

A few weeks before he died, **Daniel O’Leary**, the much-loved priest and spiritual writer, agreed to write a last piece for *The Tablet*, where so many of his articles had first appeared. In it he speaks directly to his friends and his many admirers of his struggle to make his peace with the cancer that was killing him

Coming home too soon



Well-loved: Daniel O’Leary, above and right, at different stages of his life; below, a selection of his many books

exactly like the cross of wood for Jesus, are the tumour of flesh that I must “freely accept”. You are the cup that, also like the unwilling but obedient Jesus, I must continually bring to my lips. I resist you with all my strength; but I embrace you with a more fierce intensity than ever. Because to reject you is to reject God.



A FEW IMAGES may help readers to understand the shock of the “bad” news. I felt I was living my life to the full, heading as faithfully and accurately as I could in the direction of God’s True North for me. It was what my life was about; what I had trained myself to do through study and reflection; the ministry I believed God wished for me. And I felt I was doing a good job; I was booked out; I had plans for another two books; my health was great. My barns were full. And, after all, my mother, whom, everyone said, I “took after”, lived to be 97. Hers was a fierce faith. That is the stock I come from. On our bare knees on a cold floor in front of the picture of the Sacred Heart illuminated by a red electric light, we rattled through the Rosary and litanies – and we never missed a single night.

How impossible it is to say, “Yes Lord, I gladly accept this big cross from you. I surrender to it. I do know you neither will nor desire it for me. It pains you to see me suffer so. You cannot prevent it. But you can help me grow through it. Give me grace to accept this cancer which is devouring my life away.”

Nor is there any relief in repeating these words. The darkness does not shift; there is no light now in most of my days. Last week, reflecting on this stark reality, it suddenly occurred to me, *This is it!* I am at the lowest point of my life. I am in a place I’ve never been in before. It’s the moment we all fear most. Jesus too wept in that deadly experience of despair.

Yet the *cantus firmus*, the enduring melody of my life, my one unshaken belief, penetrates and dissipates my deepest fears. When I equate God with life itself, a transformation takes place in the way I understand our Catholic Christianity. Once I remove everything that separates divinity and humanity, Heaven and Earth, grace and nature, I begin to live and move in another milieu. Once I use the same name for the gracious mysterious Mother of all becoming that I call God, and the primal energy of Creation, my faith can never be the same again. And once I commit to identifying God’s intimate presence in my

DEAR READER, it was June 2018 and I was in fine fettle. Fit as a trout, I was booked for retreats into 2020. One day I passed some blood, bought a pack of suppositories, and carried on. “Nothing serious,” the doctor said, but check it out sometime, just in case. I did. And now I’m writing about the last few months of my life.

I am 82, and the recipient of a cancer diagnosis. I’m falling into an abyss of uncertainty. On the surface, and well below it, my life is profoundly changed – and sometimes it’s a terrible hell of darkness. How do I survive? Do I pray? I have not asked God for a miracle, or to cure me, or to shrink my tumour. Only to open my heart as wide as it will go.

I know many of you are storming heaven on my behalf; you are having Masses said for me, completing novenas, going on pilgrimages, praying for my healing, for the shrinkage of my growing tumour. The prayers

are sometimes couched in military terms – they speak of Daniel O’Leary’s “battle with cancer”. But all I have ever wanted is the grace of acceptance, of surrender, of trust in God’s will. Even though the grinning face of death becomes embossed on every new page of these last mornings of my days, that is the face I must embrace gratefully, befriend with my whole self.

I am, of course, dear reader, deeply appreciative of your concern for my health and well-being. It is your love that matters. And yes, of course, I reach out for every alleviation, every lifting of the darkness, every blockage of those relentless demons of doom that currently torment my nights.

So, dear Tumour, I thank you. I thank you with all my heart and soul. You are a true child of the universe, of the mystery of Creation, yes, even of incarnate Love itself. Love did not send you. Love never could. You, my Tumour,

evolving perception of the world's most beautiful artistry and creativity, in my darkness and in my invincible light, and in my very breath, then I am living the incarnation of God in *my* life – and living it now with a passion “at the hour of my death”.

This is not spiritual vagueness. It is a kind of heart-wisdom that touches the most substantial parts of me this very day. When the tumult seems unending, it brings a kind of peace. In the silence of these starless nights, it brings a warmth, a comfort and an intimacy to my breaking heart, and it will allow me to turn over in my bed tonight, to close my eyes in thanks, and to forget, for a few hours, the demons waiting for me at dawn.

As my tumour grows and my hope diminishes, I continue to reach out of this life-less place for a stronger glimpse of the astonishing love and meaning revealed in this way of thinking. It is utterly personal; it is deeply cosmic. It may happen tonight. When everything we see, touch, hear and smell is perceived as the warm embrace of the divine arms, when the spring song of birth and the winter lamentations of death are enjoyed and endured as the evolving seasons of God's Creation, when the twinning of the new story of the universe told by evolution and the old Christian narrative captures our hearts, when the courage and hope of oppressed people on a mutilated Earth are experienced as the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, when from the jaws of a rampant cancer someone draws a pencil line of light into the darkness, then, and only then, are we living and dying the Gospel of Christian Incarnation.

