

THRESHOLDS AND INTIMACY

An address given on 16th April 2008 as part of a tribute to the memory of John O'Donohue, Irish poet, philosopher, priest and writer: London Centre for Spirituality.

“In the Western tradition the idea of the sinfulness and selfishness of the self has trapped many people all their lives in a false inner civil war. Fearful of valuing themselves in any way, they have shunned their own light and mystery.” So wrote John O'Donohue in 'Eternal Echoes' of which the subtitle, you may remember, is 'Exploring our Hunger to Belong'. The dedication of that remarkable book is: 'For the ones who inhabit lives where belonging is torn and longing is numbed.'

Perhaps of all the yearnings which human-beings experience – that is, if they dare to – none is greater than the longing for intimacy. And yet that which is so greatly desired is also often greatly feared. The torn belonging of which John speaks in his dedication may point to indescribable pain when the longed-for intimacy has been withheld or, even more dreadfully, offered and then cruelly withdrawn. It is a dangerous thing to desire intimacy for it demands a preparedness to be vulnerable and a willingness to open up the inner rooms of one's being and to permit entry to another. What is more the journey is in two directions: it takes boldness to risk entering the inner rooms of another person's being for they may slam the door in your face or, even more frightening, having permitted your entry, they may lock the door behind you and hold you prisoner. No wonder that many of us spend much of our lives trembling on the threshold of intimacy, scared to take the step that can lead to bliss because it may elicit profound rejection or re-trigger the excruciating pain of a previous wounding or the suffocating misery of imprisonment in another's possessiveness.

For the person who, in John's words, has shunned his or her own light and mystery, intimacy is no longer a possibility at all for the doors to all the inner rooms are locked, the house is in darkness and there is no place where a guest can be received. John's somewhat sinister suggestion is that the Western tradition, as he called it, has trapped many people into believing that they are not worth visiting any way because they have nothing of value to offer. Their inner world is a battle ground where raging armies clash in the darkness and the doors are barred against invaders for their own protection. For me as a psychotherapist for nearly 40 years this grim picture has about it an all too ominous air of reality. What is perhaps

astonishing is that in our so-called post-Christian age the vicious assaults of a pernicious theology are still so powerfully at work in the psyches of many contemporary men and women. It is perhaps not surprising that the client sitting before me feels worthless. She has been rejected since birth, it would seem, she has been abused, she has been deemed a failure at school and she is currently unemployed. But her sense of worthlessness goes deeper than even these dire life experiences inevitably engender. Constantly, it seems, she has been told that she is stupid, lazy, ugly, ungrateful, selfish, wicked, a waste of space, a mistake, a blot on the landscape. Where do all these terrible judgements come from? What is it that puts these death-dealing utterances on people's lips so that they crush the life out of a young person's being almost as surely as a brick could crush her skull? Could it be that this is what her bullying accusers really believe about themselves? Is there still somewhere stirring in the collective unconscious of much of Western humanity the frenzied denunciations of fanatical preachers of by-gone ages or even the measured tones of scholarly theologians: "You are vile sinners, worms and no men, perverse daughters of Eve, crucifiers of Christ, worthy of God's wrath and indignation"? I am inclined to think so and for those who seek to resist such utter condemnation there comes a second wave of threatening injunctions: 'Do not inflate yourself. Do not forget that pride is a mortal sin. Do you not know the meaning of humility? How dare you be so monstrously arrogant.' Is it surprising, then, that in the face of such a barrage from life and the unconscious forces of a demonic theology, many 21st century men and women who never darken the door of a church are, in John's words, 'fearful of valuing themselves in any way' and 'have shunned their own light and mystery'. It is perhaps more surprising that they are still alive at all.

