

Braving the THIN PLACES

*Celtic Wisdom to
Create a Space for Grace*



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The Thin Times

Irish seanfhocal (old word): Ní fhaghann cos' na comhnaidh aon nídh.

Translation: The foot at rest meets nothing.

“I think I’m going to get Botox,” my mother told me emotionally one day over the phone. “Whaaat?” I responded. “Mammy, why would you do that?” I asked her, confused. “I look old,” she said. “I’m tired.” At this time, my mother had not even turned fifty, but I could hear the weariness in her voice. “I’m coming home,” I told her. “Give me a few weeks to book my flight, don’t do anything before then, and let’s talk about this.” She agreed. Deep down in my heart, I knew my mother well enough to know that her desire to get Botox was not actually about Botox at all. It was a symptom of something much, much deeper.

Freeze-Frame, Freeze Pain

Sitting in my mother’s sunny yellow kitchen a couple of weeks later, I could see for myself just how exhausted she was. It was a deep-down tired that cut to her very soul: spiritual exhaustion. “What’s going on?” I asked. It was a rare day that day, for she opened up to me and talked for hours. Pouring out a tsunami of pain, she shared how the death of her mother and her sister had affected her, along with some difficult experiences, including the pain of multiple miscarriages. “That’s why I want to get

Botox” she said. “I want to see a different face when I look in the mirror.” I reached out to take her hand. My mother was not a “touchy-feely” person, but that day she sat silently as I held her hand.

When we go through any kind of intense pain, a transformation is waiting to take place. We wear that pain and that transformation on our hearts and our faces. The Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue throughout his writings frequently calls our faces the “icon of creation.” Our faces are the map of our souls in our journey through life. Pain, grief, sadness, joy, relief, and bitterness all wash over the contours of our face, and as we change, our faces change with us. The contours of our face change not just with the seasons but with our response to pain and joy. A wonderful example of this is my husband’s grandmother Anna.

A proud Polish woman, Anna lived to be ninety-eight years old, and her face told its own story of love and loss, restlessness and peace. It was a puzzle to me, though, because one side of her face was noticeably more wrinkled than the other side. I learned why when we went one day to pray. Anna generally had the same routine each day and loved to pray the rosary while sitting in the sunshine on her dock by the lake or on her porch. She wore no sunscreen and so the sun beamed its illuminate rays more directly on one side of her face; the other was shaded. As the years progressed, the side that was always turned to the sun was more wrinkled than the other side. When I pointed this out to her, she laughed. “I wouldn’t take back a single wrinkle,” she said, “for all the peace that came with those prayers.”

Our faces change as we change. We may not stop to think of it often, but our mind, body, and spirit all respond to life in their own way, consciously and unconsciously. As we grow older, we become more aware of time etching and contouring our faces a little at a time. Not just with age or time, but also with circumstances. Just as a smile can light up a face, grief can do remarkable things as it etches its way across the features. I heard many stories in Ireland of those whose



hair literally turned “white overnight” with the weight of grief and loss after a tragic death.

But the way that we live also affects the face that the world sees.

Your Face Is the Threshold of Your Inner World

Jean-Paul Sartre, the noted existentialist philosopher, wrote that we are born with a face that is largely the result of genetics, but after a time, how we live and what we believe will show on our faces. We cannot totally escape the past because the imprint of our ancestors reveals the character of our face. We may have our grandmother’s eye color or our father’s nose. We might have our mother’s heart-shaped face or our father’s strong nose. However, Sartre claims that, eventually, other factors in life will begin to influence our faces. What we hold inside of us will eventually seep out to the surface, no matter how hard we try to keep it hidden. For example, if life has made you a bitter, mean-spirited, and angry person, it will be incredibly difficult to keep those thoughts from your face. Similarly, if you are joyful and have a contagious effervescence for life, your face will show that same energy. At some point in our lives, our genetics will be superseded by our environment and the choices we make. To put it another way, what you believe on the inside will eventually show on the outside, especially on your face. Your interior life will manifest on the exterior.

In time, the wrinkles and lines that you develop become appropriate to your character and your experiences. Think, for example, of Mother Teresa’s face: lined and wrinkled but also filled with peace. Or the face of the Dalai Lama: noble and strong. But if you think of the faces of celebrities or even family members whose lives have been ravaged by the scourge of addiction, their face tells a different story. The opioid crisis in particular has changed the face of drug use from being an underground subculture to a problem that affects all walks of life. The derogatory terms *meth heads* or *meth face* speak to a reality of just how much drug use changes the faces of our

loved ones.

