



A READER'S JOURNAL

Anam Cara

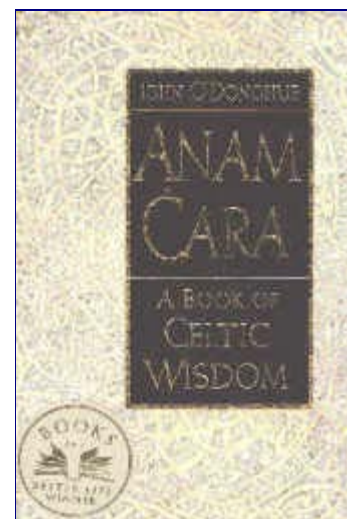
by

John O'Donohue

A Book of Celtic Wisdom

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2001



At a birthday party for a mutual friend, I met Len Daley. After we talked for a while, he said he was reading a book entitled *Anam Cara*. As a member of a small group at the time that we called *Anam Caras*, which is a Celtic word for "soul friends," I expressed an interest in finding out more about this book. He had his reading copy with him and showed it to me. When he handed it to me, the book flopped open to an ancient Celtic poem about a cat named Pangur Bán and his friend, a writer. This poem I had encountered a reference to seven years earlier in [Thomas Gray, *Philosopher Cat*](#) by Philip J. Davies. Davies had given me the impression the poem was lost forever and that I would never see it, and yet here it was under my eyes. Here's a cat's eye view of the last two stanzas of *Pangur Bán* as translated from page 55 as the cat stalks mice as assiduously as his friend the writer stalks ideas:

[page 55]

**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.**

As soon as I got home, I ordered myself a copy of *Anam Cara* and tried to find a character with the dot over the "C" in Cara, to no avail. When the book arrived, I read it all the way through without stopping. John O'Donohue is listed in the credits as a Catholic scholar, but not as a priest, which he no doubt is. The best way I can think of to describe his wonderful writing style is that he is a "male Annie Dillard." He lists Dillard's fine book, [The Writing Life](#), in his short list of books that he recommends reading. Reading a few samples of his writing in the review below will illustrate to any fan of Annie's what I mean.

[page xv] It is strange to be here. The mystery never leaves you alone. . . . 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.

"Speaking is an art — it breaks the silence — it destroys the sameness of the still air that it fills with vibrations. In this life we are but a song on a record, a cut on a CD, a single melody on the long-playing record of our immortal spirit." I wrote these words in the margins as I was reading the first pages of the Prologue. Any book that can inspire me so quickly, that can set my thoughts flying lyrically so early, belongs in a special place on my shelf, its words in a special place in my heart. On every page I found more inspiring words to set my thoughts into flight.

Have you, dear Reader, ever considered friendship to be a sacrament? I hadn't, up until now. One almost needs to fasten one's seatbelt while reading O'Donohue's words.

[page xvii] Human presence is a creative and turbulent sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace. Nowhere is there such intimate and frightening access to the mysterious. Friendship is the sweet grace that liberates us to approach, recognize, and inhabit this adventure.

[page xix] Time is eternity living dangerously.

He points out that the "human heart is never completely born" — that in baptism, from an ancient Jewish tradition, the heart is anointed during the ceremony, as the place "where all feelings will nest." The baptism prayer anoints the heart as the seat of the emotions.

[page 6] The prayer intends that the new child will never become trapped, caught, or entangled in false inner networks of negativity, resentment, or destruction toward itself. The blessings also intend that the child will have a fluency of feelings 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.

How does a child become trapped in false networks of negativity? Rightly understood, children absorb the true feelings of their parents and care-givers as those feelings are portrayed in front of the children. How can they be false except that the feelings are *not those of the child*, but the feelings of those who raised the child. The child is filled with those feelings, and, as a maturing adult, must sort through those feelings, weeding out those that are unworthy or false to its nature and those are true and worthy of keeping. In a world in which one absorbs and stores every physical body state until they reach five years old, and then has those physical substrates of their feelings recapitulated for the remainder of their life, one needs a way of removing those unwanted states before one becomes so enured of them as to accept them as one's true identity.

There is no better short definition of negative doyles⁽¹⁾ than O'Donohue gives above, namely, "false inner networks of negativity, resentment, or destruction" towards oneself. With the advent of the [science of doyletics](#), I'm pleased to say that those false inner networks are endangered species from now on. A simple thirty second [speed trace](#) is enough to disable the unwanted networks of negativity permanently.

