

Tribute to John O'Donohue

I was sitting reading the papers on Sunday thinking about John's sudden death when I fell upon this article on the American writer Joan Didion in the review section of the Sunday Times - she was talking about her book and play - The year of living magically. It's a story of the loss of her beloved husband. In the article she said this one thing that arrested me by its simplicity on the transience of life. She said, " You sit down to dinner and life as you know it stops... For all of us in a moment fate can take us through a doorway into another reality with no way back to the lives we have had before. This woman to make death possible for herself decided to write and I thought how extraordinary because John on the other hand used to write to make life possible for himself. The death of John was so utterly unexpected even though I personally think at some level he was beyond exhaustion he also wanted life so much ... he had so much still he wanted to do and so much love inside him that wanted to be lived. He was one of the most alive people I have ever met... But life has stopped and with it everything John has ever written about becomes even more poignant...Threshold was for him a fascinating country to be discovered and it is of course within threshold this evening that we encounter John's spirit - but maybe at times of death it is indeed our understanding of this very concept of threshold that is needed to be engaged with. I think he would say this is a good area to place our feelings of loss within and in this place our suffering itself can be transformed.

As a man he was truly creative with an extraordinarily beautiful mind, blessed with philosophical insight, compassion and courage - the Jungian analyst Erich Neumann speaks of men like John who have that incredible creative drive that impassions and colours a whole life

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" For the source of the creative drive is not nature, not the collective, not a definite cultural canon but something which moves through generations, peoples, epochs and individuals which calls the individual with the rigour of an absolute and whoever he may be, and whatever he may be, it compels him to travel the road of Abraham, to leave the land of his birth and seek out the land to which the godhead leads him."

John was such a man, with such a calling he was on a passionate spiritual quest. As a philosopher he intensely felt great questions would not go to sleep in

safe answers -. Questions philosophically beget questions not answers he once told me. He dedicated his life to the study of hermeneutics, possessed with a strong metaphysical desire to understand and take on profound conceptual challenges. The philosopher Iris Murdoch says that to be an artist you have to be half in love with your unconscious mind because it is doing half the work. John, did not do anything by half measures so he was in truth completely in love with the unconscious mind and whilst he was indeed very scholarly in his approach to great thinkers like Eckhart and Hegel, it was for me the love affair that he had with poetry that I found the man at his most heartfelt. He utterly loved the word. Sitting with him in his soulful home in Conamara, our days spent editing poem after poem he strove to distill to the very necessary and could work from first light to the early hours of the morning such was his passion. Admiring most the poet Celan as pure genius...he strove to excel at his craft and refine the word till the word delivered itself to him.

Threshold. For John this was home, a place to find God - within the great territory of the imagination. For myself at Threshold we meet the other and I believe without the other we cannot encounter the new. So in this tribute to John this evening there are three things that I have to talk about which are close to Johns heart -and would seem to be adequate in tribute to this remarkable man - Philosophy, Poetry and the Poetics of Possibility. I will start with philosophy.

Richard Kearney, a fellow Irish philosopher said this wonderful statement in his book The Wake of the Imagination. It goes... " After the disappearance of a self sufficient ego an other must reappear, an imagination schooled in the post-modern truth that the self cannot be centred on its own subjectivity but emerges as a response to the other as radical possibility. Radical possibility... Because of the other. For Kearney and for many other philosophers this other needs to be outside our personal imagination and Kearney is not alone in his thinking and his feeling that for radical possibility to happen in the world of the imagination then there has be ' the other '. For the French philosopher Levinas - The face of the other or what he calls the epiphany of the face is the very beginning of philosophy - in that the face of the other is not about finitude but about the infinite. Our meaning comes from our encounter with ' the

other' be it God, our friend, our medium...this face, this other, heralds the beginning of our understanding and gives us our meaning. The commitment and love of the other brings with it another world of experience, which of course in turn can hold radical possibility. For when we meet at times together at Threshold we create a third world, enter nous. Our belief and love of the other, enables us to encounter worlds that we may never have dreamed off. Love gives sight...love enables us to perceive the threshold. For without imagination our loss is that we will not be able to enter a world that generously gives life another language of possibility.

Much has been written over the last hundred years with the likes of Freud and Jung about the importance of relationships to the point of exhaustion with our sense of failure when we loose hope that ' the other' is not there. But philosophically, these writers like Kearney and Levinas are saying something beyond developmental analysis...what they are saying is specific to the imagination they are saying ' this other ' is needed in the imagination so as to go beyond imitation, this other serves the purpose of creativity, this other serves the purposes of God and They are perhaps saying most radically that only this other is unique! What does that mean? It means without coming up against the face of the other we cannot move beyond an opaque understanding of our own souls. We live in relation to the other and possibly one of the greatest gift that the philosopher Kant told us is that knowledge or understanding is formed out of an exchange or synthesis with the other and he also told us that it must also be an exchange with what cannot be known or else...nothing new is born. A favourite phrase of a friend of mine Dr. Cox was this...we must meet to make known what can never been known. Imagination and dialogue creates a world beckoned by the other for when we want to decide what is beautiful in the world we do not use understanding primarily, what we use is imagination and the other in order to know about love.

