

TROUBLING IRELAND

Generational Cross-Talk

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On Sundays, I go to see my mother. We make extraordinary efforts to meet somewhere in the middle between all that divides us. Each week we confront but almost never talk about the differences between us. Differences of disposition and temperament to be sure, fewer maybe than we want or imagine, and clear as the day except for their entirely unsimple, inexorable inflection by the massive upheavals spanning the decades of our lives, hers and mine. Lives overlapping and intertwining for so many years, yet without continuity at their extremities. Born just after the first (western) world war and Irish independence, she raised me to the very best of her means and abilities for a life like hers, as her mother had raised her. But that was not how it turned out. Born after the second (western) world war, child of the decades of (Irish) economic expansion, I grew up into a far bigger world, full of possibilities my mother couldn't even dream of.

My mother was born in Belfast, but grew up and still lives in Dublin. She left school after the Inter Cert and did clerical work until she married. She had six children, and worked fulltime at rearing us as hard as anyone I've ever known for no pay and no independent social status. She looked after our father, made our clothes and hot dinners, grew vegetables, bottled fruit and managed to make ends meet. She taught us to say the rosary, mind our manners, do our homework and turn the lights out, more or less in that order of priority. When we grew up (not all of us altogether as expected), she went on caring for her children and then her grandchildren in all kinds of ways. Although she has always had numerous friends, her family and home are the centre of her life, or so it seems to me.

This tells you nothing about who my mother is, what she is like - her intelligence, humour and stamina, or her rarely indulged penchant for extravagance. It tells you nothing of how she too must have struggled and changed over the years. The decisions, choices, dilemmas, pain, pleasure, hopes and disillusionments that have marked her life are not here. It would not be for me to tell you or anyone these very private things, even if I could. But indeed I cannot, for so much remained hidden, buried, silent in the lives of women of my mother's generation and upbringing. I don't know clearly what being a woman has meant to her, how she experienced her sexuality, what she might have done differently if she had had half a chance.

I went to University, and have been in paid work since my early twenties. I married briefly, chose to have one child - by another man - and discovered my lesbian sexuality when I was in my mid-thirties. My life has been so much more public than my mother's - teaching, writing, broadcasting, always politically involved, and I have been able to make far more decisions about how I live. I no longer believe in most of what I was taught when I was a child. I don't fear god or the neighbours, or believe in the unquestioned rightness of the State and the Constitution. I am appalled by the desperation of poverty and of war, by the terrible inhumanity of some towards the majority. Although I bow to no man, often I am afraid. I am afraid of loneliness, lies, cruelty, my own above all. I am afraid of fear itself. I believe in my right to take nothing for granted and to leave no stone unturned.

Last Sunday, my mother and I talked about my daughter, her granddaughter: loving, admiring, and acknowledging her difference and her distance from us both. The privileges I inherited have been passed on to her with interest accruing, for my generation of urban middle-class women in Ireland has gained a great deal. There is an irony in finding myself worrying about my daughter's future the way my mother (still) worries about me. I've always wished she wouldn't, of course, and know my daughter feels just the same. I hope, as I believe my mother did, that I have raised her to be able to confront the challenges of her generation and to act creatively, fearlessly and generously in the world. But I think this is not enough - and I'm not sure I can even dream far enough ahead to say precisely why. I have raised a daughter for a future I cannot even imagine. So I do worry, all the more acutely now I too am privileged to have a granddaughter, because I am often fearful of this future that is being made so fast and carelessly, without the participation of so many.

Sometimes one or other of us, my mother or I, can make the huge imaginative leap that enables us to understand the truths and realities of the other's experience, but it is not easy. Generational cross talk almost never is.

I am aware of how I drown out my mother's halting voice with my fluent assertions, and of the vulnerability of my own voice in the passage of time and the growing up of daughters. Generations are such provisional things, like centuries.