

Struggling With The Juggling

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(Opening Speech delivered at the 22nd. Annual conference of PACCS - Parents Association Of Community & Comprehensive Schools in Roscrea March 3, 2006)

Mr. President, fellow officers of PACCS and parent representatives, it is my privilege and honour this Friday evening to open your 22nd. annual conference on the theme of 'Struggling With The Juggling'

How appropriate in a week that included 'Work Life Balance' day, that we should reflect on the juggles and the struggles of being parents in a new Ireland; an Ireland vastly different to that presided over by **our parents** when we were teenagers whether 20 or 30 more years ago. In the next 25 minutes I look forward to exploring today's Ireland with you and in so doing, setting the context for this year's conference.

Before we fully commence let me as a Tipperary man welcome you to the premier county and particularly to Roscrea. You have chosen an appropriate setting to reflect on the struggles of life. Across the fields from here is the historic and tranquil Mount St. Josephs Abbey; home to the contemplative order of cistercian monks - while in the town itself are the eccleasical ruins of the ancient church of St. Cronan-just a stones throw from the vibrant and modern community college - Colaiste Pobal Rocrea.Welcome to a place; where spiritual legacies of reflection and contemplation coexist with new energies, new innovations and the different pulse of the 21st. century.

I have chosen to open this conference with the question;

- **what is this struggle all about and what is the nature of it?**

Why are we apparently juggling so much? Is there really a struggle at all or is it just a hyped up phrase synonomous with the still roaring Celtic Tiger?

I now invite you to sit back, unwind and let the struggles of this week fade far away for 25 minutes.....Let's forget about the struggle to get here, the domestic organisation and planning that allowed you to be here, the early finish in your workplace, the relentless traffic that you encountered if you drove some of our main thoroughfares to be here in Tipperary this Friday evening. Turn the mobiles off and get ready for a special journey – one of time out and reflection, as we contemplate together the joys and sorrows of **our collective struggle** as parents; parents of Ireland's Celtic Tiger Cubs in the most vibrant economy of the western world.

So how happy are we as parents juggling in Ireland today?

Successive quality of life surveys have shown us to be one of the happiest races in Europe (European Values Survey 2003 /UN Quality of life survey 2004 & Fahey Hayes and Sinnott study 2005).

The recent Amarach survey published just last month however tells us that 1 in 5 Irish people feel that the quality of life has declined in recent years (Feb 8th.) This same survey points to an increase in stress levels felt by 25-44 year olds, particularly stress related to time pressures; and men are now feeling similar levels of stress to women. Irish people are still more relaxed about the pace of change however than are their British counterparts.

Time it would seem has become the new money and even those with impressive bank accounts and investment portfolios are time poor.

So what exactly is happening to our lives? The official working week has supposedly shortened from 40 hours to 37 and in many cases 35 hours. For some there are work life balance options available that include flexi time, part-time, job sharing, career breaks and work from home options. Modern technology enables us to complete home and work tasks at greater speed. In the 1970's we were all being promised that modern technology would release us from labourious work and grant us immense leisure time. So how much leisure time did you have this week?

Did you get to the gym every morning this week? Did you fit in the round of golf after your morning meeting? Did you sit in a warm jacuzzi bath and listen to the piped music from your integrated stereo sound system this morning? Did you meet your life coach and personal trainer at the squash club? In the last week did you visit the local beauty salon for a facial, Indian head massage and seaweed treatment? Did you recently jet back from another winter break in the Adriatic or South Africa where perhaps you have purchased your leisure time holiday home? Do you own one of the 650,000 foreign properties now owned by Irish citizens? Did you queue outside BT's for the €700 bargain handbag in the recent sales? Have you already spent your SSIA's dreaming of a world cruise or alternatively building the majestic sunroom extension that no home is now complete without? Maybe you're planning yet another botox treatment! Are you already planning for the new car you will bequeath to your son or daughter when they complete the Leaving Cert? Will your designer home be sparkling clean when you return from this conference thanks to the non national worker you have hired as a domestic?

