

HEALING IRISH CULTURE...

Through the Sacred Arts of Living & Dying

An American such as myself would normally have little to contribute by way of credible insight into contemporary Irish culture. However, since 2005 I have been spending a considerable amount of time in various parts of Ireland as a teacher and a mentor for an education series called the **Sacred Art of Living and Dying**. Sponsored by Our Lady's Hospice in Harold's Cross, these programmes have engaged health care professionals, religious leaders and the general public in important conversations about the emotional and spiritual dimensions of life's most important transitions including the end of life. I am writing this article because we will begin a new programme series in November 2013. My hope is that many more persons in Ireland might consider joining a cohort of extraordinary teachers and participants in Dublin for a unique journey into the spirituality of change. The sacred art of *dying* in fact is much more about the sacred art of *living*.

The **Sacred Art of Living & Dying** is the entry level programme series into **The Anamcara Project** from which more than eighty Irish participants have graduated.

Underneath all of the courses that I have been facilitating for the past twenty five years is the theme of "Transforming Suffering... in ourselves and others." Modern medicine affirms emotional and spiritual well-being as essential components for total health and a balanced, productive life. Wisdom traditions from many cultures created 'maps' for understanding the nature of spiritual suffering and what it means to 'heal the soul.' My research as historian, theologian and chaplain was impressed by a unique wisdom found in the Celtic cultural story. After teaching the **Sacred Art of Living and Dying** to more than twenty thousand persons and in diverse cultures throughout Asia, Europe, the Americas and Africa, there is a universal resonance with the concept of *anam cara* or soul friendship. While the modern Irish psyche may feel disconnected from its ancient Celtic roots and from 'the land of saints and scholars,' many remarkable contemporary Irish teachers are capturing the imagination of the world once again.

My times and friendships in Ireland have taught me what you already know: Irish Culture is living through a time of unprecedented change. While this is true of the entire planet, the Irish situation is in some ways unique. I am grateful that many of the lessons offered in the **Sacred Art of Living & Dying** and **The Anamcara Project** speak to these changes and offer healing perspectives worth our commitment. Perhaps this is where my perspective as an 'outsider' to Celtic culture even has an advantage. My Irish colleagues believe that just as Ireland has exported its talent and wisdom all over the world for centuries, the time had come for others to remind Ireland about its own roots.

Part of my education that comes from hanging out in Ireland leads me to humbly share the following insights. At the core of any culture's well being is trust. When trust is compromised, especially in any of our core institutions such as government, religion and any dimension of healing health related services or education, everyone feels the effect. In America, we would say that Ireland has experienced a 'double whammy' of late. Only history will judge how much the demise of the Celtic Tiger economy may have contributed to these events but there is no doubt that every Irish citizen finds themselves reeling from the polarity of a feast or famine economic cycle. Some mental health professions have observed that there may be a connection between financial stress and the fact that the Island of Ireland, both North and South, has become one of the world's suicide hot spots. A recent report in the **Irish Times** quotes an HSE suicide prevention officer that Ireland has witnessed a 20 per cent rise in suicides compared with the numbers recorded in 2011. There are now on average two suicides every day in Ireland.

Since I have been teaching in Ireland, the other dominant headline has been about religion. I cannot count the number of times that I run into the term 'post Catholic Ireland' from every quarter. To be sure the Catholic sexual abuse scandal in Ireland is a major chapter in the worldwide Catholic sexual abuse scandal. But unlike the Catholic sexual abuse scandal in the United States, the scandal in Ireland included cases of high-profile Catholic clerics involved in illicit heterosexual relations as well as widespread physical abuse of children in the Catholic-run childcare network.

Again, being cautious about too quickly connecting the dots, one cannot deny data from the Central Statistics Office showing that the proportion of the population who were Catholics reached its lowest point in 2011 at 84 per cent. And regular attendance at Church services among persons under the age of forty has declined precipitously. Again, we cannot rush to connect these dots too neatly since there are undoubtedly many cultural factors at play here.

But... if nothing else, Ireland has an increasingly diverse population where changing cultures and religious beliefs play an important part. The twenty years between 1991 and 2011 has seen significant increases in the non-Catholic population driven by not only growing numbers with no religion but also large increases in the religions of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. My hope is that the tradition of the Sacred Art of Living and Dying can be a container to hold and process these quantum social changes. And, as has happened in the more than thirty countries where we have taught these same courses, may our humble contribution be a source of healing for a new generation of Irish spiritual seekers.