In quiet moments I place my left hand, nearest the heart, over the bag that covers the red and raw stoma and I try to channel my love into it. I hold it close, pouring my deepest self into it, seeing this bleeding lump as the sign, shape and substance of divine love incarnate. No sunsets or spring flowers here. The leaks, the soiled sheets, the adult nappies, the waiting shadow of the relentless chemo and its cruel and intense side effects – I try to welcome them all with love. This work, fierce and uncompromising, will, I fear, demand eternal vigilance – a vigilance at the moment that truly terrifies me, and that is totally beyond me. Yesterday I received Holy Communion and was meditating on the wonder of the bread and wine becoming flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood. And then poo of our poo. You know I'm not trying to shock – it's only my desperate need to understand deep Incarnation, and then to be healed by that understanding of Love.



THESE FINAL DAYS of my deeply wearisome waiting force me into places I would rather not go. One of the fears I carry in the event of these thoughts and ruminations becoming public is that they will be seen as the whimpering of an old fool, a cowardly wimp unable to take his beating like a man. In a weird kind of way I feel I'm trying to exorcise out of me before I go, all that's deeply flawed and hidden

Wild Geese

Last night we heard the wild geese winging high
over the crossroads at Rathmore
and we knew that you too had flown.

Of course you'd leave us with a sky dance!
A gentle goose arrow, singing softly through the Paps of Anu
into that clear, unfading musical beyond
your heart had always heard. Yearned. Earned.

And for those of us left behind at our own suddenly silent
crossroads
(waltz-less without you, all fiddles forlorn)
what parting gift? The astonishing secret
that we too have wings
borrowed from the boundless,
hearts huge as horizons,
and the Southwind.

For Daniel,
by Jonathan Tulloch

in my make-up, all that is inauthentic and false; to smash the wall of false appearance and pretence that lies at the sick heart of my inherited clericalism, spawned by a very sick institution. Maybe now, at this very last minute, if, like the thieves, I take it, is the chance to say with Jesus, “It is consummated.”

I do not want to be remembered as a coward. I've always prayed for courage, and prized it as the queen of graces. When discussing the core of spirituality, of true self-possession, of tracing the contours of the Christ-child's face within me, the presence of fragility, failure, falling, inner confusion is always emphasised. Without this poverty of spirit, we miss the whole point of salvation – the suffering, the cross, the death of the ego, the weakness mentioned so often by St Paul, and, for me, just now – a hungry tumour. This is the dark and deadly night of my soul that I will embrace, that I *must* embrace; it is God's greatest incarnate gift of self that lights up, so surely, my way home.

Forgive me for jumping from one thing to another. I touch on these thoughts and fears in this, my last meditation on my life, only because they have been central to my decisions, my terrible pain of loss, my efforts to live the life I should have lived from the beginning. My thoughts hurtle, fast and furious, in my heart, or they smoulder, slow and sluggish, in my soul. The constant source of hope that fills me is the flawed humanity of Jesus. His weakness and vulnerability comfort me in my own despair.

When I cannot think straight or find peace, cannot sit down, lie down, or stop crying, when I wonder if I can manage another 24 hours, then I find some consolation in the

broken face of Jesus as the perfect face of God. When I despair at how little of real worth I have achieved, when I remember how even these accomplishments have been ruined by self-interest and a well-disguised ego, I find a mercy, a lambent light, in the weakness of Jesus. “Because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted ... For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but who *in every respect* has been tempted as we are ...” (Hebrews 4:15) My tumour is to me what his beloved and terrible Calvary was to Jesus, no more no less.



INTO THE RESTLESS, relentless distress of these, my last January nights, there is a final all-embracing vision, a conviction that sustains my courage in mornings and evenings of fear. It is a kind of gradually forming vision, a perspective, a radical paradigm shift. It is very like the way spring delicately steps into our fields, allotments and cities, or is glimpsed now here, now there, until one day we know it will stay. The day will come when, like rain falling on parched land, like light shading in through utter darkness, like life slowly returning to a stricken land, you will find a wonderful awareness warming your soul.

It is the moment when you know for sure that the birth and death of everything, the sustaining and empowering of all that works towards good, the source of all beauty, the precious energy that creates, heals and quickens our souls and our tumours, the invisible, unimaginable, universal energy of the cos-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



I hear a weight of evidence that the intrinsic value of human life is a concept lost on many

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

mos – is *Love*. The realisation invades me, as I write, like the breaking of the dawn. It brings the deepest sigh. Once sensed, the precipice of despair will always remain out of reach.

All of this goes back a long way, I know; we've imbibed it with our mother's milk. And one day, sooner or later, it will come and stay forever at the kitchen table of our hearts. And as I sit at that small altar with a few friends, and sip the wine and bite the bread, with my last breath, my deepest desire will be to diminish, decay and to die, with this blessed tumour, into that human-eternal *Love*.



