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Anam Cara

John O'Donohue

About the Book

‘This book is currently walking off the shelves in bookshops everywhere. Since it is concerned with the language of the soul as expressed in the Celtic vision of life, it is somehow reassuring that at this time of the year when we are pre-occupied with material things, so many people are expressing a need to satisfy a spiritual hunger of their own’ ***Irish Independent***

‘This beautifully produced and beautifully written book contrasts the traditions of Celtic mythology with the depths of modern spiritual hunger . . . In the depth of his thought and the majesty of his language, O’Donohue has reached the theological summit . . .’
The Month

‘This beautiful, poetic book has become a bestseller in Ireland. It is a great joy to read and read again . . .’ ***Irish Post Supplement***

‘Something stirred in me as I read this book – a sense of the quality of life’s experiences, of the beauty and poetry present in the everyday world, of the power of a spirituality rooted in the earth, in nature, in common reality, of the mystery of being human . . . I found myself wanting to read aloud great sections of this book to anyone I happened to meet’ ***The Way***

About the Author

John O'Donohue wrote a number of international bestsellers, including *Anam Cara*, *Eternal Echoes*, *Divine Beauty* and *Benedictus*. He also wrote *Person als Vermittlung* on the philosophy of Hegel and two collections of poetry, *Echoes of Memory* and *Conamara Blues*.

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR JOHN O'DONOHUE'S
ANAM ĀARA

'John O'Donohue is a man of the soul. His scholarly meditation on the continuing relevance of Ireland's spiritual heritage has become a publishing phenomenon . . . This poetic meditation has become a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic . . . A lyrical epic prayer' *The Times*

'*Anam Āara* is a radiant source of wisdom, a link between the human and the divine. This work is a blessed, rare gem' **Larry Dossey, bestselling author of *Healing Words***

'Words of wisdom . . . a heady mixture of myth, poetry, philosophy . . . profound and moving' *Independent*

'*Anam Āara* is a rare synthesis of philosophy, poetry and spirituality. This work will have a powerful and life-transforming experience for those who read it' **Deepak Chopra, bestselling author of *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success***

'This book is a phenomenon in itself . . . a book to read and reread forever, its style of varied narration responds to our times' *Irish Times*

'A lively companion to all Celts – or those who are Celtic in their hearts' *Publishers Weekly*

'Fascinating . . . It's a challenging book packed with rich turns of phrases and avenues of thoughts which deserves and repays re-reading' *Irish Post*

'An outstanding achievement . . . *Anam Āara* is an epic meditation by one of Ireland's most gifted talkers . . . It is a paean of appreciation of landscape as the sacrament of our belonging and of

friendship as the currency of our integrity, by a modern Gaelic
Bard . . . *Floreat!* *The Furrow*

www.booksattransworld.co.uk

Also by John O'Donohue

*ETERNAL ECHOES
CONAMARA BLUES*

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ANAM ĆARA

John O'Donohue



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I heard the story of the Wolf Spider from John Moriarty.

The anecdotes in chapter 1 and the phrase in chapter 6 I heard from Leon O Morachain.

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CONTENTS

Prologue

- 1 The Mystery of Friendship
- 2 Towards a Spirituality of the Senses
- 3 Solitude is Luminous
- 4 Work as a Poetics of Growth
- 5 Ageing: the Beauty of the Inner Harvest
- 6 Death: the Horizon is in the Well

In memory of my father, Paddy O'Donohue, who worked stone so poetically and my uncle, Pete O'Donohue, who loved the mountains.

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DO MO CÁIRDE A TUG FOSCAID AGUS SOLAS.

BEANNACHT

(for Josie)

On the day when
the weight deadens
on your shoulders
and you stumble,
may the clay dance
to balance you.

And when your eyes
freeze behind
the grey window
and the ghost of loss
gets in to you,
may a flock of colours,
indigo, red, green
and azure blue
come to awaken in you
a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays
in the curach of thought
and a stain of ocean
blackens beneath you,
may there come across the waters
a path of yellow moonlight
to bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
may the clarity of light be yours,
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow

*wind work these words
of love around you,
an invisible cloak
to mind your life.*

Prologue

IT IS STRANGE TO BE HERE. The mystery never leaves you alone. Behind your image, below your words, above your thoughts, the silence of another world waits. A world lives within you. No-one else can bring you news of this inner world. Through our voices, we bring out sounds from the mountain beneath the soul. These sounds are words. The world is full of words. There are so many talking all the time, loudly, quietly, in rooms, on streets, on TV, on radio, in the paper, in books. The noise of words keeps what we call the world there for us. 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.

