

**THE
STORY
is a
SHELTER**

the STORY is a SHELTER



by GARETH HIGGINS

Publisher/editor *The Porch*

In April 2007, with the Bush era dwindling down, the Obama one still a too-much-to-be-hoped-for prospect, *Zodiac* at the movies, Red Hot Chili Peppers at Coachella, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* under printers' wraps for a few weeks yet, fifteen Royal Navy sailors under guard in Iranian waters, wars continuing, I received a phone call that changed my life.

I was standing at my desk in the little town where I grew up, Holywood (Sanctus Boscus, the "holy" wood), northern Ireland, when the phone rang. It was John O'Donohue, the writer, the priest, the bon viveur, raconteur, and

philosopher; the person who did more than anyone else in my lifetime to create the circumstances in which a renewed appreciation of the depths, credibilities, and consolations of Celtic spirituality could flourish. I had met John almost four years previously, as an acolyte—he would have preferred the term "groupie"—nervously approaching him after he gave a talk at a hotel in Limavady about how "love is the only antidote to fear." John wove tales about the extraordinary permeating the ordinary. He left me considering a culture so confused about what really matters that it devotes more time to suspicion than to wonder. He taught me that the first task of self healing, the only lens that

really enables us to distinguish the path to wholeness, and ultimately what's best for us altogether, is to cultivate the capacity to see and love yourself first.

I'd been transfixed by this elegant clown, this distinguished intellect married to laughter that could both drown out the din of airplanes and cast out the shadow of suicidal depression, this bearded wonder, tall and large and hilarious and deep. I'd approached him for a correspondence address (he seemed like the kind of guy who wrote letters and not emails), we had a brief moment of kindness, and then he was off to have a drink with the South African ambassador to Ireland.

We wrote. I believe the films of the Polish master Krzysztof Kieslowski (which were to become a motif of our friendship—really great things were always “better than Kieslowski”) made an appearance in the very first letter, along with an invitation to discuss them over what John always called “firewater,” the locally, informally distilled variation of which could be used to seal Conamara horse shoes. We met again. (In a Catholic retreat center outside Belfast, where nuns furnished us with said firewater, which was cheaper than going to the pub, and more agreeable than having to drive home.) We did what must be done, and took tentative steps toward becoming friends.

And then, in April 2007, the phone rang, and my life clicked onto a new axis.

John invited me to drive a minibus on his annual tour of the West of Ireland, an eleven day existential extravaganza of mostly U.S. American pilgrims wandering across the Burren and the terrain of their own souls. We were based in the little village of Ballyvaughan in County Clare, where the harbor imitates the womb-like welcome of

the divine love to which John's work was a compelling invitation. There would be three other drivers—a poet-farmer from Oregon, a Northeastern Swami called Roosevelt, and a Scottish architect-photographer who once bought David Bowie a pint. I had known about this tour for a few years, and looked on with envy, because I knew I could not afford the fee. But here I was, as I often am surprised to be, with an unexpected invitation to do the very thing I thought I would never get to do. It was an easy yes, and a few weeks later I found myself driving to a part of Ireland I'd never seen before, where I would walk to the top of a mountain track in the middle of a stone shelter built god knows when, as rain bit at our collars and the wind threatened to cast us off the side.

~

There's a delicate but edgy motion picture about the kind of thieves who distinguish themselves by rhetorical eloquence, wry one-liners, and “not doing it for the money, but the craft,” called *Heist*. The writer David Mamet (he directs too, but I think he values the written word more than the visual image) puts words in the mouth of Gene Hackman that, I think, would fit at the top of the mountain pass, where our small band climbed. In response to the assertion that he's a “pretty smart fella,” Hackman offers the following, and shows that rogues are often capable of ageless wisdom:

“I'm not that smart. I tried to imagine a fella smarter than myself. Then I tried to think, ‘What would he do?’”

Prior to joining John's retreat, I think I may have been smart enough to know I was human, but I know now that I had not *begun* to appreciate the gravity of the status. My ignorance, ironically, made me human still:

for how many beautiful, wonderful, miraculous things do each of us know to be true about ourselves, but that we can't yet bring ourselves to believe? It sometimes takes a companion more capable than I to teach me what I already know. Sometimes, it takes imagining what someone wiser than I would do, and then doing that.