In his chapter called "The Mystery of Friendship" we find some amazing thoughts on friendship. He explains the concept of anam cara in detail as "soul friend" or someone to whom we can confess our deepest intimacies. Here are a few quotes from that chapter:

[page 18] . . . "the hand of the stranger is the hand of God."

[page 19] a friend is a loved one who awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you.

[page 23] Love opens the door of ancient recognition.

[page 26] The one you love, your *anam cara*, your soul friend, is the truest mirror to reflect your soul.

**[page 33] When two people come together, an ancient circle closes between them. . . .
When you really love someone, you shine the light of your soul on the beloved.**

[page 41] The human person is a threshold where many infinities meet. There is the infinity of space that reaches out into the depths of the cosmos and the infinity of time reaching back over billions of years.

[page 47] A sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace. In that definition there is a fine acknowledgment of how the unseen world comes to expression in the visible world.

In that last quote, O'Donohue gives us his understanding of how the physical and spiritual worlds intermesh. In the next quotation, he shares a poem filled with a magnificent meshing of the spiritual and physical worlds, the reality of the Christ Spirit in the Sun, but deals with it as if it were simply a metaphor.

[page 56] In this Gaelic poem, the sun is worshiped as the eye and face of God. The rich vitalism of the Celtic sensibility finds lyrical expression here. . . "Glory to thee/Thou glorious sun./Glory to thee, thou son/Face of the God of life."

O'Donohue's discussion in the section, "The Eye is Like the Dawn," where he tells that the "eye is the mother of distance" and the "eye is also the mother of intimacy" prompted me to write this short poem:

**The Eye is the Mother of Distance
The Eye is the Mother of Closeness
The "I" is the Mother of Distance
The "I" is the Mother of Closeness**

The phonological ambiguity of the English word for our organ of vision with the word for our individuality is deeply meaningful, as anyone can tell by replacing the one for the other in many contexts. Here, O'Donohue tells us about the materialistic or scientific eye (or "I") that must judge everything it sees:

[page 63] The judgmental eye harvests the reflected surface and calls it truth.

Below I have compiled a litany of "eyes" or "I's" that he lists for the reader spread over pages 62, 62, and 64:

To the fearful eye, all is threatening.

To the greedy eye, everything can be possessed.

To the judgmental eye, everything is closed in definitive frames.

To the resentful eye, everything is begrudged.

To the indifferent eye, nothing calls or awakens.

To the inferior eye, every else is greater.

To the loving eye, everything is real.

During a time when loud, obnoxious music seems to pervade some people's lives, it is well to remember the words of the Irish writer Sean O'Faolain, whom O'Donohue quotes below, and wonder about the lives of those who shun the great for the mundane:

[page 73] In the presence of great music we have no alternative but to live nobly.

There is a lovely Greek word *temenos*, which originally referred to the grounds surrounding a temple. It means the sacred place or section of holy ground that we must cross to enter into the temple. Rightly understood, our senses are a *temenos* that separates us from the spiritual world. Our senses function as a moat does to protect a castle from those that would enter without permission.

In the section called "The Danger of Neon Vision," O'Donohue cautions us about the harsh light of modern consciousness that, in its spiritual hunger, "wants to unriddle and control the unknown." This explains the tendency of modern office environments to be so sterile and bright that the unknown and mysterious must disappear. I was inspired to write these lines.

**In white-washed, tube-lit corridors and antiseptic cubicles,
Where does the mystery lie?
Under overheating, buzzing ballasts,
How can serenity arise?**

To paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt, "it is better to light a candle than to curse the harshness of the artificial light." And that is exactly what O'Donohue suggests.

[page 81] 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 the course of a long marriage familiarity can paradoxically lead away from intimacy. O'Donohue, who wrote his dissertation on Hegel, quotes him as saying, "Generally, the familiar, precisely because it is familiar, is not known." This powerful sentence bears careful consideration. Where in our lives have we allowed the close presence and familiarity of some loved one to deaden our relationship?

[page 91] Familiarity can be quiet death, an arrangement that permits the routine to continue without offering any new challenges or nourishment.

One of the fallacies of modern life is the concept of art. Anyone who can mix and spread colors assumes the name of artist and our familiarity with the work of these shopping mall artists breeds a deep misunderstanding of the process of art. Replication of another's work is not art, but rather it is rightly called *kitsch*, the imitation of art. Beauty, as true art, is uniqueness; it is the destruction of sameness, the destruction of the familiar, and out of that destruction arises the wild and amazing possibilities revealed by a Picasso, a Rembrandt, a Georgia O'Keefe. Every true artist dares to reveal her soul.

