

WORDS FOR A FEARFUL CENTURY

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IN A text message sent from the hospital minutes before he died Seamus Heaney employed a Latin phrase: “*Noli timere*” – Don’t be afraid.

It was a message of comfort for his wife Marie, a mustering of his own courage knowing he could die, and not unsurprisingly perhaps, it confirms a truly great poet’s gift for delivering the perfectly measured expression to meet the challenge of ultimate occasion. Succinct and cogent, it is a heart-breaking personal communication with the ring of public pronouncement: an epitaph in keeping with, but more humane than, the Yeatsian command to, “Cast a cold eye...”

What I find so striking about the expression “Don’t be afraid” is that it can be repeated under your breath as a private means of summoning courage, and it succeeds as an act of communal affirmation with the force of a rallying cry for those of us trying to come to terms with these troubled and troubling times.

In our love affair with the 21st Century we are anxious bonders. And with good reason you might say.

September 2013 marked the

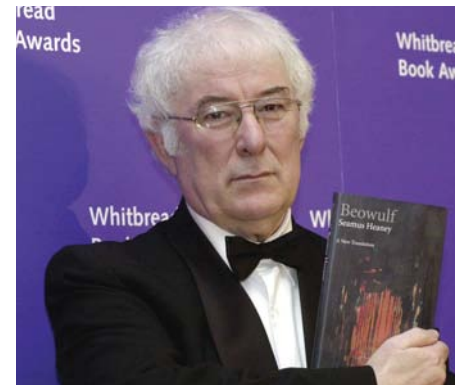
twelfth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America. And ever since that calculated spectacle and carnage, airline passengers have had to contend with a battery of scans, x-rays, bag and body-searches, while shuffling in shoeless, beltless and coatless lines through airport security to reach a plane where you’re expected to keep as quiet as a mouse or get slapped in handcuffs and turfed out at the nearest airport holding cell.

It’s institutionalized hysteria, and it’s just as scary and disempowering in its way as any ‘terrorist threat’.

Likewise every time you listen to the news at home the top items are mostly ‘statements’, ‘announcements’, ‘reports’ ‘polls’ ‘surveys’ and the ‘latest figures’, This isn’t news, its spin and propaganda. Doublespeak. And it’s calculated to induce the same feeling you get at airports of constant stress, anxiety, uncertainty and fear.

Why you might ask?

Because fear keeps us in line. Fear thwarts action. Fear as every athlete knows undermines confidence, interferes with performance and lames resolve. Fear is what has the population of Ireland so docile.



■ Seamus Heaney

Week in and week out we’re told the forces threatening our poor economy are inhumanly immense. We are made to feel insecure and unsafe and ignorant of the scale of the difficulties. And so we don’t protest. We don’t object. We don’t take to the streets, for fear of being engulfed by something worse and losing whatever dignity and possessions we have left.

But ‘merely to live’, as Seneca (a philosopher not an x-factor judge) said, ‘is itself an act of courage’. And there is true courage in simply keeping going, especially when you feel painted into a corner and your predicament falls desperately short of your needs and hopes, expectations and dreams.

Which brings me back to Seamus Heaney’s “*Noli timere*”: a fitting reminder that to participate fully, courageously and decently in life we have to “be not afraid” of whatever the heavens have left out for us.