

Letters from a shuttered country Chapter Three

They seek for the wise

A key turns in the lock of the unremarkable bungalow.

Katie wonders where her Dad is. She calls out. Then she sees him, sitting on the decking outside, staring vacantly into the garden.

Bill was lost in reverie. The years had raced backwards, pursued indelicately by time. It was over twenty years ago. In a quiet room in a lunch-hour discussion, over 20 people had gathered during the lunch-break; an assembled group of those whose time to draw breath is shrinking and whose lives are furious wheels scarcely able to stop. Liam is speaking. He was being seen as a sort of guru.

Liam reminded them that they were made for 24 hours to a day, seven days to a week.

"Have a day of rest. You can't do everything. Sort out priorities. As the Book says, 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it well'. But be sure to include time for reflection and prayer. Step off the pedal. Be more laid back. Take regular exercise. Take time for people. Neglect of relationships is a sign of burn out. Make space for music or for reading to nurture your weary soul. Find somewhere, anywhere, those times when you can slow right down in protest against a world that's speeding up".

Katie jumps into the scene. "You ok Dad?" she asks.

"Hi love, Bill says, turning to her. "I was lost there for a minute".

"Obviously!" Katie replies. "Been happening a lot recently: it's like you're being troubled by the ghosts of Christmas past".

Bill told her he had been thinking about a meeting he had been to with his friend Liam. Must have been 1998. They sat down with a cup of tea.

"What's the mood like at school?" he asked Katie.

"It's grim out there", she said. "We're trying to keep things going at the school but it's not easy. Bear in mind that we're only getting twenty seven at the moment", Katie replied. "That's the offspring of key workers of course".

"Yes but how many kids are doing on-line lessons?" Bill is curious.

"O I don't know", Katie replies. "About ten per cent over all I should say. In my case, I do these lessons and post them and all that but it requires the young people to log-in and do the material. If not, doesn't work."

"Sure" agrees Bill, shrugging his shoulders. "This'll be a wasted year for many. Who knows what the effect will be on their education. Expect they'll repeat."

"But look", he adds, "what about those on free school meals?"

"Big problem!" Katie observes. "It's an essential lifeline of support for these families. The poorest families are hit hardest. It's all right for you and I with at least some money coming through and a bungalow with a garden. If you're job is precarious, housing is unsuitable or health is tricky, how you going to cope?"

"One of our Mums is tearing her hair out" Katie goes on. "It's like she's imprisoned with her abuser.

And it's a tough world out there with her children at home all the time. There are families with nothing, who rely on this money to feed their children," she exclaims. "We are now delivering food parcels to those who have told us they have nothing to eat."

"It's not all bad", Katie adds. "Lots of children at the school seem to be enjoying staying home and learning to cook with Mum or Dad"

"This is a savage time", says Bill. "Plenty in the wider world without any safety net of course."

"Yes indeed said Katie, finishing her tea. "The UN warned today that the world is at risk of widespread famines of biblical proportions caused by the pandemic".

Bill shakes his head. What is there to say?

"Not a lot", said Katie. "But speaking of food, don't want you to feel guilty or anything but I think it's my turn to get supper Dad", Katie exclaims. She wanders out to the kitchen and pours a drink. She presses the button on her MP3. It's her favourite song. "*Some people would say to accept their fate. Well if this is fate then we'll find a way to cheat,*" Starley sings. "*You know you can call on me, if you can't stop the tears from falling down*". Katie joins in as she cuts some broccoli. "*If the cavalry and the help don't come, well then we'll find a way to dodge the smoking gun*".

Her phone pings. There's a text from her friend Maddy, training to be a nurse. She's been called up.

"Seen that guy over the road again?" Bill asks suddenly. He stands in the doorway.

"What guy is that?" says Katie, a little too nonchalantly.

"Robert Morrison as I'm sure you know!" Bill smiles.

"O him" says Katie. "We had a little exchange yesterday morning as I got into my car just as he was doing the same. He said he's on the neighbourhood What's App group. We'll probably meet later."

"Great!" says Bill. He's glad for her to get out and meet people even if it meant staying in. Anybody would be an improvement over Freddie. Katie had split up just after Christmas. Bill checks his emails.

"Hello Bill!" It was Liam. "What a wonderful surprise! Was only thinking about you the other day!

And how are you doing? Still doing those research papers and travelling? Sorry – forget that last remark! A tad insensitive- of course you are grounded like everybody else. Having to share a kitchen table to put your laptop? You still in the south of England? Who's at home there with you?

Expect like me you wonder what is happening to all those who can't stay home because they don't have one – like the gent who camps out in our local churchyard at night here in London.

