



Transcript Episode 14: Being a gay heathen with Robert

[start tune]

00:09 Rich

Welcome to the Wyrd Thing podcast. I'm your host, Rich, and I'm joined by my co-host, Jens.

00:17 Jens

Hello. Reminder, Rich, this is episode 14.

00:21 Rich

And this week, we are joined by the very interesting guest, Rob Lewis.

00:27 Robert

Hello.

00:28 Rich

Would you like to introduce yourself, and tell us about yourself, Rob?

00:23 Robert

Well, first off, I'm an American born on the West Coast but grew up in New Jersey, just outside of New York City. I've been involved in Paganism now since '99 when I first discovered Á r n Draíocht Féin, ADF. Was with them for about 20 years before I broke off. And in 2020, my local group ended up forming an official church very much in the framework of ADF's ritual style, but with more of a focus on inclusivity and being more proactive with things like that. I've also been involved in the Troth since 2012, and a lot of my inclusivity work actually has come out of the original Frith Forge in 2017.

01:22 Rich

And for those of our listeners who might not be familiar with the ADF, could you tell us a little bit about them?

01:28 Robert

Okay. ADF is a pan Indo-European religious group founded in 1983 by Isaac Bonewitz, which might be a name people are familiar with. He originally founded it as an Irish Celtic organization based off of archaeology hard sources, not based purely off of UPG or unverified personal gnosis. A lot of his ritual stuff came out of the Reform [...] of North America, which was the first local group that started up at a college as a way of getting out of the weekly religious commitment where they instead really went out into the woods, drank whiskey and quote unquote, worshipped nature. ADF has been around now for quite a long time. I was with them for about 20 years, serving on various levels, but they are pan Indo-European. So basically any culture that has a language that came from a Indo-European roots, so pretty much all of Western Europe, the Baltics and going down into the Indo-Iranian area, not including Hindu but Zoroastrian, Tocharian, those cultures



also, which are some of the more unusual ones out there. You don't normally run across people that practice those religions.

02:48 Rich

And what was it that initially drew you to the ADF?

02:52 Robert

In college I had a local grove that a friend of mine was part of and just really liked the idea of the academics behind it. Yeah, this is based off real things. This is not something that's been made up or completely personal conjecture. At least at that time, so much of the American witchcraft traditions tended to be or seem to be at least.

03:06 Rich

But then obviously there was a parting of the ways. And obviously I don't want you to name names or anything, but was there any particular reason you're happy to discuss about why you moved away to do your own thing, as it were?

03:28 Robert

I resigned in large part because around those same times, if you recall, we had a bunch of mass shootings where there were people that were wearing Norse jewellery. [Rich: Yes.] Or claim to be Norse practitioners. [...], there was New Zealand, there was a synagogue in Pittsburgh. There were a couple of others that happened, was like four within six months. And the first, I think the first three shootings, the board of directors of ADF came out and made a statement quoting their bylaws and not saying anything, not denouncing, maybe maybe denouncing the person, but not, you know, the white supremacy or anything else that was involved, because these were very obvious white supremacist shootings.

But after the fourth one, they finally came out with a rather weak denouncing white supremacy. And from my friends that were sitting on the board of directors at the time, it was a hard fought statement to get the very weak statement that they got. By that point, I was under the realisation that at least with the leadership at that time, we were... And leadership is still in place at this point, there's going to be no strides towards fighting white supremacy. There's going to be no strides to being becoming a more inclusive organization. It's not a place that I can associate with any further. I spent 20 years there, I was on the board of directors. I was clergy through the entire program for 12 years, at that point. I had dedicated a huge amount of my life. It was a very difficult decision for me to make. But I made the decision that I can't be with a group that's not going to be inclusive, that's not going to stand up for, you know, the softball shots of denouncing white supremacy in all forms. That should be a no-brainer. Everyone should be able to do that.

05:19 Rich

Absolutely. I'm interested when you mentioned sort of inclusivity, but obviously there are or may still be sort of people who are sort of gay or queer within the ADF already. Is that is that still the case?

05:31 Robert

Yes, that is.



05:32 Rich

So that must have some measure of inclusivity going on there. Perhaps?

05:36 Robert

To a degree, yes there is. We have had the Archdruid, which is the leader of the organization before the current Archdruid, Kirk Thomas, is gay. And that's very well known. [Rich: Right.] There are plenty of gay people. There's trans people, lesbians, bi, you know, they cover the spectrum as far as that goes. Relatively welcoming in sexuality does not really play a huge part in ADF rituals.

06:06 Jens

Which I think is not the point at all. So there are some quite right wing organisations, very racist organisations, who are surprisingly liberal when it comes to homosexuality [Rich: Indeed], but that doesn't excuse anything. [Rob: True.] You can't be white supremacist and inclusive at the same time, and you can't be doubtful about how your stance is to white supremacy and inclusive at the same time. So as Rob said, that should be a no-brainer.