John was wiser than I.

By the time I met John, I was well-versed in the theatre of living from the shadow. I would addict myself to sugar or the internet, falling into an arrogant spiral of consumption that had me more concerned about the latest civil war or celebrity divorce than about my own health and embracing life as a journey into making more beauty. John would say "The world cannot ruffle a soul that dwells in its own tranquility."

I would dive into cynicism, be magnetized by misplaced rage, consider the whole world my personal concern, fix my sights on others' wrongs, experience the empty catharsis of a Facebook comment smackdown, and in the end do precisely nothing about the thing that had me worried in the first place, so great was the whelming of stories of other people's suffering as they seeped through my highly permeable boundaries. I would allow the media to become, in John's words, "the mirror, enshrining the ugly as the normal standard," and I would be paralyzed by it. No good would come of the fact that I knew the death toll of whatever global crisis had been considered most worthy of tonight's headlines. I would delve into ugliness editorially controlled by people I did not know, and somehow I'd see only myself. I projected my shadow onto the stories told by questionable media sources that compete to win the spoils of an economy devoted to fear and scarcity. I bought the lie that I must always know "the news" or my life wouldn't

be complete. John would counter, saying that even those most alone and afraid and depressed can see—*need*—beauty. In fact, it is in the moments when we are most alone and afraid and depressed that we prove the efficacy of beauty as an antidote to death.

I would think: IT'S ALL ABOUT ME. John would say, yes, but perhaps not in the way you think it is. I wonder if this is what *he* was thinking at the crest of the mountain pass, before he made invited me to step into a new story. A story that made me see the world with new eyes.

~

The mountain track is called Máméan, in the Maamturk mountains of Conamara. The name means 'Pass of the Birds,' and historians say it has been a place of pilgrimage since the fifth century. Máméan rests near a settlement called Maam Cross, where there's a pub that in the telling of my friend Denis becomes the location for an elegant joke about Rene Descartes, a second pint of Guinness, and the limitations of believing your own thoughts. If you and I ever get to Maam together, I'll tell you that joke. Back then, we pilgrims were at the top of the mountain.

Or at the base, actually, because, in the absence of helicopters or the *Star Trek* transporter machine, and in the old Irish proverb, the journey to the top of a mountain begins with a single "Sweet merciful God are you serious?"

God was, I think, and we were too, so off we set, traversing bumpy, pockmarked fields. This meant that every seven steps or so someone would trip and we would have to gather ourselves—rebalancing after a fall being just one of the miracles available to us mere humans, and just one of the lessons I

learned on this magic mountain. The first field ended when we hit water: a stream wide enough that it took some delicate navigation on foot, but with enough rocks in the water that, as its level was not too high, a little game of stepping stones was in order. John walked out to the middle of the stream and stood on a larger stone, inviting us one by one to join him there, where he pronounced a blessing for the journey and

previously metaphysical emptiness, as water reawakens a dry sponge.

So the blessings were spoken, and the shoulder lightly hit, and the pilgrim sent to the other side of the river. The metaphor of baptism—dying to an old way, being refreshed and cleansed, and rising again into a new life—was not accidental, nor was it ecclesiastically bound: everyone was



Wikimedia Commons

lightly hit a shoulder to seal the deal. This was O'Donohue at his most impish. Blessings, for him, were not words dusty and official, the formal imprint of hierarchical centuries—the kind spoken only formally, and at occasions of utmost seriousness by men in robes—no, blessings were words of life to be spoken in loving embodiment of what he called “the space between us.” A real blessing, spoken in reality, would actually become an act of creation, filling what was

welcome, and it didn't matter what, or whether, your faith tradition. The sole qualification to take this walk was an openness to light. One time, I heard about an O'Donohue pilgrim who was particularly weighed down by her sense of guilt at things done or left undone, to the point where almost every sentence she spoke began with an apology. She asked him to hear her confession mid-stream. I can imagine John smiling a wry smile, and agreeing, despite its interference with the schedule (for a

sacrament of interruption is still a sacrament). She said what she needed to say, the burdens of years being articulated above the noise of the stream and the wind and the less obvious murmurs of forty-three bystanding human hearts seeking their own particular closure for their own particular shame. I imagine the vicarious pilgrims looking on, split across two sides of the river, wondering what was happening, trying not to look like they were eavesdropping, yet unable to prevent overhearing a private conversation that reminded them of what they wanted for themselves.

