

Sermon: Our Yearning to Belong

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Reading *From Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections*¹ by John O'Donohue

There is nothing in the universe as intimate as the Divine. When the image of the Divine we inherit is negative, it can do untold damage. When your God is a harsh judge, he forces your life to become a watched and haunted hunt for salvation. This God sees everything and forgets nothing. Such images of the Divine cripple us. If salvation and healing do not come lyrically as gifts, they are nothing. Belief should liberate your life. Anything that turns belief into torment hardly merits the term "salvation." The reduction of the wild eternity of your own life to a harsh divine project is a blasphemy against the call of your soul. When you stay in the inner jail of harsh deity, all the fun, humor, and irony go out of your life. Such a God has a fierce grip; he awakens everything fearful and negative in you and whispers to you that this is who you really are.

The world of Celtic spirituality never had such walls. It was not a world of clear boundaries; persons and things were never placed in bleak isolation from each other. Everything was connected and there was a lovely sense of the fluent flow of presence in and out of each other. The physical world was experienced as the shoreline of an invisible world which flowed underneath it and whose music reverberated upwards. In a certain sense, the Celts understood a parallel fluency in the inner world of the mind. The inner world was no prison. It was a moving theatre of thoughts, visions, and feelings.

Sermon

When I became a Unitarian Universalist now half a lifetime ago, I was surely on the run from a God that offered me anything but freedom. Although I should say there was no overt harshness per se to this God I fled --- truth be told I was more on the run from a patriarchal system that had atrophied my spirit and imagination and sense of wonder.

And somehow in feeling my past--- I left it all behind, God, Spirit, The Patriarchal Church, a personal faith. What I found within my first Unitarian Universalist community, having lived from within a fairly parochial life, was an intellectual freedom I had not known was possible. I will forever remain grateful to the men and women of that community who understood my need, upon arrival, to vent my fury about my past. As some of you may know, when in flight from what has felt oppressive, you are almost entirely preoccupied in finding allies ---I wanted everyone to share my disdain for what I had left.

¹ O'Donohue, J. (2002). *Eternal echoes: Celtic Reflections on our yearning to belong*. Perennial.

I remember smiling seeing the pulpit sign outside of my new religious community with a sermon title I had taken special delight in creating “Travails of an Atheist in Purgatory” -- It was full of spit and fire –lots of wonderful feminist fury, an important catalyst in my life at that time.

Some years later I studied with a wise woman (Karla McLaren) who has written: If I were to personify anger, I would describe it as a mix between a stalwart castle sentry and an ancient sage. Anger sets your boundaries by walking the perimeter of your soul and keeping an eye on you, the people around you, and your environment—when our boundaries are broken through the insensitivity of others or in another way, anger comes forward to restore our sense of strength and separateness. The question anger puts before us is: What must be protected ... What now must be restored? Both protection and restoration can happen quickly (*my words: but often over a long period of time*) when we can move through anger’s heated intensity into our imaginal boundary.”² (p.168)

Walking through the doors of my first Unitarian Universalist home
It was as if I was still battling the God, church I had supposedly abandoned and left behind. That’s a thing about fixed boundaries that come to define us over time... we can get stuck there.... Forgetting there is this larger world beyond the constraints of our thinking and imagining.

Before I progress, Fear not, my kind listeners, especially those who find deep comfort in your humanist or atheist outlook on life... this is not a sermon about my return to faith, or even God for that matter but more so about recovery—to find a place of greater ease and connection.... Moving beyond boundaries that betrayed me to a larger existence defined more by awe, gratitude-- a more forgiving space. I longed to feel a larger sense of belonging instead of just fleeing, a place of welcome where I would no longer have to be on guard ready for battle.

Here is where I really love that line from John O’Donohue, Anything that turns belief into torment hardly merits the term “salvation” The reduction of the wild eternity of your own life to a harsh divine project (*my words: be it of God or for that matter a vehement opposition to God,*) is a blasphemy against the call of your soul. Half a lifetime ago I fled dogmatic theistic faith to being a dogmatic atheist.

