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The Unseen Life That Dreams Us

JOHN O'DONOHUE ON THE SECRET LANDSCAPES OF IMAGINATION AND SPIRIT

DIANE COVINGTON

In 1996 my sister Sharon was about to undergo her first brain surgery to remove several tumors. Though we had lost our father five years before, I had never questioned that Sharon would always be a part of my life. She was my older sister. Now I had to face the unimaginable possibility of being without her.

Sharon and I had been raised Catholic, but had both long ago abandoned the Church and often joked about being “recovering Catholics.” Now Sharon’s illness raised questions for me, and on the advice of a friend I attended a retreat led by a former priest: Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue.

The retreat was a great help to me, and I was impressed and soothed by O’Donohue’s deep kindness. He had no aura of Catholic guilt — something I had worked hard to get rid of myself. His words and presence left me feeling lighter and freer. I bought his book *Anam Cara* (Harper Perennial). *Anam* is the Gaelic word for “soul,” and *cara* the word for “friend.” In the early Celtic church, an *anam cara* acted as a teacher, companion, or spiritual guide, someone with whom you could share your innermost thoughts.

In the coming years, as I watched my sister slowly slip away, I turned again and again to O’Donohue’s *Anam Cara* and his other books. They addressed my grief and also my questions about how to live a meaningful life, how to cultivate wonder, and how to be more gentle with myself. Since my sister’s death, I have attended two more retreats with O’Donohue and have discovered that underneath his gentle and kind manner lies a brilliant mind capable of addressing the most complex ques-

tions of our times.

O’Donohue has a PhD in philosophical theology from the University of Tübingen in Germany and has written several books, including *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* and *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong* (both Harper Perennial), and two volumes of poetry, *Echoes of Memory* (Dufour Editions) and *Conamara Blues* (Harper Perennial). To *Bless the Space between Us: A Book of Blessings* is due out from Random House in the fall, and he is currently working on a book about the teachings of fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart. More information can be found on his website: www.johnodonohue.com.

O’Donohue lives in a cottage in the west of Ireland — an unspoiled, rustic region of the country — and lectures and teaches around the world. He holds two annual retreats: one in Ireland in May, and one in the U.S., on the Oregon coast, in late October. This interview is composed of two conversations that took place at those retreats. Maybe it’s a characteristic of O’Donohue’s Celtic background — he speaks fluent Gaelic — but he injected a lightness and a sprinkling of laughter into our conversation.

Covington: Do you think there is a spiritual hunger in the U.S. today?

O’Donohue: There is a fierce hunger for spirit at the heart of an American culture that has lost all belief in the old language about God. That language no longer resonates for most Americans, nor leads them to wells of nourishment. Ironically,

in other areas of American culture, there is a fundamentalist obsession with God. But inevitably this God tends to be a monolith and an emperor of the blandest singularity. Attention to the living God, who incorporates the beauty of the senses and spirit, and is the deepest source of the imagination and the highest calling of intellect, seems very scarce.

New Age spirituality is rising up to try to fill the gap. I do not wish to criticize any system that can nourish people's spirits, but I find that a lot of New Age writing cherry-picks the attractive bits from the ancient traditions and makes collages of them; it usually excises the ascetic dimension. In general it is not rigorously thought out, but is what I would call "soft" thinking.

Granted, it is difficult to write well about spirit: namely, to bring the lyrical and the philosophical into a true tension. In my writing, I endeavor to excavate the Celtic and the Judeo-Christian philosophical and literary traditions and to bring them into conversation with our modern hunger and questioning.

Covington: There has been so much conflict in the name of religion down through the ages — so much war and killing and hatred. What do you, as a deeply religious person, say about that to people who aren't religious?

