

Poet in Profile: John O'Donohue

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For a friend on the arrival of illness

By John O'Donohue

Now is the time of dark invitation
Beyond a frontier that you did not expect;
Abruptly, your old life seems distant.

You barely noticed how each day opened
A path through fields never questioned,
Yet expected, deep down, to hold treasure.
Now your time on earth becomes full of threat;
Before your eyes your future shrinks.

You lived absorbed in the day-to-day,
So continuous with everything around you,
That you could forget you were separate;

Now this dark companion has come between you.
Distances have opened in your eyes,
You feel that against your will
A stranger has married your heart.

Nothing before has made you
Feel so isolated and lost.

When the reverberations of shock subside in you,
May grace come to restore you to balance.
May it shape a new space in your heart
To embrace this illness as a teacher

Who has come to open your life to new worlds.

May you find in yourself
A courageous hospitality
Toward what is difficult,
Painful, and unknown.

May you learn to use this illness
As a lantern to illuminate
The new qualities that will emerge in you.

May the fragile harvesting of this slow light
Help to release whatever has become false in you.
May you trust this light to clear a path
Through all the fog of old unease and anxiety
Until you feel arising within you a tranquility
Profound enough to call the storm to stillness.

May you find the wisdom to listen to your illness: Ask
it why it came. Why it chose your friendship. Where it
wants to take you. What it wants you to know.
What quality of space it wants to create in you. What
you need to learn to become more fully yourself. That
your presence may shine in the world.

May you keep faith with your body,
Learning to see it as a holy sanctuary
Which can bring this night-wound gradually
Towards the healing and freedom of dawn.

May you be granted the courage and vision
 To work through passivity and self-pity,
 To see the beauty you can harvest
 From the riches of this dark invitation.

May you learn to receive it graciously,
 And promise to learn swiftly
 That it may leave you newborn,
 Willing to dedicate your time to birth.¹

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My time with poet John O'Donohue has been a pilgrimage. Capturing this man's essence has been a substantial adventure, magnified by the paradoxical nature of the poet and his poetry. He embodies the transcendental as much as the earthy: a "priestly troubadour"² with a "wild soul"³ who prized interior silence and solitude while speaking on an international stage--an activist-wordsmith-former-priest who wrote impassioned letters to the world's power elite on topics of workplace integrity, environmental action and social equality. He joyfully encouraged late-nights-turned-early-mornings with his "fellow humanoids"³ and bottles of aged scotch, while also urging intentional seclusion as a means of cultivating and reconnecting with one's soul, as well as with others.²⁻⁸

He was born in January 1956 on the western coast of Ireland, the eldest child of Patrick and Josie O'Donohue. He spent his childhood wandering along the coast's barren limestone landscape, a surreal terrain that ignited his imagination and spirituality, leading to an early awareness of the Divine.^{7,9} He entered seminary at 18, a course of study that was followed by a PhD in philosophical theology from

Germany's University of Tübingen. While there, he became an expert on the writings of Hegel and later Meister Eckhart. For eighteen years, he balanced his priestly duties with writing and issues of environmental advocacy and social justice, choosing to leave the priesthood in 2000 to devote himself to full-time writing and public service. Prior to his death in January 2008, he published five books, including a collection of poetry and a book of blessings. His most famous book, "Anam Cara" launched him into surprising notoriety, allowing him to introduce the world to his beliefs on acknowledging the Divine within societal and personal realities and on choosing to engage humanity with honor and integrity.²⁻⁹

Essential to O'Donohue's mission was the belief that the self contains a sacred, vital center, often buried beneath the distractions and isolation of modern life, which seeks to weave within and between lives while journeying toward an acceptance of "human frailty but insistent on the triumphal power of divine love."⁵ This conviction fueled his passions, resulting in a life's work that was unwavering in its proclamation of the importance of the redemptive value of beauty, ambiguity and suffering, and of how attention and submission to such realities could bring us to healing, unity and reconnection, personally and collectively.^{1,5,8,9}

His 2007 *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings* (released as *To Bless the Space Between Us* in the United States in 2008) is a collection of poetic invocations intended to offer substance and language during unfamiliar, tenuous or difficult situations.¹ Within, he acknowledges the anguish of ambiguity and suffering but refuses to end in a place of pity or preciousness. Instead, harkening back to his central mission, he challenges the reader to move beyond their discomfort, invoke courage, and create a habitable space in which growth may

occur, as witnessed within the blessing “For a Friend in the Arrival of Illness”:

May it shape a new space in your heart
 To embrace this illness as a teacher
 Who has come to open your life to new worlds.
 May you find in yourself
 A courageous hospitality
 Toward what is difficult,
 Painful, and unknown.

