

## Desert Island Books

by Cynthia Allen

If I were stranded on a desert island, the first question I'd ask myself is "How did I get here?" Of course, the answer is through the winding path afforded by a lifelong addiction to reading. Each time I open a new book, I do so in the hope of discovering a clue to the mystery of my life.

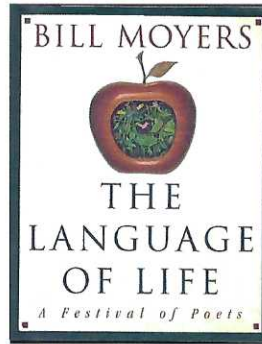
Books read to us as children are embedded in our souls. I've become aware of this recently while reading *Little Bobo and his Blue Jacket* (A Rand McNally Book-Elf Book) to my grandson Max. This is a book I cherished as a child.



Bobo's mother presents him with a beautiful blue jacket, making him the happiest little elephant in the world. He runs to the watering hole to show his friends, and in his exuberance falls into a mud puddle. His mom assures him that the old monkey laundress can clean it, which she does, but the jacket shrinks. Seeing his disappointment, she suggests giving the jacket to someone who can use it. One neighbor after another tries on the jacket, but it's either too small or too big. When Big Brother Hippo tries to squeeze into the jacket, he stretches it so much that it becomes the perfect size for a little elephant.

Hopefully, most of us begin our lives like Bobo, in a primal relationship steeped in love. When Bobo encounters difficulties, his mother reassures him. A dirty jacket can be cleaned, and when it shrinks, she helps him to find joy in helping others. The story

ends on a happy note. The metaphorical jacket now fits, and the reader is reassured that disasters can lead to blessings.



*The Language of Life, A Festival of Poets* is a companion book to the PBS series, hosted by Bill Moyers, which features poetry and conversations with thirty-four poets recorded during the 1994 Dodge Poetry Festival in Waterloo, New Jersey.

Moyers goes deep into the language and lives of the poets he interviews: Jane Kenyon on her lifelong struggle with depression, Li You Lee on how exile and exodus inform his writing, Coleman Banks on translating Rumi. We meet Rita Dove, the first African American to be designated poet laureate of the United States and Joy Harjo, who later became the first Native American to hold that honor.

"Democracy needs her poets, in all their diversity," says Moyers, "because our hope for survival is in recognizing the reality of one another's lives."

I couldn't agree more. Were it not for reading Jane Kenyon, during a particularly dark time in my life, I might not be here today.

*The Healing Path, A Memoir and an Invitation*, by James Finley.

A clinical psychologist and spiritual director, James Finley entered the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani at seventeen to become a cloistered monk. Deeply influenced by the writings of Thomas Merton (particularly *The Sign of Jonas*), Finley had grown up with an abusive, alcoholic father who threatened to kill his mother if Finley left home. He stayed at the abbey for six years, much of that time with Thomas Merton as his novice master. The emotional and spiritual gains he made were cut short when he was sexually abused by

someone he trusted. Unable to disclose this to Merton or anyone else, Finley abruptly left the abbey and reentered the world, lost and confused, a man who "no longer felt at home in my own Catholic faith."

*The Healing Path* is Finley's intimate journey from trauma to transformation. Drawing on the contemplative traditions of the world's major religions, he invites readers to embark on a healing journey of their own. In addition to his books, I've found his podcast *Turning to the Mystics* (CAC.org) a source of hope.

*To Bless the Space Between Us, A Book of Blessings*, by John O'Donohue.

John O'Donohue is best known for the international bestseller, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, available in a 25th Anniversary edition. "Anam is the Gaelic word for soul; cara is the word for friend." *Anam Cara* celebrates the eternal and ancient belonging between two friends.

*To Bless the Space Between Us* is a continuation of O'Donohue's notion that to be human is to belong to one another. His blessings follow the seven rhythms of the human journey: beginnings, desires, thresholds, homecomings, states of the heart, callings, and beyond endings.

Here are a few lines from one of my favorites:

*For Solitude*

*May you recognize in your life the presence, power and light of your soul.*

*May you realize that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.*

A blessing is an act of kindness, driven by immediacy and care. O'Donohue offers blessings For Belonging, For Beauty, For the Unknown Self, For Work, and For Lost Friends.

Reading him reminds me to pause, listen, and wish my neighbors well.

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