

A CELTIC PILGRIMAGE
with John O'Donohue

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Premieres on Public Television Stations Nationwide

San Francisco, CA, March 2010 – Seven years after she began filming in Ireland, Betsy Scarborough's one-hour documentary *A Celtic Pilgrimage with John O'Donohue* will premiere this spring on PBS member stations across the United States. Presented by KQED and distributed by American Public Television, *A Celtic Pilgrimage* is a journey through the sacred landscape of western Ireland, guided by Irish philosopher and poet John O'Donohue.

Weaving ancient wisdom with personal history and breath-taking imagery, the documentary reveals a deeper Ireland beyond the usual travelogues. With mischievous humor, keen modern awareness, and a deep, empathic spirituality, O'Donohue leads the viewer on an enlightening, emotionally affecting tour. Along the way he offers profound insights on life, death, suffering, creativity, and the divine.

After an introduction by actor Mike Farrell, the documentary moves from Christian sites like Corcomroe Abbey, to pre-Christian pilgrimage spots like Mamean Mountain and St. Coleman's Well, to Neolithic monuments like the Poulnabrone Dolmen, to the elemental locations of Dun Aengus, the Burren, and Mullaghmore – places imbued with significance in O'Donohue's unique vision of the world.

About John O'Donohue

John O'Donohue was an international best-selling author, scholar, and poet from the West of Ireland. A former priest, he received his Ph.D. in Philosophical Theology in 1990 from the University of Tübingen. In addition to his international best-sellers "Anam Cara" and "Eternal Echoes," he published a collection of poetry, and his last book, "To Bless the Space Between Us," was released in the U.S. in the spring of 2008. For many years he lectured and conducted workshops and retreats in the U.S. and Europe. O'Donohue died in January 2008, shortly after completion of production on this documentary.

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Filmmaker Betsy Scarborough, program host Mike Farrell, and O'Donohue's business manager Linda Alvarez are all available for interviews.

The Filmmakers

Betsy Scarborough

Director/Producer

Betsy Scarborough has been an independent producer and director in the Bay area since 1989, providing educational media for non-profit organizations as well as producing international documentary programs. Her award-winning documentary, "Spirit of a People: a New Portrait of Russia", aired nationally on PBS, and has been used in training programs for US State Department Foreign Service personnel.

Josh Peterson

Co-Editor

Emmy-nominated editor and director Josh Peterson is based in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he has been working on documentaries, corporate pieces and independent features since 1993. Peterson's work has appeared on PBS, network and cable TV, U.S. and international film festivals, and in theatrical release.

Marina Levitina

Co-Editor/Cinematographer

Marina Levitina has worked for CNN Moscow Bureau, CTC Moscow, and Druid Theatre Company (Ireland), as well as Ireland's two leading arts festivals. Her editing credits include *12,000 Years of Blindness* and a number of short films. Levitina has a Masters degree from Harvard and is a doctoral candidate at University of Dublin Trinity College. She also lectures on Soviet cinema at Trinity and at the Huston School of Film.

Colm Hogan

Cinematographer

Colm Hogan has worked extensively throughout Ireland, Europe and North America as a cinematographer and photographer. Clients include the BBC, Channel 4, Miramax, Paramount Classics, the Disney Channel, and RTÉ. He has shot over 30 documentaries, including *The Art of Living* (about the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami) and *Oilean Thorai* (IFTA 2002 Best Documentary Award winner). Hogan is currently working on a documentary series about Irish-American politicians.

Some Quotes from the Documentary

In our times, nature is property. We have "real estate." But for the Celtic mind nature wasn't that. Nature was divine presence.

Celtic spirituality was essentially an outdoor spirituality. Nature was the place where the divine became visible.

The Burren is a landscape of limestone. It's hundreds of millions of years old. It's almost as if this whole landscape was actually dreamed up, designed and shaped by some magnificently wild God. This was a perfect place to grow up around here, this wild, rugged place.

One of the things that's lacking in our spirituality very often is the elemental dimension. You know, that so much of our spirituality is psychology in disguise, and it's really wonderful in spiritual terms to come to a place where you can feel the pull and magnetism of the elements.

Tributes to John O'Donohue

"John O'Donohue is a man of the soul. His scholarly meditation on the continuing relevance of Ireland's spiritual heritage has become a publishing phenomenon...."

– *London Times*

"A genuinely original religious mind who, almost accidentally, became a bestselling writer and public speaker... A gregarious, fun-loving companion, and mesmerizing storyteller in the bar, but ... his public presence grew from private silence."

