

Western People

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## Time to reboot our economy

The image of a fox ambling along Ireland's main shopping thoroughfare, Grafton Street in Dublin, in broad daylight last week provided a sobering reminder of the devastating economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. It was one of those photographs where you had to look and look again to check if it was actually real. We thought we had seen it all during the banking crash of 2008 but a fox on Grafton Street on a weekday morning? Now that really is something else altogether.

A few days later, An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar went on RTE's *The Late Late Show* to explain how the Government intends to get the country back up and running again after a national shutdown now entering its sixth week. The complicated exit strategy is a welcome development at this stage but it poses as many questions as answers, and many people will wonder whether it is workable at all. In particular, many business owners are still unclear whether they can operate within the parameters of the social distancing guidelines laid down by health officials, whose record in indulging in bureaucratic nonsense is not good at the best of times, let alone during a global pandemic.

It is fine to suggest that restaurants, for example, may re-open sometime in July but how do these businesses turn a profit if two-thirds of their tables are left idle due to social distancing? Similarly, many other retail premises — from cafes to clothes shops to hairdressers — may decide it is not worth their while to re-open if they cannot function in a manner that allows them to be profitable or, at the very least, break even.

Hairdressers are a perfect illustration of the sort of dilemmas that business owners will face in the coming months. They may be only allowed to cater for one customer at a time — or, at the very most, a handful — so their turnover will inevitably be substantially reduced. How then will they pay rent, wages, heat, light, water and the myriad bills associated with running a business in Ireland? It would be far better for them to remain closed, especially if a black market for hairdressers develops in the coming months due to the ridiculous decision to force them to remain closed until mid-summer.

The truth is that many people won't wait that long for a haircut and the 'mobile' hairdresser may become as commonplace as the courier vans that are dashing around our roads at the moment delivering the countless parcels — many from China, some even from Wuhan — that people are ordering online. The refusal to allow hairdressers to re-open — at least in some kind of reduced capacity — in the coming weeks just doesn't make any sense in the same way that allowing nursing homes to remain open well into March was utterly illogical.

Everyone wants to support the chief medical officer Tony Holohan and the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) but the economist Dan O'Brien is correct when he says that we need to broaden the level of expertise on that team beyond health officials. We want to believe our leaders are infallible in times of crisis because the alternative isn't worth contemplating but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Ireland's health system, which most people regarded as the epitome of bureaucratic incompetence up to two months ago, has not undergone some sort of Pauline conversion since Covid-19 landed on our shores.

The situation in nursing homes, for example, is absolutely shocking and will undoubtedly be the subject of an extensive investigation when the dust settles on this crisis. Nursing Homes Ireland, the body representing privately-owned facilities for the elderly, wasn't even invited to have a representative on NPHE, an oversight that clearly led to the spread of this virus into homes all over the country. Indeed, nursing home staff weren't even seen as front-line workers for a long time and they have been needlessly subjected to a desperately stressful month.

The neglect of nursing homes was a failure by NPHE as were the delay in cancelling the St Patrick's Day parades, the failure to stop thousands of Italians flying into Dublin in early March and the unwillingness to stop Irish people travelling to Cheltenham for the annual racing festival. Consequently, we must stop this unhealthy habit of listening to the pronouncements from Mr Holohan and NPHE as if they are the gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The chief medical officer should be just one voice in a team of people whose focus it is to protect the most vulnerable in our society from this dreadful disease while also preserving a functioning economy for everyone else.

Otherwise we'll have a lot more foxes on Grafton Street before the summer is out.

## News

# Keeping God alive in these strange times of Covid-19

There is a curious cultural redress taking place now with the Covid-19 crisis. A tiny organism, less than 100 nanometers in size, invisible to the eye, has cut us all to the quick. It is remarkable that the situation in which we now find ourselves as a global community is raising all kinds of questions about identity, interiority, community, fragility, and, perhaps, above all, human mortality.

Because we find ourselves in increased isolation, in a displaced relationship to time, and in an alternative structuring of social engagement, the question of meaning is re-emerging for many of us. The importance of human bonds is visible in a way that one finds more usually in situations of war, the vitality of community is re-emerging in an unexpected way. The gratitude shown to those who put their own lives at risk for others is heartfelt. The desire to support and help others, especially the most vulnerable, is striking, and, somehow, in it all, the ultimate is on the horizon for everyone and beckoning discretely. There is a strange, unexpected clarity about what is important in life. It is here that the spiritual and the religious have, I believe, an essential place, and, with it, attention to and care for our interior selves.

According to his son Adam, Leonard Cohen often remarked: 'I take the inner life very seriously.'

It's an exceptional attitude. There is an enormous crisis of interiority in our Western culture. We're so busy on the outside that we have little time, or energy, or even know-how, when it comes to caring for our inner selves.

