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Benedictus

John O'Donohue

About the Book

In sharing words of grace and wisdom, John O'Donohue's blessings offer us shelter and comfort in this often troubled world.

As we open our eyes to the natural beauty and splendour of the world that surrounds us, we are inspired to confront the key thresholds of human experience. Guided by these blessings and by a reassuring vision of hope and possibility for the present and the future, we begin to recognize that our relationships with one another – and even the most seemingly insignificant rituals which frame our days – are crucial to our emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

Drawing on the heritage of ancient Celtic thought and imagination, *Benedictus* is a sanctuary of peace and a gentle, illuminating gift of light on our journey through this world.

BENEDICTUS

A Book of Blessings

John O'Donohue



TRANSWORLD IRELAND

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Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781409081258

www.randomhouse.co.uk

TRANSWORLD IRELAND
an imprint of The Random House Group Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA
www.rbooks.co.uk

BENEDICTUS
A TRANSWORLD IRELAND BOOK: 9781848270121

First published in Great Britain
in 2007 by Bantam Press
a division of Transworld Publishers
Transworld Ireland edition published 2010

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*For Olivia Leonard
Soul to soul
Through all the years*

Also by John O'Donohue

ANAM CÀRA
ETERNAL ECHOES
DIVINE BEAUTY
PERSON ALS VERMITTLUNG

Poetry

CONAMARA BLUES
ECHOES OF MEMORY

For more information on John O'Donohue and his books, see
his
website at www.johndonohue.com

INTRODUCTION



THERE IS A quiet light that shines in every heart. It draws no attention to itself though it is always secretly there. It is what illuminates our minds to see beauty, our desire to seek possibility and our hearts to love life. Without this subtle quickening our days would be empty and wearisome, and no horizon would ever awaken our longing. Our passion for life is quietly sustained from somewhere in us that is wedded to the energy and excitement of life. This shy inner light is what enables us to recognize and receive our very presence here as blessing. We enter the world as strangers who all at once become heirs to a harvest of memory, spirit and dream that has long preceded us and will now enfold, nourish and sustain us. The gift of the world is our first blessing.

It would be infinitely lonely to live in a world without blessing. The word blessing evokes a sense of warmth and protection; it suggests that no life is alone or unreachable. Each life is clothed in raiment of spirit that secretly links it to everything else. Though suffering and chaos befall us, they can never quench that inner light of providence.

While our culture is all gloss and pace on the outside, within it is too often haunted and lost. The commercial edge of so-called 'progress' has cut away a huge region of human tissue and webbing that held us in communion with each other. We have fallen out of belonging. Consequently, when we stand before crucial thresholds in our lives, we have no rituals to protect, encourage and guide us as we cross over into the unknown. For such crossings, we need to find new words. What is nearest to the heart is often farthest from the word. This book is an attempt to reach into that tenuous territory of change that we must traverse

when a threshold invites us. Each blessing is intended to present a minimal psychic portrait of the geography of change it names. Without warning, thresholds can open directly before our feet. These thresholds are also the shorelines of new worlds. The blessings here attempt to offer a brief geography of the new experience and some pathways of presence through it.

It has been a daunting undertaking over several years to create these blessings. A blessing evokes a privileged intimacy. It touches that tender membrane where the human heart cries out to its divine ground. In the ecstasy and loneliness of one's life, there are certain times when a blessing is nearer to us than any other person or thing. A blessing is not a sentiment or a question; it is a gracious invocation where the human heart pleads with the divine heart. There is nothing more intimate in a life than the secret under-territory where it anchors. Regardless of our differences in religion, language or concept, there is no heart that is without this inner divine reference. It is the modest wish of this book to illuminate the gift that a blessing can be, the doors it can open, the healing and transfiguration it can bring. Our times are desperate for meaning and belonging.

In the parched deserts of post-modernity a blessing can be like the discovery of a fresh well. It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless each other. I believe each of us can bless. When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plenitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighbourhood of loving kindness. In the light and reverence of blessing a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way.

In a dead wall a new window opens; in dense darkness a path starts to glimmer and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew. It is ironic that so often we continue to live like paupers though our inheritance of spirit is so vast.

The quiet eternal that dwells in our souls is silent and subtle; in the activity of blessing it emerges to embrace and nurture us. Let us begin to learn how to bless each other. Whenever you give a blessing, a blessing returns to enfold you.

A blessing is a difficult form to render. I have endeavoured to write them as poetically as possible but they are not poems. A poem is an utterly independent linguistic object. It begins with its first syllable and ends with the last; in between it is its own force-field. In contrast, the blessing form has an eye to the outside in order to embrace and elevate whatever is happening to someone. It is direct address, driven by immediacy and care. A poem is inevitably more oblique; it works deep underneath conversation.

This sequence of blessings follows seven rhythms of the human journey: Beginnings, Desires, Thresholds, Homecomings, States of Heart, Callings and Beyond Endings. The temptation in writing blessings is to employ the word 'God' at every juncture. I have chosen not to do this. Firstly, it would be utterly repetitive; secondly, the word 'God' is too huge to allow any other word to breathe beside it.

Furthermore, it is unnecessary; God is omnipresent and life itself is the primal sacrament, namely, *the* visible sign of invisible grace. The structures of our experience are the windows into the divine. When we are true to the call of experience, we are true to God.

The language of blessing is invocation, a calling forth. This is why the word 'may' occurs throughout the book; it is a word of benediction. It imagines and wills the fulfilment of desire. In the evocation of our blessings here, the word 'may' is the spring through which the Holy Spirit is invoked to surge into presence and effect. The Holy

Spirit is the subtle presence and secret energy behind every blessing.

