

Oscailt

Oscailt since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

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Front Cover: *Éle Ní Choncuí*, a member of this church for eighteen years. The youngest member to lead a service, ever.
(photo P. Spain)

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Oscailt

Our magazine title, **Oscailt**, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

LIVING AS AN ASYLUM SEEKER OR REFUGEE IN IRELAND

February 2022 has been designated Refugee Month in the Dublin Unitarian Church, and the proceeds of collections in that month will go to the work of the church's Unitarian Refugee Welcome Committee (for donations see bank and Go Fund Me details at end of article).

Andy Pollak gives some background information on refugees in Ireland (also see note about definitions at the end of the article).

Until the mid-1990s the number of refugees arriving in Ireland was tiny. However, as the Celtic Tiger started to boom in that decade, our new international reputation attracted increasing numbers of asylum seekers. From a base year of 1992 (when there were 39 asylum applications), by 2000 their numbers had grown to nearly 10,400; two years later they would reach 11,634. That was a record year for asylum applications in the Republic over the past 22 years. The figure was down to 3,762 in 2019 and 1,566 in 2020 – the latter figure significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The politicians and officials in the Department of Justice in Dublin back in 2000 were spooked, believing they were facing into a flood of people coming to look for work and/or claim social benefits in Europe's fastest growing economy. Something needed to be done fast and they came up with what was to become known (and notorious) as the Direct Provision system. This involved mainly privately-owned and therefore profit-making accommodation centres in unused – and sometimes rundown - hotels, hostels, holiday camps and caravan parks. The intention, said the government, was that this would be a temporary solution. By the end of 2001 there were 62 Direct Provision centres in 21 counties and they were here to stay. In the following 20 years the countries from which the largest numbers of their residents would come were Nigeria, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of Congo, Albania and Georgia.

Here these unfortunate newcomers were put up on a 'full

board' basis with canteen meals of basic Irish food served at fixed times and no self-catering kitchen facilities. Families with children would usually have to share a room and single people with strangers. The centres ranged from the truly appalling – for example, Mount Trenchard in Co Limerick, where (before it was closed in recent years) there were six-eight occupants to a room (it was nicknamed Guantanamo by its residents) – to the relatively private and comfortable – for example, the old Mosney holiday camp in Co Meath, where the former holiday chalets allowed for 'own door' accommodation.

For living expenses, adults received a weekly payment of €19.10 and children of €9.60 per week. These tiny amounts of pocket money made it virtually impossible for residents to go out into the surrounding community to mix and socialise in any real way. They have since been increased and now stand at €38.80 for adults and €29.80 for children. For these asylum seekers, many of them already traumatised by war, refugee camps and extremely difficult journeys to Ireland, and some of them stuck in centres in remote villages or countryside, the result of their marginalisation was, not surprisingly, loneliness, depression and mental illness.

The original plan envisaged that people would have to stay in these centres for only six months. However by 2010 some people had been there for up to 8-10 years. Things have improved considerably in recent years and the waiting times to process asylum applications have shortened. However there are still around 300 asylum seekers waiting five years or more to be processed.

In 2018, as the number of asylum seekers started to rise again after a decade of relatively low numbers, the Department of Justice began to rely on so-called emergency centres in Bed and Breakfast and hostel accommodation with owners who had little or no experience of asylum seekers. At the end of 2019, there were over 6,000 people living in 39 Direct Provision centres and another 1,500 in usually much smaller and even more ill-equipped emergency centres. 8,700 people – both in such centres and living in the community – were still awaiting a decision on their asylum claims. The Covid emergency has not reduced any of these numbers. The total number of people who have passed through the asylum process in the Republic of Ireland is now over 70,000.

Public sentiment towards these people has varied. In some of

the out-of-the-way places where they have been sent – for example Ballaghaderreen in Co Roscommon and Lisdoonvarna in Co Clare – they have been warmly welcomed and local support groups have been set up. In others – such as Oughterard in Co Galway and Achill Island in Co Mayo – local people have mobilised (sometimes egged on by far-right groups) to oppose their relocation to their villages.