06:37 Robert

I'm not labelling the ADF a white supremacist organization.

06:38 Rich

No, of course not. No. But I think from what you're saying, it sounds as if you felt they didn't. You felt they didn't go far enough in their sort of statements and their sort of disavowal of things.

06:45 Robert

I feel they did not. Well, about six months before I left. I purposely left later for a couple of different reasons that are somewhat personal. But [Rich: Sure] just before I left in the November when priests renewals were coming up, we lost a few female priests and you can find their statements. Places like The Wild Hunt and Oracle on that, in which was also quoted. Basically, they were complaining about the old boys club and how they felt that as women in leadership, they were not being listened to by the men in leadership. Among many other issues. But that was one of the biggest common themes. That's also, sadly, something that you find in a lot of established organizations.

07:30 Rich

Not just pagan ones, I suppose. It would be something that's sort of an issue in just any long, long running organisation or society perhaps, which is not always as straightforward as we want. We should at least try and find solutions to that.

07:46 Jens

Rob, I understand that you're active in Paganism and Heathenry for more than 20 years now. And you came out as gay during this time?

07:55 Robert

That is correct, I came out of the proverbial closet. And a bunch of things happened in my life right around 9/11. So 2001. And I want to say the end of 2001, beginning in 2002, that I started coming out, partly coming out to myself as gay, partly coming out publicly as gay.



08:20 Jens

So how was your experience about coming out in different heathen organisations and groups?

08:24 Robert

It depends on the group. And it also depends on how I joined. Within ADF, I had some worries because I was involved in the group and all that beforehand, pretending to be straight, basically not admitting who I was. And in that case I found it for the most part relatively supportive. Within Wiccan groups that I've been involved with over the years, they tend to be a lot more supporting. By the time I came to the Troth, I've been out for a long time and knowing now some of the people that I've been in leadership over the years, not surprising that they were as accepting as they were.

But there definitely have been spaces where I've been very quiet about my sexuality, just because I'm not sure about who's there, I'm not sure about what their reactions are going to be. Basically, until I got to the point in my life where I said: Well, this is who I am. I'm not going to hide it. I may not be out marching in parades, flying flags and declaring it every second of the day, but I'm not going to deny it and I'm not going to hide it either.

Getting to that point is actually a difficult place to get to where you start putting aside your personal reservations, personal concerns about safety and all that, and start just living who you are. I think one thing that really helped me get to that point was in the US, there's a festival called Between the Worlds Men's Gap. That's not to be confused with Between the Worlds, which is Evo Dominguez's Festival that happens every 3 or 4 years in Maryland. This is a different festival where it's just bi and gay pagan men, not specifically heathen. They welcome people from multiple traditions and being in a gay only space really helped a lot with coming to terms with being gay and a pagan.

10:18 Rich

And when did you first start attending that?

10:19 Robert

I'd say it was year three of the festival, which was 2004, I want to say. Jens may actually get a laugh out of this. I first found out about it getting a random message from somebody on Gay.com, from someone who saw my profile that I was pagan, mid-twenties at the time. And my opinion of the person just from looking at their profile and picture was: Who's that creepy old guy that's hitting me up? Unfortunately that is gay culture. Even today. Eventually I was like: Okay, I'll go to this. I paid the money, I drove the eleven hours, actually I think that first year it was thirteen hours as I made a wrong turn, to get to the festival site. And I found a home there.

But, to show you how cautious this group was, they didn't tell you where it was until a week or two before the event, just a general area. And the general area is a very conservative part of Ohio. It was at the point the Wisteria events site, which is one of a couple of major pagan events sites in the North East. They had security working the entire festival, you cannot register on site, you had to register beforehand. If you weren't registered they wouldn't let you in, everyone had to wear wristbands identifying that you were supposed to be there. They did everything they could to exclude anyone who was not supposed to be there, from being there.



Thankfully over the years, I see it relax, they still have security but it's mostly there to walk around and be first responders for first aid, maybe deal with random issues like someone drank too much. You know, a mean drunk or something like that. But they are no longer as cautious as they were originally.

12:05 Rich

Just was going to ask you, Rob: how would you say that event, that Between The Worlds men's festival, compares to other general pagan or heathen festivals you've attended? You know, in terms of just the atmosphere?

12:16 Robert

Er, I wanna say it's more sexually charged. [Rich: Okay] Because I've gone to some other major pagan events – I think the largest I've been to has been Sirius Rising, where one year we had around six hundred people when I was there. Between The Worlds I don't think ever got much above a hundred people. In the major pagan events you get a much broader spectrum of workshops that are offered; you get all kinds of people there; a much broader segment of paganism. Probably a much better overview of the entire world of paganism.

Within Between The Worlds you've still got a pretty good breadth of pagans that showed up. From the people that are in the 'religions with homework', like ADF; heathenry in general tends to be the religion with homework, and Celtic reconstructionists tend to be religions with homework. So that kind of religious people that come there, to the other end of things where you have Radical Faeries, and various traditions all in between the two extremes. And I'm not saying that the Radical Faeries aren't serious – they are extremely serious practitioners, not going from archaeological-type books.

