Yes, changing the rules to encourage sustainability probably means that we'd have to make do with fewer consumer goods. But that's not necessarily bad. Think about how frantically advertisers try to convince us to buy all the crap we buy. Clearly, we don't even want a lot of the stuff we buy until it's advertised, so we wouldn't be any worse off if we didn't have it, as long as we didn't have the ads telling us to want it.

In fact, restricting advertising would be one rules change to start with; we'd make less stuff, produce less waste, and use fewer resources, and the "lost" goods would be entirely things we no longer wanted anyway. Not to mention that we'd have more "mindshare" for our own thoughts.

BB: Finally, what of the future? Will the current policy of printing money and pretending save the day eventually or are we delaying the inevitable?

MG: Well, I'm pretty convinced there's another crash coming, soon. It's sort of like with an avalanche--you can't say exactly when it will happen, but you can look at all that snow resting on too little rock and know that it's going to come down sooner rather than later. We can't say exactly when the next crash will come, but we can look at all that paper wealth resting on a base of real wealth that's too small to sustain it and know that it's going to crash sooner rather than later. (For the record, I'm betting on the next crash coming this fall, or possibly fall 2014; for some reason financial crashes seem to happen in the fall).

Glennie Kindred

The neat little Henge Shop in Avebury is where I first found Glennie's work. Her beautiful, hand written and illustrated work celebrates the circular year and describes how we might integrate ourselves into our environment whilst joining it in spirit.

Here we talk about ceremony and our severed connection to nature.

BB: Hi Glennie, thanks for talking with BB today! Much of your work celebrates the cycles of nature and the power of ceremony, promoting them to a wider audience. Why do you think it's important to do so?

GL: For me ceremony is a natural part of ourselves and helps us to step into the 'sacred' in whatever way feels right for us. I believe this is something we all benefit from doing, and my books offer many different ways to do this based on my creating heart-felt ceremonies for the last 25 years. I am always learning, expanding and growing in my understanding and life is richer and more vital because of it! I particularly like the way it empowers me to be more of who I am, to explore what it is that I am feeling right now,

and what is moving me in my heart. It helps me to grow in Love and grow a deeper more intuitive and inter-connected me!

Celebrating the cycle's of the year gives us a sense of ourselves in time, the cyclic flow of our lives as the years go by, and helps us to live in harmony with the flow of the natural world around us. Each of the eight Earth Festivals gives us an opportunity to connect with the Earth and also to check in to where we are at, where we are going, and what is no longer helping us to grow well and healthy. Ceremony gives us the opportunity to let go of the old unhelpful stuff and embrace the new! It is very empowering!

BB: Aside from an obvious reverence for our connection to and place within nature, there also seems to run a rich vein of optimism throughout your work. Are you consciously trying to convey that in your writing?

GL: I am consciously creating optimism in my life! We always have choice as to what and how we think... And we can consciously change the way we think. If we wish to manifest the most positive outcome we must choose the most Loving, the most heart-

warming, heart opening, heart expanding thoughts and actions. And then the natural fertility and flow of life does the rest! Give yourself the very best chance to grow in the way you would like life to be for you! For me it is as simple as that.

Ceremony helps those moments of positive affirmation and positive intentions to become embedded within you.

BB: Despite, or perhaps because of - a probable convergence of many crises do you think that there is a general recognition that we're not where we need to be, and that people are starting to look around for alternatives to the current paradigm?

GL: Absolutely! It is time! And much needed! And it is happening! And it is a huge groundswell, a peoples movement of Love, optimism, care for the Earth, the land around us, care for each other and all the peoples and creatures of the Earth, a sense that we are not separate from Nature but we are a part of the whole thing, and this understanding and new way of thinking and living our lives is growing all the time. I always say 'Once your eyes have

opened, you can't go back'. Why should you want to!!

Everything we do and think influences everything else, our families, our friends, what we say, what we eat and what we support with our money. We are hugely powerful when we make conscious choices.

BB: Do you think that our societies lack of connection to nature, its habits and systems, may be behind our seeming inability to pull back from our abuse of it? Do you see your work as an attempt to restore connection?

