

Old Age and the Inner Harvest

"Anam Cara" means *soul friend*, that is to say, a deep and integral friendship in which the intimacies of life are explored in an open, honest, and trusting manner. Beauty is the eternal surround of friendship; in the Celtic imagination friendship is the sacred space of pure belonging and absolute integrity. The fifth section of the book *Anam Cara* by John O'Donohue is entitled *Aging: The Beauty of the Inner Harvest*, and is rich in compelling insights into the spiritual terrain of aging, and more specifically the **spirituality of old age**. Aging is a primal and ancient call to the spiritual realm, an unavoidable quest to shed our false or manufactured identity acquired through subservience to cultural conditioning, in order to pursue a deeper sense of authenticity in life. What follows here is a creative encounter or "conversation" with a series of quotes from this section that I have found to be particularly compelling.

Aging Can Be Frightening

Time forces us to face our own disappearance. Aging is a natural source of fear and anxiety. More to the point, we tend to generate a great deal of fear and anxiety about aging and old age that causes suffering. It is no surprise that aging would be the cause of distress since it places us firmly in the midst of our own impermanence; the older we get, the closer we approach our own demise. Time constantly robs us of our future, while relentlessly expanding our past. In the midst of old age, we know that the time we have left ahead is significantly less than what we have already left behind. And we are left to wonder, what happens when our consciousness is taken from us?

John O'Donohue: *"Aging is so frightening because it seems that your autonomy and independence are forsaking you against your will... old age can be a vulnerable time. Many people, as they age, get very worried and anxious... The new solitude in your life can make the prospect of aging frightening... This solitude can take the form of loneliness, and as you age you can become very lonely."*

We are only visitors here. It is interesting to consider that we enter into this world in an extremely vulnerable state, and if we live into old age, we will probably depart from this world in an equally vulnerable state. When we withdraw from the world of employment, we experience a significant retreat from familiar patterns and routines. Perhaps we feel as though we have less to contribute or are of less value now. This is a form of solitude that results from exclusion, which can be self-imposed as well as imposed by misguided cultural biases.

John O'Donohue: *"Modern society is based on an ideology of strength and image. Consequently, old people are often sidelined. Modern culture is totally obsessed with externality, image, speed, and change; it is driven. In former times, old people were seen as those who had the greatest wisdom. There was always reverence and respect for the elders."*

Unfortunately, materialism, consumption, and consumerism are defining features of modern society. We have a finely-tuned addiction to acquisition and ownership. The very idea of an elder has been denigrated into meaning someone that is merely advanced in age usually requiring some form of assistance ("elder-care"). The core meaning of *elder* refers to a respected and cherished person in a community whose influence and insight are of significant benefit to everyone. Another sense of "elder-care" can mean that we, as a society, need the care that can only originate in the natural wisdom of our elders.

The Beauty of Olden Times

Time is frightening when we feel as though we do not have enough. This feeling is the root of despair. At the same time, we know that our lives are impermanent and we will eventually run out of time. Moreover, we cannot know how much time we have left in our lives. We can only choose to believe that the amount of time we are given to experience life can be nothing less than exactly what we need. The transformation of our natural sense of despair and anxiety about death into an inspiration for living in the present moment is a fundamental task of aging. When we enter into the autumn of life our spiritual task is to transfigure our despair into authenticity, purpose, and meaning.

John O'Donohue: *"Because we live in time, each person's life is a circle... The circle brings perspective to the process of aging. As you age, time affects your body, your experience, and above all your soul... This is one of the most vital questions that affects every person. Can we transfigure the damage that time has done to us?"*

Seasonal time is more inspiring than the bleak progression of chronological time. In the Celtic tradition, autumn is most closely aligned with old age. It is also a period of time for harvesting the essence of our identity and experience in life. For the first time in our lives we know that we have travelled through more time than what can possibly lie ahead of us, and we begin to realize that our past has become a valuable resource. This is not to say that we live in the past, which is an undesirable state of stasis and confinement.

Instead, the past becomes a vast landscape of discovery that we creatively explore in order to bring a greater sense of meaning and purpose into the autumn of our life. We harvest the forgotten and neglected aspects of our lives in order to move our memories firmly into the midst of the present.