As traditional religious structures and practices recede, we are discovering new places of vulnerability in the fabric of the human condition that cannot be ignored with impunity. And whereas we have made enormous advances in caring for the body and to some degree the mind, we are becoming less and less sure about how we are to care for the human soul.

It means that interiority is becoming a new place of alienation for the self. When you lose contact with your interior journey, which is at the deepest level of your person, it leads, inevitably, to a greatly weakened sense of who you are. When you neglect that level of your being, you are more apt to experience life as artificial, with a deficit of meaning, and with little or, even, no awareness of your own inner substance. Ignoring your interior self can also lead to a great undermining of ordinary faith-in-yourself and in your ability to face the difficulties and challenges that befall you in life.

Music has always been a very powerful nourishment for human interiority. It opens up avenues for the interior self that otherwise would be inaccessible. Listening to Sinead O'Connor singing Snow Patrol's *Run* takes us well beyond the words expressed and the accompanying imagery so that we transcend something of ourselves; we reach out to and look beyond the immediate and mundane, and to do this is enormously gratifying and nourishing for the human soul. It puts us in touch with our deepest longing, and, in doing so, brings us all closer together.

In as much as all this raises the question of our spiritual needs at this crucial time, there are two significant models of response in our culture. The first, is that of the pilgrim, mirrored equally in the seeker, the explorer, the searcher, or even the wanderer. It is typified in

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the person and music of Leonard Cohen.

Cohen travels through a whole series of religious traditions in search of ideas and practices to meet the restlessness of his spirit. He is not committed to any particular tradition but takes them all seriously and is sensitive to the depths and the riches that they might harbour. The language of various religious traditions speaks to him and this is reflected in his sometimes-extraordinary lyrics. In his final album, *You Want It Darker*, for example, Cohen draws on his

own Jewish tradition of origin, quoting the poignant words 'Hineni hineni, I'm ready my Lord.' The Hebrew words mean 'here I am' and were spoken, for example, by Moses to God in the Burning Bush.

Cohen says of the song that it is: "That declaration of readiness, no matter what the outcome, that's a part of everyone's soul. We are all motivated by deep impulses and deep appetites to serve, even though we may not be able to locate that which we are hoping to serve."

He adds: "So this is just a part of my nature and I think everybody else's nature to offer oneself at the critical moment when the emergency becomes articulate."

The second kind of response, which is complementary to the first, is that of the convert, reflected in the committed, the staying put, or even the homecoming. This is where one chooses explicitly a particular religious tradition as one's place of belonging. It is the place that permits the realisation of one's spiritual identity both in terms of personal expression and in finding fulfillment. It is not, however, an uncritical and naive commitment; that is no longer an option in our culture.

Nick Cave might serve as an exemplary figure here. In Christianity he has found sustenance for his life and music that shines through his multifaceted and extraordinary work. In a radio broadcast for BBC Radio 3, for example, he speaks about finding in the prose of the Old Testament "a perfect language, at once mysterious and familiar" that "actively informed his artistic endeavours".

The example of Christ is the utmost importance for him in his creative work. He sees in him the "spiritual blueprint" that was set so that "we ourselves could become Godlike". He believes that the divine flows through us when we are creative in language, through communication, and through imagination.

"I believe this is our spiritual duty, made clear to us through the example of Christ."

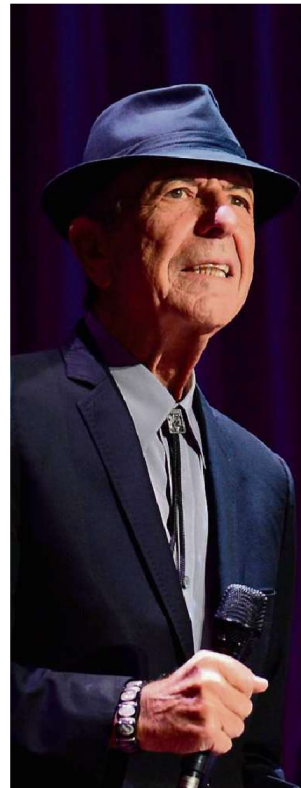
Cave talks about his relationship to his father and recalls at 12 years of age not being able to respond to a question about what he had done to assist humanity. Years later, however, he knows his response:

"Like Christ, I too come in the name of my father, to keep God alive."

Perhaps there is something of the pilgrim and the convert in each of us: there are times, when we need the energy and vitality of seeking and there are other times when we need the rest and security of belonging.

We are in a very unusual space at present; hopefully, it will not last too long. And in the meantime, it is worth paying attention to our interiority as part of this experience. Who knows, but we may look back on this threshold period and realise that for a time the world stopped, and we all discovered something new about ourselves, about others, and, even, about our God. We acted together so as to keep each other alive in our families, in our communities, in our societies, and in doing so, unknown to us, perhaps, we will come to realise that we kept God alive too.

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Leonard Cohen's music drew heavily on his search for meaning in his inner life.