

Life, death, the slow process of finding yourself, and why, after 12 years, it's time to move on

Good to hear compo culture questioned

IN a welcome outburst of common sense, former High Court president Nicholas Kearns has pointed out a blunt truth – that anyone who doesn't believe there is a compensation culture in Ireland should 'join the flat-Earthers'.

As readers of this newspaper surely know, we regularly feature stories not only about those trying to scam the system by making false or inflated claims of injury, but also of those who receive massive payouts following accidents for which they clearly are at least partly culpable.

A generation ago, someone who spilled coffee on himself would be embarrassed at his clumsiness – now, all people in this situation see is euro signs.

Mr Justice Kearns is now chairman of the Personal Injury Commission (PIC), and made the remarks in a climate in which claims are pushing up premiums to the extent that businesses are closing because the cost of insurance has risen tenfold in some cases.

Yes, there are genuine cases of negligence, but there are chancers out there too, and they are spoiling life for everyone.

Separately yesterday, a man received €20,000 in compensation following what he claimed was a hit-and-run while he was cycling.

There were no witnesses to the incident and Thomas O'Neill, a convicted burglar, could not remember if he had spoken to a GP or to a nurse in Beaumont Hospital, and never returned to a Garda station to report the incident after being sent away the first time because he was under the influence of an intoxicant.

His claim was vigorously contested by the Motor Insurance Bureau of Ireland, but Judge Michael Hanna decided that while there were implausibilities, he did not believe O'Neill gave 'false testimony'.

There is indeed no suggestion on our part that he was lying, and the fact that he is in prison for other offences is no impediment to him exercising his right to sue.

But the fact that he never returned to make a Garda report and was vague about seeking medical treatment, but still managed to engage a solicitor four days after the incident, surely is an indication that there is indeed a compensation culture in Ireland, and that it is a blight.

Building cost fiasco

ANYONE keeping an eye on the price of new houses will surely not be surprised by new data that shows Dublin is the seventh most expensive place in the world in which to build, and enjoys the dubious distinction of being the most expensive in the eurozone in relation to building costs.

It is not as if the city is short of space to build, as vast land banks amassed during the austerity years remain undeveloped, and height caps mean the density of sites that are developed is insufficient.

Above all, though, it seems no-one, not even local authorities, insists on value for money. When social housing units are being constructed at €350,000 a pop, more than twice the average for other builds, and there appears to have been little oversight of costs at the National Children's Hospital, why would any developer pitch their prices lower?

Lidl goes a long way

WELL done, Lidl. The discount retailer is to introduce recycling bins in store so customers can discard packaging before taking their purchases home. While this is particularly welcome for the likes of flatpack furniture and electrical goods sold there, it also means you can unwrap multipack fruit and vegetables.

The ideal solution, though, would be to sell all perishable foodstuffs loose, so the one-third of the adult population who live alone could buy as needed, and not end up generating food waste as well as plastic waste.

LIFE can change in a moment. As the writer Joan Didion later wrote in relation to the sudden death of her husband in their apartment in New York on one seemingly ordinary evening in December 2003: 'Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.'

So yes, life can certainly change in an instant. Be it the sudden death of a loved one or a massive lottery win, for good or bad life can, in a moment, take a completely different turn.

And change, be it for better or worse, be it of your own making or thrust upon you, is always difficult. Just ask Theresa May.

In my six decades on this earth I've experienced a lot of change in my life. Some of those changes were hugely positive and only served to enhance the way in which I tend to embrace life, while others left me reeling, desolate, and convinced that I would never again be the person I once was.

At the age of 18 I left behind the comfort-blanket of my home in the North, headed to England to university and, apart from holiday periods and weekend breaks over the years, never again lived permanently under my parents' roof.

Grim

Then, in 1981, in my early 20s and just married, I upped sticks again and moved to Dublin, to a city I only knew from occasional trips to Fairview to visit my aunt and uncle when I was a child. We didn't exactly stick a pin the map, but the decision process over where to live wasn't a million miles away from that methodology.