GL: Absolutely again! The whole point of my books is to share what has worked for me, and the solid grounded foundation of which will work for others. Reconnection to the natural world is a journey we are all on to some degree or another, and both personal, group and community ceremonies help us to connect in, if that is our intention. (Intention is everything!)

For me right now it is my ever deepening connection to our native plants and trees, which is propelling me forwards. I am a very practical person, not airy-fairy at all. But

increasingly, through some very real and astonishing experiences I am becoming more and more aware of how much the natural world is alive and communicating all the time on many different levels of interconnectivity. Back to choice. I am choosing to prioritise my journey with the native plants and the trees right now. So this is the wild edge I am living within.

Inevitably I want to share the excitement of this wonderful interconnected world and the wonders and power of our most humblest of native plants and trees! So this is what I am painting and writing about right now.

BB: Where do you think we'll be as a society in 20 years? what is your vision of the future?

GL: I have no idea! I aim to live today the future I want to see happen! It is one and the same to me. I am here now so I want to live it Now!

We can only each live our lives right now in the best, most loving, caring and positive way we can. If lots and lots of people add to this flow of good energy, then there is a strong

possibility that the future will be a good one. So it is up to us. Each and every one of us!

We all influence each other and we all add to the positive or negative energy that shapes our lives, whether in the nitty gritty of our everyday lives, or our influence on the bigger picture... we do both, all the time and the ripples spread outwards (and inwards) from us all! I have a notice on my kitchen notice board that says 'LOVE YOUR FUTURE'. It's a good reminder and makes me smile and warms my heart every time I read it.

BB: Finally, what would you foresee as the single most potent power for transformation that anyone could achieve with a little effort?

GL: LOVE!!!! It changes everything for the better!!! It creates cycles of good energy that influence us and everyone and everything around us in ways we cannot predict. Yet we can know for sure that it will create positive good, no matter what. For me this is the single most potent power for transformation and change we can all achieve. Choice and Intention are all!!

Lucy Neal

Theatre Maker, Writer, Community Activist – every community needs a Lucy Neal. I met her during my time in a neighbouring Transition Town movement (Lucy had begun Transition Town Tooting) and have been the better for it since.

Here we talked about her book, Playing For Time, as it was launched in March 2015, and how creativity and cooperation can work to solve some of our most pressing challenges.

BB: Playing for Time, your second book*, is far from being the usual, passive coffee table book about the arts, on the contrary, it's a real call to roll up your sleeves and use art for change. Would you be able to talk a little about what you're looking to achieve with this call?

LN: When I woke up to the full enormity of what was happening to the planet, and how much our own ways of living were part of that, I was pre-occupied with 'how to act'. I realised that the choices I made day to day were important.

After that I then realised there was a creative role to play in actively recreating the future, re-thinking a world we might actually want to live in. Becoming involved with the Transition movement was a key learning experience for me, recognising that I could not only make practical changes in how I live, where I live but also that working with others nearby was a galvanising exciting door into feeling part of much bigger changes happening in all corners of the world at present.

Having worked in the arts all my life, I also began to see that creativity was at the heart of the Transition process, so Playing for Time became a process of mapping the ways in which Transition and the arts combine and that is inherently about bringing people together, working collaboratively and creatively, responding to serendipity and possibility, trusting in one's imagination, taking risks and believing that the universe responds positively when one takes steps to act for change.

The book is about what those steps might be and gives readers some 'ends of pieces of

string' to take up and try. So far, readers have got in touch saying that is exciting and they are going to give the recipes a go - whether it is a land journey, revealing the carbon web in their lives, following the Give and Gain process for initiating a creative project or learning all about fermentation and kefir culture. There are, I hope, many doors in.

BB: Transformation is the underlying theme of the work; through your experience of using the tools described in the book within the context of your work with Transition Town and other community projects, do you think transformation could be achieved on a wider societal level with them?

LN: A Transition contexts allows us many opportunities to rehearse change. It might simply be a film night we are putting on locally, but how we host that, invite people in, allow inclusive discussion, foster dialogue, be honest about what we fear and what we hope for, all this adds up to what we have called 'live story making'.