I've just been outside and had a great time going like the clappers! That's the neighbours by the way and it's the highlight of our week to cheer and bang saucepans for the health workers. My Dad used to teach history as you know and think he would have called them the Spitfire pilots of our time. Generally I think that we are not seeing other people so we are less connected in one way. But we're definitely more connected through love and we're thinking more about everyone else now.

This is so making us realise our own limitations. Some will find that strength on their own but I suspect most of us are obliged to reach out to some other source to meet the challenge. If we have learned anything it is that kindness counts. It was Plato who said that we should be kind to all because everyone is fighting a hard battle. Now that's the kind of quote you think is in the Bible!

Speaking of which, I'm doing another version of Vicaring: peace and reconciliation work.

A movement of the brave, a glimpse of a people's alliance is where it all began for me - a glint in the eye holding me in remorseless focus, sapping all other energies except towards the goal.

A goal did I say? No, that cannot be it. That is too mechanical, too technocratic. A dream would be more accurate; a vision asking 'Why not?' You said once that a global consensus could never come about, even for successful dreamers, even for pragmatic dreamers who combine what they see in the night with a healthy grasp of the possible. Nevertheless, possibility is transforming the world for me, and I continue in my journey (electronically now) with the same sense of adventure that we shared all those years ago. And yes, I am keenly aware of the wretched ambiguity this evokes.

I endeavour to help neighbours, families and groups in dispute to learn to value each other so as to be open to each other's narratives. Maybe this will extend to a broader canvas in time. As Napoleon remarked, "Victory belongs to the most persevering!"

So many I know seem to take refuge in rationalisations which are so bland people have stopped listening to them. What wisdom and strength do the politicians convey to be shepherds or maybe fathers and mothers to their people? I tell you: it would be good to think there is a spiritual turning at long last. We yearn to find a vision we can hold on to carry us forward. Maybe now voices can be heard. This time we want to listen to those voices and The Voice: perhaps.

Until we all had to experience mass incarceration, wherever I went and I got together with people over a drink or a meal, the conversation turned to the subterranean issues of life, the inner vision without which we are wandering listlessly in the dark. It's like there's a hunger that can only be acknowledged in whispers, a hunger to be heard and to matter somehow amidst a universe that belies our significance. It's ridiculous. Why do we kid ourselves that we should feature at all when we hardly loom very high in the scheme of things? Maybe we are only the sigh of the universe.

The landscape of the mind is after all a site of ambiguity when it comes to our having any value. Some experience of being written off maybe necessary to spur ourselves on or for human creativity. It was Nietzsche who said, "I say unto you, a man must have chaos yet within him to give birth to a dancing star." Undeniably though, put-downs can be amusing at times. My favourite is Samuel Johnson who said of Milton's 'Paradise Lost', that it was a book easy to put down - hard to pick up!

I don't have all the answers. I'm still learning. What I do have is questions. And I ask plenty of questions, to enquire what people are really thinking about their underlying concerns. Aunt Miriam helped me to recover when I hit the buffers just as I did when Dad died. She casts her own particular brand of magic, turning her weaving into a metaphor for life. Her love of music is also pressed into service. She was intriguing.

"Listen to the music' she said."Tune in to the themes playing deep down. And as the songs are heard, they will change in the hearing just as stories evolve in the telling."

When the Covid asteroid fell to earth, I made all these resolutions. I joined dozens of social networks advising me how to spend my new found free time, looked on-line for some great physical fitness training and decided I would speak and cook Italian like a native. I remembered the other day a meal

I had out in California with Steve, not long after we met. For once, Steve was talking openly about the deeper questions of life. He was surprised at himself. Animated conversation led to lunch.

"You like Italian?" asked Steve. "Fine by me!"

Remember looking intently at this man with jet- black hair that toned in with his skin colouring and a dark blue shirt. "So is the human mind as fast as a computer?" I asked, as we sat waiting for the deep fried pizza. Picture the scene. A weathered, auburn- haired woman was approaching, clutching a tray as she picked her way through a crowded restaurant. "About a million nerve endings from your eye to the brain have just worked simultaneously to build that picture", Steve told me. "It's stunning. In your brain, there are as many neurons as there are stars in the galaxy. An average neuron has tens of thousands of inputs and outputs. The old transistors we used when I began had only a few". He knew about all that of course as he was CEO of a Silicon Valley start-up before he took it back to UK.

In the light of what happened subsequently, I had glanced at Steve, yielding to a deeper place of memory and encounter and power-driven emotions. It was definitely him. The youth and magic of that morning had suddenly become an evening grown weary with the past. I tried to compose myself by reaching down to the place of inward refreshing to which I was no stranger. Years after Dad's death, Aunt Miriam had shown me where it was. "How's life treating you" was all I could muster, though it struck me as being trifling and fumbling, utterly incapable to do justice to the encounter. Conversation ranged briefly across continents, time zones and families.

