Agus mé ar leath-chos

Cormac Mac a'Ghoill

There is an expression in the Gaeilge for those of us who have had to undergo a leg amputation. They tell us we are 'ar leath chos' I oft times wondered about that expression and more so since I joined the 'ar leath chos' brigade.

I do not profess to be a Gaelic scholar and yet the grammatical oddity intrigues me. I suppose it is derived from the old Irish Uimhir Dheidhe or dual number. Whereas in modern day English we regard the figure two generally as plural the Gaels had their own grammatical construction on that figure and declined it generally in the singular using the tuiseal tabharthach or dative case on all occasions.

Enough for the grammar, alas, a subject now badly neglected in present day education, and let us discuss the real world of the amputee. As you read this I will be three years ar 'leath chos'. Absolutely no point in even suggesting it has not changed my lifestyle as it most certainly has. It has changed my modus operandi but in absolutely no way has it inhibited me. Slowed me down a trifle in certain every day actions, but it has not prevented me from carrying out normal routine duties.

To come to my story and I tell it, so that as I have coped and am coping, I hope my experiences will help others. Following maybe fifteen years suffering from leg ulcers, a diabetic and an overweight one at that, living a sedentary life, a heavy smoker, I was diagnosed as a diabetic too late, I had the amputation in St Vincent's Private Hospital in late September 2000. The surgeon was Mr. Vincent Keaney, a Donegal man of extreme kindness and efficiency, with strong Leitrim connections. Following a period of recuperation in Vincent's private I was sent to the nursing home outside Longford for a fortnight to prepare me for the Re-Hab in

Dun Laoire. A seven week stint followed there to prepare me for life ar leath chos.

This was a period I really enjoyed. That probably sounds odd but it is very true and I was actually sad leaving the place. It was my first time ever in a public ward and the craic, day and night was always mighty. An army officer at the end of the ward always set the tenor of our day as the morning tea arrived at 7pm. 'Lads' he would shout down the ward, 'We are not sick we only have lost a limb' and that was the attitude that prevailed.

We were told by the staff we were not disabled merely less than able and that the deletion of that word less was entirely in our own hands. The medical ethos seemed to allow us do all we could for ourselves after the nurses and physiotherapists had shown us, shown us how to do the basic normal skills such as walking, sitting, rising from a chair, washing, showering, dressing, toileting and in some of the worst cases eating, but above all else showing us how to get about and get on with life.

One cannot speak highly enough of the care given. Yet we were not molly coddled. The nurses, doctors and physios preached the doctrine of Independence. Helped us and showed us as required and then watched us as we fended for ourselves. Times I felt they were really merciless but never less than very kind and always insisting the hardship we were enduring in recovery would lead to our own success.

Within the six weeks I had learned to cope. Daily work-outs in the sports hall under an individual physio had made me efficient in the use of the artificial limb and so they sent me back home to Dromod. I had retired from teaching in 1989 and had filled in my spare time by teaching music a few days a week in various schools and also working for the Longford Leader as their Leitrim GAA reporter. That and my usual weekly contribution about Dromod to the Leitrim Observer and my weekly supporters' GAA column in the Donegal Democrat.

Immediately I returned home I took up the newspaper work again. Great to be back at the GAA games and meeting old friends. Indeed my first real day out was at a Leitrim GAA Convention. I knew that day I was going to make it. This was wonderful therapy and then as my strength returned I returned to teaching traditional music, my real love in life, taking about five classes a week.

Well I could say I was again living a totally normal life and the amputation simply a very minute fly in life's ointment. Truly I was flying. A walking aid or zimmer frame and then by late February 2001 on two crutches my willingness to beat my so-called affliction and sheer will power had me on the crutches three months ahead of the usual time frame.

Life was normal and then I was struck down again. Back to Vincent's private July

2001. Toes on the other foot gone black. Mr Keaveney talked amputation hoping he would get away with toes only and not have to go for the leg. He got away with four toes and left me the small one. That is how I am to-day. Strangely losing the toes came harder on me than losing the left leg. I remember the night he told me that he would have to amputate toes at least and I suppose this was the nadir of my experiences.

I will forever be grateful to a certain young nurse who sat with me through the night and kept my mind off the next day's operation, making me look on the bright side and telling me to be thankful as there were people much worse than I was and of course she supplied regular pots of tea until I fell asleep, heavily drugged about 3 am. Six or eight weeks more in Vincent's as I was a victim to the hospital bug, MRSA, and infection was a constant worry to the medical staff. I finally got three consecutive clear swab tests from this bug and was sent to the Manor Nursing Home in Edgeworthstown for a fortnight and then back to Dromod almost a year to the day I had come home in December 2000. Problem now was that I had such a hole where the four toes had been, a real gaping wound and of course dare not put a foot on the ground and was confined to the wheel chair.