In contrast to that kind of rigidity, I love remembering our town in 2007 when we were visited by His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama was in Ithaca to bless the groundbreaking for a new monastery—the fruition of which is now that remarkable library that was celebrated last week (*mention Peaches’ participation*). During his 2007 visit, The Dalai Lama as you may recall first spoke at Cornell and I like so many others in attendance

² McLaren, K. (2023). *The language of emotions: What your feelings are trying to tell you*. Sounds True. P168

were entirely amused by his ability to disarm the hype that comes to audiences anticipating his arrival.... Against a magnificent display of banners, flowers and with the room crawling with security people talking into their sleeves – The Dalai Lama smiled, began the afternoon first by taking off his shoes, laughing as he struggled with the shoelaces....

I don't recall the exact words of the welcome I was asked to give the next day at the State Theater for the interfaith service, but it was the experience the day before that I put my trust in, trusting that I would somehow know what to say—Truthfully, I had overwhelmed with anxiety of meeting this insane task of introducing the Dalai Lama (*laughter*). But the Dalai Lama's gently playful humor invited my own to surface, I remember saying something like ...In a very serious, serious town, with very very serious people doing very very important work, you enter our lives with a playful, unassuming smile and we find ourselves relaxing into our bodies in a way that is both unfamiliar but also home in the best sense of the word. Thank you and welcome.

Like many of you I remain mesmerized by the spirit of this monk. Having endured such heartache and utter desolation over the continued suffering of those still living in Tibet, his spirit (beyond the world of words) was utterly soft but resolute, fluid, full of light, disarming.

And I remember that space between him and all of us was also full of that light and kindness and generosity.

For a while, I thought spiritual growth was about fighting and banishing the harshness in one's heart, in our efforts to live out of a more forgiving and genuinely loving space--- but banishing is a lot of like repression and repression can do a lot of damage to ourselves and others.

I was reminded of this when reading the Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron who wrote of her fury upon hearing of her former husband's infidelity.... Recalling how her rage led her to pick up a big rock and throw it at him. Writing much later in her book entitled, "When Things Fall Apart"³ "When anyone ask me how I got involved in Buddhism, I always say it was because I was so angry at my husband. The truth is he saved my life. When our marriage fell apart, I tried hard, very hard to go back to some kind of comfort, some kind of security, some kind of familiar, resting place, Instinctively I learned that I needed to make contact with my dependent, clinging self (my words: *that craves the familiar*) and find a way to let it go.... Life is a good teacher and friend, ... the off center, in-between state is an ideal situation in which if we don't get caught that we can open our hearts and minds beyond previously perceived limits."

³ Chodron, P. (1998). *When things fall apart*. Shambhala.

At the heart of being this community of faith, one of our calls is to support each of us to experience companionship in facing the personal and collective betrayals that have diminished our lives and others. And yet to find a way not to be defined by those betrayals seems to be the message.

listen to this one part of the reading read earlier: “The physical world can be experienced as the shoreline of an invisible world which flows underneath it and whose music reverberated upwards. In a certain sense, the Celts understood a parallel fluency in the inner world of the mind. The inner world was no prison. It was a moving theatre of thoughts, visions, and feelings. The Celtic universe was the homeland of the inspirational and the unexpected. They saw themselves as guests in a living, breathing universe.”

Guests in a living, breathing universe. I love that concept of approaching life with an expectation that inspiration resides everywhere, often in the most unexpected moments.

I appreciate that one of the powerful gifts of our non-creedal tradition is that we are invited to cultivate an openness within ourselves and outside of ourselves to possibility (new ways of thinking, of responding, or relating to self and others). –the invitation is there of course for everyone inside and outside the walls of this community. What I value about being here in this community is that it is a spiritual principle at the core of our covenant with one another----a collective historic willing to be open to new ways of understanding

I love the Celtic notion of our living as guests in a living, breathing universe— as it engenders wonder and humility.

There are so many wonderful things happening in our community right now, we are welcoming and exploring new ways of shared leadership,
Of finding our place in being of service to each other and to our larger world,

I want to suggest we add a Celtic sensibility: to approach our lives with an expectation that inspiration resides everywhere, often in the most unexpected moments. Keep a look out! I know I will be.

Thank you for listening.

Closing Words by John O’Donohue

With the support from within and without
May you awaken to the mystery of your own unique presence
May you have joy and peace in the temple of your senses
May you receive encouragement when new frontiers beckon
May you respond to the call of your gift and find
The courage to follow its path
May the flame of anger free you from falsity
May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul

*May you take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention
May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven
Around the heart of wonder.*

Blessed be.