

Dancing to My Death

SAMPLE

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“I first remember Daniel O’Leary sitting humbly in a crowd of men at a male initiation rite I was leading here at rugged Ghost Ranch in New Mexico.

Only when I talked with him and responded to his smile did I realise I was meeting a very special human being. Only later did I realise how well known he was in the UK, and more importantly how truly holy and good he was. Read even small parts of this marvellous book, and you will know all of the same!”

Fr Richard Rohr, O.F.M.
Center for Action and Contemplation
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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* * *

“Can anyone love without first shattering
the membrane of the heart?”

This book is a searing account of immense honesty and beauty. It is a book full of courage – unsentimental, powerful. It comes from the core of a large-large-hearted man who, when beset by the effects of an aggressive cancer, still stubbornly hangs on to the belief that he is experiencing life playing out its inevitable cycle of love. He warns us never to separate life from the gracious mystery we call our God.”

Mgr. Tony Doherty,
Sydney, Australia

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“Daniel O’Leary’s life and priesthood were God’s special gifts to His struggling people. We trusted Daniel. He understood our legitimate confusion and was generous to a fault in giving his entire life to helping us discover a loving, merciful God.

Daniel was a theologian who knew God personally.

He was a hero to me. Yet it was only in latter years we got to know each other better. We lived in two different worlds, both doing what we could to plant seeds of hope.

Daniel came to The Graan in Enniskillen to talk at our Novena of Hope. We chatted our way through a couple of late nights. His incisive mind directed me away from the systemic failures of Vatican clericalism.

We both accepted he could communicate with clergy more effectively than I could. He held that my gift was opening up an avenue of Hope for the unchurched masses.

We spoke on the phone during his last few months on earth. He knew his time was short yet he laboured ceaselessly to finish this book as his last gift to us all. It was something he had to do before peacefully moving on to meet the God he came to know so intimately.

During his final illness he was gifted with immense clarity about what is important and what is not. That is why this book is his greatest and his most inspirational. It is a fitting summation of his beautiful life.”

Fr Brian D’Arcy, C.P.

Author, Newspaper Columnist and Broadcaster

* * *

The last masterpiece from the bestselling author

**DANIEL
O'LEARY**

Dancing to My Death

WITH THE LOVE CALLED CANCER





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Leigh is a Victorian Artist who resides in South Gippsland. His landscapes are painted in the ‘Tonal Impressionist’ style.

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“The most fortunate author is one who is able to say as an old man that all he had of life-giving, invigorating, uplifting, enlightening thoughts and feelings still lives on in his writings, and that he himself is only the grey ash, while the fire has been rescued and carried forth everywhere.”

Friedrich Nietzsche,
Human, All too Human: A Book for Free Spirits.

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CONTENTS



FOREWORD

1

INTRODUCTION

77

PART ONE

11

PART TWO

51

PART THREE

91

PART FOUR

137

AFTERWORD

199

POSTSCRIPT FOR DANIEL

201

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

205

FOOTNOTES

207



FOREWORD



Sr Stanislaus Kennedy

Daniel O' Leary's life and ministries were an incredible source of inspiration to hundreds of thousands of people right across the globe, right to the end of his life and beyond it. I, like many more people, met Daniel through his writings, his teachings, through his retreats and various other exchanges and each encounter with him was special. He was always encouraging, always challenging, incredibly empathetic; and his humility and his great kindness always shone through. His death in January 2019 leaves us with a huge sense of loss but it also leaves us with a deep sense of gratitude for the life he gifted us with, urging us all the time to live our lives more fully, more deeply, and more lovingly.

Daniel's life was a full one, he was literally full of life, and he shared that in every possible way he could with everyone. That included his gifts and talents as well as his vulnerability and his imperfections in a way that helped many people. For Daniel, God was an expansive God, a great God, a big God, a God of cosmic proportions, not one that we could confine to our thoughts, our ideas or our imagination, and certainly not to our institutions. Through all his writings and teachings, that was the God he drew us to. He wanted us all to know always that no matter what happened to us on our journey, no matter how much we felt we failed, we were eternally and unconditionally loved by our God who always and forever delights in us.

Daniel believed our fullest destiny was to become love in human form, to become fully ourselves. He knew that to become fully human is to become divine. He often cited the story of the prophet saying to the cherry tree, "cherry tree speak to me of God and the cherry tree blossomed" and so too with our lives, if our lives are to be divine, they must be fully human. Daniel reminded us again and again about the holiness of our hearts, about the wonder of our bodies, and the wisdom we carry within us. He wanted to reveal the intimate and liberating presence of the divine heart in our hearts, already waiting and hoping

to be discovered at every moment and in every experience of every new day.

His whole life and passion was to help us realise as fully as possible the story of incarnation. God became human to reveal to us our divinity. Daniel found God in all of life and all life in God. In him there was no duality, there was no separation, everything is holy, everything one. In Jesus he helped us to find our own enfleshed God experiencing his humanity as we experience it. For Daniel the mystery of the universe is love, creation is of the order of love and God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things.

One of Daniel's greatest gifts was his authenticity and his total honesty; he was able to share his light and shadow, his strength and weaknesses. Because of his deep inner life of prayer, he knew himself intimately and understood and accepted himself. He was able to share his life experience, his own humanity, his own struggles in a way that helped him relate in a very meaningful way with us in our search and in our struggles. Like Jesus he ministered from a position of vulnerability. But as well as sharing his weaknesses, failings and his vulnerability, he also shared his source of strength, and how he found strength in weakness and light hidden in the darkness.