SOON I'LL BE next at the waiting-room exit door. I'm anxious to be in my best bib and tucker for the occasion. This, as you know, has long been my desire – to be free of fear and bitterness, and full of love and desire, as I step up for the final inspection. So I must be very careful in what I write next. I now believe, with all my heart, that compulsory celibacy is a kind of sin, an assault against God's will and nature. Let me avoid the minefield that this could drag us into! I'm just pointing out that one of the fall-outs of mandatory celibate life is the violence it does to a priest's humanity, and the wounds that it leaves on his ministry. Again, I can hear the voices calling me a traitor to the cause. But, please remember, I'm only recalling the memories, convictions and awakenings that are filling my soul during these ever-so-strange final days and nights.

Some priests hang on to their authentic, essential selves; many of us do not. The enemy, we were warned, back in the 1950s, was a failure in prayer; falling in love was the cancer; suppression, sublimation and confession were the cure. Emotion was the threat; detachment was the safeguard; becoming too human was the risk; the subtle carapace of clericalism was the precaution. Clericalism is a collective malaise which keeps vibrant, abundant life at bay; it quarantines us for life from the personal and communal expression of healing relationships, and the lovely grace of the tenderness which Pope Francis is trying to restore to the hearts of all God's people.



HOW LONG HAVE I left on this beautiful blue planet? Gradually, everything somehow is becoming more simple – and just fading away. We grow, and we die, by subtraction. Is that all there is?

These words were scribbled here in my flat on 31 December. Yet that very night I was back in bed 6 of bay 3 in Aintree Hospital, as the New Year's bells rang out in the distance, suffering from unforeseen complications – as if I needed any more evidence for the unpredictable vicissitudes of my life...

Daniel died peacefully in the early hours of Monday 21 January.



I've changed my mind". The words of Greg Wise filled the Exchange theatre like a cool breeze on a hot day. But the heat, this time, had been created by an unsettling intervention from a woman in the audience.

The woman told us that her sick husband intends to go to Switzerland to arrange an assisted death. He has prostate cancer and he fears a painful death. Wise listened, nodding in recognition. He once felt similarly about a terminal diagnosis. But not any more.

I was at the theatre interviewing the actor, who had cared for his sister, Clare, in the last three months of her life, and Dr Kathryn Mannix, a palliative care consultant who has debunked many of the myths around what dying is like, for an event at the Twickenham venue of St Mary's University being hosted by its website, *The Art of Dying Well*.

Greg and Clare co-wrote *Not That Kind of Love* (Quercus Books), a compilation of the blogs written by Clare after she was diagnosed with breast cancer and then taken up by her brother in the last three months of her life. Kathryn's book, *With the End in Mind* (William Collins), drawing on 30 years of experience of working with patients in busy teaching hospitals, in hospices, and in their own homes, has just been published in paperback.

Kathryn pointed to film and TV drama as among the worst offenders in misleading us about the experience of dying, too often depicting it as an agonising, dramatic affair.

Among the many thousands of deaths she has witnessed, she told us that only a handful have involved physical distress. It can help relatives to stay calm if the dying person has planned ahead and told them where they would like to die, and also to have a Plan B in case their preferred scenario is not possible.

"It's a question of finding your coping style. Think about how you organise Christmas and how you cope with being under stress," said Kathryn.

Greg and Kathryn both want the conversation around death to change. I think that's happening already. The large and lively audience at the Art Of Dying Well event revealed a huge

appetite for it. And those who advocate assisted suicide, like it or not, want in on that conversation.

My own experience of facing the death of a loved one – that of my father and of a much loved aunt – is that the process was handled with great sensitivity and skill. In both cases clinical staff explained things clearly and accurately, and gently predicted the course of events; and there was sensitivity to the religious beliefs of the patients and their families.

Even as my father died before my eyes, there were moments so tender and sacred to me I have never really been able to find the words for them. It was that most blessed of things, "A Good Death".

On my LBC radio show we frequently talk about death. From miscarriage and stillbirth, to sudden death and death after a long illness, to the death of a parent and the death of a child, and, inevitably, to whether or not people should have the right to be helped to end their own lives if they wish. Euthanasia in some form or other is now widely discussed. There is no doubt that calls to make assisted dying legal in the United Kingdom are increasing.

Two things strike me. First, the speed with which a conversation about the care of an elderly person now becomes a conversation about assisted dying. What an alarming development that is. Second, I hear a weight of evidence that the intrinsic value of human life is a concept lost on many, including people working in our hospitals.

The arguments for and against assisted dying must be listened to. The woman in the audience at Twickenham, who loves her frightened, terminally ill husband and who wants to help him have his wish to be helped to die, has as much right as anyone to be heard.

My biggest fear is that the sacred, tender love that changed Greg Wise's mind and which held me up as my dad died is in danger of being drowned out by louder voices. May every voice be heard.



Shelagh Fogarty is a radio and television presenter and journalist.