



anam  
CARA

SPIRITUAL  
WISDOM  
FROM THE  
CELTIC  
WORLD

JOHN O'DONOHUE

*I was born in a limestone valley. To live in a valley is to enjoy a private sky. All around, life is framed by the horizon. The horizon shelters life yet constantly calls the eye to new frontiers and possibilities. The mystery of this landscape is further intensified by the presence of the ocean. For millions of years an ancient conversation has continued between the chorus of the ocean and the silence of the stone . . . The Irish landscape is full of memory; it holds ruins and traces of ancient civilization. There is a curvature in the landscape, a colour and shape that constantly frustrates the eye anxious for symmetry or linear simplicity . . . Every few miles of road the landscape changes; it always surprises, offering ever new vistas. This landscape which surprises the eye and calls the imagination has a wild yet serene complexity. In a sense, this reflects the nature of Celtic consciousness.*

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ANAM CÀRA  
JOHN O'DONOHUE



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In memory of my father, Paddy O'Donohue, who  
worked stone so poetically and my uncle, Pete  
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*DO MO CÁIRDE A TUIG FOSCAID AGUS SOLAS.*

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# BEANNACHT

(for Josie)



*O*n the day when  
the weight deadens  
on your shoulders  
and you stumble,  
may the clay dance  
to balance you.

*And when your eyes  
freeze behind  
the grey window  
and the ghost of loss  
gets in to you,  
may a flock of colours,  
indigo, red, green  
and azure blue  
come to awaken in you  
a meadow of delight.*

*When the canvas frays  
in the curach of thought  
and a stain of ocean*

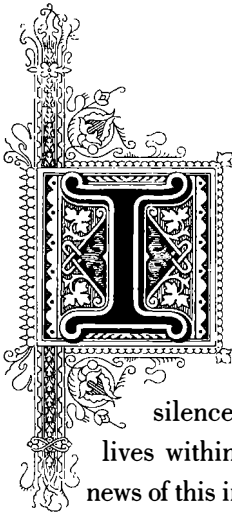


*blackens beneath you,  
may there come across the waters  
a path of yellow moonlight  
to bring you safely home.*

*May the nourishment of the earth be yours,  
may the clarity of light be yours,  
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,  
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.*

*And so may a slow  
wind work these words  
of love around you,  
an invisible cloak  
to mind your life.*

## PROLOGUE



It is STRANGE to be here. The mystery never leaves you alone. Behind your image, below your words, above your thoughts, the silence of another world waits. A world lives within you. No-one else can bring you news of this inner world. Through our voices, we bring out sounds from the mountain beneath the soul. These sounds are words. The world is full of words. There are so many talking all the time, loudly, quietly, in rooms, on streets, on TV, on radio, in the paper, in books. The noise of words keeps what we call the world there for us. We take each other's sounds and make patterns, predictions, benedictions and blasphemies. Each day, our tribe of language holds what we call the 'world' together. Yet the

uttering of the word reveals how each of us relentlessly creates. Everyone is an artist. Each person brings sound out of silence and coaxes the invisible to become visible.

Humans are new here. Above us, the galaxies dance out towards infinity. Under our feet is ancient earth. We are beautifully moulded from this clay. Yet the smallest stone is millions of years older than us. In your thoughts, the silent universe seeks echo. An unknown world aspires towards reflection. Words are the oblique mirrors which hold your thoughts. You gaze into these word mirrors and catch glimpses of meaning, belonging and shelter. Behind their bright surfaces is the dark and the silence. Words are like the god Janus, they face outwards and inwards at once.

If we become addicted to the external, our interiority will haunt us. We will become hungry with a hunger no image, person or deed can still. To be wholesome, we must remain truthful to our vulnerable complexity. In order to keep our balance, we need to hold the interior and exterior, visible and invisible, known and unknown, temporal and eternal, ancient and new, together. No-one else can undertake this task for you. You are the one and only threshold of an inner world. This wholesomeness is holiness. To be holy is to be natural; to befriend the worlds that come to balance in you.

Behind the façade of image and distraction, each person is an artist in this primal and inescapable sense. Each one of us is doomed and privileged to be an inner artist who carries and shapes a unique world.

Human presence is a creative and turbulent sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace. Nowhere else is there such intimate and frightening access to the *mysterium*. Friendship is the sweet grace which liberates us to approach, recognize and inhabit this adventure. This book is intended as an oblique mirror in which you might come to glimpse the presence and power of inner and outer friendship. Friendship is a creative and subversive force. It claims that intimacy is the secret law of life and universe. The human journey is a continuous act of transfiguration. If approached in friendship, the unknown, the anonymous, the negative and the threatening gradually yield their secret affinity with us. As an artist, the human person is permanently active in this revelation. The imagination is the great friend of the unknown. Endlessly, it invokes and releases the power of possibility. Friendship, then, is not to be reduced to an exclusive or sentimental relationship; it is a far more extensive and intensive force.

The Celtic mind was neither discursive nor systematic. Yet in their lyrical speculation, the Celts

brought the sublime unity of life and experience to expression. The Celtic mind was not burdened by dualism. It did not separate what belongs together. The Celtic imagination articulated the inner friendship which embraces nature, divinity, underworld and human world as one. The dualism which separates the visible from the invisible, time from eternity, the human from the divine, was totally alien to them. Their sense of ontological friendship yielded a world of experience imbued with a rich texture of otherness, ambivalence, symbolism and imagination. For our sore and tormented separation, the possibility of this imaginative and unifying friendship is the Celtic gift.

The Celtic understanding of friendship found its inspiration and culmination in the sublime notion of the *anam cara*. *Anam* is the Gaelic word for soul; *cara* is the word for friend. So *anam cara* means soul friend. The *anam cara* was a person to whom you could reveal the hidden intimacies of your life. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the friend of your soul. Taking this as our inspiration, we explore interpersonal friendship in Chapter One. Central here is the recognition and awakening of the ancient belonging between two friends. Since the human heart is

never completely born, love is the continuous birth of creativity within and between us. We will explore longing as the presence of the divine and the soul as the house of belonging.

In Chapter Two we will outline a spirituality of friendship with the body. The body is your clay home, your only home in the universe. The body is in the soul; this recognition confers a sacred and mystical dignity on the body. The senses are divine thresholds. A spirituality of the senses is a spirituality of transfiguration. In Chapter Three we will explore the art of inner friendship. When you cease to fear your solitude, a new creativity awakens in you. Your forgotten or neglected inner wealth begins to reveal itself. You come home to yourself and learn to rest within. Thoughts are our inner senses. Infused with silence and solitude, they bring out the mystery of the inner landscape.

In Chapter Four we will reflect on work as a poetics of growth. The invisible hungers to become visible, to express itself in our actions. This is the inner desire of work. When our inner life can befriend the outer world of work, new imagination is awakened and great changes take place. In Chapter Five we will contemplate our friendship with the harvest time of life, old age. We will explore memory as the place where our vanished days secretly gather and acknowledge that the passionate heart never

ages. Time is eternity living dangerously. In Chapter Six we will probe our necessary friendship with our original and ultimate companion, death. We will reflect on death as the invisible companion who walks the road of life with us from birth. Death is the great wound in the universe, the root of all fear and negativity. Friendship with our death would enable us to celebrate the eternity of the soul which death cannot touch.

The Celtic imagination loved the circle. It recognized how the rhythm of experience, nature and divinity followed a circular pattern. In acknowledgement of this the structure of this book follows a circular rhythm. It begins with a treatment of friendship as awakening, then explores the senses as immediate and creative thresholds. This builds the ground for a positive evaluation of solitude which in turn seeks expression in the external world of work and action. As our outer energy diminishes, we are faced with the task of ageing and dying. This structure follows the circle of life as it spirals towards death and attempts to illuminate the profound invitation it offers.

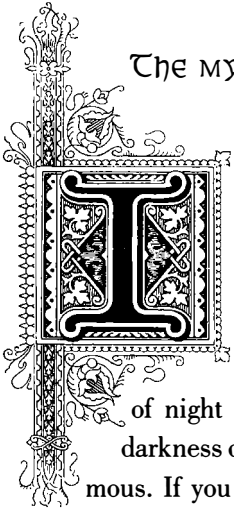
These chapters circle around a hidden, silent seventh chapter which embraces the ancient namelessness at the heart of the human self. Here resides the unsayable, the ineffable. In essence, this book attempts a phenomenology of friendship

in a lyrical-speculative form. It takes its inspiration from the implied and lyrical metaphysics of Celtic spirituality. Rather than being a piecemeal analysis of Celtic data, it attempts a somewhat broader reflection, an inner conversation with the Celtic imagination, endeavouring to thematize its implied philosophy and spirituality of friendship.



## chapter I

### THE MYSTERY OF FRIENDSHIP



Light is GENEROUS

IF YOU HAVE EVER HAD OCCASION to be out early in the morning before the dawn breaks, you will have noticed that the darkest time of night is immediately before dawn. The darkness deepens and becomes more anonymous. If you had never been to the world and never known what a day was, you couldn't possibly imagine how the darkness breaks, how the mystery and colour of a new day arrives. Light is incredibly generous, but also gentle. When you attend to the way the dawn comes, you learn how light can coax the dark. The first fingers of light appear on the horizon; ever so deftly and gradually, they pull the mantle of darkness away from the world. Quietly, before you is the mystery of a new dawn, the new

day. Emerson said: 'No-one suspects the days to be gods.' It is one of the tragedies of modern culture that we have lost touch with these primal thresholds of nature. The urbanization of modern life has succeeded in exiling us from this fecund kinship with our mother earth. Fashioned from the earth, we are souls in clay form. We need to remain in rhythm with our inner clay voice and longing. Yet this voice is no longer audible in the modern world. We are not even aware of our loss, consequently, the pain of our spiritual exile is more intense in being largely unintelligible.

The world rests in the night. Trees, mountains, fields and faces are released from the prison of shape and the burden of exposure. Each thing creeps back into its own nature within the shelter of the dark. Darkness is the ancient womb. Night-time is womb-time. Our souls come out to play. The darkness absolves everything; the struggle for identity and impression fall away. We rest in the night. The dawn is a refreshing time, a time of possibility and promise. All the elements of nature: stones, fields, rivers and animals are suddenly there anew in the fresh dawn light. Just as darkness brings rest and release, so the dawn brings awakening and renewal. In our mediocrity and distraction, we forget that we are privileged to live in a wondrous universe. Each day, the dawn unveils

the mystery of this universe. Dawn is the ultimate surprise; it awakens us to the immense 'thereness' of nature. The wonderful subtle colour of the universe arises to clothe everything. This is captured in the phrase from William Blake: 'Colours are the wounds of light.' Colours bring out the depth of secret presence at the heart of nature.

## THE CELTIC CIRCLE OF BELONGING



ll THROUGH Celtic poetry you find the colour, power and intensity of nature. How beautifully it recognizes the wind, the flowers, the breaking of the waves on the land. Celtic spirituality hallows the moon and adores the life-force of the sun. Many of the ancient Celtic gods were close to the sources of fertility and belonging. Since the Celts were a nature people, the world of nature was both a presence and a companion. Nature nourished them; it was here that they felt their deepest belonging and affinity. Celtic nature poetry is suffused with this warmth, wonder and belonging. One of the oldest Celtic prayers is a prayer called 'St Patrick's Breastplate'; its deeper name is 'The Deer's Cry': there is no separation between subjectivity and the elements. Indeed it is the very elemental forces which inform and elevate subjectivity:



*L* arise today  
Through the strength of heaven:  
Light of sun,  
Radiance of moon,  
Splendour of fire,  
Speed of lightning,  
Swiftness of wind,  
Depth of sea,  
Stability of earth,  
Firmness of rock.

(trans. Kuno Meyer)

The Celtic world is full of immediacy and belonging. The Celtic mind adored the light. This is one of the reasons why Celtic spirituality is emerging as a new constellation in our times. We are lonely and lost in our hungry transparency. We desperately need a new and gentle light where the soul can shelter and reveal its ancient belonging. We need a light which has retained its kinship with the darkness. For we are sons and daughters of the darkness and of the light.

We are always on a journey from darkness into light. At first, we are children of the darkness. Your body and your face were formed first in the kind darkness of your mother's womb. You lived the first nine months there. Your birth was a first journey from darkness into light. All your life, your mind

lives within the darkness of your body. Every thought that you have is a flint moment, a spark of light from your inner darkness. The miracle of thought is its presence in the night side of your soul; the brilliance of thought is born in darkness. Each day is a journey. We come out of the night into the day. All creativity awakens at this primal threshold where light and darkness test and bless each other. You only discover balance in your life when you learn to trust the flow of this ancient rhythm. The year also is a journey with the same rhythm. The Celtic people had a deep sense of the circular nature of our journey. We come out of the darkness of winter into the possibility and effervescence of springtime.

Ultimately, light is the mother of life. Where there is no light, there can be no life. If the angle of the sun were to turn away from the earth, all human, animal and vegetative life, as we know it, would disappear. Ice would freeze the earth again. Light is the secret presence of the divine. It keeps life awake. Light is a nurturing presence which calls forth warmth and colour in nature. The soul awakens and lives in light. It helps us to glimpse the sacred depths within us. Once human beings began to search for a meaning to life, light became one of the most powerful metaphors to express the eternity and depth of life. In the Western tradition,

and indeed in the Celtic tradition, thought has often been compared to light. In its luminosity, the intellect was deemed to be the place of the divine within us.

When the human mind began to consider the next greatest mystery to life, the mystery of love, light was also always used as a metaphor for its power and presence. When love awakens in your life, in the night of your heart, it is like the dawn breaking within you. Where before there was anonymity, now there is intimacy; where before there was fear, now there is courage; where before in your life there was awkwardness, now there is a rhythm of grace and gracefulness; where before you were jagged, now you are elegant and in rhythm with your self. When love awakens in your life, it is like a rebirth, a new beginning.

## THE HUMAN HEART IS NEVER COMPLETELY BORN



hough the human body is born complete in one moment, the human heart is never completely born. It is being birthed in every experience of your life. Everything that happens to you has the potential to deepen you. It brings to birth within you new territories of the heart. Patrick Kavanagh captures this

sense of the benediction of happening: 'Praise, praise, praise/ The way it happened and the way it is.' In the Christian tradition one of the most beautiful sacraments is baptism. It includes a special anointing of the baby's heart. Baptism comes from the Jewish tradition. For the Jewish people, the heart was the centre of all the emotions. The heart is anointed as a main organ of the baby's health but also as the place where all its feelings will nest. The prayer intends that the new child will never become trapped, caught or entangled in false inner networks of negativity, resentment or destruction towards itself. The blessings also intend that the child will have a fluency of feeling in its life, that its feelings may flow freely and carry its soul out to the world and gather from the world delight and peace.

Against the infinity of the cosmos and the silent depths of nature, the human face shines out as the icon of intimacy. It is here, in this icon of human presence, that divinity in creation comes nearest to itself. The human face is the icon of creation. Each person also has an inner face which is always sensed but never seen. The heart is the inner face of your life. The human journey strives to make this inner face beautiful. It is here that love gathers within you. Love is absolutely vital for a human life. For love alone can awaken what is divine within

you. In love, you grow and come home to your self. When you learn to love and to let your self be loved, you come home to the hearth of your own spirit. You are warm and sheltered. You are completely at one in the house of your own longing and belonging. In that growth and homecoming is the unlooked-for bonus in the act of loving another. Love begins with paying attention to others, with an act of gracious self-forgetting. This is the condition in which we grow.

Once the soul awakens, the search begins and you can never go back. From then on, you are inflamed with a special longing which will never again let you linger in the lowlands of complacency and partial fulfilment. The eternal makes you urgent. You are loath to let compromise or the threat of danger hold you back from striving towards the summit of fulfilment. When this spiritual path opens, you can bring an incredible generosity to the world and to the lives of others. Sometimes it is easy to be generous outwardly, to give and give and give and yet remain ungenerous to your self. You lose the balance of your soul if you are a generous giver but a mean receiver. You need to be generous to your self in order to receive the love that surrounds you. You can suffer from a desperate hunger to be loved. You can search long years in lonely places, far outside your self. Yet the whole



time, this love is but a few inches away from you. It is at the edge of your soul but you have been blind to its presence. Through some hurt, a door has slammed shut within the heart and you are powerless to unlock it and receive the love. We must remain attentive in order to be able to receive. Boris Pasternak said: 'When a great moment knocks on the door of your life, it is often no louder than the beating of your heart, and it is very easy to miss it.'

It is strangely ironic that the world loves power and possessions. You can be very successful in this world, be admired by everyone, have endless possessions, a lovely family, success in your work and have everything the world can give, but behind it all you can be completely lost and miserable. If you have everything the world has to offer you, but you do not have love, then you are the poorest of the poorest of the poor. Every human heart hungers for love. If you do not have the warmth of love in your heart, there is no possibility of real celebration and enjoyment. No matter how hard, competent, self-assured or respected you are, no matter what you think of your self or what others think of you, the one thing you deeply long for is love. No matter where we are, who we are or what we are, or what kind of journey we are on, we all need love.

In his *Ethics* Aristotle devotes several chapters

to reflection on friendship. He grounds friendship on the idea of goodness and beauty. A friend is someone who wishes what is good for the other. Aristotle acknowledges how the complexity of individual interiority is mirrored and fulfilled in the discovery and activity of friendship: 'Our feelings towards our friends reflect our feelings towards ourselves.' He acknowledges the patience required to develop real friendship: 'The wish for friendship develops rapidly, but friendship does not.' Friendship is the grace which warms and sweetens our lives: 'Nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all other good things.'

## LOVE IS THE NATURE OF THE SOUL



HE SOUL NEEDS LOVE AS URGENTLY AS THE body needs air. In the warmth of love, the soul can be itself. All the possibilities of your human destiny are asleep in your soul. You are here to realize and honour these possibilities. When love comes into your life, unrecognized dimensions of your destiny awaken and blossom and grow. Possibility is the secret heart of time. On its outer surface time is vulnerable to transience. Regardless of its sadness or beauty, each day empties and vanishes. In its deeper heart, time is transfiguration. Time minds possibility and makes

sure that nothing is lost or forgotten. That which seems to pass away on the surface of time is in fact transfigured and housed in the tabernacle of memory. Possibility is the secret heart of creativity. Martin Heidegger speaks about the 'ontological priority' of possibility. At the deepest level of being, possibility is both mother and transfigured destination of what we call events and facts. This quiet and secret world of the eternal is the soul. Love is the nature of the soul. When we love and allow ourselves to be loved, we begin more and more to inhabit the kingdom of the eternal. Fear changes into courage, emptiness becomes plenitude and distance becomes intimacy.

The *anam-cara* experience opens a friendship that is not wounded or limited by separation or distance. Such friendship can remain alive even when the friends live far away from each other. Because they have broken through the barriers of persona and egoism to the soul level, the unity of their souls is not easily severed. When the soul is awakened, physical space is transfigured. Even across the distance two friends can stay attuned to each other and continue to sense the flow of each other's lives. With your *anam cara* you awaken the eternal. In this soul-space there is no distance. This is beautifully illustrated during the meal in the film *Babette's Feast*, where an old soldier speaks with

the woman he loved from youth but was not allowed to marry. He tells her that even though he had never seen her since she had been always at his side.

Love is our deepest nature: consciously or unconsciously, each of us searches for love. We often choose such false ways to satisfy this deep hunger. An excessive concentration on our work, achievements or spiritual quest can actually lead us away from the presence of love. In the work of soul, our false urgency can utterly mislead us. We do not need to go out to find love, rather we need to be still and let love discover us. Some of the most beautiful writing on love is in the Bible. Paul's letter to the Corinthians is absolutely beautiful. There he writes: 'Love is always patient and kind; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful . . . Love is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.' Elsewhere the Bible says: 'Perfect love casts out all fear.'

## THE UMBRA NIHILI



**L** IN A VAST UNIVERSE WHICH OFTEN seems sinister and unaware of us, we need the presence and shelter of love to transfigure our loneliness. This cosmic loneliness is the root of all inner loneliness. All of our life,

everything we do, think and feel is surrounded by nothingness. Hence, we become afraid so easily. The fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart says that all of human life stands under the shadow of nothingness, the *umbra nihili*. Nevertheless, love is the sister of the soul. Love is the deepest language and presence of soul. In and through the warmth and creativity of love, the soul shelters us from the bleakness of that nothingness. We cannot fill up our emptiness with objects, possessions or people. We have to go deeper into that emptiness, then we will find beneath nothingness the flame of love waiting to warm us.

No-one can hurt you as deeply as the one you love. When you allow the Other inside your life, you leave yourself open. Even after years together, your affection and trust can be disappointed. Life is dangerously unpredictable. People change, often quite dramatically and suddenly. Bitterness and resentment quickly replace belonging and affection. Every friendship travels at some time through the black valley of despair. This tests every aspect of your affection. You lose the attraction and the magic. Your sense of each other darkens and your presence is sore. If you can come through this time, it can purify your love; falsity and need will fall away. It will bring you onto new ground where affection can grow again.

Sometimes a friendship turns, and the partners

fix on each other at their points of mutual negativity. When you meet only at the point of poverty between you, it is as if you give birth to a ghost who would devour every shred of your affection. Your essence is rifled. You become so helpless and repetitive with each other. Here you need deep prayer, great vigilance and care in order to redirect your souls. Love can hurt us deeply. We need to take great care. The blade of nothingness cuts deeply. Others want to love, to give themselves, but they have no energy. They carry around in their hearts the corpses of past relationships, addicted to hurt as confirmation of identity. Where a friendship recognizes itself as a gift, it will remain open to its own ground of blessing.

When you love, you open your life to an Other. All your barriers are down. Your protective distances collapse. This person is given absolute permission to come into the deepest temple of your spirit. Your presence and life can become their ground. It takes great courage to let someone so close. Since the body is in the soul, when you let someone so near, you let them become part of you. In the sacred kinship of real love two souls are twinned. The outer shell and contour of identity becomes porous. You suffuse each other.

## THE ANAM CARA



IN the Celtic tradition, there is a beautiful understanding of love and friendship. One of the fascinating ideas here is the idea of soul love; the old Gaelic term for this is *anam cara*. *Anam* is the Gaelic word for soul and *cara* is the word for friend. So *anam cara* in the Celtic world was the soul friend. In the early Celtic Church, a person who acted as a teacher, companion or spiritual guide was called an *anam cara*. *Anam cara* was originally someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life. With the *anam cara*, you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention, morality and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the 'friend of your soul'. The Celtic understanding did not set limitations of space or time on the soul. There is no cage for the soul. The soul is a divine light that flows into you and into your Other. This art of belonging awakened and fostered a deep and special companionship. In his *Conferences*, John Cassian says this bond between friends is indissoluble: 'This, I say, is what is broken by no chances, what no interval of time or space can sever or destroy, and what even death itself cannot part.'

In everyone's life, there is great need for an *anam cara*, a soul friend. In this love, you are understood as you are without mask or pretension. The superficial and functional lies and half-truths of acquaintance fall away. You can be as you really are. Love allows understanding to dawn, and understanding is precious. Where you are understood, you are at home. Understanding nourishes belonging. When you really feel understood, you feel free to release your self into the trust and shelter of the other person's soul. This recognition is described in the beautiful line from Pablo Neruda: 'You are like nobody since I love you.' This art of love discloses the special and sacred identity of the other person. Love is the only light that can truly read the secret signature of the other person's individuality and soul. Love alone is literate in the world of origin; it can decipher identity and destiny.

It is precisely in awakening and exploring this rich and opaque inner landscape that the *anam-cara* experience illuminates the mystery and kindness of the divine. The *anam cara* is God's gift. Friendship is the nature of God. The Christian concept of God as Trinity is the most sublime articulation of Otherness and intimacy, an eternal interflow of friendship. This perspective discloses the beautiful fulfilment of our immortal longings in the words of Jesus who said: 'I call you friends.'



Jesus as the Son of God is the first Other in the universe; he is the prism of all difference. He is the secret *anam cara* of every individual. In friendship with him we enter the tender beauty and affection of the Trinity. In the embrace of this eternal friendship, we dare to be free. There is a beautiful Trinitarian motif running through Celtic spirituality. This little invocation captures this:



*The Sacred Three  
My fortress be  
Encircling me  
Come and be round  
My hearth and my home.*

Consequently, love is anything but sentimental. In fact, it is the most real and creative form of human presence. Love is the threshold where divine and human presence ebb and flow into each other.

All presence depends on our consciousness. Where there is a depth of awareness, there is a reverence for presence. Where consciousness is dulled, distant or blind, the presence grows faint and vanishes. Consequently, awareness is one of the greatest gifts you can bring to your friendship. Many people have an *anam cara* of whom they are not truly aware. Their lack of awareness cloaks the friend's presence and causes feelings of distance

and absence. Sadly, it is often loss that awakens presence; by then it is too late. It is wise to pray for the grace of recognition. Inspired by awareness, you may then discover beside you the *anam cara* of whom your longing has always dreamed.

The Celtic tradition recognized that *anam-cara* friendships were graced with affection. Friendship awakens affection. The heart learns a new art of feeling. Such friendship is neither cerebral nor abstract. In Celtic tradition the *anam cara* was not merely a metaphor or ideal. It was a soul bond which existed as a recognized and admired social construct. It altered the meaning of identity and perception. When your affection is kindled, the world of your intellect takes on a new tenderness and compassion. The *anam cara* brings epistemological integration and healing. You look and see and understand differently. Initially this can be disruptive and awkward, but it gradually refines your sensibility and transforms your way of being in the world. Most fundamentalism, greed, violence and oppression can be traced back to the separation of idea and affection. For too long we have been blind to the cognitive riches of feeling and the affective depth of ideas. Aristotle says in *De Anima*: 'Perception is *ex hypothesi* a form of affection and being moved; and the same goes for thinking and knowing. Thinking particularly is like a peculiar

affection of the soul.’ The *anam-àara* perspective is sublime because it permits us to enter this unity of ancient belonging.

## INTIMACY AS SACRED



IN OUR CULTURE, THERE IS AN EXCESSIVE concentration on the notion of relationship. People talk incessantly about relationships. It is a constant theme on TV, film and media. Technology and media are not uniting the world. They pretend to provide a world that is inter-netted, but in reality, all they deliver is a simulated world of shadows. Accordingly, they make our human world more anonymous and lonely. In a world where the computer replaces human encounter and psychology replaces religion, it is no wonder that there is an obsession with relationship. Unfortunately, however, ‘relationship’ has become an empty centre around which our lonely hunger forages for warmth and belonging. Much of the public language of intimacy is hollow and its incessant repetition only betrays the complete absence of intimacy. Real intimacy is a sacred experience. It never exposes its secret trust and belonging to the voyeuristic eye of a neon culture. Real intimacy is of the soul, and the soul is reserved.

In the Bible, it says that no-one can see God and

live. In a transferred sense, no person can see himself and live. All you can ever achieve is a sense of your soul. You gain little glimpses of its light, colours and contours. You feel the inspiration of its possibilities and the wonder of its mysteries. In the Celtic tradition, and especially in the Gaelic language, there is a refined sense of the sacredness which the approach to another person should embody. The word 'hello' does not exist in Gaelic. The way that you encounter someone is through blessing. You say, *Dia dhuit*, God be with you. They respond, *Dia is Muire dhuit*, God and Mary be with you. When you are leaving a person, you say, *go gcumhdái Dia thú*, may God come to your assistance or *go gcoinne Dia thú*, may God keep you. The ritual of encounter is framed at the beginning and at the end with blessing. Regularly throughout conversation in Gaelic, there is explicit recognition that the divine is present in others. There are also old recognitions embodied in sayings such as: the hand of the stranger is the hand of God. The stranger does not come accidentally; he brings a particular gift and illumination.

## The mystery of approach



FOR YEARS I HAVE had AN idea for a short story about a world where you would only approach one person in the course of your life. Naturally, one would have to subtract biological considerations from this assumption in order to draw this imaginary world. You would have to practise years of silence before the mystery of presence in the Other, then, you could begin to approach. In the course of your life, you might only approach one or two people. This idea gains in reality if you view your life carefully and distinguish between acquaintances and friends. A friend is different from an acquaintance. Friendship is a deeper and more sacred connection. Shakespeare has a beautiful phrase for this: 'The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel.' So a friend is incredibly precious. A friend is a loved one who awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you.

Ireland is a land of many ruins. Ruins are not empty. They are sacred places full of presence. A friend of mine, a priest in Connemara, was going to build a car-park outside his church. There was a ruin nearby which had been vacated for fifty or sixty years. He went to the man whose family had

lived there long ago. He asked the man to give him the stones for the foundation. The man refused. The priest asked why and the man said: ‘*Céard a dhéanfadh anamacha mo mhuintire ansin?*’ i.e. what would the souls of my ancestors do then? The implication was that even in this ruin long since vacated, the souls of those who had once lived there still had a particular affinity and attachment to this place. The life and passion of a person leaves an imprint on the ether of a place. Love does not remain within the heart, it flows out to build secret tabernacles in a landscape.

## DIARMUID AND GRÁINNE



TRAVELLING THROUGHOUT IRELAND, you will see beautiful stone shapes called dolmens. A dolmen is two massive, long tables of limestone, laid down parallel to each other. Over them as a kind of shelter is placed another giant cap stone. In the Celtic tradition these were known as ‘*Leaba Dhiarmada agus Gráinne*’, i.e. the bed of Diarmuid and Gráinne. The legend tells that Gráinne was to marry Fionn, chief of the Fianna, the old Celtic warriors. She fell in love with Diarmuid and threatened him with magical destruction if he refused to elope with her. The two of them eloped and the Fianna chased them all over Ireland. They

were cared for by the animals and received advice from wise people on how to evade their pursuers. They were told, for instance, not to spend more than two nights in any one place. But it was said that when they rested at night, Diarmuid put up the dolmen as a shelter for his lover. The actual archaeological evidence shows that these were burial places. The legend is more interesting and resonant. It is a lovely image of the helplessness which sometimes accompanies love. When you fall in love, common sense, rationality and your normal serious, reserved and respectable persona dissolve. Suddenly, you are like an adolescent again; there is new fire in your life. You become revitalized. Where there is no passion, your soul is either asleep or absent. When your passion awakens, your soul becomes young and free and dances again. In this old Celtic legend, we see the power of love and the energy of passion. One of the most powerful poems about how this longing transfigures life is by Goethe and is called:

## BLESSED LONGING



*ell no-one else, only the wise,  
For the crowd will sneer at once.  
I wish to praise what is fully alive,  
What longs to flame towards death.*

*When the calm enfolds the love-nights  
That created you, where you have created  
A feeling from the Unknown steals over you  
While the tranquil candle burns.*

*You remain no longer caught  
In the penumbral gloom  
You are stirred and new, you desire  
To soar to higher creativity.*

*No distance makes you ambivalent.  
You come on wings, enchanted  
In such hunger for light, you  
Become the butterfly burnt to nothing.*

*So long as you have not lived this:  
To die is to become new,  
You remain a gloomy guest  
On the dark earth.*

(Author's translation)

This poem captures the wonderful spiritual force at the heart of longing. It suggests that true vitality



is hidden within longing. When you give in to creative passion, it will bring you to the ultimate thresholds of transfiguration and renewal. This growth causes pain but it is a sacred pain. It would be much more tragic to have cautiously avoided these depths and remained marooned on the shiny surfaces of the banal.