It's not possible for us all to go from 0% responsibility for the planet to 100% overnight. We have to learn and feel our way

through to how we might see things differently, do things differently, but once we have seen that we CAN respond (closely tied to responsibility - the ability to respond) and that we have a role to play, I believe this vision is transformative for us.

We do not have to leave things to 'experts' - those who deal with facts and figures about climate change and carbon. This is how we learn to live within limits creatively and huge changes are needed at societal levels to think differently about consumerism, about social justice, about competition, about economic growth, about the connection between ourselves and others around the world and future generations.

The German artist Joseph Beuys believed in something called social sculpture: that to use our imaginations was already changing society and that the transformation of society was considered an art in itself. So yes, societies are transformed culturally; ideas of who we are and what our lives mean are all opened up and played with in the arts. The arts hold the key to the biggest social changes and they can be made overnight.

Just like that if we are all harnessed and looking in the same direction and gathered in the same spaces, imaginatively and creatively. It's all possible. Transformation can happen within us personally or collectively amongst many people at the same time. It works both ways.

BB: The book turns the idea of the solitary artist on its head, allowing the role of artist to be re-defined as collaborative instigator; it seems clear that our current problems are too large for an individual response do you think artists have a pivotal role to play in a making much needed change happen?

LN: The collaborative aspects of transitional arts practice are key. It is not only that we are capable of so much more with others than on our own, but also that the future will not have a single voice. The future needs to be pluralistic, diverse, inclusive. Everyone's story is needed; every voice; every narrative, so working collaboratively fosters the emergence of such diversity. It positively encourages the idea that 'we are the many'. Collaboration also involves the word 'laborare': it can be hard work sometimes, but

it is ultimately powerful, celebratory and joyful and joy, like gratitude, is a radical force. It emphasises the fact that we have all that we need.

A consumerist culture persuades us we are needy and incomplete. The truth is, as humans, we are creative, kind, empathic, imaginative, collaborative beings and we can celebrate that.

Playing for Time also explains how artists can be disrupters, truth-tellers and agents of change. They can make the enormity of what is happening potentially less painful as alternative ways of seeing things are shown at the same time as a 'waking up' to truth. Artists can be circuit breakers. Potential tragedy can be turned to comedy in the comedic sense of the word - a reconstituting of the community. Learning and hope come from this.

BB: Many people see the need for a change of course but feel powerless to make a difference. What would you say to them?

LN: Act consciously in the service of life. Make your intentions clear. Take one small step. Speak it out loud. Such actions will make

other things happen. Surprising things. Providence comes to meet us and however risky or scary 'acting' feels, courage is rewarded. An unbounded energy comes to meet us and this gives us all the energy we need to see new possibilities unfold.

If you have ever played that systems game where you keep your eye on 2 people moving slowly around a room keeping a triangle between them and yourself, you will see clearly how your actions affect others and whilst you may be following others, you have NO IDEA how many are also following YOU/. We are all connected, so our own steps towards building a positive future matter hugely. We have so much power to change. When people realise they too have a role to play - that changes everything.

BB: Finally, do you think art can cut through preconceptions to address difficult, and often complicated issues effectively on its own or do you think its use in tandem within a community setting is where its power lies?

LN: Context is all. I get quite frustrated when I see 'art' that is disconnected to the planetary context we are living in/ This does not have

to be literal references to climate change necessarily. It could be more around a sense of connection to the narrative we're living in and that includes feelings of loss, yearning, despair as well as gratitude for what we have, a deep connection for example to others, other species, land and the Earth. Similarly I get quite frustrated by community awareness raising projects that fix on facts and figures of science, of carbon and energy.

We need those of course, but we also need celebratory social spaces that allow us to see the challenges plainly but leave emotional space for us to feel and imagine alternatives. We need above all a language of the heart to transform feelings of negativity and powerlessness into a collective narrative of change.

Philip Carr Gomm

Until June 2020 Philip led the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. A popular and established author and blogger, Philip also began, and regularly presents the popular 'Tea with a Druid' stream available on You Tube and live on Facebook. His work is an inspiration regardless of your path – as is his generosity of spirit.