I have no idea why I am telling you this except as a round-about way of saying I am still in touch with Steve and his half brother Jack. These days I seem to have an unstoppable online social life – on Messenger, WhatsApp, Skype and of course the ubiquitous Zoom. Whoever had shares in that made a smart move. But there was Steve. And there was Jack! It occurs to me I could fix up a Zoom drink together if you'd like that?

Talk soon.

Liam

Dear Liam,

What a fabulously informative and reflective email! Wasn't expecting that but why am I surprised?

I'm doing ok though feeling for all those who are confined to some pretty small barracks or trapped with an abusive partner! If nothing else, this is an opportunity all ways round to make some big changes. Fear is forcing us into realising our interconnectedness and dependency beyond ourselves.

It's interesting how nourishing your own space and taking care of yourself has gone from nice-to-have indulgence to must-have necessity. As this is the biggest existential moment in our lifetime, rarely has it been so universally pressing. What are you doing to service yourself as well as clearly reaching out to others and helping us think? It's so fresh to hear bird song rather than the sound of cars outside. Apart from social distancing and putting a human shield round health systems in case they get overwhelmed, we can't do much about Covid. But we can control exercise, diet, sleep and enjoy the reward of calling old friends like you. Many of my pals have Zoom calls with colleagues so

it's great to harness the power of telecommunications to stay in touch with everyone. Think it was Aristotle who said without friends, we would not choose to live though we had all other goods?

Getting creative? They say a good book restores your vision of life. We absolutely have to develop the potential of people everywhere as we come through this crisis situation. Our big resource is people and the scope for creative optimism and practical solutions. Just hope the children at Katie's school will understand that.

At the same time though as we absolutely need to be realistic about the present time and be optimistic about the future, do you think there's a place to be gentle with our past – or nostalgic?

There is no precedence in living memory for any of this. Bang goes our predictable lives. Maybe unpredictability is the nature of things, contingency by another word, and assured security is the exception. Yet how do you do life with that? Farmers have to sow seeds knowing harvest will come!

Yes would love to have a re-union with Steve and Jack. What are they doing with themselves?

Take care,

Bill

Hi Bill,

What an interesting series of points you make! Lots of food for thought. In the meantime, how the world's poor get physical food security at the moment is incredibly disturbing. This cunning virus is shining a harsh light on the profound inequalities that scar the globe like the Rift Valley in Africa.

It would be such a missed opportunity if rich countries work their way to get back to normal but those 'normal' patterns of how things are done leaves poorer areas unable to deal with the ravages.

Crisis won't change our egoism but it does show what the common good is for the benefits we all need. We need a New Deal to come out of this and not just think in terms of narrow nationalism. Inclusivity and an economy that deals with a public good agenda is essential. It is the personal attention and care tailor made by health workers rather than structured for everyone that is taking care of people at the time. The plates are shifting. We'll have to get past the international blame game though. That is definitely not showing us in a good light. Just think of this though. Futures are usually created by the high powered elites. Maybe we could alter that so it's not just top down.

Busy trying to figure out how we can give birth to a new way of being the church so as to be a lot more responsive to the world's needs and not just ensuring our own survival. Solidarity, justice for marginalised groups, those big inequalities and the existential threat of climate change is as least as important as tradition.

It used to feel like another universe if we could discern a global consensus standing up for the care of people and the value of the world where we are embedded- those con-joined twins. But it would be helpful to use you as a sounding board for the thoughts and ideas that have been building up for a while. Let me know if that would be ok. I'm getting more and more convinced that you just can't understand the interior landscape without some concept of the struggle to realise our sense of inner worth and what I call 'a valuable self'. So how do you do a trade-off between lives and the economy?

Nostalgic about the past? That's a tough one. When Dad died, Mum married Hugh and we all moved to Belfast, such certainties as I possessed were now as ephemeral as a lingering puff from a steam train, imposing one minute, then gone with the wind. From that time, Hugh worked overtime to make us fit in with his previous family. It keeps coming back to me how insistently he would urge upon us the only ethic he knew? "We can't have anybody around who is not one of us. You can do whatever you want. You'll go far. Build up a head of steam. No one can stop you. Show them all what you can do, whose son you are!"

It was dinned into me morning, noon and night. My most enduring memory is that of a rather fat, bald figure puffing out his chest in a red armchair by the fire, sitting back in a haze of self satisfaction and congratulation. I guess he had reason. His business was growing quickly. Then came Sundays and he would take us to church; one more opportunity to breathe out pleasure in his achievements.

