

# Personal Reflections

## FIRE HYDRANTS IN BOSTON

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Fire hydrants, like leprechauns in hard hats, pop out of the Boston footpath at regular intervals. They give a comforting promise of safety, but only the promise of possibility. Without a fireman, they are benign, powerless, unable to be what they are destined to be.

And so, they wait for fire. Without fire there will be no firemen and no gushing expression of their purpose. If a fire hydrant could call 000 (911 in the US), how many false alarms would there be? It might be an irresistible temptation.

What false alarms do we ignite in order to marshal the forces that will create the opportunity to be a Hero, to create ourselves in the image that our culture requests? Has there ever been a fireman who lit a fire just to create an opportunity to shine? A Hero who was, in truth, accidental, but needed to hide this innocent truth behind invented glory to feel the full measure of success? Are there conditions in this world that make the high regard of others that imperative?



The rewards for *doing* good are so much more tangible than those for *being* good. Whole lifetimes can be lived with a good heart and a shining soul, without a single headline or medal. Meanwhile, we recognize actions above the ordinary as worthwhile, and reward them openly. These rewards can tempt us to do whatever is necessary—even if dishonest—to be the Hero, the Angel, the Saviour. To be recognized as extraordinary. But if the untruth behind our actions becomes known, if there is some deceit behind even the noblest act, then the fallen Hero can suffer blame more than an out-and-out criminal. To be deceived by the devil is no surprise, but when an Angel disappoints, the shock may cause us to cast this person into hell.

worked tirelessly to help victims in the months and years since 9/11. To give context to her devotion to this cause, she shares her story of that day, talking of the bravery of those around her who died, inspiring many. After all these months, it seems that her story may not be true. Standard journalistic inquiries have revealed that the company she said she worked for has no record of her employment. The family of the man to whom she said she was engaged, and who, she said had died in the fire, never heard of her. Is she still the Angel? At the very least, she is not a truthful one. She has made no profit and worked tirelessly, but public awareness of the truth has stolen the virtue from her work. The Press has begun its expose. I suppose the public does need to know, but unlike some bandit who can skulk away to continue thieving elsewhere, this woman has no desire to slip from view. Regardless of why she began with a lie, the only benefactors of her actions are those who suffered that tumultuous day. But our judgment and expectation of perfection may require her to disappear from sight and stop contributing even what comes from a kind heart. In the context of a society

trapped in the dichotomy of judgments, this is an irreconcilable dilemma.

When an Angel falls, the world is changed. Unfortunately, often for the worse. Dictators may destroy the lives of millions, but when honorable miscreants do good on the back of a lie, they create a different damage that can be so much deeper and hurt for so much longer. This has and is happening to nations, the famous and the infamous, and it also affects general folk. When our minds are shaped to perceive only failure and success, we create impossible expectations. The deck is stacked so we cannot be the fullness of who we are. Children fail to fulfill the picture of innocence; lovers fail in their efforts to measure up to everlasting love; and everyone fails in the

demand to be perfect, authentic, engaged, inspired, and righteous. Being human is impossible in the face of the need to be the “perfect” Angel. There is little room to just *be* human. There is little freedom to participate in the experience of life with all its opportunities to be frail and imperfect.

We become like disengaged fire hydrants, dependent on the perception of others for our value. We would do better without *having* to be anything at all because then we have the possibility of becoming more of what we might be. When we can accept failure side by side with success, and when doing springs from being, then we have the foundation for a life of creative participation.



So how might we view this 9/11 Angel differently? Perhaps we can start by not seeing her as an Angel at all, but simply another fascinating fire hydrant who, having tired of waiting for the fire and the fireman, sadly played by society’s rules. She may be a blessing, an insight into the fearful world of personal dissatisfaction and the public demand for heroes. She is a reminder that our perceptual equipment has been so biased in the direction of perfection/imperfection that we have little room for the fullness of who we actually are. With some effort, we might become conscious of the possibility of living each day without fear of our lives being unfulfilled because of what we do or don’t do to meet society’s expectations. Then we might experience the joy of celebrating whatever unique and living fire hydrant leprechaun we happen to be.

Now you realise that ‘eternal vigilance is the price of liberty’ and you undertake the difficult but beautiful path to freedom. On this journey, you begin to see how the sides of your heart that seemed awkward, contradictory and uneven are the places where the treasure lies hidden. You begin to become true to yourself.

The journey shows you that from this inner dedication you can reconstruct your own values and action. You develop from your own self-compassion a great compassion for others. You are no longer caught in the false game of judgement, comparison and assumption. More naked now than ever, you begin to feel truly alive. You begin to trust the music of your own soul; you have inherited treasure that no one will ever be able to take from you. At the deepest level, this adventure of growth is in fact a transfigurative conversation with your own death. And when the time comes for you to leave, the view from your death bed will show a life of growth that gladdens the heart and takes away all fear.

-John O’Donohue