

Anam Cara and the Essence of True Friendship

by Maria Popova

Aristotle laid out the philosophical foundation of friendship as the art of holding up a mirror to each other's souls. Two millennia later, Emerson contemplated its two pillars of truth and tenderness. Another century later, C.S. Lewis wrote: "Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival."

But nowhere do the beauty, mystery, and soul-sustenance of friendship come more vibrantly alive than in the 1997 masterwork *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (public library) by the late, great Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue (January 1, 1956–January 4, 2008), titled after the Gaelic for "soul-friend" — a beautiful concept that elegantly encapsulates what Aristotle and Emerson and Lewis articulated in many more words.

O'Donohue examines the essence and origin of the term:

In the Celtic tradition, there is a beautiful understanding of love and friendship. One of the fascinating ideas here is the idea of soul-love; the old Gaelic term for this is *anam cara*. *Anam* is the Gaelic word for soul and *cara* is the word for friend. So *anam carain* the Celtic world was the "soul friend." In the early Celtic church, a person who acted as a teacher, companion, or spiritual guide was called an *anam cara*. It originally referred to someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life. With the *anam cara* you could share your inner-most self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention, morality, and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the "friend of your soul." The Celtic understanding did not set limitations of space or time on the soul. There is no cage for the soul. The soul is a divine light that flows into you and into your Other. This art of belonging awakened and fostered a deep and special companionship.

Illustration by Maurice Sendak from 'Let's Be Enemies' by Janice May Udry. [Click image for more.](#)

The kind of friendship one finds in an *anam cara*, O'Donohue argues, is a very special form of love — not the kind that leads us to pit the platonic against the romantic but something much larger and more transcendent:

In this love, you are understood as you are without mask or pretension. The superficial and functional lies and half-truths of social acquaintance fall away, you can be as you really are. Love allows understanding to dawn, and understanding is precious. Where you

are understood, you are at home. Understanding nourishes belonging. When you really feel understood, you feel free to release yourself into the trust and shelter of the other person's soul... This art of love discloses the special and sacred identity of the other person. Love is the only light that can truly read the secret signature of the other person's individuality and soul. Love alone is literate in the world of origin; it can decipher identity and destiny.

But being an anam cara requires of a purposeful presence — it asks that we show up with absolute integrity of intention. That interior intentionality, O'Donohue suggests, is what sets the true anam cara apart from the acquaintance or the casual friend — a distinction all the more important today, in a culture where we throw the word "friend" around all too hastily, designating little more than perfunctory affiliation. But this faculty of showing up must be an active presence rather than a mere abstraction — the person who declares herself a friend but shirks when the other's soul most needs seeing is not an anam cara.

O'Donohue writes:

The heart learns a new art of feeling. Such friendship is neither cerebral nor abstract. In Celtic tradition, the anam cara was not merely a metaphor or ideal. It was a soul-bond that existed as a recognized and admired social construct. It altered the meaning of identity and perception. When your affection is kindled, the world of your intellect takes on a new tenderness and compassion... You look and see and understand differently. Initially, this can be disruptive and awkward, but it gradually refines your sensibility and transforms your way of being in the world. Most fundamentalism, greed, violence, and oppression can be traced back to the separation of idea and affection.

The anam cara perspective is sublime because it permits us to enter this unity of ancient belonging.

O'Donohue borrows Aristotle's notion of friendship and stretches it to a more expansive understanding:

A friend is a loved one who awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you.

[...]

The one you love, your anam cara, your soul friend, is the truest mirror to reflect your soul. The honesty and clarity of true friendship also brings out the real contour of your spirit.

Anam Cara is a soul-stretching read in its entirety, exploring such immutable human concerns as love, work, aging, and death through the timeless lens of ancient Celtic wisdom. Complement it with poet and philosopher David Whyte on the true meaning of friendship, love, and heartbreak, then treat yourself to O'Donohue's magnificent *On Being* conversation with Krista Tippett — one of the last interviews he gave before his sudden and tragic death.

If you realize how vital to your whole spirit — and being and character and mind and health — friendship actually is, you will take time for it... [But] for so many of us ... we have to be in trouble before we remember what's essential... It's one of the lonelinesses of humans that you hold on desperately to things that make you miserable and ... you

only realize what you have when you're almost about to lose it.