In this chat we discussed some of his work and how an Earth based spirituality can lend clarity to a life deprived of nature and space to contemplate.

BB: Firstly, thanks very much for taking the time to talk to Beetroot today, having led a spiritual order that grew into major movement must have been as demanding as it is rewarding. How has the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids managed to reach out and resonate with so many people at this time?

PCG: It's funny isn't it? The title Order of Bards Ovates & Druids sounds so very old-fashioned, with the word 'Order' evoking images of cloistered monks, Bards Shakespearian figures or medieval troubadors, Druids old bearded fellows, and Ovates sounding plainly mysterious, since I

imagine most people don't know what Ovates are. And yet, as you say, what we do and are seems to resonate with many people today. And I reckon this is for at least three reasons:

More and more people are seeking a spirituality that is 'green', that is Earth-respecting, and that doesn't carry the baggage of the major religions. The fact that our organization is an 'Order' isn't really an issue, and in fact in today's chaotic world the idea of some order can seem quite attractive! Just to clarify this point, the term 'Order' in the way it is used by us comes from the tradition of magical orders not religious orders.

Although the image of the Druid might seem too arcane for some, for many it symbolizes the wisdom of the ancestors, of an ancient tradition that inspires us and that we can try to reclaim.

The Bard symbolizes the singer, the artist, the Creative Self in each of us, and I think more and more people are drawn today to ways that can help them nourish their inner Bard.

So I think the way we combine a love of the Arts with a love of Nature, while being rooted in a spiritual tradition, is the main reason why we are seeing so many people getting involved in our work these days.

BB: Your own introduction to the spiritual path came under the guidance of OBOD founder Ross Nichols. If you had never made his acquaintance, do you believe you would have followed a similar path anyway?

PCG: At the time I met him I was also very interested in Buddhism, and so it is possible I would have pursued that way instead if he had never appeared in my life. However, although I feel very drawn to Buddhism (and Jainism), Druidry speaks to a connection to the land and to the traditions and culture of the country I was born into, and I think for that reason I would have made my way towards it even if I had never met him.

BB: In works such as 'The Druid Mysteries', you talk about the benefits of reintegrating our lives back into the natural patterns of the seasons, the cross quarter festivals of the solstices and equinoxes and the larger reality of the natural world. Could you explain the

advantages of this approach? Do you think many of the problems of industrial society are due to the severance of our connection from nature?

PCG: This one issue - the way we have become alienated from the natural world - lies at the roots of the dire situation we find ourselves in today. If we were aware of the interconnectedness of all life, and sensitive to it, we would be unable to destroy and pollute the Earth in the ways we have done. Any method or way that we can use to become more aware of our intimate relationship with all of life is of value.

One of the central practices of a Druid today lies in observing the eightfold wheel of the year (the solstices and so on that you mention). This means that every six weeks or so we come together and attune ourselves to the cycle of the Earth and her seasons. We open ourselves to the deeper meaning of Time and Place and their relationship. If you do this, year after year, it forms a sort of living mandala, a warp and weft that nourishes you spiritually and gives you a sense of being part

of a greater life beyond your own individual life.

BB: You also emphasise the positive power of meditation, do you think that anybody can reap benefit from the practice regardless of their spiritual inclinations or daily schedule?

PCG: If you change 'anybody' to 'most people', I think the short answer is 'yes', but with some qualifications. There are many different forms of meditation, and some methods are more suited to certain types of person and lifestyles than others. We also seem to go through 'seasons' in our life, and daily meditation may be just the thing we need in one season, while at another time perhaps very little will be best.

A good analogy would be with physical exercise. Generally, of course, it is a beneficial activity, but the question then is: 'what kind of exercise should I do and how often?' And as we know there are many different kinds of exercise, and there is no one-size-fits-all.

There are some people who should proceed very cautiously with any kind of exercise, and

it's the same with meditation. Meditation can open you to deeper parts of the Self, and depending upon your psychological state this can sometimes be counter-productive.

We offer a very simple exercise which should be safe for anyone to perform and which can act as a preliminary to other deeper kinds of meditation such as this [tree meditation](#).