Dublin in the early Eighties was a fairly grim and graceless place and a complete culture shock after my carefree university life in Liverpool and Oxford. The Holy Hour, the Angelus bell, getting off at the front of the bus, primary school classes called 'High Babies' and 'Low Babies'. And red lemonade. What on earth was that about?

When I arrived here from England in the summer of 1981, all my Dublin contemporaries were catching boats and planes in the other direction.

But I built a life for myself, found work in journalism, a profession I have loved and that has been good to me, and I learned to appreciate – to truly love, in fact – the wonderful Joycean city of Dublin.

But change, even when you are apparently at your most settled, is always waiting in the wings. And so, just when I least expected it, I met the man who would upend my life, fill it with joy, and transform it forever. Gerry Sandford – Dubliner,



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newspaper designer, photographer, filmmaker – returned to his native city in the mid-Nineties after a decade at the newspaper coalface in London, and it was very shortly after we started working together in the Sunday Tribune that I finally understood, albeit in a different context, that line from Seamus Heaney's 'Post-script', a line of poetry that I had long loved. Finally I knew what it meant to 'catch the heart off guard and blow it open'.

Separation, divorce, new home, new life, new marriage all followed. Along with happiness beyond measure for 20 glorious years.

But change wasn't done with me. And yes, I remember the pivotal moment. It was actually five years ago yesterday – 10 April 2014. It was the early evening and Gerry and I were sitting talking together at home. And the word 'biopsy' was mentioned for the first time.

He'd actually been told the day before that a lung biopsy was necessary. And this man who shared everything with me had gone through more than 24 hours holding close this ticking-bomb knowledge, and keeping it from me. I was angry with him. Why had he not told me?

Catastrophic

I can still see the pain on his face. Then, eventually, he spoke. 'I wanted to protect you,' he said, quietly.

And so, as regular readers will know, I faced into the last year of my husband's life, finally leaving the hospital where he spent his last five weeks just as dawn was breaking on the morning of 22 June 2015. To borrow, again, from Joan Didion, life as I knew it had ended. And this was change that was catastrophic, a tidal wave that almost sank me, a grief from whose grip I felt there would be no release.

Ever. Some change is thrust upon us. We have no choice. Gerry's death was the hand

that was dealt to me. Just as his arrival in my life changed everything, so too did his leaving.

Six weeks after my husband's death, my father also passed away. And then, just last month, I lost my mother. More change. Yet at what an extraordinary time in my life.

To everything, as the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes tells us, there is a season. And 'a time to every purpose under the heaven'.

In the past few months my life has changed. Not dramatically, and not overnight, but slowly I have been emerging, embracing the new, and, finally, beginning to look to the future. My new little dog, Dudley, has filled my life with joy. And he has given me back the gift of laughter.

I was missing from this page for the past number of weeks because I had made another decision. I had decided that I wanted a stretch of time off, to re-boot my head, to try to live more in the moment, but also to take stock and have a peek at what might be around the next corner.

Unexpected

And then, four days into my leave of absence, my mother died. And despite the fact that she was almost 99 years of age, Marion's passing was totally unexpected. And as I walked the windswept beaches of my childhood in the days after her funeral, I kept asking myself what she was trying to tell me. That to everything there is indeed a season? Is that it, Marion?

Well, I have loved my 12-year season here in the Mail. I have enjoyed great professional challenges, have worked with some extraordinarily talented people, and have been given all manner of opportunities for which I am most grateful. And I can say with all honesty that without the support and kindness of my colleagues in the weeks, months, and years after Gerry's death, I don't know how I would have survived.

But it's time to move on. And that's precisely what I have decided to do. To ease my foot just that little bit off the pedal. To continue to write and do some broadcasting – but at my own pace and on my own terms.

None of us ever know what is around the corner.

For me, all I know on this particular day in April 2019 is that it's never too late to embrace change. That it can be challenging, invigorating, exciting and, yes, terrifying.

Just before sitting down at home to write this column, I went to check if I had any post. There was a small envelope, with a card inside. It was from one of my oldest and dearest friends. I looked at the front of the card, and smiled.

'Leap, and the net will appear', it said. So here goes...

Irish Daily Mail COMMENT

Fraud unit needed on bogus motor claims

INSURANCE fraud is a scourge that adds as much as €50 a year to every already wildly expensive premium, and you might think that rooting out the conmen and women who engage in it would be a priority.