If this affluent and leisurely lifestyle isn't yours just yet – then you may have to struggle a little longer. Perhaps this week in addition to your paid work, you also juggled with the sheer physical energy of parenting: the business of driving, collecting and dropping off to school, to: sports training, friends houses, discos, cinema et al, the relentless laundry, ironing, hoovering and preparation of meals, the negotiation and renegotiation around houserules, pocket money, lunch money, school money, the pleading for designer clothes- as the teenage gods of *nike*, *calvin klein*, *tommy hilfiger*, compete for your hard earned money ; This week did you have arguments about friends and relationships; about

school and study, about the dreaded school reports after the mocks or the recent parent teacher meetings. Perhaps you argued over part time work or the wasted time watching Reality TV, or downloading DVD's to their ipods or lazing with playstations or texting the whole universe. Did you witness the continuous lusting after fast food and the ongoing taunts of *"Is there anything decent to eat in the house?"* Do you juggle with the lingering suspicion that you are not always told the full story by your teenage offspring? Have you sometimes juggled in your mind between what you think you should know versus what you think you can handle? Sometimes ignorance is bliss! When things go wrong and tiredness wears you down; have you resorted to the inevitable sermon that begins with either *"You don't know how good you have it..... when I was your age..* or the ultimate threat- *not while you are living in this house!"*

Welcome Parents one and all to Reality Land but it's no harm to dream of the Indian Head massage or the holiday pad in the Adriatic!

The relentless everyday struggle is however vaguely normal and for the most part what we expected as parents. There is I suspect though - a far greater struggle; We are the first ever parents of Irish teenagers - the majority of whom have never known hard economic times. We struggle psychologically with the new materialism and the new pluralism; we struggle between past and present.....so what exactly does the present look like?

In Ireland today we have virtually full employment; yes I kid you not; full employment and one of the lowest inflation rates in the EU. We will require an annual influx of 60,000 emigrants for the next 5 years to just maintain our current levels of growth. It's all a far cry from the graduation classes of 20 & 25 years ago when sizeable numbers (including some of us here perhaps) took the planes to Boston, New York, Brussels, or Sydney. Parents wept at airports when they watched their typically educated sons and daughters fail to get even a menial job in their own country. Having a Morrison visa was like winning the lotto as even the historically benevolent US placed restriction on Irish emigrants - even on those with degrees from our best universities!

Nowadays almost all our young people are guaranteed a place in some third level programme (tuition fees paid for one and all!) as more places than students are fast becoming available. Last year alone over 7,000 students took up apprenticeships (some may I add in preference to a college place), reflecting the relentless boom in Ireland's construction industry and a realization that an apprenticeship was a fast track route to employment with lucrative financial reward. So confident are many of our young that they are taking a year out before they even commence third level. There is also a refreshing sense of optimism about many different careers in a lifetime and little pressure to get the safe pensionable job! Travel is a must and many celtic tiger cubs know more of Thailand, Sydney, LA and New York than they do of Dublin, Cork, Galway or Limerick. Parents no longer cry at airports but thanks to the texting revolution just continue to lodge the required instalment of money for each leg of the exotic year out! Some of our 20 somethings are putting deposits on apartments costing anywhere between €250-500,000.

But despite this great economic boom, there is as I said a far greater struggle; one that is more psychological than physical! It is a struggle around values; a struggle around the speed of change and a struggle around our incredulity at what we ourselves have already witnessed. Sometimes it's like we exist with our bodies and souls in two different eras of time. I grew up as a farmer's son in a large family. I was a teenager in the 1970's. There was some optimism after Ireland had joined the EEC but there was also a huge sense of privilege about being able to avail of third level education and even contemplate the prospect of a permanent job. The infamous giveaway election budget of 1977 - was of course too good to be true and inevitably we would pay the price for playing Santa Claus economics! Ireland was destined to become bankrupt and we all remember the litany of redundancies that followed- accompanied by interest rates that rose to a staggering 18% in the mid 1980's. Ireland could never possibly lift itself from its knees or so we thought! As Emily O'Reilly put it at a national conference over a year ago: (Ceifinn 2004)

“ Those of us who were educated in Catholic schools in the 1970's will have been reared with the notion that happiness is not something to be attained in this life. With the passing of that era, and the coincidental massive increase in personal wealth, we are now awash in the notion that not alone can happiness be attained this side of paradise but that the more money you have; the more of the happiness stuff you can buy.”

But how do we expect our teenagers and young people generally to accept the culturally redundant principle of delayed gratification when they see wealth all around them and feel it is theirs by right? How do we foster their resilience against disappointment when it is likely that they have never experienced it? How do we help them develop strong faith systems when confidence in faith institutions themselves have been seriously eroded? How do we help them negotiate meaning in a society that has seen a significant increase in youth suicide, violent crime, road traffic accidents and a general devaluing of human life? How do we help them have a sensible attitude towards alcohol in a country that has woven alcohol into the very fabric of its social life? How do we help them negotiate the temptation of drug abuse that was cited by 70% of our youth as the issue of greatest concern to them in a recent survey? How do we guard against the increased sexualisation of young people as frequently targeted by slick advertising and the more tabloid elements of our mass media?

