

## Anam cara

Michael and Sean grew up in Claremorris in County Mayo; they were best friends. They were seventeen when the War to End All Wars broke out in France. They enlisted together “to see what war was like, to see new countries, to get a gun, and to feel like a man.” They were replacements in the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division that was fighting in France.

The Somme (so-mmm) Offensive was one of the bloodiest battles in all of World War I. It was trench warfare where one side attacked the other side only to be pushed back into the trenches they had just left. There was little ground gained on either side. The word came down that there was going to be another charge in the morning. The artillery barrage started early and lasted until after the sunrise. At 9:00 that morning the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division went over the top and attacked the German lines. The Irish were beaten back to their trenches; they gained no ground. Michael landed in the bottom of the trench trying to catch his breath. After a time he began to look for Sean. Someone told him that they had seen his friend get shot somewhere out in no-mans-land. Michael wanted to find his friend but the captain would not let him go. Then came the first sounds of someone still alive out there. It was muffled at first and later it became clear that Sean was calling for Michael. Michael wanted to go for his friend but the captain was holding strong. He told Michael, “It would be suicide to go for Sean, he will most likely die before you get there and there would be a good chance of you dying yourself.” Michael took his chance when the Captain was not looking. He crawled out of the safety of the trench and ran to where he heard his friend calling his name. At that moment a German sentry called out and the guns from the German side opened up on the lone Irishman running across the field. Somehow Michael found Sean; he threw his wounded friend over his shoulder and ran back. By this time the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division was giving Michael and Sean covering fire. He made it back to the trench and fell in with Sean still on his shoulder. The captain ran over to Michael yelling that he would be shot for disobeying a direct order. Then the captain saw that Sean was dead, and he saw the blood gushing out of the fatal chest wound Michael had; he knew the boy was dying. He knelt down to the dying Irishman and said, “I told you it wouldn’t be worth it. Your friend is dead and you are mortally wounded.” “It was worth it, though sir,” Michael said. “How do you mean, worth it? I tell you your friend is dead.” “Yes, sir,” the boy answered, “but it was worth it, because when I got to him he was still alive, and he said to me, Michael, I knew you would come.”

From his *Meditation XVII*, John Donne (Dun) wrote:

*“No man is an island, entire of itself.”*

No one questions a need for solitude and refreshment in our lives, but faith tends to thrive when shared and experienced with another. Without the connections that a community gives us, we experience what some might call “spiritual loneliness.” We meet God not just by sitting alone in quiet corners but in and through the people we live, work and interact with as we go through life.

Aristotle said, “*Nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all other good things.*” We develop relationships because we are social beings. These

relationships may be as clear-cut as an acquaintance or they may have a deeper and a more sacred bond. Shakespeare wrote: *“The friends thou hast and their attention tried, grapple them to your soul with hoops of steel.”* A friend is a person who stirs your life in order to release those wild possibilities inside of you.

Augustine defined the word sacrament as *“a visible sign of invisible grace.”* For the ancient Celts, life was a chaotic and creative sacrament. Our existence, our life, is also a sacrament that is just as chaotic and creative as the ancient Celts. Friendship is that sweet blessing that frees us to feel the closeness of someone. Nowhere else is there such intimate and frightening access into the human mystery. If we are approached in friendship, the unknown, the mysterious, the harmful, and the frightening slowly give way to the hidden attractions we have with each other.

The ancient Celtic mind was neither orderly nor disorderly. The Celts brought together a blend of life and knowledge. The idea that the visible was separate from the invisible, time was separate from eternity, and the human separate from the divine was alien to them. Not concerned with dualism, they did not separate what they felt belonged together. Their imagination put together an organized uniqueness that embraced their humanity, their divinity, their environment, and the unknown. Their reality of friendship gave way to a world of symbolic imagination and unity. The Celtic mind had a beautiful understanding of love and friendship in the concept of the *anam cara*. In the old Gaelic language *anam* is the word for soul and *cara* is the word for friend. In ancient Celtic spirituality if you had a teacher, a companion, or a spiritual guide they were called your *anam cara*. You would share with them your private self, your heart and your mind. This friendship cut across all backgrounds, ethics, and morals. You had an ancient and everlasting link to the “friend of your soul.”

The Celts believed the soul was a divine light that flowed into you and into your *anam cara*. There were no limitations of space or time on the soul, no cage that could hold the soul. This belonging stirred and encouraged a deep and unique companionship.