## LOVE AS ANCIENT RECOGNITION



REAL FRIENDSHIP OR LOVE IS NOT MANUFACTURED or achieved. Friendship is always an act of recognition. This metaphor of friendship can be grounded in the clay nature of the human body. When you find the person you love, an act of ancient recognition brings you together. It is as if millions of years before the silence of nature broke, his or her clay and your clay lay side by side. Then, in the turning of the seasons, your one clay divided and separated. You began to rise as distinct clay forms, each housing a different individuality and destiny. Without even knowing it, your secret memory mourned your loss of each other. While your clay selves wandered for thousands of years through the universe, your longing for each other never faded. This metaphor helps to explain how in the moment of friendship two souls suddenly recognize each other. It could be a

meeting on the street, or at a party, a lecture or just a simple, banal introduction, then, suddenly there is the flash of recognition and the embers of kinship glow. There is an awakening between you, a sense of ancient knowing. Love opens the door of ancient recognition. You enter. You come home to each other at last. As Euripedes says, 'Two friends, one soul.'

In the classical tradition this is wonderfully expressed in Plato's magical dialogue on the nature of love, the *Symposium*. Plato adverts to the myth that humans in the beginning were not single individuals. Each person was two selves in one. Then they became separated; consequently, you spend your life looking for your other half. When you find and discover each other, it is through this act of profound recognition. In friendship, an ancient circle closes. That which is ancient between you will mind you, shelter you and hold you together. When two people fall in love, each comes in out of the loneliness of exile, home to the one house of belonging. At weddings, it is appropriate to acknowledge the gracious destiny that enabled this couple to recognize each other when they met. Each recognized the other as the one in whom their heart could be at home. Love should never be a burden, for there is more between you than your mutual presence.

## THE CIRCLE OF BELONGING



WE NEED MORE RESONANT WORDS TO mirror this than the tired word 'relationship'. Phrases like 'an ancient circle closes' or 'an ancient belonging awakens and discovers itself' help to bring out the deeper meaning and mystery of encounter. This is the more sacred language of the soul for togetherness and intimacy. When two people love each other, there is a third force between them. Sometimes when a friendship is in trouble, it is not to be healed by endless analysis or counselling. You need to change the rhythm of seeing each other and come in contact again with the ancient belonging which brought you together. This ancient affinity will hold you together, if you invoke its power and presence around you. Two people who are really awakened inhabit the one circle of belonging. They have awakened a more ancient force around them which will hold them together and mind them.

Friendship needs a lot of nurturing. Often people devote their primary attention to the facts of their lives, to their situation, to their work, to their status. Most of their energy goes into doing. Meister Eckhart writes beautifully about this temptation. He says many people wonder where they should be and what they should do, when in fact they should be more concerned about how to *be*. The love side of

your life is the place of greatest tenderness within you. In a culture preoccupied with fixities and definites and correspondingly impatient of mystery, it is difficult to step out from the transparency of false light into the more candlelight world of the soul. Perhaps, the light of the soul is like Rembrandt light. That tawny, gold light for which Rembrandt's work is known. This light gives you such a real sense of the depth and substance of the figures on whom it gently shines. It achieves a profound complexity of presence through the subtle use of shadow. Such a golden earth-light is the natural sister of shadow and the cradle of illumination.

## THE KALYANA-MITRA



he Buddhist tradition has a lovely concept of friendship. This is the notion of the '*Kalyana-mitra*', the 'noble friend'. Your *Kalyana-mitra*, your noble friend, will not accept pretension, but will gently and very firmly confront you with your own blindness. No-one can see their life totally. As there is a blind spot in the retina of the human eye, there is also in the soul a blind side where you are not able to see. Therefore, you must depend on the one you love to see for you, where you cannot see for yourself. Your *Kalyana-mitra* complements your vision in a kind and critical

way. Such friendship is creative and critical; it is willing to negotiate awkward and uneven territories of contradiction and woundedness.

One of the deepest longings of the human soul is the longing to be seen. In the ancient myth, Narcissus looks into the pool, sees his own face and becomes obsessed with it. Unfortunately, there is no mirror in the world where you can catch a glimpse of your soul. You cannot even see your own body completely. If you look behind you, the front of your body is out of view. You can never be fully visually present to yourself. The one you love, your *anam cara*, your soul friend, is the truest mirror to reflect your soul. The honesty and clarity of true friendship also brings out the real contour of your spirit. It is beautiful to have such a presence in your life.

## THE SOUL AS DIVINE ECHO



WE ARE capable of such love and belonging because the soul holds the echo of a primal intimacy. When talking about primal things, the Germans talk of *ursprüngliche Dinge* – original things. One could say that there is an *Ur-Intimität in der Seele*, i.e. a primal intimacy in the soul. This original echo whispers within every heart. The soul did not invent itself. It is a presence from the divine world,

where intimacy has no limit or barrier.

You can never love another person unless you are equally involved in the beautiful, but difficult, spiritual work of learning to love your self. There is within each of us at the soul level, an enriching fountain of love. In other words, you do not have to go outside your self to know what love is. This is not selfishness, and it is not narcissism; they are negative obsessions with the need to be loved. Rather, this is the wellspring of love within the heart. Through their need for love, people who lead solitary lives often stumble upon this great inner fountain. They learn to whisper awake the deep well of love within. This is not a question of forcing yourself to love your self. It is more a question of exercising reserve, of inviting the wellspring of love that is, after all, your deepest nature to flow through your life. When this happens the ground that has hardened within you grows soft again. Through a lack of love everything hardens. There is nothing as lonely in the world as that which has hardened or grown cold. Bitterness and coldness are the ultimate defeat.

If you find that your heart has hardened, one of the gifts that you should give your self is the gift of the inner wellspring. You should invite this inner fountain to free itself. You can work on your self in order to unsilt this, so that gradually the nourishing

waters begin in a lovely osmosis to infuse and pervade the hardened clay of your heart. Then the miracle of love happens within you. Where before there was hard, bleak, unyielding, dead ground, now there is growth, colour, enrichment and life flowing from the wellspring of love. This is one of the most creative approaches in transfiguring what is negative within us. You are sent here to learn to love and to receive love. The greatest gift new love brings into your life is the awakening to the hidden love within. This makes you independent. You are now able to come close to the Other, not out of need or with the wearying apparatus of projection, but out of genuine intimacy, affinity and belonging. It is a freedom. Love should make you free. You become free of the hungry, blistering need with which you continually reach out to scrape affirmation, respect and significance for your self from things and people outside your self. To be holy is to be home, to be able to rest in the house of belonging that we call the soul.

## The wellspring of love within



YOU CAN SEARCH FAR AND IN HUNGRY places for love. It is a great consolation to know that there is a wellspring of love within your self. If you trust that this wellspring is

there, you will then be able to invite it to awaken. The following exercise could help develop awareness of this capacity. When you have moments on your own or spaces in your time, just focus on the well at the root of your soul. Imagine that nourishing stream of belonging, ease, peace and delight. Feel, with your visual imagination, the refreshing waters of that well gradually flowing up through the arid earth of the neglected side of your heart. It is helpful to imagine this particularly before you sleep. Then, during the night, you will be in a constant flow of enrichment and belonging. You will find that when you awake at dawn, there will be a lovely, quiet happiness in your spirit.

One of the most precious things you should always preserve in a friendship and in love is your own difference. It can happen within the circle of love that one person will tend to imitate the Other or reimagine himself in the image of the Other. While this may indicate a desire for total commitment, it is also destructive and dangerous. There was an old man I knew on an island off the west of Ireland. He had an unusual hobby. He used to collect photographs of newly married couples. He would then get a photograph of that couple some ten years later. From the ten-year-old photograph, he would begin to demonstrate how one of the couple was beginning to resemble the other. Often



in a relationship there can be a subtle homogenizing force which is destructive. The irony is that it is usually the difference that makes one person attractive to another. Consequently, this difference needs to be preserved and nurtured.

Love is also a force of light and nurture that liberates you to inhabit to the full your own difference. There should be no imitation of each other; no need to be defensive or protective in each other's presence. Love should encourage and free you fully into your full potential.

In order to preserve your own difference in love, you need plenty of room for your soul. It is interesting that in Hebrew one of the original words for salvation is also the word for space. When you are born on a farm, you realize that space is vital, especially when you are sowing something. If you plant two trees side by side, they will smother each other. That which grows needs space. Kahlil Gibran says: 'But let there be spaces in your togetherness, let the winds of the heavens dance between you.' Space allows your Otherness to find its own rhythm and contour. Yeats speaks of: 'A little space for the rose breath to fill.' One of the lovely areas of love where space can be rendered beautiful is when two people make love. The one you love is the one to whom you can bring the full array and possibility and delight of your senses in the knowledge that it

will be received in welcome and tenderness. Since the body is in the soul, the body is illuminated all around with soul light. It is suffused with a gentle, sacred light. Making love with someone should not be merely physical or mechanical release. It should engage the spiritual depth which awakens when you enter the soul of another person.

The soul of a person is most intimate. You meet a person's soul before you meet his body. When you meet soul and body as one, you enter the world of the Other. If a person could bring a gentle and reverent recognition to the depth and beauty of that encounter, it would extend incredible possibilities of delight and ecstasy within love-making. It would free in both people this inner wellspring of deeper love. It would reunite them externally with this third force of light, the ancient circle, that actually brings the two souls together in the first place.


## The TRANSFIGURATION OF THE SENSES



THE MYSTICS ARE AMONG THE MOST trustable in this area of sensuous love. The mystics have a lovely theology of the sensuous implicit in their writings. They never preach a denial of the senses, rather they speak of the transfiguration of the senses. The mystics recognize that there is a certain gravity or darkness in

Eros which can sometimes predominate. The light of the soul can transfigure this tendency and bring balance and poise. The beauty of such mystical reflection on Eros reminds us that Eros is ultimately the energy of divine creativity. In the transfiguration of the sensuous, the wildness of Eros and the playfulness of the soul come into lyrical rhythm.

Modern Ireland has had a complex and painful journey towards the recognition and acceptance of Eros. In the old Irish tradition, there was a wonderfully vibrant acknowledgement of the power of Eros and erotic love. This finds expression in one of the most interesting poems from that era, a poem by Brian Merriman called ‘*Cúirt an Mheáin Oidhche*’ or ‘*The Midnight Court*’. This comes out of the eighteenth century. Much of it is written from the perspective of the woman. It is a radically free, feminist perception. The woman’s voice speaks:

 *Amn't I plump and sound as a bell?  
Lips for kissing, and teeth for smiling,  
Blossomy skin and forehead shining?  
My eyes are blue and my hair is thick  
and coils and streams about my neck,  
A man who's looking for a wife,  
Here's a face that will keep for life;  
Hand and arm and neck and breast,  
Each is better than the rest:*

*Look at that waist. My legs are long,  
Limber as willows and light, and strong.*

(trans. Frank O'Connor)

This is a very long poem, a ribaldry celebration of the erotic. There is no intrusion of the frequently negative language of morality which tries to separate sexuality into pure and impure. It is redundant in any case to use such words about clay creatures. How could you possibly have such purity in a clay creature? A clay creature is always a mixture of light and darkness. The beauty of Eros is its passionate thresholds where light and darkness meet within the person. We need to reimagine God as the energy of transfigurative Eros, the source from which all creativity flows.

Pablo Neruda has written some of the most beautiful love lines. He says: 'I will bring you happy flowers from the mountains, bluebells, / dark hazels, and rustic baskets of kisses. / I want / to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees.' This thought is so beautiful; it shows that love is also the awakening of springtime in the clay part of the heart. Yeats, too, wrote some inspiring love poetry. He has lines like: 'But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you / and loved the sorrows of your changing face.' These poems show a recognition of the special depth and presence within the beloved. Love helps you to see the Other in his or her own unique and special nature.

## THE WOUNDED GIFT



ONE OF THE GREAT POWERS OF LOVE is balance; it helps us towards transfiguration. When two people come together, an ancient circle closes between them. They also come to each other not with empty hands, but with hands full of gifts for each other. Often these are wounded gifts; this awakens the dimension of healing within love. When you really love someone, you shine the light of your soul on him or her. We know from nature that sunlight brings everything to growth. If you look at flowers early on a spring morning, they are all closed. When the light of the sun catches them, they trustingly open out and give themselves to the new light.

When you love someone who is very hurt, one of the worst things you can do is to directly address the hurt and make an issue of it. A strange dynamic comes alive in the soul if you make something into an issue. It becomes a habit and keeps recurring in a pattern. Frequently it is better simply to acknowledge that there is a wound there, but then stay away from it. Every chance you get, shine the gentle light of the soul in on the wound. It is helpful to remember that there are ancient resources of renewal and refreshment in the circle of love that brings and holds you both together. The destiny of your love is never merely dependent on the fragile

resources of your separate subjectivities. You can invoke the healing of the third force of light between you; this can bring forgiveness, consolation and healing in stony times.

When you love someone it is destructive to keep scraping at the clay of your belonging. There is much to recommend in not interfering with your love. Two people who love each other should never feel called to explain to an outside party why they love each other, or why it is that they belong together. The place where they belong is a secret place. Their souls know why they are together; and they should trust that togetherness. If you keep interfering with your connection with your Other, your lover, your *anam cara*, you gradually begin to force a distance between you. There is this wonderful two-line poem from Thom Gunn called 'Jamesian'. Henry James is the most precise and utterly nuanced of novelists. He described things in such fine detail and from so many different angles. Such insidious analysis can become obsessive and destructive of the lyrical presence of love.

## JAMESIAN



*heir relationship consisted  
In discussing if it existed.*

If you keep shining the neon light of analysis and accountability on the tender tissue of your belonging, you make it parched and barren.

A person should always offer a prayer of graciousness for the love that has awakened in them. When you feel love for your beloved and his or her love for you, now and again you should offer the warmth of your love as a blessing for those who are damaged and unloved. Send that love out into the world to people who are desperate; to those who are starving; to those who are trapped in prison; in hospitals and all the brutal terrains of bleak and tormented lives. When you send that love out from the bountifulness of your own love, it reaches other people. This love is the deepest power of prayer.

## IN THE KINGDOM OF LOVE, THERE IS NO COMPETITION



PRAYER is the act and presence of sending this light from the bountifulness of your love to other people to heal, free and bless them. When there is love in your life, you should share it spiritually with those who are pushed to the very edge of life. There is a lovely idea in the Celtic tradition that if you send out goodness from your self, or if you share that which is happy or good within you, it will all come back to you multiplied

ten thousand times. In the kingdom of love there is no competition; there is no possessiveness or control. The more love you give away, the more love you will have. One remembers here Dante's notion that the secret rhythm of the universe is the rhythm of love which moves the stars and the planets.

## A FRIENDSHIP BLESSING



*May you be blessed with good friends.  
May you learn to be a good friend to  
your self.*

*May you be able to journey to that place in your  
soul where there is great love, warmth, feeling  
and forgiveness.*

*May this change you.*

*May it transfigure that which is negative, dis-  
tant or cold in you.*

*May you be brought in to the real passion, kin-  
ship and affinity of belonging.*

*May you treasure your friends.*

*May you be good to them and may you be there  
for them; may they bring you all the bless-  
ings, challenges, truth and light that you  
need for your journey.*

*May you never be isolated; but may you always  
be in the gentle nest of belonging with your  
anam cara.*



## chapter 2

### TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF THE SENSES



### THE FACE IS THE ICON OF CREATION

LANDSCAPE IS THE FIRST-BORN OF creation. It was here hundreds of millions of years before the flowers, the animals or the people appeared. Landscape was here on its own. It is the most ancient presence in the world though it needs a human presence to acknowledge it. One could imagine that the oceans went silent and the winds became still the first time the human face appeared on earth; it is the most amazing thing in creation. In the human face, the anonymity of the universe becomes intimate. The dream of the winds and the oceans, the silence of the stars and the mountains, reached a mother-presence in the face. The hidden, secret warmth of

creation comes to expression here. The face is the icon of creation. In the human mind, the universe first becomes resonant with itself. The face is the mirror of the mind. In the human person, creation finds the intimacy it mutely craves. Within the mirror of the mind it becomes possible for diffuse and endless nature to behold itself.

The human face is an artistic achievement. On such a small surface an incredible variety and intensity of presence can be expressed. This breadth of presence overflows the physical form. No two faces are exactly the same. There is always a special variation of presence in each one. Each face is a particular intensity of human presence. When you love someone and are separated from them for a long time, it is lovely to receive a letter or a phone call or even, in the silence of your own spirit, to sense their presence. Yet there is such deeper excitement when you return again and see the face you love; at this moment you enjoy a feast of seeing. In that face, you see the intensity and depth of loving presence looking towards you and meeting you. It is beautiful to see each other again. In Africa certain forms of greeting mean, 'I see you.' In Connemara the phrase used to describe popularity and admiration is, '*tá agaidh an phobail ort*', i.e. the face of the people is towards you.

When you live in the silence and solitude of the

land, cities seem startling. In cities there are such an incredible number of faces: the faces of strangers moving all the time with rapidity and intensity. When you look at their faces, you see the particular intimacy of their lives imaged. In a certain sense, the face is the icon of the body, the place where the inner world of the person becomes manifest. The human face is the subtle yet visual autobiography of each person. Regardless of how concealed or hidden the inner story of your life is, you can never successfully hide from the world while you have a face. If we knew how to read the face of another, we would be able to decipher the mysteries of their life story. The face always reveals the soul; it is where the divinity of the inner life finds an echo and image. When you behold someone's face, you are gazing deeply into his or her life.

### The holiness of the gaze



IN South America a journalist friend of mine met an old Native American chief whom he would have loved to interview. The chief agreed on the condition that they could have some time together beforehand. The journalist presumed that they would hold a conversation in the normal manner. Instead, the chief took him aside and looked directly into his eyes in

silence for a long time. Initially, this terrified my friend, he felt his life was totally exposed to the gaze and silence of this stranger. After a while the journalist began to deepen his own gaze. Each continued this silent gazing for more than two hours. After this time it seemed as if they had known each other all of their lives. There was no longer any need for the interview. In a certain sense, to gaze into the face of the other is to gaze into the depth and entirety of their life.

We assume too readily that we share the one world with other people. It is true at the objective level that we inhabit the same physical space as other humans; the sky is, after all, the one visual constant in all of our perception. Yet this outer world offers no access to the inner world of an individual. At a deeper level, each person is the custodian of a completely private, individual world. Sometimes our beliefs, opinions and thoughts are ultimately ways of consoling ourselves that we are not alone with the burden of a unique, inner world. It suits us to pretend that we all belong to the one world, but we are more alone than we realize. This aloneness is not simply due to our difference from each other; it derives more from the fact that each of us is housed in a different body. The idea of human life being housed in a body is fascinating. For instance, when someone comes to visit your

home, they come bodily. They bring all of their inner world, experience and memory into your house through the vehicle of their body. While they are visiting you, their life is not elsewhere; it is totally there with you, before you, reaching out towards you. When the visit is over, their body stands up, walks out and carries this hidden world away. This recognition also illuminates the mystery of making love. It is not just two bodies that are close, but rather two worlds; they circle each other and flow into each other. We are capable of such beauty, delight and terror because of this infinite and unknown world within us.

## THE INFINITY OF YOUR INTERIORITY



he human person is a threshold where many infinities meet. There is the infinity of space that reaches out into the depths of the cosmos; the infinity of time reaching back over billions of years. There is the infinity of the microcosm: one little speck on the top of your thumb contains a whole inner cosmos, but it is so tiny that it is not visible to the human eye. The infinity in the microscopic is as dazzling as that of the cosmos. However, the infinity which haunts everyone and which no-one can finally quell, is the infinity of their own interiority. A world lies hidden

behind each human face. In some faces the vulnerability of inner exposure to these depths becomes visible. When you look at some faces, you can see the turbulence of the infinite beginning to gather to the surface. This moment can open in a gaze from a stranger, or in a conversation with someone you know well. Suddenly, without their intending it or being conscious of it, their gaze becomes the vehicle of some primal inner presence. This gaze lasts for only a second. In that slightest interim something more than the person looks out. Another infinity, as yet unborn, is dimly present. You feel that you are being looked at from the strangeness of the eternal. The infinity gazing out at you is from an ancient time. We cannot seal off the eternal. Unexpectedly and disturbingly, it gazes in at us through the sudden apertures in our patterned lives. A friend, who loves lace, often says that it is the holes in the lace that render it beautiful. Our experience has this lace structure.

The human face carries mystery and is the exposure point of the mystery of the individual life. It is where the private, inner world of a person protrudes into the anonymous world. While the rest of the body is covered, the face is naked. The vulnerability of this nakedness issues a profound call for understanding and compassion. The human face is a meeting place of two unknowns: the infinity of the

outer world and the unchartered, inner world to which each individual alone has access. This is the night world that lies behind the brightness of the visage. The smile on a face is a surprise or illumination. It is as if the inner night of this hidden world brightens suddenly, when the smile crosses the face. Heidegger said, very beautifully, that we are custodians of deep and ancient thresholds. In the human face you see that potential and the miracle of undying possibility.

The face is the pinnacle of the body. Your body is as ancient as the clay of the universe from which it is made; and your feet on the ground are a constant connection with the earth. Your feet bring your private clay in touch with the ancient, mother clay from which you first emerged. Consequently, your face at the top of your body signifies the ascent of your clay life into intimacy and selfhood. It is as if the clay of your body becomes intimate and personal through the ever new expressions of your face. Beneath the dome of the skull, the face is the place where your clay life takes on a real human presence.

## THE FACE AND THE SECOND INNOCENCE



OUR FACE IS THE ICON OF YOUR LIFE. IN THE human face a life looks out at the world and also looks in on itself. It is frightening to behold a face in which bitterness and resentment have lodged. When a person's life has been bleak, much of its negativity can remain unhealed. Since it is left untransfigured, the bleakness lodges in the face. The face, instead of being a warm presence, has hardened to become a mask. One of the oldest words for person is the Greek word *prosōpon*; and *prosōpon* originally meant the mask that actors wore in a Greek chorus. When bitterness, anger or resentment are left untransfigured, the face becomes a mask. Yet one also encounters the opposite, namely, the beautiful presence of an old face which is deeply lined and inscribed by time and experience, but has retained a lovely innocence. Even though life may have moved wearily and painfully through such a person, they have still managed not to let it corrode their soul. In such a face a lovely luminosity shines out into the world. It casts a tender light that radiates a sense of holiness and wholesomeness.

The face always reveals who you are, and what life has done to you. Yet it is difficult for you to see



the shape of your own life; your life is too near you. Others can decipher much of your mystery from your face. Portrait artists admit that it is exceptionally difficult to render the human face. Traditionally the eyes are said to be the windows of the soul. The mouth is also difficult to render in the individual portrait. In some strange way the line of the mouth seems to betray the contour of the life; a tight mouth often suggests meanness of spirit. There is a strange symmetry in the way the soul writes the story of its life in the contours of the face.

## The body is the angel of the soul



he human body is beautiful. It is such a privilege to be embodied. You have a relationship to a place through the body. It is no wonder that humans have always been fascinated by place. Place offers us a home here; without place we would literally have no where. Landscape is the ultimate where; and in landscape the house that we call *home* is our intimate place. The home is decorated and personalized; it takes on the soul of the people who live there and becomes the mirror of their spirit. Yet in the deepest sense, the body is the most intimate place. Your body is your clay home; your body is the only home that you have in this universe. It is in and through your body

that your soul becomes visible and real for you. Your body is the home of your soul on earth.

Often there seems to be an uncanny appropriateness between the soul and the shape and physical presence of the body. This is not true in all instances, but frequently it yields an insight into the nature of a person's inner world. There is a secret relationship between our physical being and the rhythm of our soul. The body is the place where the soul shows itself. A friend from Connemara once said to me that the body is the angel of the soul. The body is the angel who expresses and minds the soul; we should always pay loving attention to our bodies. The body has often been a scapegoat for the deceptions and poisons of the mind. A primordial innocence surrounds the body, an incredible brightness and goodness. The body is the angel of the life.

The body can be home to a great range and intensity of presence. Theatre is a striking illustration. An actor has enough internal space available to take in a character and let it inhabit him totally, so that the character's voice, mind and action find subtle and immediate expression through the actor's body. The body of the actor becomes the character's presence. The most exuberant expression of the body is in dance. Dance theatre is wonderful. The dance becomes fluent sculpture. The body shapes the

emptiness poignantly and majestically. The exciting example of this in the Irish tradition is *sean nós* dancing, where the dancer mirrors in his body the wild flow of the traditional music.

The body is much sinned against, even in a religion based on the Incarnation. Religion has often presented the body as the source of evil, ambiguity, lust and seduction. This is utterly false and irreverent. The body is sacred. The origin of much of this negative thinking is in a false interpretation of Greek philosophy. The Greeks were beautiful thinkers precisely because of the emphasis they placed on the divine. The divine haunted them and they endeavoured in language and concept to echo the divine and find some mirror for its presence. They were acutely aware of the gravity in the body, and how it seemed to drag the divine too much towards the earth. They misconceived this attraction to the earth and saw in it a conflict with the world of the divine. They had no conception of the Incarnation, no inkling of the Resurrection.

When the Christian tradition incorporated Greek philosophy, it brought this dualism into its thought world. The soul was understood as beautiful, bright and good. The desire to be with God belonged to the nature of the soul. Were it not for the unfortunate gravity of the body, the soul could constantly inhabit the eternal. In this way, a great suspicion of

the body entered the Christian tradition. Coupled with this is the fact that a theology of sensual love never flowered in the Christian tradition. One of the few places the erotic appears is in the beautiful canticle, the Song of Songs. It celebrates the sensuous and sensual with wonderful passion and gentleness. This text is an exception; and it is surprising that it was allowed into the Canon of Scripture. In subsequent Christian tradition, and especially among the Church Fathers, there was a deep suspicion of the body and a negative obsession with sexuality. Sex and sexuality were portrayed as potential danger to one's eternal salvation. The Christian tradition has often undervalued and mistreated the sacred presence of the body. Artists, however, have been wonderfully inspired by the Christian tradition. A beautiful example is Bernini's *'Teresa in Ecstasy'*. Teresa's body is caught in the throes of an ecstasy where the sensuous and the mystical are no longer separable.

## THE BODY AS MIRROR OF THE SOUL



he body is a sacrament. The old, traditional definition of sacrament captures this beautifully. A sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace. In that definition there is a fine acknowledgement of how the unseen

world comes to expression in the visible world. This desire for expression lies deep at the heart of the invisible world. All our inner life and intimacy of soul longs to find an outer mirror. It longs for a form in which it can be seen, felt and touched. The body is the mirror where the secret world of the soul comes to expression. The body is a sacred threshold; and it deserves to be respected, minded and understood in its spiritual nature. This sense of the body is wonderfully expressed in the amazing phrase from the Catholic tradition: *the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit holds the intimacy and distance of the Trinity alert and personified. To describe the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit recognizes that the body is suffused with wild and vital divinity. This theological insight shows that the sensuous is sacred in the deepest sense.

The body is also very truthful. You know from your own life that your body rarely lies. Your mind can deceive you and put all kinds of barriers between you and your nature; but your body does not lie. Your body tells you, if you attend to it, how your life is and whether you are living from your soul or from the labyrinths of your negativity. The body also has a wonderful intelligence. All of our movements, indeed everything we do, demands the most refined and detailed co-operation of each of

our senses. The human body is the most complex, refined and harmonious totality.

The body is your only home in the universe. It is your house of belonging here in the world. It is a very sacred temple. To spend time in silence before the mystery of your body brings you towards wisdom and holiness. It is unfortunate that it is only when we are ill that we realize how tender, fragile and precious is the house of belonging called the body. When you work with people who are ill, or awaiting surgery, you can encourage them to have a conversation with the body area that is unwell. To talk to it as a partner; and to thank it for all it has done, for what it has suffered and to ask forgiveness of it for whatever pressure it may have had to endure. Each part of the body holds the memory of its own experience.

Your body is, in essence, a crowd of different members who work in harmony to make your belonging in the world possible. We should avoid this false dualism which separates the soul from the body. The soul is not simply within the body, hidden somewhere within its recesses. The truth is rather the converse. Your body is in the soul and the soul suffuses you completely. Therefore, all around you there is a secret and beautiful soul light. This recognition suggests a new art of prayer: close your eyes and relax into your body. Imagine a

light all around you, the light of your soul. Then with your breath, draw that light into your body and bring it with your breath through every area of your body.

This is a lovely way to pray because you are bringing the soul light, the shadowed shelter that surrounds you, right into the physical earth and clay of your presence. One of the oldest meditations is to imagine the light coming into you, and then on your outward breath to imagine you are exhaling the darkness or inner charcoal residue. People who are ill can be encouraged to pray physically in this way. When you bring cleansing, healing soul light into your body, you heal the neglected, tormented places. Your body knows you very intimately; it is aware of your whole spirit and soul life. Far sooner than your mind, your body knows how privileged it is to be here. It is also aware of the presence of death. There is a wisdom in your physical, bodily presence that is luminous and profound. Frequently, the illnesses that come to us result from our self-neglect and our failure to listen to the voice of the body. The inner voices of the body want to speak to us, to inform us of the truths beneath the fixed surface of our external lives.

## FOR THE CELTS, THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE ARE ONE



he body has had such a low and negative profile in the world of spirituality because spirit has been understood more in terms of the air element than the earth element. The air is the region of the invisible; it is the region of breath and thought. When you confine spirit to this region alone, the physical becomes immediately diminished. This is a great mistake, for there is nothing in the universe as sensuous as God. The wildness of God is the sensuousness of God. Nature is the direct expression of the divine imagination. It is the most intimate reflection of God's sense of beauty. Nature is the mirror of the divine imagination and the mother of all sensuality; therefore it is unorthodox to understand spirit in terms of the invisible alone. Ironically, divinity and spirit derive their power and energy precisely from this tension between the visible and the invisible. Everything in the world of soul has a deep desire and longing for visible form; this is exactly where the power of the imagination lives.

The imagination is the faculty which bridges, co-presents and co-articulates the visible and the invisible. In the Celtic world, for instance, there was a wonderful sense of how the visible and the



invisible moved in and out of each other. In the west of Ireland there are many stories about ghosts, spirits or fairies who had a special association with particular places; these legends were as natural as the landscape to the mind of the local people. For instance, there is a tradition that a lone bush in a field should never be cut down. The implication is that it may be a secret gathering place for spirits. There are many other places which are considered to be fairy forts. The local people would never build there, or intrude in any way on that sacred ground.

## THE CHILDREN OF LIR



ONE OF THE AMAZING ASPECTS OF THE Celtic world is the idea of 'shape shifting'. This becomes possible only when the physical is animate and passionate. The essence or soul of a thing is not limited to its particular or present shape. Soul has a fluency and energy which is not to be caged within any fixed form. Consequently, in the Celtic tradition, there is a fascinating interflow between soul and matter and between time and eternity. This rhythm also includes and engages the human body. The human body is a mirror and expression of the world of soul. One of the most poignant places in the Celtic tradition illustrating this is the beautiful legend of the Children of Lir.