In my own work and in discussion with John one of the things that I have been investigating is the idea of Poeisis (which means simply calling into existence

That which was not there before) I believe the encounter or the call to Poeisis takes places at Threshold through the call to the other. It is the other that infact enables our call, for it is the other that holds both our answer of Poeisis and our future call. It is essential that we know and live with this other at a profound level of soul connection. As artists one thing you begin to find out studying is that your choice is only as great as

your understanding and in order to understand you have to be prepared to cross thresholds. These crossing through images beget a sacred Threshold. Images hold experience for us and between us which can carry for us emotions that are too painful or too brittle or too broken to be able to withstand penetrative thought, we need images to carry us and then bridge us into new possibilities.

-If we stop for a moment and think analytically not philosophically then to enter the world of threshold you must also be able to move away from literal and concrete thinking...Psychological entity abounds within the world of threshold and within this possibility there will be found a Threshold a bridge. So the void used to being seen by artists as a transitional space where nothing has happened but everything is possible becomes more a territory of threshold where we stand on the bridge with the other and call the new in the sacrament of the present moment.

Turning to The Poetics of Possibility between us Plato believed that nothing new came from reading books but from discourse and dialogue between two...that is why he set up the symposium to call Poiesis into existence. The relation to the other is the beginning of the intelligible, it is how we make sense so that we enter an anima mundi a spirited and ensouled world - believing that in consciousness, subjectivity no longer has first place. It is in relationship to the other that we will find ourselves in dialogue. According to Levinas before Eros there was the Face... In love between one and the other... feeling is not imprisoned in images but is released into images that call dialogue. How are we released from subjectivism? - For the analyst James Hillman in his beautiful book about the thought of the heart it is through a personal divinity to which we address in our hearts - an other outside ourselves. Hillman believes we are saved by these divinities, psychologically, for we are saved from the personalism of feeling by bringing our feelings to 'him' who is not we, 'the other' which is beyond our own notion of experience. The dialogical situation, which constitutes prayer, is the supreme act of the creative imagination - for the alchemist of course prayer is the work. For the writer it is the poem, the word as well as the silent face of God. For John, as a philosopher he never wanted the conversation with the other to stop and for him the poem was not solipsistic but an act of heart felt communication.

To read one of John's poems it to enter into the world of threshold, as his language informs our sight and we begin to be able to see the shapes that he is calling into the world. We are thrown into a field of forces that is composed not only of images but the dynamic of these images...beckoning our imaginations he tries with his words to capture forces and to give attention to the call to bring forth form into the world. John was a man who knew well about the forest, mountains and rivers and he also knew that if you did one thing with this life then you needed to feel that you were not alone, you needed to replenish your soul and possibly for him he felt that it was essential that the most difficult and the deepest philosophical concepts were accessible for everyone's heart - that for John was what his books were all about for himself and for the world. His endless energy did not come from an abstract desire to be one with nature but to be 'in life' body, mind, spirit, word as flesh in the fullness of all his desire. His poems are his records of encounters, a process of penetration, love and mutual dependence and they are John at the limits of himself at threshold - in his home country. He wrote as he breathed to make life possible for himself and his beloved poetry was the treasure he gave to himself and like a beloved he longed to be with it. In his last e-mail he sent to me he said he was done and finished exhausted from the finishing of *Benedictus* and like Eliot said in *The Four Quartets* there is something here about the idea of work like his, this quality of integrity and love costing not less than everything. He also said in this e-mail that he was getting back to his poems as there was so much more depth, love and conversations to be had in the year ahead. I want to read you a poem of John's about *Courage*, where he informs us the reader that only at threshold do we receive the reward of our understanding and the relinquishment of our suffering. Can I ask you also to just close your eyes so as to sharpen the word in your heart and just quieten your mind for a moment and listen to this with your body.

When the light around you lessens,
And your thoughts darken until
Your body feels fear turn
Cold as stone inside.

When you find yourself bereft
Of any belief in yourself
And all you unknowingly
Leaned on has fallen,

When one voice commands
Your whole heart
And it is raven dark,

Steady yourself and see
That it is your own thinking
That darkens your world,

Search and you will find
A diamond-thought of light

Know that you are not alone
And that this darkness has purpose
Gradually it will school your eyes
To find the one gift your life requires
Hidden with this night-corner

Invoke the learning of every suffering
You have suffered

Close you eyes
Gather all the kindling
About your heart
To create one spark
That is all you need
To nourish the flame
That will cleanse the dark
Of its weight of festered fear

A new confidence will come alive
To urge you towards higher ground
Where your imagination
Will learn to engage difficulty
At its most rewarding threshold.

Lastly, I found these words in a book in Scotland in the summer it is the sort of thing that I would have picked up the phone to read to John...from the artist George Mackay Brown - Brown wrote this on a death of a friend. So believing within the eternal heart we speak to those we love forever...and our conversations never stop...this last quote is for John, as I didn't get a chance to read it to him...

Mackay says:

I have a deep rooted belief that what has once existed can never die: not even the frailest of things, spindrift or clover scent or glitter of star on wet stone. All is gathered into the web of creation, that is apparently established and yet is perhaps only a dream in the

eternal mind, and yet, to get to work at the making of it
with every word and thought and action of our lives...
beloved John did just that. Thank you.

Catherine Clancy

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