Eventually our faces mirror our thoughts, beliefs, practices, and experiences. Despite the fact that some people are very good at projecting what is often called a “poker face,” we can never hide from the world who we truly are, for our faces are always visible to others.

Our face is the threshold of our own inner world, and we become its gatekeeper. Thresholds were important to the Celts, who were drawn to the edges and margins of life. Thresholds mark the space between the inner and the outer, the interior and the exterior. To this day, the rustic stone walls of the west of Ireland mark spaces and boundaries as thresholds between properties of different landowners. Darkness and light are marked by their own fluid thresholds of twilight and dawn. In the dim light, shadows are cast, and we find rest and solace, as the Scriptures tell us: “Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16). In rural parts of Ireland, you might still find some of the old “half-doors” that mediate the space between inside and outside by allowing the homeowner to open the door fully or partway.

We can do the same with our face. We can project open or closed, apathetic or joyful, and inviting or indifferent. Depending on what we want to hide, our face becomes something not to *face* the world but instead a mask used to hide our pain. We often aren’t even aware of this mask until we look into the mirror one day and don’t recognize the person looking back at us. Confronting what we see and who we are takes courage. The body protects itself, and pain often forces us to adopt a mask of pretension out of self-preservation.

My mother wanted to hide her pain and so instead of doing the difficult work of looking within, she looked to a solution provided by the outside world to freeze her face. Her solution was Botox! A bit drastic but it made sense to my mother. After we talked about the source of her sadness, she came to realize that freezing her face might have made her temporarily happy, but it was unlikely to freeze her pain.



Just in case you think that I am super uptight about personal enhancement, let me assure you that I'm not. There's nothing wrong with enhancing what has been given naturally to us as long as we keep things in perspective. But Botox injections wouldn't have solved the pain in my mother's soul any more than pain is healed by smoothing over its wrinkles. Her pain was born of grief, and the only way through that grief was to deal with its source. "The only way out is through," as the popular expression goes. My mother found that the best way to cope with her pain was to talk it out and also to walk it out, which she did literally by joining a mountain walking group. Afterward we would talk about her experiences, and I would refer to this time in my mother's life as "pilgrimage through her pain."

Walking It Out: The Pilgrimage of Pain

As noted earlier, pilgrimage has been important to the Irish as a way of walking out our need for forgiveness, to express repentance, to give thanks, or for the myriad other reasons that people undertake pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a spiritual catalyst for transformation. In contrast with a trip where we visit a specific place as a guest or as a visitor, pilgrimages are times when you journey inward even if your body is facing outward. As your outward body moves, inside, the real work is happening.

Before she climbed Ireland's highest mountain, Carrauntoohil, my mother called and said, "You know, it would be a lot easier if I could take something for the grief." "What do you mean?" I asked her. "Oh, you know, like a pill or a tablet," she said. We both laughed but also acknowledged the pain of what lay ahead in facing her grief. "We all know," I responded, "that life would be so much duller if all we knew was happiness and never pain." "Hard to argue with that one," she said. Then she set out to begin the slow trek through her memories and the choices she had made.

Carrauntoohil is a difficult climb, with the weather in the west of Ireland being notoriously fickle. There are pictures of my mother at each stage of the journey: at the

bottom of the climb, making her way up the mountain, at the top of the mountain, and again when she came down. What is so fascinating to me is how much her face changed through these pilgrimages. Starting out tense and weary, she ended her journey exhilarated and lighter, even when she was pushing the edge of her physical limits.

What my mother found is not new. Grief, loss, and pain cut to the heart, and there's nothing you can take in pill form when your soul is sick. While we have hospitals that treat physical, emotional, and mental health, when it comes to "soul sickness" there isn't a special hospital that can rehabilitate us in the same way. There isn't a human experience that can kiss the boo-boo away as I do with my children. Spiritual boo-boos require their own kind of medicine to treat the causes at the root, down to the core. Fortunately, we don't have to go it alone.

My mother invited Jesus, the Soul Healer, the Divine Physician, into the space in her soul that was weary and exhausted. She never regretted it. Even as she lay dying from cancer four days after her fifty-fourth birthday, she would repeat her own little mantra to make it through the pain. "May the precious blood of Christ flow through me today, thank you, Jesus," she would whisper. It was her greatest prayer and the one that took her home to her eternal rest, finally at peace with who she was and where God was calling her to be.