Central to the ancient Irish mind was the mythological world of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the tribe who lived under the surface of the earth in Ireland; this has imbued the whole landscape with a numinous depth and presence. Lir was a chieftain in the world of the Tuatha Dé Danann and he had conflict with the king in that region. In order to resolve the conflict, a marriage agreement was made. The king had three daughters and he offered Lir one of them in marriage. They married and had two children. Shortly after they had two more children, but then unfortunately Lir's wife died. Lir came again to the king and the king gave him his second daughter. She watched over him and the children, but she became jealous when she saw that he dedicated most of his attention to the children. She noticed that even her own father, the king, had a very special affection for the children. Over the years, the jealousy grew in her heart until she finally took the children in her chariot and with a touch of her Druidic magic wand, turned them into four swans. They were condemned to spend nine hundred years in exile on the oceans around Ireland. Even though they were in swan form, they still retained their human minds and full human identity. When Christianity came to Ireland, they were returned to human form as old decrepit people. There is such poignance in the description of their journey in the

wilderness as animal shapes imbued with human presence. This is a deeply Celtic story which shows how the world of nature finds a bridge to the animal world. The story also demonstrates that there is a profound confluence of intimacy between the human and the animal world. As swans, the song of the Children of Lir had the power to heal and console people. The pathos of the story is deepened by the vulnerable openness of the animal world to the human.

The animals are more ancient than us. They were here for millennia before humans surfaced on the earth. Animals are our ancient brothers and sisters. They enjoy a seamless presence – a lyrical unity with the earth. Animals live outside in the wind, in the waters, in the mountains and in the clay. The knowing of the earth is in them. The Zen-like silence and thereness of the landscape is mirrored in the silence and solitude of animals. Animals know nothing of Freud, Jesus, Buddha, Wall Street, the Pentagon or the Vatican. They live outside the politics of human intention. Somehow they already inhabit the eternal. The Celtic mind recognized the ancient belonging and knowing of the animal world. The dignity, beauty and wisdom of the animal world was not diminished by any false hierarchy or human arrogance. Somewhere in the Celtic mind was a grounding perception that humans are the

inheritors of this deeper world. This finds playful expression in the ninth-century poem:

## THE SCHOLAR AND HIS CAT



*and Pangur Bán my cat,  
'Tis a like task we are at:  
Hunting mice is his delight,  
Hunting words I sit all night.*

*Better far than praise of men  
'Tis to sit with book and pen;  
Pangur bears me no ill will,  
He too plies his simple skill.*

*'Tis a merry thing to see  
At our tasks how glad are we,  
When at home we sit and find  
Entertainment to our mind.*

*Oftentimes a mouse will stray  
In the hero Pangur's way;  
Oftentimes my keen thought set  
Takes a meaning in its net.*

*'Gainst the wall he sets his eye  
Full and fierce and sharp and sly;  
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I  
All my little wisdom try.*

*When a mouse darts from its den*

*O how glad is Pangur then!  
O what gladness do I prove  
When I solve the doubts I love!*

*So in peace our tasks we ply,  
Pangur Bán, my cat and I;  
In our arts we find our bliss,  
I have mine and he has his.*

*Practice every day has made  
Pangur perfect in his trade;  
I get wisdom day and night  
Turning darkness into light.*

(trans. Robin Flower)

For the Celts, the world is always latently and actively spiritual. The depth of this interflow is also apparent in the power of language in the Celtic world. Language itself had power to cause events and to divine events yet to happen. Chants and spells could actually reverse a whole course of negative destiny and bring forth something new and good. In the Celtic world, and especially in the Celtic world of the senses, there was no barrier between soul and body. Each was natural to the other. The soul was the sister of the body, the body the sister of the soul. As yet there was no negative splitting of dualistic Christian morality that later

did so much damage to these two lovely and enfolded presences. The world of Celtic consciousness enjoyed this unified and lyrical, sensuous spirituality.

Light is the mother of life. The sun brings light and colour. It causes grasses, crops, leaves and flowers to grow. The sun brings forth the erotic charge of the curved earth; it awakens her wild sensuousness. In this Gaelic poem the sun is worshipped as the eye and face of God. The rich vitalism of the Celtic sensibility finds lyrical expression here.



*he eye of the Great God,  
The eye of the God of Glory,  
The eye of the King of Ghosts,  
The eye of the King of the Living.*

*Pouring upon us  
At each time and season,  
Pouring upon us  
Gently and generously.*

*Glory to thee  
Then glorious sun.  
Glory to thee, thou son  
Face of the God of Life.*

(trans. A. Carmichael)

## A spirituality of TRANSFIGURATION



pirituality is the art of TRANSFIGURATION. We should not force ourselves to change by hammering our lives into any predetermined shape. We do not need to operate according to the idea of a predetermined programme or plan for our lives. Rather, we need to practise a new art of attention to the inner rhythm of our days and lives. This attention brings a new awareness of our own human and divine presence. A dramatic example of this kind of transfiguration is one all parents know. You watch your children carefully, but one day they surprise you: you still recognize them, but your knowledge of them is insufficient. You have to start listening to them all over again.

It is far more creative to work with the idea of mindfulness rather than with the idea of will. Too often people try to change their lives by using the will as a kind of hammer to beat their life into proper shape. The intellect identifies the goal of the programme, and the will accordingly forces the life into that shape. This way of approaching the sacredness of one's own presence is externalist and violent. It brings you falsely outside your self and you can spend years lost in the wildernesses of your own mechanical, spiritual programmes. You can perish in a famine of your own making.

If you work with a different rhythm, you will come easily and naturally home to your self. Your soul knows the geography of your destiny. Your soul alone has the map of your future, therefore you can trust this indirect, oblique side of your self. If you do, it will take you where you need to go, but more importantly it will teach you a kindness of rhythm in your journey. There are no general principles for this art of being. Yet the signature of this unique journey is inscribed deeply in each soul. If you attend to your self and seek to come into your own presence, you will find exactly the right rhythm for your life. The senses are generous pathways which can bring you home.

A renewal, indeed a complete transfiguration of your life, can come through attention to your senses. Your senses are the guides to take you deep into the inner world of your heart. The greatest philosophers admit that to a large degree all knowledge comes through the senses. The senses are our bridges to the world. Human skin is porous; the world flows through you. Your senses are large pores which let the world in. Through attunement to the wisdom of your senses, you will never become an exile in your own life, an outsider lost in an external spiritual place which your will and intellect have constructed.



## The senses as thresholds of soul



OR TOO LONG, we have believed that the divine is outside us. This belief has strained our longing disastrously. This is so lonely since it is human longing that makes us holy. The most beautiful thing about us is our longing; this longing is spiritual and has great depth and wisdom. If you focus your longing on a faraway divinity, you put an unfair strain on your longing. Thus, it often happens that the longing reaches out towards the distant divine, but, because it overstrains its self, it bends back to become cynicism, emptiness or negativity. This can destroy your sensibility. Yet we do not need to put any strain whatever on our longing. If we believe that the body is in the soul and the soul is divine ground, then the presence of the divine is completely here, close with us.

Being in the soul, the body makes the senses thresholds of soul. When your senses open out to the world, the first presence they encounter is the presence of your soul. To be sensual or sensuous is to be in the presence of your own soul. Wordsworth, careful of the dignity of the senses, wrote that, 'pleasure is the tribute we owe to our dignity as human beings.' This is a profoundly spiritual perspective. Your senses link you intimately with the divine within and around you. Attunement to the

senses can limber up the stiffened belief and gentle the hardened outlook. It can warm and heal the atrophied feelings which are the barriers that exile us from our selves and separate us from each other. Then, we are no longer in exile from the wonderful harvest of divinity that is always secretly gathering within us. Though we will consider each of the senses specifically, it is important to acknowledge that the senses always work compositely. The senses overlap. We can see this in the different responses people have to colour. This indicates that colours are not perceived merely visually.

## The eye is like the dawn



he first sense we will consider is the sense of sight or vision. The human eye is one place where the intensity of human presence becomes uniquely focused and available. The universe finds its deepest reflection and belonging in the human eye. I imagine the mountains dreaming of the coming of vision. The eye, when it opens, is like the dawn breaking in the night. When it opens, a new world is there. The eye is also the mother of distance. When the eye opens, it shows that others and the world are outside us, distant from us. The spur of tension that has enlivened all of Western philosophy is the desire to

bring subject and object together. Perhaps it is the eye as mother of distance that splits the subject from the object. Yet infinity somehow invests our perception of every object. Joseph Brodsky points out, beautifully, that an object makes infinity private.

Yet, in a wonderful way, the eye as mother of distance makes us wonder at the mystery and otherness of everything outside us. In this sense, the eye is also the mother of intimacy, bringing everything close to us. When you really gaze at something, you bring it inside you. One could write a beautiful spirituality on the holiness of the gaze. The opposite of the gaze is the intrusive stare. When you are stared at, the eye of the Other becomes tyrannical. You have become the object of the Other's stare in a humiliating, invasive and threatening way.

When you really look deeply at something, it becomes part of you. This is one of the sinister aspects of television. People are constantly looking at empty and false images; these impoverished images are filling up the inner world of the heart. The modern world of image and electronic media is reminiscent of Plato's wonderful allegory of the cave. The prisoners are in one line, chained together, looking at the wall of the cave. The fire behind them casts images onto the wall. Looking at

the wall of that cave, the prisoners believe it to be reality. Yet all they are seeing are shadows of reflections. Television and the computer world are great empty shadowlands. To look at something that can gaze back at you, or that has a reserve and depth, can heal your eyes and deepen your sense of vision.

There are those who are physically blind; they have lived all their lives in a monoscape of darkness. They have never seen a wave, a stone, a star, a flower, the sky, or the face of another human being. Yet there are others with perfect vision who are absolutely blind. The Irish painter Tony O'Malley is a wonderful artist of the invisible; in an introduction to his work the English artist Patrick Heron said, 'In contrast to most people, Tony O'Malley walks around with his eyes open.'

Many of us have made our world so familiar that we do not see it any more. It is an interesting question to ask yourself at night: what did I really see this day? You could be surprised at what you did not see. Maybe your eyes were unconditioned reflexes operating automatically all day without any real mindfulness or recognition; while you looked out from yourself, you never gazed or really attended to anything. The field of vision is always complex and when your eyes look out, they cannot see everything. If you attempt a full field of vision,

then it becomes unspecified and blurred; if you focus on one aspect of it, then you really see that, but you miss out on the larger picture. The human eye is always selecting what it wants to see and also evading what it does not want to see. The crucial question then is, what criteria do we use to decide what we like to see and to avoid seeing what we do not want to see? Many limited and negative lives issue directly from this narrowness of vision.

It is a startling truth that how you see and what you see determines how and who you will be. An interesting way of beginning to do some interior work is to explore your particular style of seeing. Ask yourself: what way do I behold the world? Through this question you will discover your specific pattern of seeing. There are many different styles of vision.

## Styles of vision



To the fearful eye, all is threatening. When you look towards the world in a fearful way, all you see and concentrate on are things that can damage and threaten you. The fearful eye is always besieged by threat.

To the greedy eye, everything can be possessed. Greed is one of the powerful forces in the modern Western world. It is sad that a greedy person can

never enjoy what they have, because they are always haunted by that which they do not yet possess. This can refer to land, books, companies, ideas, money or art. The motor and agenda of greed is always the same. Joy is possession, but sadly possession is ever restless; it has an inner insatiable hunger. Greed is poignant because it is always haunted and emptied by future possibility; it can never engage presence. However, the more sinister aspect of greed is its ability to sedate and extinguish desire. It destroys the natural innocence of desire, dismantles its horizons and replaces them with a driven and atrophied possessiveness. This greed is now poisoning the earth and impoverishing its people. Having has become the sinister enemy of being.

To the judgemental eye, everything is closed in definitive frames. When the judgemental eye looks out, it sees things in terms of lines and squares. It is always excluding and separating, and therefore it never sees in a compassionate or celebratory way. To see is to judge. Sadly, the judgemental eye is always equally harsh with itself. It only sees the images of its tormented interiority projected outwards from itself. The judgemental eye harvests the reflected surface and calls it truth. It enjoys neither the forgiveness nor imagination to see deeper into the ground of things where truth is paradox. An

externalist, image-driven culture is the corollary of such an ideology of facile judgement.

To the resentful eye, everything is begrudged. People who have allowed the canker of resentment into their vision can never enjoy who they are or what they have. They are always looking out towards others with resentment. Perhaps they are resentful because they see others as more beautiful, more gifted or richer than themselves. The resentful eye lives out of its poverty and forgets its own inner harvest.

To the indifferent eye, nothing calls or awakens. Indifference is one of the hallmarks of our times. It is said that indifference is necessary for power; to hold control one has to be successfully indifferent to the needs and vulnerabilities of those under control. Thus, indifference calls for a great commitment to non-vision. To ignore things demands incredible mental energy. Without even knowing it, indifference can place you beyond the frontiers of compassion, healing and love. When you become indifferent, you give all your power away. Your imagination becomes fixated in the limbo of cynicism and despair.

To the inferior eye, everyone else is greater; others are more beautiful, brilliant and gifted than you. The inferior eye is always looking away from its own treasures. It can never celebrate its own

presence and potential. The inferior eye is blind to its secret beauty. The human eye was never designed to look up in a way that inflates the Other to superiority, nor to look down, reducing the Other to inferiority. To look someone in the eye is a nice testament to truth, courage and expectation. Each one stands on common, but different, ground.


To the loving eye, everything is real. This art of love is neither sentimental nor naïve. Such love is the greatest criterion of truth, celebration and reality. Kathleen Raine, the Scottish poet, says that unless you see a thing in the light of love, you do not see it at all. Love is the light in which we see light. Love is the light in which we see each thing in its true origin, nature and destiny. If we could look at the world in a loving way, then the world would rise up before us full of invitation, possibility and depth.

The loving eye can even coax pain, hurt and violence towards transfiguration and renewal. The loving eye is bright because it is autonomous and free. It can look lovingly upon anything. The loving vision does not become entangled in the agenda of power, seduction, opposition or complicity. Such vision is creative and subversive. It rises above the pathetic arithmetic of blame and judgement and engages experience at the level of its origin, structure and destiny. The loving eye sees through and



beyond image and affects the deepest change. Vision is central to your presence and creativity. To recognize *how* you see things can bring you self-knowledge and enable you to glimpse the treasures your life secretly holds.

## Taste and speech

he sense of taste is subtle and complex. The tongue is the organ of taste and also the organ of speech. Taste is one of the casualties in our modern world. Since we are under such pressure and stress, we have so little time to taste the food we eat. An old friend of mine often says that food is love. At a meal in her house one has to take time and bring patience and mindfulness to the meal.

We have no longer any sense of the decorum appropriate to eating. We have lost the sense of ritual, presence and intimacy of the meal; we no longer sit down to meals in the old way. One of the most famous qualities of the Celtic people was hospitality. The stranger always received a meal. This courtesy was observed before any other business was undertaken. When you celebrate a meal you also taste flavours of which you are normally unaware. Much modern food lacks taste completely; even while it is growing, it is forced with

artificial fertilizer and sprayed with chemicals. Consequently, it has none of the taste of nature. The sense of taste has become severely dulled. The fast-food metaphor provides a deep clue to the poverty of sensibility and lack of taste in modern culture. This is also clearly mirrored in our use of language. The tongue, the organ of taste, is also the organ of speech. Many of the words we use are of the fast-food spiritual variety. These words are too thin to echo experience; they are too weak to bring the inner mystery of things to real expression. In our rapid and externalized world, language has become ghostlike, abbreviated to code and label. Words that would mirror the soul carry the loam of substance and the shadow of the divine.

The sense of silence and darkness behind the words in more ancient cultures, particularly in folk culture, is absent in the modern use of language. Language is full of acronyms; nowadays we are impatient of words which carry with them histories and associations. Rural people, and particularly people in the west of Ireland, have a great sense of language. There is a sense of phrasing that is poetic and alert. The force of the intuition and the spark of recognition slip swiftly into deft phrase. One of the factors that makes spoken English in Ireland so interesting is the colourful ghost of the Gaelic language behind it. This imbues the use of English

with great colour, nuance and power. Yet the attempt to destroy Gaelic was one of the most destructive acts of violence of our colonization by England. Gaelic is such a poetic and powerful language, it carries the Irish memory. When you steal a people's language, you leave their soul bewildered.

Poetry is the place where language in its silence is most beautifully articulated. Poetry is the language of silence.

If you look at a page of prose, it is crowded with words. If you look at a page of poetry, the slim word shapes are couched in the empty whiteness of the page. The page is a place of silence where the contour of the word is edged and the expression is heightened in an intimate way. It is interesting to look at your language and the words that you tend to use to see if you can hear a stillness or silence. One way to invigorate and renew your language is to expose your self to poetry. In poetry your language will find cleansing illumination and sensuous renewal.

## FRAGRANCE AND BREATH



HE SENSE OF SMELL OR FRAGRANCE IS DEFT and immediate. Experts tell us that smell is the most faithful of all the senses in terms of memory. The smells of one's childhood still

remain within. It is incredible how a simple scent on a street or in a room can bring you back years to an experience you had long forgotten. Animals, of course, work wonderfully with the sense of smell. To take dogs for a walk is to realize how differently they experience landscape. They are glued to trails of scent and enjoy a complete adventure, tracing invisible smell pathways everywhere. Each day we breathe twenty-three thousand and forty times; we have five million olfactory cells. A sheep dog has two hundred and twenty million such cells. The sense of smell is so powerful in the animal world because it assists survival by alerting the animal to danger. The sense of smell is vital to the sense of life.

Traditionally, the breath was understood as the pathway through which the soul entered the body. Breaths come in pairs except the first breath and the last breath. At the deepest level, breath is sister of spirit. One of the most ancient words for spirit is the Hebrew word '*Ruah*'; this is also the word for air or wind. '*Ruah*' also denotes pathos, passion and emotion – a state of the soul. The word suggests that God was like breath and wind because of the incredible passion and pathos of divinity. In the Christian tradition, the understanding of the mystery of the Trinity also suggests that the Holy Spirit arises within the Trinity through the breathing of

the Father and the Son; the technical term is *spiratio*. This ancient recognition links the wild creativity of the Spirit with the breath of the soul in the human person. Breath is also deeply appropriate as a metaphor because divinity, like breath, is invisible. The world of thought resides in the air. All of our thoughts happen in the air element. Our greatest thoughts come to us from the generosity of the air. It is here that the idea of inspiration is rooted, you inspire or breathe in the thoughts concealed in the air element. Inspiration can never be programmed. You can prepare, making your self ready to be inspired, yet it is spontaneous and unpredictable. It breaks the patterns of repetition and expectation. Inspiration is always a surprising visitor.

To labour in the world of learning, research or in the artistic world of writing, one attempts again and again to refine one's sense of readiness so that the great images or thoughts can approach and be received. The sense of smell includes the sensuality of fragrance, but the dynamic of breathing also takes in the deep world of prayer and meditation, where through the rhythm of the breath you come down into your own primordial level of soul. Through breath meditation, you begin to experience a place within you which is absolutely intimate with the divine ground. Your breathing and

the rhythm of your breathing can return you to your ancient belonging, to the house, as Eckhart says, that you have never left, where you always live: the house of spiritual belonging.

## TRUE LISTENING IS WORSHIP



With the sense of hearing, we listen to creation. One of the great thresholds in reality is the threshold between sound and silence. All good sounds have silence near them, behind and within them. The first sound that every human hears is the sound of the mother's heartbeat in the dark waters of the womb. This is the reason for our ancient resonance with the drum as a musical instrument. The sound of the drum brings us consolation because it brings us back to that time when we were at one with the mother's heartbeat. That was a time of complete belonging. No separation had yet opened; we were completely in unity with another person. P. J. Curtis, the great Irish authority on rhythm and blues music, often says that the search for meaning is really the search for the lost chord. When the lost chord is discovered by humankind, the discord in the world will be healed and the symphony of the universe will come into complete harmony with itself.

It is lovely to have the gift of hearing. It is said

that deafness is worse than blindness, because you are isolated in an inner world of terrible silence. Even though you can see people and the world around you, to be outside the reach of sound and the human voice is very lonely. There is a very important distinction to be made between listening and hearing. Sometimes we listen to things, but we never hear them. True listening brings us in touch even with that which is unsaid and unsayable. Sometimes the most important thresholds of mystery are places of silence. To be genuinely spiritual is to have great respect for the possibilities and presence of silence. Martin Heidegger says that true listening is worship. When you listen with your soul, you come into rhythm and unity with the music of the universe. Through friendship and love, you learn to attune your self to the silence, to the thresholds of mystery where your life enters the life of your beloved and their life enters yours.

Poets are people who become utterly dedicated to the threshold where silence and language meet. One of the crucial tasks of the poet's vocation is to find his own voice. When you begin to write, you feel you are writing fine poetry; then you read other poets only to find that they have already written similar poems. You realize that you were unconsciously imitating them. It takes a long time to sift through the more superficial voices of your own

gift in order to enter into the deep signature and tonality of your Otherness. When you speak from that deep, inner voice, you are really speaking from the unique tabernacle of your own presence. There is a voice within you which no-one, not even you, has ever heard. Give yourself the opportunity of silence and begin to develop your listening in order to hear, deep within yourself, the music of your own spirit.

Music is after all the most perfect sound to meet the silence. When you really listen to music, you begin to hear the beautiful way it constellates and textures the silence, how it brings out the hidden mystery of silence. The gentle membrane where sound meets silence becomes deftly audible. Long before humans arrived on earth, there was an ancient music here. Yet one of the most beautiful gifts that humans have brought to the earth is music. In great music the ancient longing of the earth finds a voice. The wonderful conductor Sergiu Celibidache said, 'We do not create music; we only create the conditions so that she can appear.' Music ministers to the silence and solitude of nature; it is one of the most powerful, immediate and intimate of sensuous experiences. Music is, perhaps, the art form that brings us closest to the eternal because it changes immediately and irreversibly the way we experience time. When we are listening to beautiful music, we enter



into the eternal dimension of time. Transitory, broken linear time fades away and we come into the circle of belonging within the eternal. The Irish writer Sean O'Faolain said, 'In the presence of great music we have no alternative but to live nobly.'

## THE LANGUAGE OF TOUCH



OUR SENSE OF TOUCH CONNECTS US TO THE world in an intimate way. As the mother of distance, the eye shows us that we are outside things. There is a magnificent piece of sculpture by Rodin called *The Kiss*. The sculpture shows two bodies reaching for each other, straining towards the kiss. All distance is broken in the magic of this kiss; two distanced ones have finally reached each other. Touch and the world of touch brings us out of the anonymity of distance into the intimacy of belonging. Humans use their hands to touch, explore, trace and feel the world outside them. Hands are beautiful. Kant said that the hand is the visible expression of the mind. With your hands, you reach out to touch the world. In human touch, hands find the hands, face or body of the Other. Touch brings presence home. The activity of touch brings us close to the world of the Other. The eye readily translates its objects into intellectual terms. The eye appropriates according to its own

logic. But touch confirms the Otherness of the body it touches. It cannot appropriate, it can only bring its objects closer and closer. We use the word 'touching' to describe a story which moves us deeply. Touch is the sense through which we experience pain. There is nothing hesitant or blurred in the contact which pain makes with us. It reaches the core of our identity directly, awakening our fragility and desperation.

It is recognized now that every child needs to be touched. Touch communicates belonging, tenderness and warmth which fosters self-confidence, self-worth and poise in the child. Touch has such power because we live inside the wonderful world of skin. Our skin is alive and breathing, always active and ever present. Human beings share such tenderness and fragility because we live not within shells, but within skin which is always sensitive to the force, touch and presence of the world.

Touch is one of the most immediate and direct of the senses. The language of touch is a language in itself. Touch is also subtle and distinctive and holds within itself great refinement of memory. A concert pianist came to visit a friend. He asked her if she would like him to play something for her. He said, 'At the moment I have a lovely piece from Schubert in my hands.'

The world of touch includes the whole world of

sexuality; this is probably the most tender aspect of human presence. When you are sexual with someone, you have let them right into your world. The world of sexuality is a sacred world of presence. The world of Eros is one of the devastated casualties of contemporary commercialism and greed. George Steiner has written powerfully about this. He shows how the words of intimacy, the night words of Eros and affection, the secret words of love, have been vacated in the neon day of greed and consumerism. We desperately need to retrieve these gentle and sacred words of touch in order to be able to engage our full human nature. When you look at your inner world of soul, ask yourself how your sense of touch has developed. How do you actually touch things? Are you alive or awakened to the power of touch both as a sensuous and tender and healing force? A retrieval of touch can bring a new depth into your life; and it can heal, strengthen you and bring you closer to your self.

Touch is such an immediate sense. It can bring you in from the false world, the famine world of exile and image. Rediscovering the sense of touch returns you to the hearth of your own spirit, enabling you to experience again warmth, tenderness and belonging. At the highest moments of human intensity, words become silent. Then, the language of touch really speaks. When you are lost in the black valley

of pain, words grow frail and dumb. To be embraced and held warmly brings the only shelter and consolation. Conversely, when you are completely happy, touch becomes an ecstatic language.

Touch offers the deepest clue to the mystery of encounter, awakening and belonging. It is the secret, affective content of every connection and association. The energy, warmth and invitation of touch comes ultimately from the divine. The Holy Spirit is the wild and passionate side of God, the tactile spirit whose touch is around you, bringing you close to your self and to others. The Holy Spirit makes these distances attractive and laces them with fragrances of affinity and belonging. Graced distances make strangers friends. Your beloved and your friends were once strangers. Somehow at a particular time, they came from the distance towards your life. Their arrival seemed so accidental and contingent. Now, your life is unimaginable without them. Similarly, your identity and vision is composed of a certain constellation of ideas and feelings which surfaced from the depths of distance within you. To lose these now would be to lose your self. You live and move on divine ground. This is what St Augustine said of God: You are more intimate to me than I am to myself. The subtle immediacy of God, the Holy Spirit, touches your soul and tenderly weaves your ways and your days.

## Celtic SENSUOUSNESS



he world of Celtic spirituality is completely at home with the rhythm and wisdom of the senses. When you read Celtic nature poetry, you see that all the senses are alerted: you hear the sound of the winds, you taste the fruits and above all you get a wonderful sense of how nature touches human presence. Celtic spirituality also has a great awareness of the sense of vision, particularly in relation to the spirit world. The Celtic eye has a great sense of that interim world between the invisible and the visible. This is referred to in scholarship as the *imaginal world*, the world where the angels live. The Celtic eye loves this interim world. In Celtic spirituality, we find a new bridge between the visible and the invisible; this comes to expression beautifully in its poetry and blessings. These two worlds are no longer separate. They flow naturally, gracefully and lyrically in and out of each other.

### A BLESSING FOR THE SENSES



*ay your body be blessed.  
May you realize that your body is  
a faithful and beautiful friend  
of your soul.*

*And may you be peaceful and joyful and  
recognize that your senses are sacred  
thresholds.*

*May you realize that holiness is mindful gazing,  
feeling, hearing and touching.*

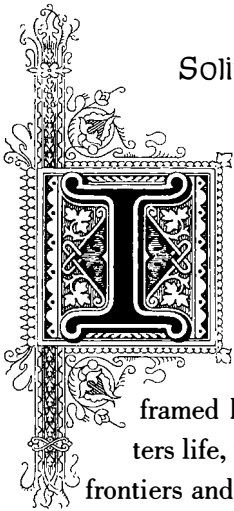
*May your senses gather you and bring you home.*

*May your senses always enable you to celebrate  
the universe and the mystery and possibilities  
in your presence here.*

*May the Eros of the Earth bless you.*

## chapter 3

### Solitude is luminous



The world of the soul  
is secret

was born in a limestone valley. To live in a valley is to enjoy a private sky. All around, life is framed by the horizon. The horizon shelters life, yet constantly calls the eye to new frontiers and possibilities. The mystery of this landscape is further intensified by the presence of the ocean. For millions of years, an ancient conversation has continued between the chorus of the ocean and the silence of the stone.

No two stone shapes in this landscape are the same. Each stone has a different face. Often the angle of the light falls gently enough to bring out the shy presence of each stone. Here, it feels as if a wild, surrealistic God laid down the whole


landscape. These stones, ever patient, ever still, continue to praise the silence of time. The Irish landscape is full of memory; it holds the ruins and traces of ancient civilization. There is a curvature in the landscape, a colour and shape that constantly frustrates the eye anxious for symmetry or linear simplicity. The poet, W. B. Yeats, in referring to this landscape, speaks of ‘. . . that stern colour and that delicate line that are our secret discipline’. Every few miles of road the landscape changes; it always surprises, offering ever new vistas which surprise the eye and call the imagination. This landscape has a wild, yet serene complexity. In a sense, this reflects the nature of Celtic consciousness.

The Celtic mind was never drawn to the single line; it avoided ways of seeing and being which seek satisfaction in certainty. The Celtic mind had a wonderful respect for the mystery of the circle and the spiral. The circle is one of the oldest and most powerful symbols. The world is a circle; the sun and moon are too. Even time itself has a circular nature; the day and the year build to a circle. At its most intimate level so is the life of each individual. The circle never gives itself completely to the eye or to the mind, but offers a trusting hospitality to that which is complex and mysterious; it embraces depth and height together. The circle



never reduces the mystery to a single direction or preference. Patience with this reserve is one of the profound recognitions of the Celtic mind. The world of the soul is secret. The secret and the sacred are sisters. When the secret is not respected, the sacred vanishes. Consequently, reflection should not shine too severe or aggressive a light in on the world of the soul. The light in Celtic consciousness is a penumbral light.

## THE DANGER OF NEON VISION

HERE IS AN UNPRECEDENTED spiritual hunger in our times. More and more people are awakening to the inner world. A thirst and hunger for the eternal is coming alive in their souls; this is a new form of consciousness. Yet one of the damaging aspects of this spiritual hunger is the way it sees everything in such a severe and insistent light. The light of modern consciousness is not gentle or reverent; it lacks graciousness in the presence of mystery; it wants to unriddle and control the unknown. Modern consciousness is similar to the harsh and brilliant white light of a hospital operating theatre. This neon light is too direct and clear to befriend the shadowed world of the soul. It is not hospitable to what is reserved and hidden. The Celtic mind had

a wonderful respect for the mystery and depth of the individual soul.

The Celts recognized that the shape of each soul is different; the spiritual clothing one person wears can never fit the soul of another. It is interesting that the word *revelation* comes from *re-valere*, literally, *to veil again*. The world of the soul is glimpsed through the opening in a veil which closes again. There is no direct, permanent or public access to the divine. Each destiny has a unique curvature which must find its own spiritual belonging and direction. Individuality is the only gateway to spiritual potential and blessing.

When the spiritual search is too intense and hungry, the soul stays hidden. The soul was never meant to be seen completely. It is more at home in a light that is hospitable to shadow. Before electricity, people used candlelight at night. This is ideal light to befriend the darkness, it gently opens up caverns in the darkness and prompts the imagination into activity. The candle allows the darkness to keep its secrets. There is shadow and colour within every candle flame. Candlelight perception is the most respectful and appropriate form of light with which to approach the inner world. It does not force our tormented transparency upon the mystery. The glimpse is sufficient. Candlelight perception has the finesse and reverence appropriate to the

mystery and autonomy of soul. Such perception is at home at the threshold. It neither needs nor desires to invade the temenos where the divine lives.

In our times, the language of psychology is used to approach the soul. Psychology is a wonderful science. In many ways it has been the explorer who in heroic adventure discovered the uncharted inner world. In our culture of sensate immediacy, much psychology has abandoned the fecundity and reverence of myth and stands under the strain of neon consciousness, powerless to retrieve or open the depth and density of the world of soul. Celtic mysticism recognizes that rather than trying to expose the soul or offer it our fragile care, we should let the soul find us and care for us. Celtic mysticism is tender to the senses and devoid of spiritual aggression. The stories, poetry and prayer of the Celts finds expression in a language which is obviously pre-discursive. It is a language of lyrical and reverential observation. Often it is reminiscent of the purity of the Japanese haiku. It bypasses the knottedness of narcissistic, self-reflexive language to create a lucid shape of words through which the numinous depths of nature and divinity can glisten. Celtic spirituality recognizes wisdom and the slow light which can guard and deepen your life. When your soul awakens, your destiny becomes urgent with creativity.