– *The Guardian*

"His vision appealed to an audience who recognized their own spiritual hunger."

– *The Independent*

Filmmaker's Statement

When people ask me why I chose to spend so many years of effort producing a documentary about Irish writer and philosopher John O'Donohue, I recall my first encounter with him. It was in December 2001, and my mother had just died. I was at a local bookstore, searching for something to read that might help calm the grief that I was feeling. There on the shelves I saw a small gold and green book covered with Celtic symbols intriguingly entitled *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, by John O'Donohue. (*Anam Cara* in Gaelic means "soul friend.")

That night, I began reading, learning that John, whose first language was Gaelic, lived in the unspoiled rustic west of Ireland. As I read, I was caught up in the beauty of his writing, which conveyed a deep awareness of the human spirit and the inner world of love and growth and loss. Reading on, I was inspired by his powerful descriptions of the Irish landscape and the Celtic belief in the holiness of the natural world. His words somehow settled my mind and eased the pain I had been feeling.

As a documentary filmmaker, I could imagine hearing John's words and seeing this landscape come alive on film. It seemed to me that John O'Donohue had a

story that went beyond the page and one that might bring comfort and insight to a great many people like myself.

(I later learned that *Anam Cara*, affectionately called “Ireland’s little book of calm,” was reprinted 13 times in 12 months and translated into 15 languages, gaining a worldwide audience.)

By happy coincidence, just weeks after reading the book, I had the chance to see and hear John O’Donohue in person. The California Pacific Medical Center’s Institute for Health and Healing was hosting a large fundraiser in San Francisco, with John as the honored speaker. Tall and energetic, he lifted the large audience with his poetic delivery, his insight into the human heart and soul, and his occasional hilarious Irish humor. Like a giant Druid, he carried us along with his magic, and his presentation ended in huge applause and gratitude.

Afterwards, I waited to talk with him, introduced myself and impulsively asked whether he would be willing to work with me on a documentary. He smiled and kindly said, “I don’t do documentaries.” But he seemed so open that I continued to pursue the idea and suggested that his message deserved an even larger audience. Further, I asked that he might reconsider after viewing a documentary that I had produced on Russia, which he suggested that I send to his assistant.

A month or so later, I heard from his assistant that she loved the Russian program and would ask him to view it, but I later learned that he hadn’t taken the time to watch. For months, I heard nothing, and I put aside my thoughts on working with him.

One morning in early autumn 2002, I received a surprise phone call from John, who cheerfully announced that he was over from Ireland and in San Francisco, and could he come to my house in an hour and see the Russian documentary! He said that on the advice of his assistant, he might reconsider working with me once he had a chance to evaluate my former program.

I learned later that this kind of spontaneous arrival was indicative of John, part of his charm as well as his ability to rattle those around him who possessed more linear methods of dealing with life.

He arrived promptly, and I felt somewhat overwhelmed by his presence, sitting in my living room, filled with intense energy. It was hard to believe that he was actually in my house! I wondered how he would respond to the Russian documentary, and was enormously relieved when afterwards he turned to me with great enthusiasm and said, “How shall we work together?”

That was the beginning of a 6-year relationship with a remarkable human being. The following May, my husband and I went to Ireland to begin filming.

We brought along as co-producer and camera operator a wonderful Russian woman, Marina Levitina, whose family had been featured some years before in my Russian documentary. At the time of filming in Russia, Marina was 19 years old, and desperately wanted to study in the States. We were fortunate to find

several scholarships for her, and she spent the next 8 years on and off with us, attending college and graduate school, majoring in history and film studies, graduating at the top of her class. After school, she worked for CNN in Moscow, hoping eventually to find full time work in documentary filmmaking.

Our intention in filming John O'Donohue was to document a retreat that he was to lead in the west of Ireland. The retreat was a popular one, and people from many countries would come each year for his lectures and outings to sacred Celtic sites.

We were all lodged in thatched cottages in the picturesque little town of Ballyvaughan, in County Clare, looking out on Galway Bay. The usual operating procedure was to gather for a morning lecture in the largest cottage, complete with a warming fire. John would lecture on Celtic wisdom and how it can nurture the contemporary human spirit. What made sense to me in those talks was that John addressed the human hunger for spiritual nourishment, which, for some of us, may no longer be filled in traditional ways.

John had been a Catholic priest for 19 years, and he received a PhD in philosophical theology from University of Tübingen in Germany. At a point in his life when he differed strongly from the Catholic hierarchy, he left the priesthood, saying that he needed more "spiritual oxygen"-- a more fulfilling and broader foundation for his inner life. He later observed, "Sometimes the people who represent a religious tradition at a particular moment will masquerade as the absolute owners of the tradition, but they are not. They are only good or bad servants of the tradition."

