

UUMAN
Music, Stone, and Spirit: Reflections on Ireland
July 1, 2018

My spouse Marty sings in a local community chorus, the Michael O'Neal Singers. Every other year, the chorus goes on a performance tour overseas, which is like a vacation where you also get the privilege of singing a handful of concerts.

Two years ago, Marty went with the group to Vienna, Salzburg, and Prague. I was working as a chaplain at Emory University Hospital, and couldn't go. Marty came back with pictures and stories, full of energy, relaxed, and clearly renewed. I was, I admit, envious.

This year, however, the timing of the trip was perfect. They went to Ireland, from late May into June: conveniently, right in the gap between my graduation from Emory's school of Public Health, and my return to full-time work at the hospital.

And let me tell you, I was ready. School was a long and arduous two years. It was really hard. I rarely had time to come to UUMAN, and although I continued to work at the hospital part-time, I was working on research projects, and not as a chaplain, which is the work that feeds me spiritually and makes me feel grounded.

Now don't get me wrong - - I love learning, and I love science. But spiritually, I felt disconnected from all the things that nurture and sustain me. By the time I graduated, I felt desperate not only for rest, but for spiritual renewal.

The Ireland trip was just on time. I determined at the outset that I would look for opportunities for connection, for renewal, for spiritual nurturance. I tuned my senses to it. I paid attention to it. And Ireland did not disappoint.

We actually began our trip with a weekend in London, which was nice because it gave us a chance to acclimate to the new time zone after an overnight trip on the plane where it was nearly impossible to sleep.

We hooked up with another couple from the chorus, and their adult daughters, and explored the city. We went to restaurants, museums, the London Tower... we took a boat ride on the Thames, we walked along the waterfront, we explored quaint neighborhoods.

I was struck by the history around us. Here's the place where Ann Boleyn was beheaded. Here's some Roman ruins, which have lain undisturbed since perhaps the fourth or fifth century. Here's the Rosetta stone on display, inscribed over 2,000 years ago with a written decree in both Egyptian and Greek - a key of sorts, which enabled modern scholars to finally decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Empires rose and fell where I stood. How many feet had trod the earth below me? All these people - - part of the great family of humankind, part of the great migration of peoples around

the world, part of our great collective history, with chapters both bloody and noble. I felt an expanding consciousness, a connection to our shared human history, and the gentle stirrings of spirit.

We joined the rest of the tour group in Dublin, 89 of us altogether: 59 singers and 30 hangers-on. We filled two motor coaches, and off we went.

I followed Marty's lead, getting to know the people on our bus. Every time we left one stop and headed toward our next destination, she would go to the front of the bus and work her way back, learning and practicing names.

Because I am plagued by a wretched memory, I thought this was a grand idea to help me, to connect names and faces and to practice over and over until I could remember them. What I didn't realize, was that many on our bus felt it was a service to *them*.

Several couples told us it was helpful for them to learn who we were, and as we engaged each pair of seatmates in conversation, their neighbors joined in and people got to know others around them.

Even though these folks sang in a chorus together, practices and concerts are time for work rather than socializing, and singers often were not familiar with anyone beyond those in their sections.

The response to us moving through the bus made me realize, that people are hungry for connection. I was too - - there's a loneliness about moving through the business of your hectic life... when it's all you can do to get from day to day and you never find time to slow down, to make new friends, and deepen relationships. We have a deep need to know others, and to be known. Without connection, we can feel isolated even on a crowded bus.

Ireland is a lovely country, mostly rural, with rolling, green hills dotted with sheep. It made me feel peaceful just to see it. But the landscape can also be rugged, and untouched. We toured the Ring of Kerry, a scenic drive through the mountains that surround a large valley.

The drive took several hours, and it seemed that each vista was more beautiful than the last. Toward the end, we pulled off the narrow road at an overlook, with a view of a long lake.

John Muir says, "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness," but I think it holds true anywhere the grandeur of nature is on display. The mountains, the valley, the lakes – these were my companions as my heart released its burdens, and the simple joy of being swept me along.