Instead, Michael D'Arcy, Minister for State at the Department of Finance, says that some 400 cases referred to An Garda Síochána by investigators working for the insurance companies have not been pursued. When we requested confirmation of this, a Garda spokesman said that it would take time, but we have no reason to doubt a Government minister's word.

This is deeply concerning. Insurance fraud is not a victimless crime, because the insurance companies themselves do not lose out. Instead, they pass their costs on to the honest motorists who have been hit with massive increases in their premiums over the past few years.

Failure to prosecute also means that fraudsters feel that they will get away with it, and not face the rigour of the law. That is why each and every bogus claimant must be zealously pursued, prosecuted and, hopefully, jailed, not only to punish them for their own crime, but to send a clear message that might deter others from embarking on the same path.

It is unusual for a Government minister to criticise the Garda, but it clearly comes from a place of frustration and we commend the Minister for being so forthright.

Where we disagree though, is with his refusal to allow the insurance industry fund a special unit within the Garda to investigate fake claims. This system has been run very successfully for seven years in London, but Mr D'Arcy says he does not want policing paid for by private companies.

In fact, there is precedent, insofar as organisers and promoters of massive sporting and entertainment events already pay for policing outside stadiums and festival sites, so we urge him to reconsider. It would reduce demands on the taxpayer and remove the argument that a lack of resources is the key stumbling block to the pursuit of the insurance scammers.

Heads must roll

IT now seems inevitable that the knock-on effect of the massive overspend on constructing the new National Children's Hospital, with costs now expected to reach €1.7billion – roughly four times the original estimate – will see other critical health projects and infrastructure scaled back or abandoned.

That will come as a crushing blow to those who were waiting for proper community healthcare, and we need to find out not only why the budget has increased so outrageously, but also who sanctioned the increases. We must learn how a fixed-price contract was allowed to balloon, and specific individuals must be held accountable not only for what they did sanction, but also for any omissions in securing binding guarantees on price and progress. The vast sum involved demands that accountability be the priority and that, where necessary, serious consequences follow.

Keep to speed limit

THE operators of GoSafe speed camera vans have agreed not to park at graveyards after concerns were raised about their presence during funerals in the past. Not only was this distressing for the families of the bereaved, it also often cut down on the number of parking spaces available and led to claims that funeral attendees were being targeted as easy pickings.

We are glad that common sense has prevailed and that negotiation has led to this outcome. That said, we still believe that these vans make a major contribution to road safety and we urge everyone, no matter where their journey takes them, to always drive within the speed limit.

Yes, our goal is to attract tourists... but we must set some limits if we want to keep our heritage

LAST May I was sitting outside Nico's café in Venice, sipping a caffè macchiato and chatting to my friend Andrea who, although originally from Naples, has made his home in Venice with his wife Silvia and their two children.

Nico's fronts on to what in Venice is known as the Zattere – a wider-than-usual promenade that then fronts straight on to the Giudecca Canal, the big channel that runs parallel to one of the most famous waterways in the world – the city's Grand Canal.

On this particular day it was gloriously sunny, and the Zattere was buzzing with activity as workers hurried hither and thither, couples strolled arm in arm, and elderly ladies stopped to chat while out walking with their dogs.

Unfortunate

While enjoying the sunshine and talking to Andrea, suddenly, out of the blue, the sunlight vanished and we were left in shadow. I looked up. Right in front of me and drifting down the canal was one of the largest cruise ships I had ever seen. I had to crane my neck skywards to take in the full height of this monster-ship that had, literally, blocked out the sun.

Andrea was fit to be tied, his normally excellent English deserting him as he lapsed back into Italian, cursing the ship, its owners, and all who sailed in her. The cheek of them – coming here, sleeping on the ship, eating on the ship, contributing nothing to the city, and sailing off again the next day, having 'ticked' Venice off their list and getting ready now to invade some other unfortunate place.

Eventually, he calmed down. Too many people visit Venice and the tourist hordes are destroying the infrastructure of this small, fragile city and making life increasingly unpleasant for its residents.