[page 104] 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 your soul, which makes your solitude luminous.

When things seem to be going awry in my life, I have a pet phrase that I toss off to remind me of a deep truth. It's EAT-O-TWIST, which is an acronym for Everything Always Turns Out The Way It's Supposed To. By 'supposed to' I mean the way that we expect things to turn out, the way we spend our time 'supposing' things will turn out, matches the way they will turn out. That 'supposing' is pure creative energy, rightly understood, but it is seldom rightly understood. If we apply such a creative force over time to destroy the things we would else treasure, who can we blame but ourselves?

[page 105] 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. . . The way you look at things is the most powerful force in shaping your life. In a vital sense, perception is reality.

The longer I write, the more appreciation I develop for the importance of words, and I especially take note of their origin. The words we use today are flattened metaphors whose life has been drained from them by familiarity to the point that all mystery and meaning have vaporized. O'Donohue recognizes the importance of re-connecting words with their underlying reality.

[page 110] Fundamentally, there is the great silence that meets language; all words come out of silence. Words that have a depth, resonance, healing, and challenge to them are words loaded with ascetic silence. Language that does not recognize its kinship with reality is banal, denotative, and purely discursive. The language of poetry issues from and returns to silence.

Everywhere you look these days, you see people watching television: in homes, in airport lobbies, in restaurants. If they're not watching television, they're driving their cars listening to their radios or talking on cell phones. By filling up their hours and minutes with chatter, they further distance themselves from the spiritual world.

[page 111] 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.

"The word *authority* signifies your authorship of your ideas and actions." With these words, O'Donohue cuts through a lot of foolishness that we are led to believe about authority as young adults. During that time of my life, I thought authority was something that someone gave to you, and once they did, you acted with authority. To understand that the root of "author-ity" is in the word "author" is to have made a gigantic leap in understanding of what it means to have authority. You have it when you are the author of your ideas and actions. The Order of St. Theresa is a special medal given to army officers in Austria who disobeyed their commands, but won the battle nevertheless. In other words, the medal is given to officers who showed true authority by their authorship of a battle to a successful conclusion.

O'Donohue had a problem getting started on his research work on Hegel. Finally a mentor from India told him to discover a few questions about Hegel that no one had thought of asking. With this novel approach, O'Donohue was able to conceive of his work in a completely new way.

One thing that can stultify a person's life is to become identified with a role, a career. The author illustrates this aptly with a humorous epitaph from a London graveyard, "Here lies Jeremy Brown born a man and died a grocer." When one becomes so lodged in an occupation that all the wildness of one's soul shrinks to the size of one role, then only a very serious event can dislodge their spirit from its place of captivity. In this society that often takes the form of a nervous breakdown. A nervous breakdown is a psychic breakthrough. The walls imprisoning the psyche are blown open and the soul goes out for a walk in the fresh air of wild possibilities.

[page 151] A breakdown is often a desperate attempt by the soul to break through the weary facade of role politics. There is a profundity to the human soul that the linear surface of the work world cannot accommodate.

In sighting a mortar, the first thing you learn is to over shoot the target on the first try and undershoot on the second try. The reason why you don't try to hit the target on the first try is that you have a forward observer and you use the reports back from the forward observer about how far you overshot on the first try and undershot on the second try to bracket in closer on the next round, each time coming closer to the target. If you did not purposely overshoot and undershoot the target, you would be lost as to how to move closer to the target. It is similar with life — those who make few or no mistakes are never really sure whether they're approaching or moving away from their targets.

[page 183] Frequently, in a journey of the soul, the most precious moments are the

mistakes. They have brought you to a place that you would otherwise have always avoided.

In the last section "The Dead Bless Us" O'Donohue tells us that the evolution of human consciousness is bringing us back into a relationship with the invisible spiritual world in which we are immersed.

[page 228] I believe that our friends among 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 among 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.

If we do not believe that there is a spiritual world to link up with our friends in, then we will have effectively shut ourselves off from them, completely confirming that EAT-O-TWIST never breaks — what we supposed, what we expected, what we greatly feared for so long has come upon us. How wonderful might it have been had we supposed otherwise? How wonderful might our futures be if we choose now to begin supposing otherwise.

Reading this book is a great way to begin your journey into the wild possibilities of your eternal being, your true *anam cara*, your soul friend.

footnote

¹ To define a doyle is easy. Simply put doyles are "physical body states stored before one was five years old." For more detailed information on doyles and doylic memory, see [Footnote 3](#) or http://www.doyletics.com/doyletic.htm#N_3 .