John often said that one of the cures for depression was found in making himself a promise: that he would always be his own best friend. That seemed like a revolutionary idea when I pondered it—for we all know that it's easier to treat others better than we do ourselves; that we make accommodation after accommodation for the mistakes of a friend, yet the slightest imperfection within ourselves we often show no mercy. I heard John speak about wanting to train people's fingers to unpick the knots in which religiosity and bitterness had tied them—so that we could free ourselves from the deadening effects of a domination system that has turned grace and mercy inside out, making "spirituality" at best the province of "experts," and at worst a weapon to control the populations of both entire countries and individual personalities alike. So when John pronounced absolution, what I think he wanted to do was to show someone three things. 1: That their perception of their own "sin" was faulty to begin with—and that we are usually judging ourselves in vast disproportion to our error. 2: That by virtue of asking for forgiveness, of recognizing that there may indeed be some need for restoration or reconciliation, we are already experiencing forgiveness. And 3: That we don't need a sacralized magistrate to show us

this is true—though a friend on the journey certainly helps.

This particular pilgrim, the apologizing, guilt-ridden one, finished her confession, and the onlookers saw John take her seriously. He spoke for a few moments, only to her. And then, because a decisive public act seemed appropriate to the moment, he brought his right hand down on her left shoulder, strong enough to be noticed, gentle enough not to hurt, and offered this absolution, loud enough for all to know that it was for them too:

NOW GO FORTH AND SIN BEAUTIFULLY!

Some people believe we can only learn the path by stumbling, that the meaning of something is only found in understanding its opposite. For some, the story of leaving paradise represents a necessary step on the way to becoming selves—liberated from the stifling rules and the serpent both. The only way to go somewhere new is to allow yourself to be a little bit lost, and if sin means exile from an old way of being—then walking up Máméan was a beautiful sin indeed.

Search the encyclopedia of the psyche for "rugged" and you'll find a sketch of Máméan. Seek a definition of "exodus," and you should eventually happen upon a picture of us, blessed in our river, walking our hill, quietly emerging into this awareness: that the horizon of possibility is in fact more infinitely expansive than we thought.

When you enter into freedom, possibility comes to meet you, John would say; dangerous words when unmoored from accountability, yet self-steadying, liberating ones when freedom matters more than money, status, or people-pleasing. Once you

have crossed the river at the bottom of Máméan, you can see—and have embodied that undeniable metaphor for no-turning-back—and when that river crossing has been accompanied by a Celtic priest's blessing to go forward, even a soul as ignorant as mine recognizes that it is indeed time to enter into freedom.

~

So we bumped our way up the mountain. This retreat, full of all too rare things like holy laughter and silences from U.S. Americans had been surprised also by unseasonably good weather. And when I say unseasonably, I mean it's *Ireland* we're talking about, where five minutes' respite from constant soaking and freezing, for some, equates to two weeks' sun-tannable glory in Sardinia. We had been the delighted recipients of the hottest ten-day stretch I can remember. Every morning the sun split the sky, the grass warmed up for the Swami's early yoga class, and one of us lit the fire in the retreat headquarter cottage out of habit or to invoke peak peat authenticity, but there was no need for its temperature-animating powers. By noon we would be walking, be-hatted and be-sunscreened and be-guiled by the landscape and the sky furnace that had, for reasons best known elsewhere, decided to shine upon us. We got used to the Irish heatwave, so on the day we went to Máméan, we were expecting more of the same. When you enter into freedom, possibility comes to meet you.

Today's freedom was wet. About halfway up the mountain, the sun suddenly disappeared behind the kind of gray clouds that, when they show up in movies, look like clichés. It became rapidly cold, a wind arising that appeared intent on making up for the people-punishing time it had lost in the past week's more agreeable climate. And then, the rain.

I've heard tales of international pilgrims from sunnier lands coming to Ireland just to see the rain. If any were among our group that day on Máméan, they didn't just see it. Down sideways it came, like darts or little arrows, biting into the face; glasses protected my eyes, but soon fogged up; and the path became bumpier still, as we now had to watch where we put our feet lest a stray pothole invite one in. The mind wanders in such times and places. In this time and this place, mine wandered to blindness and music and something wonderful.