As you can imagine, life in this strange and faraway country – which until recent years was overwhelmingly white, Catholic and monocultural - is not easy for these people. My daughter Sorcha Pollak, who writes about migration for the *Irish Times*, contributes a weekly column called ‘*New to the Parish*’ about people from overseas who come to live in Ireland – among them refugees and asylum seekers.

In a recent column Sorcha wrote about a young South African woman – a former bank worker – called Tumi Gaonwe who arrived in Ireland with her two young sons and spent six months in emergency accommodation in a hotel in Bray, Co Wicklow. In the hotel they had to eat their evening meal at 5 pm and to use a separate entrance from the hotel's other guests. “To be honest it felt so humiliating,” she said. “It felt like we are not human beings, we are nobodies.”

With no guidance on where to enrol her sons at school, Gaonwe turned to a local refugee support group for help. However, just days before the boys were due to start, the family was transferred to another emergency accommodation centre, in Courtown, Co Wexford. Here they found they were in a rundown former hotel. The situation became more difficult when Gaonwe argued with the owners – two local farmers - about the centre’s poor living conditions. “My kids could see me crying”, she said. “At some point we were even scared to leave the room. Emergency accommodation is not a good thing. They don’t care about people’s feelings; the only thing they care about is money in their pocket.”

Until a Supreme Court ruling in 2017 declaring this unconstitutional, asylum seekers did not have the right to work, a situation almost unique in Europe. Even after that ruling, very restrictive government rules limiting the professions open to them, initially meant that few were actually able to find jobs. In recent years these restrictions have been relaxed, so that now they can seek employ-

ment in most sectors.

So-called ‘programme refugees’ are in a more fortunate position. As part of an agreement with other EU countries Ireland agreed in 2015 to take 4,000 Syrian refugees in camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Greece. By 2019 3,800 of these had arrived. After the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan last August, Ireland issued visas for 530 Afghan refugees to come here; another 500 who are relatives of Afghans who are already living here will be allowed in under a separate programme. To put this in context, neighbouring Iran has 780,000 registered Afghan refugees.

Programme refugees are relocated to reception centres in places like Roscommon and Laois, and eventually are helped – more by local people than by any government agency – to integrate into their Irish communities. For example in Laois, community groups and churches organised a wide range of integration initiatives: a drop-in clinic, cafe befriending, language and children’s homework support, an intercultural women’s group, job skills training, family advocacy, and the local people and the newcomers celebrating key Muslim festivals together.

Another initiative to support such programme refugees is the Community Sponsorship Scheme, based on a successful Canadian model, which sees community and church groups, including this church, pledging to support incoming refugees for two years, including finding them accommodation, schools for their children and help in accessing government welfare and other services. Our Community Sponsorship group – the Unitarian Refugee Welcome Committee - have found a house for a family from South Sudan and are currently sponsoring a young woman refugee from Afghanistan.

Now there is some hope that the wretched Direct Provision system may be on the way out. A year ago the Green Minister in charge of children and integration, Roderick O’Gorman, unveiled a White Paper which proposed a transition to a two stage asylum accommodation system, with an initial four month period in one of six state-owned reception centres where asylum seekers would receive assistance with health, education, childcare, and learning English. They would then move to the second stage: social housing to be provided by housing associations or rented accommodation provided by local authorities and private landlords. This praiseworthy

if ambitious scheme is supposed to be up and running by December 2024.

*There are two terms which need to be defined. When I refer to a **refugee**, I mean one of two things: a person who is recognised as a refugee under the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, or (more likely) someone who has come to Ireland from a war zone or other place where they are endangered or persecuted as part of an official UN or EU-sponsored programme.*

*An **asylum seeker** is someone who arrives in Ireland on their own initiative and seeks to be recognised as a refugee in accordance with that 1951 Convention.*

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Andy Pollak

Dublin Unitarian Church

A Better Man

This is a copy of the reading I did on 16 January 2022 - my contribution to the discussions on toxic masculinity in the wake of the Aisling Murphy murder. I highly recommend Michael Ian Black's book "A Better Man: A (Mostly Serious) Letter To My Son," published by Algonquin Books in 2020, for all the young men (everybody, really!).

Good morning!

