

"Top of the Hill"
Homily of March 16, 2003
by Kate Nauer

John O'Donohue is an Irish poet, a priest, and a storyteller. He is also the author of a number of books on Celtic spirituality, two of which I would recommend to you, "Anam Cara" and "Eternal Echoes."

Recently, I was at a conference in Los Angeles, and I had the opportunity to attend a talk that John gave. The title of his talk was, "The Poetics of Dreaming." In short, what he suggested is that, each day as the sun goes down and we surrender to sleep, we open ourselves to great potential and possibility through the work of our dreams. In essence, a world to the sacred opens to us, that we might not dare consider in our awake moments.

He suggests that our waking moments tend to be moments that we live on the surface. We move from one thing to the next, taking care of this responsibility and the next, almost unaware of the natural rhythm of our day, and missing opportunities for transformation. And we know how our days can become ordinary and predictable like that, because as our world grows bigger and the pace quickens, we struggle to keep up. We find ourselves communicating by syncing this calendar with that computer, and text-messaging friends, rather than making a phone call or writing a letter. You see, in our rush to become the first, the fastest, and the best in everything, we are risking losing a sense of the sacred in our awake world.

Our sleeping moments, on the other hand, are filled with fantasy and potential and even danger. And it's odd, but it seems to me that, perhaps, we are most awake when we are dreaming. Whether we are dreaming during our sleep or we are dreaming while we are awake, we no longer exist on the surface of life. Instead, we have surrendered ourselves to the world of our dreams, to that which is perhaps waiting to be born in us in the light of day.

In many ways, when we sleep, we become like children again. We become trusting, creative, and resilient, just like the disciples that day of Transfiguration with Jesus. And, you know how young kids and young people risk, and they are not ashamed to make believe or pretend. I think it is one of the things that I like so much about being a mom or about the work that I get to do as a youth minister. I get to be a part of their dreams, a part of their potential every day. Because, out of their creativity and their trust, their dreams often accompany them into the daylight. You see, they tend to be hopeful and they tend to think outside of the box. They see the glass as half-full, rather than half-empty. It's as if they have a sense of something sacred that lives just below the surface of what's going on, just as did the disciples that day of the Transfiguration.

With young people, in fact with people who are young at heart, everything is new and everything has potential. My seven-year-old daughter can turn a tree in the backyard into her best friend for an entire afternoon of play. And the teens, some nights at youth group or at confirmation, I sit and I am actually very, very amazed as I watch them turn characters of doubt and darkness into shapes of hope and possibility and transformation. And, the best thing is that they don't have the answers or the responses to these situations in the beginning, but, because they trust and because they make space for the potential, incredible solutions and possibilities come into being.

So, people who are young at heart have something to teach us about the sacred in our own lives. I'd invite you to watch them as they move through their day, because they are wide-eyed. They are fully awake, and they are curious. And, I think it is this curiosity that must have been a pre-requisite if you were to be a disciple of Jesus, because who else but the curious and the dreamers are going to follow Jesus to the top of the hill? Who else are going to follow him to lift depression, to name the darkness in the present, and to challenge the social and religious structures of the day. Those were the kind of people that Jesus invited to the top of the hill with Him that day of His Transfiguration.

Now, I imagine that they were somewhat peaceful as well, but, no doubt they were vital. They walked with a sort of humility, I am sure, that set them apart. But, more so, they walked with a sense of purpose, intention and trust, trust in something that was unfolding, but was not yet complete. They experienced something in Jesus that was greater than their fear of embracing the other. They had an experience, in Jesus, of trust meeting the sacred. And whatever fear or self-doubt they may have been experiencing in their lives at that time, that was overshadowed by the trust that they had placed in Jesus.

It's much like that of a child with his or her parent. And, perhaps, it is one of the things that Jesus meant when He tells us that we are going to have to become like small children and trust if we are going to enter the kingdom. We are encouraged to become vulnerable. We are encouraged to make room for the unexpected, the not-yet in our lives. And part of that journey then, is to be agreeable. In fact, part of that journey is to be hospitable to that which is unfamiliar, or different from us. Like the disciples, we are being challenged to risk and to be part of a new creation, being challenged to be new with one another. God knows, there is plenty of space in our world for healing and for building bridges of hope and of understanding.

So, during the season of darkness seeking the light, perhaps we are being asked to consider a sort of transfiguration for ourselves. Perhaps we are being asked to consider where in our lives we can become more like Jesus that we might bring the light to those

dark places. Certainly there are areas of our Church and areas of our government that can use the light of Jesus. During this season can we begin to name the darkness where it dwells? And then can we seek gently, gently to bring the light there? We see examples of this "naming the darkness." We see it in the anti-war and peace demonstrations. We see it in the courage and the witness of the victims of sexual abuse. And if we examine our own lives, I am sure we can see examples of it right there, examples of trust meeting the sacred.

Transfiguration, then, is the reason Jesus invited the disciples to the top of the hill that day. And it is the reason that Jesus invites us to the top of the hill today, not so much to see the transfiguration in Jesus but to begin to appreciate the potential for transfiguration and transformation in ourselves and in our own lives.

It reminds me of the story of an elder and a student of spiritual discipline. One day, the elder says to the student of spiritual discipline, in talking to him about loss and fear, "You know, I feel as if I have two wolves living in my heart. One wolf is full of anger and venom and resentment. And the other wolf is full of love and compassion." So, the young one asks the elder, "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?" The old one answers, "The one that I feed." The old one is reminding the young one that we always have potential, in life, we will always have potential for anger, fear, and resentment. But we also have potential, great potential, for hope and healing and transformation. It depends on which wolf we feed.

A life of faith, then, has its demands. It demands a different response, and it demands a different rhythm. It demands a rhythm that makes time for rest, reflection and recreation, because, if we are going to be people of transformation, people who bring the light into the world, if we are going to be people who feed the wolf of love, we must look for ways in our lives to live beyond the surface, to make space, to dream those places into being and to travel to those places where the trust and the sacred can meet. During this season of Lent, as we travel towards the light of Easter, I have three suggestions that might help us to stand at the top of the hill with Jesus.

The first suggestion is this, to name a darkness in our own lives, and then, with great trust, to bring that darkness to prayer, to invite Jesus in and then to be open to where it is Jesus asks us to go with that.

The second suggestion I have is to name a dream, to name a dream in our lives that we have maybe for our families, or for our world, or for our church, and then to invite God in to accompany us as we take one small step to make that dream come true, and to listen as God delights that we had the courage to dream and the courage to invite God in.

And finally, to take a moment, maybe sometime this week or next, and to call to mind someone who has helped us along our journey from darkness to light, someone who has helped us experience the trust meeting the sacred. And then don't e-mail or text-message or cell phone that person, but make a time with that person, take a walk, take that person to lunch, and thank that person for showing you that experience of trust meeting the sacred.

So, during this time of naming the darkness and seeking the light, may we be a people who feed the wolf of love and compassion together. Amen.