

Remembering James Flanagan

Stephen Flanagan

As many readers of *The Corran Herald* will already be aware, James Flanagan passed away peacefully on May 21, 2012, at Sligo General Hospital, surrounded by his family.

We miss him dearly. He was a husband, a father, a grandfather, a friend, a teacher and a scholar. From the hundreds who attended his funeral the word I heard over and over was 'gentleman'. Mourners came from all strands of his life - former pupils and colleagues from his days in St Nathy's College, from the Heritage Group, from the Credit Union, from his student days in Maynooth, from his decades-long work with the Church, from Ballymote and all over Ireland. He loved Sligo and Ardconnell and felt a deep connection with the area, and he would have been very pleased to see all those who turned out.

He was born in 1940, and I often spoke to him about the changes he had seen in his life: the introduction of running water, electricity, television, telephones, personal computers, the internet and much else. Dad embraced each phase. He had one of the first commercially available 'pocket' calculators in the early 1970s, a brick-sized device that needed to be plugged in to work. In the 1980s he brought home a computer from St Nathy's each summer so he could better understand it, and of course teach his children to use it. In 1996, he and I made a deal whereby I would use some of the proceeds of my first summer job to purchase a modem and an internet subscription, and he would make up the shortfall. He was as excited

as I was when we first managed to successfully connect to the internet and understood that the information we were seeing was coming to us across the phone network from a computer in another country. Near the end of his life we talked about the latest innovation from Google - a pair of glasses that allow you to see information projected into space in front of you - and wondered what it might mean for the world.

Throughout his life he was constantly questioning and learning and observing. He often told me that his own father used to say 'Keep your eye on what you're doing,' and Dad took that almost as a philosophy. If he was working on a mathematical problem, he concentrated on it totally. If he was cutting the hedge, he thought about cutting the hedge. He was always present in the moment. Benjamin Franklin once said that you should 'give time to all your businesses', and Dad lived that idea. He was interested in a wide range of things, from mathematics and science to politics and history, and he immersed himself in them all.

But as much as he was a man of science, he was a man of God. He studied at Maynooth with the intention of becoming a priest, and his faith never left him. He attended daily Mass for much of his life. He believed in tolerance and love, and abhorred violence. I never once heard him swear, but when he read stories of violence and atrocity in the newspaper, it was as close as he came.

From his studies and reading he had a broad knowledge of

theology, and looking through his bookshelves now I see books on how science and religion combine, and on theology and the history of the church, among the many other volumes. When I was a teenager I sometimes pointed out places in the readings at Mass where there were contradictions or implausibilities, and he would smile his wry smile, point out a few more that I had missed, and steer me back towards the broader truths.

Dad loved to teach. After he left Maynooth, he studied for a Higher Diploma in Education at UCD. He gave some maths grinds on the side and taught a few hours a week in a school in Maynooth and one on Synge Street in Dublin. Those were his first tentative steps on his own in the world, finding his way into what would turn out to be his true vocation. He loved the city and the subject, and he said later that that year was one of the happiest of his life.

His gift was to be able to understand how the person he was teaching saw the world, to see the limits of their knowledge and then explain things in a way they could understand. He never forgot how difficult he had found it himself in the first place to learn the concepts of mathematics and science. He once described his early introduction to mathematics as being exposed to the 'doubtful joys of Algebra and Geometry'. But for most of his life they were as dear to him as old friends. In the mid 1960s the 'new maths' syllabus was introduced to secondary schools, and because of his third-level background he became one of the people who taught other teachers

the new course. He travelled all over Ireland doing it for more than a decade, and it gave him some of his happiest times.

Maybe above all else, though, he was a family man. He was always there for his wife, Anne, his three children, six grandchildren and his extended family, a wise, supportive, loving presence, part of the bedrock of our existence. Throughout our lives his children turned to him for guidance on all the aspects and stages of growing up – school, college, career, friends, relationships, children and family of our own, decisions large and small. He would pause before answering, his most characteristic trait, thinking things over before helping us think things through.

He was a 'content' person, as my mother has said, happy with his life. Of her, he once wrote of their first meeting that they had been introduced on 'the afternoon of May 30, 1970', and that it was an 'earth-shakingly fateful afternoon.' Their relationship was and is an example and an inspiration.

This is the first issue of *The Corran Herald* produced without Dad's guidance since it began publication in 1985. One way or another we will continue what he started – of all the many things he did, working on *The Corran Herald* was one he loved most. I have a clear image of him from my childhood sitting at the kitchen table in the early summer sun, surrounded by papers and articles

for the edition he was putting together, carefully checking and editing and refining, working on his labour of love.

Dad's faith was strong and deep, and we prayed with him to the very end. At his funeral there were fifteen priests, and when they stood on the altar together they were arrayed like the messengers of God come to see him on his way. I can think of no more fitting tribute. Though we mourn his passing and miss him dreadfully, we are thankful that he was his lucid, loving self to the very end, and he slipped away very peacefully and serenely. He died as he lived: a gentleman and a scholar. We take comfort that he's in a place now where all the answers are to be found.



James Flanagan
1940 - 2012