At the risk of putting an emotional burden on an old man, now deceased, the sarcasm and the put-downs were arrows Hugh used to devastating effect. I doubt if it came from serving in the Army but he was a skilled verbal archer. An arrow? Don't mean that. To me it felt more like he was an axe-wielding warrior when he got going.

Don't know if I shared with you that day Hugh passed away. It was heart-rending to hear Mum wishing she had gone to see him earlier that afternoon as she often did; if only she had a memory of holding his hand. Those dark, grief-lined eyes! None of us knew what to say or do though this was hardly an unfamiliar landscape. The mascara on her face was lined with tears like river valleys.

I was glad I was there and made the first move as we embraced and the tears flowed. For years, Mum had waited for this moment but both she and Hugh had put up too many barriers. Now, all the planned words dissolved. As we were never able to see Dad like that, it was really poignant to see my step-father with calm on his face that lent him an air of gentleness, rarely expressed in life.

In those last few months, Hugh knew he didn't have long. Yet I was struck as I always am by the tenacity of the human spirit and a defiant unwillingness to be resigned to the inevitable. It is what I am coming to call, "The Protest". The narcissism of self-importance as Freud characterised it? Or was it the sigh of "I count" ... "I matter!"

From where I sat, I never felt I measured up, that Hugh was indifferent to me. That feeling was a ghost which he had commanded to walk the painful corridors of my mind. Until recently, I cursed myself because he knew I still craved for recognition from a father-figure- but let's call him for what he is: my step-father, now old and frail. Some years on, the ghost had finally stopped walking. I needed to make my peace with him before he died. He held out this limp handshake. At first it wasn't easy for me to take. What did I want with a limp hand? Afterwards, I was pleased I had.

I stepped out of the room and was glad to take in a little of the atmosphere of the nursing home where Hugh spent his last days. It was certainly not clad with any sense of impending doom. Rather it was dominated by a lively group of old folk who had formed a cabal against death. After a late supper, a few old records had filled the room with the light and colour of nostalgia at its best. There had been some merriment and they were having a cup of hot chocolate. Matron cleared their cups away, a lady who breathed out an atmosphere of kindness and reassurance in the way she treated

them with dignity, unlike some nurses who keep asking you the same question. She left them to it. A few of the staff casually joined in the songs as they breezed in and out of the room.

I watched for a few minutes as in the dying hours of a December night, eight octogenarians exchanged their bittersweet memories of life. They were evidently protective of each other; their solidarity shining through in a brief encounter with someone who had just lost her husband. Their talk was of the times they had lived through that were now drawing to a close. They had seen three new generations. Scattered survivors of their own generation lived on. The darker side of optimism a when their parents were alive had been a *fin de siècle* era of decadence and a relentless search for anything that was new.

The cabal exchanged memories about where and when they were born, discussing what life had been like for them in those alien days when they lived on another planet. It was all there, so vivid; the day before yesterday. The flowering of childhood and adolescent years must have felt like the smell of awakening spring. I doubt if you and I would have felt like that after what happened.

Just then Mum called me back to outside Hugh's room to discuss funeral plans.

Guess all this is on my mind as I think about how we work our way through the loss of income, family and friends into a more hopeful future. Low wage sectors are doing the heavy lifting right now and being put under more strain than ever. We're all called to fight a national battle as well as a human crisis. You mentioned Katie's nurse friend Maddy. Most of us probably know someone who works for the NHS. The coronavirus pandemic is taking a heavy toll on the healthcare workers around the world battling to contain it. Yet hunkered down as we are though into our national spaces, we don't appreciate that many African countries have hardly any ventilators.

As I say, I don't have all the answers. I'm still learning. What I do have is questions: lots of them. It was Milton Friedman who said it is only a crisis that produces real change but that always depends on the resources of ideas and people that are lying around at any one time. The creation of something else is possible like seeing those struggling to make ends meet as not because it's their own fault but as a threat to us all. Pandemics force people to change their world. Different futures are being assembled as we speak, courtesy of technology. At least for now, rates of pollution have come down. And the wealth of billionaires has fallen by a third or so. Poor people have little to lose.

In the meantime, here we are transformed into a walking, talking bubble who might infect others. We can't live life in our own bubble though for long. It's all those people who avoid you as if you've got the plague – which, if you think about it, possibly I do! With that, am off out for daily exercise.

Always remember Bill, it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Talk soon and I'll see if I can get Steve and Jack together for re-union. You still in touch with Beth? Best not include her eh?

Liam

PS – A final thought. 'All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone'. That's Blaise Pascal in giving us permission to come apart and rest a while (if you can!) And that's Jesus by the way!