The young woman in front of me is clearly not ugly. In fact, she is, to my eyes, rather beautiful. If she is stupid, lazy, ungrateful, selfish and wicked, I have yet to see the evidence. Why has she come again? I do not know and I am not minded to ask. It is enough that she is here. I try to put her at ease but she seems uncontrollably restless and anxious as she has been ever since we first met. Then something happens: she begins to weep. We have reached a threshold. The gift of tears heralds a new possibility but if the threshold is to be crossed we must both somehow find the courage to proceed. For her there is the risk of relinquishing control, of embracing her vulnerability not knowing where it will take her. It means accepting her own mystery. For me there is the fear of behaving clumsily, of having my love misunderstood, of being altogether rejected, of being confused with an abuser whose

semblance of love is but a mode of seduction. Somehow we manage it and through her tears she, for a second, glimpses the light within her. For me that light holds steady: from now on I can be the witness of what she can only intermittently dare to believe she has glimpsed within the dark recesses of her inner world.

It may be difficult to believe that an ageing professor who writes books and a young unemployed woman from a Norwich housing estate belong together. John O'Donohue would have had no difficulty in believing that. In his last book 'Benedictus' he wrote of the real pastures where experience will lead us if we can trust it. "There is within each heart," he wrote, "A hidden voice that calls out for freedom and creativity. We often linger for years in spaces that are too small and shabby for the grandeur of our spirit. Yet experience always remains faithful to us. If lived truthfully and generously, it will always guide us towards the real pastures." In his address last year at Greenbelt he said with passion: 'Be who you are. Live the life your heart wants'. Such a difficult command and yet it somehow contains all our yearnings. It incites us to have the courage to be and to know that, if we can really do that, we will be extending permission to others to do the same. There will then be the promise of a world where thresholds are crossed in the sure knowledge that we are on a path which leads deeper and deeper into the heart of God where all is one.

Many years ago now I realized with absolute clarity that as a psychotherapist I had the enormous privilege of glimpsing from time to time heaven on earth and of being allowed to dwell there for a space. This was a world of exquisite intimacy which for a long time defied description. And then, one day, the words came and I want to end by sharing them with you again now.

"Inwardly, I feel a sense of heightened awareness and this can happen even if I am near exhaustion at the end of a gruelling day. I feel in touch with myself to the extent that it is not an effort to think or to know what I am feeling. It is as if energy is flowing through me and I am simply allowing it free passage. I feel a physical vibrancy and this often has a sexual component and a stirring in the genitals. I feel powerful and yet at the same time almost irrelevant. My client seems more accurately in focus: he or she stands out in sharp relief from the surrounding décor. When he or she speaks, the words belong uniquely to him or her. Physical movements are a further confirmation of uniqueness. It seems as if for a

space, however brief, two human beings are fully alive because they have given themselves and each other permission to risk being fully alive. At such a moment I have no hesitation in saying that my client and I are caught up in a stream of love. Within this stream there comes an effortless or intuitive understanding and what is astonishing is how complex this understanding can be. It sometimes seems that I receive my client whole and thereafter possess a knowledge of him or her which does not depend on biographical data. This understanding is intensely personal and invariably it affects the self-perception of the client and can lead to marked changes in attitude and behaviour. For me as a counsellor, it is accompanied by a sense of joy which, when I have checked it out, has always been shared by the client. The difficulty lies in trusting such experiences, for there seems to be in all of us *a deep and almost pathological distrust* of something which brings such joy and such clarity. It is as if *joy and knowledge are forbidden fruits* and the experience of them must therefore be evidence of dubious motives and unhealthy desires or of insanity. Or to put the matter into slightly different terminology 'If I am full of understanding and of the joy of desiring then it can only be that I have fallen into the hands of Satan'. If, however, both the client and I are able to trust the moment, that is to trust the working of tenderness, then a number of things can happen and I have come to realise a whole range of possibilities. Tears, for example, may flow without warning and without apparent cause or there may be a sudden release of laughter. There may be an overwhelming desire for physical contact which can result in holding hands or in a close embrace. There may be an urgent need to talk about death or God or the soul. There may be a desire to walk around or lie down. Always there is a sense of well-being, of it being good to be alive and this in spite of the fact that problems or difficulties which confront the client remain apparently unchanged and as intractable as ever. Life is good and life is impossible, long live life."

I feel sure that John O'Donohue would recognise this terrain and it is my belief that he lives there now in the intimacy of the Holy Trinity, permanently in the fullness of light and in the glory of mysteries revealed.

References

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