Yes, I am one of those who visit, but not in an 'if-it's-Tuesday-it-must-be-Venice' way.

I fell in love with Venice 23 years ago and have been visiting three or four times a year ever since, spending, on occasion, proper chunks of time there. I have friends there now, and some of the shopkeepers know me on sight. I go to the cinema when I'm there, I know the times of the services in the Angelo Raffaele parish church, and I traipse across the city to Calle del Forno to order a new batch of business cards from printer Gianni Basso when my supplies are running low. Gianni, in fact, holding court in his shop, and raising his eyes to the heavens about how the city is being overrun with tourists and cheap foreign-made souvenirs, actually hits the nail on the head.

'Here,' he says, pointing to the ground under his feet in his backwater printing shop, 'here it is Venice. Over there,' he stresses, as he raises his thumb dismiss-



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ively in the direction of the city's more touristy territory, 'there it is Taiwan.'

Only 55,000 people are lucky enough to call Venice their home. And every year they have to suffer the influx of 25 million visitors. Of those 25 million, however, less than a third actually stay in the city, so most are day-trippers or cruise passengers.

In the past two years, I have noticed, for the first time ever, anti-tourist graffiti on many walls in Venice, with 'No Grandi Navi' (No Big Ships) not only a commonly seen scrawl, but also, nowadays, an actual movement.

Overtourism is alive and well and very much a 21st-century phenomenon.

When you cannot see the landmark sights because of the crowds, that's overtourism. When local people cannot rent homes because of holiday rentals, that's overtourism. When fragile places are under threat, the environment suffering because there are too many boots tramping all over the place, that's overtourism.

Doorstep

And lest we shake our heads and say how awful it must be for Venetians, or the people of Barcelona, or the citizens of Dubrovnik, let's just take a look at what's happening on our own doorstep.

From statistics released just last week, it seems that Skellig Michael, famed the world over in recent times as a result of its Star Wars associations, is now heading for another kind of war altogether.

Last year, this beautiful 6th-century monastic site attracted almost 17,000 visitors, at least a third more than what is deemed sustainable if the remains are to be preserved.

At present, 15 different boat operators are licensed to bring 12 visitors to Skellig Michael every day over a 140-day season. In an ideal tourist world, where weather wasn't an issue, that would allow 25,000 people onto this sacred island every year. And that, obviously, is unsustainable.

When it comes to tourism, it's about

getting the balance right. But in a world where cheap flights are part of the landscape, where 'retirement' no longer means you sit at home by the fire with your slippers on, where 'gap years' are the norm, and where, in all honesty, people rely on making a living from tourism, then it's a hard balance to strike.

Government bodies, city authorities and tourist boards have always counted success in numbers. Until now. For now those numbers come with a warning – carry on like this and you will kill what you are trying to sell.

Substantial

Numbers need to be tackled – from Skellig Michael to Barcelona, Venice and beyond.

Like other cities, Venice has already introduced a small tourist tax, payable in your hotel.

But still they come. Last summer they introduced turnstiles to limit crowds, and at the waterbus stops there are now two queues – one for residents and one for visitors, with residents, rightly, boarding first.

But still they come. Now, however, in another attempt to deter those who, essentially, the city authorities don't want, a €10 daytripper tax will be imposed this summer.

It strikes me, in this context, that they should slap a substantial tax on those who want to visit the sacred stones of Skellig Michael – enough to make people think twice. Again, it's that delicate balance between showcasing what we are understandably proud of, while not allowing it to be destroyed.

Tomorrow, the Holiday World Show opens in Dublin. If this year is anything like other years, there will be around 40,000 people pouring through the doors of Simonscourt this weekend.

That is one holiday show, in one capital city, for one weekend of the year – and this illustrates why overtourism is such an issue.

Nobody wants to make travel as elitist as it was in the past or to return to the days of exorbitant prices for flights, but we have to accept that with such easy access comes responsibility.

I want my great-grandchildren to be able to enjoy the beauty of Skellig Michael. I want them to walk the walls of Dubrovnik and stroll through Park Güell in Barcelona.