~

The cardboard slipcase for Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life* includes a facsimile of Mr. Wonder's signature, presumably written in 1976 when that particular extraordinary etching on the panorama of Being (to use Vaclav Havel's phrase) was recorded. Of course, Mr. Wonder is blind, and so his signature looks rather like that of a child just learning to write, or someone with a tremor trying to unlearn new and distressing habits of the hand. You look at the STEVLAND in block letters, spidery; when you're listening to *Songs in the Key of Life* you wonder (indeed) if any further evidence is required that blindness is only in the eye of the beholder. We were blind on Máméan, stumbling in rain so cold and sharp it seemed antagonistic. We were blind, not knowing where we were going other than up, being led by someone who would disavow any sense of being special or at least any more special than the rest of us. We were blind and hopeful because not being able to see what's in front has the knack of opening up the eye within, the one that makes things like *Songs in the Key of Life* possible. The eye within, on Máméan, was about to perceive something new.

Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth century German mystic, wrote that “the eye with which I see God is God’s eye seeing me.” Whatever your conception of God (and what a funny idea *that is*, that you could *conceive* God), poetry and science and philosophy agree: *how* you see determines *what* you see. You can be halfway up a mountain, for goodness’ sake, and pay no heed to thoughts of the ancient or the miraculous or the beautiful. You can just be pissed off by the rain. The rain doesn’t care, of course, and the rain on Máméan kept coming, relentlessly. And I was pissed off.

That which is considered a limitation, or even that which is mocked, is often a harbinger of wisdom. Van Gogh sold one painting in his lifetime, nobody believed Galileo, and people still make jokes about Stevie Wonder’s eyesight. I have sometimes wondered if the challenge of blindness also grants gifts. I hope—in fact, to listen to Steve Wonder’s music, it’s *obvious*—that physical darkness promotes inner light. Some of us know that the beautiful and the warm make more sense when we feel ugly and cold. What *we* knew, after what felt like several hours of stumbling up Máméan was that we needed something to change. It was too cold. Our faces felt like they were being set on fire by water being shot from a cannon hidden in a secret mountain cave, at the hands of an especially vicious strain of leprechaun. The fact that we were now turning our minds to one of the most absurd stereotypes of Irishness was the final sign that something needed to change. We needed to stop. We needed a shelter.

~

Máméan is home to one of St. Patrick’s holy wells—places of pilgrimage, restoration, and justice, where the subterranean water was not only a metaphor for life, but could help literally sustain it. There were times in

Ireland’s history when her people were not legally permitted to practice their religion, which, let’s face it, is another way of saying that there were times in Ireland’s history when the colonial authorities tried to stop her people from loving. Can’t be done, of course, though a little dexterity may be required on the part of those being oppressed. Holy wells sometimes became sites of political resistance, where folk would gather to reaffirm their community; they were also places where the work of inner healing could be marked, often by leaving a stone near the well as an emblem of a sorrow or a shame that the pilgrim wanted to leave behind. Patrick—and I mean the Patrick I choose. Not the Patrick who, once a year, gives Chicago an excuse to dye its river green, or anyone with a great-great-great-great-great-grandfather from the Aul Sod (note: if you call it the Aul Sod, you’re almost certainly not from there) to wear oversized hats that owe more to the tea party in Alice in Wonderland than Irish myths and legends. And certainly not the Patrick that inspires strangers to kiss the entire population of red-headed America. The Patrick I choose may have walked the Maamturk region, may have hung out around Máméan, may have even touched the well.

Or maybe not, but it doesn’t really matter. As the central figure in the most-told myth from perhaps the most misty-eyed and, shall we say, imaginative storytellers on earth, Patrick has unsurprisingly inspired narratives that would strain the credulity of even those who believe that My Little Ponies are real. We don’t actually know a lot about Patrick that can be taken as read. There were no snakes. He didn’t write anything about shamrocks. He wasn’t even Irish. But he did do something that warrants, at the very least, an annual parade, if not sainthood both religious and cultural: at a time when others saw us as targets for pillage or indentured

labor at best, the Patrick I choose, and there's as much evidence for this Patrick as for any other, was the first outsider to address us Irish as *human beings*. Not primitives or backwards or less-than. The primary point of Patrick is not that he converted Ireland to Christianity. It was that he considered us worthy to be loved in the first place. Like the 19th century Belfast bishop who instructed that he be buried in the corner of the unconsecrated ground where lay thousands of victims of a cholera epidemic thus sanctifying it and allaying their families' fears of permanent limbo, or the civil war-averting refusal to avenge that Nelson Mandela embodied on release from prison, or the effect of one droplet of lavender oil in a running bath: a little Patrick changed a lot.