Today is my son Ben's 21st birthday. Ben is very lucky to have a father, two grandfathers and an uncle that are great role models in a more evolved idea of masculinity. Not everyone is that lucky, and after the events of last week, I thought I would read something by another evolved man, the actor, podcaster, author and self-styled "praythiest" Michael Ian Black, from his 2020 book "A Better Man: A (Mostly Serious) Letter To My Son."

He starts by recommending adopting the "practice of consideration" and says: "What do I mean by a "habit of consideration"? Just that. Taking a breath to consider. A check-in with yourself. How am I? What's going on with me? What am I doing right now, and why? Who or what am I serving? Little moments of deliberation that will hopefully lead you to sound decisions about the choices you make day to day, moment to moment.

What does all of this have to do with masculinity? A lot, I think. Men and women are no different when it comes to spiritual matters. Every person feeds their spirit in different ways, but I suspect that women, on average, have greater access to their inner lives for the same reasons that they have greater access to their emotional lives. Not because they are naturally more open to their inner selves, but because we men are unnaturally closed off from our own. Men often end up stifling the best parts of our selves—our joy, our wonder, our empathy—to maintain our place in a pecking order that serves no purpose.

Life, a good life, demands constant self-interrogation. Who am I? What do I value? Where do I devote my time? What deserves my attention? Be a relentless interrogator of yourself. Dis-

cover your own assumptions and question them. Question everything. Follow those lines of inquiry. Educate yourself. Find viewpoints that challenge your own and treat them with the seriousness that you would expect others to treat yours. Read about other people's experiences moving through this life. You may agree with them, you may not, but at least consider that you might be wrong. Consider that you might be wrong about almost everything. Don't become complacent because complacency can quickly turn to the spiritually destructive apathy.

The answer doesn't lie in abandoning traditional masculinity, only that we broaden and deepen its language as we reorient our place as men. Manhood has always celebrated service to others. It has asked men to pick up rifles and plows and welding torches. We have done so because we understand that the work of men has been to provide and protect, and we have done our work. Now the nature of that work is changing.

Men are fumbling to find an alternative to our old ways, but we don't want to abandon everything we understand ourselves to be. We don't have to. We can preserve the best parts of our masculinity, jettison the stuff that's hurting us and the people around us, and work on developing the skills that will help us in school, in the workplace, and with our families. Empathy, compassion, understanding. Love.

Love isn't something that happens to us. It's something we do. Whether it's the love of a child, spouse, friend, community, or even an idea, love communicates itself as an action and a practice. Traditional masculinity teaches us to be strong and tough and brave. Think about how much strength love requires. How much perseverance. How much courage.

But also: how much empathy, vulnerability, grief.

To get better, I had to figure out a way to become a new me. I had to figure out how to become a better man. That process is slow and ongoing. It's an everyday practice, just like the practice of love is an everyday practice. The good news is I can practice them at the same time because they're the same thing.

I've found that it helps to start with some of love's components and work on those: patience, kindness, empathy, resilience. All the stuff you already know. Maybe you just pick one of those things to work on in a given moment, or day. It's like anything else. You practice and practice. Sometimes it comes easy and sometimes it

doesn't come at all. Sometimes you fake it.

Listen, I know how naive it sounds to say that “love” is going to fix men. Is love really going to help a guy graduate high school? Get a job? Is love going to feed his family? Is love going to drive the bad guys out of town instead of the gunslinger? Maybe not.

But maybe.

As you leave home, I'm asking you take a leap of faith: Who you are as a man is enough. It's more than enough. You don't need to get married or become a father to be a man. You don't need a high-paying job. You never have to question your manhood, defend it, or prove it. You only have to be who you are.

There are so many ways to be a man, as many ways as there are to take a breath. Your masculinity is not a competition any more than your humanity is a competition; any more than one breath is better than another. They are all important, each leading to the next. Most of the time you will not even know you are breathing. So it should be with your humanity.

When I was a kid, somebody told me to “be a man,” but he didn't tell me how. I'm telling you now. Be strong and resilient, yes. But also, be tender. Be kind. Be forgiving—of others, but equally importantly, of yourself. Breathe. Be inspired. Practice love.”

