

Mortality and Sustainability

By Professor Frank J. Convery, Chairperson of Comhar Sustainable Development Council and
Director of Earth Sciences Institute, University College Dublin

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Time flies faster as you get older. The playwright Christopher Fry commented when he was 93 that, after the age of 80, you seem to be having breakfast every five minutes.

And around the age of 50 or so, most of us lose our immortality; we realise that our time on earth is finite.

For some, this is it. As John McGahern put it, 'We bloom only once, and you would want to be very foolish not to know that'. For others, it is a mere preamble to a joyful hereafter. I like J.W. Dunne's anticipation (quoted by Borges) that, in death, we shall finally learn how to handle eternity: 'We shall recover all the moments of our lives and combine them as we please. God and our friends and Shakespeare will collaborate with us.'

Death is silence – a voice, an anecdote, a support and an encouragement never to be heard again. It is also a wake-up call; a reminder of how important it is to make the most of what remains.

And of course life goes on. As Szyborska puts it:

'Reality demands
That we also mention this:
Life goes on.
It continues at Cannae and Borodino,
At Kosovo, Polje and Guernica.

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Where Hiroshima had been
Hiroshima is again,
Producing many products
For everyday use.'

These reflections are triggered by the recent passing of two Dubliners – Derry Roughan, a city man with a great affinity for Hook Head in Wexford, where he was buried, and Hugh Brady – who suddenly are gone, having been a reassuring presence and influence in my life for about 50 years.

I was a lowly forward on the Junior and Senior Schools Cup rugby teams that Derry captained in Blackrock College, Dublin. On the Junior team, he played in the centre, in an era when the only job of the forwards was to get the ball quickly and cleanly to the backs, where all the important and glamorous talents resided.

His speed, strength, consistency, skill and fearlessness were a joy to behold; if we got the ball to him, he either scored or we gained serious distance. This experience was wonderful but, of course, it was a misleading metaphor for life; nothing since has been so simple.

Later on, in the US, I was reminded of Derry's qualities as I observed the great American football full-back Larry Csonka of Syracuse University and later the Miami Dolphins. A coach was quoted as saying that

Csonka had to be tackled every five yards to straighten him up so he could keep going and that when he goes on safari, the lions roll up their windows.

Derry had an austerity and seriousness of purpose that the team absorbed and enjoyed. Those were simpler times, but there was no laddish bravado in his style or substance.

Engineers are not renowned for their aesthetic sense, or for taking the imaginative leap. But his engineering consulting company – Roughan and O'Donovan, formed in 1974 – was responsible for the design of the Boyne Bridge, which is the most aesthetically pleasing piece of motorway in Ireland, and ranks amongst the best in the world: a huge achievement that complements and adorns the outstanding natural beauty and historical, archaeological and ecological significance of the area.

He had a great sense of humour. At his funeral mass, an early hymn talked about angels carrying him up to heaven. Derry struggled with his weight, and I found myself looking around to share a smile and thought with him, which would have said: 'These guys drew the short straw today'.

Hugh Brady was a quiet revolutionary. In the 1950s, the rest of the western world opened up to investment, people, goods and ideas – and prospered. Ireland and Albania kept their doors closed, and suffered the inevitable consequences of falling incomes; lack of investment and innovation; rising unemployment; mass emigration, and deepening poverty.

And it was a time when the Catholic Church in Ireland was defined as a clerical dominion, where lay-people were not encouraged to play leading roles or to think for themselves. Not an atmosphere to encourage the venturesome. But before the Peace Corps was thought about, or volunteering in developing countries became the norm, Hugh was instrumental – with others in 1960 – in setting up Viatores Christi as an Irish Catholic lay volunteer missionary association, which recruits, trains and places people in areas of need overseas and at home.

Even today, very few architects take the time and trouble to train professionally as planners: a self imposed apartheid applies. Hugh went against the tide and trained in the US in urban and regional planning and then, returning to Ireland, established Brady Shipman and Martin in 1968 with fellow revolutionaries, Philip Shipman and Arthur Martin.

The early waves of emigrants to academe in the US acquired not only technical skills, but also the oxygen of self-confidence; the sense that the future can be better than the past, and that they have a role in making it so – Obama's 'yes we can' is not a new idea. Brady Shipman and Martin's self-confidence and skill at combining the visual, the spatial and the empirical changed how we understand ourselves.

In his elegy for Robert Lowell, Seamus Heaney – as always – has the mot juste:

'The way we are living
Timorous or bold
Will have been our life'

In their different ways, their lives were bold, their achievements will continue to sustain us, and they both had the satisfaction of dying while they were still wholly alive.