Those lectures in the cottage were filled with wonderful philosophical discussions, along with deeply probing questions and answers, which could sometimes resonate so achingly as to elicit tears. For me, still feeling the loss of my mother, those mornings were extremely helpful. In contrast to the intensely serious moments, his talks were also laced with an impish sense of humor and a great-hearted laugh, which could, in a flash, render us all breathless with surprised laughter.

Our afternoons were often spent outdoors, visiting places which held meaning for John: a timeless holy well hidden away in the forest, a magnificent pilgrimage mountain in Connemara, a Neolithic burial mound in the limestone landscape of the Burren, and the ruins of an ancient Cistercian abbey. All of these sites evoked a sense of the eternal, and we as a group felt blessed in coming to these places with John.

My husband and I and our camera crew were included in all of these experiences, and were caught up emotionally, even as we were filming. We had hired a second camera person, Colm Hogan, a talented Irish photographer who lived nearby. Between Colm and Marina and a local sound engineer, we had a good team. Like me, my husband had, I believe, one of the most interesting times of his life. He came along in his good-natured way to carry equipment, pay the bills and make oatmeal for the crew.

We were to return to Ireland and to John's cottage in the west of Ireland to continue recording his stories and observations for five more years. During that time, we came to know John in a more personal way. When he spoke about his memories as the child of a farming family, we understood his wonder and reverence for the land. That reverence was evident in his work as an environmental activist, organizing with other artists to block the construction of a commercial tourist center at the beloved mountain, Mulloch Mor.

When filming a documentary, sometimes strange and wonderful occurrences come about, indirectly related to the program. Our lovely Russian co-producer, Marina, and Colm, our wonderful Irish cameraman, fell in love while working together, and in 2004 we all attended their wedding. John O'Donohue officiated, of course. What an experience in itself, with relatives flying in from Moscow and America, and an Irish gathering full of dancing and joy, not the least because of John's presence and hearty, booming laughter and merrymaking!

During those years, we came to truly know the magic of Ireland through his eyes. I believe that the beauty we experienced in him and in his country is reflected in the documentary, just as I had imagined when first reading *Anam Cara*.

John O'Donohue was born on January 1, 1956, and died quietly in his sleep on January 3, 2008, at age 52, while on a trip to the South of France with his fiancée and her family. Just the day before, I had received a happy e-mail from him in answer to a birthday greeting I had sent. He expressed warm gratitude for our work together, and told me he was having a wonderful holiday in France. What a terrible shock, then, to hear that he had died so suddenly and unexpectedly – he had been so vibrantly alive and happy. His death was devastating for those of us who knew and loved him.

John was something of a folk hero in Ireland as well as in Europe and the States, and the news of his death was out in the media immediately. I called Marina in Ireland and learned that airing the documentary quickly there would be important, and so Marina quickly finished the editing we had begun together, and it was shown in the spring, to a large and grateful Irish audience. Afterwards, here at home, my editor Josh Peterson and I talked about completing the program in a slightly different format for an American audience. It was hard at first to watch the footage again together, because we had both been truly touched by his life. His death haunted all of us who had worked with him and known his friendship.

Now that the program is finished and going out to a public television audience, we who have put it together are grateful to be able to offer it as something of a memorial to John's life and work. Actor and activist Mike Farrell, who was a close friend of John's, kindly volunteered to provide an on-camera introduction to the program. John was a passionate, elemental man, who seemed almost part of the wilderness around him, and we are pleased that the documentary will

allow viewers to experience the mythic presence of Ireland through his eyes and mind and heart.

This autumn, my husband and I visited our crew in Ireland, and went to John's grave, which is in a small, humble country churchyard, overlooking Galway Bay, near his family home. We then spent time with his brother, Pat, a farmer, who is at heart a poet himself, and his mother, Josie, who says she feels John's presence sometimes, looking after her. We all talked around the kitchen table, remembering John's hearty laughter and storytelling, and lifted our glasses to his memory. It seemed a very fitting way to say goodbye.

Some years ago, I was visiting another small bookstore, this time on Saltspring Island in Canada. I found John's book *Anam Cara* on the shelf there. I asked the owner, who was also a local fisherman, what he knew of the book. His answer made me smile, as a kindred spirit: "People who get it for themselves, come back again and get it for their friends! Oh, that book brings such comfort." I hope that *A Celtic Pilgrimage with John O'Donohue* will do the same.

Betsy Scarborough
January 2010

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