As I discovered, especially in losing my mother, there is no medicine you can take for grief. There is no pill that magically makes it all better, and despite what the world tells us, life isn't about the absence of pain and suffering but about our ability to live with it, to cope with it, and to move with it.

Pain is a threshold of growth. If we miss the pain, then we also miss the growth in the slow work of transformation that is happening, often unnoticed. What the eye doesn't see, as the popular saying goes, the heart won't grieve over.

Out of sight, however, does not mean out of soul. The people we love walk with us every day, and they are especially close to us in the memory of special places

and events. My mother found great comfort in these “thin places” that are scattered around Ireland, as numerous as the stars in the sky. Let’s continue to take a look at these “thin places” in our lives.

Thin Spaces and Places

Growing up in Ireland, I had a sense of mystery and spirituality permeating daily life, even if the understanding of Ireland as the land of “saints and scholars” has waned. The misty weather, the ruins that are scattered throughout the country, and the lingering superstitions that are a part of the tapestry of Irish culture—all contribute to a sense of mystery that settles into your bones. While mystery is largely associated today with magic and superstition, thin places are spaces of mystery and encounter—where we meet God, in ourselves and in others. They are places imbued with a sense of ancient longing, where we can feel and discern the naked truth of life, not just with our five senses but also with our sixth. This is seen especially in the respect the Irish have for spirits and the places where the spirit folk gather such as fairy forts or fairy trees.

Ring forts were built around the Bronze Age up until 1000 BC. Today they are essentially the remains of ancient circular fortifications, but most people in Ireland know them as fairy forts and generally avoid disturbing them. The Irish generally believed it was unlucky to call fairies by the name “fairy” and referred to them in Gaelic in the following ways:

Na daoine maithe (the good people)

Na daoine uaisle (the gentry)

Bunadh na gcnoc (the people of the hills)

Children are warned to avoid the places where fairies gather, such as ring forts. Farmers will plow their fields around these forts, and roads have been diverted to

preserve them as sacred spaces. Certain trees are also associated with the “other world,” and great care is taken with respect to them. For example, when I was growing up, I was never allowed to play near hawthorn or whitethorn trees because they are trees that are associated with “the little people” and those who walk before us in the form of spirits.

For the Irish, surrounded by the ruins of ancient castles and monastic villages, the wisdom of those who have passed on from our communities and families is just a whisper away. Every day as I went to secondary school (the Irish equivalent of middle and high school), I passed megalithic tombs known as portal tombs (or dolmens), ring forts or “fairy forts” where puca (spirits) gather, and the ruins of manors and castles, some recent and others from a thousand years ago.

Embedded in Celtic beliefs and practices is the understanding that there is more to the world than we can see, and the burial tombs and graveyards of Ireland are a constant reminder that the old and the new can live side by side in harmony. Fairy forts, tombs, and dolmens are places where conversation between the known and the unknown continues to take place as people continue to gather at these sacred places. We live in a world that is both hidden and revealed, seen and unseen, mysterious and yet known.

Even today, when the practice of Catholicism is declining in Ireland, people still gather at these ancient places to search for meaning in their lives, particularly at sites called “holy wells.” Surveys conducted in Ireland estimate that there are perhaps 2,500–3,000 holy wells in Ireland. Some of them are so famous that they can be found on ordinance survey maps, some are known only to locals by word of mouth, and many have been lost to the annals of history. A good number of the wells are associated with various saints of Ireland, but their origins predate Christianity by thousands of years. Holy wells are usually spring fed and are circular or oval. They may be situated by a lone tree, often an oak, for oak trees were sacred to the Celts, or they may be located in the copse of a nondescript field. The Irish consider holy wells

to be thin places that radiate a sense of otherworldliness, places where people of all ages and faiths still gather to mourn, to pray, to remember, and to celebrate. Many people today approach holy wells with the same sense of reverence that they have done in the past. They will often take their shoes off and walk barefoot around the well or dip their feet and hands into it. I took a group of pilgrims to a special holy well in Ireland some years ago, and we sat and watched a steady trickle of people, the young and the old, the devout and the searching, all gather in this thin place.

Cloaked in history, these ancient ruins seep into the imagination, encouraging us to see “beyond the beyond.” Thin places are not just “over there” in Ireland but also “in here”—in our mind, in our heart, and in our soul. We are drawn to these thin places such as holy wells that encourage us to look at our own thin places, with all their light and shadow, as places of healing. Your own “healing well” might be in your garden or a seat in your favorite chair by a window. We do not have to learn how to speak to God in these thin places, for God is already present to us. This encourages us to see the sacramental nature of life—that all of life has been made sacred because it was created by a God at the heart of life rather than distant and away from life.