The Sunday Independent (Feb 19th) did a feature article on the impression of Ireland held by non-national emigrants resident here. Four attractive ladies called *Serena, Micaela, Monika and Naatascha* from Italy, Portugal, Lithuania and South Africa respectively are consistent in highlighting elements of Irish life which have surprised and disappointed them; They are; the excessive materialism/alcohol dependency/the sexualised behaviour of the very young/and the apparent laziness of their Irish co-workers and they also have a question mark about our reputation as a friendly nation and also observe the growing dependency on fast food.

So as parents perhaps we too are juggling and struggling with significant value changes that we prefer to ignore. We too are attracted to a new found freedom; a new way of being that amuses us, scares us and sometimes bewilders us.

But all is not lost ..we still approach every day with the best of intentions and instinct about appropriate parenting for 2006? Like no other parents before us in Ireland; we must strive to be almost self reliant. We cannot rely on Church, Community, State, School or Mass media to articulate and inculcate *our own* family values. In the absence of naming and knowing what our own family values are however then of course our children will be effected by a curious KARAOKE Tabloid Culture that is in freeflow in Ireland. What Michael D Higgins calls a “*dulling of consciousness*” or information overload and wisdom deficit! In a knowledge based society of digital multi channel and fast download websites; is it possible that we may be less wise than our forefathers whose view of the world sometimes came from the inside out rather than the outside in? Stanislavsky said: “*the longest and most exciting journey is the journey inwards*”

In today’s world we are challenged to ring fence time to reflect on our own values; time to let our own philosophy of life emerge and time to discover what Buddhists might call ‘*centredness*’ or a worked out value system that is like an **anchor** for all our pursuits.

Do we have a clear set of values that we can stand over as parents or do we sometimes suffer from a *cut and paste sub culture; or an al a carte menu of political correctness*? How can we pass on values that we can’t sometimes name for ourselves? Perhaps we are still unsure about what we should pass on. We have witnessed the fall of communism, socialism and the rise of capitalism across Europe and much of Asia. We have witnessed the fall of institutional church and the erosion of confidence in political systems. In 2004 the national Youth poll revealed that 45% of 16-17 year olds declared no interest at all in politics. Over 50% were not able to name one local politician and almost 90% could not name one MEP for their own constituency. The mass going attendance rate for 16-17 year olds has dropped to just 30% in urban areas according to the Irish Times MRBI poll in 2003. We have witnessed the changing structure of family life as we have moved from extended nuclear families to more cosmopolitan and inclusive constellations that embrace; single parents, new partner parents and same sex couples.

Sixteen percent of all our 15-24 year olds (or 1 in 6) have parents who are divorced or seperated. One in every 3 children born is to a single parent. There is a shift in unerstanding about the meaning of the word family. It is less to do with structure and more to do with the quality of relationships within.

There is however growing concern at the absence of male role models for many children. The teaching profession is becoming more and more feminised. There is a deficit of male volunteers at community sporting and voluntary levels. Many separated fathers feel somewhat isolated and dispossessed and many young men feel under valued and inferior in a more supposedly equal world. Many single mothers do a wonderful job on their own while others struggle alone with little support in increasingly marginalised socioeconomic environments.

We have also witnessed the ongoing urbanisation of Irish society and the increasing suburbanisation of the countryside. The perceived interdependence of traditional rural communities may be yielding to a more aggressively independent lifestyle of large houses, security gates and multiple cars. How many of us eat a family meal together on a daily basis? We are witnessing the institutionalisation of care for the elderly and care for children. Tax incentives now encourage the building of ever more nursing homes and creches. Could we be losing something of the wisdom of inter - generational knowledge? The elderly have much to offer us – a perspective on life that was hard earned and refined through years of experience?

John Abbot a leading world educationalist (who spoke at an educational seminar in North Tipperary last year) presented research findings; highlighting the need for young children to be with a significant other - preferably a parent for the first 2 years. The child's need to be held, hugged and physically reassured is now considered the foundation of connectedness and self esteem for later years. The recent government announcement of extended paid maternity leave is hopefully a step in the right direction.