Each person has a unique intimacy with God. I have kept these blessing forms open and not particularized their divine source; for me personally, when I bless, I do it in the name and spirit of Jesus. At the end of the book I include a poetic evocation of the infinite kindness in his gaze. The book concludes with a poetic essay, 'To Retrieve the Lost Art of Blessing'; here I explore what blessing is, where it meets us and how the Celtic imagination framed so much of life in blessing.

May we all receive blessing upon blessing. And may we realize our power to bless, heal and renew each other.

BEGINNINGS



1

THERE ARE DAYS when Conamara is wreathed in blue Tuscan light. The mountains seem to waver as though they were huge dark ships on a distant voyage. I love to climb up into the silence of these vast autonomous structures. What seems like a pinnacled summit from beneath becomes a level plateau when you arrive there. Born in a red explosion of ascending fire, the granite lies cold, barely marked by the millions of years of rain and wind. On this primeval ground I feel I have entered into a pristine permanence, a continuity here that knew the wind hundreds of millions of years before a human face ever felt it.

When we arrive into the world, we enter this ancient sequence. All our beginnings happen within this continuity. Beginnings often frighten us because they seem like lonely voyages into the unknown. Yet, in truth, no beginning is empty or isolated. We seem to think that beginning is a setting out from a lonely point along some line of direction into the unknown. This is not the case. Shelter and energy come alive when a beginning is embraced. Goethe says that once the commitment is made, destiny conspires with us to support and realize it. We are never as alone in our beginnings as it might seem at the time. A beginning is ultimately an invitation to open towards the gifts and growth that are stored up for us. To refuse to begin can be an act of great self-neglect.

Perhaps beginnings make us anxious because we did not begin ourselves. Others began us. Being conceived and born, we eventually enter upon ourselves already begun, already there. Instinctively we grasp onto and continue within the continuity in which we find ourselves. Indeed, our very life here depends directly on continuous acts of beginning; but these beginnings are out of our hands; they decide themselves. This is true of our breathing and our heartbeat. Beginning precedes us, creates us and constantly takes us to new levels and places and people. There is nothing to fear in the act of beginning. More often than not, it knows the journey ahead better than we ever could. Perhaps the art of harvesting the secret riches of our lives is best achieved when we place profound trust in the act of beginning. Risk might be our greatest ally. To live a truly creative life, we always need to cast a critical look at where we presently are, attempting always to discern where we have become stagnant and where new beginning might be ripening. There can be no growth if we do not remain open and vulnerable to what is new and different. I have never seen anyone take a risk for growth that was not rewarded a thousand times over.

There is a certain innocence about beginning, with its excitement and promise of something new. But this will only emerge through undertaking some voyage into the unknown. And no one can foretell what the unknown might yield up. There are journeys we have begun that have brought us great inner riches and refinement; but we had to travel through dark valleys of difficulty and suffering. Had we known at the beginning what the journey would demand of us, we may never have set out. Yet the rewards and gifts became vital to who we are. Through the innocence of beginning we are often seduced into growth.

Sometimes the greatest challenge is to actually begin; there is something deep in us that conspires to remain

within safe boundaries, to stay the same. Years ago my neighbour here set out to build his new home. He had just stripped the sod off the field to begin digging out the foundation, when an old man from the village happened to come by. He blessed the work and said: 'You have the worst of it behind you now.' My neighbour laughed and said: 'But I have only just begun.' The old man said: 'That's what I mean. You have begun; and to make a real beginning is the most difficult act.' There is an old Irish proverb which says: *Tús maith leath na hoibre* – A good beginning is half the work. There seems to be a wisdom here when one thinks of all the considerations, hesitation and uncertainty that can claim our hearts for such a long time before the actual act of beginning happens. Sometimes a period of preparation is necessary, where the idea of the beginning can gestate and refine itself; yet quite often we unnecessarily postpone and equivocate when we should simply take the risk and leap into a new beginning.

The Greeks believed that time had secret structure. There was the moment of 'epiphany' when time suddenly opened and something was revealed in luminous clarity. There was the moment of '*krisis*' when time got entangled and directions became confused and contradictory. There was also the moment of '*kairos*'; this was the propitious moment. Time opened up in kindness and promise. All the energies cohered to offer a fecund occasion of initiative, creativity and promise. Part of the art of living wisely is to learn to recognize and attend to such profound openings in one's life. In the letters between Boris Pasternak and Olga Ivanskya, collected in *A Captive of Time*, there is the beautiful recognition: 'When a great moment knocks on the door of your life, its sound is often no louder than the beating of your heart and it is very easy to miss it.' To live a conscious life, we need to constantly refine our listening.

The Jewish tradition believed that time had its own psychic seasons. In the book of Ecclesiastes there is a list of the correspondences between certain events and their proper time:

To everything, there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace.

Before it occurs, a beginning can be a long time in preparation. This is why some beginnings take off with great assuredness and one can instinctively recognize that the right direction has been chosen. Without any struggle, one enters into a fluency that seemed to have been awaiting one's choice. Other beginnings are awkward and slow and it takes considerable time before the new path opens or welcomes one. Sometimes beginnings can catch us unawares. Often when something is ending, we discover within it the spore of new beginning and a whole new train of possibility is in motion before we even realize it.

When the heart is ready for a fresh beginning, unforeseen things can emerge. And in a sense, this is exactly what a beginning does. It is an opening for surprises. Surrounding the intention and the act of beginning, there are always exciting possibilities. This inevitably excites artists. So much can actually happen between the moment the brush is taken into the hand and the moment it touches the canvas. Such beginnings have their own mind and they invite and unveil new gifts and arrivals in one's life. Beginnings are new horizons that want to be seen; they are not regressions or repetitions. Somehow they win clearance and become fiercely free of the grip of the past. What is the new horizon in you that wants to be seen?