This recovery of the shadow aspect of life, the place where mystery dwells, is, I believe, the place where faith and religious imagination dwell, and it is the playground of God in our hearts. It is the place where we feel delight, true joy, and an abiding sense of peace. Threshold or liminal places take us from one place to another, in our surroundings but also inside of ourselves. Just as the half-doors of Ireland can open in and out at the same time, our eyes navigate this inside-outside dynamic for our lives. Our eyes become a gatekeeper for what we absorb and what we reject, and yet we rarely are discerning in terms of the visual pollution that surrounds us. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so too is prejudice and avarice. What we see often becomes what we believe, and what we believe often becomes how we live. Let’s take a deeper look at this concept.

In the Eye of the Beholder

Our eyes are intensely powerful. They are physical portals that mediate messages to our brains and process information. When we look at something repeatedly, it becomes a part of our being, and if we are unguarded, it can seep into our consciousness. “What you put your mind to often grows,” my mother used to say, which is a nod to the Irish expression *An rud a lionas an tsuil lionann se an croi*, which means “What fills the eye, fills the heart.” My love for collecting sea glass has taught me that our eyes have the ability to magnify what we see in a positive and negative sense when it comes to what our eye accepts or rejects. A friend of mine who has lived by the water for many years once remarked, “It must be the luck of the Irish that you find beach glass all the time because I have lived here for twenty years and have never found anything!” I assured her that finding beach glass has less to do with luck and more to do with being aware of the properties of the glass and knowing where to look. Just because we do not see beach glass does not mean that it is not there. We took a walk together, and I explained to her a few things that I had learned through the years, such as the best time of the day to search for glass, the places where it washes up, and even how to walk so that it can be spotted more easily. After we walked for ten minutes or so, lo and behold, she found her first piece of glass!

When we collect certain items, our eye naturally picks out what it is that we look for. For example, if you collect elephant figures, in a store you will find one easily enough. I do not collect elephant figures, so if I went into the same store, it is unlikely that my eyes would spot the figure, since I am not looking for it. My focus would not be attuned for a particular item and so would skip over it. When our eyes “weed out” information, we lose perspective. We do this to others, but we also exercise the same critical eye when it comes to ourselves.

We can become desensitized and numb to violence depicted on television. Young people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of toxic imagery and pornography,



especially on social media. We are constantly bombarded with advertisements enticing us to become better, skinnier, wealthier, and less wrinkly versions of ourselves and, over time, we tune out. Noise is not simply about sound but also visual disturbance and can affect us deeply. Social media can increase anxiety as we see others who apparently have more than us even though we know that what we are seeing is not always true.

Our eyes “see” but do not always perceive. This can also be true of our relationship with God. St. Ignatius of Loyola urged his followers to find God “in all things,” and if we seek to find God in our daily lives, God will speak to us, but first we must attune our presence to him. God speaks, often in the silence of our hearts, but we are often so busy and distracted that we fail to see him. Jesus says to us “seek and you will find” (Luke 11:9), and yet how often do we fail to seek Jesus and see his face in our lives? Tune out the visual noise. Consciously attune your eye toward the good, in yourself and others, by looking for beauty.

If we look upon the world with the eyes of wisdom and faith, beauty and goodness surround us. If we look with the eyes of anger, we will see anger reflected, not just in the people but even in the landscape. Rain will be perceived as harsh and driving instead of nourishing and energetic. The landscape speaks its own language and can be interpreted by people who reflect and listen. Every landscape tells a story of the people who have shaped it, coaxed it into submission, or abandoned it to the elements. Many people gloss over the landscape without thinking, and yet the earth enfolds us and whispers to us its own story. I took a group to Ireland some years ago and watched a wise mystic, David, interpret the landscape masterfully, pointing out nuances that most people missed: the curve of the landscape, the abandoned roads, the sacred ruins buried underneath mounds of earth, and the stories of the people who walked the earth. “If you know where to look, you will know what to look for,” David reminded me. In a single generation, the language of the landscape can be lost as we lose the connection to the memory of the earth. The earth keeps its own

memories, and so do we.