O'Donohue: I think it's true that religion has been used to funnel political hostility, racial hatred, and all kinds of awful violence. But I would suggest that this is not the fault of religion but of the people who use it this way. In Northern Ireland we had a conflict said to be between Protestant and Catholic, but that conflict had nothing to do with the heart of Protestantism or the heart of Catholicism. Similarly with Islam nowadays, we in the West are often working with a mere caricature of that faith. But there is a beautiful and mystical theology at the heart of Islam. It's ironic that one of the most widely read poets in the U.S. today is Rumi, who comes out of the thirteenth-century Islamic tradition.

One of the great problems in postmodern culture is the lack of true conversation. What we have is more a series of intersecting monologues. There has been no real conversation between the West and Islam. We need one badly, for it is conversation that breaks down caricature and allows bridges to be built.

The tragedy of the West at the moment is that all interaction seems to take place across one bridge: economics. China is the next big superpower, and if we look at it only through economic lenses, as a field for profitable investments, the consequences will be disastrous. I was in China for six weeks and talked to a lot of people there. Even though they use Western tools for economic development, their mentality and sensibility are so different from ours. Whereas our starting point is the individual, theirs is the group. Their perception and language have such a different subtlety and structuring; economic bridges will never help us reach toward each other. Without a true cultural conversation, no real relationship will occur.



JOHN O'DONOHUE

The conflict in Northern Ireland has proven beyond a doubt that, sooner or later, you come to the table. And it is wiser to come to the table sooner, rather than after thirty years of murder, grief, and personal tragedy.

Covington: You are writing a book on fourteenth-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart. How are his teachings relevant to Americans in the twenty-first century?

O'Donohue: The U.S. is a great country. You can live the way you want there; you can be a self-made person. But sometimes, when all our energy goes into progress, acquisition, and productivity, it leaves a huge emptiness in the heart. I think the teachings of Meister Eckhart can address that emptiness, can show us how to be patient with it, and in fact bring

us deeper into it. At the heart of our emptiness, we can actually discover nourishment in the secret landscapes of imagination and spirit.

Covington: You've said that each Catholic can create his or her own "niche" in the faith. Is that really Catholicism?

O'Donohue: The term *a la carte Catholicism* has been used to denigrate those who pick and choose from the tradition, selecting only what nourishes, challenges, and heals them. On the other hand, nobody goes into a restaurant and chooses everything on the menu.

One of the difficulties in Western religion in general is that we are inclined to take current manifestations of the tradition as the whole truth about the religion. I don't think that is a responsible or honorable way to engage with a tradition. Tradition is to a community what memory is to the individual: a huge archive of knowledge that is tested over time. The questions of the human spirit are perennial, but they come in different forms at different moments in history; we shouldn't equate contemporary, and often banal or inferior, manifestations of the tradition with the depth of the tradition itself. Sometimes the people who represent a religious tradition at a particular moment will masquerade as the absolute owners of the tradition, but they are not. They are only good or bad servants of the tradition.

Although we might reject the faith's current representatives, I don't believe we can simply jump from one tradition to another. I can do Buddhist practice, but I cannot be a Buddhist. Nor can a Tibetan Buddhist come to Ireland and turn into a Catholic.

It saddens me to see so many spiritually starved people in the West passing the great granaries of the Christian traditions on their way to some New Age or fundamentalist church, and not even looking in the doorways. When the grain is tested, as it is in the great traditions, you get true nourishment, not fast food.

Covington: Why did you leave the priesthood?

O'Donohue: It was a difficult decision, and it did take years to make. I suppose the oxygen had become too scarce. I also found myself diverging from quite a few of the teachings.

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The final straw was acquiring a new bishop who exhibited and exercised a strong chemical hesitancy to my theological viewpoint. Once made, the decision brought me great peace of heart.

Covington: You’ve said the Catholic Church has a “pathological fear of the feminine.” Why do you think that is?