Real friendship is not man-made or attained by an act of force. It is an act of recognition, ancient recognition that brings two people together. It is as if eons ago the clay of your body lay next to the clay of your *anam cara*. Then one day those two pieces separated and each distinct piece of clay began to rise into the clay vessel that we reside in today. But without knowing it we mourned the loss of the other. We wandered through the centuries longing to be together. This metaphor may help us understand how one day we meet someone on the street, at a lecture, a party, or a chance introduction and there is recognition. You have a flint moment, a spark of light within your inner darkness, and in that moment the embers of kinship begin to glow. There is an awakening, a sense of knowing. The door of ancient recognition opens and you are home again with your *anam cara*. Euripides said,

*“Two friends, one soul.”*

In friendship, an ancient circle closes.

The *anam cara* is God’s gift to us. Friendship is the nature of God. The ancient Celtic belief of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may have been the most magnificent expression of a rare intimacy. In the Celtic mind the trinity was the eternal source of friendship.

Jesus tells his disciples in John 15:15, *“I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you*

*friends.*” The literal translation of the word “friends” in this verse, from the Greek word *philos* (*fee-los*), is “loved one.” In this scripture, friendship is defined by Jesus’ love. To be Jesus’ friend is to love Jesus and to be loved by him. As the son of God, Jesus is the first *anam cara*, the secret soul friend for many of us. At the end of verse 15 Jesus tells the disciples that he is giving them all that the Father had given to him, “*I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father.*” Jesus is the *anam cara*, the “friend of my soul” who passes on the wisdom of the Father to the friends he loves; to us.

I have been blessed with many good friends in my lifetime; friends who have helped me along the way. Dick Simons and Jim Pierce were both soul friends in my life. They helped guide me in my journey. Jack Price has helped me in my spiritual, as well as my personal path. I belong to a group of men who meet every week and I consider them “friends of my soul.” Every so often I ask them, “Do you like me.” They love me as I am, they also help me along the path, and they pass on to me their wisdom with no strings attached. They are the ones who, when I make a fool of myself, say they don’t think I’ve done a permanent job. My wife, Debbie, is my soul friend. She has known me longer than anyone else, and throughout our struggles, our laughter, our tears, and our joys she is still there. There are many others I consider soul friends and they are all a blessing to me in my journey. These people are the “the friend of my soul.” The gifts they have given me are the gifts they have received from their soul friend. These are the gifts that go all the way back to Jesus telling the disciples, “*I have called you friends... I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father.*”

It is the *anam cara* that helps us, who brings medicine for our soul, who supports and challenges us throughout our lives. The importance of everyone having an *anam cara* identifies the role of a spiritual mentor and the deep human need to experience healing. In the ancient Celtic Church, the soul friend was a spiritual guide who helped everyone find his or her own path.

In the movie *Waking Ned Devine*, there is a funeral. Jackie O’Shea is talking about his friend, Michael O’Sullivan:

*Michael O’Sullivan was my great friend but I don’t ever remember telling him that. The words that are spoken at a funeral are spoken too late for the man that is dead. What a wonderful thing it would be to visit your own funeral. To sit at the front and hear what was said. Maybe to say a few things yourself. Michael and I grew old together, but at times, when we laughed we grew younger. If he was here now, if he could hear what I say, I’d congratulate him on being a great man and thank him for being a friend.*

Let’s take a few moments of quiet to remember and recognize those people who have been mentors, spiritual guides, teachers, the friend of your soul, your *anam cara*. So I invite you to get comfortable, close your eyes and take a few slow deep breaths. And begin to remember those who have come into your life and have been a soul friend. Take some time to allow these people to come into your awareness.

**Pause . . . pause . . . pause . . .**

Now, keeping your eyes closed, in a moment I will invite you to whisper the names of those you have identified as soul friends. This is not a time to speak aloud to the community – this time is between you and the Spirit. So let’s whisper to the Spirit, as an act of recognition and gratitude, the names of the soul friends who have been given to us.

**Pause for the whispering . . .**

Thank you for each of the precious people we have remembered. We remember with gratitude the love and wisdom that they brought to us. We recognize that this was an expression of your love. We find ourselves in a river of life, a river of love, a river of the Spirit that has flowed through time, through the anam caras to us. May the river not stop with us. May we also be the ones who pass on your life, your love, your Spirit that continues to flow like a river through time. Open our eyes and our hearts to those who are in need of a soul friend. Help us know when we are called to be the anam cara for another.

*A Friendship Blessing*

*Leader:*

- May you be blessed with good friends.
- May you learn to be a good friend to yourself.
- May you be able to journey to that place in your soul where there is great love, warmth, feeling, and forgiveness.
- May this change you.
- May it transfigure that which is negative, distant, or cold in you.
- May you be brought in to the real passion, kinship, and affinity of belonging.

*Responsive (repeat after leader):*

- May you treasure your friends.
- May you be good to them
- And may you be there for them;
- May they bring you
- All the blessings, challenges, truth, and light
- That you need for your journey.
- May you never be isolated.
- May you always be in the gentle nest of belonging
- With your *anam cara*

Sláinte