But the energy at Between The Worlds since it's a single-sex, it's a gay/bi festival, has a lot more sexual energy involved. There's a lot more... Almost saying there's a lot more opportunity for sex, it's kind of set up more like that, when it was at Wisteria – unfortunately between the pandemic and other things that happened last year they ended up going to a different camp and changed times, so I wasn't able to make it. So I can't speak on how it is currently, but there've been things there that I would never have seen at a major pagan festival because of the sexuality component involved.

14:11 Rich

So it's very sex-positive, is what you're saying, in a sense? Would that be a fair way to describe it?

14:18 Robert

Yes.

14:19 Jens

I can very much relate to you saying you have been quiet about your sexuality on the first pagan meetings and the first pagan groups, because that's mainly what I have been myself. And I've been asking myself several times: These are all very nice people and they claim to be inclusive, and they claim to be open... Why don't I feel more comfortable to show my own sexual identity more there? But it took me several years and several events, and the option to be there with a partner, to make that obvious. So I can very much relate to this being quiet.



And I try to imagine a gay pagan event, which I have never attended and I've never even heard about in Europe, and of course that's sexually more charged. It's very obvious to me, because these other events, as a gay man, the first thing is even if there is someone I would like to do other things than discuss paganism with him, he's very probably straight, and he might be embarrassed if I approach him, even if they're very liberal in general. So, yeah, I keep very quiet about that, whereas when the assumption in the beginning is everybody here is gay or bisexual, that's just a total different starting point there.

15:36 Robert

Yeah, it is. I have to say, going to that festival has been an extremely positive experience for me. The... It exposed me to a bunch of different traditions and some extremely amazing workshops. As high-quality as any other event I've ever been to. It's a different environment but it's definitely a very positive one to go to. I would hope to see similar popping up elsewhere throughout the world. Because obviously, trying to fly to the centre of Ohio and go to one of these camps is not accessible for the vast majority of people.

16:12 Rich

Absolutely. Do you think that there's a definitely future for, sort of, having that division; or should, in your view, those general pagan sort of camps seek to be more inclusive, or to try and learn from what these, that these other sort of spaces are doing?

16:30 Robert

My experience with the general pagan festivals, even when you're talking about the larger Heathen festivals like IASC in Europe... They tend to be relatively welcoming overall, but with most, as with all festivals and such, if you don't know people there already, unless you're a really, really outgoing person, you could be shy, you could be sitting in the corner and trying to figure out what's going on here. And it takes a little bit of time before you feel like you might be accepted. That's probably just general, how people work in general, more than the event itself, but I've never been to an event where I've not seen inclusivity trying to be worked on to some degree.

17:14 Rich

So if you were attending an event, you know, what would you hope to see that would put your mind at ease? You know, do you think, like, is this a safe sort of place to be open about who I am? I mean I know that you said that you're determined to not hide who you are, but obviously I'm just wondering what would you want to see? What sort of... Do you see what I'm getting at? What would be the symbolism or the representation you'd want to see that, "Ah, well, yes, I know I'm okay here"?

17:41 Robert

Seeing rainbow flags everywhere is definitely one thing that is a good sign. Or seeing, you know, all the various parts of the LGBT community. LGBTQ+, 'cause there are so many different subsections that, you know, have either been defined or come to light since the original acronym came out, and of course everyone has their own flags for each part of the community, and seeing those makes one, makes me feel very welcome.



Without being on site and seeing things like that, though, reading in the event descriptions any kind of policy on inclusivity. Any kind of policy on, you know, the rules, basically. It may sound like a weird thing but reading that, you know, the first aid tents have safe-sex supplies that they're giving out for free. That tells me this is a sex-positive event, and most likely... my experience has been at least most sex-positive events tend to be inclusive.

18:42 Rich

I was wanting to ask a bit more about your own sort of... would you call it a grove? I think you'd call it a church – what's your actual, your group that you founded after ADF?

18:50 Robert

The group that we founded here in Albany called The Ring of *Ghosti-, and we're a church using the legal definitions of our Internal Revenue Service. So, we are not-for-profit, we meet the definition for the IRS to be called a church. I know that in Europe there are different ways the tax rules work over there, and 'church' may have a completely different meaning, depending on which country you're in. But here it basically means it's a non-profit religious organization where our focus is on the religion and effects.

We are very much modelled after ADF, so our ritual format is very similar to what ADF does. We have removed one of the potentially controversial issues with ADF ritual is use of what they call the Gatekeeper. This comes directly from Santería; it's not anything that is found within any of Indo-European religion. At ADF [...] Isaac admitted that this was where that came from. That has raised concerns of cultural appropriation – every now and then you'll hear that. So we remove controversial things like that out of the ritual format, put some things in, maybe change the order up a little bit here and there... Apart from those changes, the real thing is we're looking at being inclusive first. Thinking about how to be inclusive.

