

Across the Pond.....Michael Tracey



A Blank Page

I try to avoid a sense of panic when another of my columns is due to Gulf Pine Catholic. I usually have some in reserve to combat insipid inspiration or insolvent ideas.

We all face moments of a yawning blank page demanding to be fed whether we be an artist with a blank canvas, a writer with a deadline; a reporter with an unfolding story, a musician trying to transform a melody from head and heart to paper.

The month of January is like that; named after the two-headed goddess, Janus as she looks back and forward. January becomes a month of new beginnings, new risks, new resolutions and new possibilities. It brings with it both fear and freedom; fear of what might be ahead and freedom to expand horizons and happenstance; the fear of letting go of the routine and ruminations of the past instead of embracing the freedom of another blank moment, day or year filled with growth and grace.

We are all creatures of habit. We all have our projects, schedules, deadlines and timetables. The preoccupation with such and their resulting busyness, creates an aura of control, discipline and personal worth around us. We become and live through our busyness. Letting go may be a choice but rarely becomes an option. The poet, H.W. Auden, suggests

“We would rather be ruined than changed
We would rather die in our dread than
Climb the cross of the moment
And see our illusions die.”

Here in Ireland, the days are short and the nights long at this time of year. Night begin to envelop the evening around 4p.m. Night continues until 8 a.m. the next morning. There is an eerie feeling lurking within the darkness. An extra layer of clothes or a cranked up central heating system does little to banish the long darkness. Going to bed in the darkness and getting up in the darkness mimics an inner darkness that cannot be escaped. It doesn't matter if one is a morning, afternoon, evening or night person; all seems woven from the same tapestry of subdued darkness.

On a dark winter morning, it is hard to vacate a cosy bed as the darkness of night still surrounds a shirring world. There is the known fear of embracing the chill of cold clothes and floors that must be navigated into another day in spite of its diminished sunshine. Yet, there is no choice. Fear must lay amid the bed clothes as a new day beckons.

January is a month of beginnings; a movement from the creature comforts of life's past warm memories to embrace new opportunities, new possibilities, new adventures, new personhood, and ultimately, new life.

January is the month during which we can confront our fears. It was fear that brought us Good Friday but it was hope that brought us Easter Sunday. It is the fear, imbedded deep in our psyche that debilitates us. It is the oft repeating messages from our past – our inadequacy, our being compared with others, our put downs from teachers and friends, our wallowing in the cancer of self-doubt. If only we could embrace Nelson Mandela's dictum that our inadequacies are not the root of our fears but, instead, our immeasurable possibilities.

My polytunnel awaits the spring planting. But planting has begun elsewhere – in the shallow potting trays filled with compost and seeds of possibility. From small beginnings, nurslings will be transplanted into larger beds so that what died might come to life; that what had to die to its natural order might yield a more sublime order.

As I ponder the cyclical nature of life, I am reminded of a God who “cares for the earth, give it water, fill it with riches...drench its furrows, level it, soften it with showers and bless its growth” (Psalm 65)

And so, as I commune with nature that gives the appearance of death at this time, I banish the fear of loss and replace it with the hope of a bountiful harvest to reap.

Like with nature, the warm bed is abandoned. The feet embrace the cold floor. The chilled tap roars to life. The cobwebs of night disappear. The new day, the new January begins.