Jennifer Buller

Dublin Unitarian Church

Mr. Black kindly consented to let us reprint the above excerpt on 16 January 2022 in response to my thread explaining where and why we wanted to share it. Thanks, @MichaellanBlack!

*This is
The Last Will and Testament
I do hereby give and Bequeath my property and possesions*

Are you willing ?

As part of our Fund Raising Campaign, we would like to encourage members to consider a bequest to the Church Restoration Fund in their will.

A legacy to charity is free of capitol acquisition tax. The donor can specify that the gift be used for the upkeep and maintenance of this church.

For advice on how to make a bequest or gift to the church by way of will or conveyance you should contact the treasurer.

Genesis

In September of 2021, I started my first year of English and Philosophy at university. One of my first modules was “*An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*”. After two weeks of online lectures, I had a tutorial in the module, and in order to prove my eagerness, I volunteered to make a presentation on the existence of God with two others, Tim and Billy. By coincidence, I had met Tim before, but neither of us knew Billy. He has a fiery red-headed mullet and a broad Northern accent. The first thing he said to us was “You’re in luck, you’ll be making this presentation with a Believer.” We went to get coffees together and it became increasingly clear that Billy was not just any believer – He is a self-described hard-line loyalist Protestant from the Free Presbyterian church, the church of Ian Paisley to be exact, and a fan of Edward Carson. Surprisingly though, it was another aspect of his beliefs that struck me most – He’s a creationist, believing that the earth began 6,000 years ago according to the Book of Genesis. I have nothing but respect for other people’s beliefs, as has been instilled in me by this church, but it did pose a problem when we had to make a secular presentation on the existence of God, together.

About a week later, my Professor in that same module happened to refer to creationism and the Irish philosopher, Ussher, who managed to pinpoint the exact date of the first day according to the Bible. Ussher believed that the world was made on October 22nd in 4004 B.C. During this lecture, I was sitting in the Ussher library in college, watching the leaves turn, which, to me, was a series of coincidences I couldn’t ignore.

The beginning of the universe has significance in science and religion as both parties argue that it points to there being or not being a God. The very fact that there is a universe at all has always been a point of deep reflection and contemplation – As English Philosopher J.J.C. Smart said :-

"...my mind often seems to reel under the immense significance this question has for me. That anything exists at all does seem to me a matter for the deepest awe."

Using the universe's beginning as proof of God is known as a cosmological argument – coming from the Greek words 'kosmos' and 'logia', directly translated as 'discourse of the world'. I won't endeavour to fully discuss cosmological arguments but I will boil down their premises to this – one thing happens after another, one thing moves after it is moved by another, one thing comes into being after it is created by another – but these create a problem, where did it all begin? Therefore, there must be a prime mover, a first cause, a necessary being – God. While studying this, I spent a lot of time cycling in the Phoenix Park, and I began to notice a flaw in all of these arguments. The philosophers we studied say that infinities are impossible, because nothing could ever begin, but they use that argument to prove the existence of a God that is infinitely Good and Just and Powerful. I looked at the park around me and I thought – what if they're all circles? Why can't each cause, cause another simultaneously? Since that moment, I've noticed that many philosophers and thinkers, in general, don't show an understanding of the way that the earth works, and how it influences us. I call this understanding my 'environmental lens' and it has helped me in ways I couldn't have ever imagined. The fact is that with this lens, concepts of infinity, goodness, justice, and power don't seem so difficult. Through this environmental lens, we not only gain a clearer picture of the earth but also the divine.

This realisation sent me on a journey to look for further sources to back my beliefs, being fully aware that I wasn't the first person to think this. One day, I bought a book called '*There is No Point of No Return*' and was introduced to Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess's idea of the ecological self for the very first time. Simply put, it develops on theories of the self to expand it beyond human horizons. One of the earliest concepts of the self is in the second chapter of Genesis, when God makes Adam and Eve in God's image. The mistake I think that we've made is thinking that being in God's image makes us singular and distinct from Nature. You don't have to believe in God to fall victim to this, deep within society remains the idea that humans are extraneous to Nature. However, even in a secular way, Nature can help us to understand and encounter the sublime. Arne Naess describes a form of introspection that allows us to include the earth and everything on it in our idea of the self. Christians often note that looking inwards is a way to understand God, so to me

the obvious answer is that these two ideas are not oppositional – but complimentary. It makes more sense that being in God’s image, is inherently to be a part of the earth. To paraphrase Naess:

“The meaning of life, and the joy we experience in living, is enhanced through increased self-realization, which implies a broadening and deepening of the self to include the world at large.”