This is more than just being welcoming, to people, to non-white people, or being welcoming to non-straight people. When you're holding an event, when you're, you know, rituals, whatever, is this accessible? Can people with handicaps get in? What if we have people that show up that are deaf, that are blind – how would you handle that? How would you make them feel welcome? What about people with food allergies? We know probably one of the more common things that you're finding food-wise is that people are going gluten-free. Our tradition is to literally break bread and pass the bread around as part of the ritual. Well, if we have some that's gluten-free, we can't use regular bread, or we need to make an accommodation for them.

Another common thing, and this is something that everyone really needs to be paying attention to, is alcoholic beverages. If you're in ritual and you have someone there that's alcoholic, and you're passing the mead or whatever drink around, there should be a non-alcoholic option available, and there should be no stigma attached to it.

21:27 Rich

Absolutely. Absolutely. I believe there's a Canadian group or groups where it was getting so complex with some people could drink, some people had medical conditions, some people were driving, some people weren't old enough to drink alcohol, so they just dumped alcohol completely from their rituals. It was just getting, it was just easier just to have a non-alcoholic I think... I forget what they actually used in the end but... Was it apple juice, maybe? Or something like that... And just 'cause it was just easier to do it that way rather than have, you know, it was actually more inclusive to not even involve alcohol at all.



21:57 Robert

Yeah, and there is that. But these are the kinds of things that we point out, and actually in the documentation we sent to the IRS, explaining various points of our ritual, keep this in mind when setting up this ritual. Do we have someone with food allergies? Make sure that the bread is edible by everyone, or there's options. Do we have anyone that's alcoholic, or minors? Or might not want to drink alcohol? Even if it is just a, you know, an ounce or two of liquid, make sure that you have options available.

I know in my local group we do have at least one person that is a recovering alcoholic, so making sure we have a non-alcoholic option at every ritual, at every event we do, is high on the list.

22:39 Rich

A friend of mine who does a lot of rituals, and he never drinks alcohol at all now, except at rituals, so that's the only time, 'cause he says that, in his view, that's when he can feel the benefit of the alcohol, and the rest of the year he doesn't drink. He drinks like zero-percent beer, or whatever. And so he's kind of gone that way, so that's the only... He's not an alcoholic, by any means, but he made that decision as a personal way to do it for specifically only drinking alcohol for ritual purposes.

23:08 Robert

And that's a great thing.

23:11 Rich

'Cause then he says [...] he can feel the alcohol flowing through his system whereas, when he used to drink, barely noticed it. So he feels it's for ritual purposes, that's fantastic for him.

23:22 Robert

Yeah, I know people that will only do marijuana or other drugs as part of ritual. And they won't do it the rest of the year. 'Cause sometimes having help getting into that altered state for ritual is useful.

23:36 Rich

Oh, indeed. It's a really interesting concept about getting into that state for ritual and things like that. I was interested also in terms of your rituals, a lot of the older rituals you might find from some traditions, or from one or two of the heathen traditions, they make a great deal about heavily gendered rituals. And I know a lot of groups have made a point of trying to get away from that. Is that something I presume you've been working on as well?

23:59 Robert

Yes, and I never really fully grasped that, obviously we all live in a heteronormative world. You just see male-female everywhere. And honestly the way a lot of rituals I've gone to prior to this coming up, for me, it's always like, okay, a husband-and-wife deity, two deities associated with, you know, whatever the ritual is, male and female. And that's extremely common when you're talking about Wiccan-based rituals.

24:29 Rich

The God and the Goddess, that sort of thing. Yes, indeed.



24:31 Robert

Yeah, the God and Goddess archetypes. But a friend of mine, years ago, who's gay and involved in all of this also, pointed out that he never was comfortable with the male-female dichotomy because he's gay. And that's one of the things that working with the Between The Worlds community is, there's not that much pressure that we have to have a female goddess involved in the rituals. Through that, you know, we started working with single-sex deity in rituals. And for a lot of people that makes them feel more comfortable. They're not feeling like they're being forced to be heterosexual. Especially since, you know, the traditional Gardnerian Wiccan ritual is the God and Goddess symbolically having sex, in the ritual with the Great Rite.

25:14 Rich

Oh yes, the Great Rite – which again goes back to Crowley in a sense as well, and his predilections.

25:20 Robert

Well yeah, it dates back to the early days of Wicca. That kind of symbology has driven a lot of gay men away. Because it makes them feel like they can't take part.

25:32 Rich

It's interesting, because in a previous podcast, not to do with The Wyrd Thing, I was trying to link a whole bunch of suggested reading for sort of books aimed at specifically from a gay perspective on paganism, on heathenry or whatever, and there weren't, I was surprised at how few there were. I really was.

25:49 Robert

Yeah, there's very few.

25:51 Rich

I thought there would, you know, by now there would've been loads but there wasn't that many. Surprised.

