How to Bless Each Other
by Maria Popova

Every once in the bluest moon, if you are lucky, you encounter someone with such powerful and generous light in their eyes that they rekindle the lost light within you and return it magnified; someone whose calm, kind, steady gaze penetrates the very center of your being and, refusing to look away from even the most shadowy parts of you, falls upon you like a benediction.

That we can do this for each other, but that it happens so rarely, is both the great miracle and the great tragedy, for there is no loneliness like the loneliness of having your light unmet.

The great Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue (January 1, 1956–January 4, 2008) takes up these immense and intimate questions in the opening pages of his altogether wonderful final book To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings (public library) — his parting gift to the world, published just before his untimely death, celebrating “the gift that a blessing can be, the doors it can open, the healing and transfiguration it can bring” and inviting us to “rediscover our power to bless one another.”

Art by Coralie Bickford Smith from The Fox and the Star

He writes:

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.

The even greater blessing is our presence here together, as mirrors and magnifiers of each other’s light. “Whenever you give a blessing, a blessing returns to enfold you,” O’Donohue reminds us. At their best, at their rarest, those moments of profound light-to-light connection are thresholds, portals to transformation, invitations to a more radiant life.

With an eye to “that tenuous territory of change that we must traverse when a threshold
invites us,” O’Donohue writes:

Without warning, thresholds can open directly before our feet... In the ecstasy and loneliness of one’s life, there are certain times when blessing is nearer to us.

Figure study for The Spirit of Light, Edwin Austin Abbey, 1989.

To step across the threshold with courage and openheartedness is to honor the truth and sanctity of our experience, of our light — it is to bless ourselves:

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.

Complement with a blind hero of the French resistance on how to live in light, a Baldwin-lensed meditation on the light between us, and David Whyte’s “Blessing for the Light,” inspired by John O’Donohue, then revisit O’Donohue on why we fall in love and the essence of friendship.