Though destiny reveals itself slowly and partially, we sense its intention in the human countenance. I have always been fascinated by human presence in a landscape. When you walk in the mountains and meet another person, you become acutely aware of the human face as an icon cast against the wilderness of nature. The face is a threshold where a world looks out and a world looks in on itself. The face brings these two worlds together. Behind each human face, there is a hidden world which no-one can see. The beauty of the spiritual is its depth of inner friendship which can totally change everything you touch, see and feel. In a sense, the face is where the individual soul becomes obliquely visible. Yet the soul remains fugitive because the face cannot express directly everything we intuit and feel. Nevertheless, with age and memory the face gradually mirrors the journey of the soul. The older the face, the richer its mirroring.

## TO BE BORN IS TO BE CHOSEN



TO BE BORN IS TO BE CHOSEN. NO-ONE is here by accident. Each one of us was sent here for a special destiny. Often the deeper meaning of a fact emerges when it is read in a spiritual way. When you consider the moment of

conception, there are endless possibilities. Yet in most cases, only one child is conceived. This seems to suggest that a certain selectivity is already at work. This selectivity intimates a sheltering providence which dreamed you, created you and always minds you. You were not consulted on the major questions which shape your destiny: when you were to be born; where you would be born; to whom you would be born. Imagine the difference it would have made to your life had you been born into the house next door. Your identity was not offered for your choosing. In other words, a special destiny was prepared for you. But you were also given freedom and creativity to go beyond the given, to make a new set of relationships and to forge an ever new identity, inclusive of the old but not limited to it. This is the secret pulse of growth, quietly at work behind the outer façade of your life. Destiny sets the outer frame of experience and life; freedom finds and fills its inner form.

For millions of years, before you arrived here, the dream of your individuality was carefully prepared. You were sent to a shape of destiny in which you would be able to express the special gift you bring to the world. Sometimes this gift may involve suffering and pain that can neither be accounted for nor explained. There is a unique destiny for each person. Each one of us has something to do here

that can be done by no-one else. If someone else could fulfil your destiny, then they would be in your place, and you would not be here. It is in the depths of your life that you will discover the invisible necessity which has brought you here. When you begin to decipher this, your gift and giftedness come alive. Your heart quickens and the urgency of living rekindles your creativity.

If you can awaken this sense of destiny, you come into rhythm with your life. You fall out of rhythm when you renege on your potential and talent, when you settle for the mediocre as a refuge from the call. When you lose rhythm your life becomes wearily deliberate or anonymously automatic. Rhythm is the secret key to balance and belonging. This will not collapse into false contentment or passivity. It is the rhythm of a dynamic equilibrium, a readiness of spirit, a poise which is not self-centred. This sense of rhythm is ancient. All life came out of the ocean; each one of us comes out of the waters of the womb; the ebb and flow of the tides is alive in the ebb and flow of our breathing. When you are in rhythm with your nature nothing destructive can touch you. Providence is at one with you; it minds you and brings you to your new horizons. To be spiritual is to be in rhythm.

## The Celtic UNDERWORLD AS RESONANCE



OFTEN think that the INNER WORLD is like a landscape. Here, in our limestone landscape, there are endless surprises. It is lovely to be on top of a mountain and to discover a spring well gushing forth from beneath the heavy rocks. Such a well has a long biography of darkness and silence. It comes from the heart of the mountain where no human eye has ever gazed. The surprise of the well suggests the archaic resources of consciousness awakening within us. With a sudden freshness, new springs come alive within.

The silence of landscape conceals vast presence. Place is not simply location. A place is a profound individuality. Its surface texture of grass and stone is blessed by rain, wind and light. With complete attention landscape celebrates the liturgy of the seasons, giving itself unreservedly to the passion of the goddess. The shape of a landscape is an ancient and silent form of consciousness. Mountains are huge contemplatives. Rivers and streams offer voice; they are the tears of the earth's joy and despair. The earth is full of soul.

Plotinus in *The Enneads* speaks of 'the souls' care for the universe': 'this All is one universally comprehensive living being, encircling all the

living beings within it, and having a soul, one soul which extends to all its members in the degree of participant membership held by each’.

Civilization has tamed place. Ground is levelled to build homes and cities. Roads, streets and floors are level so that we may walk and travel easily. Left to itself the curvature of the landscape invites presence and the loyalty of stillness. In the distraction of the traveller and the temporary its ancient thereness goes unnoticed. Humans only know the passing night. Below the surface of landscape the earth lives in the eternal night, the dark and ancient cradle of all origin.

It is no wonder that in the Celtic world wells were sacred places. The wells were seen as threshold places between the deeper, dark, unknown, subterranean world and the outer world of light and form. The land of Ireland was understood in ancient times as the body of the goddess. Wells were revered as special apertures through which divinity flowed forth. Manannán mac Lir said: ‘No-one will have knowledge who does not have a drink from the well.’ Even to this day, people still visit sacred springs. They walk several rounds of the well, travelling in a clockwise direction, and often leave votive offerings. Different wells are thought to hold different kinds of healing.

When a well awakens in the mind, new



possibilities begin to flow; you find within your self a depth and excitement which you never knew you had. This art of awakening is suggested by the Irish writer James Stephens who saw the only barrier as our readiness. We often remain exiles, left outside the rich world of the soul simply because we are not ready. Our task is to refine our hearts and minds. There is so much blessing and beauty near us which is destined for us, and yet it cannot enter our lives, because we are not ready to receive it. The handle is on the inside of the door; only we can open it. Our lack of readiness is often caused by blindness, fear and lack of self-appreciation. When we are ready, we will be blessed. At that moment the door of the heart becomes the gate of heaven. Shakespeare expressed this beautifully in *King Lear*: 'Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither: / Ripeness is all.'

## TO TRANSFIGURE THE EGO – TO LIBERATE THE SOUL



SOMETIMES OUR SPIRITUAL PROGRAMMES take us far away from our inner belonging. We become addicted to the methods and programmes of psychology and religion. We become so desperate to learn how to *be* that our lives pass, and we neglect the practice of being.

One of the lovely things in the Celtic mind was its sense of spontaneity. Spontaneity is one of the greatest spiritual gifts. To be spontaneous is to escape the cage of the ego by trusting that which is beyond the self. One of the greatest enemies of spiritual belonging is the ego. The ego does not reflect the real shape of one's individuality. The ego is the false self born out of fear and defensiveness. The ego is a protective crust that we draw around our affections. It is created out of timidity, the failure to trust the Other and to respect our own otherness. One of the greatest conflicts in life is the conflict between the ego and the soul. The ego is threatened, competitive and stressed, whereas the soul is drawn more towards surprise, spontaneity, the new and the fresh. Real soul presence has humour and irony and no obsessive self-seriousness. It avoids what is weary, worn or repetitive. The image of the well breaking out of the hard, crusted ground is an illuminating image for the freshness that can suddenly dawn within the heart that remains open to experience.

Freud and Jung illuminated the vast complexity of the soul. A person is no simple one-dimensional self. There is a labyrinth within the soul. What we think and desire often comes into conflict with what we do. Below the surface of our conscious awareness a vast unknown rootage determines our

actions. The mythic story of the earth and the gods whispers within us. We become aware of the patterns of blindness and obsession which unknowingly drive us. We find ourselves so often returning to the same empty places which diminish and impoverish our essence. All psychic activity is at first unconscious; this is the realm of concealed wishes. The unconscious is a powerful and continuous presence. Every life lives out of and struggles with this inner night; it casts its challenging and fecund shadow over everything we do and think and feel. We are earthen vessels that hold the treasure. Yet aspects of the treasure are darker and more dangerous than we allow ourselves to imagine. When the unconscious becomes illuminated its darker forces no longer hold us prisoner. This work of freedom is slow and unpredictable; yet it is precisely at this threshold that each individual is the custodian and subject of their own transfiguration. Outside us, society functions in an external way, its collective eye does not know interiority, it sees only through the lens of image, impression and function.

## THERE IS NO SPIRITUAL PROGRAMME



IN OUR TIME THERE IS MUCH OBSESSION with spiritual programmes. Such spiritual programmes tend to be very linear. The

spiritual life is imagined as a journey with a sequence of stages. Each stage has its own methodology, negativity and possibilities. Such a programme often becomes an end in itself. It weights our natural presence against us. Such a programme can divide and separate us from what is most intimately ours. The past is forsaken as unredeemed, the present is used as the fulcrum to a future that bodes holiness, integration or perfection. When time is reduced to linear progress, it is emptied of presence. Meister Eckhart radically revises the whole notion of spiritual programmes. He says that there is no such thing as a spiritual journey. If a little shocking, this is refreshing. If there were a spiritual journey, it would be only a quarter-inch long, though many miles deep. It would be a swerve into rhythm with your deeper nature and presence. The wisdom here is so consoling. You do not have to go away outside your self to come into real conversation with your soul and with the mysteries of the spiritual world. The eternal is at home – within you.

The eternal is not elsewhere; it is not distant. There is nothing as near as the eternal. This is captured in the lovely Celtic phrase: *tá tír na n-óg ar chúl an tí – tír álainn trína chéile*, i.e. the land of eternal youth is behind the house, a beautiful land fluent within itself. The eternal world and the

mortal world are not parallel, rather they are fused. The beautiful Gaelic phrase, *fighte fuaighte*, i.e. 'woven into and through each other', captures this.

Behind the façade of our normal lives eternal destiny is shaping our days and our ways. The awakening of the human spirit is a homecoming. Yet, ironically, our sense of familiarity often militates against our homecoming. When we are familiar with something, we lose the energy, edge and excitement of it. Hegel said, '*Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt,*' i.e. generally, the familiar, precisely because it is familiar, is not known. This is a powerful sentence. Behind the façade of the familiar, strange things await us. This is true of our homes, the place where we live and, indeed, of those with whom we live. Friendships and relationships suffer immense numbing through the mechanism of familiarization. We reduce the wildness and mystery of person and landscape to the external, familiar image. Yet the familiar is merely a façade. Familiarity enables us to tame, control and ultimately forget the mystery. We make our peace with the surface as image and we stay away from the otherness and fecund turbulence of the unknown which it masks. Familiarity is one of the most subtle and pervasive forms of human alienation.

In a book of conversations with P. A. Mendoza, the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, when asked about his thirty-year relationship with his wife Mercedes, said, 'I know her so well now that I have not the slightest idea who she really is.' For Márquez, familiarity is an invitation to adventure and mystery. Conversely, the people close to us have sometimes become so familiar that they become lost in a distance which no longer invites or surprises. Familiarity can be quiet death, an arrangement which permits the routine to continue without offering any new challenge or nourishment.

This happens also with our experience of place. I remember my first evening in Tübingen. I was to spend more than four years there working on Hegel, but that first evening Tübingen was utterly strange and unknown to me. I remember thinking: look very carefully at Tübingen this evening because you will never again see it in the same way. And this was true. After a week there I knew the way to the lecture halls and seminar rooms, the canteen and library. After I had mapped out my routes through this strange territory, it became familiar and soon I did not see it for itself anymore.

People have difficulty awakening to their inner world, especially when their lives have become overly familiar to them. They find it hard to discover something new, interesting or adventurous in

their numbed lives. Yet everything we need for our journey has already been given to us. Consequently, there is great strangeness in the shadowed light of our soul world. We should become more conversant with our reserved soul light. The first step in awakening to your inner life and to the depth and promise of your solitude would be to consider yourself for a little while as a stranger to your own deepest depths. To decide to view yourself as a complete stranger, someone who has just stepped ashore in your life, is a liberating exercise. This meditation helps to break the numbing stranglehold of complacency and familiarity. Gradually, you begin to sense the mystery and magic of yourself. You realize that you are not the helpless owner of a deadened life, but rather a temporary guest gifted with blessings and possibilities you could neither invent nor earn.

## THE BODY IS YOUR ONLY HOME

**I**t is mysterious that the human body is clay. The individual is the meeting place of the four elements. The person is a clay shape, living in the medium of air. Yet the fire of blood, thought and soul moves through the body. Its whole life and energy flows in the subtle circle of the water element. We have come up out of

the depths of the earth. Consider the millions of continents of clay that will never have the opportunity to leave this underworld. This clay will never find a form to ascend and express itself in the world of light, but will live for ever in that unknown shadow world. In this regard, the Celtic idea is very beautiful; it claims that the underworld is not a dark world but a world of spirit. There is an old belief in Ireland that the Tuatha Dé Dannan, the tribe of Celts banished from the surface of Ireland, now inhabited the underworld beneath the land. From there they controlled the fecundity of the land above. Consequently, when a king was being crowned, he entered into a symbolic marriage with the goddess. His reign mediated between the visible landscape with its grass, crops and trees and the hidden subterranean world in which all is rooted. This balance was vital since the Celts were a rural, farming people. This mythological and spiritual perspective has had an immense subconscious effect on how landscape is viewed in Ireland. Landscape is not matter nor merely nature, rather it enjoys a luminosity. Landscape is numinous. Each field has a different name and in each place something different happened. Landscape has a secret and silent memory, a narrative of presence where nothing is ever lost or forgotten. In Tom Murphy's play *The Gigli Concert*, the unnamed



man loses this sense of landscape and loses the ability to connect with himself simultaneously.

The mystery of the Irish landscape is mirrored in all the stories and legends of different places. There are endless stories about ghosts and spirits. Near my home, a magic cat minds ancient gold in a big field. One finds an enthralling weave of stories about the independence and structure of the spiritual world. The human body has come out of this underworld. Consequently, in your body, clay is finding a form and shape which it never found before. Just as it is an immense privilege for your clay to have come up into the light, it is also a great responsibility.

In your clay body things are coming to expression and to light that were never known before, presences that never came to light or shape in any other individual. To paraphrase Heidegger, man is a shepherd of being, we could say: *man is a shepherd of clay*. You represent an unknown world that begs you to bring it to voice. Often the joy you feel does not belong to your individual biography but to the clay out of which you are formed. At other times, you will find sorrow moving through you, like a dark mist over a landscape. This sorrow is dark enough to paralyse you. It is a mistake to interfere with this movement of feeling. It is more appropriate to recognize that this emotion belongs more to

your clay than to your mind. It is wise to let this weather of feeling pass; it is on its way elsewhere. We so easily forget that our clay has a memory which preceded our minds, a life of its own before it took our present form. Regardless of how modern we seem, we still remain ancient, sisters and brothers of the one clay. In each of us a different part of the mystery becomes luminous. To truly be and become your self, you need the ancient radiance of others.

Essentially, we belong beautifully to nature. The body knows this belonging and desires it. It does not exile us either spiritually or emotionally. The human body is at home on the earth. It is probably some splinter in the mind which is the sore root of so much of our exile. This tension between clay and mind is the source of all creativity. It is the tension in us between the ancient and the new, the known and the unknown. Only the imagination is native to this rhythm. It alone can navigate in the sublime interim where the lineaments of these differing inner forces touch. The imagination is committed to the justice of wholeness. It will not choose one side in an inner conflict and repress or banish the other; it will endeavour to initiate a profound conversation between them in order that something original can be born. The imagination loves symbols because it recognizes that inner divinity can only find ex-

pression in symbolic form. The symbol never gives itself completely to the light. It invites thought precisely because it resides at the threshold of darkness. Through the imagination, the soul creates and constructs your depth experience. Imagination is the most reverent mirror of the inner world.

Individuality need not be lonely or isolated. Cicero said so beautifully, '*Nunquam minus solus quam cum solus.*' One can come into harmony with one's individuality, if it is viewed as a profound expression or sacrament of the ancient clay. When there is a real awakening in love and friendship, this sense of the clay within can dawn. If you knew the beloved's body well enough, you could imagine where his or her clay had lain before it came to form in him or her. You could sense the blend of different tonalities in his or her clay: maybe some clay comes from beside a calm lake, some from places where nature was exposed and lonely, and more from secluded and reserved places. We never know how many places of nature meet within the human body. Landscape is not all external, it has crept inside the soul. Human presence is infused with landscape.

This profound and numinous presence of nature is brought out in the poem by Amairgen, chief poet of the Milesians, as he steps ashore to take possession of the land on behalf of his people:



*I am the wind which breathes upon  
the sea,  
I am the wave of the ocean,  
I am the murmur of the billows –  
I am the ox of the seven combats,  
I am the vulture upon the rocks,  
I am a beam of the sun,  
I am the fairest of plants,  
I am the wild boar in valour,  
I am the salmon in the water,  
I am a lake in the plain,  
I am a world of knowledge,  
I am the point of the lance of battle,  
I am the God who created the fire in the head.*

(ed. P. Murray)

This is traditionally believed to be the first poem ever composed in Ireland. All of the elements of the poem have numinous associations in early Irish literature. There is no dualism here. All is one. This ancient poem pre-empts and reverses the lonely helplessness of Descartes' '*Cogito ergo sum*', I think therefore I am. For Amairgen, I am because everything else is. I am in everything and everything is in me. This magnificent hymn to presence outlines the ontological depth and unity of the *anam-cara* experience.

The Celtic world developed a profound sense of the complexity of the individual. Often the places within us where conflict arises are places where different parts of our clay memory come together; the energy here may at times be unrefined, raw or difficult. The recognition of our clay nature can bring us a more ancient harmony. It can return us to the ancient rhythm which we inhabited before consciousness made us separate. This is one of the lovely things about the soul. The soul is in the middle ground between the separation of the air and the belonging of the earth. Your soul mediates between your body and your mind; it shelters the two and holds them together. In this primal sense the soul is imaginative.

## The body is in the soul



WE MUST LEARN TO TRUST THE INDIRECT SIDE of our selves. Your soul is the oblique side of your mind and body. Western thought has told us that the soul is in the body. The soul was thought to be confined to some special, small and refined region within the body. It was often imaged as white in colour. When a person died, the soul departed and the empty body collapsed. This version of the soul seems false. In fact, the more ancient way of looking at this question

considers the relationship of soul to body in a converse way. The body is in the soul. Your soul reaches out further than your body and it simultaneously suffuses your body and your mind. Your soul has more refined antennae than your mind or ego. Trusting this more penumbral dimension brings us to new places in the human adventure. But we have to let go in order to be; we have to stop forcing our selves, or we will never enter our own belonging. There is something ancient at work in us creating novelty. In fact, there is very little needed in order to develop a real sense of your own spiritual individuality. One of the things that is absolutely essential is silence, the other is solitude.

Solitude is one of the most precious things in the human spirit. It is different from loneliness. When you are lonely, you become acutely conscious of your own separation. Solitude can be a homecoming to your own deepest belonging. One of the lovely things about us as individuals is the incommensurable in us. In each person there is a point of absolute non-connection with everything else and with everyone. This is fascinating and frightening. It means that we cannot continue to seek outside ourselves for the things we need from within. The blessings for which we hunger are not to be found in other places or people. These gifts can only be given to you by your self. They are at home at the hearth of your soul.

## To be natural is to be holy



IN THE WEST OF IRELAND MANY HOUSES have open fires. At wintertime when you visit someone, you go through the bleak and cold landscape until you finally come in to the hearth, where the warmth and magic of the fire is waiting. A turf fire is an ancient presence. The turf comes out of the earth and carries the memory of trees and fields and long-gone times. It is strange to have the earth burning within the domesticity of the home. I love the image of the hearth as a place of home, a place of warmth and return.

In everyone's inner solitude there is that bright and warm hearth. The idea of the unconscious, even though it is a very profound and wonderful idea, has sometimes frightened people away from coming back to their own hearth. We falsely understand the subconscious as the cellar where all of our repression and self-damage is housed. We have imagined monsters down there out of our fear of ourselves. Yeats says, 'Man needs reckless courage to descend into the abyss of himself.' In actual fact these demons do not account for all the subconscious. The primal energy of our soul holds a wonderful warmth and welcome for us. One of the reasons we were sent onto the earth was to make this connection with ourselves, this inner

friendship. The demons will haunt us if we remain afraid. All the classical mythical adventures externalize the demons. In battle with them the hero always grows, ascending to new levels of creativity and poise. Each inner demon holds a precious blessing which will heal and free you. To receive this gift, you have to lay aside your fear and take the risk of loss and change which every inner encounter offers.

The Celts had a wonderful intuitive understanding of the complexity of the psyche. They believed in various divine presences. Lugh was the god who was most venerated. He was god of light and giftedness. The Shining One. The ancient festival of Lunasa takes its name from him. The earth goddess was Anu, mother of fecundity. They also acknowledged the divine origin of negativity and darkness. There were three mother-goddesses of war: Morrígan, Nemain and Badb. These play a crucial role in the ancient epic, *The Táin*. Gods and goddesses were always linked to a place. Trees, wells and rivers were special places of divine presence. Fostered by such rich textures of divine presence, the ancient psyche was never as isolated and disconnected as the modern psyche. The Celts had an intuitive spirituality, informed by mindful, reverent attention to landscape. It was an outdoor spirituality impassioned by the erotic charge of the



earth. The recovery of soul in our times is vital in healing our disconnection.

In theological or spiritual terms, we can understand this point of absolute non-connection with everything, as a sacred opening in the soul which can be filled by nothing external. Often all the possessions we have, the work we do, the beliefs we hold, are manic attempts to fill this opening, but they never stay in place. They always slip, and we are left more vulnerable and exposed than before. A time comes when you know that you can no longer wallpaper this void. Until you really listen to the call of this void, you will remain an inner fugitive, driven from refuge to refuge, always on the run with no place to call home. To be natural is to be holy; but it is very difficult to be natural. To be natural is to be at home with your own nature. If you are outside your self, always reaching beyond your self, you avoid the call of your own mystery. When you acknowledge the integrity of your solitude, and settle into its mystery, your relationships with others take on a new warmth, adventure and wonder.

Spirituality becomes suspect if it is merely an anaesthetic to still one's spiritual hunger. Such a spirituality is driven by the fear of loneliness. If you bring courage to your solitude, you learn that you do not need to be afraid. The phrase, do not be

afraid, recurs three hundred and sixty-six times in the Bible. There is a welcome for you at the heart of your solitude. When you realize this, most of the fear that governs your life falls away. The moment your fear transfigures, you come into rhythm with your own self.

## THE DANCING MIND



HERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF solitude. There is the solitude of suffering when you go through darkness that is lonely, intense and terrible. Words become powerless to express your pain; what others hear from your words is so distant and different from what you are actually suffering. Everyone goes through that bleak time. Folk-consciousness always recognizes that, at such a time, you must be exceedingly gentle with yourself. I love the image of the field of corn in the autumn. When the wind catches the corn, it does not stand stiff and direct against the force of the wind; were it to do this, the wind would rip it asunder. No. The corn weaves with the wind, it bends low. And when the wind is gone, it weaves back and finds its own poise and balance again. There is also the lovely story of the wolf-spider; it never builds its web between two hard objects like two stones. If it did this, it would be rent by the

wind. Instinctively, it builds its web between two blades of grass. When the wind comes, the web lowers with the grass until the wind has passed, then it comes back up and finds its point of balance and equilibrium again. These are beautiful images for a mind in rhythm with itself. We put terrible pressure on our minds when we tighten them or when we harden our views or beliefs; we lose all the softness and flexibility which makes for real shelter, belonging and protection. Sometimes the best way of caring for your soul is to make flexible again some of the views that harden and crystallize in your mind; for these alienate you from your own depth and beauty. Creativity seems to demand flexible and measured tension. In musical terms, the image of the violin is instructive here. If the strings are tuned too tightly or too loosely they snap. When the tuning is balanced, the violin can endure massive force and produce the most powerful and tender music.

### Beauty likes neglected places



ONLY IN SOLITUDE CAN YOU DISCOVER a sense of your own beauty. The Divine Artist sent no-one here without the depth and light of divine beauty. This beauty is frequently concealed behind the dull façade of routine. Only

in your solitude will you come upon your own beauty. In Connemara, where there are a lot of fishing villages, there is a phrase which says: '*is fanach an áit a gheobfá gliomach,*' i.e. it is in the unexpected or neglected place that you will find the lobster. In the neglected crevices and corners of your evaded solitude, you will find the treasure that you have always sought elsewhere. Ezra Pound said something similar about beauty; beauty likes to keep away from the public glare. It likes to find a neglected or abandoned place, for it knows that it is only here it will meet the kind of light that respects its shape, dignity and nature. There is a deep beauty within each person. Modern culture is obsessed with cosmetic perfection. Beauty is standardized; it has become another product for sale. In its real sense, beauty is the illumination of your soul.

There is a lantern in the soul which makes your solitude luminous. Solitude need not remain lonely. It can awaken to its luminous warmth. The soul redeems and transfigures everything because the soul is the divine space. When you inhabit your solitude fully and experience its outer extremes of isolation and abandonment, you will find at its heart there is neither loneliness nor emptiness but intimacy and shelter. In your solitude you are frequently nearer to the heart of belonging and

kinship than you are in your social life or public world. At this level, memory is the great friend of solitude. The harvest of memory opens when solitude is ripe. This is captured succinctly by Wordsworth in his response to the memory of the daffodils: 'Oft when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood / They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude.'

Your persona, beliefs and role are in reality a technique or strategy for getting through the daily routine. When you are on your own, or when you wake in the middle of the night, the real knowing within you can surface. You come to feel the secret equilibrium of your soul. When you travel the inner distance and reach the divine, the outer distance vanishes. Ironically, your trust in your inner belonging radically alters your outer belonging. Unless you find belonging in your solitude, your external longing remains needy and driven.

There is a wonderful welcome within. Meister Eckhart illuminates this point. He says that there is a place in the soul that neither space nor time nor flesh can touch. This is the eternal place within us. It would be a lovely gift to your self to go there often – to be nourished, strengthened and renewed. The deepest things that you need are not elsewhere. They are here and now in that circle of your own soul. Real friendship and holiness enables a person

to frequently visit the hearth of his solitude; this benediction invites an approach to others in their blessedness.

## THOUGHTS ARE OUR INNER SENSES



OUR life in the world comes to us in the shape of time. Consequently, our expectation is both a creative and constructive force. If you expect to find nothing within yourself but the repressed, abandoned and shameful elements of your past, or a haunted hunger, all you will find is emptiness and desperation. If you do not bring the kind eye of creative expectation to your inner world, you will never find anything there. The way you look at things is the most powerful force in shaping your life. In a vital sense, perception is reality.

Phenomenology has shown us that all consciousness is consciousness *of* something. The world is never simply there outside us. Our intentionality constructs it. For the most part we construct our world so naturally that we are unaware that we are doing this every moment. It seems that the same rhythm of construction works inwards. Our intentionality constructs the landscapes of our inner world. Maybe it is time now for a phenomenology of soul. The soul creates, shapes and peoples our

inner life. The gateway to our deepest identity is not through mechanical analysis. We need to listen to the soul and articulate its wisdom in a poetic and mystical form. It is tempting to use the soul as merely another receptacle for our tired and frustrated analytical energies. It deserves to be remembered that from ancient times the soul had depth, danger and unpredictability precisely because it was seen as the presence of the divine within us. If we cut the soul off from the holy, it becomes an innocuous cipher. To awaken the soul is also to travel to the frontier where experience bows down before the *mysterium tremens et fascinans* of Otherness.

There is such an intimate connection between the way we look at things and what we actually discover. If you can learn to look at your self and your life in a gentle, creative and adventurous way, you will be eternally surprised at what you find. In other words, we never meet anything totally or purely. We see everything through the lens of thought. The way that you think determines what you will actually discover. This is expressed wonderfully by Meister Eckhart: 'Thoughts are our inner senses.' We know that when our outer senses are impaired, this immediately diminishes the presence of the world to us. If your sight is poor the world becomes a blur. If your hearing is damaged a dull silence replaces

what could be music or the voice of your beloved. In a similar way if your thoughts are impaired or if they are negative or diminished, then you will never discover anything rich or beautiful within your soul. If thoughts are our inner senses, and if we allow our thoughts to be impoverished and pale, then the riches of our inner world can never come to meet us. We have to imagine more courageously, if we are to greet creation more fully.

You relate to your inner world through thought. If these thoughts are not your own thoughts, then they are second-hand thoughts. Each of us needs to learn the unique language of our own soul. In that distinctive language we will discover a lens of thought to brighten and illuminate our inner world. Dostoevsky said that many people live their lives without ever finding themselves in themselves. If you are afraid of your solitude, or if you only meet your solitude with entrenched or impoverished thought, you will never enter your own depth. It is a great point of growth in your life when you allow what is luminous within to awaken you. This may be the first time that you actually see your self as you are. The mystery of your presence can never be reduced to your role, actions, ego or image. You are an eternal essence; this is the ancient reason why you are here. To begin to get a glimpse of this essence is to come into harmony with your destiny



and with the providence that always minds your days and ways. This process of self-discovery is not easy; it may involve suffering, doubt, dismay. But we must not shrink from the fullness of our being in order to reduce the pain.

## Ascetic solitude

**A**scetic solitude is difficult. You withdraw from the world to get a clearer glimpse of who you are, what you are doing and where life is taking you. The people who do this in a very committed way are the contemplatives. When you visit someone at home, the door into the house, the threshold, is rich with the textures of presence from all the welcomes and valedictions that occur on that threshold. When you visit a cloister or contemplative convent, there is no-one to meet you at the door. You go in, ring a bell and the person arrives behind the grille to meet you. These are the special houses which hold the survivors of solitude. They have exiled themselves from the outside worship of the earth to risk themselves in the interior space where the senses have nothing to celebrate.

Ascetic solitude involves silence. And silence is one of the great victims of modern culture. We live in an intense and visually aggressive age; everything is drawn outwards towards the sensation of

the image. Because culture is becoming ever more homogenized and universalist, image has such power. With the continued netting of everything, chosen images can immediately attain universality. There is an incredibly subtle and powerfully calculating industry of modern dislocation, where that which is deep and lives in the silence within us is completely ignored. The surfaces of our minds continue to be seduced by the power of images. There is a sinister eviction taking place; people's lives are being dragged outwards all the time. The inner world of the soul is suffering a great eviction from the landlord forces of advertising and external social reality. This outer exile really impoverishes us. One of the reasons so many people are suffering from stress is not that they are doing stressful things but that they allow so little time for silence. A fruitful solitude without silence and space is inconceivable.

Silence is one of the major thresholds in the world. The spirituality of the Desert Fathers deeply influenced Celtic spirituality. For these ascetics silence was the teacher: 'A certain brother came to the Abbot Moses in Scete seeking a word from him. And the old man said to him: "Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you all things."' In the Celtic world there was always the recognition of the silent and the unknown as the closest companions of

the human journey. Encounter and farewell which framed conversations were always blessings. Emer gives a lovely blessing to Cúchulainn in *The Táin*. She says, 'May your road be blessed,' literally, I drive around you in a chariot turning to the Right. This was the sun's direction and it attracted good fortune. Behind Celtic poetry and prayer, there is the sense that the words have emerged from a deep, reverential silence. This perspective of solitude and silence purified and intensified the encounter of two people in the *anam-cara* experience with powerful resonance.