25:56 Robert

I think one of the first books that I've come across like that was *Gay Witchcraft* by Christopher Penczak.

26:02 Rich

Yes, I think that was one of the few ones I found that was very very clearly marketed as that, but give the glut of authors that've come out, you know, particularly with self-publishing I thought, oh well, there's bound to be hundreds now, but no, there wasn't.

26:14 Robert

I wanna say there's only about a dozen or so out there at this point. And that may be overestimating.



26:21 Rich

I think I found about six, maybe? And I think at least half of those were by, shall we say, people I don't want to mention on the podcast. Let's just leave it at that.

26:29 Robert

Right. [laughs] Christopher's a wonderful person, I've known him for years.

26:34 Rich

No, Christopher is not one of the people I'm talking about.

26:40 Robert

[laughs] There is a lack of literature focused towards gay men. And I can say I still keep one book to remind myself of this, and I'm not going to name the title of the book, 'cause it's just that bad a book. Sometimes you get something that's written... in this case written for a specific gender, not necessarily gay, or lesbians or whatever, but it was such a bad book, it's like okay, I have to remember to keep this to remind myself that not everything is good out there. You should read everything with a critical eye.

27:13 Rich

Yeah, I think we've all bought those books where we, buyer's regret, 'cause they had a nice cover... But yes, I can imagine it's even more disappointing with, "Oh, finally, I've found a book that's great for me", and oh, oh no. No it's not. Oh, well. I have many of those books, I've tried to pass them away and give away some of those books, but yes, I know what you mean.

27:31 Robert

Yeah, if they're truly horrible I throw them out.

27:34 Rich

I think it's interesting, I was talking to a few people about this, that there's almost like a... not an undercurrent, but there is a tradition or there is a history of gay men, particularly gay men, within heathenry, going back a very long way, that really isn't documented anywhere. There's a number of pivotal figures who were openly gay, and accepted by their community in modern heathenry. And they're not really, unless you go digging, unless you've asked some of the older people, or ask around, it's not there, which is a shame I think.

28:04 Robert

Yes, it is. I think a lot of that has to do with our overall culture. Because really, until relatively recent times, maybe the past 20 years, a lot of gay culture is behind closed doors, for fear of being ganged up, killed, losing your job, depending of where you live. Even until today, in America there are some states where you can lose your job for being gay. We don't have any kind of national anti-discrimination law that protects sexual orientation.

28:35 Rich

So yes, I can imagine why people are still hiding. Which is unfortunate, but I can see why people are doing it. It's quite terrible.



28:41 Robert

Yeah. The current front of LGBTQ+ rights is trans rights. And that's even worse world wide, to be honest.

28:51 Rich

Yeah, I think I listened to the national day of transgender remembrance. I listened into, there was some kind of Zoom thing during lockdown. And it was all very moving, but the bit, I am not part of that community, but I found heartbreaking, I had to go on mute, it was awful. Because they were giving the list of people who'd been assaulted or killed. But then so many of the names were unknown. Oh, nobody even knew their names. Something awful has happened to someone and not even their name is remembered. And that was just terrible to think about. Heartbreaking in every sense. Just awful.

29:32 Robert

Especially when we are coming from a religion where a very common thing is: That which is remembered, lives.

29:39 Rich

Absolutely. In terms of that, there were mentionings of people who were openly gay. I just remembered the name of them, there is a guy, he is passed away now. Rod Landris, I don't know if you've come across that name.

29:51 Robert

Yes. He was a, I think he was an elder in the Troth. I never actually met him, but I know of him and heard many good things about him.

30:02 Rich

Yes. I've heard about him in a couple of places. But I feel that his story should be amplified. He was incredibly influential and openly gay and a heathen. What a great story. That's sometimes the thing we're missing. That remembrance of things, as you say. Because it gives sort of, not courage but perspective to people who are younger coming to heathenry.

30:20 Robert

Hm.

30:22 Jens

Earlier in the podcast we talked about Rob and myself being silent about ourselves. I think that is a mirror to the silence that there were these or are these quite openly gay people. But it is completely unknown in a way. So there's also the same kind of silence from the other side. So we have been silent about ourselves and have become more comfortable in showing that we are gay in the heathen community. But there is also the silence about these people. And I think it is two different sides of the same story there. Of not mentioning the identity of people who are practising in rituals.

31:02 Robert

I also think that a lot of this is slowly going to change. And change for the better. Because, if you're looking at gay culture where I have lived, I understand back in the sixties and seventies, even in



the eighties and nineties, if you're going out to a gay bar, you had to go into the back entrance. It was all clandestine. And now the kids, who are in their twenties and thirties, they never experienced that. And they are able to come out at a much younger age, a lot more open. Now we have kids which are very comfortable coming out in high school. Maybe even a little bit earlier if they know. So the culture is changing, is becoming more accepting.

