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The Comfort of Poetry in a Pandemic

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My late father was a product of the 1950s Irish Catholic education that insisted on rote learning as a way of acquiring information, while throttling imagination. The positive outcome was that he could still recite poetry perfectly even while his executive function faltered. For his generation there was great contentment in being able to draw a few apt lines or even an entire poem from deep within, its imprint remaining beyond other memories. At his funeral, the congregation recited Wordsworth's "Daffodils" together as he often used to. While the sadness of the service peaked, this incantation alleviated distress in a way that suggested the power of poetry to surpass other forms of comfort.

It was while the pandemic raged across Ireland in February 2021 that I found myself thinking about this. Wrapped in full PPE, I entered a four-bedded room in what used to be a workhouse for 600 paupers during the Irish Famine. One hundred and eighty years to the day after the first famished residents were admitted, I was tending to frail older people with COVID-19 in what had become a small community hospital that could accommodate around 100 patients. Our COVID unit, formerly the rehabilitation ward, had been opened to relieve pressure on the nearby university hospital that had escalated to an unprecedented seven COVID wards, in Ireland's third pandemic wave.

Despite its unusual history, most locals in Dublin and Wicklow have a fondness for St Columcille's, and many of the COVID patients transferred to this repurposed hospital regarded the staff as extended family. Some had not seen their own families for months due to their long hospital stays at a time when visitors were prohibited, so the spirited conversations they had with kitchen staff, carers, and cleaners were a social lifeline. The peculiar structure of the hospital meant that even 'isolation' was spent not alone, but with two or three other COVID-positive patients.

On that dark morning I found myself exhausted by the emotional weight of imminent, yet often unpredictable, death that always surrounded us. It must have been clearly visible despite my PPE, as one of the patients reversed the caring role and asked me if I was doing alright. I nodded yes, while crouching beside him, the visitors' chairs having been long removed. "Mind yourself", he said, the phrase loaded with more meaning than it had ever evoked. I inquired how he was, but the banality of the question ignored the extraordinary situation, where one's mortality simply had to be confronted. Almost every day we phoned another family to break the news of a loved one's death. During one of those calls the wife of a man who had just died disclosed her own positive test result to me. She calmly explained that they would soon be reunited. Stunned at the way she accepted her fate, I was unable to find the words to comfort her; she died at home a few days later.

This struggle to find language appropriate to the circumstances — a kind of pandemic-induced expressive dysphasia — led me to a deeper appreciation of how poetry could help. This was not something I realised by myself despite my experience at my father's funeral. The patients themselves demonstrated how a familiar rhythm and rhyme could provide reassurance, how allusion could touch on their own mortality. As I tried to think of a pertinent comment, the patient remarked easily on what the Irish poet W.B. Yeats would say: "Whether man dies in his bed / Or the rifle knocks him dead / A brief parting from those dear / Is the worst man has to fear." This was what I had wanted to convey on the phone call, capturing the sentiment perfectly. Murmurs of approval rose from the other men, some of whom could not leave their bed and seemed to have accepted their own fate with stoicism.

These men, of my father's age and education, used poetry to comfort not just themselves but their carers. Despite knowing that they awaited likely death, they met us with dignity every day. As one died, the others continued reciting poems. Without open acknowledgement, poetry had become a form of expression that supplanted conversation with a novel therapy that consoled. A communal room meant shared experiences including sudden death, but also the opportunity for peer support at dark times. With no family to hold or see, their roommates became cherished companions on a tragic journey.

As the peak of the pandemic receded, the last patient with COVID-19 died. The staff began recovering from the trauma

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and the isolation unit was closed in March 2021, at least temporarily. This had been an unforgettable chapter in the hospital's history, leaving a lasting imprint, perhaps almost poetic, in everyone's memory. St. Columcille, who gave his name to the hospital, was born 1500 years before these events and lived through the bubonic plague. He was a poet and must have had a similar longing for peace after his experience, writing in Irish: "Aoibhinn dom bheith air cnoc oileáin/Ar barr carraige/Go bhféacha mé minic ar an fharraige ciúin". This translates as "How lovely to be on an island hill, on the crest of a rock, that I could often gaze upon the quiet sea". I thought of this during coffee breaks spent in solitude, within view of the coast from the hospital's highest point.

Finally having time to reflect on the chaos of the previous months, I stood in an empty room on the ward and remembered the poetry and the men who had now departed. Though the hospital's function had normalised, my dysphasia

remained when I tried to speak about the experience. It was Wordsworth who helped me to find words to describe the ordeal. In the "Lucy" poems, he encapsulated what we had lived through: "She died, and left to me / This heath, this calm and quiet scene; / The memory of what has been / And never more will be."

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