Our eye often skips over nuances, but if we are careful, we can be surprised by beauty in the most unlikely places. The harsh rawness of the Burren landscape, for example, in the west of Ireland is beautiful for its bleakness and the gray canvas it presents to the eye. But if you look carefully between the cracks or “grikes” that run across its uneven surface, you will see the most beautiful and delicate flora. I grew up in the Wicklow Mountains, and from afar, they can present a flat picture of subtle shades of gray or green. But if you walk into the mountains, you will be surprised by the riot of a heather bloom or the prickliness of the *sceach* or thornbushes that grow willy-nilly. Nestled among gorse and moss are the wild bilberries I used to gather with my mother as a child; these are known as *fraughan*, from the Irish *fraochán*, which are traditionally gathered on the last Sunday in July, known as Fraughan Sunday. The same was true living in Wisconsin, where I used to dread the frozen-tundra winters, with their bleak sky in muted shades of gray and blue until I looked more closely and saw dazzling layers between them.

Be where your feet are, and you will see differently. The same is often true of our spiritual lives. We can experience a winter in our heart even though it may be summer outside. Through difficult times, we experience winters of scarcity and pain. One of the ways that you can tell if you are in a winter season is if you can discern color and vibrancy. In winter it is very hard to see the color in the world. Everything seems to look gray or white. Green is gone, vibrant blue seems banished, and golden light has disappeared. When we go through a winter, it’s hard for us to see any color or joy in the world. And yet it is there—we just need to look harder.

In a thin space, if you attune your eye to what is in front of you, you will begin to pick up subtleties in color and variation, your eye will move from the general to the particular, and in death you will see new life. This is especially true in the beauty that lies inside us as we go through our own thin moments.



Embracing Thin Moments

Thin moments, like intense joy, grief, love, pain, heartache, and heartbreak, have the ability to change even how we see life and one another. In the winter of my grief when I lost my mother, all was muted: color, sound, and emotion. Time was measured BTL (before the loss) and ATL (after the loss). My eyes could see beauty, but this did not reach into my grief. I remember one suffocating summer when the weight of the grief felt crushing and it hurt to take a full breath. And then one day, I was driving to work months after my mother had passed away and noticed, it seemed for the first time in forever, how blue the sky was. Beauty pierces pain. It reminds us who we are and invites us to reconnect with our soul.

Beauty is everywhere and in every person. The phrase “wandering eye” doesn’t have to have negative connotations: allow your eye to wander over the landscape to appreciate its beauty. God’s eye is a wandering eye. God’s eye sees you as part of a conversation with the landscape in which you interact. God beholds you in your beauty even when you feel you look ugly on the inside or the outside. If you look with God’s eyes upon the world, beauty abounds.

You are beautiful.

Let’s not miss beauty because of pain. Let’s not miss the beauty that lies at the heart of ourselves even if embracing it is painful.

One of the best gifts you can give someone is to see them, really see them, and to allow yourself to be seen. The real you, the broken-down you and the broken-through you. Break through what your eye sees but does not perceive, what you know but do not understand, and the kaleidoscope of color that’s all around you will appear. In breaking through the noise, you become a better listener in that you can perceive what is unspoken. Spirit connects our senses. You hear better because you can see differently.

Don’t fix your eye on one flaw you perceive in yourself, one slight from another, or one moment that was hurtful. Break that mirror! Don’t allow one moment or one season of thinness to define you without “grabbing a hold of it,” as we say in Ireland. Break through that season! Remember the old maxim: boats don’t sink because of all the water that is outside of them; they sink because they let the water get inside them. Don’t allow others to drill holes in your boat! There are plenty who will do it. Instead, keep on rowing, for life is to be embraced not endured, no matter what we go through. One of the best ways to break through thin moments is with prayer. So let’s take a look at that in our next chapter.

Your Thin Place: The Thin Times

Breaking Open

Irish seanfhocal (old word): Ní fhaghann cos' na comhnaidh aon nídh.

Translation: The foot at rest meets nothing.

This *seanfhocal* reminds us that there is a time for thinking and a time for doing. Often what links the two is the motivation to want to move forward. The same is true of faith. Every step you take brings you closer and deeper into the thin places in your life.

Breaking Through

- Try to identify a “thin place” in your life where you feel God is most present to you. Describe the feeling of being in this place.
- What are some thin moments from your life? How do you feel God’s presence reaching into these moments?
- As you think about thin moments, which ones have shaped how you see yourself? As you look at your face, what experiences are etched there?
- What do you see when you look into your eyes?

Breaking Free

*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy,
your whole body will be full of light.*

—Matthew 6:22

We all look at our faces at some point during the day, usually when we are washing our face or brushing our teeth. The next time you are in front of the mirror, take a pause. Look at your face and think of how it has changed with time and experience. Now imagine looking at your face through God’s eyes. What is the difference?