Implicitly, we are encouraged to partner with illness, if not forgive it the process, unfurling a pathway that may unearth its unforeseen beauty and, more importantly, our own. This is a substantial challenge for a worldview in which we enthusiastically “kick cancer,” “beat illness” and champion the embodiment of “live strong” and “just do it.”

Theoretically, I agree with O'Donohue's mission, but as I suspect is the case with most of us, the truth is that I find myself recoiling and pushing against the images his poem invokes. The lines “To embrace this illness as a teacher” and, further within the poem, “Why it chose your friendship,” feel supremely uncomfortable. On the one hand, “embrace,” “teacher” and “friendship” conjure images of safety and comfort, while “illness,” is synonymous with pain and disillusionment. Placed together, the images feel unjust and unwanted. My spirit does not want illness to be “teacher,” any more than it wants it to be “friend.” And, yet, what I have to acknowledge as a human and specifically, a healthcare worker – and what I think O'Donohue is challenging us to accept – is that regardless of my reactivity and rejection of the possibility, suffering does exist and quite frequently, we are powerless in its pursuit.

To this end, the question must be asked: How does my belief or disbelief in the transformative power of

ambiguity or suffering guide my interactions with myself, as well as with my friend, partner or patient? Do I believe that “illness” (replace with any word or situation that connotes confusion or difficulty) can guide me toward a fuller understanding of myself? Do I believe that my patients, too, have this opportunity, and that they, discharged home with newly acquired physical limitations and altered independence, may also become more aware and expanded versions of themselves? If I do subscribe to such, how do I write goals and design treatments sustained by this belief? How does it guide the words I choose to impart hope while in the midst of disillusionment? Do I act or speak in a manner that facilitates acceptance without also encouraging passivity? Am I patient with their journey – and my own – toward recovery, acknowledgement and a future of revised images and dreams?

These are hard questions, and the answers are perhaps as individualized as the patients we treat. However, because of O'Donohue's personal and written legacy, we are not left to find our way without guidance. He believed that we “live at the intersection of the sacred with the profane,”⁶ a place that allows for grief during the loss and grace during the journey, but seeks to discover the hidden resources and possibility that – until this moment – we may not have known existed.¹ He believed that each of us hold these resources, fueled by the Divine but often experienced within the context of community.^{1,8} It is our awareness of our connectedness to both that can create the space in which we receive the unexpected, forgive ourselves our inadequacies and release our expectations; the space in which we extend unto ourselves – as well as to others and the situation – “courageous hospitality” and a willingness “to dedicate [our] time to birth.”¹

Acknowledgments

Courtesy of John O'Donohue estate

More Resources

- Listen to John O'Donohue Recite the Poem at Onbeing.org
- Listen to the Onbeing.org interview with John O'Donohue

References

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About the Author



Jenifer Breshears Markley, PT, DPT graduated with Honors from Emory University in 2000 with a Masters in Physical Therapy. She received her Doctor of Physical Therapy in 2010 from MGH Institute of Health Professions in Boston Massachusetts. Dr. Markley worked clinically for over 13 years within a variety of pediatric settings with an emphasis on developmental pediatrics. Concurrently, she worked in research with individuals post stroke on the NIH-funded, phase III, multi-site, randomized clinical trials EXCITE (Extremity Constraint Induced Therapy) and ICARE (Interdisciplinary Comprehensive Arm Rehabilitation Evaluation). Currently, Dr. Markley serves as the Assistant Director for Continuing Education within the Emory University Division of Physical Therapy and as the Faculty Associate Editor for the Journal of Humanities in Rehabilitation.



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