

Welcome Home

by

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Cead mille failte. Blessings for you all on this brilliant day of Irish sunshine filled with magic, story and song. It's grand you've decided to join me on our journey home to Ireland and beyond.

Now I know you may have heard tales about the days of endless rain, but I can assure you that wherever we travel we'll find a rich abundance of light. One that will embrace us in the warmth and glow of the mysteries and miracles of this land with its tradition, history and vision.

Look to this radiance in the green rainbows blanketing her hillside and pastures, the dancing silver-indigo waters across her lakes and sea, and a mirror-sky that reflects the warmth from the eyes and hearts of her people waiting at the door to greet you.

See it in on the endless roads winding through a world "more full of weeping than you can understand," but one recalled with poignancy, pride and redemption in her music and dance.

Witness it also in a new day of independence, health and prosperity that celebrates the lives of all that nourished her with their sacrifices and dreams.

'Tis a gift to be your guide and companion as we roam together through the beauty and wonder of this land, and encounter the stories that await us about who we are.

If you're of Irish ancestry you will discover threads and pieces of yourself in the people and land that will gladden your heart or bring forth the tears, oft at the same moment. But it matters not if you're of another heritage for this is a land that honors and celebrates the stranger. For here each visitor's curiosity and passion for life bring a blessing to this land, and these gifts will make you a welcome guest in this home.

Listen to me go on here now without having introduced myself or telling you a bit about what brings me here. My name is Sean K. Hehir, and I'll be your guide as we journey through this land of story, song and dance. Like you I'm a visitor and guest here as well. But it's also true that I've been here before, and my heart keeps bringing me back to this place I call home.

This land is where I hear the sound of my parent's voices who were born here, and where they introduce me to family, friends and strangers both living and those who have journeyed on. Their names are Pat and Nellie and though they have also gone on, they will join us from time to time in opening doors of cottages, churches and castles that will reveal stories and dreams about our hidden selves.

There's more I could tell you about them as well as myself, but for now it's enough to say that as we travel on you'll soon discover plenty. Some of it will be a grand and joyous awakening for us all, but knowing this land as I do there will be more than enough surprises tender, poignant and puzzling as well. But let's be on with it now.

Come with me to a May Sunday morning on the pasture roads of Baltard on the West Coast of Clare. The air is blessed with sweet sounds from the ocean rolling up to the cliffs at Donegal Point. It is a morning to walk forever without tiring.

At Baltard Junction stands the National Schoolhouse with its door wide open. Tradition has it this is an invitation to knock on the door, as it is with all the homes in Ireland. In response, there will be a gracious welcome to enter and have some tea and soda bread served with a nourishing story.

Katherine, who is custodian to the space and spirit of the school, greets me with a warm and gentle smile. She is in the midst of tidying up from the week's activities, but assures me that she is pleased I have stopped by to visit and chat.

She shows me around to each of the large rooms, introducing me to the three teachers by name though they are not here today. With a warm sense of pride she also points out photos of the seven current students, who attend the school, and assures me they are educated with a dedication worthy of the highest standards.

Although she apologizes for the absence of tea and bread, our conversation is rich and filling for this stranger who has recently come back to their shores. After a generous helping of engaging stories about Baltard with its history and customs she inquires about the purpose of my travels.

Listening to the plans about visiting the homes of my father and mother, she is genuinely touched and pleased for me as she seeks to learn more about where they grew up. As I wander through fragmented memories about each of their birthplaces in Clare and Cork, her curiosity grows as she weaves connections with her own associations.

In the midst of our recollections, she comments, "Tis grand you've come back home to remember them and meet the rest of the family, Sean. It's for certain ye'll return back to the states filled with many treasures to share. But if ye don't mind me saying so, ye also seem fascinated with learning more about who all the rest of us are as well."

When I inform her I've been traveling for many years in the tradition of the seanchies (shon uh keys) sharing stories about where people find the home of their hearts and souls, she opens another door to me without hesitation. "Well to tell ye the truth, Sean, Baltard was not always my home. It was my husband's home. It's where I came to be with him."

Soon a loving tale of their marriage and family living in this gentle farming community unfolds in a simple beauty. "Although it took a while to get used to living

here, it's home for me now." She pauses as a soft mist enters her eyes. "But my husband died a year ago now. Indeed it's been a sad time for us all, and I miss him something bad."

There is more quiet followed by an early day remembrance, "I dreamed of him this morning, and I woke up talking out loud to him as if he were still there." Turning as she glances out the window, she begins to speak in a new found voice, "I think it must mean I'm finished grieving him now. 'Tis time to get on with things."

She reflects for a moment on this insight, then looks at me with a smile, "This is home too, ye know. This, what we're doing now. Our conversation. Conversation is home, don't ye think?" I nod and smile. Indeed it is.

To Katherine's insight I could hear my father echoing agreement, as he walked through the front door of our house in the Dorchester section of Boston with another unknown guest. It was, as he would say, "Somebody I met on the way home from work, and he looked like he could use a good meal. So I invited him home with me. After all we do run a boarding house, and what's one more at the table."

This generosity from my father, and openness to "the stranger coming across the fields" was important to him in creating a sense of home. It was also an event that took place on a weekly basis as we prepared for our evening meal.

It was a bustling place at that time of day. My mother would have returned home from work an hour prior to my father's arrival, and stepped right into the rhythm of preparing dinner for the four of us. In addition, there would also be a setting for the three boarders at the dining room table. My brother, Mike and I also knew our assigned tasks of setting both tables, running to the corner store to pick up last minute supplies and most important of all staying out of my mother's way in the kitchen.

Finished with our duties for the time being, the two of us would then sit on the front porch or play catch with whatever ball was in season. We could be assured that at least once a week we could look down the street to see my father strolling in animated dialogue with somebody we had never met before.

Often it was the stranger that was very animated in telling a wide range of stories. My father's pleasure in conversation was in the listening which he had developed to a fine art form. This would continue until they arrived at the porch, at which point my father would ask the guest to wait outside as he entered to negotiate with my mother for another place at the table.

My father, over the years, had also learned the art of respecting my mother's authority regarding new people entering our house. For my mother, it was not a question of "having enough for another mouth to feed. We always have more than enough food." She also knew that all the visitors my father brought home were "friendly, respectful and offered to help clean up after the meal."

Her concern was more about how late into the night the tales and songs would continue because they both had to be up early the next day for work. For if there was one thing she knew about him, it was that his welcome for all our guests could extend well into the next morning.

Even though it was a source of struggle at times, resolution would always come about because they both understood the primal pledge to honor the family inheritance of providing equal helpings of food and listening to those who came to our door. After all, who knew when our guests had last been back home?

As I stood there in the Baltard classroom, I experienced a profound connection between Katherine and my father. In that moment I felt grateful to each of them for reminding me once again that sharing the tale was at the heart of all who welcome the visitor.

There was a span of more than fifty years between them, but they both understood this rich tradition shared by all cultures that live close to the land and sea. It was part of a heritage they embraced in which making guests welcome was as essential as all the other tasks needing to be done. That same legacy is a shared passion deep within each of us regardless of what land we call home.

To read more from “Welcome Home” please visit our web-site to learn where to purchase the book, “Home to Ireland and Beyond.” Thank you.