

Also by John O'Donohue

Person als Vermittlung

Echoes of Memory (*poetry*)

Stone as Tabernacle of Memory

Air: Breath of God

Fire: At Home at the Hearth of Spirit

Water: The Tears of the Earth

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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 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 that 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 has been understood as a wanderer. Traditionally, these wanderers traversed foreign territories and unknown places. Yet Stanislavsky, the Russian dramatist and thinker, said that "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 you 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 facade 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 when he said, "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.

Near is
and difficult to understand the God
But where danger is
The redemptive also grows.

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 that says, "It is more difficult to spend a day well than 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 honor 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. A lovely Celtic prayer 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 that embraces God, self, others, and nature.

God 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 neighbor
may my neighbor 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 that had depth, possibility, and beauty.

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

I 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 that 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 where a person can lose 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 that remains outside the territories of creativity and feeling. Negotiating 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 the desires, thoughts, and feelings that 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 often feel 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 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.