In her book *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath said "I felt my lungs inflate with the onrush of scenery—air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, 'This is what it is to be happy.'" That's how I felt. Embedded in nature, held by the Universe, connected to the vast and immutable source of life.

There was no shortage of places for such feeling. At the end of the lake, where it narrows into a stream that meanders its way to the ocean, we stopped at Castle Ross. It rose up from the lake shore, its foundation of stone built upon and incorporating the exposed rock of the hills.

The castle dated from the 15th century, and the thick stone walls made it seem like part of nature itself. In the shallow water at the end of the lake, a couple dozen mallard ducks swam and fed.

Someone noticed they were all males, recognizable by their brightly-colored heads. The females, we speculated, were all on their nests in the tall grass. All around us, the place vibrated with life.

Farther north, on the western coast not quite to Galway, we stopped at the Cliffs of Moher. A bit of a tourist attraction, there were gift shops, restaurants, and paved pathways up to the top of the cliffs, which rise to over 700 feet above the ocean. But once you got to the top and looked out, the view was stunning.

The shale and sandstone cliffs make a sheer drop-off from the railing to the ocean, and watching the waves crash against the base of the cliffs gives one the feeling of being a witness to the power of nature; the active shaping of a landmass.

More geological wonders awaited us on the east coast, in Northern Ireland, at the Giant's Causeway. Here, the ocean meets a rocky shore composed of interlocking columns of basalt, formed - - as legend has it - - when the Irish giant Finn MacCool placed the stone pillars to construct a causeway, so he could reach Scotland and fight his rival.

A display at the visitors' center described the origins of the formation in more scientific terms: over 50 million years ago, molten rock pushed its way through a bed of limestone to form a lake of lava, which cracked as it cooled into the characteristic hexagonal columns of stone.

Marty and I sat on the stair-step columns for an hour and watched the tide come in, burbling over the high places to wash into deeper pools, with every type of seaweed rocking to and fro in the current.

It was not only peaceful, it was awe-inspiring. I was grateful to be reminded: the natural world is full of mystery and wonder. It is nourishing simply to be in it, and be still.

Oddly, it never rained on us while we were in Ireland. Our tour guide, who had warned us to prepare for daily showers, was dumbfounded. Her explanation was that our group sang so beautifully, the angels blew the clouds away.

For me, the singing of the chorus was another avenue to spiritual renewal. I'm not sure I can describe it adequately. They sang at Saint Mary's cathedral in Killarney, at a Gothic church at Kylemore Abby, at St. Nicholas Collegiate Church in Galway, and at Christ Church in Dublin. Those were just the scheduled stops. The group also did some impromptu singing at the old monasteries we toured.

Clonmacnoise was a monastery founded on the banks of the River Shannon around the year 544 by St. Kieran, and was at one time an important center of religion and learning. Now, it's a set of stone ruins maintained by the Office of Public Works.

The ruins include a cemetery with old, worn gravestones and lichen-covered Celtic crosses, some with both Christian and pagan symbols carved in them from the time when the two faiths were interacting.

The monastery's church had crumbled to four partial walls. Unlike the U.S., where historical sites are often marked off with walking paths and railings, these ruins were completely open to the public. We walked among the graves and among the ruins, entering the old church where stone slabs engraved as grave markers had become nearly unreadable with the passage of time.

The group sang an Irish Blessing among the ruins, a potent wish for good fortune in the midst of decay. Other tourists stopped to listen, and it made our tour guide misty-eyed.

But as moving as that was, and again at Glendalough Monastery, where we walked through the graveyard and packed into a tiny stone church, still intact, and the group sang one of the spirituals, it was nothing compared to the feelings evoked when they sang at the Cathedrals.

These were huge, open spaces in old, stone buildings. And when I say old, I mean *old*. St Nicholas Church in Galway was preparing to celebrate its 700th anniversary. Christopher Columbus prayed there in 1477, before his voyage to the New World.

Christ Church cathedral was older still, founded shortly after 1020. The tomb of Strongbow, a pivotal figure in the Norman invasion of Ireland, was there in the Sanctuary. Like, right there by the pews, with a large stone cover carved with a Knight in armor. A crypt below the church held the remains of other notables.