Fundamentally, there is the great silence which meets language; all words come out of silence. Words which have a depth, resonance, healing and challenge are words that are loaded with ascetic silence. Language, which does not recognize its kinship with reality is banal, denotative and purely discursive. The language of poetry issues from and returns to silence. In modern culture, conversation is one of the casualties. Usually when you talk to people all you hear is surface narrative or the catalogue of therapy news. It is quite poignant to hear people describe themselves in terms of the programme in which they are involved or the outer work which their role involves. Each person is the daily recipient of new thoughts and unexpected feelings. Yet, so often, in our social encounter and

in the way we have grown used to describing ourselves, this finds no welcome or expression. This is disappointing in view of the fact that the deepest things that we have inherited have come down to us across the bridges of meaningful conversation. The Celtic tradition was primarily an oral tradition. The stories, poems and prayers lived for centuries in the memory and voice of the people. They were learned by heart. The companionship and presence of such a rich harvest of memory helped poeticize their perception and conversation. Without the presence of memory conversation becomes amnesic, repetitive and superficial. Perception is most powerful when it engages both memory and experience. This empowers conversation to become real exploration. Real conversation has an unpredictability, danger and resonance; it can take a turn anywhere and constantly borders on the unexpected and on the unknown. Real conversation is not a construct of the solitary ego; it creates community. So much of our modern talk is like a spider manically weaving a web of language outside himself. Our parallel monologues with their staccato stutter only reinforce our isolation. There is so little patience for the silence from which words emerge or for the silence that is between words and within them. When we forget or neglect this silence we empty our world of its secret and

subtle presences. We can no longer converse with the dead or the absent.

## SILENCE IS THE SISTER OF THE DIVINE



SILENCE IS THE SISTER OF THE DIVINE. Meister Eckhart said that there is nothing in the world that resembles God so much as silence. Silence is a great friend of the soul; it unveils the riches of solitude. It is very difficult to reach that quality of inner silence. You must make a space for it so that it may begin to work for you. In a certain sense, you do not need the whole armoury and vocabulary of therapies, psychologies, or spiritual programmes. If you have a trust in and an expectation of your own solitude, everything that you need to know will be revealed to you. These are some wonderful lines from the French poet, René Char: 'Intensity is silent, its image is not. I love everything that dazzles me and then accentuates the darkness within me.' Here is an image of silence as the force that discloses hidden depth.

One of the tasks of true friendship is to listen compassionately and creatively to the hidden silences. Often secrets are not revealed in words, they lie concealed in the silence between the words or in the depth of what is unsayable between two people. In modern life there is an immense rush to

express. Sometimes the quality of what is expressed is superficial and immensely repetitive. A greater tolerance of silence is desirable, that fecund silence which is the source of our most resonant language. The depth and substance of a friendship mirrors itself in the quality and shelter of the silence between two people.

As you begin to befriend your inner silence, one of the first things you will notice is the superficial chatter on the surface level of your mind. Once you recognize this, the silence deepens. A distinction begins to emerge between the images that you have of your self and your own deeper nature. Sometimes much of the conflict in our spirituality has nothing to do with our deeper nature but rather with the false surface constructs we build. We then get caught in working out a grammar and geometry of how these surface images and positions relate to each other; meanwhile our deeper nature remains unattended.

## The crowd at the hearth of the soul



Individuality is NEVER SIMPLE OR ONE-dimensional. Often it seems as if there is a crowd within the individual heart. The Greeks believed that when you dreamed at night,

the figures of your dreams were characters who left your body, went out into the world and undertook their own adventures; then returned before you awoke. At the deepest level of the human heart, there is no simple, singular self. Deep within there is a gallery of different selves. Each one of these figures expresses a different part of your nature. Sometimes they will come into contradiction and conflict with each other. If you only meet these contradictions on the surface level, this can start an inner feud that could haunt you all the days of your life. Frequently, you see people who are sorely divided. They are in a permanent war zone and have never managed to go deeper to the hearth of kinship where the two forces are not enemies, but reveal themselves as different sides of the one belonging.

We cannot embody in action the multiplicity of selves we encounter in our most inward meditations. But without a knowledge of these numberless selves our existence is severely diminished and our access to mystery is blocked. We are talking here of the imagination and its riches; too often we degrade imagination to a problem-solving technique.

We need to develop a new sense of the wonderful complexity of the self. We need thought models or patterns which are fair and appropriate to that complexity. When people discover their own

complexity, they become afraid and with the hammers of second-hand thoughts they beat this rich internal landscape into a monoscape. They make themselves conform. They agree to fit in; they cease to be vivid presences, even to themselves.

## CONTRADICTIONS AS TREASURES



ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING FORMS of complexity is contradiction. We need to rediscover contradiction as a creative force within the soul. Beginning with Aristotle, the Western thought tradition has outlawed contradiction as the presence of the impossible, and consequently, as an index of the false and the illogical. Hegel, alone, had the vision, subtlety and hospitality of reflection to acknowledge contradiction as the complex force of growth which disavows mere linear progress in order to awaken all the aggregate energies of an experience. It is the turbulence and conflict of their inner conversation which brings an integrity of transfiguration and not the mere replacement of one image, surface or system by another which so often passes for change. This perspective makes for a more complex notion of truth. It demands an ethic of authenticity which incorporates and goes beyond the simplistic intentions of mere sincerity.



We need to have greater patience with our sense of inner contradiction in order to allow its different dimensions to come into conversation within us. There is a secret light and vital energy in contradiction. Where there is energy, there is life and growth. Your ascetic solitude will allow your contradictions to emerge with clarity and force. If you remain faithful to this energy, you will gradually come to participate in a harmony which lies deeper than any contradiction. This will give you new courage to engage the depth, danger and darkness of your life.

It is startling how desperately we hold on to what makes us miserable. Our own woundedness becomes a source of perverse pleasure and fixes our identity. We do not want to be cured, for that would mean moving into the unknown. Often it seems we are destructively addicted to the negative. What we call the negative is usually the surface form of contradiction. If we maintain our misery at this surface level, we hold off the initially threatening but ultimately redemptive and healing transfiguration which comes through engaging our inner contradiction. We need to revalue what we consider to be negative. Rilke used to say that difficulty is one of the greatest friends of the soul. Our lives would be immeasurably enriched if we could but bring the same hospitality to meet the negative as we bring to the joyful and pleasurable. In

avoiding the negative, we only encourage it to recur. We need a new way of understanding and integrating the negative. The negative is one of the closest friends of your destiny. It contains essential energies which you need and which you cannot find elsewhere. This is where art can be so illuminating. Art is full of intimations of the negative in ways that allow you to participate imaginatively in their possibility. The experience of art can help you build a creative friendship with the negative. When you stand before a painting by Kandinsky you enter the church of colour where the liturgy of contradiction is fluent and glorious. When you listen to Martha Argerich play Rachmaninov Three, you experience the liberation of contradictory forces which at every point threaten and test the magnificent symmetry of form which holds them.

You can only befriend the negative if you recognize that it is not destructive. It often seems that morality is the enemy of growth. We falsely understand moral rules as descriptions of the soul's direction and duty. Yet the best thinking in moral philosophy tells us that these rules are only signposts to alert us to the complex of values latent in or consequent upon our decisions. Moral rules encourage us to act with honour, compassion and justice. They can never be descriptions simply because each person and situation is so different.

When we notice something immoral, we normally tend to be harsh with ourselves and employ moral surgery to remove it. In doing this we are only ensuring that it remains trapped within. We merely confirm our negative view of ourselves, and ignore our potential for growth. There is a strange paradox in the soul: if you try to avoid or remove the awkward quality, it will pursue you. In fact, the only effective way to still its unease is to transfigure it, let it become something creative and positive that contributes to who you are.

One encouraging aspect of the negative is its truthfulness. The negative does not lie. It will tell you clearly where you court absence rather than inhabit presence. On entering your solitude one of the first presences to announce itself is the negative. Nietzsche said that one of the best days in his life was the day that he rebaptized all his negative qualities as his best qualities. In this kind of baptism, rather than banishing what is at first glimpse unwelcome, you bring it home to unity with your life. This is the slow and difficult work of self-retrieval. Every person has certain qualities or presences in their heart which are awkward, disturbing and negative. One of your sacred duties is to exercise kindness towards them. In a sense, you are called to be a loving parent to your delinquent qualities. Your kindness will slowly poultice their

negativity, alleviate their fear and help them to see that your soul is a home where there is no judgement or febrile hunger for a fixed and limited identity. The negative threatens us so powerfully precisely because it is an invitation to an art of compassion and self-enlargement which our small thinking utterly resists. Your vision is your home and your home should have many mansions to shelter your wild divinity. Such integration respects the multiplicity of selves within. It does not force them into a factitious unity, it allows them to cohere as one, each bringing its unique difference to complement the harmony.

This rhythm of self-retrieval invites your generosity and sense of risk, not merely internally, but also externally, at the interpersonal level. This is probably the uneasy territory of which Jesus spoke when he exhorted: 'Love your enemies.' We should be careful in our choice of 'adversaries'. An awakened soul should have only worthy 'adversaries' who reveal your negativity and challenge your possibility. To learn to love your adversaries is to earn a freedom that is beyond resentment and threat.

## The soul adores unity



WHEN YOU decide to practise inner hospitality, the self-torment ceases. The abandoned, neglected and negative selves come into a seamless unity. The soul is wise and subtle; it recognizes that unity fosters belonging. The soul adores unity. What you separate the soul joins. As your experience extends and deepens, your memory becomes richer and more complex. Your soul is the priestess of memory, selecting, sifting and ultimately gathering your vanishing days towards presence. This liturgy of remembrance, literally re-membering, is always at work within you. Human solitude is rich and endlessly creative.

The solitude of nature is mainly silent. This is expressed beautifully in the old Irish wisdom: *'castar na daoine ar a chéile ach ní chastar na sleibhte ar a cheile,'* – the mountains never meet, but people can always encounter each other. It is strange that two mountains can be side by side for millions of years and yet can never move closer to each other. Whereas two strangers can come down these mountains, meet in the valley and share the inner worlds they carry. This separation must be one of nature's loneliest experiences.

The ocean is one of the delights for the human eye. The seashore is a theatre of fluency. When the

mind is entangled, it is nice to walk by the seashore, to let the rhythm of the ocean inside you. The ocean disentangles the netted mind. Everything loosens and comes back to itself. The false divisions are relieved, released and healed. Yet the ocean never actually sees itself. Even light that enables us to see everything cannot see itself; light is blind. In Haydn's *The Creation* it is the vocation of man and woman to celebrate and complete creation.

Our solitude is different. In contrast to nature and to the animal world, there is a mirror within the human mind. This mirror collects every reflection. Human solitude is so unsolitary. Deep human solitude is a place of great affinity and of tension. When you come into your solitude, you come into companionship with everything and everyone. When you extend yourself frenetically outwards, seeking refuge in your external image or role, you are going into exile. When you come patiently and silently home to your self, you come into unity and into belonging.

No-one but you can sense the eternity and depth concealed in your solitude. This is one of the lonely things about individuality. You only arrive at a sense of the eternal in you through confronting and outfacing your fears. The truly lonely element in loneliness is fear. No-one else has access to the

world you carry around within yourself, you are its custodian and entrance. No-one else can see the world the way that you see it. No-one else can feel your life the way that you feel it. Thus, it is impossible to ever compare two people with each other because each stands on such different ground. When you compare yourself to others, you are inviting envy into your consciousness; it can be a dangerous and destructive guest. This is always one of the great tensions in an awakened or spiritual life, namely, to find the rhythm of its unique language, perception and belonging. To remain faithful to your life requires commitment and vision that must be constantly renewed.

If you try to view yourself through the lenses that others offer you, all you will see are distortions; your own light and beauty will become blurred, awkward and ugly. Your sense of inner beauty has to remain a very private thing. The secret and the sacred are sisters. Our times suffer from such a loss of the sacred because our respect for the secret has completely vanished. Our modern technology of information is one of the great destroyers of privacy. We need to shelter that which is deep and reserved within us. This is why there is such hunger in modern life for the language of the soul. The soul is a shy presence. The hunger for the language of the soul shows that the soul has been forced to recede

to private areas, only there can it mind its own texture and rhythm. The modern world, by trumpeting the doctrine of self-sufficiency, has denied the soul and forced it to eke out its existence on the margins.

Maybe one of the ways to reconnect with your deeper soul life is to recover a sense of the soul's shyness. While shyness may be personally difficult, it is an attractive quality in a person. In an unexpected piece of advice, Nietzsche says one of the best ways to make someone interested in you is to blush. The value of shyness, its mystery and reserve is alien to the brash immediacy of much modern encounter. If we are to connect with our inner life we need to learn not to grasp at the soul in a direct or confrontational way. In other words, the neon consciousness of much modern psychology and spirituality will always leave us in soul poverty.

## TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY OF NON-INTERFERENCE



**O**N A FARM YOU LEARN TO RESPECT nature, particularly for the wisdom of its dark underworld. When you sow things in the spring, you commit them to the darkness of the soil. The soil does its own work. It is destructive to



interfere with the rhythm and wisdom of its darkness. You sow drills of potatoes on Tuesday and you are delighted with them. You meet someone on a Wednesday who says that you spread the potatoes too thickly, you will have no crop. You dig up the potatoes again and spread them more thinly. On the following Monday you meet an agricultural adviser who says this particular variety of seed potatoes needs to be spread close together. You dig them up again and set them closer to each other. If you keep scraping at the garden, you will never allow anything to grow. People in our hungry modern world are always scraping at the clay of their hearts. They have a new thought, a new plan, a new syndrome that now explains why they are the way they are. They have found an old memory that opens a new wound. They keep on relentlessly, again and again, scraping the clay away from their own hearts. In nature we do not see the trees, for instance, getting seriously involved in therapeutic analysis of their root systems or the whole stony world that they had to avoid on their way to the light. Each tree grows in two directions at once, into the darkness and out to the light, with as many branches and roots as it needs to embody its wild desires.

Negative introspection damages the soul. It holds many people trapped for years and years and, ironically, it never allows them to change. It is wise

to allow the soul to carry on its secret work in the night side of your life. You might not see anything stirring for a long time. You might have only the slightest intimations of the secret growth that is happening within you, but these intimations are sufficient. We should be fulfilled and satisfied with them. You cannot dredge the depths of the soul with the meagre light of self-analysis. The inner world never reveals itself cheaply. Perhaps analysis is the wrong way to approach our inner dark.

We all have wounds; we need to attend to them and allow them to heal. Hegel's beautiful phrase is apposite here: 'Die Wunden des Geistes heilen, ohne das Narben bleiben', the wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars. There is a healing for each of our wounds, but this healing is waiting in the indirect, oblique, and non-analytic side of our nature. We need to be mindful of where we are damaged, then invite our deeper soul in its night world to heal this wounded tissue, renew us and bring us back into unity. If we approach our hurt indirectly and kindly, it will heal. Creative expectation brings you healing and renewal. If you could trust your soul, you would receive every blessing you require. Life itself is the great sacrament through which we are wounded and healed. If we live everything, life will be faithful to us.

## ONE OF THE GREATEST SINS IS THE UNLIVED LIFE



IN the Western tradition we were taught many things about the nature of negativity and the nature of sin, but we were never told that one of the greatest sins is the unlived life. We are sent into the world to live to the full everything that awakens within us and everything that comes towards us. It is a lonely experience to be at the deathbed of someone who is full of regret; to hear him say how he would love another year to do the things his heart had always dreamed of but believed he could never do until he retired. He had always postponed the dream of his heart. There are many people who do not live the lives they desire. Many of the things that hold them back from inhabiting their destiny are false. These are only images in their minds. They are not real barriers at all. We should never allow our fears or the expectations of others to set the frontiers of our destiny.

We are so privileged to still have time. We have but the one life and it is a shame to limit it by fear and false barriers. Irenaeus, a wonderful philosopher and theologian in the second century, said: 'The glory of God is the human person fully alive.' It is lovely to imagine that real divinity is the presence in which all beauty, unity, creativity, darkness and negativity are harmonized. The divine has such

passionate creativity and instinct for the fully inhabited life. If you allow your nature to come alive, then everything will come into rhythm. If you live the life you love, you will receive shelter and blessings. Sometimes the great famine of blessing in and around us derives from the fact that we are not living the life we love, rather we are living the life that is expected of us. We have fallen out of rhythm with the secret signature and light of our own nature.

The shape of each soul is different. There is a secret destiny for each person. When you endeavour to repeat what others have done or force yourself into a preset mould, you betray your individuality. We need to return to the solitude within, to find again the dream that lies at the hearth of the soul. We need to feel the dream with the wonder of a child approaching a threshold of discovery. When we rediscover our childlike nature, we enter into a world of gentle possibility. Consequently, we will find ourselves more frequently at the place of ease, delight and celebration. The false burdens fall away. We come into rhythm with ourselves. Our clay shape gradually learns to walk beautifully on this magnificent earth.

## A blessing of solitude



*May you recognize in your life the presence, power and light of your soul.*

*May you realize that you are never alone that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.*

*May you have respect for your own individuality and difference.*

*May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique,*

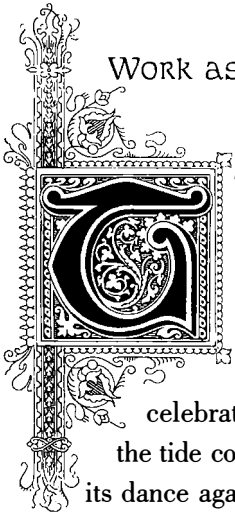
*that you have a special destiny here*

*that behind the façade of your life there is something beautiful, good and eternal happening.*

*May you learn to see your self with the same delight, pride and expectation with which God sees you in every moment.*

## chapter 4

### Work as a poetics of growth



#### The eye celebrates MOTION

THE HUMAN EYE ADORES MOVEMENT and is alert to the slightest flicker. It enjoys great moments of celebration when it beholds the ocean as the tide comes in, and tide upon tide repeats its dance against the shore. The eye also loves the way light moves, summer light behind a cloud crawling over a meadow. The eye follows the way the wind shovels leaves and sways trees. The human person is always attracted to motion. As a little baby you wanted to crawl, then to walk, and as an adult you feel the continuous desire to walk into independence and freedom.

Everything alive is in movement. This movement we call growth. The most exciting form of growth is

not mere physical growth, but the inner growth of one's soul and life. It is here that the holy longing within the heart brings one's life into motion. The deepest wish of the heart is that this motion does not remain broken or jagged, but develops sufficient fluency to become the rhythm of one's life.

The secret heart of time is change and growth. Each new experience which awakens in you adds to your soul and deepens your memory. The person is always a nomad, journeying from threshold to threshold, into ever different experiences. In each new experience, another dimension of the soul unfolds. It is no wonder that from ancient times the human person has been understood as a wanderer. Traditionally, these wanderers traversed foreign territories and unknown places. Yet, Stanislavsky, the Russian dramatist and thinker, wrote: 'The longest and most exciting journey is the journey inwards.'

There is a beautiful complexity of growth within the human soul. In order to glimpse this, it is helpful to visualize the mind as a tower of windows. Sadly, many people remain trapped at the one window, looking out every day at the same scene in the same way. Real growth is experienced when you draw back from that one window, turn and walk around the inner tower of the soul and see all the different windows that await your gaze. Through these different windows, you can see new vistas of

possibility, presence and creativity. Complacency, habit and blindness often prevent you from feeling your life. So much depends on the frame of vision – the window through which we look.

## TO GROW IS TO CHANGE



IN a poetics of growth it is important to explore how possibility and change remain so faithful to us. They open us to new depths within. Their continual, inner movement makes us aware of the eternity that hides behind the outer façade of our lives. Deep within every life, no matter how dull or ineffectual it may seem from the outside, there is something eternal happening. This is the secret way that change and possibility conspire with growth. John Henry Newman summed this up beautifully with the idea that to grow is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often. Change, therefore, need not be threatening; it can in fact bring our lives to perfection. Perfection is not cold completion. Neither is it avoidance of risk and danger in order to keep the soul pure or the conscience unclouded. When you are faithful to the risk and ambivalence of growth, you are engaging your life. The soul loves risk; it is only through the door of risk that growth can enter. Hölderlin wrote: *'Nah ist / Und schwer zu fassen der*



*Gott. Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch,*’ i.e. near is and difficult to understand, the God. But where danger is the Redemptive grows. Perfection is the fulfilment of the fully lived and inhabited life.

Possibility and change become growth within the shape of time that we call a day. Days are where we live. This rhythm shapes our lives. Your life takes the form of each new day that is given to you. The wonderful Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz describes the difficulty of writing good poetry. A writer writes and writes and writes, and yet the harvest is so minimal. Nonetheless, Różewicz quotes an old dictum which says that it is more difficult to spend a day well than it is to write a book. A day is precious because each day is essentially the microcosm of your whole life. Each new day offers possibilities and promises that were never seen before. To engage with honour the full possibility of your life is to engage in a worthy way the possibility of your new day. Each day is different. In the Book of Revelation, God said, ‘The world of the past has gone . . . Behold I am making all of creation new.’ The new day deepens what has already happened and unfolds what is surprising, unpredictable and creative. You may wish to change your life, you may be in therapy or religion, but your new vision remains merely talk until it enters the practice of your day.

## The Celtic REVERENCE FOR the day



Celtic spirituality has a GREAT SENSE OF the significance of each day, how the new day is sacred. The Celts never entered the day with a repetitious deadening perspective; they took each day as a new beginning. There is a lovely Celtic prayer which articulates this sense of the day as a gift from God. The metaphor of vision suffuses the poem. There is an invocation that the human eye may 'bless all it sees' and that God's vision may guard and guide the day. The day is understood as a time of reflexive blessing which embraces God, self, others and nature.



*od bless to me the new day  
never vouchsafed to me before  
it is to bless thy own presence thou has  
given triumph God.*

*Bless thou to me  
mine eye  
may mine eye bless all it sees  
I will bless my neighbour  
may my neighbour bless me,  
God give me a clean heart  
let me not from sight of thine eye*

*bless to me my children and my wife  
and bless to me my means and cattle.*

(trans. A. Carmichael)

For the Celtic person the new day was lived amidst nature. It is easy to have a creative sense of the day when you live in the presence of the great divinity called nature. For the Celtic people, nature was not matter, rather it was a luminous and numinous presence which had depth, possibility and beauty.

There is also a beautiful invocation of the day in the ancient poem called 'The Deer's Cry':



*Arise today  
Through God's strength to direct me:  
God's might to uphold me,  
God's wisdom to guide me,  
God's eye to look before,  
God's ear to hear me,  
God's word to speak to me,  
God's hand to guard me,  
God's way to lie before me,  
God's shield to protect me,  
God's hosts to save me from snares of devils,  
From temptation of vices,  
From everyone who shall wish me ill,*

*Afar and anear,  
Alone and in a multitude.*

(trans. Kuno Meyer)

This poem articulates the Celtic recognition of the omnipresence of God. The very act of awakening is recognized as a gift. At the threshold of a new day there is no arrogance; rather a longing to praise. God is pictured in sensuous detail as the divine *anam cara*. At every moment and in every situation God is the intimate, attentive and encouraging friend.

This notion of the day as a sacred place offers a lovely frame for the creativity which a day can bring. Your life becomes the shape of the days you inhabit. Days enter us. Sadly, in modern life, the day is often a cage. Here a person loses his youthfulness, energy and strength. The day is often experienced as a cage precisely because it is spent in the workplace. So many of our days and so much of our time is spent doing work which remains outside the territories of creativity and feeling. The workplace can be complex and very difficult. Most of us work for someone else and lose so much of our energy. As a matter of fact, one of the definitions of energy is the ability to do work. Days spent caged make us tired and weary. In a city all the morning

traffic jams hold people who are barely out of the night and are sleepy, anxious and frustrated. Pressure and stress have already stolen their day. In the evening, the same people are weary after a long workday. By the time they get home, they have no energy left to attend to the desires, thoughts and feelings which were neglected all day.

It is very difficult, at first consideration, to bring the world of work and the world of soul together. Most of us work in order to survive. We need to make money; we have no choice. On the other hand, those who are unemployed feel frustrated and demeaned and suffer a great loss of dignity. Yet those of us who work are often caught within a grid of predictability and repetition. It is the same every day. There is such an anonymous side to work. All that is demanded of us is the input of our energy. We move through the workplace, and as soon as we are gone in the evening, we are forgotten. We have the feeling that our contribution, while it is required and demanded, is merely functional and in reality hardly appreciated. Work should not be like that at all; it should be an arena of possibility and real expression.

## THE SOUL DESIRES EXPRESSION



THE HUMAN PERSON deeply desires expression. One of the most beautiful ways the soul is present is through thought. Thoughts are the forms of the soul's inner swiftness. In a certain sense, there is nothing in the world as swift as a thought. It can fly anywhere, and be with anyone. Our feelings too can move swiftly; yet even though they are precious to our own identity, thoughts and feelings still remain largely invisible. In order to feel real, we need to bring that inner invisible world to expression. Every life needs the possibility of expression. When we perform an action, the invisible within us finds a form, and comes to expression. Therefore, our work should be the place where the soul can enjoy becoming visible and present. The rich unknown, reserved and precious within us, can emerge into visible form. Our nature longs deeply for the possibility of expression which we call work.

I was raised on a farm. We were poor and each of us had to do our share of chores. I am always grateful that I was taught how to work. Ever since, I have found satisfaction in being able to do a day's work. I find it frustrating when a day goes astray, and at evening I sense that many of the possibilities that slept in that day remained unmet. On a farm, work has a clear and visible effect. When you are digging

potatoes, you see the results of your harvesting; the garden yields its buried, nurtured fruit. When you build a wall in a field, you are introducing a new presence into the landscape. If you are out footing turf on the bog, in the evening you see all the *grogáin* of turf standing up ready to dry. There is great satisfaction in farm work. Even though it is difficult, you still see a great return for your work. When I left home, I entered the world of thought, writing and poetry. This work is in the invisible realm. When you work in the territory of the mind, you see nothing. Only sometimes are you given the slightest little glimpse of the ripples from your effort. You need great patience and self-trust to sense the invisible harvest in the territory of the mind. You need to train the inner eye for the invisible realms where thoughts can grow, and where feelings put down their roots.

## PISREOGA



OR MANY people, the workplace is unsatisfactory and permits neither growth nor creativity. More often than not, it is an anonymous place where function and image have control. Since work demands such labour and effort, it has always made the worker vulnerable. Even in the ancient Celtic tradition negativity could

be harnessed to make nature work against the worker. When people disliked each other or wanted to damage each other, they often did it through destroying the neighbour's harvest. This is the world of *pisreoga*. Maybe one neighbour was jealous of another and planted eggs in his garden of potatoes. When the neighbour goes to dig up the potatoes at harvest time, the potatoes have decayed. The destructive wish of the neighbour is realized through a ritual of negative invocation and the symbol of an egg. This then robs the power and the fruitfulness of the garden.

In the Celtic tradition, the first of May was a precarious date. The Celts guarded their wells at this time; negative or destructive spirits might want to destroy, poison or damage them. Such negativity is illustrated in a story my uncle used to tell of a neighbouring village. One May morning a farmer was out herding his animals. He met a strange woman pulling a rope along the meadow. He greeted her with a blessing. 'Dia dhuit,' he said, but she did not answer. Rather, she turned and disappeared, leaving the rope behind her. It was a fine rope. He coiled it and brought it back to the house and threw it into a barrel in one of the outhouses where it lay forgotten. The following harvest the neighbours were helping him bring hay home from the meadows with the horse and cart and they



needed an extra rope to tie the load of hay. Someone asked if he had any other rope. He said, *‘Níl aon rópa agam ach rópa an t-sean cailleach,’* i.e. I have no rope but the rope of the old hag. He went to the shed to find the rope but when he came to the barrel, it was full of butter. The old woman was no innocent visitor, she had stolen the cream and strength of the land on May morning. When she dropped the rope, the power remained in the rope and the cream of the land filled up the barrel. This story shows how sometimes the harvest and the reward of work could be stolen at the precarious threshold of May morning.

## PRESENCE AS SOUL TEXTURE



**I**N THE MODERN workplace such a negative atmosphere can be very destructive. When we speak of an individual, we speak of his presence. Presence is the way a person's individuality comes towards you. Presence is the soul texture of the person. When we speak of this presence in relation to a group of people, we refer to it as atmosphere or ethos. The ethos of a workplace is a very subtle group presence. It is difficult to describe or analyse an ethos; yet you immediately sense its power and effect. Where the ethos is positive, wonderful things can happen. It is

a joy to come to work because the atmosphere comes out to meet you, and it is a happy atmosphere. It is caring, kind and creative. Where the ethos of the workplace is negative and destructive, people wake up in the morning and the first thought of going to work literally makes them ill. It is sad that so many people have to spend so much of their short time in the world in a negative and destructive work ethos. The workplace can be quite hostile; it is often an environment of power. You are working for people who have power over you. They have the power to sack you, criticize you and bully you, or compromise your dignity. This is not a welcoming atmosphere. People have power over us because we give our power away to them.

It is an interesting exercise to ask yourself what image you have of the people who have power over you. A friend of mine works in a school which has an insecure principal. He is weak and defensive. He uses his power in a very negative way. Recently at a meeting to start the school term, he berated the staff. The next day my friend met this man in town with his wife. She was shocked to recognize that outside of his power context he looked totally insignificant. This startled her because she had projected such power onto him as school principal.

Sometimes we allow people to exercise destructive power over us simply because we never ques-

tion them. When falsity masquerades as power, there is no force that can unmask it as swiftly as a question. We are all familiar with the story of the Emperor's new clothes. The Emperor paraded through town in his new suit; in reality he was stark naked. Everyone cheered and said what a wonderful suit the Emperor wore. They were all in complicit agreement until a little child blurted out the truth. The word of truth is completely powerful. In the New Testament Jesus says, 'If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.' This maxim is relevant to every situation. Gentle, non-confrontational questions which pursue the truth, as you see it, can prevent a person from taking over all the power in a situation. This will save complex and gentle people from being reduced to the function of an external controlled role.

## WEAKNESS AND POWER



REQUENTLY people in power are not as strong as they might wish to appear. Many people who desperately hunger for power are weak. They seek power positions to compensate for their own fragility and vulnerability. A weak person in power can never be generous with power because they see questions or alternative

possibilities as threatening their own supremacy and dominance. If you are going to be creatively confrontational with such a person, you need to approach very gently in a non-direct manner. This is the only way to reach the heart of such a frightened, powerful person with the word of truth.

The workplace as a place of power can also be a place of control. Control is destructive because it reduces your own independence and autonomy. You are placed back in an infantile role where you are dealing with an authority figure. Because of our untransfigured relationship to our parents we sometimes turn authority figures into giants. There is a crucial distinction here between power and authority. When you are awake to the integrity of your inner power, then you are your own authority. The word authority signifies your authorship of your ideas and actions. The world functions through power structures. Consequently, it is desirable that genuine people of refined sensibility, imagination and compassion leave themselves available to take up positions of power. A charismatic person in a powerful position can be an agent of far-reaching and positive change.

When you are being controlled, you are treated as an object rather than a subject. Often people in power have an uncanny instinct for working the system against you. I know a millionaire who made

his money in the clothes trade. The women working for him were paid poorly. Every so often, he would sense the tension building up amongst them. One day he turned the radio on really loud. Then all the workers began to complain. He watched the aggression building up until finally a group came to him and asked that the volume be lowered. He refused. They became more militant and threatened to go on strike. He insisted on keeping the volume loud. When they were almost out on the street, he lowered the volume. His strategy was to let them have the impression that they had the power. Then they returned to work, feeling they had won a victory over the boss, even though he had staged the conflict from the very beginning. This happened forty years ago. In the modern workplace unionization and the development of workers' rights means that employers can no longer get away with such obvious manipulation. Still the work situation continues to exploit people. Management is now more subtle in its strategies of control and alienation.

