



## Quiet Garden Movement

sharing outdoor space for the inner journey

### Talk by Matt Freer, Projects Manager, at Quiet Garden Movement Annual Gathering 2018 - Silence in a changing landscape

I wanted to share with you a few thoughts around our topic of seeking enchantment in the landscape and Quiet Gardens...

#### Firstly, The Inner Landscape...

**John O'Donohue** (the Irish poet, author, priest, and philosopher) who will be familiar to many of you talked a lot about the mystery of the inner landscape. In one of his last interviews (The Inner Landscape of Beauty and available from OnBeing <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty/>) before his untimely death in 2008 he used the word "landscape" not just in describing the natural world but an important word in talking about how human beings know themselves and move through the world.

In the interview he is asked how he has come to understand landscape as something that forms each of us.

*"I think it makes a huge difference when you wake in the morning and come out of your house. Whether you believe you are walking into dead geographical location, which is used to get to a destination, or whether you are emerging out into a landscape that is just as much, if not more, alive as you but in a totally different form. And if you go towards it with an open heart and a real watchful reverence, that you will be absolutely amazed at what it will reveal to you. And I think that that was one of the recognitions of the Celtic imagination: that landscape wasn't just matter, but that it was actually alive. What amazes me about landscape, landscape recalls you into a mindful mode of stillness, solitude, and silence where you can truly receive time."*

We often associate silence with natural landscapes. The two go together. If I asked you to picture yourself enjoying silence the chances are you'll picture yourselves out in a favourite natural landscape. It's less likely that you'd picture yourself in an urban landscape.

It is important for us to go to those landscapes, and immerse ourselves in it. Allowing ourselves to connect with nature. From it will come silence and stillness. And in O'DONOHUE'S words "you will be absolutely amazed at what it will reveal to you".

And yet more of us live in urban landscapes than ever before, and so we've got to also find ways to find silence in amongst the city, urban and suburban landscape. Many Quiet Gardens are in such places. One of the special things about Quiet Gardens is that they cover a wide spectrum of spaces.

From rustic wild gardens to grand formal gardens, from the tiny garden, to the farm, from the rural hamlet to suburban terrace to city centre churchyard. They come in all shapes and sizes. And where ever they are, be it city or village, they are as much a part of their landscape as the other.

And God is found in each landscape. Nature is always present. It is our attitude and perception that can be the barrier – remember John O'Donohue's words, "...if you go towards it with an open heart and a real watchful reverence, you will be absolutely amazed at what it will reveal to you."

The Quiet Garden landscape can, and does, provide sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of life. And that is in part thanks to the physical landscape of those spaces but also it is due to the way those spaces are made available, the way they make space for time and reflection, the way the space is led and hosted – which helps us to connect with our inner landscape.

So that's one thought – the importance of our attitude to landscape, our openness and watchfulness. Regardless of whether we are in the landscape we are immediately drawn to, or are in our perhaps more mundane everyday landscape.

**Secondly, I also wanted to look at the metaphor of landscape in a different way... Our social and cultural landscape** – the social landscape we find ourselves has changed a lot over the 25 year history of Quiet Gardens.

We now found ourselves in a very different landscape to when Quiet Gardens started in 1992. It is a landscape in which we find less people going to church, but one where more people associate with being 'spiritual'. A landscape where stress related illnesses are increasing but as result it is also landscape where wellbeing is more on the agenda, where for example mindfulness is now a word in regular use.

This changed landscape is one of the reasons we produced the Quiet25 Course last year. As a fresh way to explore old practices. A resource to spark new ways of offering Quiet Garden space. Opening up perhaps new styles and language to help people to explore the benefits of silence and time in a Quiet Garden.

It is also a landscape of people sat on trains or walking along the street absorbed in their mobile phones. Social media and technology have hugely changed the way we live and communicate, and have brought with them new challenges and stresses.

Research by Microsoft suggests the average human attention span has fallen from 12 seconds in 2000 (around the time the mobile revolution began), to eight seconds so you've probably already zoned out! We live in a landscape deeply changed by the internet and digital technology.

But whilst we may bemoan shrinking attention spans. Ask millennials about the impact of technology on their lives and they will likely consider many of the changes it has brought as largely positive.

Oliver Burkeman (This column will change your life – 26 Jan 2018) said recently: "The trouble is that smartphones, like most technology, aren't simply bad. They're worse: a diabolical mixture of bad and very good..."

It isn't something we would associate with Quiet Gardens, and I suspect many Quiet Garden folk would see it as something we are 'against'. But that would be a mistake I think. It undoubtedly brings with it many challenges, and stops many of us from switching off and finding stillness.

But it permeates every aspect of our landscape – and isn't going anywhere. Whether you like it or not, and whether you use it or not, it is here to stay. And we need to work out a way to thrive with it. Making technology work for us rather than it being a distraction. It may not be an issue for you but it will be for those around you.

The frequently touted remedy is a “digital detox” – banning yourself from connectivity for hours or days at a time. But that can have the perverse effect of making the banned object more enticing. Apparently what you need to do is make it boring (This column will change your life – 26 Jan 2018).

So perhaps following the words of John O'Donohue, by helping people *go towards [landscape] with an open heart and a real watchful reverence*, [and as a result being] *absolutely amazed at what it will reveal*. We make the digital object boring in comparison?

Perhaps this new landscape brings opportunity for stillness? Perhaps it means Quiet Gardens are needed more than ever?

Rather than lamenting the changes, perhaps we need to ask how Quiet Gardens can adapt to the landscape we are in? How can we share skills and practices we all need to thrive in this digital landscape.

**That perhaps is our challenge, and the potential gift of Quiet Gardens to our social landscape.**

### **Exercise**

Before we have some discussion... I want to lead us in a moment of reflection using our technology. In the Quiet25 course we talk about tools to help us focus our mind, such as a **word** or **breath**. We often refer to these as '**anchors**'. One such tool is an **object**. Having something in your hand as you practice silent contemplative prayer can provide an 'anchor', helping to prevent the mind wandering. Such prayer aids can take many forms, such as a prayer rope or a holding cross. I'm going to break many of the 'rules' and develop this into an exercise with our mobile phone. So if you've got a mobile phone or tablet... please take it out. This exercise is a simple way to nurture being mindful and staying connected to yourself when you're using technology:

Sit comfortably, hold your device in your hands in your lap. Ideally close your eyes if you're comfortable doing that. Let your shoulders drop. Take three breaths. Observe the feeling of the device in your hand. Feel the weight of the device in your hands. Notice the different textures. The smoothness of the screen. The hardness. The Bumps of the buttons. The temperature. You might like to touch the device to your cheeks and feel the temperature that way.

Hold your hands in your lap again, with your device in your open hands. Breathe. Slowly open your eyes, and again observe the device in your hands. Without getting drawn into what's on the device explore it. Breathe. Shoulders dropped. Feel the weight. The smoothness of the screen. The hardness. The Bumps of the buttons. The temperature.

Breathe. When we bring more awareness to what it is to hold our phone in this relaxed intentional way, when we pick it up in the future we can tune into to these feelings and be aware our ourselves.

Matt Freer - April 2018