~

We were at the top now.

And there it was.

A stone altar on a stone platform with a stone arch forming a ceiling, enclosed on three sides, open at the front, its shape evoking the natural cave-like opening in the rocks to the left, its aesthetic reminding onlookers and indwellers, I suppose, of hobbits and magical swords and the bloke who never actually kicked the snakes out of Ireland.

The rain still battered our faces. The wind still threatened to pick us up and cast us back down the hill. Some folk took what they thought was a step forward, but were lifted by their raincoat parachute a foot or two from where they had begun. But no one was going to turn around. We could see the shelter.

In ones and twos and clumps we arrived at the gape; John ushered each in quickly—on

other days there would be a priest behind the altar, and pilgrims would have to stand or sit on rocks in front. On days when the rain feels like a plague of angry pine needles, no such ceremony is required. Forty-three of us squeezed in behind the stone table, against the stone walls, under the stone ceiling, planted on the stone floor. If we had not huddled before, we were expert huddlers now, human sardines canned on a Conamara mountain, sheltered from the rain.

And now stuck, sweaty, freezing. Alive, grateful—what next?

John spoke. "Gareth, will you tell us that story, the one about the Jack Daniel's distillery and the funny tour guide? It will warm us."

~

We were tired as the guy who minds the holy grail for seven hundred years before Indiana Jones arrives and demolishes his house: feet wrecked, breathing heavy, wondering just what had been the point. Well now we were *under* the point, huddled into the point, exhausted and leaning up against the point. My friend Kevin muttered something about being stuck in the back corner, though he wasn't the only uncomfortable one—the architect of this shelter had not the foresight to provide deck chairs or hammocks, so while we were no longer getting wet, there would be sore backs and tired feet to contend with tomorrow. But the privilege of concerning ourselves with such things had yet to contend with the most powerful substance human beings have been given.

The story.

Nothing can defeat a story. Once an idea takes hold it can't be erased: you can only replace it with a stronger one. Hopefully a better one. So on the day when the first story was rain and cold and wind and fear, I unfolded a new story about a droll tour guide in a whiskey distillery several thousand miles away, whom I had met a decade before, and who told a tale that would lengthen the mane of an already very shaggy dog, regarding money and power and family and love and fermentation and security and sorrow and a lesson learned. In the telling, the rain let up not one drop. In the telling, the wind howled as loud as before. In the telling, the thermometer did not move.

~

It came to me later, after we had descended the mountain, after the retreat had ended, after even John had died, his crossing occurring just seven months after our Mamean endeavor, one night in France with no warning, his beloved by his side. It came to me after John's body was in one sense gone, merged with the earth of County Clare, his father and mother and uncle also there, and the mountains and the sea boundary witnesses to the life of a true mystic. Still his words and the sheer benevolent force—the insistence—of his presence remained. And it remains. So not in a flash, but over years of wrestling with the fear that happens to be the loudest song in my shadow's repertoire, I finally understood that the metaphors we use

On Máméan, we hit into fearful weather. But it did not kill us. We were sheltered. And in the shelter I had the unusual experience of hearing my voice telling a story that evoked what can only be called *powerful* laughter—of the kind that bonds you not only to your fellows, but to *yourself*, breaking through the calcified boundaries of cynicism and hopelessness to create something like what happens when two old lovers have their candles lit and their clothes off and their eyes opened: yes, that's *you*—someone I thought I knew, but who I'm seeing for the first time. *You*—whose reflected gaze deepens my own self-love. *You*—whom I love. *You*—who teach me how to love the world. That laughter—the laughter of those who, for a moment, are so overcome with joy that they may briefly not be able to *breathe*: that laughter can break through and help you become the most powerful agent of healing your life will ever know: Your Own Best Friend. It is the shelter of becoming your own best friend that will do for you what your fear is most afraid of. It is not a battle. It is an invitation to something new, and perhaps even something that sounds antithetical to everything you've heard about how to deal with fear.