And I pray that they will one day climb the ancient steps of the Rialto Bridge in Venice, before pausing at the top to take in THAT view of the Grand Canal. And that they will feel humbled in their realisation that that same vista was once enjoyed by Casanova and Canaletto, by Henry James and Ezra Pound. And by me, their probably long-gone great-grandmother.

And I hope most of all that my generation, and the one after me, haven't destroyed it all before they get there.

Irish Daily Mail

COMMENT

Bruton must give us digital tsar timeline

RICHARD Bruton is the Government minister responsible for the introduction of a Digital Safety Commissioner, and to date has resolutely reaffirmed that self-regulation of the online world by massive international search engine and social media platforms must end.

However, words and actions are two different things, and when pressed yesterday to provide a timeline for the appointment of such a commissioner, he resolutely refused to do so.

He claimed, with some merit, that to rid the internet of harmful content, you first have to define what that is, and that the definition must be robust and watertight so that these companies cannot rush to the High Court or Supreme Court in a bid to pull down the legislation or have it ruled unconstitutional.

On the other hand, though, it is perfectly reasonable to at least demand that the Government have a plan in place and work to get all the details done and dusted.

In any walk of life, a job without a proper timeline, and deadline, simply ends up being a recipe for inaction. The refusal to offer one might be interpreted as a handy excuse for doing nothing, whether this is true or not.

It is not like there is no clear evidence of the harm people are exposed to. Erin McGregor, sister of UFC fighter Conor, is the latest celebrity to reveal the vile abuse she has suffered at the hands of internet trolls, and quite rightly points out that while she, as an adult, can deal with it, those who are younger or just more vulnerable might not be so lucky.

The longer the minister drags his heels, the more it looks like the position of Digital Safety Commissioner is being kicked into the long grass.

The time for fudge is over, and Mr Bruton must redouble his efforts to ensure his staff are drafting the legislation.

The time for action has long since passed, and what we need now is a clear and unambiguous timeline that everyone adheres to.

Common-sense rule

HOUSING Minister Eoghan Murphy has, often rightly, been strongly criticised for the slow pace of housebuilding to alleviate the twin crises of affordability and homelessness.

The latest stick used to beat him is the new plan that rules social housing applicants who reject two home offers within 12 months will have their waiting period set back by five years.

He makes the point that the more the system is tied up by people with very specific requests, the longer it takes to clear the backlog for the 70,000 others who would take whatever they were given in a heartbeat.

Of course the State should build social and affordable housing – that is part of any healthy democracy, and a model that served us well for decades.

If, however, anyone needs a house that is subsidised, or even free, when others work every hour available to secure mortgages and repay them, they must realise that it is likely they won't get to live on the precise street or in the area they desire.

Everyone has to make sacrifices, and this rule is a sensible one.

Our thanks to Vicky

VICKY Phelan yesterday announced that after a brief viral illness, she is stepping back from the CervicalCheck campaign she so ably spearheaded for almost a year.

First, we wish her the very best of health – no one deserves it more.

And secondly, we hope that she knows she has the gratitude of the entire nation for the work she has done to date, tirelessly and selflessly giving her best to ensure that Ireland is a better and safer place for all women.

How, after four years of bitter grief, I have at long last learned to laugh again... and it's all thanks to Dudley!



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HE thinks that birds – and the bigger the better – are there purely for his entertainment and exercise; he loves Lyric FM when he's in the car, but isn't so gone on the Six Nations rugby commentary; he thinks that the shower going full blast in my ensuite is the funniest thing he has ever seen; he adores the feel of the sand under his feet on the beach, but can't quite get his head around all that wet stuff called the sea (he's a native of rural Co. Meath), so he makes a run for it every time the waves get too close for comfort.

He also likes nothing better than a bit of a snooze under the table inside Café Gourmet in Greystones, and he is utterly incapable of understanding, at any time of the day, when I'm around, why he simply can't go everywhere – and I mean everywhere – with me. (See shower reference above.)

Ten days ago Dudley thundered into my life and changed it for the better. He's a ten-month-old wirehaired dachshund, very smart, and completely adorable. With apologies to American writer John Reed and his 'take' on the Russian revolution of 1917, talk about the Ten Days That Shook The World! Dudley has certainly shaken mine.

