



David Sherlock's regular soundings from the learning and training frontline

Hanging on for Spring

What trumps icy, both-ends-of-the-day-gloomy winter, is not some grand pattern of events but the fine grain of satisfying daily life.

Hibernation, emigration or suicide seem to be the only solutions to February. If we weren't so busy we'd surrender to a terminal attack of the grumps.

You could say there's little to be cheery about. Will Hutton, one of the few human beings to have read the Treasury's Pre-Budget Report (PBR), calculates that any government after May has to add about £100 billion a year to the credit side of the national balance sheet to dig us all out of the mire. According to the number crunchers that's likely to take £30 billion off capital investment, £20 billion extra taxes, £11 billion off public sector pay by restricting any rise to 1 per cent over two years, £14 billion off the quaintly-named 'non-frontline public services', and £25 billion assumed benefits from economic recovery. Hutton also reckons that the pension age will have to go up to 68 by 2020 and 70 by 2025. That lot's going to hurt, neighbour. The main difference between potential future governments is likely to be how fast they turn the screw, though even that seems less certain as we head towards 6th May.

A brave face

Add all that to the usual New Year natural disaster, this time the catastrophe in Haiti; silly boys being allowed on to aeroplanes in explosive underpants, thus spelling even more grief for all of us when we travel; and the waning hope that Obama will be able to bring commonsense to the American political system and you have good reason for what Churchill used to call 'The Black Dog'.

Just as the great man did, we try to scare away the gremlins with a whirl of activity. This month we're in London lots, Newcastle, Liverpool, Leeds, Bristol, Birmingham and doubtless two or three other puddles of sunshine besides. Sometimes, it can all feel a bit much. If there was a time when I relished it,

standing on a cold station platform at 7am waiting for the London train no longer holds much attraction. Airport check-in, surrender of your remaining life prospects to developing-world taxi drivers who tailgate at 90 on their way from airport to hotel while turning round to talk to you, and the dreary fringes of conferences at which you know none of the delegates, likewise offer few pleasures. In darker moments, Ms. Perry (who is much younger than me) and I occasionally feel like elderly horses flogged onwards to pull the cart a last mile before we collapse between the shafts.

All this is, of course, over-dramatised; to make the foolish mistake of standing back for a moment to see oneself as a player in one's own life. What trumps icy, both-ends-of-the-day-gloomy winter, is not some grand pattern of events but the fine grain of satisfying daily life. We like doing a decent job for our customers. We like our customers. We like it when we can use the web of contacts one makes in a busy career to bring people together to achieve more than is possible by simply, straight-line problem solving: $2 + 2 = 5$. Magic.

Don't be retiring

I was reminded of the value of keeping on, to us and I hope to others, a couple of times in particular last year. We visited old friends at their home in the Wicklow Mountains. We had not seen them for a decade or more and finding the right small road among the boulders, bog and scrubby trees was a challenge. Eventually we came to the gateway of what we faintly recognised as their land, blurred and concealed by the growth of time. Both well-heeled and smart, two confident people had built this ranch house as their dream home. It reflected them; a little piece of Frank Lloyd Wright surrounded by retired and resting polo ponies in their paddocks, the

friendly hills and the sea. Now there was more than a hint of Sleeping Beauty. Great briars, rampant trees and untrimmed grass softened the outlines of the house, which had seen no lick of paint or running repair since the builders left a quarter of a century ago.

Three dogs, a host of cats, some days' washing-up, dominated indoors. Our friends were as warm as ever. Drinks instantly appeared in weighty Waterford crystal, quickly unearthed from boxes. My fastidious daughter-in-law, transfixed by this vision of relaxed retirement, Irish-style, clearly dreaded the moment when she might be offered something less antiseptic to eat or drink. While I love Irish disdain for mere matters of appearance, retirement, I decided there and then, was not for me. Not then. Not now. Probably not ever.

Check your own obituary

The second reminder was of an even more galvanising kind. A couple of years ago, the first principal to whom I was deputy, died. Jonah Jones was a sculptor who, apart from three years leading an Irish college and a spell in the Parachute Regiment during the Second World War, had been self-employed all his life. His 'children', youngsters when I first met them more than 30 years ago but in grizzled middle age now, are celebrating his life with a memorial publication of prints, writings, an exhibition at the National Gallery of Wales and a new biography. A bundle of Jonah's letters which I have kept, adds a vital spark to the enterprise.

Having trawled my memory and dug out memorabilia, I was rewarded with the gift of a monstrous tome¹ written by another old friend, John Turpin: the history of the National College of Art & Design in Dublin from its launch as a 'little school of drawing' in 1746 to the day it moved from Kildare Street to Power's Distillery in the early 1980s. And there, in faultless but properly opinionated academic-ese, are pen portraits of Sherlock as a young dog, complete with sober assessments of what I achieved in my first senior job in my 30s and the elephant traps into which I plunged headlong.

If anything is to give you a sense that your life has shape, and that there's a good deal more to do to complete the colouring-in, it's reading about your younger self in a perspective of 240 years and 710 pages. This stuff is going

to be part of your obituary; best get the balance right.

The god of small things

From the windows of our new office we can see the Bristol Channel, the Mendip Hills and the washed blue sky of the West Country on a good day. Every prospect pleases. Rather than any grand reflections, or any trepidation about plans that somebody, somewhere, has to make things troublesome, it is the succession of tiny delights which brings certainty of fulfilment. Just as Montaigne wondered whether his cat was as conscious that she was playing with him as he was of playing with her, I know that the coming of crocus and daffodil are more potent signs of the world's motions than the doings of bankers and politicians. Just keep on keeping on.

¹ A School of Art in Dublin since the Eighteenth Century, Professor John Turpin, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1995

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info@beyondstandards.net