



SIEBENQUELL

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# The Lesson of the Hearth

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SOURCE: ROSEMARIE MONNERJAHN, CNOC SUAIN 2014

*The hearth is a powerful metaphor for the spiritual quest,  
for the hearth is the place where the heart is at home.*

*This is the longing in all spirituality:  
to come in out of the winter of alienation, self-division and exile  
and into the hearth of warmth and at-one-ness.*

*John O'Donohue*

The uncle sat next to his niece on the grassy hillside and silently looked out at the hills of Connemara, bathed in that gently, purple light that seems to only grace this part of Ireland. His niece had come to stay with him for a few days, and they had deeply relished one another's company.

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Confined to the house by the hard rain that had fallen earlier in the day, the two of them had decided to watch one of the uncle's videos together. Ever the gentleman, and never one to miss an opportunity to spoil his beloved niece, he allowed her to make the choice. A quiet smile twitched at the corners of his mouth as he saw her choose »The Immortal Beloved«, a film about the mysterious woman whom Beethoven mentions in a love letter and whose identity remains a mystery until this day. His young niece was obviously in the mood for a romantic story.

Yet, after the film she had grown quiet and withdrawn. The rain had ceased and her uncle had suggested fresh air and a walk to clear the mind and invigorate the soul. So the two of them had come to sit on this green hillside in Connemara.

Finally the niece broke the silence. »The film was very nice,« she said, »but very frustrating. We sit there for two hours and wonder who this immortal beloved is, and in the end we are left with no answer. It is as big a mystery at the end as it was in the beginning. That was not very satisfying! I am just dying to know who Beethoven's immortal beloved was!«

The uncle turned to his niece and said, »Let me tell you a story, lass. When your father and I were still young boys, a storyteller came to our village. He was a powerful man, dressed in his black wool Inverness cloak and his large black hat. When evening came, we gathered around the hearth and he began to tell us great stories about Irish heroes and warriors. My mother, however, insisted that he also tell us a good religious story. Ah, it was a thing to behold! He told us the story of a father who loved his two lads. Now nothing was dearer to this man's heart than to have his two sons warm, safe and welcome in his house, gathered with him around his hearth. How he loved his hearth and home, and how he wanted his lads to share his joy.

But isn't it the way of things, that the youngest of the boys up and left and took his half of the inheritance and left his poor father behind, with half of his heart missing. Ah, the tears that flowed at our hearth that night, as the storyteller told us of terrible wastefulness, ravaging hunger, the stench of the pig sty and the stumbling journey home. And a great cheer went up as the young lad was finally seated next to his father's hearth, warm, well fed, properly clothed and back where he belonged.

But what a groan went up as the storyteller went on to weave the tale and the poor father was forced yet again to leave the warmth and joy of his hearth and home to try and bring in the older lad. The forth and back of the banter between the two made us shiver, wishing the boy would just go inside and let us all get warm around that welcoming hearth. But the storyteller left us outside in the cold, shivering with the man and his boy,

I was as unsatisfied as you were with the film's ending. I could not contain myself and asked the storyteller to tell us how the story ends. »That is all there is to it, and there is no more!«, was his less than satisfactory reply.

»Then it is a stupid story«, said I. »It's no good if you never know whether the older boy goes to his father's hearth or not!«

The storyteller narrowed his eyes, as if he was trying to set his sights on me. »Well now, young man, my good friend Luke, who first told this story, did not see fit to give this story any other ending than the one it has. And I am of his mind in this matter, indeed I am. In fact, no other ending will suffice. Now just imagine what would happen if one day, someone found the long lost and secret ending to this tale. And lo and behold, the older boy did go into the house and took a seat at the hearth of his father. Ah, lad, that would content your restless little heart for a while and it would satisfy your mere curiosity. But you would still not have the answer to the only question of importance that could change your life!«

»And what would that be?«, I asked.

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»When you are stubborn and angry, shivering unnecessarily from the cold, because you are too proud, and too wounded and too full of pity for yourself, while all the while a hearth burns in love and welcome for you, would you go in? What does it matter what that father's son would do, if you do not know what you would do?«

The niece looked at her uncle, her brow ever so slightly furrowed with adolescent impatience. »Why are you telling me all this?«

The uncle smiled warmly. »The storyteller was right. What does any ending written by another mean, if I do not know what kind of ending I am willing to write for my own story? And that is why you need not be frustrated if you do not know who Beethoven's immortal beloved was. The main thing is, that he knew who she was for him. And even more important, is that that you know who the immortal beloved of your life is! Then he leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.«

Thus, it came to be that an uncle sat next to his niece on the grassy hillside and silently looked out at the hills of Connemara, bathed in that gentle, purple light that seems to only grace this part of Ireland.

**Erik Riechers**

*April 21, 2015, Vallendar*