

Beginnings

John O'Donohue from *To Bless the Space Between Us*

There are days when Conamara is wreathed in blue Tuscan light. The mountains seem to waver as though they were a huge dark voyage. I love to climb up into the silence of these vast autonomous structures. What seems like a pinnacled summit from beneath becomes a level plateau when you arrive there. Born in a red explosion of ascending fire, the granite lies cold, barely marked by the millions of years of rain and wind. On this primeval ground I feel I have entered into a pristine permanence, a continuity here that knew the wind hundreds of millions of years before a human face ever felt it.

When we arrive into the world, we enter this ancient sequence. All our beginnings happen within this continuity. Beginnings often frighten us because they seem like lonely voyages into the unknown. Yet, in truth, no beginning is empty or isolated. We seem to think that beginning is setting out from a lonely point along some line of direction into the unknown. This is not the case. Shelter and energy come alive when a beginning is embraced. Goethe says that once the commitment is made, destiny conspires with us to support and realize it. We are never as alone in our beginnings as it might seem at the time. A beginning is ultimately an invitation to open toward the gifts and growth that are stored up for us. To refuse to begin can be an act of great self-neglect.

Perhaps beginnings make us anxious because we did not begin ourselves. Others began us. Being conceived and born, we eventually enter upon ourselves already begun, already there. Instinctively we grasp onto and continue within the continuity in which we find ourselves. Indeed, our very life here depends directly on continuous acts of beginning. But these beginnings are out of our hands; they decide themselves. This is true of our breathing and our heartbeat. Beginning precedes us, creates us, and constantly takes us to new levels and places and people. There is nothing to fear in the act of beginning. More often than not it knows the journey ahead better than we ever could. Perhaps the art of harvesting the secret riches of our lives is best achieved when we place profound trust in the act of beginning. Risk might be our greatest ally. To live a truly creative life, we always need to cast a critical look at where we presently are, attempting always to discern where we have become stagnant and where new beginning might be ripening. There can be no growth if we do not remain open and vulnerable to what is new and different. I have never seen anyone take a risk for growth that was not rewarded a thousand times over.

There is a certain innocence about beginning, with its excitement and promise of something new. But this will emerge only through undertaking some voyage into the unknown. And no one can foretell what the unknown might yield. There are journeys we have begun that have brought us great inner riches and refinement; but we had to travel through dark valleys of difficulty and suffering. Had we known at the beginning what the journey would demand of us, we might never have set out. Yet the rewards and gifts became vital to who we are. Through the innocence of beginning we are often seduced into growth.

Sometimes the greatest challenge is to actually begin; there is something deep in us that conspires with what wants to remain within safe boundaries and stay the same. Years ago my neighbor here set out to build his new home. He had just stripped the sod off the field to begin digging out the foundation when an old man from the village happened to come by. He blessed the work and said, "You have the worst of it behind you now." My neighbor laughed and said, "But I have only just begun." The old man said, "That's what I mean. You have begun; and to make a real beginning is the most difficult act." There is an old Irish proverb that says, "Tus maith leath na hoibre." "A good beginning is half the work." There seems to be a wisdom here, when one considers all the considerations, hesitation, and uncertainty that can claim our hearts for such a long time before the actual act of beginning happens. Sometimes a period of preparation is necessary, where the idea of the beginning can gestate and refine itself; yet quite often we unnecessarily postpone and equivocate when we should simply take the risk and leap into a new beginning.

The Greeks believed that time had secret structure. There was the moment of Epiphany when time suddenly opened and something was revealed in luminous clarity. There was the moment of crisis when time got entangled and directions became confused and contradictory. There was also the moment of *kairos*; this was the propitious moment. Time opened up in kindness and promise. All the energies cohered to offer a fecund occasion of initiative, creativity, and promise. Part of the art of living wisely is to learn to recognize and attend to such profound openings in one's life. In the letters between Boris Pasternak and Olga Ivinskaya there is the beautiful recognition: "When a great moment knocks on the door of your life, its sound is often no louder than the beating of your heart and it is very easy to miss it." To live a conscious life, we need to constantly refine our listening.

The Jewish tradition believed that time had its own psychic seasons. In the book of Ecclesiastes there is a list of the correspondences between certain events and their proper time:

To every thing, there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace.

Before it occurs, a beginning can be a long time in preparation. This is why some beginnings take off with great assuredness, and one can instinctively recognize that the right direction has been chosen. Without any struggle, one enters into a fluency that seemed to have been awaiting one's choice. Other beginnings are awkward and slow, and it takes considerable time before the new path opens or welcomes one. Sometimes beginnings can catch us unawares. Often when something is ending we

discover within it the spore of new beginning, and a whole new train of possibility is in motion before we even realize it.

When the heart is ready for a fresh beginning, unforeseen things can emerge. And in a sense, this is exactly what a beginning does. It is an opening for surprises. Surrounding the intention and the act of beginning, there are always exciting possibilities. This inevitably excites artists. So much can actually happen between the moment the brush is taken into the hand and the moment it touches the canvas. Such beginnings have their own mind, and they invite and unveil new gifts and arrivals in one's life. Beginnings are new horizons that want to be seen; they are not regressions or repetitions. Somehow they win clearance and become fiercely free of the grip of the past. What is the new horizon in you that wants to be seen?