

LEADER'S ADDRESS AGM NOVEMBER 2005

The Flowers Appeared

Four quotations to begin with. The first is from the film Joe Hill by the Swedish director Bo Widerberg *'we want bread and roses too'*. The second is from the BA chairman who was recently asked what the retiring Chief Executive's greatest legacy was. He replied *'perhaps his greatest legacy is that we're still around here to ask what his greatest legacy was'*. The third was on a dirty van coming back from Corrymeela. It said *'stress, stress, stress'*. And finally, a quote from that great Irish pessimist playwright, Samuel Beckett. It's from his play *'Worstward Ho'*, *'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'*.

A few days ago on October 30 was the 40th Anniversary of the official opening of Corrymeela. I wonder whether Ray had any idea of what he was starting and the great difficulty of this society – perhaps any society – receiving a message of reconciliation. Some recent research by Democratic Dialogue into the concept suggests one reason why. Let me quote:

Reconciliation... is seen as a deep and sometimes threatening process. Respondents chose not to use the term in their daily work because they feared it would scare some people off. In some cases this might have been associated with the perceived religious overtones, but in others it was because reconciliation was understood as somewhere 'coming together' and thus some process of social and political transformation.

And, of course, the respondents in this research are profoundly right. Reconciliation is not about something comfortable, warm and fuzzy; it is about social and political transformation. We might add spiritual transformation. And this, of course, is totally biblical. Jesus was profoundly threatening to his society and he was forced out of it onto a cross. A picture of gentle Jesus meek and mild is simply wrong, the gospels are riven by conflict and violence from beginning to end, and show our incapacity to live with truth, shalom and right relations.

The Government's Shared Future document should be central to political and social activity in Northern Ireland. Community relations and reconciliation are not something for the enthusiastic, the idealistic, the marginal and the voluntary sector. They are for everyone. *'It is relationships, stupid'*, to misquote President Clinton.

There are many threats to a shared future. One key one is people's – and it is not just politicians' – reluctance to face social and political transformation. Egypt is better than the Promised Land. The bondage we know is better than the prospect of freedom, because real freedom would mean that we would have to become different people.

Another is loyalist lostness – the sense of worlds collapsing – which brings inchoate rage, violence and the crudities of sectarianism.

And another is republican arrogance and control – of everything being given second place to the 'project'. So, while decommissioning is of huge practical and symbolic

significance, what is the lurking in the shadows – a lost eco-tourist, a decommissioned Northern Bank note crumpled in the gutter?

And what if we get a devolved administration dominated by Sinn Fein and the DUP? What powers of intimidation of those not in these flocks will this bring? In a country dominated by public expenditure, the threat of grants being cut will reduce many to silence. Combine a devolved administration with increased powers to local councils...

So, positive change in Northern Ireland is simply very difficult. Which brings me to change in Corrymeela? But first of all a digression which I hope illuminates our strengths.

Dermot Ahern, the Irish Foreign Minister, was recently at the Centre. I invited a number of community members and others to meet him, and we had an hour with him. I was reflecting afterwards on the richness of skills and experience of the people who met the Minister – that richness is the product of 40 years of Corrymeela life and experience. I tried to write some of it down in the Corrymeela Learning paper that was circulated to you all, and I suggest you read it if you have not already done so. It is as much part of the 40th Anniversary as anything else.

There were some other things I noticed in preparation for that meeting: the chairs and tables were carefully arranged, the windows in the lounge were cleaned, the floor hoovered and flowers appeared. I want to particularly celebrate the people who made the flowers appear. I was recently talking to Cecelia Clegg who was a member of a religious community. We were talking about who were the really important people. She said that she was once in a community where it emerged that in that particular place it was the person who did the ironing. She never said anything much, but she was the calming influence, the still point, the listener, and when she left the community really noticed the difference. So the flowers appeared.

Back to change in Corrymeela. I think this decade has been the most difficult in Corrymeela's history and I think in some ways it is going to get more difficult. This can be literally graphically illustrated by a chart that Peter Anderson produced of income and expenditure for the years 1992 to date. In the years 1992 to 2001 there were only two years when expenditure exceeded income, since 2001 expenditure has always exceeded income.

We are seeking International Fund for Ireland and Peace Money for the site developments. We got IFI money for 3 years for the Volunteering Project and we have applied for Peace II Continuation money for 2 of our programme posts. But there will not be IFI and Peace Funding in years to come. When they go is a matter of speculation, but go they will. Decommissioning means for many people in Britain that Northern Ireland is sorted; add suicide bombing in London. The Northern Ireland problem is diminishing in importance; perhaps some of our local egos will diminish as well.

In the world of financial constriction which is our increasing lot

- We must increase the occupancy at the Centre

- Cut costs
- Do things differently

Ronnie Millar is actively working on these things. We are trying to improve the ease of doing business with the Centre – symbolised for me by having the answer phone in the laundry (which has now gone).

And this is also about the involvement of community members – in our contributions of time, skills and money. Corrymeela cannot do without you.

Community members, staff and others have powerful emotional involvements in Corrymeela. That on the whole is a good thing, in fact a marvellous thing. But there are downsides. Corrymeela is in the business of change in Northern Ireland, but when that change personally affects us we are less happy. In Corrymeela I have heard some of the most sophisticated argument for no change or a return to the past that I have heard anywhere.

There is a pain to change and particular people bear that pain. During this year we have made people redundant – Jackie Rodgers, Fred Vincent and Frances Boyd. Mike Bartle left because of the prospect of his job disappearing. Others have had their hours reduced. Some have been relocated, either physically or job-wise.

It is impossible to make such changes well; farewells are difficult. Endings remain painful and people carry the experience and the scars. This has not been about how people performed in their posts. In fact I want to acknowledge the contributions that people have made. Ironically in Fred Vincent's case, his success in grant applications has meant posts for other people. Making people redundant is not personal, although it is always paradoxically personal in its effects. It has been necessary for the survival of the organisation, for the greater good.

To conclude, we are entering a different world – in fact we entered it in our year of financial crisis in 2001-2. We need to adapt to this difficult world and get out into it, while retaining the good things of the last 40 years. We can have bread and roses too.

David Stevens