Society does seem to be changing as the collective realisation of where we are now increasingly triggers positive action. Are you optimistic that there'll be enough momentum to steer us voluntarily towards a more harmonious relationship with each other and Earth? Has the current paradigm run its course?

I'm very optimistic and I'm very pessimistic about the future. I have spent years trying to decide which of these feelings is the right one, but I have come to the conclusion that there are certain questions that naturally evoke an ambivalent response, and that rather than trying to reject one in favour of the other, I need to accept both.

On the one hand I see the global awakening that is occurring, the thousands of fantastic projects that are being born (Paul Hawken in 'Blessed Unrest' is good on this), and the incredible new inventions that suggest we really can turn things around. And on the other hand I see the mass extinction of species that is occurring, I see war, starvation and the destruction of the Earth continuing unabated, and I can see nothing but a bleak future for our grandchildren.

Somehow I have to hold both those feelings in my mind, for to focus only on the positive seems like naïve denial, and to focus only on the negative is just a recipe for unhappiness and renders me less able to be of any use in the world.

It's in response to this question that I believe a spiritual path can be of real value. We all need inspiration, a sense of meaning, nourishment, connection, and support on our journey through life. If we are to give of our best we need these things, and it's the job of a spiritual way, and of spiritual leaders and teachings, to offer these things.

If we are able to plug into this flow of meaning and encouragement, we can ride the waves of hope and despair in relation to the future, and as a result be of more use to ourselves and those around us.

BB: Beetroot Books is committed to planting trees in order put back what had been taken. The order has a tree planting programme too; could you tell us a little about what you wish to achieve with that?

I think that's a fantastic project that you run, and I wish more organizations did this. We started our project (called the 'Sacred Grove Planting Programme') 25 years ago, and it was founded (a) to replace the trees we were responsible for felling, in all the paper and carbon we were using, and (b) to create a tree-planting project with a difference, that had a historical and spiritual dimension to it, reviving the idea of the Sacred Grove; which is a sacred space which can act as a sanctuary, a place of peace and meditation for humans, a nature sanctuary for animals and birds too.

We hear about sacred groves in many different parts of the world: in Greece, in

India, in Ireland and Britain. It's an idea that transcends religious divides and speaks eloquently to our need today for more places that are treated as sacred, and which can answer the needs of all living beings.

So our vision is of temples all over the world, but temples that require no bricks and concrete, and no tree-felling. 2014 was the Order's 50th anniversary, and we planted a number of 'endangered-species sacred groves' using varieties of trees that are at risk of disappearing.

BB: Finally, what brings you the greatest inspiration?

The answer to this has to be the countryside: the natural world all around me. We are lucky enough to live in the South Downs, and every day I try to take a walk down by the stream or up on the hill behind our house. Sometimes the natural world will inspire me directly - with an impressive sky or vista, for example - but often the inspiration works in a less specific way, and instead creates a feeling, or supports a mood, or somehow nourishes me so that I find myself thinking more clearly, or

getting new and utterly unexpected ideas. I lived in the city for 35 years, but I never want to go back! This green is too precious to me now.

Rob Dickins

Rob runs the Psychedelic Press, a grassroots organisation that publishes books on psychedelic and psychoactive substances in history, literature, and science, as well as Psychedelic UK culture – if you're going to plug into this scene, Psyppress is the place to start.

Rob generously took time out to share his views on the value of the psychedelic experience and surrounding culture.

BB: Could you tell us a little about your work with Psyppress?

RD: The Psychedelic Press UK project started in 2008 as a blog dedicated to providing a wide-ranging literature review of psychedelics texts, which quickly evolved to become an online magazine, featuring interviews and articles. Then, in 2012, I put a shout-out online asking if people would be interested in a print edition of PsyppressUK, with original and in-depth articles, and the response was a resounding Yes! Since then we've gone from strength to strength and now publish a volume every 2 months.

The journal features articles from across academic fields - the sciences and humanities

- along with literary and opinion pieces. Psychedelia is such an interwoven field that taking any one aspect in isolation feels rather contrived. What we aim to do is explore society and culture at large, with all their intricacies, and ask just how the psychedelic experience effects it all. My work specifically is as Editorial Director - so I manage contributions and editing - although I'm helped out by a brilliant group of writers, artists, and editors, without whom the whole project would be untenable.

