

ETERNAL ECHOES: EXPLORING OUR YEARNING TO BELONG

BY JOHN O'DONOHUE

REVIEWED BY LYNDA KLAU

Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Yearning to Belong by John O'Donohue. HarperCollins Publishers, New York, New York, 1999, 304 pages. Paperback ISBN 978-0-06-095558-8

ETERNAL ECHOES AND INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGY: TOWARD THE INTEGRATION OF SPIRITUALITY AND SCIENCE

This review of *Eternal Echoes* will explore John's philosophy, based on ancient wisdom, and compare it with the cross-disciplinary approach of interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB), showing the consilience of the two.

John O'Donohue was a poet, philosopher, author, master orator, and extraordinary human, called by some "a force of nature". His writings were described as "a love letter to humanity", his vocabulary "a bird of paradise". John lived in Connemara, in western Ireland, and in 2008 he died suddenly at the age of 52.

John met Dan Siegel in the late '90s and almost immediately they became close friends and colleagues. Dan Siegel is one of the founders of IPNB and has been a courageous leader in studying neuroscience and its applications in all areas of living. An abundant author in his own right with several books on the New York Times best-seller list, his most recent, *AWARE: The Science and Practice of Presence* (2018) is dedicated to his life partner, Caroline, and to John O'Donohue.

Dan's relationship with John changed them both and transformed their work. From their connection, John became an Advisory Board member of the Global Association of

Interpersonal Neurobiology Studies (GAINS). Dan went on to study meditation and mindfulness.

Eternal Echoes is a book drawn from John's understanding of and reflections on ancient wisdom, gleaned from his personal experiences and scholarly studies. In his resonant voice (which you can hear whether you read or listen to him), he discusses eternal truths that ring true today. This is a book that will inspire you personally and professionally.

The basic tension John explores throughout *Eternal Echoes* is belonging and longing: the longing of our being and the being of our longing. When we belong, we are at one with other people, ourselves, and nature. When we belong, we can be suffused with longing. When we long, we can dream, discover the divine, be the midwife to our soul, and manifest possibilities.

To be human is to belong. Belonging is a circle that embraces everything; if we reject it, we damage our nature. The word 'belonging' holds together the two fundamental aspects of life: Being and Longing, the longing of our Being and the being of our Longing. (p. 2)

The book opens with John as a young boy who discovers the echo of his own voice in the mountains as he is herding cattle with his father. For a young child, this is a magical and mystical experience. Later in his life, how adult John comes to understand his young discovery is exquisite. From the echo of his own voice in the mountains, he concludes there is a resonant heart in the world, as well as a resonant heart within each of us. What does it mean to live with a resonant heart in the world and within ourselves? How do we come to live this, and know its truth? I believe John held this wisdom from his earliest experiences of belonging: because he belongs, he feels the truth of a resonant heart ever abiding within and without.

To credit the earliest source of his feeling of belonging, John dedicates this book to his mother, and to all of us. Thus, *Eternal Echoes* is prefaced with this touching message of appreciation:

For Josie, my mother

In appreciation of all her warmth and love
Which helped us to discover our longings
within

A kind of shelter of belonging.

And for all those who inhabit lives

Where the belonging is torn

And the longing is numbed.

John's dedication is critical. With it he communicates to us what his experience was as a baby and child, and of the kind of belonging and longing he was graced to have because of his close bond with his mother. He had what Winnicott (1971) called a *good enough mother*, a mother who sees us and loves us as we are. When we have had a good enough mother, we carry in our cells a deep sense of belonging, trusting in the presence of a resonant other. From that belonging, we can long deeply, dream, and feel connected to everything and everyone.

In neuroscience terms, we are all socially wired. We feel a biological and neurological need to belong. IPNB draws from attachment theory and research to help us determine whether we had a secure or insecure attachment. John formed a secure attachment in his childhood, which remains a key element to understanding his perspective on belonging and longing. As humans, it is our nature to be able to experience both intimacy and isolation, holding in us the desire to connect and also to hold distance; we can thrive within this spectrum when we have found belonging. Yet, John recognizes and appreciates that those of us who had insecure attachments can fall into the abyss of the mind, get lost, become fragmented,

feel rejected, and experience a darkness of the soul. He understands insecure attachments and early trauma. James Baldwin (1966) said it this way:

My inheritance was particular, specially limited and limiting; my birthright was vast, connecting me to all that lives and to everyone, forever. But one cannot claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance. (p. xii)

As humans, John goes on to say, we want to experience being connected to all parts of ourselves. There should be no civil war within our souls. This acceptance and increasing conscious awareness of all parts of ourselves sounds very much like the theories of differentiation, linkage, and integration found in IPNB. Thus he concludes that the secret of all belonging is to belong to yourself first, and from there to everything and everyone else.