Humans are new here. Above us, the galaxies dance out towards infinity. Under our feet is ancient earth. We are beautifully moulded from this clay. Yet the smallest stone is millions of years older than us. In your thoughts, the silent universe seeks echo. An unknown world aspires towards reflection. Words are the oblique mirrors which hold your thoughts. You gaze into these word mirrors and catch glimpses of meaning, belonging and shelter. Behind their bright surfaces is the dark and the silence. Words are like the god Janus, they face outwards and inwards at once.

If we become addicted to the external, our interiority will haunt us. We will become hungry with a hunger no image, person or deed can still. To be wholesome, we must remain truthful to our vulnerable complexity. In order to keep our balance, we need to hold the interior and exterior, visible and invisible, known and unknown, temporal and eternal, ancient and new, together. No-one else can undertake this task for you. You are the one and only

threshold of an inner world. This wholesomeness is holiness. To be holy is to be natural; to befriend the worlds that come to balance in you. Behind the façade of image and distraction, each person is an artist in this primal and inescapable sense. Each one of us is doomed and privileged to be an inner artist who carries and shapes a unique world.

Human presence is a creative and turbulent sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace. Nowhere else is there such intimate and frightening access to the *mysterium*. Friendship is the sweet grace which liberates us to approach, recognize and inhabit this adventure. This book is intended as an oblique mirror in which you might come to glimpse the presence and power of inner and outer friendship. Friendship is a creative and subversive force. It claims that intimacy is the secret law of life and universe. The human journey is a continuous act of transfiguration. If approached in friendship, the unknown, the anonymous, the negative and the threatening gradually yield their secret affinity with us. As an artist, the human person is permanently active in this revelation. The imagination is the great friend of the unknown. Endlessly, it invokes and releases the power of possibility. Friendship, then, is not to be reduced to an exclusive or sentimental relationship; it is a far more extensive and intensive force.

The Celtic mind was neither discursive nor systematic. Yet in their lyrical speculation, the Celts brought the sublime unity of life and experience to expression. The Celtic mind was not burdened by dualism. It did not separate what belongs together. The Celtic imagination articulated the inner friendship which embraces nature, divinity, underworld and human world as one. The dualism which separates the visible from the invisible, time from eternity, the human from the divine, was totally alien to them. Their sense of ontological friendship yielded a world of experience imbued with a rich texture of otherness, ambivalence, symbolism and imagination. For our sore and tormented separation, the possibility of this imaginative and unifying friendship is the Celtic gift.

The Celtic understanding of friendship found its inspiration and culmination in the sublime notion of the *anam cara*. *Anam* is the

Gaelic word for soul; *cara* means soul *cara* is the word for friend. So *anam cara* friend. The *anam cara* was a person to whom you could reveal the hidden intimacies of your life. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the friend of your soul. Taking this as our inspiration, we explore interpersonal friendship in Chapter One. Central here is the recognition and awakening of the ancient belonging between two friends. Since the human heart is never completely born, love is the continuous birth of creativity within and between us. We will explore longing as the presence of the divine and the soul as the house of belonging.

In Chapter Two we will outline a spirituality of friendship with the body. The body is your clay home, your only home in the universe. The body is in the soul; this recognition confers a sacred and mystical dignity on the body. The senses are divine thresholds. A spirituality of the senses is a spirituality of transfiguration. In Chapter Three we will explore the art of inner friendship. When you cease to fear your solitude, a new creativity awakens in you. Your forgotten or neglected inner wealth begins to reveal itself. You come home to yourself and learn to rest within. Thoughts are our inner senses. Infused with silence and solitude, they bring out the mystery of the inner landscape.

In Chapter Four we will reflect on work as a poetics of growth. The invisible hungers to become visible, to express itself in our actions. This is the inner desire of work. When our inner life can befriend the outer world of work, new imagination is awakened and great changes take place. In Chapter Five we will contemplate our friendship with the harvest time of life, old age. We will explore memory as the place where our vanished days secretly gather and acknowledge that the passionate heart never ages. Time is veiled eternity. In Chapter Six we will probe our necessary friendship with our original and ultimate companion, death. We will reflect on death as the invisible companion who walks the road of life with us from birth. Death is the great wound in the universe, the root of all