

## DECEMBER BOOK SUMMARY

By Dan Brent

### *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

John O'Donohue, Harper, 1997, 231 pp., \$15

*"May there come across the waters a path of yellow moonlight to bring you safely home." (p.v)*

These lines are from the author's poem with which he opens the book. And the Irish wisdom in the book is the yellow moonlight to guide the reader home!

"Anam Cara" is – in Gaelic – the "soul friend", the person to whom you can safely trust your heart and life. The human heart, O'Donohue attests, is never fully born. At least not until love embraces it. "Love is like the dawn breaking within you." (p.5) But "we do not need to go out to find love; rather, we need to be still and let love discover us." (p.11) Jesus "is the secret *anam cara* of every individual." (p.15) And Gaelic culture everywhere alerts us that "the divine is present in others." (p.18) So "a friend is a loved one who awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you." (p.29)

Next the book addresses our need to recognize the friend within us. "A world lies hidden behind each human face." (p.41) Our senses give us marvelous contacts. Sight is "the mother of intimacy bringing everything close to us." Hearing brings us back to the heartbeat of our mothers. "Music changes the way we experience time." Touch "brings presence home."

Attention to our inner self prompts the suggestion that "only in your solitude will you come upon your own beauty." (p.103) And "you withdraw from the world to get a clearer glimpse of who you are." (p.108) Modern technology, O'Donohue says, is one of the great destroyers of privacy.

In his chapter on work, he notes that we are attached to motion and change. And these elements are built into nature. "Tide upon tide repeats its dance against the shore." (p.126) The challenge is to find ways to give expression to our internal selves. Work is the answer. "Our work should be the place where the soul can enjoy becoming visible." (p.134) Ideally, work is done out of the appreciation of who you are. We ought not become prisoners of our work roles. He cites a London tombstone: "Here lies Jeremy Brown, born a man and died a grocer." (p.149)

Next O'Donohue turns to aging. We are fascinated with the circle because it suggests a timelessness like the seasons. ("When one flower blooms, it is spring everywhere.") The Celtic cross simply adds a circle to the stark crossbars. Old age is part of the natural flow of things. "Transience is the force of time that makes a ghost of every experience. . . .

There never was a day yet that did not get buried in the graveyard of the night." (p.170) As we age, our life experiences get gathered in a place called memory. And there they await us. The mistakes and regrets of our lives are healed by the compassion we have learned in dealing with others.

Finally, the chapter on death counters the natural fear with the optimism of Irish faith. "You are going home to where no shadow, pain, or darkness can ever touch you again." (p.206) In coping with the death of a loved one, the author says, "In the Celtic tradition, there is a great sense that the dead do not live very far away." (p.210) And "our friends among the dead really mind us and look out for us." (p.228)

If you're Irish, the book is an opportunity to bask in the stories, sayings, and wisdom of your ancestors. If you're not Irish, you'll enjoy borrowing from the insights of this very faith-filled culture.