It is imagination, especially through the arts, that helps repair our belonging and connects us with our souls and the divine, the more we learn to listen and receive. Increasingly, as we are able to live from our souls and unconditioned selves, we reach a greater understanding of who we are; we discover why we are here and recognize the gifts we have to offer the world. He warns us that our gifts hold elements of light and shadow, and we need to be open to what both have to offer us. This emphasis on the evolution and transfiguration of our selves is harmonious with the IPNB understanding of the plasticity of the brain throughout the lifespan: John is very clear to distinguish brain from the emergent mind, as one does

in IPNB.

With belonging and longing, he says, you gain presence. John delineates various kinds of presences in this work, but for our purposes, what stands out is his celebration of the sense of wonder, engagement in the present moment, and beauty of direct experience, very much akin to the experience of childlike innocence. Presence leads to imagination and creativity.

In that, he sounds very aligned with Dan Siegel's *AWARE* (2018). Just the tagline of the book, *The Science and Practice of Presence*, says it all. Dan's *AWARE* and John's divine soul both suggest real ways of learning to love and embrace yourself, warts and all, unconditionally. This love for oneself will unfold organically the more one learns how to receive it.

John bemoans the disconnection in our postmodern world, remarking that the hunger to belong has rarely been more intense, more urgent. With many of the ancient, traditional shelters now in ruins, it is as if society has lost the art of fostering community. Consumerism propels us towards an ever more lonely and isolated existence; although technology pretends to unite us, more often than not all it delivers are simulated images that distance us from our lives (p. 233)

He goes on to grieve the lack of presence, the lack of wonder; in Martin Buber's (1923) words, he is grieving the loss of *I-Thou*

relationships wherein the other is seen and heard, and points out the inundation of *I-It* relationships in our society, where the Other is not really seen but is instead treated as an object.

What does John suggest as a remedy? What the ancients knew: valuing nature, imagination, the arts, silence, solitude, friendship, and community. He doesn't respect a therapy that focuses on fixing the patient, rather he wants therapists to see the whole person who needs to be honored at a deeper level so the true human being emerges.

The psychotherapeutic approach to wellness of IPNB is a not a fix-it kind of therapy. Both John and Dan value presence, awareness, attention, kind intention, silence, nature, and the emergent mind. IPNB targets the development of the mid-prefrontal cortex explicitly while John's philosophy encourages it experientially, bringing individuals the ability to reflect and choose.

John talked about accepting and transfiguring the wounded parts of ourselves. You belong, you long, you dream, and you are the midwife to your soul. You discover your soul is unconditionally loving and embracing. What truly matters is that we recognize that we live in and are surrounded by an innate, inborn wisdom that needs to be drawn forth, and received. In John's words, "I don't believe you have to get a peaceful heart, I think there is a native tranquility within each of us that's already there. And through quieting your mind and your heart you can slip right down into it." He discusses how nature grounds our being and belonging. Nature brings us home to ourselves.

John's wisdom on silence applies to a time in my own experience. I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. Have you ever visited Brooklyn? If so, then you know how densely populated it is. How noisy it is. That it is hard to see or feel nature there. Years into my adulthood, I went to live in the Adirondack Mountains. It was there, in the wilderness, that I discovered silence. I fell in love with silence, and I never lost my love of it. I loved walking the trails where the wooded paths, the mountains, the clear, clean water, and the silence lived in abundance. As John says, it changes you. It changed me.

It is especially interesting that so many of us, in these days, have been called to create practices in the same spirit as the ancients, to come home to ourselves through meditations of all sorts. A powerful example is Dan Siegel's Wheel of Awareness, used to develop our awareness, our attention, and our kind intention. We know it can be invaluable to our human development to go beyond our limiting and limited conditioning.

First of all, John says, you have to dream something in order to bring it into form. When you belong and you long, and you connect to spirit, not only do you find your way, but you have the opportunity to bring the divine into consciousness. An unlimited number of possibilities can emerge from inspiration and imagination. In John's words, "The sacred duty of being an individual is to gradually learn how to live so as to awaken the eternal within oneself."

In our world today, we can use John's blessings and poetry to remember our wholeness of body, mind and spirit, our

relationships, our belonging and longing, and to create a world where everyone belongs, where nature is critical, and imagination vital. The more we live the eternal truths and validate them subjectively and objectively, the more we can cultivate a full and thriving life and world. John's work heralds the aspect of subjective knowing and Dan's is the objective validation, leading to the very important and much-resisted integration of science and spirituality. *Eternal Echoes* is prescient to such an important integration.

A new edition of John O'Donohue's book, *Walking in Wonder: Eternal Wisdom for a Modern World* (Convergent Books, 2018), was released on November 6th. It is a collection of conversations between John O'Donohue and a well-known Irish radio broadcaster, John Quinn, recorded over a number of years.

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In: *Eternal echoes: exploring our yearning to belong*. New York: Harper Collins; 1999:97. Jan 1993. An explorative study of child and youth care workers experiences of "lifespace therapeutic care". Jennifer Ann Smith. The goal of this research was to explore and describe child and youth care workers lived experiences of life space therapeutic care in a residential setting. Life space refers to the daily living environment, context and situation of children. [Read more.](#)