BB: For you what is the value of the psychedelic experience?

RD: Well, this is both a very easy and very difficult question to answer - the psychedelic experience is nothing if not paradoxical! In one sense, people are still fascinated by the 'what the hell is going on here?' point, yet there are many groups of people who have begun to find value in the psychedelic experience, without necessarily coming to satisfactory answers as to what exactly is happening.

For me the value of the psychedelic experience lies in one's ability to manipulate

imagination through set and setting - essentially a theatrical understanding. The chaos magic tradition, if you can call it that, is particularly bang on at exploring this aspect. Whether your intention is healing, exploration, transformation, communing with the spirits, etc., then psychedelic substances can be a tool by which to explore these paradigms. Ultimately then, the value of the psychedelic experience is the ability to stand out from one's usual identity monikers, which socially speaking is a remarkably healthy and rewarding act - what is like to be in the boots of the other?

BB: You obviously have a significant role in bringing the subject of psychedelics in to the wider conversation; interest is perhaps as high now as in the countercultural heyday of the 60's, why do you think that is?

RD: Older generations have passed on now since the initial hysteria of the Sixties - in terms of revolutionary advocacy and mass-media misinformation - and I think time is ultimately the great healer. Having some hindsight and perspective does wonders! When you add the fact that mental health

issues have become a primary concern in many quarters today, then there's a lot of medical people looking back at their history and saying, 'well these substances appeared to work, why aren't we using and researching them anymore?'.

Moreover, people are generally more drugs savvy on the whole now. In the 1950s medical drugs revolution, a whole generation of essentially naive people were told about the extreme wonders and horrors of drugs and they took what they were told at face value. Nowadays, we are able to make more discerning choices, and our understandings are better informed. And as alchemists have kept the psychedelic flame going for decades, it is basically impossible for the flaws in drug laws do not be shown in their full glaring horror.

BB: What's your ideal in relation to current drug policy?

I follow the late Alexander Shulgin's position on this. The drug laws simply need to be repealed - in this country all the way back to the Pharmacy Act of 1868. Building legislation on legislation is a bureaucratic

nightmare, and a recipe for a confused state-of-play. The term 'drug' can't be adequately defined: How can one produce law based on a near-meaningless word? The result can only ever be that the interpretation of it by the powers-that-be will be based on their own particular agenda, the reification of institutional racism is one example of this. Any regulation should be aimed at producers producing what they say they produce - never in the act of consumption.

BB: Psychedelics have obviously been neglected until comparatively recently as a therapeutic tool but would you concede that they could be used a tool for wider societal transformation? Perhaps our collective neurosis and flawed relationships with our environment could also be transformed?

RD: Well I think this was the essential lesson that gave rise to the countercultural Sixties with LSD, which had its roots in psychiatry. In traditional therapeutic contexts, individual neurosis was treated in the hope of adjusting the individual back to 'normality'. What certain more revolutionary minded psychiatrists and psychologists recognised

was that these neuroses were often the result of 'normal society', and they were merely treating the symptom and not the cause - returning people to a state of 'alienation'. Hence they wanted a revolution in society.

In this sense, LSD revealed a societal problem. Could it possibly be a cure, however? I'm not sure. If you have a radical agenda to begin with, then it might perhaps seem that way, but not everyone believes society is broken, so while someone may gain personal and/or spiritual insight, their thoughts will not necessarily turn towards revolution.

The beauty of LSD, and psychedelics more generally, is not that they're revolutionary - they're fundamentally insurrectionary. Rise up and recognise your theatre, but embody the society in order to address them - revolving who's in charge, in an 'us and them' attitude, will just bring the same problems about in a different disguise.

BB: What advice would you give the uninitiated?

RD: If you'd like to be initiated, do so with friends, love and respect is the way to depend.

BB: Finally, what's your longterm vision for Psyppress UK?

RD: I'd like to see PsyppressUK stocked in newsagents all around the world, in a state where being educated on the effects, uses, and understandings of psychedelic substances is an important part of society!

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