

Above ground

An older, retired priest, I knew, when asked, "How are you?" would simply reply with two words: "Above ground." Obviously, he is no longer "above ground." He is "below ground." Another person, I know used to say, when asked the same question, would say, "Every day, I am above ground, and not below, is a gift. It's a joy to be alive."

I suppose the hardest thing for anyone of us to accept is to accept that we are loved. Many of us grew up with a conditional kind of love. Often, the idea of being loved was played out with promises of "either or." So often, "If" was injected into the equation. "If you..., then you can..." Reward and punishment became the pattern. Other times, it was played out in the comparison game of "Why aren't you like..." "Why aren't you as smart as..." "Why don't you work as hard as..."

I wonder what would happen to us if we stopped judging ourselves; stopped beating ourselves over the head, stopped comparing ourselves with others, stopped letting other people's expectations dictate our lives; stopped trampling on our own unique dreams; stopped determining our success or failure in life based on what we achieved or failed to achieve, rather than who we are as loved persons.

This past summer, I took some friends from Mississippi on a trip to the Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland. The forty five minute boat ride allowed us to drink in the salt air and enjoy the sea breeze as the boat bobbed up and down in the wake of its generated waves. Sitting beside me on the open deck was a gentleman. In his mid-fifties, he was spending two weeks riding around Ireland on a bike. He was from Holland. We began to talk about places he had visited and suggested other places for him to see. I suggested one place for him which was the Burren District, an area where tropical plants grew where, according to the climate, they should not grow. Then, the man said, "Isn't that where John Donohue was born." Our conversation zeroed in on this priest who wedded the philosophy of Hagel with theology and the idea of befriending our life, love, and environment which become our "Anam Cara" or "soul friend" on our journey through life."

The prologue of O'Donohue's book, "Anam Cara," begins with: "it is strange to be here. The mystery never leaves you alone. Behind your image, below your words, above your thoughts, the silence of another world waits. A world lives within you. No one else can bring you news of this world. Through the opening of the mouth, we bring out sounds from the mountain beneath the soul. These sounds are words. The world is full of words. There are so many talking all the time, loudly, quietly, in rooms, on streets, on television, on radio, in the paper, in books. The noise of words keep what we call the world there for us. We take each other's sounds and make patterns, predictions, benedictions and blasphemies. Each day, our tribe of language holds what we call the world together. Yet, the uttering of the word reveals how each of us relentlessly creates, Everyone is an artist. Each person brings sound out of silence and coaxes the invisible to become visible."

I thought of that solitary figure from Holland, peddling his bike around Ireland, amid the sound of passing cars, busily traveling to more important places. Yet, he could drink in the sounds of nature all around him, the call of the tame and wild animals, the smells of the heather and freshly cut peat, the gentle breeze from the lakes that caressed his face, the tall stature of the mountains that both challenging and protecting him. In his own thoughts and peddling power, he was able to coax the invisible out to join him on his journey.

Tomorrow morning, my first outdoor journey will be along the country road by the side of my house, where I can hear the call of nature as well as the call deep within my personhood inviting me to embrace the invisible in the visible I will be grateful to enjoy another day above ground, blessed to appreciate life as a gift of love.