During Daniel's last six months of life, he suffered intensely, physically, psychologically and spiritually. During those months he chronicled what was happening to him, the pain, the suffering, the darkness, but he also shared with great conviction what sustained him during that time and in this, his last book, *Dancing to my Death* we have this enlightened wisdom. He shared with us his experience of the cross but also his extraordinary faith and belief in the light within the suffering and the immense beauty that he knew awaited him. It is the story of faith, love and trust. This book is an extraordinary inspiration for everyone, but it is I think especially comforting for anyone encountering pain, suffering or darkness in their life.

THE WAY IT IS

*There is a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.¹*

The thread in this poem by William Stafford is your True Self. It is who you have always been, created in the image and likeness of Love. All you are called to do is nurture the love you are into a greater love so that it radiates visibly from you, like a sacrament called 'you'. Against this backdrop, death is no longer seen as a fearful enemy, but as part of our evolving world of love. It is a wild moment of growth and transformation into an unimaginable depth of being.

Daniel O'Leary



INTRODUCTION



Dear Reader,

This is a collection of some of my thoughts and feelings since I was diagnosed with cancer in June 2018. These no-frills reflections were written as they happened. Apart from some necessary editing in the interests of clarity and sequence, they remain essentially unaltered, with no attempt to justify or explain them; nor do they carry any ‘messages’ about a right way, or a wrong way to handle shocking happenings. Contradictions, mood swings and anomalies abound.

Please do not judge me; I have only risked writing the unbidden thoughts and feelings of my heart and mind. And please forgive me too; for the pathetic nature of my inability to cope with the cup I was given to drink. The pages resound with the cries of a self-centred ‘poor me’ victim, selfishly unaware of a wider and far more deserving world of indescribable pain outside my own. But that’s the truth of these reflections. They simply describe what happened, and is still happening in my mind and heart.

But why write about them? I’m not sure. Maybe they will help my recovery and healing. Maybe not. Maybe, hopefully, they will comfort your own encounters with darkness. One thing I am sure of is how differently the mystery of one’s life looks when viewed from the actual experience of shock, loss and the confusion of a routine that is suddenly up-ended and knocked utterly off track. It is a desperate place to be. When I am thrown into the water and cannot touch the bottom with my feet; when I’m hanging off the cliff-edge and can hold on no longer – then I panic!

These unframed, often barely connected meditations and reveries were written as they happened, covering a summer and an autumn. They are finally gathered together now in wintertime and will be with you in Spring 2019. And they are far from finished because they form the new setting, context and horizon for the remaining months of my life. Pillars of certainties, doctrines, teachings and religious habits have toppled. Foundations of my faith have been shaken. Raw experience takes no hostages to fortune. There is a silent assassination of shallow certainties.

I feel I need a bigger picture. The one I'm relying on is found wanting. Our God, our Faith, our Church are all just too shockingly small. The true Love that is God is beyond all religions, faiths and beliefs. Richard Rohr OFM writes that God is not only stranger than we think; God is stranger than we *can* think. And so, throughout these pages I have tried to outline and include glimpses of that bigger horizon of Creation and Incarnation, which you and I have patiently tried to share over the years and for which our hearts were created. That very wonder is keeping me from despair just now. Anyway, the rudderless confused drift of thoughts and feelings recounted in these pages is what happens when you lose your certainties and your True North. More deeply than I can say, I do appreciate your company, not only in the past in different ways, but during this current season of my bewilderment.

A thousand thanks.
Namaste.

Daniel.



Part One



SAMPLE



RAW GRACE

Sincerest thanks, dear readers, for your support, encouragement and appreciation of my words, written and spoken, over the decades. You have been just wonderful. As I try to make friends with my new companion whose name is ‘Cancer’, there are many unformed and unfinished thoughts and feelings beginning to arise within me that I want to share with you, as I have shared with you before.

Over the decades my desire has always been to reveal to you something of the beautiful mystery of the God of my heart. Guided by the Holy Spirit, I hope that your hearts too may have been touched from time to time. Among the many inadequacies of my efforts, in the light of my current experiences of darkness and light, I am struck by the shallowness of much that I have said and written. My communication was mental rather than visceral; out of my head rather than out of my heart and guts; descriptive rather than personally expressive; not really hammered and moulded on the anvil of pain.

It isn’t that my efforts were all wrong – they were just not shaped or uttered from a place of suffering and sacrifice. It isn’t, either, that my efforts with you were untrue, or misleading – it’s that they were cerebral rather than born of silence and suffering. Maybe that’s the best I could do, at the time. A constant theme of mine, you may remember is the centrality of ‘depth’, especially in the manner in which Richard Rohr, one of my heroes, taught it. Now in my eighties, and the recent recipient of a cancer diagnosis, I am falling into an ambiguous, confusing and paradoxical abyss of unwelcome uncertainty. Well below the surface, my life is being radically changed: sometimes it’s a terrible hell of darkness, sometimes a fleeting ray of dawn light.

My anticipation of this experience of dying seems very far removed from our conventional understanding of religion, religious practices, religious beliefs. It seems to have little to do with denominational differences, rubrics, orthodoxies, worthiness and infallibility. What’s

happening is like being stripped naked in public, where the ego is exposed in all its tricks of hiding, covering up, inauthenticity, falsity and fear. And even though it's early days yet, far too early to make sense in any definitive way, there are fleeting intimations, hints and guesses of many levels of darkness and love. I ask your permission to write about dark, raw and painful grace.

SAMPLE