So what do we prioritise as parents in the midst of all this struggle to; reconcile the past with the present, to reconcile instinct with knowledge? Let's not be too hard on ourselves as the parents of the Celtic Tiger cubs. Let us strive bravely forth content to accept some uncertainties; but resolved to clarify what is really most important to us and to our children as life unfolds. What is the star that guides us and gets at the heart of life? What is the spirit that animates us and prevents us from being the walking dead fatigued by the daily drudge? Can each of us here tonight identify some core values we want to pass on to our young people? Can we also stand back from the barrage of messages transmitted on a daily basis and reclaim the powerfully rewarding role of parenting. Research suggests that in years to come our young people will have gleaned more of their values from us than from their peers, church, state or the mass media. Just think of who you are today and who influenced you most in your lifetime. So perhaps the struggle and the juggle is not wasted.....

The poet William Blake said;

“ We are put on earth for a little space that we may learn to bear the beams of love”

Our children need those beams of love to see them emerge as the parents of tomorrow's youth. True Love is unconditional and as parents we give it because we are the adults and accept that we may not always get it back in return from the hormonally charged independent seeking teenager - for whom we just cannot be cool! Parental Love is about establishing rights and responsibilities. It is about boundaries that can be renegotiated as they get older. It is **not** about free and easy access to everything. It is frequently much easier to say **yes** than **no** and sometimes much easier to give money than to give time!

My 12 year old daughter has felt aggrieved for some time because she is one of only three girls in her 6th. class who does not possess a mobile phone or have a television in her bedroom. Recently however a wonderful teacher congratulated her and her 2 friends for admitting same! I think she was actually proud and temporarily at least we are saved the ongoing taunts of being mean parents out of touch and sooo uncool! Maybe the time and patience we spent explaining why will prove worthwhile but she is still determined to get that mobile on her 13th. Birthday! The TV in the bedroom is still not up for discussion!

I know some older parents and indeed colleagues who worked very hard and are now nearing retirement. One consistent regret I listen to is about the time not spent with their children. The organisation will live on without us, the workplace will find a replacement, but we cannot buy back time with our children. Isn't this what work life balance is all about finding quality time in the midst of all the juggling. So when this conference is over- keep remembering why you are happy to keep struggling with the juggling. Thank God for the endless hours of household chores/of car journeys/of cold Saturday mornings on camogie/hurling or soccer pitches/of cold evenings at Feis Ceoil/ or school concerts/ the winter nights at parent association meetings and the reorganised schedules to attend parent teacher meetings. Thank God for the privilege of being a parent at a crossroads in Irish civilization. Maybe we do live in wonderful times. Gandhi once said that "*mankind is notoriously dense to read the signs that God sends from time to time....*" Perhaps God is sending us a sign that he/she trusts us to continue struggling with the challenge of parenting.

I have worked with young people for almost 25 years now - 17 of those spent in one of Ireland's finest Community schools in North Dublin and more recently 7 years in the third level sector at Tipperary Institute. I would be generally optimistic about our youth. They strike me as more self assured, more tolerant and inclusive in outlook, less hypocritical about their faith than previous Irish generations. They are typically loyal, proud to be Irish, interested in the environment and global justice, not oppressed by church or state.

In some of the programmes I currently lecture on at TI there are mature students. They thoroughly enjoy being in the company of today's youth and sometimes regret the oppressive schooldays of former times. So let's not romanticise about the past and recreate it as a panacea for great joy. The Education system of those times was frequently based on fear and not on motivation. Only academics and the wealthy went to college. There were no learning supports back then, no recognition of learning disabilities, no recognition of multiple intelligences and no provision for life long learning or returning to college as a mature student. Education was for most people a one chance saloon. So notwithstanding all the challenges outlined earlier and indeed current day concerns about early school leaving; perhaps we are struggling and juggling in privileged times in the context of education at least.

The good news is that the majority of today's youth are happy with life. In the Irish Times MRBI Youth poll in 2003, parents were cited as the number one role models – by

Ireland's youth - ahead of friends, rock stars or public figures. Take a bow – you the parents of Ireland's Celtic Tiger Cubs are doing a good job in difficult times and you are acknowledged for it. There is light at the end of the struggle. In this the weekend of Hollywood Oscars- you all deserve nominations for best parent awards!

In conclusion I would say in this week of work life balance day; do look after yourself because the best tool kit you can have as a parent is courage, patience, energy, enthusiasm but above all some sense of what it is; you wish to pass on to your children.

Pascal the great philosopher said:

In difficult times you should always keep something beautiful in your hearts

Perhaps the something beautiful is about reminding yourself occasionally that you are actually doing the most important job there is. If the struggling and the juggling gets to you on occasion – remind yourself of this; and remember; your legacy as a parent is the one that will endure more than any other. Fear not - the rewards will eventually be yours and those of the next generation.

Have a wonderful conference and may the spirit of Spring in Tipperary send you home refreshed, energised and happy to continue struggling with the juggling!