John O'Donohue: *"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... aging can be a time of great strength, poise, and confidence."*

Wisdom is, in part, the ability to bring together and unify opposed ideas, beliefs, or experiences that have the appearance of being opposed or contrary to one another. A core capacity in the development of wisdom is awareness, or the ability to observe the flow of life around us without imposing our habitual biases, perspectives, attitudes, and assumptions. Early in life we tend to focus on the accumulation of information and the expansion of our warehouse of knowledge. As we age, the nature and character of learning changes later in life. While it remains important throughout life to constantly expand our knowledge and retain a degree of currency with society, it is no longer our primary concern; learning becomes inexorably connected to the uniquely individual and personal pursuit of authenticity, identity, meaning, and purpose.

This change in our orientation to and capacity for learning is fundamental to the development of strength, poise and confidence in later life. It is not, however, an easy change to navigate. Our ideas about learning are strongly biased, limited, and confined to a technology known as *education*, which originates in the concept of the prerequisite. Wisdom is not fostered by education. We reach a point in our lives when learning must be inspired by authenticity, meaning and purpose; we passionately pursue specific kinds of qualities in our experience of life, including beauty, gratitude, and belonging.

The Inner Harvest

During the first half of our lives we tend to have an external orientation to living in which our ambitions are focused on reaching out into society in order to grasp, take, acquire, achieve, and accumulate. This external orientation, however, provides little satisfaction later in life. Aging eventually touches our soul and invites an inner conversation about the more mysterious and impenetrable aspects of being alive.

This does not mean we shun the external world; however, we replace our preoccupation with manufactured environments such as culture and society and move deeply into the natural ecology of the earth. This inevitable return to the enchantment of nature inspires a deep inward spiritual movement that is inanimately joined to the natural ecology of the earth. This is the essence of the inner harvest.

John O'Donohue: *"Old age can be a time of clearance. In old age, as your life calms, you will be able to make many clearances in order to see who you are, what life has done to you, and what you have made of your life... False burdens can fall away in old age."*

As we become older, the pace of life begins to slow down. Modern society has a misguided addiction to speed and acceleration. Old age is a period of release from the intense grind of surviving in society that offers the time and opportunity for meaningful reflection and renewal. New kinds of questions, interests, and motivations begin to reveal themselves that help to clear the debris field created from our subservience to social expectation.

John O'Donohue: *"In a positive sense, aging becomes a time for visiting the temple of your memory and integrating your life... Sometimes difficulty is the greatest friend of the soul."*

Aging inspires both the clearance of false burdens and the integration of our experiences. We reach out into nature and the natural ecology of the earth; we simultaneously reach inward into the mysteries of the spirit. We realize that spirit is both outside and inside of us – it is our total surround. The inner harvest is a time of life when we value wisdom over knowledge, contemplation over analysis, beauty over logic, perception over thought, and awareness over comprehension. These new and vital capacities are the underlying energy that serves to manifest meaningful change in the course of our life.

John O'Donohue: *"How you view your future actually shapes it... Natural wisdom seems to suggest that the way you are toward your life is the way that your life will be toward you... Old age is the time of second innocence... You know the bleakness of life, you know its incredible capacity to disappoint and sometimes destroy. Yet notwithstanding that realistic recognition of life's negative potential, you still maintain an outlook that is wholesome and hopeful and bright."*

Author's Note:

John O'Donohue (January 1, 1956 – January 3, 2008), poet, philosopher, spiritual guide, and scholar, explored the Celtic imagination in unique and fascinating ways. In 1997 he published *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, a book that remains a constant companion of mine. In it he reveals a compelling spiritual terrain of friendship authenticity, beauty, identity, presence, and sense of belonging. His poetics of the inner landscape of aging is animated by his deeply passionate relationship with the natural world. He was particularly inspired by the Connemara Region on the west coast of Ireland.

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Brian Alger is a writer exploring the liminal frontiers of aging, vitality, impermanence, relationship, loss, solace, resilience, vulnerability, and death.

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