If you’re anything like me, you’ll probably be confused by such a vague idea. To be honest, initially it was Naess’s attitudes around love that actually caught my attention. Naess believes that when we love ourselves it broadens our sense of self to include other people. We can be aware that to love others properly you must love yourself first, but achieving that, is much harder than it sounds. It is so important that we understand that the root of community is the extension of love, and according to Naess – the extension of ourselves. We as a Church hold a doctrine of love, showing that we already have a fundamental understanding of its importance in service and worship. There’s this false idea that you have to be a morally mature person to be a good environmentalist. This is because we have been led to believe that a selfless love must be a self-sacrificing love. ‘Jesus was a martyr, we must give up meat for the planet, we cannot make funny jokes because they’re not politically correct.’ We are incapable of seeing this supposed sacrifice as a part of love and not as a by-product of it. We assume we must suffer, but that will only ever lead to bitterness. Let’s not forget that sustainability by definition is about preservation and longevity.

The right decisions will be an extension of love, not a diminishing of the self.

This brings me back to the ecological self. It may be easy to understand how other people can become integral to your sense of self – but how could a tree or a badger? But not only that but how could every tree, and every badger, and every person? Well, I contextualise this by asking about your childhood home. Or your favourite spot in the city, or the country. How do you feel when the flower you planted grows again in the springtime? Or when you wake up to a beautiful sunrise and a fresh cup of tea. Do you feel a sense of something you can’t hold? Maybe it’s not that you find nature beautiful from a distance, but you actually find yourself in nature, which makes it beautiful.

Plato proposed that the physical world we lived in paled in comparison to the world of forms – where the ideal representations of all things lived. Our souls belong to the world of the forms and return there after our bodies decay. Many have heard of this, especially because of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. But what fewer people might realise is that Plato, through the dialogues of Socrates while he was on his deathbed, uses this idea to propose a theory of reincarnation. In ‘Phaedo’, Socrates states that our souls return to the world of forms, only to be reborn into a new body. Our awareness of the existence of the forms is a vague recollection of this experience. Most beautifully, he tells his companions that if they took one look around them they’d notice that everything in the world moves in circles – so why would you think that life and death are any different? When asked in the same dialogue, why he has reserved such a startling revelation for a moment so close to his death Socrates replies:

“Though they do sing during their lifetime as well, swans reserve their longest and most beautiful song for when they realise it’s time for them to die. Mankind’s own fear of death causes them to say it’s a song of grief and lament the swans are singing on their departure. They ignore the fact that no bird sings when it’s hungry, or cold, or in any other kind of pain. They sing because they foresee the good things which await them, and they are happier that day than they have ever been before.”

This consolation in the belief in reincarnation, allows *memory* to become the key to unlocking the reality of the world. Much as Naess believes introspection to be the gateway to expanding ourselves. One of my favourite figures in Classical Greek Mythology is the Goddess of Memory, Mnemosyne (nimohsinee). She is the daughter of heaven and earth and the mother of the Nine Muses. Which, I think, was particularly apt of the Greeks – because what is memory if not the tool of love and creation? Think back to what that childhood home and sunrise have in common. They not only fill you with joy at their beauty but, wonder at what they remind you of.

We constitute our love for things, by remembering them. Similarly, when we continually interact with nature, we instil a memory of ourselves within it, so if you remove that interaction, if you isolate yourself from that reality, you lose that part of yourself. Possibly our souls do not belong to the Platonic Ideal but our bodies

do belong to the earth. Even if our reincarnation is only into fertile soil, we are still a part of that unified community we have built. We have the power to make and remake new worlds all the time, but that does not make us Gods – it makes us human.