Beloved

Regular readers will know that I have been considering getting a dog for some time now – about 18 months.

I've had many dogs in my life, most notably Oscar and Finn who have featured here in the past – the Irish wheaten terrier brothers who were so central to the lives of myself and my late husband for so many years.

Oscar died in 2011 when he was 12 while Finn made it to December 2014, just one month short of his 16th birthday. We were grief-stricken at the loss of our adored dogs, but then, just six months after Finn died, grief took on a whole other meaning for me when I lost my beloved husband.

It's been a long, hard journey ever since, as I have attempted to drag myself, day in and day out, up to the surface and out of that black hole where grief has continued to hold me prisoner.

Oh, I have done my job to the best of my ability (with a lot of support from my colleagues), I have looked after my elderly mother's interests, I have had occasional nights out with close friends, and I have travelled, mostly alone but sometimes in

the company of my adult son or my sister, to different parts of the world. I have tried, in other words, to get on with the kind of life that is left to me after such an overwhelming loss.

But have I been happy? Have I known moments of unbridled joy? Have I actually laughed out loud, spontaneously? Have I woken up even one morning in the last three years and eight months without my husband being the first thought in my head, without, in fact, speaking aloud to him before I even throw back the covers, plant my feet on the floor, and face into yet another day without him?

The answer to all those questions is no. Not until now.

A couple of nights ago, in the quiet of my apartment, I suddenly heard a noise. What was it, I wondered for a moment. And then I realised that it was me – that I had laughed, really laughed, out loud. Why? Because Dudley had suddenly spotted his favourite soft toy – an old black-and-white panda – on the other side of the room and had launched himself off the sofa with such joy and vigour that when he landed on the rug, it took off like a magic carpet, flying across the wooden floor with Dudley onboard. And so comical was it that it made me laugh in a way that I haven't laughed in a very long time.

Energy

Dogs are great medicine. And Dudley is all I hoped that he would be. He's a big commitment, of course, and that's precisely why I didn't make any rash decisions over the past 18 months. I needed the timing to be right and I needed the dog to be right.

Hopefully I have now managed to tick both of those boxes. A very young puppy, for instance, would have been a mistake because, with work commitments, I simply don't have the time to invest in house training and all that that involves. Dudley is ten months old and fully

trained. He comes to me, therefore, with all the fun and energy attributes of a very young dog, but without the practical problems.

And I have a day-care arrangement in place for him so that he never has to be left alone all day at home.

That's important for Dudley, and it's also important for my neighbours, for who wants to have to listen to a lonely dog whining or barking all day?

Putting everything in place for his arrival took time and planning. But if a dog is important enough to you, it can be done.

Which is what makes it so depressing to hear, just this week, that the Dogs Trust charity was asked to re-home almost 400 dogs in the four weeks immediately after Christmas.

Loyalty

What kind of planning was put into giving those poor dogs a home? None at all, it seems.

Dudley has already given me a bit of my mojo back. And just to see his happy face and his wagging tail first thing every morning when I open the door to where he sleeps in the living room has done me more good than any of the grief counselling that I've had over the past few years. He needs me and I need him. We are bound together. It's as simple as that.

Dogs teach you so much about life: to appreciate the simple things, to love with all your heart, to always be yourself, to live in the moment. And their gift for loyalty is simply immeasurable. And not just for their human owners.

When Oscar was just a few weeks from death back in 2011, his brother Finn became his carer. So we would come upon him, in the kitchen, perhaps, or out in the garden, standing tight up against his frail brother, leaning into him, offering him comfort.

And they would stand there together for ages, the two of them, joined forever in blood and in love, with Finn gently licking Oscar's ears, or snuffing his fur, as if to reinforce to his dying brother that he was there, that he wouldn't leave him, that he would stand by him to the end. As he did.

And now it's just me and Dudley. And as I step tentatively out of the shadows to embrace this more joyful life that is now beckoning me, I can only give thanks for the affectionate and ebullient little dog who has come into my life and is doing his very best to make me whole again.

And I can't help but reflect on how extraordinary it is that this small, hairy dachshund has so quickly helped to finally ease my grief, and let me laugh again.