

Going and coming

The email arrived on Monday morning. It was the first time I ever heard from this lady. I did not know her or ever had met her. I wondered how she got my email address. She was not looking to sell me anything, just asking a question.

Her email began, “Hi Mr. Tracey, I’ve seen your name associated with a few you tubes and websites about Killawalla. I am the granddaughter of * which I believe, lived in house 1 and later house 20 Killavally West, Mayo. She was born in 1901 to *. * was the daughter of *. * later divorced (I believe) and married a man by the name of *. I believe there were 3 children from the first marriage (my grandmother being one of them) and 5 from the second.

I live outside of Boston, Massachusetts and plan on visiting Ireland, arriving on March 22 of this year. If you might know of any history regarding my family or area in which they resided, I would greatly appreciate your insight. I do plan to visit the area and would like nothing more than to find the area that my grandmother lived as a child. Thank you for any insight you may be able to offer.”

I began to roll back the years and I realized that the family in question were neighbours here in the last century.

Some years ago, someone gave me a copy of “Anchor Book of New American Short Stories” In its introduction, Ben Marcus says “In twenty-nine separate but ingenious ways, these stories seek permanent residence within a reader. They strive to become an emotional or intellectual cargo that might accompany us wherever, or however, we go. . . . If we are made by what we read, if language truly builds people into what they are, how they think, the depth with which they feel, then these stories are, to me, premium material for that construction project. You could build a civilization with them.”

I thought about Deborah and her quest for information on her family that might root her more deeply wherever she goes in life. In the words of Marcus, she was engaging in a “construction project” that might flush out the details of her own historical life.

It seems that, according to Marcus, there are two types of stories: stories of journeys and stories of strangers coming into town. The scripture story has both types. It begins with a journey, a journey of creating, naming, destroying, banishing and nomadic treks through periods of exiles and possessions. It is also a story of the stranger who came to town. In this case, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Deborah is on her own journey, a journey to discover her roots, to link with her past and try and discover how it continues to shape and form her. Along the way, she has asked the stranger, yours truly, to come into her town, her life, and help her find the missing links that will plug the holes of uncertainty with a more permanent connection. That is why she, too, will arrive in town in March – ironically the month of St. Patrick who gives every Irish person the gift of part of their identity in not only the faith, but also its culture, history and story.

When I meet this stranger coming into town for the first time, I will take her to the ruins of her family homestead where she can connect visually and emotionally with her past. I will be able to remind her how, as a little kid, I watched the auctioneer stand on the wall outside the house ruins and auction off the land and house belongings of her forbearers.

Yes, stories are about journeys, about connections, about meeting strangers who arrive into our lives to help us discover more connections that root us more deeply in our family story just as the scripture story keeps reminding us that we are on a similar journey of discovery that often takes us through many byways and detours where, along the way, we meet the Stranger who joins us on our journey in the cool of the evening or on our own Emmaus road.