The workplace can be a place of great competition. Management sometimes plays the workers against each other. Consequently, when you go into work you are in solo combat with your colleague in terms of productivity. Your colleagues begin to appear as a threat. Where productivity becomes

God, each individual is reduced to a function. It would be wonderful if the workplace were a place of real inspiration with the work engaging your creativity. Your gift would be welcomed there; your contribution seen. Everyone has a special gift. Your life becomes happier when your gift can grow and come to expression in your place of work. You are freed to receive inspiration from others. Furthermore, because the gift of each person in relation to the overall work is unique, there need be no competition between the workers. This makes the workplace hospitable to the energies, rhythms and gifts of the soul. There is no reason why every workplace could not begin to develop such creativity.

Work should not serve the owners and the employers alone. Work should also serve the workers and the community. Structures should be developed whereby workers are able to share in the profits. The entry of imagination and the awakening of soul demands that work be understood as contributing to the creativity and improvement of the larger community. A firm or corporation which has large profits should assist and support the poor and the underprivileged. To create optimal conditions of work should become a priority. Furthermore, awkward but honest questions should be engaged. Where work creates products which endanger people or nature, it should be critiqued and changed.

One of the most powerful and prophetic analysts of work was Karl Marx. He showed how work can alienate a person from their nature and potential. Certain work can dull and darken human presence. In our century some of the most prophetic, trenchant and illuminating critical thought has come from this tradition. The school of critical theory has delivered a penetrating and critical evaluation of industrial society. It has revealed that history and society internally influence the structure of human identity. The nature of work and consumerism diminish and oppress the self. Critical theory has made a great contribution to the recovery of soul by identifying the subtlety and pervasiveness of these alienating forces. It cuts through the colourful but fictitious surface-image which conceals the quiet suffocation of individuality. Contemporary society worships at the altar of functionalism. Concepts such as process, method, model and project have come to infiltrate our language and determine how we describe our relation to the world. The recovery of soul means a rediscovery of Otherness; this would awaken again the sense of mystery, possibility and compassion. The deadening force of function would diminish and a new vitality infuse our activities. Stated philosophically, being could find expression in doing. The recovery of the sense of Otherness is the deepest mystical task of modern society. Celtic

spirituality has an immense contribution to make in fostering this sense of Otherness. In its metaphysic of friendship there is a profound acknowledgement of the Otherness of nature, the self and the Divine. However, our modern conversation with Celtic tradition must be critical and reflective. Otherwise Celtic spirituality is in danger of becoming another fashionable and exotic spiritual programme in our sensation-driven culture.

In the world of negative work, where you are controlled, where power prevails and you are a mere functionary, everything is determined by an ethic of competition. In the world of creative work, where your gift is engaged, there is no competition. The soul transfigures the need for competition. In contrast, the world of quantity is always haunted by competition: if I have less, you have more. In the world of soul, the more you have, the more everyone has. The rhythm of soul is the surprise of endless enrichment.

## THE TRAP OF FALSE BELONGING



THIS REIMAGING OF THE WORKPLACE would help fulfil one of the crucial needs that every individual has: the need to belong. Everyone loves to belong. We want to belong to a group, to a family and particularly to the



place in which we work. Here is the point at which an immense creativity could be released in the workplace. Imagine how lovely it would be if you could be yourself at work and express your true nature, giftedness and imagination. There need be no separation between your home, your private life and your actual world of work. One could flow into the other in a creative and mutually enriching way. Instead, too many people belong to the system because they are forced to and controlled.

People are often exceptionally careless in their style of belonging. Too many people belong too naïvely to the systems in which they are involved. When they are suddenly laid off, or the system collapses, or someone else is promoted, they feel broken, wounded and demeaned. In nearly every corporation or workplace you will find many disappointed individuals. Initially, they brought the energy and innocence of their belonging to their work, but they were let down, disappointed, and treated as functionaries. Their energy was claimed and used, but their souls were never engaged.

The heart of the matter is, you should never belong fully to something that is outside yourself. It is very important to find a balance in your belonging. You should never belong totally to any cause or system. Frequently, people need to belong to an external system because they are afraid to belong to

their own lives. If your soul is awakened then you realize that this is the house of your real belonging. Your longing is safe there. Belonging is related to longing. If you hyphenate belonging, it yields a lovely axiom for spiritual growth: be-your-longing. Longing is a precious instinct in the soul. Where you belong should always be worthy of your dignity. You should belong first in your own interiority. If you belong there, and if you are in rhythm with yourself and connected to that deep, unique source within, then you will never be vulnerable when your outside belonging is qualified, relativized or taken away. You will still be able to stand on your own ground, the ground of your soul where you are not a tenant, where you are at home. Your interiority is the ground from which nobody can distance, exclude or exile you. This is your treasure. As the New Testament says, 'Where your treasure is, there is your heart also.'

## WORK AND IMAGINATION



ONE OF THE ENCOURAGING aspects of modern work, particularly in the corporate world, is the increasing recognition of the imagination as a vital and essential force. This is not because the corporate world loves the imagination. Corporate appreciation of the imagin-

ation has happened for other reasons, namely, the markets are now volatile and the pace of change so rapid that the old patterns of work control are unproductive. There is a recognition dawning that the repetitive linear system which controls the work and the worker is no longer profitable. Consequently, the presence of the soul is now welcome in the workplace. The soul is welcome because it is the place where the imagination lives.

The imagination is the creative force in the individual. It always negotiates different thresholds and releases possibilities of recognition and creativity which the linear, controlling, external mind will never even glimpse. The imagination works on the threshold that runs between light and dark, visible and invisible, quest and question, possibility and fact. The imagination is the great friend of possibility. Where the imagination is awake and alive fact never hardens or closes but remains open, inviting you to new thresholds of possibility and creativity.

When I was doing my postgraduate work in Germany, I had the good fortune to share a house in Berlin with a wonderful philosopher of science from India who has written some amazing books on the growth of scientific knowledge. As this man had directed many postgraduate students, I asked him what advice he would give me as I was about to

engage in research on Hegel. He said that most research endeavours to establish a conclusion or reach verification that no-one can successfully criticize or undermine. Everyone attempts that, there is nothing new in it. I should take a different approach. He said, try to discover a few questions in this area that no-one has thought of asking, then you will have discovered something truly original and important. This advice was an invitation to novelty, an inspiration to perceive a given situation in a completely new way.

Even though much effort is put into the workplace, the actual application of fresh imagination is rare. Usually a bland sameness is allowed to dominate work. Even the patterns of criticism from workers become predictable and entrenched. Often a new person coming in can bring a new art of questioning and thinking. Suddenly a dead situation coheres itself in a fresh and exciting way. Possibilities which had slept there, under the surface of the old bland similarity, now awaken. People become empowered and engaged; the whole project of that particular workplace comes alive with a new energy. The person who can approach the workplace not with linear analysis, which is so predictable and repetitive, but with imaginative possibility, can reimagine the workplace for its participants and open it up in an engaging and

inspiring way. For this reason, the poet, or the artist of soul, has become such an important presence in the contemporary corporate world. He can bring a freshness that it severely lacks, opening doors and windows in places that up to then had had impenetrable walls. This approach to the workplace ensures that creativity and spontaneity become major energizing forces there.

## Spontaneity and blockage



When the workplace is run in a deliberate, forced way, nothing new can happen there. If you try to force the soul, you never succeed. When I was in Germany my consciousness became intensified and relentlessly active. Consequently, I began to develop a sleep problem. If you are doing physical work during the day, you can survive with very little sleep. If you are doing precise and difficult mental work, you need sleep. I began to have major insomnia problems. After rising, I could work for about an hour, then I was suddenly tired and frustrated. I hated going to bed at night, and every night I made furious attempts to get to sleep. I tried everything. I remember one night being particularly exhausted and I said to myself: face it, now you will never sleep properly again. You will never have a night of

complete rest. You are going to have this problem for the rest of your life. The strange thing was that as soon as I admitted that to myself, within five minutes I was fast asleep. Over the next few nights my rhythm of sleep returned. What prevented me from sleeping was the deliberate commitment to try to get to sleep. As soon as I let go of the desire to sleep, sleep came naturally.

When the will and the intellect are brought as deliberate forces into the workplace, this only makes the bland similarity even more entrenched. When the imagination, the force of illumination in the soul, is allowed to stir, it opens up the workplace in a completely new way. No-one should be neutral or indifferent to his work or workplace. It is very important for a person to have a careful look at the kind of work he does. He should try to establish whether the work he does and his workplace is actually expressive of his identity, dignity and giftedness. If not, difficult choices may need to be made. If you sell your soul, you ultimately buy a life of misery.

Respectability and security are subtle traps on life's journey. Those who are drawn to extremes are often nearer to renewal and self-discovery. Those trapped in the bland middle region of respectability are lost without ever realizing it. This can be a trap for those addicted to the business world. Many

people in business operate only with one side of their mind: the strategic, tactical, mechanical side, day-in day-out. This becomes a mental habit which they apply to everything, including their inner life. Even though they are powerful people in the theatre of work, outside of the workplace they look forlorn and lost. You cannot repress the presence of your soul and not pay the price. If you sin against your soul, it is always at great cost. Work can be an attractive way of sinning deeply against the wildness and creativity of your own soul. Work comes to dominate your identity. One of the most disturbing stories in twentieth-century literature portrays the surrealistic destiny of an utterly meticulous and faithful functionary. This is Kafka's *Metamorphosis* which has the uncanny opening sentence: 'As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning out of troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.' With deft anonymity, surrealistic detail and black humour, Kafka is unequalled in his ability to portray system and functionary.

## THE ROLE CAN SMOTHER



**I**F YOU ONLY AWAKEN YOUR WILL AND intellect, then your work can become your identity. This is summed up in the

rather humorous epitaph on a gravestone somewhere in London: 'Here lies Jeremy Brown born a man and died a grocer'. Often a person's identity, that wild inner complexity of soul and colour of spirit, becomes shrunken into their work identity. They become prisoners of their role. They limit and reduce their lives. They become seduced by the practice of self-absence. They move further and further away from their own lives. They are forced backwards into hidden areas on the ledges of their hearts. When you encounter them you meet only the role. You look for the person, but you never meet him. To practise only the linear external side of your mind is very dangerous. Thus, the corporate and work world now recognizes how desperately they need the turbulence, anarchy and growth possibilities from the unpredictable world of the imagination. These are so vital for the passion and force of a person's life. If you engage only the external side of yourself, and stay on this mechanical surface, you become secretly weary. Gradually, years of this practice make you desperate.

## Sisyphus



WHEN WEARINESS BECOMES GRAVITY, it destroys your natural soul protection. It is reminiscent of the myth of Sisyphus.



Sisyphus was condemned for his sin. In the underworld, his task was to roll a huge boulder up a hill. He would painstakingly roll the boulder slowly up and up almost to the summit, then the rock would roll out of his grasp and crash right to the bottom. If Sisyphus could stop and decide never to roll the stone again, he would have peace. He is the prisoner of the futile, condemned eternally to begin the same task but never complete it. He has to roll the boulder up the hill eternally in the sure knowledge that he can never get it over the summit. Anyone in the business or corporate work world who remains on the surface of the role, and practises only the linear side of the mind, is like Sisyphus. They are in great danger of a breakdown. A breakdown is often a desperate attempt by the soul to break through the weary façade of role politics. There is a profundity to the human soul that the linear surface of the work world cannot accommodate. When you remain in the rut, you become caged behind one window of the mind. You are then not able to turn around towards the balcony of the soul and enjoy the different views through the other windows of wonder and possibility.

Rapidity is another force causing massive stress in the workplace. Baudrillard, the French philosopher, speaks of the exponential speed of modern

life. Where things are moving too quickly, nothing can stabilize, gather or grow. There is a lovely story of a man exploring Africa. He was in a desperate hurry on a journey through the jungle. He had three or four African people helping him to carry his equipment. They raced onwards for about three days. At the end of the third day, the Africans sat down and would not move. He urged them to get up, telling them of the pressure he was under to reach his destination before a certain date. They refused to move. He could not understand this; after much persuasion, they still refused to move. Finally, he got one of them to admit the reason. This African said: 'We have moved too quickly to reach here; now we need to wait to give our spirits a chance to catch up with us.' Many people who are secretly weary of work have never given themselves time, or taken time out or away from work, to allow their spirits to catch up. It is a simple but vital reflective exercise to give yourself plenty of time: leave all agendas behind you. Let the neglected presence of your soul come to meet and engage you again. It can be a lovely re-acquaintance with your forgotten mystery.

The Celtic imagination testifies to a different concept and experience of time. The recognition of presence and the celebration of nature was only possible because time was a window on the eternal.

Time was never reduced to achievement. Time was time for wonder. This is still one of the charming things about Ireland. People here still have time. In contrast to many areas in the Western world, people here inhabit a more flexible and open time rhythm. The ideology of rapidity and clinical efficiency has not gained a grip here, yet.

## THE SALMON OF KNOWLEDGE



URPRISINGLY, there is often great irony in the way the soul behaves. Sometimes in the work world a person with analytic, linear vision can miss out totally on the harvest and fruits of work. The imagination has a particular rhythm of vision which never sees directly in a linear way. The eye of the imagination follows the rhythm of the circle. If your vision is confined to linear purpose, you may miss out on the secret destiny that a form of activity can bring you. There is a lovely old Celtic story about Fionn and the salmon of knowledge. Fionn wanted to become a poet. In Celtic Ireland to be a poet was a sacred vocation. The poet summed up in himself a supernatural power, the power of the Druid and the power of creativity. Poets had special access to mysteries which were not available to the common masses.

There was a salmon in the River Slane in County

Meath. Whoever caught this salmon and ate it would become the greatest and most gifted poet in Ireland and would also receive the gift of second sight. There was a man called Fionn the Seer who had spent seven years pursuing this salmon. Young Fionn mac Cumhaill came to him to learn the craft of poetry. One day Fionn the Seer came back, having caught the salmon of knowledge. He started a fire and put the salmon on a spit. The salmon had to be turned very carefully and could not be burnt or the gift would be ruined. After a while the fire went low and the salmon could no longer be cooked properly. He had no-one to gather more wood for the fire. Just then his protégé, Fionn, came out of the wood and he left him to turn the salmon slowly on the spit. Young Fionn mac Cumhaill began to turn the salmon but he was a dreamer and he allowed his mind to wander. When he looked, a blister had appeared on the side of the salmon. He grew very anxious, knowing that Fionn the Seer would be furious with him for having ruined the salmon. With his thumb he tried to press the blister back in. As soon as he did, he burnt his thumb, then put it in his mouth to relieve the pain. There was some of the oil of the salmon on his thumb and as soon as he tasted the salmon oil, he received the wisdom, the gift of second sight and the vocation of poet. Old Fionn came back with the wood. As soon

as he looked at young Fionn's eyes, he knew what had happened. He sat there disappointed that the destiny he had pursued so deliberately had at the last moment turned away from him to be received by an innocent young man who had never even dreamed of such a gift.

This is a good story to illustrate how the linear mind, despite its sincerity and commitment, can totally miss the gift. The imagination in its loyalty to possibility often takes the curved path rather than the linear way. Such risk and openness inherits the harvest of creativity, beauty and spirit.

Sometimes a person has difficulty with work, not because the work is unsuited to them, or they to it, but because their image of the work is blurred and defective. Frequently, such a person lacks a focus. They have allowed the tender presence of their experience to become divided and split. Their sense of their work as expression and imagination has been replaced by an image of work as endurance and entrapment.

## THE FALSE IMAGE CAN PARALYSE



PERCEPTION IS CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING. How you see, and what you see, determine how you will be. Your perception, or your view of reality, is the lens through which you

see things. Your perception determines the way that things will behave for you and towards you. We tend to perceive difficulty as disturbance. Ironically, difficulty can be a great friend of creativity. I love the lines from Paul Valéry: '*Une difficulté est une lumière / Une difficulté insurmontable est un soleil,*' i.e. a difficulty is a light; an insurmountable difficulty is a sun. This is a completely different way of considering the awkward, the uneven and the difficult. Deep within us, there is a terrible impulse and drive towards perfection. We want everything flattened into the one shape. We do not like unexpected shapes. One of the essential aspects of beginning to reimagine the workplace is to awaken the ability to welcome that which is difficult and awkward. Frequently the actual work itself is fine, rather it is our image of it which makes it appear difficult and awkward.

During a phase of my study in Germany, I became acutely aware of the impossibility of my task. I was working on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Anyone who knows Hegel will readily admit that this long text is magical but difficult to penetrate. My sense of the difficulty of the project began to mirror itself in my presence towards the work. I began to paralyse myself and soon I was not able to work at all. As the German so beautifully says of such blockage: '*Ich stehe mir im Weg,*' i.e. I am

standing in my own way. I would go to my desk with great commitment, believing that I was going to break through this barrier, but I could not concentrate. The image that kept haunting my mind was the impossibility of my task. Each day I would try anew, but I was paralysed.

One day, I went for a long walk in the forest near Tübingen. In the forest it suddenly occurred to me that Hegel was not the problem, rather it was my image of the task that obstructed me. I came back home immediately, and sat down and scribbled quickly on a page the image of my work that I had constructed. I recognized the power that the image had. When this became clear to me, I was able to distance the image from the actual work itself. After a couple of days, the image had faded and I was back into the rhythm of the work.

Some people have a lot of difficulty at work, even though the work is a genuine expression of their nature, giftedness and potential. The difficulty is not with the work, but rather with their image of the work. The image is not merely a surface; it also becomes a lens through which we behold a thing. We are partly responsible for the construction of our own images and completely responsible for how we use them. To recognize that the image is not the person or the thing is liberating.

## THE KING AND THE BEGGAR'S GIFT



DIFFICULT OR UNWANTED THING CAN TURN out to be a great gift. Frequently, we receive unknown gifts in disguise. There is a wonderful old story told of a young king who took over a kingdom. He was loved before he became a king and his subjects were delighted when he was finally crowned. They brought him many different gifts. After the coronation, the new king was at supper in the palace. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. The servants went out to discover an old man shabbily dressed, looking like a beggar. He wanted to see the king. The servants did their best to dissuade him but to no avail. The king came out to meet him. The old man praised the king, saying how delighted everyone in the kingdom was to have him as king. He had brought the king the gift of a melon. The king hated melons. Being kind to the old man, he took the melon, thanked him, and the old man went away happy. The king went indoors and gave the melon to his servants to throw out in the back garden. The next week at the same time, there was another knock at the door. The king was summoned again and the old man praised the king and offered him another melon. The king took the melon and said goodbye to the old man. Once again, he threw the melon out the back door. This continued for several weeks.



The king was too kind to confront the old man or belittle the generosity of the gift that he brought. Then, one evening, just as the old man was about to hand the melon to the king, a monkey jumped down from a portico in the palace and knocked the melon from the old man's hand. The melon shattered into pieces all over the front of the palace. When the king looked, he saw a shower of diamonds flying from the heart of the melon. Eagerly, he checked the garden at the back of the palace. There, all the melons had melted around a little hillock of jewels. The moral of this story is that sometimes in awkward situations, in problems or in difficulties, all that is awkward is the disguise. Very often at the heart of the difficulty, there is the light of a great jewel. It is wise to learn to embrace with hospitality that which is awkward and difficult.

My father was an accomplished stonemason. I often watched him building walls. Frequently, he would choose a stone that was completely round. A round stone is useless because it cannot be bound into the structure of the wall. Yet with a little tap of the hammer, my father could transform the stone. Something that looked unformed and awkward would fit into the wall as if it had been made specially for it. I love, too, that image of Michelangelo's: that in every stone no matter how dumb, awkward or blunt

there is secret shape waiting to emerge. Michelangelo's wonderful *Prisoners in Stone* illustrates this. The human figures have almost emerged from the stone, yet from the waist down they are still trapped in the dull unformed stone. It is an incredible image of release which is arrested. Very often in difficult work projects there is a secret shape waiting to emerge. If you concentrate on releasing the hidden possibility within your project, you will find a satisfaction that will surprise you. Meister Eckhart speaks beautifully about the way one should be towards what one does. If you work with a creative and kind eye, you will bring forth beauty.

## HEARTFUL WORK BRINGS BEAUTY



WHEN YOU CONSIDER it, the world of your action and activity is a very precious world. What you do should be worthy of you; it should be worthy of your attention and dignity and conform to your respect for yourself. If you can love what you do, then you will do it beautifully. You might not love your work at the beginning; yet the deeper side of your soul can help you bring the light of love to what you do. Then, regardless of what you do, you will do it in a creative and transforming way.

There is an apposite story about a Zen monk in Japan. The Emperor had an absolutely magnificent vase which was ancient and intricately beautiful. One day someone let the vase fall and it split into millions of fragments. The fragments were gathered up and the best potter in the land was called to reassemble the vase. He came but failed. He paid for his failure by losing his head. The Emperor ordered the next best potter and he also failed. This continued for weeks until, finally, all the best artists in the land had died, having failed to reassemble the broken, beautiful vase. There was only one artist left, an old Zen monk who lived in a cave in the mountains. He had a young apprentice. He came and collected all the fragments himself and brought them back to his work shed. For weeks and weeks he worked until, finally, the vase was there again. The apprentice looked at it and thought how beautiful it was. The two of them made the journey to the city and brought the vase into the palace. The Emperor and all his courtesans beamed in admiration at the beauty of the reassembled vase. The old Zen monk was graciously rewarded. He and his young apprentice went back to their cave in the mountains. Then, one day the young apprentice was looking for something and unexpectedly came upon the fragments of the vase. He ran in to his master: 'Look at all the fragments

of the vase, you never assembled them all. How did you make a vase as beautiful as the ancient one that was broken?' The old master said: 'If you do the work that you do from a loving heart, then you will always be able to make something beautiful.'

## A BLESSING



*May the light of your soul guide you.  
May the light of your soul bless the  
work you do with the secret love and  
warmth of your heart.*

*May you see in what you do the beauty of your  
own soul.*

*May the sacredness of your work bring healing,  
light and renewal to those who work with you  
and to those who see and receive your work.*

*May your work never weary you.*

*May it release within you wellsprings of  
refreshment, inspiration and excitement.*

*May you be present in what you do.*

*May you never become lost in the bland  
absences.*

*May the day never burden.*

*May dawn find you awake and alert,  
approaching your new day with dreams,  
possibilities and promises.*

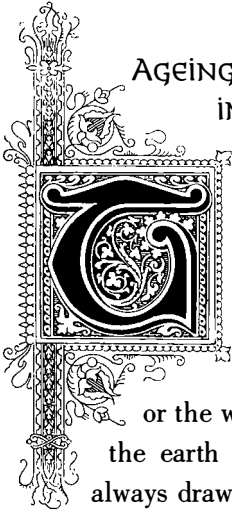
*May evening find you gracious and fulfilled.*

*May you go into the night blessed, sheltered and  
protected.*

*May your soul calm, console and renew you.*

## chapter 5

### Ageing: the beauty of the inner harvest



#### TIME AS A CIRCLE

THE HUMAN EYE ADORES GAZING; it feasts on the wild beauty of new landscapes, the dignity of trees, the tenderness of a human face, or the white sphere of the moon blessing the earth in a circle of light. The eye is always drawn to the shape of a thing. It finds some deep consolation and sense of home in special shapes. Deep within the human mind, there is a fascination with the circle because it satisfies some longing within us. It is one of the most universal and ancient shapes in the universe. Reality often seems to express itself in this form. The earth is a circle; and even time itself seems to have a circular nature. The Celtic world was always fascinated with circles; they are prevalent in so much of its art work; the

Celts even transfigured the Cross by surrounding it with a circle. The Celtic Cross is a beautiful symbol. The circle around the beams of the Cross rescues the loneliness where the two lines of pain intersect; it seems to calm and console their forsaken linearity.

For the Celtic people the world of nature had different domains; firstly, there was the underworld of nature below the surface of landscape. Here the Tuatha Dé Danann, the fairy people or the good people, lived. The human world was the middle kingdom between the underworld and the heavenly world. There was no closed or sealed frontier between them. Above, there was the supersensual or upper world of the heavens. Each of these three dimensions flowed in and out of each other. Indeed, they participated in each other. It is no wonder, then, that time could be understood as an inclusive and all embracing circle.

The year is a circle. There is the winter season which gives way to the spring; then summer grows out of spring until, finally, the year completes itself in the autumn. The circle of time is never broken. This rhythm is even mirrored in the day; it too is a circle. First, the new dawn comes out of the darkness, strengthening towards noon, falling away towards evening until night returns again. Because we live in time, the life of each person is also a

circle. We come out of the unknown. We appear on the earth, live here, feed off the earth and eventually return back into the unknown again. The oceans move in this rhythm too; the tide comes in, turns and goes back out again. It resembles the rhythm of human breath which comes in, fills and then recedes and goes back out again.

The circle brings perspective to the process of ageing. As you age, time affects your body, your experience and above all your soul. There is a great poignancy in ageing. When your body ages, you begin to lose the natural and spontaneous vigour of your youthfulness. Time, like a bleak tide, begins to indent the membrane of your strength. It will continue doing that, until gradually it empties your life completely. This is one of the most vital questions that affects every person. Can we transfigure the damage that time does to us? Let us pursue this question by first exploring our kinship with nature. Since we are formed from clay, the rhythm of the seasons outside in nature is also active within our own hearts. We can learn much, therefore, from the people who constructed and articulated their spirituality in sisterhood with nature, namely, the Celtic people. They experienced the year as a circle of seasons. Though the Celts had no explicit psychology, they had implicit intuition and great wisdom about the deeper rhythms of



human belonging, vulnerability, growth and diminishment.

## The seasons in the heart



HERE ARE FOUR SEASONS within the clay heart. When it is winter in the world of nature, all the colours have vanished; everything is reduced to grey, black or white. All the visions and beautiful rich colouring of nature thin out completely. Grass disappears from the land and the earth itself is frozen and perished in a bleak self-retraction. In wintertime, nature withdraws. A tree loses all its leaves and retires inwards. When it is wintertime in your life, you are going through pain, difficulty or turbulence. It is now wise to follow the instinct of nature and withdraw into yourself. When it is winter in your soul, it is unwise to pursue any new endeavours. You have to lie low and shelter until this bleak, emptying time passes on. This is nature's remedy. It minds itself in hibernation. When there is great pain in your life, you, too, need sanctuary in the shelter of your own soul.

One of the beautiful transitions in nature is the transition from winter to springtime. An old Zen mystic said, when one flower blooms it is spring everywhere. When the first innocent, infant-like

flower appears on the earth, one senses nature stirring beneath the frozen surface. There is a lovely phrase in Gaelic, '*ag borradh*', meaning that there is a quivering life about to break forth. The wonderful colours and the new life the earth receives makes spring a time of great exuberance and hope. In a certain sense, spring is the youngest season. Winter is the oldest season. Winter was there from the very beginning. It reigned amidst the silence and bleakness of nature for hundreds of millions of years before vegetation. Spring is a youthful season; it comes forth in a rush of life and promise, hope and possibility. At the heart of the spring there is a great inner longing. It is the time when desire and memory stir towards each other. Consequently, springtime in your soul is a wonderful time to undertake some new adventure, some new project, or to make some important changes in your life. If you undertake this, when it is springtime in your soul, then the rhythm, the energy and the hidden light of your own clay works with you. You are in the flow of your own growth and potential. Springtime in the soul can be beautiful, hopeful and strengthening. You can make difficult transitions very naturally in an unforced and spontaneous way.

Spring blossoms and grows into summertime. In summertime nature is bedecked with colour. There

is great lushness everywhere, a richness and depth of texture. Summertime is a time of light, growth and arrival. You feel that the secret life of the year, hidden in the winter and coming out in the spring, has really blossomed in the summertime. Thus, when it is summertime in your soul, it is a time of great balance. You are in the flow of your own nature. You can take as many risks as you like, and you will always land on your feet. There is enough shelter and depth of texture around you to completely ground, balance and mind you.

Summertime grows into autumn. Autumn is one of my favourite times of the year; seeds sown in the spring, nurtured by the summer, now yield their fruit in autumn. It is harvest, the homecoming of the seeds' long and lonely journey through darkness and silence under the earth's surface. Harvest is one of the great feasts of the year. It was a very important time in Celtic culture. The fertility of the earth yielded its fruitfulness. Correspondingly, when it is autumn in your life, the things that happened in the past, or the experiences that were sown in the clay of your heart, almost unknown to you, now yield their fruit. Autumntime in a person's life can be a time of great gathering. It is a time for harvesting the fruits of your experiences.

## AUTUMN AND THE INNER HARVEST



THESE ARE THE FOUR SEASONS OF THE heart. Several seasons can be present simultaneously in the heart, though usually, at any one time, there is one dominant season present in your life. It is customary to understand autumn as synchronous with old age. In the autumn time of your life, your experience is harvested. This is a backdrop against which we can understand ageing. Ageing is not merely about the body losing its poise, strength and self-trust. Ageing also invites you to become aware of the sacred circle that shelters your life. Within the harvest circle, you are able to gather lost moments and experiences, bring them together and hold them as one. In actual fact, if you can come to see ageing not as the demise of your body, but as the harvest of your soul, you will learn that ageing can be a time of great strength, poise and confidence. To understand the harvest of your soul against the background of seasonal rhythm should give you a sense of quiet delight at the arrival of this time in your life. It should give you strength and a sense of how the deeper belonging of your soul world will be revealed to you.

Even though the body ages, diminishes, becomes frail, weak and ill, the shelter of the soul around the

body always embraces that fragility tenderly. That the body is in the soul is a great consolation and shelter. As your body ages, you can become aware of how your soul enfolds and minds your body; the panic and fear often associated with ageing falls away. This brings a deeper sense of strength, belonging and poise. Ageing is so frightening because it seems that your autonomy and independence are forsaking you against your will. To the young, old people seem ancient. When you begin to age yourself, you recognize how incredibly quickly time is moving. In actual fact, the only difference between a young person at the height of their exuberance and a very old person at a very frail and empty physical level is time.

One of the greatest mysteries in life is the mystery of time. Everything that happens to us, happens to us in and through time. Time is the force that brings every new experience to the door of your heart. All that happens to you is controlled and determined by time. The poet Paul Murray speaks of the moment as ‘the place of pilgrimage to which I am a pilgrim’.

Time opens up and opens out the mystery of the soul. The transience and the mysteries which time unfolds have always filled me with reverence and wonder. This found expression in one of my poems called ‘Cottage’:



*sit alert  
behind the small window  
of my mind and watch  
the days pass, strangers  
who have no reason to look in.*

Time in this sense can be very frightening. All around the human body is nothingness; that nothingness is the air element. There is no obvious, physical protection around your body, therefore anything can approach you at any time, from any direction. The clear empty air will not stop the arrows of destiny from lodging in your life. Life is incredibly contingent and unexpected.