I think this is just a matter of another generation or so when this discussion is so archaic that, of course, gays were always welcome in this religion. Hopefully sooner than later. And for myself, I'm in my mid-forties, and things have greatly changed from when I came out first to now. My partner, he came out in high school and he is only five years younger. It's amazing how much has changed and how quick it changed.

32:16 Rich

I think I wholeheartedly agree. Because in online-spaces I've been, which are heathen and pagan spaces, the percentage of people, obviously, offline will be different, but online you'll find that on some discord servers or chat groups or Facebook groups, the percentage of members of those groups which are somewhere within the LGBT+ community, can be sometimes as high as 50% in these groups.

32:43 Robert

Yes.

32:44 Rich

And I think once those people get their confidence and start doing stuff offline and writing books and start becoming leaders of their own rights, we're going to see a huge change. And that'll be fantastic to see. We already see the faint beginnings of it but it's going to be big, I think, great.

33:02 Jens

I'm a bit older than you, Rob, not very much, but a bit. I know people my age who came out in high school but I know way too many people who where over thirty and forty when they finally came out. And I think one reason there in my opinion is the availability of role models. Of people you see in public somehow which you can self-identify with.

And that was something I was lacking for years. So all this public picture of: These are gay people, I simply couldn't self-identify with. I fortunately came out relatively early anyway. But that was a bit of a barrier and I see it quite often and I hope these things are really getting better. So more younger people realise: Okay, I don't have to be like this if I'm gay. I can be as I am and being gay and so realise that for themselves earlier.

33:56 Robert

Yes. That's two different things that I think are at play here. One is: We lost almost an entire generation in the eighties

34:03 Jens

Absolutely.



34:04 Robert

Due to the pandemic of HIV at that point. And all the people that would be role models, at least for me, a huge number of them did not survive. And part of what you're talking about of I can be what I am, most of what we see as gay culture in public, on TV or especially during Pride Month, is only the very flamboyant end of gay culture. That's only part of the culture. There are people who go out who are very flamboyant to very conservative. And now that we are starting to get more people that are coming, that are the generation after all those deaths, starting to be out, to be public, and showing the breadth of what's out there and what you can be. It's starting to make it easier for the next generation of kids to come through.

34:56 Jens

I would like to add one thing: You are totally right when you say that one generation was killed. And those who have not been killed went into hiding afterwards. At least that's what happened here in Germany and probably in many other places in the world. Because of the stigma of HIV, several people have not been out after that.

35:15 Robert

Yeah.

35:16 Jens

So if people nowadays say, "Oh, it wasn't like this 30, 40 years ago. There were not so many queer people at all." Yes, they were. They were either just dead or in hiding and not being out, but they have always been there.

35:40 Robert

Yeah. And I can say when I came out to my mother, her first concern was HIV. Honestly, I think that especially with the way treatments are today not as huge a concern. But growing up just outside New York City, and seeing the news about, they were calling it at that time the 'gay pandemic', in the eighties, I can understand why that was her first reaction.

35:55 Rich

I've been watching a series on YouTube talking about gay representation on television, particularly in America. It was incredible to see that in the late seventies there began to be this very positive representation of gay people, as, you know, which sounds awful to say, as normal people. But that was a huge step for television.

36:19 Robert

Yeah.

36:20 Rich

Having people that, not they're main characteristic wasn't that they were gay. They were a person who did all the other things and they were gay. So that was in a number of shows where this was done. Unfortunately, the book end almost every episode tends to be like you're saying: this person was great and they were doing well but unfortunately the pandemic of HIV killed them. So it was almost as if there was going to a breakthrough in representation but the pandemic put an end to that. Another hidden tragedy, almost.



36:27 Robert

Yeah, and it was until really the nineties that the gay culture started being shown on television in America. You have shows like *Will and Grace*, Ellen DeGeneres coming out, making lives on TV. It takes time. We're going to get there. And I think we are probably getting away from the heathenry discussion.

37:00 Rich

It's all related to inclusivity. Because that is the broader culture of which heathenry is a part of. So, that representation will filter through. And I mean, obviously the next part is what is the theological or pagan response to that representation which we are going to see. I think, in a positive way.

37:18 Robert

Oh, on that line I had to laugh every time I see one of these non-inclusive groups, these white-supremacist groups, they, oh, yeah, "There is no support for gay people in the lore" or "There is no support for gay people in the culture". You just have to look at the lore and look at Loki and right there you have a gender-queer deity right there in the lore. Whether or not you believe Snorri, there is enough evidence of Loki to actually have been part of their culture. More than just what Snorri wrote. Yeah, it's right there. There is stories, I believe, where you can, they were definitely not sex-positive stories as queerness goes. I have heard stories where you could basically sue someone for calling you gay. But that is also more nuanced because you can sue someone for being the receptive partner in a gay relationship.

38:11 Rich

I've definitely seen that in some comments because it has to do with their conception of sex being something you did to someone else rather than an act between two people.

38:20 Robert

Yeah.