Bit by bit the open wound started to close. It was 9 cms long, 6 wide and 5 deep originally and as I write it has filled up from the inside, now to about 3 cms long, 1 cm wide and less than 1 cm deep. That has taken two years but it is ever improving. Medical opinion says that I will not now need a skin graft and I am back on the frame and hopefully on the crutches just as you read this. That basically is my story. For that story I do not want anybody's sympathy. Your support when needed certainly. That is always forthcoming from even the most unlikeliest sources.

I am back working in newspapers but having crossed the three score and ten mark I, as of now anyhow, have not gone back to the music. Times I feel the urge. Times I feel it would give me a fuller life. I will however take every day as it comes and if I feel I can still teach the ceol traidisiunta then my amputation will not stop me, I think the army man in Re-Hab had it right. Amputees are not sick. Our affliction if you have to call it that is not terminal. We can lead a life. We can lead a worthwhile life. we can do anything we want to do but provided at all times we look positively on our experiences. It would be very easy to go under for those of us with amputations. Go under and look day and daily for sympathy. Do that and your life as an amputee has no further meaning. Give in to what has happened to you and regard yourself as an object of pity and you can rest assured depression and despondency will become the major factors in your life. You are not sick. I am not sick.

My body and mind are healthy. That must be the starting point of your return to normal living. You can get out and about. You can do what you want if you have the will. Of course it will not be easy. But the will or human mind is a mighty factor in leading a normal life. Use that will and think positively. Make yourself do what seems to you to be the difficult things of life. Challenge what seems to be impossible. Strength of will and mind and you will succeed. I know. I have come through it. I speak from ongoing experiences.

Above all be independent as far as possible and seek to bring those horizons of the impossible closer every day. I am back in normality. I have attended GAA games in all four provinces. It takes an effort, a mental as well as a physical effort but make that effort and reap the rewards which are highly satisfying, mentally and dare I say it, physically. I remember the first day I drove a car. An automatic. I was again independent. In Rehab they had given us trial drives under an instructor. Driving that car on my own was the first time I knew I had a new life to lead and that I could lead it to the full, every bit as full as pre-amputation days. Days like that lead you on to more and still more.

I remember my first walk on crutches. Another red letter day. The limb fitter, delighted with my progress on the walking frame had told me that day I would be on crutches in a few months. I went in to Jimmy's bar here in Dromod for a coffee as I am years off the 'quare stuff' and Gerry Moran was there with two crutches 'Give me them Gerry' says I and sailed up and down Jimmy's floor to the accompanying cheers from the lads telling me I would be fit for the championship. Indeed within a few further weeks I could do perhaps twenty yards without any support. That, until the toes kicked. I did it because I wanted to do it. I did it because I was totally determined I was going to return to normality.

I am beating the toes crisis and le cuidiú Dé I intend some day in the near future to walk again unaided. Maybe I will never see that day. But if I want to see it then I have to work at it day and daily, and if I have the will, then I will succeed. Getting back to normality for us is merely an exercise in mind over matter. You fail. You try again. You fail again and then try again. Remember Lady Macbeth when she said 'Screw your courage to the sticking point and you shall not fail'. Constant dripping wears the stone and with constant effort you too will be back where you were and living life to the full.

Remember life is too short to waste any of it, even a single hour. As of now I want for nothing. A massive factor in my return to normality has been the friendship of the GAA. The present Uachtaran, Sean O Ceallaigh, even honoured me with membership of the national committee on Teanga, Cultur agus Scor and when I suggested my infirmity would be a deterrent he said that my infirmity was no hindrance, duties would be mental and in the physical sense he saw nothing wrong with being in a wheelchair. Believe you me that was a massive mental boost. A wheelchair bound person on a national GAA committee.

As I speak of Scor, the great GAA cultural competition, I must thank Leitrim Co Board for insisting I continue as chairman. This was normality as I had served in that position for many years pre-amputation.

Above all else I must thank my great friend and Scor secretary Maura Mulvey who brings me to meetings all over Connacht and lifts the wheelchair into her car as if it were a mere toy wheelbarrow. Always with a smile. I know I am a bother to her but she insists the contrary. Thanks also to Sean Maxwell, Sean and Brid Sullivan, Johnny Keaveney in Manorhamilton and Aodan O Docraigh here in Rooskey. These great people have assisted me as Scor Cathaoirleach and in their assistance have helped me back to a normal lifestyle. They have helped me back into public life. helped me continue my work for Irish culture and without their constant help I am afraid I would not to-day be mentally or physically as well as I am.