## TRANSCIENCE MAKES A GHOST OF EXPERIENCE



ONE OF THE LONELIEST ASPECTS OF TIME IS transience. Time passes and takes everything away. This can be consoling when you are suffering and going through a lonely, searing time. It is encouraging to be able to say to yourself: this too will pass. The opposite is also true: when you are having a lovely time and are really happy; you are with the person you love and life could not be better. On such a perfect evening or day, you secretly say to your heart: God, I wish

this could continue for ever. But it cannot; this too comes to an end. Even Faust begged the moment to stay: '*Verweile doch, Du bist so schön,*' i.e. linger awhile, for you are so beautiful.

Transience is the force of time which makes a ghost of every experience. There was never a dawn, regardless of how beautiful or promising, that did not grow into noontime. There was never a noon that did not fall into afternoon. There was never an afternoon that did not fade towards evening. There never was a day which did not get buried in the graveyard of the night. In this way transience makes a ghost out of everything that happens to us.

All of our time disappears on us. This is an incredible fact. You are so knitted into a day. You are within it; the day is as close as your skin. It is around your eyes; it is inside your mind. The day moves you, often it can weigh you down; or again it can raise you up. Yet the amazing fact is: this day vanishes. When you look behind you, you do not see your past standing there in a series of day shapes. You cannot wander back through the gallery of your past. Your days have disappeared silently and for ever. Your future time has not arrived yet. The only ground of time is the present moment.

In our culture we place a great and worthy emphasis on the importance and sacredness of

experience. In other words, what you think, believe or feel remains a fantasy if it does not actually become part of the fabric of experience. Experience is the touchstone of verification, credibility and deep intimacy. Yet the future of every experience is its disappearance. This raises the fascinating question: is there a place where our vanished days secretly gather? As the medieval mystic asked: where does the light go when the candle is blown out? I believe that there is a place where our vanished days secretly gather. The name of that place is Memory.

## MEMORY: WHERE OUR VANISHED DAYS SECRETLY GATHER



MEMORY IS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL realities of the soul. Since the body itself is so linked into the visual senses, it often does not recognize memory as the place where the past is gathered. The most powerful image of memory is the tree. I remember once, at the Natural History Museum in London, seeing a sliver of the diameter of a giant redwood from California. This tree's memory reached back to about the fifth century. The memory rings within the diameter of the tree had little white flags at different points documenting the age of the particular memory ring.



The first one was St Colmcille going to Iona in the sixth century, then up along the Renaissance, the seventeenth, eighteenth century up to the twentieth century. This giant redwood had lived through twelve or thirteen centuries of time. Its great memory had unfolded all that time within the texture of its timber.

In the classical tradition the most beautiful evocation of the power, presence and riches of memory is in Book Ten of St Augustine's *Confessions*. The following passage is splendid in its portrayal of the inner world.

'Great is the power of memory, exceedingly great, O my God, a spreading limitless room within me. Who can reach its uttermost depth? Yet it is a faculty of soul and belongs to my nature. In fact I cannot totally grasp all that I am. Thus the mind is not large enough to contain itself: but where can the part of it be which it does not contain? Is it outside itself and not within? As this question struck I was overcome with wonder and almost stupor. Here are men going afar to marvel at the heights of the mountains, the mighty waves of the sea, the long courses of great rivers, the vastness of the ocean, the movements of the stars, yet leaving themselves, unnoticed and not seeing it as marvellous that when I spoke of all these things, I did not see them with my eyes, yet I could not have spoken of them unless

these mountains and waves and rivers and stars which I have seen, and the ocean of which I have heard, had been inwardly present to my sight: in my memory, yet with the same vast spaces between them as if I saw them outside me.'

One of the great poverties of our modern culture of rapidity, stress and externality is that there is so little attention to memory. The computer industry has hijacked the notion of memory. To say that computers have memory is false. A computer has storage and recall. Human memory is, however, more refined, sacred and personal. Memory has its own inner selectivity and depth. Human memory is an inner temple of feeling and sensibility. Within that temple different experiences are grouped according to their particular feeling and shape. Our time suffers from a great amnesia. The American philosopher Santayana said: 'Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'

The beauty and invitation of old age offers a time of silence and solitude for a visit to the house of your inner memory. You can revisit all of your past. Your soul is the place where your memory lives. Since linear time vanishes, everything depends on memory. In other words, our time comes in yesterdays, todays and tomorrows. Yet there is another place within us which lives in eternal time. That place is called the soul. The soul, therefore, lives

mainly in the mode of eternity. This means that as things happen in your yesterdays, todays and tomorrows, and fall away with transience, they fall and are caught and held by the net of the eternal in your soul. There they are gathered, preserved and minded for you. Levinas says, 'Memory as an inversion of historical time is the essence of interiority.' Consequently, as your body ages and gets weaker, your soul is in fact getting richer, deeper and stronger. With time your soul grows more sure of itself; the natural light within it increases and brightens. There is a beautiful poem by the wonderful Czeslaw Milosz on old age called 'A New Province'; this is the last verse:



*would prefer to be able to say: 'I am  
satiated,  
What is given to taste in this life, I  
have tasted.'*

*But I am like someone in a window who draws  
aside a curtain*

*To look at a feast he does not comprehend.*

TÍR NA N-ÓG: the land of youth



*he Celtic tradition had a wonderful  
sense of the way eternal time is woven  
through our human time. There is the*

lovely story of Oisín who was one of the Fianna, the band of Celtic warriors. He was tempted and seduced to visit the land called 'Tír na n-Óg'. Tír na n-Óg is the land of eternal youth, where the good people, the fairy people lived. Oisín went off with them and for a long, long time he lived happily there with his woman, Niamh of the golden hair. The time seemed so short to him, being a time of great joy. The quality of our experience always determines the actual rhythm of time. When you are in pain, every moment slows down until it resembles a week. When you are happy and really enjoying your life, time flies. Oisín's time passed really quickly in the land of Tír na n-Óg. Then his longing for his old life began to gnaw. He began to wonder how the Fianna were and what was happening in Ireland. He began to long for home, the land of Éire. The fairy people discouraged him, because they knew that as a former inhabitant of mortal and linear time, he would be in danger of getting lost there for ever. Nevertheless, he decided to return. They gave him a beautiful white horse and told him never to dismount. If he did, he would be lost. He came on the great white horse back to the land of Ireland. Greater loneliness awaited him when he discovered that he had been gone for hundreds and hundreds of years. The Fianna had disappeared. He consoled himself by visiting their old hunting

sites and the places where they had feasted, sung, recited old stories and achieved great feats of valour. In the meantime, Christianity had come to Ireland. When Oisín was riding around on his white horse he saw a group of men failing in an attempt at raising a big rock to build a church. He, being a warrior, had wonderful strength and he looked at them and longed to help them; but he knew he dare not dismount from the horse; if he did, he was lost. He watched them from a distance for a while, then he rode nearer. He could not resist any longer. He took his foot out of the stirrup and reached under the rock to raise it up for them, but as soon as he did the girth broke, the saddle turned over, and Oisín hit the ground. The very moment he hit the land of Ireland, he became a feeble, wrinkled old man. This is a wonderful story to show the co-existence of the two levels of time. If you broke the threshold, which the fairies observed, between these two levels of time, you ended up stranded in mortal, linear time. The destination of human time is death. Eternal time is unbroken presence.

## ETERNAL TIME



his story also shows that there is a different rhythm of life in eternal time. One night, a man from our village was

coming back home along this road where there were no houses. Cycling along, he heard beautiful music. The music was coming from inside the wall by the sea. He crossed over to the wall to find that he was entering a village in this forsaken place. The people there seemed to have expected him. They seemed to know him and he received a great welcome. He was given drink and lovely food. Their music was more beautiful than he had ever heard before. He spent a few hours of great happiness there. Then he remembered that if he did not return home, they would be out searching for him. He bade farewell to the villagers. When he arrived home, he discovered that he had been missing for a fortnight even though it seemed like half an hour in the eternal, fairy world.

My father used to tell another such story about a monk named Phoenix. One day in the monastery he was reading his breviary. A bird began to sing and the monk listened so purely to the song of the bird that he was aware of nothing else. Then the song stopped, and he took up his breviary and went back into the monastery to discover that he no longer recognized anyone there. And they did not recognize him either. He named all his fellow monks with whom he had lived up to what seemed to be half an hour before, but they had all disappeared. The new monks looked up their annals and sure enough,

years and years before, a monk called Phoenix had mysteriously disappeared. At the metaphorical level this story claims that through real presence the monk Phoenix had actually broken into eternal time. Eternal time moves in a different rhythm from normal, broken human time. Oscar Wilde said, 'We think in eternity, but we move slowly through time.' This beautiful phrase echoes powerfully since it comes from *De Profundis*, Wilde's letter of love and forgiveness to one who had betrayed and destroyed him.

These Celtic fairy stories suggest a region of the soul that inhabits the eternal. There is an eternal region within us; there we are not vulnerable to the ravages of normal time. Shakespeare expressed the ravages of calendar time beautifully in sonnet sixty:



*Like as the waves make towards the  
pebbled shore,  
so do our minutes hasten to their end  
each changing place with that which goes before  
in sequent toil all forwards do contend.*

## THE SOUL AS TEMPLE OF MEMORY



*The Celtic stories suggest that time as the rhythm of soul has an eternal dimension where everything is gathered and*

minded. Here nothing is lost. This is a great consolation: the happenings in your life do not disappear. Nothing is ever lost or forgotten. Everything is stored within your soul in the temple of memory. Therefore, as an old person, you can happily go back and attend to your past time; you can return through the rooms of that temple, visit the days that you enjoyed and the times of difficulty where you grew and refined your self. In actual fact, old age, as the harvest of life, is a time where your times and their fragments gather. In this way you unify your self, achieve a new strength, poise and belonging that was never available to you when you were distractedly rushing through your days. Old age is a time of coming home to your deeper nature, of entering fully into the temple of your memory where all your vanished days are secretly gathered awaiting you.

The idea of memory was very important in Celtic spirituality. There are lovely prayers for different occasions. There are prayers for the hearth, for kindling the fire and for smooing the hearth. At night the ashes were smooed over the burning coals, sealing off the air. The next morning the coals were still alive and burning. There is also a prayer for the hearth-keepers which evokes St Bridget, who was both a pagan Celtic goddess and a Christian saint. In herself, Bridget focuses the two



worlds easily and naturally. The pagan world and the Christian world have no row with each other in the Irish psyche, rather they come close to each other in a lovely way. This is a prayer for the hearth which also recognizes memory:



*Brighid of the Mantle, encompass us,  
Lady of the Lambs protect us,  
Keeper of the Hearth, kindle us,  
Beneath your mantle, gather us  
And restore us to memory.*

*Mothers of our mother,  
Fore mothers strong,  
Guide our hands in yours,  
Remind us how  
To kindle the hearth.*

*To keep it bright,  
To preserve the flame,  
Your hands upon ours,  
Our hands within yours,  
To kindle the light,  
Both day and night.*

*The mantle of Brighid about us,  
The memory of Brighid within us,  
The protection of Brighid keeping us*

*From harm, from ignorance, from heartlessness,  
This day and night,  
From dawn till dark,  
From dark till dawn.*

(by Caitlín Matthews)

This is a fine recognition of the circle of memory holding everything together in a hospitable unity.

In a positive sense, ageing becomes a time for visiting the temple of your memory and integrating your life. Integration is a vital part of coming home to your self. What is not integrated remains fragmented; sometimes it can come into great conflict within you. The presence and process of integration brings you more fully home to your self. There is so much that needs to be integrated within each person. Camus said, aptly, that after one day in the world you could spend the rest of your life in solitary confinement and you would still have dimensions of that day's experience left to decipher. So much happens to us even within the simple circle of a day of which we are unaware. To visit the temple of memory is not merely to journey back to the past; it is rather to awaken and integrate everything that happens to you. It is part of the process of reflection which gives depth to experience. We all have experiences, but as T. S. Eliot said, we had the

experience but missed the meaning. Every human heart seeks meaning; for it is in meaning that our deepest shelter lies. Meaning is the sister of experience and to discern the meaning of what has happened to you is one of the essential ways of finding your inner belonging and discovering the sheltering presence of your soul. There is an amazing line in the Bible from the prophet Haggai: 'You have sown so much but harvested so little.' Everything that happens to you is an act of sowing a seed of experience. It is equally important to be able to harvest that experience.

## SELF-COMPASSION AND THE ART OF INNER HARVESTING



OLD AGE CAN BE A WONDERFUL TIME TO develop the art of inner harvesting. What does inner harvesting mean? Inner harvesting means that you actually begin to sift the fruits of your experience. You begin to group, select and integrate them. One of the places where inner harvesting is most vital is the abandoned areas within your life. Areas of inner neglect and abandonment cry out to you. They are urgent for harvest. Then they can come in out of the false exile of neglect and enter into the temple of belonging, the soul. This is particularly necessary in relation

to the things that you have found difficult in your life, things to which you had great resistance. Above all, your inner wounds cry out for healing. There are two ways of doing this. You can do it in an analysis-driven way, where you go back to the wound and open it up again. You take off the protective healing skin which has grown around it. You make it sore and you make it weep again. A lot of therapy reverses the process of healing. Maybe there is a less intrusive art of attention that you can bring to your wounds. For the soul has its own natural rhythm of healing. Consequently, many of your wounds are very well-healed and should not be opened up again. If you want to you could select a list of your wounds and spend the next thirty years opening them up, until eventually you become like Job with your body a mass of sores. If you engage in this practice of woundology, you will turn your soul into a mass of weeping sores. Each of us has a wonderful but precarious freedom in relation to our inner life. We need, therefore, to treat ourselves with great tenderness.

Part of the wisdom of spiritual soulful self-presence is to be able to let certain aspects of your life alone. This is the art of spiritual non-interference. Yet other aspects of your life call urgently for your attention; they call to you as their shelterer, to come and harvest them. You can

discern where these wounds are in the temple of memory, then visit them in a gentle and mindful way. The one kind of creative presence you could bring to these areas is compassion. Some people can be very compassionate to others, but exceptionally harsh with themselves. One of the qualities that you can develop, particularly in your older years, is a sense of great compassion for your self. When you visit the wounds within the temple of memory, the places where you made bad mistakes and now feel such regret, you should not blame your self. Sometimes you have grown unexpectedly through these mistakes. Frequently, in a journey of the soul, the most precious moments are the mistakes. They have brought you to a place which you would otherwise have always avoided. You should bring a compassionate mindfulness to your mistakes and wounds. Endeavour to inhabit again the rhythm you were in at that time. If you visit this configuration of your soul with forgiveness in your heart, it will fall into place itself. When you forgive your self, the inner wounds begin to heal. You come in out of the exile of hurt into the joy of inner belonging. This art of integration is very precious. You have to trust your deeper, inner voice to know which places you need to visit. This is not to be viewed in a quantitative way, but rather in a gentle, spiritual way. If you bring that kind light to your

soul and to its wounded places, you effect incredible inner healing.

## To keep something beautiful in your heart



he soul is the natural shelter around your life. If during the course of your life, you have not continually scraped away this shelter, your soul will now gather around you to mind you. To approach your soul and memory with neon analysis can be very destructive, especially in the vulnerability of your old age. You should let your soul be natural. From this perspective old age can be a vulnerable time. Many people as they age get very worried and anxious. It is precisely in difficult and vulnerable times that you really have to mind your self. I love the idea of Blaise Pascal that, in difficult times, you should always keep something beautiful in your heart. Perhaps, as a poet said, it is beauty that will save us in the end.

How you view your future actually shapes it. In other words, expectation helps create the future. Many of our troubles do not belong to us. They are troubles we draw upon us through our gloomy attitude. There is a friend of mine from Cork who lived near an old woman called Mary who had a notoriously negative and gloomy outlook on everything.

She always had the 'bad word'. A neighbour met her one beautiful May morning. The sun was shining, flowers were out and nature looked as if it wanted to dance. He said to her, 'God, isn't it a beautiful morning, Mary?' Her reply was, 'I know sure, but what about tomorrow?' She was not able to enjoy the actual presence of beauty around her because she was already troubled by how awful tomorrow was going to be. Troubles are not just constellations of the soul or consciousness; frequently, they are actually in spirit form. Perhaps there are little crowds of miseries flying along through the air. Then, they look down and see you gloomy and miserable. They imagine if they come down they might be able to lodge for a week or a few months or even a year. If you let your own natural shelter down, these miseries can come in and take up tenancy in different places in your mind. The longer you leave them there, the harder it will be to evict them in the end. Natural wisdom seems to suggest that the way you are towards your life is the way that your life will be towards you. To have an attitude which is compassionate and hopeful brings home to you the things you really need.

Old age is a time of second innocence. There is the first innocence when we are children; but that innocence is based on naïve trust and ignorance. The second innocence comes later in your life,

when you have lived deeply. You know the bleakness of life, you know its incredible capacity to disappoint and sometimes destroy. Yet, notwithstanding that realistic recognition of life's negative potential, you still maintain an outlook which is wholesome and hopeful and bright. That is a kind of second innocence. It is lovely to meet an old person whose face is deeply lined, a face that has been deeply inhabited, to look in the eyes and find light there. That light is innocent; it is not inexperienced, but rather is innocent in its trust in the good and the true and the beautiful. Such a gaze from an old face is a kind of blessing. You feel good and wholesome in that kind of company.

## THE BRIGHT FIELD




ONE OF THE MOST DESTRUCTIVE NEGATIVE attitudes towards one's past or towards one's memory is the attitude of regret. Often regret is very false and displaced, imagining the past to be totally other than it was. The phrase from Edith Piaf, '*Je ne regrette rien*', is wonderful in its free and wild acceptance.

I know a wild woman who has lived a very unprotected life. She has had a lot of trouble and things have often gone wrong for her. I remember that she said to me one time, 'I don't regret a bit of



it. It is my life, and in everything negative that happened to me, there was always something bright hidden.' She brought a lovely integrating perspective to her past, a way to retrieve treasures that were hidden in past difficulties. Sometimes difficulty is the greatest friend of the soul. There is a beautiful poem by the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas about looking back on life feeling, maybe, that you missed something or that you regret something that you did not do. It is called 'The Bright Field':

 *have seen the light break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl  
of great prize, the one field that had  
the treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying*

*on to a receding future nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush. To a brightness  
that seems as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

At the heart of R. S. Thomas's beautiful poem is a Celtic idea of time. Your time is not just past or future. Your time here always inhabits the circle of your soul. All your time is gathered and even your future time is waiting here for you. In a certain sense your past is not gone, but rather is hidden in your memory. Your time is the deeper seed of the eternity that is waiting to welcome you.

## THE PASSIONATE HEART NEVER AGES



OFTEN old people have a touching mellowness about them. Age is not dependent on chronological time. Age is more related to a person's temperament. I know some young people who are about eighteen or twenty, they are so serious, grave and gloomy that they sound like ninety-year-olds. Conversely, I know some very old people who have hearts full of roguery, devilment and fun; there is a sparkle in their presence. When you meet them, you have a sense of light, lightness and gaiety. Sometimes in very old bodies there are incredibly young, wild souls looking out at you. It is so invigorating to meet a wild old person who has remained faithful to their wild life force. Meister Eckhart said that too in a more formal way: there is a place in the soul that is eternal. He says time makes you old but that

there is a place in the soul which time cannot touch. It is a lovely thing to know this about your self. Even though time will inscribe your face, weaken your limbs and make your movements slower and, finally, empty your life, nevertheless there is still a place in your spirit that time can never get near. You are as young as you feel. If you begin to feel the warmth of your soul, there will be a youthfulness in you that no-one will ever be able to take away from you. Put more formally, this is a way of inhabiting the eternal side of your life. It would be sad on your one journey through life to miss out on this eternal presence around you and within you.

When a person is young there is a great intensity and sense of adventure. You want to do everything. You want it all and you want it now. Your young life is usually not a time for reflection. That is why Goethe said that youth is wasted on the young. You are going in all directions and you are not sure of your way. A neighbour of mine has a lot of difficulty with alcohol. The nearest pub is in the next town. If he wanted to get a ride to the pub he would have to go to the next village which lies in the opposite direction. My brother passed this man on the road one evening. He stopped the car to give him a ride. But he refused, saying, 'Even though I'm walking this way I'm going the other way.' Many people in


modern life are walking one way but their lives are going in the other direction. Old age offers the opportunity to integrate and bring together the multiplicity of directions that you have travelled. It is a time when you can bring the circle of your life together to where your longing can be awakened and new possibilities come alive for you.

## THE FIRE OF LONGING



MODERN SOCIETY IS BASED ON AN IDEOLOGY of strength and image. Consequently, old people are often sidelined. Modern culture is totally obsessed with externality, image, speed and change; it is driven. In former times, old people were seen as people of great wisdom. There was always reverence and respect for the elders. Old people still have the fires of longing burning brightly and beautifully within their hearts. Our idea of beauty is impoverished now because beauty is reduced to good looks. There is a whole cult of youthfulness where everyone is trying to look youthful; there are facelifts and endless methods of endeavouring to keep the image of youth. In actual fact, this is not beauty at all. Real beauty is a light that comes from the soul. Sometimes in an old face, you see that light coming from behind the lines; it is a vision of the most poignant beauty. That

passion and longing is beautifully expressed in Yeats' poem 'The Song of Wandering Aengus':

 *went out to the hazelwood,  
Because a fire was in my head,  
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,  
And hooked a berry to a thread.  
And when white moths were on the wing  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout.*

*When I had laid it on the floor  
I went to blow the fire aflame,  
But something rustled on the floor,  
And someone called me by my name.  
It had become a glimmering girl  
With apple blossom in her hair  
Who called me by my name and ran  
And faded through the brightening air.*

*Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,  
I will find out where she has gone,  
And kiss her lips and take her hands;  
And walk amongst dappled grass,  
And pluck till time and times are done  
The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun.*

## AGEING: AN INVITATION TO NEW solitude



he new solitude in your life can make the prospect of ageing frightening. A new quietness settles on the outer frame of your active life, on the work that you have done, the family that you have raised and the role that you have played. Your life takes on a greater stillness and solitude. These facts need not be frightening. If you view them creatively, your new stillness and solitude can be wonderful gifts and great resources for you. Time and again we miss out on the great treasures in our lives because we are so restless. In our minds we are always elsewhere. We are seldom in the place where we stand and in the time that is now. Many people are haunted by the past, things that they have not done, things that they should have done that they regret not doing. They are prisoners of their past. Other people are haunted by the future; they are anxious and worried about what is coming.

Few people are actually able to inhabit their present time because they are too stressed and rushed. One of the joys of ageing is that you have more time to be still. Pascal said that many of our major problems derive from our inability to sit still in a room. Stillness is vital to the world of the soul.

If, as you age you become more still, you will discover that stillness can be a great companion. The fragments of your life will have time to unify, the places where your soul shelter is wounded or broken will have time to knit and heal. You will be able to return to your self. In this stillness, you will engage your soul. Many people miss out on themselves completely as they journey through life. They know others, they know places, they know skills, they know their work, but tragically, they do not know themselves at all. Ageing can be a lovely time of ripening where you actually meet yourself, indeed maybe for the first time. There are beautiful lines by T. S. Eliot which say: 'And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And to know the place for the first time.'

## LONELINESS: THE KEY TO COURAGE



WHEN YOU ARE TOO FAMILIAR with who you are, you have become in fact a real stranger to your self. As you age, you will have more space to become acquainted with your self. This solitude can take the form of loneliness and as you age you can become very lonely. Loneliness is exceptionally difficult. A friend, who was living in Germany, told me of his battle with homesickness. He found the temperament, the

order, the structures and the externality of Germany very difficult. He had flu during the winter and the loneliness he had repressed came out to haunt him. He got desperately lonely; instead of avoiding it, he decided to allow the loneliness to have its way. He sat down in the armchair and gave himself permission to feel as lonely as he wanted. As soon as he gave that invitation to his soul, the loneliness just poured through him. He felt like the most abandoned orphan in the cosmos. He cried and cried. In a way, he was crying for all the loneliness in his life that he had kept hidden. Though this was painful, it was a wonderful experience for him. When he let the loneliness flow, let the dam burst within, something shifted in his relation to his own loneliness. He was never again lonely in Germany. He became free, once he had engaged and befriended the depth of his own loneliness. It became a natural part of his life. An old friend of mine in Connemara said one evening as we were talking about loneliness: *'Is pol dubh dóite é an t-uaigneas, ach má dhúnann tú súas é, dúnfaidh tú amach go leor eile atá go h-álainn chomh maith,'* i.e. loneliness is a black burnt hole, but if you close it up, you close out so much that can be so beautiful for you as well. There is no need for us to be afraid of that loneliness. If we engage it, it can bring us new freedom.



## WISDOM AS POISE AND GRACE



WISDOM IS ANOTHER QUALITY OF OLD AGE. In former societies the old people were called elders because it was recognized that having lived so long, they had harvested wisdom. Our culture is absolutely obsessed with information. There is more information now available in the world than ever before. We have so much knowledge about every possible thing. Yet there is a great difference between knowledge and wisdom. You can know many things, you can know a lot of facts about things, even facts about your self, yet it is the things that you realize that move deeply into you. Wisdom, then, is a deeper way of knowing. Wisdom is the art of living in rhythm with your soul, your life and the divine. Wisdom is the way that you learn to decipher the unknown; and the unknown is our closest companion. So wisdom is the art of being courageous and generous with the unknown, of being able to decipher and recognize its treasures. In Celtic culture, and in the old Irish Celtic world, there was immense respect for wisdom. Since the Celtic world was primarily a matriarchal society very many of these wise people were women. The Celts had a wonderful tradition of wisdom which subsequently continued into Irish monasticism. When Europe was going through the

Dark Ages it was the monks from Ireland who had preserved the memory of learning. They set up centres of learning all over Europe. The Irish monks recivilized Europe. That learning became the basis of the wonderful medieval scholasticism and its rich culture.

Traditionally in Ireland each region had its own wise person. In County Clare there was a wise woman called Biddy Early. In Galway there was a woman called Cailleach an Clochain, or the old woman of Clifden, who also had this wisdom. When people were confused in their lives, or worried about the future, they would often visit these wise figures. Through their counsel, people learned to engage their destiny anew; they learned to live more deeply and enjoy protection from imminent danger and destruction. Wisdom is often associated with the harvest time of life. That which is scattered has no unity, whereas that which is gathered comes home to unity and belonging. Wisdom, then, is the art of balancing the known with the unknown, the suffering with the joy; it is a way of linking the whole of life together in a new and deeper unity. Our society would be very well advised to attend to the wisdom of old people, to integrate them into the processes of decision making. The wisdom of the aged could be invaluable in helping us to articulate a vision for our future. Ultimately, wisdom and

vision are sisters; the creativity, critique and prophecy of vision issues from the fount of wisdom. Older people are great treasure houses of wisdom.

## Old age and the twilight treasures



Old age is also the twilight time of life. On the west coast of Ireland the light is really magical. Many artists come to work in this light. Twilight in the west of Ireland is a time of beautiful colours. It is as if the latent colours of the day which were lost under the whiteness of the light now have the courage to emerge; every colour has a great depth. The day bids us adieu in such a dignified and beautiful way. The day's farewell is expressed in twilight, in the magic of colour and beauty. The twilight makes the night welcome. It is as if the beautiful colours of twilight slip into the night and make the night habitable and bearable, a place where there is hidden light. Similarly in old age, the twilight time of life, many of the unnoticed treasures in your life can now become available and visible to you. Often it is only with the twilight perception that you can really glimpse the mysteries of your soul. When the neon light of analysis grasps at the soul, the soul rushes to conceal and hide itself. Twilight perception can be a threshold to invite the

shy soul to come closer to you in order to glimpse its beautiful lineaments of longing and possibility.

## OLD AGE AND FREEDOM



Old age can also be a time of clearance. All perception requires clearance. If things are too close to you, you cannot see them. Frequently, that is the reason we value so little the people who are really close to us. We are unable to step back and behold them with the sense of wonder, critique and appreciation they deserve. Nor do we behold ourselves either because we are too close to the rush of our lives. In old age, as your life calms, you will be able to make many clearances in order to see who you are, what life has done to you and what you have made of your life. Old age can be a time of releasing the many false burdens that you have dragged behind you through stony fields of years. Sometimes the greatest burdens humans carry are the burdens they make for themselves. People who put years into constructing a heavy burden for themselves often say, 'Sure it is my cross in life, God help me, I hope God will reward me for carrying it.' This is nonsense. God looks down and sees people carrying burdens they have invented and created themselves. God must think: 'How foolish they are to think that it has any-

thing to do with my destiny for them. It has more to do with their own negative use of the freedom and possibility that I give them.' False burdens can fall away in old age. One possible way to begin would be to ask yourself: what are the lonely burdens that you have carried? Some of them would definitely belong to you, but more of them you have just picked up and made for yourself. To begin to let them go is to lighten the pressure and weight on your life. You will then experience a lightness and a great inner freedom. Freedom can be one of the wonderful fruits of old age. You can undo the damage that you did to yourself early on in your life. This whole complex of possibility is summed up magnificently by the wonderful Mexican poet Octavio Paz in *Eagle or Sun*:

*With great difficulty advancing by millimetres each year, I carve a road out of the rock. For millenniums my teeth have wasted and my nails broken to get there, to the other side, to the light and the open air. And now that my hands bleed and my teeth tremble, unsure in a cavity cracked by thirst and dust, I pause and contemplate my work. I have spent the second part of my life breaking the stones, drilling the walls, smashing the doors, removing the obstacles I placed between the light and myself in the first part of my life.*

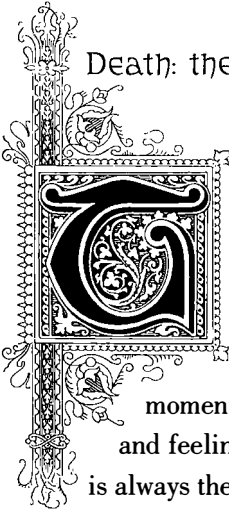
## A BLESSING FOR OLD AGE



*May the light of your soul mind you,  
May all of your worry and anxious-  
ness about becoming old be trans-  
figured,  
May you be given wisdom for the eye of your  
soul,  
to see this beautiful time of harvesting.  
May you have the commitment to harvest your  
life,  
to heal what has hurt you, to allow it to come  
closer to you and become one with you.  
May you have great dignity, may you have a  
sense of how free you are,  
and above all may you be given the wonderful  
gift of meeting the eternal light  
and beauty that is within you.  
May you be blessed, and may you find a  
wonderful love in your self for your self.*

## chapter 6

Death: the horizon is in the well



### THE UNKNOWN COMPANION

HERE is a PRESENCE who walks the road of life with you. This presence accompanies your every moment. It shadows your every thought and feeling. On your own, or with others, it is always there with you. When you were born, it came out of the womb with you; with the excitement at your arrival, nobody noticed it. Though this presence surrounds you, you may still be blind to its companionship. The name of this presence is death.

We are wrong to think that death comes only at the end of life. Your physical death is but the completion of a process on which your secret companion has been working since your birth. Your life

is the life of your body and soul, but the presence of your death enfolds both. How does death manifest itself to us in our day-to-day experience? Death meets us in and through different guises in the areas of our life where we are vulnerable, frail, hurting or negative. One of the faces of death is negativity. In every person there is some wound of negativity; this is like a blister on your life. You can be quite destructive towards yourself, even when times are good. Some people are having wonderful lives right now, but they do not actually realize it. Maybe, later on, when things become really difficult or desperate, a person will look back on these times and say, 'You know I was really happy then but sadly I never realized it.'

