

JOHN O'DONOHUE

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A BOOK OF  
CELTIC  
WISDOM



Cliff Street Books

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers



## AGING: 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 artwork. 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 and seems to calm and console their forsaken linearity.

For the Celtic people the world of nature had different domains. First, 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 each of these three worlds. 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 away 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 toward noon, falling away toward 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 aging. As you age, time affects your body, your experience, and above all your soul. There is a great poignancy in aging. When your body ages, you begin to lose the natural and spontaneous vigor 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. Because 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

There are four seasons within the clay heart. When it is winter in the world of nature, all the colors have vanished, every-

thing is reduced to gray, black, or white. All the visions and beautiful rich coloring 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 inward. When it is wintertime in your life, you are going through pain, difficulty, or turbulence. At such times it is 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 endeavors. 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 that when one flower blooms it is spring everywhere. When the first innocent, infantlike flower appears on the earth, one senses nature stirring beneath the frozen surface. There is a lovely phrase in Gaelic, *ag borraibh*, that means there is a quivering life about to break forth. The wonderful colors and the new life the earth receives make 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 toward 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 summer time, nature is bedecked with color. 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 summertime in your soul 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, which is one of my favorite times of the year; seeds sown in the spring and 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, one season is dominant in your life. It is customary to understand autumn as synchronous with old age. In the autumntime of your life, your experience is harvested. This is a lovely backdrop against which we can understand aging. Aging is not merely about the body losing its poise, strength, and self-trust. Aging 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 aging not as the demise of your body but as the harvest of your soul, you will learn that aging 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, and the panic and fear often associated with aging can fall away from you. This can bring you a deeper sense of strength, belonging, and poise. Aging is so frightening because it seems that your autonomy and independence are forsaking you against your will. To the young, old people seem incredibly quickly time is moving. But the only difference between a young person at the height of their exuberance and a very old person who is frail and physically wasted 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 that time unfolds have always filled me with reverence and wonder. This found expression in one of my poems, called "Cottage":

I 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. But the opposite is also true when you are having a lovely