

A LETTER HOME: FAR AWAY FROM LEITRIM, BUT NEVER FAR FROM MY HEART

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Identity is a uniquely individual concept.

THERE ARE few constants in life. Having lived in various cities over the past number of years, as I moved across Europe and the Americas pursuing the next opportunity in my education and career, my sense of identity has evolved. However, those elements that have remained permanent, I treasure and I think define me most as a person. No element of my identity is more permanent than where I was born and reared.

Each of us responds differently to our circumstances. As a child and throughout my school years I attended summer camps away from home, and invariably, I was the only Leitrim person present. Upon introduction to my peers, some were amused, and at times dismayed to discover the existence of County Leitrim. It intrigued me that they, claiming the benefits of education, did not know where other counties were located. It never diminished my deep appreciation of my native place and my sense of pride in Drumshanbo and County Leitrim.

I am fortunate to have received



my introduction to geography in St Patrick's National School, Drumshanbo. This is particularly so as under the wonderful tutelage of both the Principal, Mr Paddy O'Keefe and teachers not only did I learn all the counties and capital towns of Ireland, but I also learned the capital city of each country in the world together with some salient facts about them. Learning about your own region and other places is a magical experience as a child. I remember the sense of mystical wonder when I first heard exotic names such Addis Abba and

■ Hugh with his brother Denys on the Golden Gate Bridge

Ulaanbaatar—the onomatopoeic syllables just rolling off the tongue in perfectly formed parcels. Today, this knowledge has proved useful as I regularly meet people from diverse international backgrounds. I am aware of their capital city, which is—more often than not—their home town!

The other typical response was a bad attempt at humour—when I was much younger it was some

variation of a derogatory comment made by Dustin the Turkey—the children’s puppet from TV. Later, it was the question of whether there were traffic lights in County Leitrim yet. The first ten times I heard the traffic light joke it was funny but it quickly wore thin thereafter. I often wondered why people responded in such a manner to Leitrim as my sense was that other counties did not provoke similar responses. Of course, we all have our own stereotypes about characters and characteristics from different counties and places but rarely do people immediately resort to them during initial introductions. This never reduced my enthusiasm for my County. In fact, it had the opposite effect, in that I thrived and relished in County Leitrim and its uniqueness.

This is still true today. There are few thoughts I more readily share when meeting new people than the fact that I am from “Drumshanbo, a town of 1000 people, located in County Leitrim in the north west of Ireland”. I love sharing the minutiae—and am excited to describe its people, the beautiful mountains and lakes such as Lough Allen, its arts/culture and sporting traditions together with the recently opened spectacular new boardwalk across Acres Lake. Even still, with the best descriptive dialogue, I rarely do justice to the

natural beauty of Leitrim. My international friends sometimes perceive that I am from a remote green wilderness far from civilization. This impression is quickly erased when they visit County Leitrim. It always amuses me at their sense of surprise that I am not actually from a vast green prairie-like landscape but rather from an area that is as modern, except much more beautiful than their own home place.

There are many parameters around which we can frame the lattice of nodes that create each person’s own identity. Whether in the board rooms of Silicon Valley or the bars of New York City, the Leitrim accent has acted as a particularly positive badge of my identity. Beyond the more superficial, outward aspects however, our identity is much more determined by the values and morality we develop growing up and build upon in adult life. These are crucial and I am extremely grateful for those values I learned as a young person reared in County Leitrim.

Society’s definition of identity will continue to be challenged and will change. Many suggest that technology, particularly television and social media, is diluting our sense of identity and place in society. There is certainly merit in this point. I understand

how a traditional view of identity can appear weakened today yet this does not paint the full picture. The advances in technology through the reduction in cost and increase in speed of computing power, as predicted by Moore’s Law, has created a Cambrian explosion in it’s potential to continue to improve the world. This has exciting promise: whether it is the progress that technology heralds in the reduction of poverty, improvement in health, increase in jobs and productivity or peace in the world, we must welcome the accruing benefits.

The identity of tomorrow’s children ought not to be defined by any technology but rather by the values of their families, communities and environment. The manner in which some identify more with characters on TV than in the real world indicates a loss of a sense of place, a loss of identity and a loss of a pride in place. Whilst immersing ourselves in other cultures and environments may enrich an identity, it is imperative we do not lose sight of where that sense of self was first cultivated.

As Leitrim people, we must continue to rear our children to be proud to identify as people of Leitrim and Ireland, lest we lose sight of what made us who we are today.