## THE FACES OF DEATH IN EVERYDAY LIFE



HERE is a gravity within that continually weighs on us and pulls us away from the light. Negativity is an addiction to the bleak shadow that lingers around every human form. Within a poetics of growth or spiritual life, the transfiguration of this negativity is one of our continuing tasks. This negativity is the force and face of your own death gnawing at your belonging in the world. It wants to make you a stranger in



your own life. This negativity holds you outside in exile from your own love and warmth. You can transfigure negativity by turning it towards the light of your soul. This soul light gradually takes the gravity, weight and hurt out of negativity. Eventually, what you call the negative side of your self can become the greatest force for renewal, creativity and growth within you. Each one of us has this task. It is a wise person who knows where their negativity lies and yet does not become addicted to it. There is a greater and more generous presence behind your negativity. In its transfiguration, you move into the light which is hidden in this larger presence. To continually transfigure the faces of your own death ensures that at the end of your life your physical death will be no stranger, robbing you against your will of the life that you have had; you will know its face intimately. Since you have overcome your fear, your death will be a meeting with a lifelong friend from the deepest side of your own nature.

Another face of death, another way it expresses itself in our daily experience, is through fear. There is no soul without the shadow of fear. It is a courageous person who is able to identify his fears and work with them as forces for creativity and growth. There are different levels of fear within each of us. One of the most powerful aspects of fear is its uncanny ability to falsify what is real in your

life. There is no force I know that can so quickly destroy the happiness and tranquillity of life.

There are different levels of fear. Many people are terrified of letting go and use control as a mechanism to order and structure their lives. They like to be in control of what is happening around them and to them. But too much control is destructive. You become trapped in the protective programme that you weave around your life. This can put you outside many of the blessings destined for you. Control must always remain partial and temporary. At times of pain, and particularly at the time of your death, you may not be able to maintain this control. The mystical life has always recognized that to come deeper into the divine presence within, you need to practise detachment. When you begin to let go, it is amazing how enriched your life becomes. False things, which you have desperately held on to, move away very quickly from you. Then what is real, what you love deeply, and what really belongs to you, comes deeper into you. Now no-one can ever take them away from you.

## Death as the root of fear



Other people are afraid of being themselves. They play a continual game, fashioning a careful persona which they

think the world will accept or admire. Even when they are in their solitude they remain afraid of meeting themselves. One of the most sacred duties of one's destiny is the duty to be yourself. When you come to accept yourself and like yourself, you learn not to be afraid of your own nature. At that moment you come into rhythm with your soul and then you are on your own ground. You are sure and poised. You are balanced. It is so futile to weary your life with the politics of fashioning a persona in order to meet the expectations of other people. Life is very short and we have a special destiny waiting to unfold for us. Sometimes through our fear of being ourselves, we sidestep that destiny and end up hungry and impoverished in a famine of our own making.

The best story I know about the presence of fear is an old story from India about a man condemned to spend the night in a cell with a poisonous snake. If he made the slightest movement, the snake would kill him. All night the man stood petrified in the corner of the cell, afraid even to breathe for fear of alerting the snake. As the first light of dawn reached into the cell, he could make out the shape of the snake in the other corner. He was deeply relieved not to have alerted it. Then, as the light of dawn increased further and it became really bright, he saw that it was not a snake but an old rope lying

in the corner of the cell. The moral of the story suggests that if there are harmless things, like that old rope, lying around in many of the rooms of our minds, then our anxiousness works on them until we convert them into monsters which hold us imprisoned and petrified in small rooms in our lives.

One of the ways of transfiguring the power and presence of your death is to transfigure your fear. I find it very helpful when I am anxious or afraid to ask myself of what am I really afraid? This is a liberating question. Fear is like fog; it spreads everywhere and falsifies the shape of everything. When you pin it down to that one question, it shrinks back to a proportion that you are able to engage. When you know what is frightening you, you take back the power you had invested in fear. This also separates your fear from the night of the unknown, out of which every fear lives. Fear multiplies in anonymity, it shuns the name. When you can name your fear, your fear begins to shrink.

All fear is rooted in the fear of death. There is a time or phase in every life when you are really terrified of dying. We live in time and time is notoriously contingent. No-one can say with certainty what is going to happen to us tonight, tomorrow or next week. Time can bring anything to the door of your life. One of the terrifying aspects of life is this

unpredictability. Anything can happen to you. Now, as you are reading this, there are people all over the world who are being savagely visited by the unexpected. Things are now happening to them which will utterly disturb their lives for ever. Their nest of belonging is broken, their lives will never be the same again. Someone in a doctor's surgery is receiving bad news; someone in a road accident will never walk again; someone's lover is leaving, never to return. When we look into the future of our lives, we cannot predict what will happen. We can be sure of nothing. Yet there is one fact that is certain, namely, that a time will come, a morning, an evening or a night, when you will be called to make the journey out of this world, when you will have to die. Though that fact is certain, the nature of the fact remains completely contingent. In other words you do not know where you will die, how you will die, when you will die or who will be there or how you will feel. These facts about the nature of your death, the most decisive event in your life, remain completely opaque.

Though death is the most powerful and ultimate experience in one's life, our culture goes to great pains to deny its presence. In a certain sense, the whole world of media, image and advertising are trying to cultivate a cult of immortality; consequently, the rhythm of death in life is rarely

acknowledged. As Emmanuel Levinas puts it, 'My death comes from an instant upon which I can in no way exercise my power. I do not run up against an obstacle which at last I touch in that collision, which, in surmounting or in enduring it, I integrate into my life, suspending its otherness. Death is a menace that approaches me as mystery; its secrecy determines it – it approaches without being able to be assumed, such that the time that separates me from any death dwindles and dwindles without end, involves a sort of last interval which my consciousness cannot traverse, and where a leap will somehow be produced from death to me. The last part of the route will be crossed without me; the time of death flows upstream . . .'

## Death in the Celtic tradition



he Celtic tradition had a refined sense of the miracle of death. There are some beautiful prayers about death in Celtic spirituality. For the Celts, the eternal world was so close to the natural world that death was not seen as a terribly destructive or threatening event. When you enter the eternal world, you are going home to where no shadow, pain or darkness can ever touch you again. There is a lovely Celtic prayer on this theme:



*I am going home with thee, to thy home,  
to thy home,*

*I am going home with thee, to thy home  
of winter.*

*I am going home with thee, to thy home, to thy  
home,*

*I am going home with thee, to thy home of  
autumn of spring and of summer.*

*I am going home with thee, thy child of my love  
to thy eternal bed to thy perpetual sleep.*

(trans. A. Carmichael)

In that prayer the whole world of nature and the seasons are linked up beautifully with the presence of the eternal life.

In Connemara the people say: ‘*Ní thuigfidh tú an bás go dtiocfaidh sé ag do dhorás féin,*’ i.e. you will never understand death until it comes to your own door. Other phrases they have are: ‘*Is fear direach é an bás, ní chuireann sé scéal ar bith roimhe,*’ i.e. death is a very direct individual who sends no story before him. Another phrase is, ‘*Ní féidir dul i bhfolach ar an mbás,*’ i.e. there is no place to hide from death. This means that when death is searching for you, it will always know where to find you.

## WHEN DEATH VISITS . . .



Death is a LONELY visitor. After it visits your home, nothing is ever the same again. There is an empty place at the table; there is an absence in the house. When someone close to you dies, it is an incredibly strange and desolate experience. Something breaks within you then, which will never come together again. Gone is the person whom you loved, whose face and hands and body you knew so well. This body, for the first time, is completely empty. This is very frightening and strange. After the death many questions come into your mind concerning where the person has gone, what they see and feel now. The death of a loved one is bitterly lonely. When you really love someone, you would be willing to die in their place. Yet no-one can take another's place when that time comes. Each one of us has to go alone. It is so strange that when someone dies, they literally disappear.

Human experience includes all kinds of continuity and discontinuity, closeness and distance. In death, experience reaches the ultimate frontier. The deceased literally falls out of the visible world of form and presence. At birth you appear out of nowhere, at death you disappear to nowhere. If you have a row with someone you love and she goes



away, if you desperately need to meet again, regardless of the distance, you can travel to where she is to find her. The terrible moment of loneliness in grief comes when you realize that you will never see the deceased again. The absence of their life, the absence of their voice, face and presence become something that, as Sylvia Plath says, begins to grow beside you like a tree.

## THE CAOINEADH: THE IRISH MOURNING TRADITION




ONE OF THE lovely things about the Irish tradition is its great hospitality to death. When someone in the village dies, everyone goes to the funeral. First everyone comes to the house to sympathize. All the neighbours gather around to support the family and to help them. It is a lovely gift. When you are really desperate and lonely, you need neighbours to help you, support you and bring you through that broken time. In Ireland there was a tradition known as the '*caoineadh*'. These were people, women mainly, who came in and keened the deceased. It was a kind of a high-pitched wailing cry full of incredible loneliness. The narrative of the *caoineadh* was actually the history of the person's life as these women had known him. A sad liturgy, beautifully

woven of narrative was gradually put into the place of the person's new absence from the world. The *caoineadh* gathered all the key events of his life. It was certainly heartbreakingly lonely, but it made a hospitable, ritual space for the mourning and sadness of the bereaved family. The *caoineadh* helped people to let the emotion of loneliness and grief flow in a natural way.

We have a tradition in Ireland known as the wake. This ensures that the person who has died is not left on their own the night after death. Neighbours, family members and friends accompany the body through the early hours of its eternal change. Some drinks and tobacco are usually provided. Again, the conversation of the friends weaves a narrative of remembrance from the different elements of that person's life.

## The soul that kissed the body

 It takes a good while to really die. For some people it can be quick, yet the way the soul leaves the body is different for each individual. For some people it may take a couple of days before the final withdrawal of the soul is completed. There is a lovely anecdote from the Munster region, about a man who had died. As the soul left the body, it went to the door of the

house to begin its journey back to the eternal place. But the soul looked back at the now empty body and lingered at the door. Then, it went back and kissed the body and talked to it. The soul thanked the body for being such a hospitable place for its life journey and remembered the kindnesses the body had shown it during life.

In the Celtic tradition there is a great sense that the dead do not live far away. In Ireland there are always places, fields and old ruins where the ghosts of people were seen. That kind of folk memory recognizes that people who have lived in a place, even when they move to invisible form, somehow still remain attached to that place. There is also the tradition known as the '*coiste bodhar*' or the deaf coach. Living in a little village on the side of the mountain, my aunt as a young woman heard that coach late one night. This was a small village of houses all close together. She was at home on her own, and she heard what sounded like barrels crashing against each other. This fairy coach came right down along the street beside her house and continued along a mountain path. All the dogs in the village heard the noise and followed the coach. The story suggests that the invisible world has secret pathways where funerals travel.

## The Bean Si



IN the Irish tradition, there is also a very interesting figure called the '*Bean Si*'. *Si* is another word for fairies and *Bean Si* is the word for fairy woman. This is a spirit who cries for someone who is about to die. My father heard her crying one evening. Two days later a neighbour from a family for whom the *Bean Si* always cried died. In this, the Celtic Irish tradition recognizes that the eternal and the transient world are woven in and through each other. Very often at death, the inhabitants of the eternal world come out towards the visible world. It can take a person days or hours to die and then often preceding the moment of death that person might see their deceased mother, grandmother, grandfather or some relation, husband, wife or friend. When a person is close to death, the veil between this world and the eternal world is very thin. In some cases, the veil is actually removed for a moment, so that you can indeed be given a glimpse into the eternal world. Your friends, who now live in the eternal world, come to meet you, to bring you home. Usually, for people who are dying, to see their own friends gives them great strength, support and encouragement. This elevated perception shows the incredible energy that surrounds the moment of

death. The Irish tradition shows great hospitality to the possibilities of this moment. When a person dies, holy water is sprinkled in a circle around the person. This helps to keep dark forces away and to keep the presence of light with the newly dead as they go on their final journey.

Sometimes people are very worried about dying. There is no need to be afraid. When the moment of your dying comes, you will be given everything that you need to make that journey in a graceful, elegant and trusting way.

## A beautiful death



was ONCE PRESENT at the deathbed of a friend. She was a lovely young woman, a mother of two children. The priest who helped her to die was also a friend. He knew her soul and spirit. As it became apparent that she would die that night, she became frightened. He took her hand and prayed hard into his own heart, asking to receive the words to make a little bridge for her journey. He knew her life very deeply so he began to unfold her memories. He told her of her goodness, beauty and kindness. She was a woman who had never harmed anyone. She always helped everyone. He recalled the key events of her life. He told her there was no need for her to be afraid. She

was going home and there would be a welcome for her there. God, who had sent her here, would welcome her and embrace her and take her so gently and lovingly home. Of this she could be completely assured. Gradually, an incredible serenity and calmness came over her. All of her panic was transfigured into a serenity that I have rarely met in this world. All her anxiousness, worry and fear had completely vanished. Now she was totally in rhythm with herself, attuned and completely tranquil. He told her that she had to do the most difficult thing in her life. She had to say farewell to each member of her family. This was extremely lonely and difficult.

He went out and gathered her family. He told them that each of them could go in for five or ten minutes. They were to go in and talk to her, tell her how much they loved her and to tell her what she meant to them. They were not to cry or burden her. They could cry afterwards, but now they were to concentrate completely on making her journey easy. Each one of them went in and talked to her, consoled her and blessed her. Each of them came out shattered, but they had brought her the gifts of acknowledgement, recognition and love; beautiful gifts to help her on her journey. She herself was wonderful. Then he went to her, he anointed her with the holy oil and we all said the prayers

together. Smiling and serene, she went absolutely happily and beautifully on the journey that she had to make alone. It was a great privilege for me to be there. For the first time my own fear of death was transfigured. It showed me that if you live in this world with kindness, if you do not add to other people's burdens, but if you try to serve love, when the time comes for you to make the journey, you will receive a serenity, peace and a welcoming freedom that will enable you to go to the other world with great elegance, grace and acceptance.

It is an incredible privilege to be with someone who is making this journey into the eternal world. When you are present at the sacrament of someone's death, you should be very mindful of their situation. In other words, you should not concentrate so much on your own grief. You should rather strive to be fully present to, with and for the person who is going on the journey. Everything should be done to completely facilitate the dying person, and to make the transition as easy and as comfortable as possible.

I love the Irish tradition of the wake. Its ritual affords the soul plenty of time to take its leave. The soul does not leave the body abruptly; this is a slow leave-taking. You will notice how the body changes in its first stages of death. The person does not really leave life for a while. It is very important not

to leave the dead person on his own. Funeral homes are cold, clinical places. If at all possible, when the person dies, they should be left in their familiar surroundings so that they can make this deeper transition in a comfortable, easy and secure way. The first few weeks after a person dies, that person's soul and memory should be minded and protected. One should say many prayers for him or her to help on the journey home. Death is a threshold into the unknown and a person needs much shelter as he or she goes on that journey.

Death is pushed to the margins in modern life. There is much drama about the funeral, but this often remains external and superficial. Our consumerist society has lost the sense of ritual and wisdom necessary to acknowledge this rite of passage. The person who has entered the voyage of death needs more in-depth care.

## THE DEAD ARE OUR NEAREST NEIGHBOURS



he dead are not far away, they are very, very near us. Each one of us some day will have to face our own appointment with death. I like to think of this as an encounter with your deepest nature and most hidden self. It is a journey towards a new horizon.



As a child when I looked up at the mountain, I used to dream of the day that I would be old enough to go with my uncle to the summit. I thought that I would be able to see the whole world from the horizon. I remember that I was very excited when the day finally came. My uncle was bringing sheep over the mountain, and he told me that I could come with him. As we climbed up the mountain and came to where I thought the horizon would be, it had disappeared. Not only was I not able to see everything when I got there, but another horizon was waiting, further on. I was disappointed, but also excited in an unfamiliar way. Each new level revealed a new world. Hans-Georg Gadamer, a wonderful German philosopher, has a lovely concept of the horizon as something towards which we journey, but also something that journeys along with us. This is an illuminating metaphor for understanding the different horizons of your own growth. If you are striving to be equal to your destiny and worthy of the possibilities that sleep in the clay of your heart, then you should be regularly reaching new horizons. Against this perspective, death can be understood as the final horizon. Beyond there, the deepest well of your identity awaits you. In that well, you will behold the beauty and light of your eternal face.

## THE EGO AND THE SOUL



IN OUR STRUGGLE with the silent and secret companion, death, the crucial battle is the one between the ego and the soul. The ego is the defensive shell we pull around our lives. It is afraid; it is threatened and grasping. It acts in an overly protective way and is very competitive. The soul, on the other hand, has no barriers. As Heraclitus, the great Greek philosopher said 'The soul has no limits.' The soul is a pilgrim journeying towards endless horizons. There are no exclusion areas; the soul suffuses everything. Furthermore, the soul is in touch with the eternal dimension of time and is never afraid of what is yet to come. In a certain sense, the meeting with your own death in the daily forms of failure, pathos, negativity, fear or destructiveness are actual opportunities to transfigure your ego. These are invitations to move out of that protective, controlling way of being towards an art of being which allows openness and hospitality. To practise this art of being is to come into your soul rhythm. If you come into your soul rhythm, then the final meeting with your physical death need not be threatening or destructive. That final meeting will be the encounter with your own deepest identity, namely, your soul.

Physical death, then, is not about the approach of a dark destructive monster that cuts off your life and drags you away to an unknown place. Masquerading behind the face of your physical death is the image and presence of your deepest self, waiting to meet and embrace you. Deep down, you hunger to meet your soul. All during the course of our lives we struggle to catch up with ourselves. We are so taken up, so busy and distracted, that we cannot dedicate enough time or recognition to the depths within us. We endeavour to see ourselves and meet ourselves; yet there is such complexity in us and so many layers to the human heart that we rarely ever encounter ourselves. The philosopher Husserl is very good on this subject. He talks about the *Ur-Präsenz*, the primal presence of a thing, an object or a person. In our day-to-day experience, we can only glimpse the fullness of presence that is in us; we can never meet our own presence face to face. At our death, all the defensive barriers that separate and exclude us from our presence fall away; the full embrace of the soul gathers around us. For that reason, death need not be a negative or destructive event. Your death can be a wonderfully creative event opening you up to embrace the divine that always lived secretly inside you.

## Death as an invitation to freedom

**W**HEN you think about it, you should not let yourself be pressurized by life. You should never give away your power to a system or to other people. You should hold the poise, balance and power of your soul within yourself. If no-one can keep death away from you then no-one has ultimate power. All power is pretension. No-one avoids death. Therefore, the world should never persuade you of its power over you, since it has no power whatever to keep death away from you. Yet it is within your own power to transfigure your fear of death. If you learn not to be afraid of your death, then you realize you do not need to fear anything else either.

A glimpse at the face of your death can bring immense freedom to your life. It can make you aware of the urgency of the time you have here. The waste of time is one of the greatest areas of loss in life. So many people are, as Patrick Kavanagh put it, preparing for life rather than living it. You only get one chance. You have one journey through life; you cannot repeat even one moment or retrace one footstep. It seems that we are meant to inhabit and live everything that comes towards us. In the underside of life there is the presence of our death. If you

really live your life to the full, death will never have power over you. It will never seem like a destructive, negative event. It can become, for you, the moment of release into the deepest treasures of your own nature, your full entry into the temple of your soul. If you are able to let go of things, you learn to die spiritually in little ways during your life. When you learn to let go of things, a greater generosity, openness and breath comes into your life. Imagine that multiplied a thousand times at the moment of your death. That release can bring you to a completely new divine belonging.

## Nothingness: a face of death



EVERYTHING that we do in the world is bordered on by nothingness. This nothingness is one of the ways that death appears to us; it is one of the faces of death. The life of the soul is about the transfiguration of nothingness. In a certain sense, nothing new can emerge if there is not a space for it. That empty space is the space that we called nothingness. R. D. Laing, the wonderful Scottish psychiatrist, used to say, 'There is nothing to be afraid of.' This means that there is no need to be afraid of anything but also that there is nothing there to be afraid of, namely, that the nothingness is everywhere, all around us. Because we shrink from

this terrain, emptiness and nothingness are undervalued. From a spiritual perspective, they can be recognized as modes of presence of the eternal. The eternal comes to us mainly in terms of nothingness and emptiness. Where there is no space, the eternal cannot visit. Where there is no space, the soul cannot awaken. This is summed up beautifully in a wonderful poem by the Scottish poet Norman MacCaig:

## PRESENTS



*give you an emptiness,  
I give you a plenitude,  
unwrap them carefully –  
one's as fragile as the other –  
and when you thank me  
I'll pretend not to notice the doubt in your voice  
when you say they're just what you wanted.*

*Put them on the table by your bed.  
When you wake in the morning  
they'll have gone through the door of sleep  
into your head. Wherever you go  
they'll go with you and  
wherever you are you'll wonder,  
smiling about the fullness  
you can't add to and the emptiness  
that you can fill.*

This beautiful poem suggests the dual rhythm of emptiness and plenitude at the heart of the life of the soul. Nothingness is the sister of possibility. It makes an urgent space for that which is new, surprising and unexpected. When you feel nothingness and emptiness gnawing at your life, there is no need to despair. This is a call from your soul, awakening your life to new possibilities. It is also a sign that your soul longs to transfigure the nothingness of your death into the fullness of a life eternal, which no death can ever touch.

Death is not the end; it is a rebirth. Our presence in the world is so poignant. The little band of brightness that we call our life is poised between the darkness of two unknowns. There is the darkness of the unknown at our origin. We suddenly emerged from this unknown, and the band of brightness called life began. Then, there is the darkness at the end when we disappear again back into the unknown. Samuel Beckett is a wonderful writer who meditated deeply on the mystery of death. His little play *Breath* is only a few minutes long. First there is the birth cry, then a little breathing and finally the sigh of death. This drama synthesizes what happens in our lives. All of Beckett's work, especially *Waiting for Godot*, is about death. In other words, because death exists, time is radically relativized. All we do here is invent games to pass the time.

## Waiting and absence



FRIEND OF MINE WAS TELLING ME a story about a neighbour. The local school was going into town to see *Waiting for Godot*. This man took a ride on their bus. He intended to meet some of his drinking colleagues in town. He travelled in with the school to the theatre and went immediately to the two or three pubs where he thought his friends would be, but they were not there. Since he had no money, he ended up having to watch *Waiting for Godot*. He was describing the experience to my friend: 'It was the strangest play I ever saw in my life; seemingly the fellow who was to play the main part never turned up, and the actors were forced to improvise all night.'

I thought that it was a good analysis of *Waiting for Godot*. I think it was the kind of review with which Samuel Beckett himself would have been very pleased. In a certain sense, we are always waiting for the great moment of gathering or belonging and it always evades us. We are haunted with a deep sense of absence. There is something missing from our lives. We always expect it to be filled by a definite person, object, or project. We are desperate to fill this emptiness, but the soul tells us, if we listen to it, that this absence can never be filled.

Death is the great wound in the universe and the great wound in each life. Yet, ironically, this is the



very wound that can lead to new spiritual growth. Thinking of your death can help you to radically alter your fixed and habitual perception. Instead of living merely according to the visible or possessible within the material realm of life, you begin to refine your sensibility and become aware of the treasures that are hidden in the invisible side of your life. A person who is really spiritual has developed a sense of the depth of his own invisible nature. Your invisible nature holds qualities and treasures that time can never damage. They belong absolutely to you. You do not need to grasp them, earn them or protect them. These treasures are yours; no-one else can ever take them from you.

### Birth as death



IMAGINE if you could talk to a baby in the womb and explain its unity with the mother. How this cord of belonging gives it life. If you could then tell the baby that this was about to end. It was going to be expelled from the womb, pushed through a very narrow passage finally to be dropped out into vacant, open light. The cord which held it to this mother-womb was going to be cut and that it was going to be on its own for ever more. If the baby could talk back, it would fear that it was going to die. For the baby within the

womb being born would seem like death. Our difficulty with these great questions is that we are only able to see them from one side. In other words, we can only see death from one side. No-one has had the experience. Those who have died stay away; they do not return. Therefore, we cannot actually see the other half of the circle which death opens. Wittgenstein summed it up very nicely with the idea that death is not an experience in one's life. It cannot be an experience because it is the end of the life in which and through which all experience came to you.

I like to imagine that death is about rebirth. The soul is now free in a new world where there is no more separation or shadow or tears. A friend of mine lost a son of twenty-six years of age. I was at the funeral. Her other children were all there as the coffin was lowered into the grave. A terrible wail of sadness rose up from the brothers and sisters. She put her arms around them and said: *'Ná bigí ag caoineadh, níl tada dhó thíos ansin ach amháin an clúdach a bhí air,'* which translates as, let ye not be crying because there is nothing of him down there, only the covering that was on him in this life. It is a lovely thought, a recognition that the body was merely a covering and the soul is now freed for the eternal.

## Death transfigures our separation



**I**N CONNEMARA the graveyards are near the ocean, where there is a lot of sandy soil. To open the grave the sod is cut on three sides. It is rolled back very carefully from the surface of the field, but it is not broken off. Then the coffin is put down. The prayers are said and the grave is blessed and filled. Then the sod is rolled out over the grave so that it fits exactly over the opening. A friend of mine calls it a 'Caesarean section in reverse'. It is as if the womb of the earth, without being broken, is receiving back the individual who once left as a clay shape to live in separation above in the world. It is an image of homecoming, of being taken back completely again.

It is a strange and magical fact to be here, walking around in a body, to have a whole world within you and a world at your fingertips outside you. It is an immense privilege and it is incredible that humans manage to forget the miracle of being here. Rilke said: 'Being here is so much.' It is uncanny how social reality can deaden and numb us so that the mystical wonder of our lives goes totally unnoticed. We are here. We are wildly and dangerously free. The more lonely side of being here is our separation in the world. When you live in a body

you are separate from every other object and person. Many of our attempts to pray, to love and to create are secret attempts at transfiguring that separation in order to build bridges outwards so that others can reach us and we can reach them. At death this physical separation is broken. The soul is released from its particular and exclusive location in this body. The soul then comes into a free and fluent universe of spiritual belonging.

## ARE SPACE AND TIME DIFFERENT IN THE ETERNAL WORLD?



SPACE AND TIME ARE THE FOUNDATION of human identity and perception. We never have a perception that does not have each of these elements in it. The element of space means that we are always in a state of separation. I am here. You are there. Even the person that you are closest to, the one you love, is still a separate world from you. That is the poignancy of love. Two people become so close that they really want to become one; but their separate spaces keep the distance between them. In space we are always separated. The other component of perception and identity is time. Time always separates us too. Time is primarily linear, disjointed and fragmented. All of your past days have disappeared; they have vanished.

The future has not come to you yet. All you have is the little stepping-stone of the present moment.

When the soul leaves the body, it is no longer under the burden and control of space and time. The soul is free; distance and separation hinder it no more. The dead are our nearest neighbours; they are all around us. Meister Eckhart was once asked, where does the soul of a person go when the person dies? He said, no place. Where else would the soul be going? Where else is the eternal world? It can be nowhere other than here. We have falsely spatialized the eternal world. We have driven the eternal out into some kind of distant galaxy. Yet the eternal world does not seem to be a place but rather a different state of being. The soul of the person goes no place because there is no place else to go. This suggests that the dead are here with us, in the air that we are moving through all the time. The only difference between us and the dead is that they are now in an invisible form. You cannot see them with the human eye. But you can sense the presence of those you love who have died. With the refinement of your soul, you can sense them. You feel that they are near.

My father used to tell us a story about a neighbour who was very friendly with the local priest. There is a whole mythology in Ireland about Druids and priests having special power. But this man and

the priest used to go for long walks. One day the man said to the priest, where are the dead? The priest told him not to ask him questions like that. But the man persisted and finally, the priest said, 'I will show you; but you are never to tell anyone.' Needless to say, the man did not keep his word. The priest raised his right hand; the man looked out under the raised right hand, and saw the souls of the departed everywhere all around as thick as the dew on blades of grass. Often our loneliness and isolation is due to a failure of spiritual imagination. We forget that there is no such thing as empty space. All space is full of presence, particularly the presence of those who are now in eternal, invisible form.

For those who have died, the world of time is also different. Here we are caught in linear time. We have forgotten the past; it is lost to us. We cannot know the future. Time must be totally different for the dead because they live now within a circle of eternity. Earlier we talked about landscape and how the Irish landscape resisted linearity. How the Celtic mind never liked the line but always loved the shape of the circle. Within the circle, beginning and ending are sisters and they belong within the shelter of the unity of the year and the earth, which the eternal offers. I imagine that in the eternal world time has become the circle of eternity.

Maybe, when a person goes into that world, he can look back at what we call past time here. He may also see all of future time. For the dead present time is total presence. This suggests that our friends amongst the dead know us better than they can ever have known us in life. They know everything about us, even things that may disappoint them. But since they are now transfigured their understanding and compassion is proportionate to everything they come to know about us.

## THE DEAD BLESS US



feel that our friends amongst the dead really mind us and look out for us. Often there might be a big boulder of misery over your path about to fall on you, but your friends amongst the dead hold it back until you have passed by. One of the exciting developments that may happen in evolution and in human consciousness in the next several hundred years is a whole new relationship with the invisible, eternal world. We might begin to link up in a very creative way with our friends in the invisible world. We do not need to grieve for the dead. Why should we grieve for them? They are now in a place where there is no more shadow, darkness, loneliness, isolation or pain. They are home. They are with God

from whom they came. They have returned to the nest of their identity within the great circle of God. God is the greatest circle of all, the largest embrace in the universe which holds visible and invisible, temporal and eternal as one.

There are lovely stories in the Irish tradition of a person dying and then meeting all their old friends. This is expressed powerfully in a wonderful novel by Mairtin Ó'Cadhain called *Cré na Cille*. This is about life in a graveyard and all that happens between the people buried there. In the eternal world, all is one. In spiritual space there is no distance. In eternal time there is no segmentation into today, yesterday or tomorrow. In eternal time all is now; time is presence. I believe that this is what eternal life means: it is a life where all that we seek, goodness, unity, beauty, truth and love, are no longer distant from us but are now completely present with us. There is a lovely poem by R. S. Thomas on the notion of eternity. It is deliberately minimal in form but very powerful:





*think that maybe  
I will be a little surer  
of being a little nearer.*

*That's all. Eternity  
is in the understanding  
that that little is more than enough.*

Kahlil Gibran articulates how the unity in friendship, that we call the *anam cara*, overcomes even death: 'You were born together, and together you shall be for evermore. You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days. Aye, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God.' I would like to end this chapter with a lovely prayer poem from thirteenth-century Persia.



*Some nights stay up till dawn as the  
moon sometimes does for the sun.  
Be a full bucket, pulled up the dark  
way of a well then lifted out into light.  
Something opens our wings, something makes  
boredom and hurt disappear.  
Someone fills the cup in front of us, we taste  
only sacredness.*

(trans. R. Bly)

## A blessing for death



*pray that you will have the blessing of being consoled and sure about your own death.*

*May you know in your soul that there is no need to be afraid.*

*When your time comes, may you be given every blessing and shelter that you need.*

*May there be a beautiful welcome for you in the home that you are going to.*

*You are not going somewhere strange. You are going back to the home that you never left.*

*May you have a wonderful urgency to live your life to the full.*

*May you live compassionately and creatively and transfigure everything that is negative within you and about you.*

*When you come to die may it be after a long life.*

*May you be peaceful and happy and in the presence of those who really care for you.*

*May your going be sheltered and your welcome assured.*

*May your soul smile in the embrace of your anam cara.*

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