In the sanctuary, stone arches rose to a vaulted ceiling, high above us. When the chorus sang, their voices filled the space and echoed off the stone. Soft Irish songs like Danny Boy were followed by two American Spirituals, which got the blood pumping, and brought to mind the immediacy of the enslaved Africans' experience of God:

"God's Gonna Set This World on Fire," they sang, then "Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world," belting it out louder and louder with each verse... I want to see my mother... I want to see my father... I want to see my Jesus, going home to live with God!"

The audience was swept along, tapping feet, swaying... how could we not? Then came the hymns. Gooseflesh-raising hymns. First, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." Their voices rose in this space, made sacred by centuries of worship:

"Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love Thou art;

Visit us with Thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.”

I thought of all the lives that had moved through this stone cathedral... generations upon generations, for a thousand years, stones worn smooth by an endless stream of feet; an endless number of people kneeling in prayer; all of life's troubles brought here before their God. People with hard lives, buffeted by wars and invasions, finding in Jesus a friend, comforter, savior. It's not my theology, but the power of the history was palpable.

The chorus finished up with “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” a personal favorite.

Come, thou Fount of every blessing,
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.

Again, they used their voices like an instrument, the sound getting larger and larger, filling my heart until I felt I would come unglued from my own body. It was glorious. Truly, it was a spiritual experience, a view echoed by our tour guide who spoke afterward with a shaking voice about how powerful it was.

And we were not the only ones moved by the music. Our bus driver was not sure he would be able to come, but I did see him, sitting alone on the side of the sanctuary, where he apparently had slipped in after the concert had begun. He told us afterward, how very much the music had meant to him. He had just returned from a funeral.

His 93-year-old mother, who had eight boys and five girls, also had one more child who died at birth, 64 years earlier. At that time, the hospital took care of everything, and simply sent the mother home with the bare knowledge that the child didn't survive.

She had carried her grief for all those years, and then, when her granddaughter became a medical doctor employed in that same hospital, she asked whether she could look up the records. She had always wanted to know what happened... where the baby had been buried, and to mark its life somehow.

The granddaughter learned that the baby, a boy, had been baptized and named, and where he had been buried. The mother renamed him Francis, even changing the name legally, and at long last marked his death and gave voice to her grief.

Our bus driver, along with the other family, had been present. He returned to the concert, full of emotion, and told us that the music had touched him deeply. He said, “you never know what's going on with the people in the audience.”

The chorus director shared a similar bit of wisdom: that every time you sing, you should sing fresh... because for some, it may be their first time hearing the piece, and for some it may be their last.”

Our driver’s heartfelt gratitude reminded me that we never know how our actions touch people, and the importance of being kind.

I’ve talked today about some of the highlights of my trip, but this isn’t just a reflection on Ireland, it’s also a reflection on *reflection*. We all get tired and worn, and that’s perhaps especially easy in these days when injustice seems all around us.

We all have burdens from living, and perhaps burdens from our past as well. We can all get busy, and disconnected... we can all be in need of spiritual renewal.

The good news, is we don’t need to go to Ireland to rejuvenate our spirits. Are you renewed in nature? Nature is right outside our walls. Take a moment, step into the garden... go to the woods, go to the river, sit outside and feel the sun, or the breeze.

Does music move you? There is music in our service every Sunday. Give yourself over to it, open your heart to it. Make use of local opportunities, like the Roswell Riverside Sounds, or Brook Street Park summer concert series. Take time to listen to a CD. Let the music feed you.

Have you been feeling disconnected, or so busy that your connectedness has taken a back seat? Reach out. Call a friend. Go out for coffee. Speak to a visitor after the service. Do something nice for someone.

The source of life is all around us. With a bit of reflection, a bit of openheartedness, we can feel it, find it. We can renew our spirits in it.

As one member of the chorus said, “you don’t need to have a passport for this kind of thing... you just need to pay attention.”

May it be so.

Benediction

As you leave this place, may you find the renewal you seek. For your journey, I offer this traditional Irish blessing:

May the road rise up to meet you.

May the wind be always at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face;

the rains fall soft upon your fields

and until we meet again,

may God (or whoever) hold you in the palm of His hand.