O’Donohue: First, before I criticize it, let me say what I love about the Catholic Church. I think the seven sacraments are the most beautiful liturgical rituals. The Christian mystical tradition is populated by such giants as Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, Hildegard von Bingen, and Julian of Norwich. The dogmas of the Catholic Church are sophisticated, poetic, speculative doctrines; they invite imagination, not dogmatism. I love the Church’s teaching on the communion of saints. I love the theology of the Trinity, which is not often preached because it is such a complex thing, yet it remains one of the most exciting discoveries of the nature of the divine.

On the other side, I do not trust the Catholic Church with Eros. I never did, even when I was a priest. The Church does have a pathological fear of the feminine. It would sooner allow priests to marry than it would allow women to become priests. This awful mistrust of the feminine goes all the way back to Genesis, where Eve is blamed for offering the apple to Adam. And the doctrine that a woman, after giving birth to a child — the most beautiful thing a human being can do — has to go to the Church to be cleansed: this is a demonization of women that I cannot understand.

All extremes create a mirror of themselves. So when you have the demonization of the feminine, you also have the creation of the ideal feminine type: Mary as the perfect woman, on whom no stain of mortality — or complexity — was allowed to fall. None of the awkward, subtle, different, or dark faces of the feminine were allowed near her image. I think it’s a shame, and it has consequences. I think the Church is in danger of losing women. As I’ve said for the last twenty years: if tomorrow all the women in the Catholic Church decided to walk, the Church wouldn’t last three months.

Covington: From your perspective, what intellectual and

theological contributions does the U.S. make?

O’Donohue: I have great admiration for intellectual life in the U.S. You have some of the best minds in the world in the sciences and the humanities. Universities like Harvard, Boston College, Princeton, Cornell, Stanford, Chicago Divinity School, and Emory can hold their own with the best universities in the world. But where are these intellects in the U.S. media, the public discourse? Religious fundamentalists, who claim to speak for God yet would not be able to distinguish God from a cucumber, are allowed full access to the public, and nobody comes along and questions their vacuousness. We need the renowned academics to step up and say, “The emperor has no clothes.” There’s never been a greater need for prophetic, courageous, informed, critical, imaginative people in any domain than there is in the U.S. media today. Instead you have journalists dancing to the tune of that horrible little two-syllable scourge the “sound bite.”

Covington: It’s ironic that the U.S. is supposed to be setting up a democracy in Iraq, while our own democratic principles are threatened.

O’Donohue: Yes, the country seems divided into two extremes. In the absence of a strong middle ground, the political pendulum will always swing too far to either side. By “middle ground” I don’t mean the status quo. I mean a true balance that is autonomous and authentic. That’s why we need responsible media and good conversation and universities that are open-minded and not already loyal to one side or the other. Plato said that to practice philosophy is to follow the question wherever it leads. Loyalty to the voyage of the question will create a wise middle ground and protect us from extremism.

Covington: In *Anam Cara* you write that the phrase “do not be afraid” appears 366 times in the Bible. I find that profound.

O’Donohue: Fear is the greatest source of falsification in life. It makes the real seem unreal, and the unreal appear real. In *The Courage to Be*, the theologian Paul Tillich draws a distinction between fear and anxiety. Anxiety, for him, is this diffuse worry that has no object or point of reference. This is the atmosphere right now in the U.S., the land of the free and the home of the brave. There is a huge anxiety just under the surface.

Fear, as distinct from anxiety, has an object and a point of reference. Tillich says that in order to handle anxiety, you have to translate it into a fear that has a definite object. Then you can engage with it. Part of the intention of growth is to overcome one’s fears.

Covington: *Anam cara* means “soul friend.” Underneath, is your book about being a friend to yourself?

O’Donohue: Yes, most things that are true and lasting have a symmetry between inside and out. Your outward relationship toward your beloved, if it is not mirrored internally by a loving relationship with yourself, is reduced and limited. You end up scraping from him or her what you are not giving yourself. But if you are nourished at your own table, you do not need so desperately to be fed by someone else; consequently, you can be free and open with that person.

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