38:21 Rich

That was the sort of part of it. But interestingly I think there is an author Maria Kvilhaug who is about to come out with a book on *seidhr* and on a podcast she said *ergi*, that the concept of *ergi* being unmanly and being a huge insult having been through all of the sagas and all of the surviving literature. She said that as an insult has been hugely overstated, way, way way more having been given far more weight than it deserved.

38:50 Robert

I'm sure.

38:51 Rich

Because it is not mentioned that much. I forgot what she actually said but she said it's far more overstated. Religion with homework, we have to go back to the books again and re-examine people's own, people who were originally translating putting in their own biases on that as well. I think there is a whole lot more to be looked at.



39:03 Robert

I think my favourite translation of the term ergi, although I don't recommend the book anymore because of the revelations about the author of the translation in past year or two, Andy Orchard's Eddas translates ergi as "cock-craving". Unfortunately, he has been accused of sleeping with his students. At multiple universities.

39:29 Rich

That's a shame.

39:30 Robert

Yeah.

39:31 Rich

I don't know who did this but I know someone who was selling their shirts had something translated from the Old Norse which essentially was as close as they could get for "queer as fuck". But written in younger Futhark, big letters. Apparently some people were quite interested in that. So some straight people as well. I think the Old Norse, if I remember rightly, they translated as "an unquenchable desire to be penetrated".

40:01 Robert

Sounds about right.

40:03 Rich

So, yes, I think that was the closest where they could get to that. It's available online somewhere.

40:08 Robert

I'm sure.

40:09 Rich

It's probably copied, it's probably all of a red bubble now, goodness me, but that is some of the positive attitude I've seen in some groups which have been more inclusive certainly in the UK. I mean there are groups that aren't, there are always some of these groups around. But it's worth noting that the groups which have been inclusive have seen a huge boom in their members and in their activity. And when people realise that they are welcome and the gates open, come on in, I think that is extremely telling about the future of paganism and heathenry in general.

40:41 Robert

Yes, definitely.

40:42 Rich

Not that that's the end of the road. There's always more to do, I am not saying we've solved bigotry. No. There's always more to do.



41:02 Robert

In an odd way, the pandemic helped inclusivity. Mostly through making things accessible to those that can't make it to the ritual. I know that in America, a very common stereotype is that the average pagan is poor. That's not 100% true but there is definitely enough of the poor population in the pagans in the US that gives it a little bit of water.

The pandemic, pre pandemic, you really did have people who couldn't afford to go to festivals, afford to go to ritual, get the gas or whatever, or pay whatever the entrance fee was. You also had people who were specifically excluded because in the US a lot of our stuff is done in the parks, in the forest, field, whatever, outdoors. And if you're in a wheelchair or if you use a walker or some kind of mobility disabled, it's very difficult to get to these things.

And the online rituals, starting in 2020, when everyone was forced to go online really opened things up to a lot more people. I know a couple of events that I've been involved with online, the second Frith Forge which was in 2020 was 100% online and not in person, we had hundreds of people show up versus the thirty or forty people we were expecting if we did in person. The Trothmoots that were online, we got hundreds of people showing up instead of the maybe fifty people that we were going to get.

So in a perverse way, being forced to go online has made a lot more organizations a lot more inclusive for those that could not go to the events for monetary reasons, for mobility reasons, health reasons in general, whatever it may be. Unfortunately, now that the general consensus is that the pandemic is winding down, we're going back to in person only again. And that's to the detriment of a huge segment of the population.

42:50 Rich

What do you think that bodes for the future, where there's been these people who have been included, who perhaps were, not that they were pushed away but was just by accident rather than by design. Do you think that there will be more online rituals and more sort of inclusivity?

43:15 Robert

I think that we're going to reach a point where we might get more online based community, now that these people have had a chance to experience it. My personal experience is that, I've actually been doing online rituals since 2018, is when I first started doing them. And started figuring out how they worked. They do work. And I think there's going to be communities forming around, more communities forming around doing it online.

I know there has been some really long standing online covens or whatever you call the groups, where they have been online ever since the days of IRC. I know at one point someone was trying to use the video game *Second Life* to do rituals. And was doing it successfully. I think there are some better video games now that they are doing similar things in. I'm not sure what platform specifically, but. I think we're going to start seeing more online community for rituals because it's been shown that there is a need. That people want to do this. I think that for those of us that hold stuff in person, we start including an online component, so those that want to show up, but can't, they can't participate live, they can have the experience.

44:17 Rich

That's certainly been a thing I've seen in a lot of discussions, how can we stream this live, record it, and again it's sort of a technical thing that is out of reach of some people because of finance, or



some technical knowledge, but as I said that the younger generation are going to be able to do that, to stream live, or whatever. And I think we're going to see a lot more of that.

44:38 Robert

I was running a festival in Albany for a few years. One of the things that we were determined to do from the start was stream the ritual live. And apart from Wi-Fi issues in the hotel we were at, things like Facebook live, at that time, made it very simple.

44:52 Rich

Yes.