This is all very important, but it lacks an element of practicality necessary for climate action. The number one question that people ask concerning climate change, is what can I do as an individual to help? It can seem daunting and let's face it, a bit useless. As comedian Sean Locke once said 'tackling climate change on an individual level, is like showing up to the aftermath of an earthquake with a dustpan and brush.'

And yet, I have an answer. You draw three overlapping circles in a Venn Diagram and title them "What I love", "What I'm good at", and, "How I want to help". Where these three circles overlap – that is what you do. One of the biggest problems in climate action is that so far, it has asked everyone to do the same things. The better thing would be to take advantage of our individual strengths and skills, collectively. But the far more important question is not what you should do, but what we as a congregation should. What do we love? What are we good at? How do we want to help?

At my first proper introduction to this church, Bill Darlison poured a cup of water over my head and handed me the world. You, as a congregation promised to help raise me. And you have, but I'm giving the world back, and asking you what we should do with it.

If the world began 6,000 or 4 billion years ago, it doesn't matter, because life as we know it could end. And for what? Those were the thoughts rolling around my brain as I sat in the Phoenix Park at the end of October, mulling the world over and off my shoulders. And I thought that Love is too small a word to describe how I feel about the park, it is now a part of my heart. Each branch on each tree not only mirrors each other but my veins and lungs. To understand me, you'd have to understand the park. On that average October day, I finally realized that I was only one tiny manifestation of the earth, and I loved myself. And so, I loved the world.

After all this study, I found that I held common ground with Billy the Creationist. I have come to experience that the world was made on a crisp October morning, and ends when love is lost.

Comment from Rev. Bill Darlison

Morag and I watched Éle's service on Sunday and we were mightily impressed! How could one so young be so confident, so competent, and so articulate? She seems to have grown up so fast. I can remember her baptism and I can remember the incident that Bridget referred to when, during the children's story, a four-or-five-year old Éle told us all the ending of the story of the tortoise and the hare. The last time I saw her, just a few years ago, she was upbraiding the famous actor Frank Langella for his comment that the youth of today are only interested in their mobile phones. She gave him such a hard time that he retracted his comment and told her that she had convinced him to change his opinion! I think Éle is destined to change a lot of minds in the future.



**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's
choice for December 2021.**



OUR LITTLE CRUELTIES

by
LIZ NUGENT

The Drumm family are no ordinary family, they are dysfunctional with a capital D and the cruelties they inflict upon each other are by no means little.

The story opens at a funeral, one of the three Drumm brothers is in the coffin but we don't know which one until the reveal at the end of the book, and by then it could be any one of them.

The brothers William, Brian and Luke are brought up in the 70's and 80's in Dublin's leafy Suburbia by their Dad/Martin, an insurance clerk and Mam/Melissa, a former showband singer and a wannabe celebrity. Dad "is just there", William says and so it is Melissa's character that has the most influence throughout their lives and it hovers like a dark shadow even when she is no longer there.

The boys compete for Melissa's attention and she malevolently encourages this rivalry by treating them unequally, all her love is conditional. William, the eldest and favourite can do no wrong, then she belittles and undermines Brian and constantly compares him to William, and as for Luke, the youngest, she doesn't hide the fact that she does not love him and he is the real victim of her psychological abuses.

The Dad tries to hold it all together despite being emasculated by Melissa and her infidelities, her total selfishness and forays into the world of entertainment to deal with. Parenting skills and family relationships are to the fore in this book.

The story is told in three parts, each brother having his own chapters to give their perspective on their lives from childhood to middle age. It is interesting to hear the different versions of the same events and you get to know their characters quite well. William is a successful film producer, he is arrogant, entitled, a womaniser and misogynist, Brian says "William always gets what he wants". Brian was a teacher and is now a successful Agent in the entertainment business, he still feels second best, is manipulative, miserly and resentful and sees everything in monetary terms or how he can benefit from something. Luke is

the youngest and most disturbed of all. From an early age he showed signs of serious mental health problems, he knows his mother does not love him thus his Dad overcompensates this with his attention . He surprised everyone by becoming a very successful pop star , but when that had it's day it had long lasting damaging effects to his life, but after a turnaround or two he's now an actor. He still has mental health problems alongside substance abuses and addictions. He is the most lost of the three and so you do have some sympathy for him.