For a shelter does not defeat the rain. And a shelter does not argue with the rain. And the shelter does not transcend the rain. It simply makes it irrelevant.

Gareth



A BLESSING FOR FRIENDSHIP WITH YOUR OWN SOUL

You deserve to be known by the miracle of a day.

You are cradled through the night, the dusk affirming yesterday's work.

You don't just wake. You awaken unto something.

The miracle of a day.

What can happen in a day?

Everything.

Stand in front of the mirror and repeat twenty times

'I'm super-cool, and beautiful, and thrillingly alive.'

In the shower, be gentle with your skin, as if you were caressing a Rodin sculpture.

Pick up the first piece of trash you see, and turn it into an origami Yoda.

Make breakfast as if you were making love, and eat it that way too.

Make sure no one's looking.

This time is for you.

To ready yourself for the miracle of a day.

Your day.

Go out into the world of wonder - trees and cars and roads and buildings and books and restaurants and computers and desks and the greatest wonder: people!

Oh, people, screwed-up and gorgeous; alive and dying; deceitful and trying; and trying hard to be good.

They need you.

We need you.

Show us your love, and your origami Yoda.

Hold yourself like you believe in your own glory - not more than or less than others, but inviting them into the same.

Take delight in your foibles. Laugh when you lose your keys (again). Smile a wry smile at the first fifteen fantasies that interrupt your conference call.

Stretch your arms and legs and neck and let your voice transcend Whitman, for goodness' sake: make it a beatific yawp!

Take yourself out to lunch and enjoy the sacrament of interruption that is queuing and choosing and eating.

Look up at the sky!

Look up at the sky!

Look up at the sky!

This is your roof.

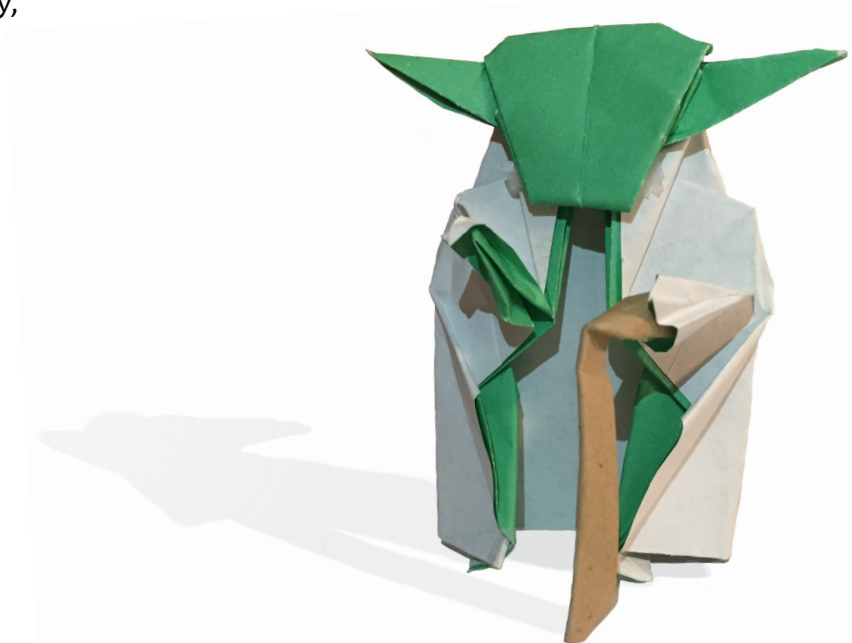
Know that you're not the only one thinking this.
And that both of you are right.

Then, when the working day is winding down,
reaching itself to give way to rest and play,
find someone who needs your smile.

Give it to them. And you'll never lose it.

May you find the Anam Cara within.
Soul Friendship with yourself,
that opens unto others,
makes a home for them,
and transfigures your inner life.

May you be the friend to yourself
that we are all waiting for.





The Porch is a project of Ireland Retreat, Inc. and nurtured into being by a community of people who want to tell a better story, and make a better world. We invite you to join the conversation at theporchmagazine.com

Cover image: Exterieur ZINKEN LEIEN OP KERKDAK - Tzum, Netherlands (Metal shingles on St, Johns Church) Wikimedia Commons