45:01 Robert

There streaming a ritual, recording a ritual comes up as other things that you have to be worried about. There are people that don't want to come out of the proverbial broom closet.

45:02 Rich

Yes.

45:03 Robert

So, you need to make sure that they know where things are being recorded, their voice will be recorded, you can't hide that obviously, but if they don't want to be on camera, 'stay in this part'.

45:19 Rich

I've heard of groups asking people to sign waivers just so that they understand, so that nobody can say 'I wasn't told or I didn't understand this would be on YouTube forever'. You know, so that everyone is clear about what they're agreeing to, to be filmed. If you're not happy about that, that's fine, stand here please. It almost goes against what a lot of people think of heathenry and paganism being free and easy and we don't need to have rules and regulations. But actually, we do, in the bigger we get, and the more we try to be inclusive, sometimes we do need rules to govern people. Because if you know five people and you're friends, that's fine, but if there's a hundred people there, you know it just takes one person to cause a problem and then that's the event soured forever perhaps, in some cases.

45:56 Robert

Y'know the fear is very strong here in the US, and probably throughout Europe too, that if I'm forced out as pagan, I may lose family, I may lose a job, I may lose all kinds of things. The reality of it, probably not for the vast majority of people, but there is that fear. A lot of people feel that 'I'm a school teacher, I can't be seen like this.' There, especially in America now, how politics and schools have gotten so intertwined, recently in the past couple of years. I don't want to be outed as pagan, because then parents gonna complain to the school board and I'll get fired. Just because of what I do outside of school.

46:48 Rich

I suppose that if you're outed as gay and pagan, then well absolutely, there'll be a box waiting for you on the steps of the school when you go to work on Monday. Unfortunately. I wonder what the correlation is between people hiding their sexual identity, or their gender identity and also being



pagan and having, those things, not by design but by necessity end up becoming more intertwined, that my sexual identity and religious beliefs, my religious life are both hidden together. And that's something, I've certainly seen quite a lot of in terms of younger communities. Not always American, but predominantly.

47:15 Robert

I do have to say most of the events I've gone to they have some kind of photography caution, which in the end basically comes down to, 'ask permission from the person you're taking the picture of and ask what you can do with the picture'. You don't want to inadvertently out someone without their knowledge of it happening.

47:34 Rich

Yes, yes, absolutely.

47:36 Robert

And of course their permission.

47:38 Rich

Yeah, I was at a druid ritual where, one year, it was a fairly low-key affair, nothing particularly fancy, but the following year, the guy who was leading it said: 'Oh, by the way, please no pictures this time. I know we're all friends here, but there was somebody here that was upset about being.' I don't think they were particularly outed in my view but they felt they were and that's what's important.

Because, so they didn't want any pictures taken at all. Because, you know, it was such a low-key informal affair and it was an open event as well. So they felt just to be on the safe side, they went to just, sort of, just no pictures thank you. That was that. Or at least no pictures of people, you could take pictures, you know, of the ritual space, fine do that, but make sure there's no people in it.

48:19 Robert

Or maybe the backs of people or you blur out the faces.

48:22 Rich

I know how to do that but I think it was just safer, which is a shame, but you know, I think the whole point was to make everyone feel comfortable, so there you are. I was going to ask what your hopes for the future, not just for the group that you're running, but also for gay or queer paganism that you've been involved with. What are you hoping to see in the future?

48:40 Robert

I hope in the future it's not an issue.

48:42 Rich

Well, yes, yes.



48:44 Robert

My hope in the future is that this kind of discussion is ever going to be needed. There are quite a few groups out there that are working towards being inclusive and be welcoming for everybody. I hope that we basically win the day, that we become the norm and the ones that are exclusive, the ones that are white supremacist, they really get pushed to the sides, get shrunk down to almost no membership, we know it's never going, that kind of ideology, it's be wonderful if it did though. But hopefully, at some point in the future, it'll be a matter of not having to ask and not having to worry, that it's just going to be the default. Really being inclusive is just being a good person. It's really being kind to everybody, being welcoming to everybody. And not judging them on any single particular characteristic.

49:35 Rich

Fantastic. Thanks very much, Robert. Do you have any closing thoughts, Jens?

49:40 Jens

Oh yes! I could wind up half of the podcast, but I won't do that. One thing I am hoping for the future and we spoke about that in our pre-chat is that Rob mentioned that people who are either pagan first or gay first and I've seen these different types a lot and I felt it resonating within me, and I think if I look back into our introduction episode, where I said something along the lines that I had split my own personality in different slices, that it will be the norm for people to be in spiritual places with their whole personality, not feeling like they have to hold something back. That we're moving forwards to that, and thank you Rob, I think you're helping a lot on that with what you're doing over there.

So much for episode 14, thanks to Rich and Rob for this episode and thanks to everyone for listening. Next time, Rich and Jochem will be joined by Sif for more queer topics. You can find us online at [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) @The Wyrd Thing. Goodbye!

[end tune]