The other people in their lives are treated like pawns in a game of chess. Mam /Melissa, taught them that love is conditional and self serving. There's Susan, William's wife and daughter Daisy, all three brothers have an assortment of girlfriends, (some shared!) then there's business partners, band members and friends who are caught in the cross fire of their rivalries and betrayals and are the collateral damage to their actions.

There is no florid or descriptive prose to soften the characterisation of the despicable Drumm Brothers but it is good writing and the story is skilfully told, otherwise you would not want to keep reading about such horrible characters or care or want to find out who is in the coffin. It reminds me of looking at an operation on the television, you don't want to see it but you can't look away.

Most of the book club readers did not like the book, not just because the main characters are awful but even unto the end you know the two surviving brothers will continue with their cruelties and have passed on such malevolence to the next generation, as Daisy (the daughter) says at the end of the book "You cant buy your way out of guilt gentlemen. I am determined to make you suffer". Personally I could skip a sequel about the Drumm family.

Alison Claffey
Dublin Unitarian Church

Nothing Changes

Our ancestors had a custom, observed right down as far as my own lifetime, of adding to the opening words of a letter: *'I trust this finds you as it leaves me, in good health'*. We have good reason to say: *'I trust this finds you in pursuit of wisdom.'* For this is precisely what is meant by good health. Without wisdom the mind is sick, and the body itself, however physically powerful, can only have the kind of strength that is found in persons in a demented or delirious state. So this is the sort of healthiness you must make your principal concern. You must attend to the other sort as well, but see that it takes second place. It won't cost you any great trouble if good health is all you want. For it is silly and no way for an educated man to behave, to spend one's time exercising the biceps, broadening the neck and shoulders and developing the lungs. Even when the extra feeding has produced gratifying results and you've put on a lot of muscle, you'll never match the strength or the weight of a prize ox. The greater load, moreover, on the body is crushing to the spirit and renders it less active. So keep the body within bounds as much as you can and make room for the spirit. Devotees of physical culture have to put up with a lot of nuisances. There are the exercises, in the first place, the toil involved which drains the vitality and renders it unfit for concentration or the more demanding sort of studies. Next there is the heavy feeding, which dulls mental acuteness. Then there is the taking on as coaches, persons who divide their time between putting on lotion and putting down liquor, whose idea of a well spent day consists of getting up a good sweat and then replacing the fluid lost with plenty of drink, all the better to be absorbed on a dry stomach. Drinking and perspiring – it's the life of a dyspeptic!

There are short and simple exercises which will tire the body without undue delay and save time. There is running, swinging weights about and jumping – either high – jumping or long-jumping. Pick out any of these for ease and straightforwardness. But whatever you do, return form body to mind very soon. Exercise it day and night. Only a moderate amount of work is needed for it to thrive and develop. It is a form of exercise to which cold and heat and even old age are no obstacle. Cultivate an asset which the passing of time it-

self improves. Continually remind yourself, of the many things you have achieved, when you look at all the people out in front of you, think of all the ones behind you. Set yourself a limit which you couldn't even exceed if you wanted to.

Away with pomp and show; as for the uncertain lot that the future has in store, why should I demand from fortune that she should give me this and that rather than demand from myself that I should not ask for them? Why should I ask for them, after all? Am I to pile them up in total forgetfulness of the frailty of human existence? What is the purpose of my labours going to be? See, this day's my last – or maybe it isn't, but it's not so far away from it.

It is clear to you, that no one can lead a happy life, or even one that is bearable, without the pursuit of wisdom, and that the perfection of wisdom is what makes the happy life, although even the beginnings of wisdom make life bearable. Yet this conviction, clear as it is, needs to be strengthened and given deeper roots through daily reflection; making noble resolutions is not as important as keeping the resolutions you have made already.

Sections of letter 15 and the beginning of letter 16 from Seneca (Letters from Stoic, translated by Robin Campbell) to Lucilius. Written 35B.C. or 15A.D.

Adapted and read by *Denis Conway*.

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Sunday 2nd January 2022

New Year resolutions '**February is the new January**', an article by *Doireann Ni Bhriain* published in *Oscailt* February 2019.