The Value of prayer... When I was awaiting and indeed in the days following my amputation it seemed as if the entire world was praying for me, Mass cards arriving at my hospital bed by the score and I'd say the good nuns in Drumshanbo were hounded with requests from ever so many people on my behalf. These prayers did not stall the operation. However, and of this I am utterly convinced, these prayers gave me the courage to get up and fight my way back to normality and that is indeed a wonderful grace. The prayer may not have been answered as we humans wished, but God chose to help me if not physically then and more importantly and above all, mentally. The prayers showed me the way back.

Living to-day... I still need the public health nurse twice a week for bandaging purposes on the open wound or hole in the right foot. It is ever improving under their great care as well as Georgina Gethins in the leg ulcer clinic at Sligo General Hospital. To all the nurses in the Mohill Health Centre who have come out to bandage I will be for ever grateful and particularly to Nurse Margaret Reilly who is so faithful to my cause. Margaret calls the shots in my battle to full recovery and her expertise is winning the battle for me. Her twice weekly visits have been the primary factor in my recovery. I must also thank Dr Ann Rogers, Dr Eugene Hardiman and Dr Greene who made the original diagnosis.

Family Support...Family support is the sine qua non of getting over the trauma. In all I had spent abut 12 months in hospital between St Vincent's Private, the Longford nursing home, the Manor in Edgeworthstown and that absolutely wonderful institution, the Re-Hab in Dun Laoire. In all I was treated with the absolute greatest of kindness and professional care by doctors, nurses and physiotherapists. These people will for ever be in my prayers any time I take a notion to pray.

I was blessed in my recovery with great family support, great neighbours and friends. In my long spells in hospital my wife Mary came up from Dromod a few times every week along with our Downs Syndrome girl, Ailbhe. Fergal and Nessa, son and daughter, were working in Dublin at the time and their daily visits, one of them at lunch time and the other in the evening shortened my stay immeasurably.

I dare not finish without a very special word of thanks to Jimmy and his staff here in Jimmy's Bar and Restaurant. I visit there as often as five times weekly for the coffee and the chat. Jimmy says the coffee is always on the house. It breaks the monotony. It keeps me in touch with reality. It makes me feel a real person and not a freak. It makes me feel really great when the staff, Geraldine, Serina, Kathleen, Emma and Carmel with the chef himself Aspru all treating me as normal. Again the mind playing such an important part in physical recovery

The Future... Nobody knows what is in store for any of us. Like normal people, we amputees must just live life to the full and there is absolutely nothing but ourselves to stop us living a normal life. We can be our own biggest help or worst enemy depending on the mental approach. It will be a battle. It will take courage. It will take trust in God. Feel privileged as God suits the back to the burden. The pains God has sent us will be our glories in the Hereafter. Above all else it will take your own will to overcome what the good Lord has sent.

I am still battling. I will have to battle right until the very end. I am winning. I know that. The day I stop that battle is the day I start losing and stop living normally. I tell my story not seeking anybody's sympathy but hoping that as I have battled to as near normality as possible, you too will do the very same. You must always seek to achieve your potential and remember you will get plenty of help but the real struggle will be within your own mind. The struggle, while physical is more mental. Think positively and you will succeed.

The Health Service...One hears regularly criticisms of our health service. I have been totally dependent on these services for over three years and I have no complaints, only words of deep gratitude. Life is getting a lot easier for the amputees of this world. I find everybody willing to help, indeed too willing at times and thus diminishing the independence that is so necessary to us all. I know a few more disabled parking bays in towns and villages would be a big help. Nothing annoys a person such as myself more than to drive to a disabled parking bay and find a car parked there by an able-bodied with no card on display to show disability. This does happen and happens far oftener than you might ever imagine. Suffice it for me to finish by saying if I can help a fellow amputee anywhere who is feeling depressed, who feels he/she is losing the mental battle I will be more than willing to go along and offer whatever help and comfort I can.

If my cupla focal have helped anybody, even a single amputee, then writing this was worthwhile. I suppose if I have learned from my experiences it would be an appreciation of the real kindness, help and caring, ordinary people have at all times shown to those such as us. Put away those crutches. I am going to walk again.

Ná lagaidh Dia sibh uilig.