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LEARNING BY WANDERING: USING TECHNOLOGY TO NOURISH THE SPIRIT

By

Marie Martin

Submitted in partial fulfilment of

the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

Instructional Technology Program

School of Education

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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February 15, 2007

LEARNING BY WANDERING: USING TECHNOLOGY TO NOURISH THE SPIRIT

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Abstract

My purpose in this dissertation is to explore aspects of the nature of learning and to address the question of how to use technology in education to nourish the human spirit. To do this, I use a combination of critical and historical analysis. I reconnect first of all with my native ancient Irish culture. From this perspective, I gain an understanding of learning as a spiritual quest for transcendence effected through learning by wandering, and an insight into technology's noble role in nourishing this hunger of the human spirit. I find that this vision is given historical expression in the wanderings across medieval Europe of the Irish scholar-saints and *vagantes*, and in the inner wanderings of confessional writers from St. Augustine in the fourth century to the Internet bloggers of the new millennium. I contrast this perspective with the radically different and still dominant 19th century utilitarian factory school paradigm that sees transfer learning as the norm and technology's role as limited to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the traditional learning experience. I discern intimations, however, of the urge to nourish the hunger of the human spirit in the prophetic voices that, since the turn of the 20th century, have been urging us to rethink our vision of learning. I identify an emerging awareness of the importance of harnessing the new technologies to the service of this vision of education and to a collaborative upbuilding of the human spirit, through the connectedness of global learning communities. I find further intimations in the writings of modern visionaries who see the convergence of minds in cyberspace as part of the process of human and planetary becoming. Finally, I seek to reconfigure the ancient Irish perspective in order to offer a vitality restoring vision of learning that may encourage 21st century educators to reclaim the primacy of the spirit in our education philosophy,

and to foster a new relationship with technology that honors its transformative potential

to help us become other than we have been, and to have a new perspective of ourselves,

our world, and our place and purpose in it.

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My purpose in this dissertation is to explore aspects of the nature of learning and to

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I explore aspects of the nature of learning and address the question of how to use technology in education to nourish the human spirit. The ongoing and constantly accelerating pace of the technology revolution that began in the late 20th century has led to a rush to technologize schools in western society, and rendered the issue of optimizing the use of technology in learning increasingly acute (Papert, 2006; Spector, 2000). With notable exceptions, the discourse has generally tended to centre on using technology to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the factory school model of education that has prevailed since the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century (Pea, 1998; Shaffer, 2002). To date, however, though technology has radically transformed society in general, it has had only minimal impact on education where computerization has led mainly to automating existing practice and has largely failed to show significant academic improvement (Bailey, 2003; Bigum & Lankshear, 1998; Cuban, 2006). To my mind, this results largely from the fact that the discourse is framed almost exclusively in terms of the utilitarian mindset of the western world. It thus fails to address the fundamental questions of the nature and purpose of learning and the role of technology in the learning process.

To address these vital questions, I reconnect with a perspective of learning derived from my native ancient Irish culture. From this perspective, I gain an understanding of learning as a spiritual quest. Its purpose is, therefore, to nourish the human spirit's hunger for growth and for making meaning, with available technology having a vital role to play in that nourishing. Having uncovered that understanding, I

endeavor to reconfigure it, in order to bring this ancient wisdom to bear on learning in this digital age. In so doing, I hope to offer educators in the 21st century a vision that will encourage them to embrace anew the ancient noble perspective of the nature and purpose of learning, and to honor technology's role in helping the learner break through barriers to human becoming.

Because the process of reconnecting, uncovering, reconfiguring, and re-envisioning is fundamental to my thesis, I find it necessary to depart from the linear structure of the traditional dissertation. I opt instead for a typically Irish curvilinear path. Using a combination of critical and historical analysis, I journey from reconnecting with the ancient Irish understanding of learning, through uncovering its universal relevance, and contrasting this with the narrow, restricted perspective of education in modern western society, to finally returning to the understanding that was my starting point – the ancient Irish perspective of learning - this time to reconfigure it and offer it as a vision for 21st century educators. I also add an appendix in which I demonstrate how this reconfigured perspective informed my personal efforts to introduce the technology of videoconferencing into formal and informal learning environments in my school district in Northern Ireland.

In Chapter II, I begin my journey. I examine aspects of Ireland's ancient and honorable story from pre-Christian times to the early Middle Ages. Here, in its art, its social structures, its mythology, its monastic schools, and its wandering scholar-saints, I find a perception of learning as a curvilinear, open-ended spiritual quest for transcendence (Bieler, 1963; MacCana, 1970; Ó Cróinín, 2005). I uncover a particularly eloquent expression of this mindset in the *imrama* tales. These tales tell how heroes,

hungry for transcendence of themselves and of their known world, and impelled by a

tantalizing vision of an "Otherworld," learn by wandering over uncharted seas, using the

simple technology of a rowing boat (Wooding, 2000). I also note the historical expression

of this vision in the wanderings across medieval Europe of Ireland's scholar-saints and

vagantes (Waddell, 1927/1968).

      In Chapter III, I posit that the great confessional writers from St. Augustine

onward, with their focus on the search for meaning through inner wandering in the

"Otherworld" of the spirit, express the universal hunger of the human spirit that exercised

the minds of my ancestors, both pagan and Christian. I trace the learning by wandering

down the inner paths of the spirit, as "confessed" by St. Augustine and other writers from

the fifth century to our own time**.** Based on the literature (Anderson, 2005; Beck, 1996;

Gutman, 1988; Marcus, 1994; Olney, 1998; Outler, 1955; Raskolnikov, 2005), I illustrate

that they used the technology available to them – writing and reading – to prioritize the

needs of the spirit and to gather a community of readers around them to collaborate in the

search for nourishment. I argue that the typicality of their personal journeys gives their

accounts lasting appeal and relevance down to our own time. Man is still a "confessional

animal" (Foucault, 1976/1978), and Augustinian learning by wandering down the

labyrinthine pathways of the human spirit finds echoes and resonances not only in printed

texts, but in the ever-increasing popularity of confessional "blogs" and the growing

community of such "bloggers" on the Internet (Efimova, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, &

Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004; Wijnia, 2004).

      In Chapter IV, I contrast the mindset revealed in ancient Irish culture that was

given universal and timeless expression in the great confessional literature with the

impoverished view of learning in the utilitarian mindset that still informs much of modern educational thinking and results in the phenomenon of school resistance to change and the pattern of high expectations and low impact with the introduction of each new technology (Reiser, 2001). I undertake a brief overview of the history of education in the western world, I look at the structure of classical education (Sayers, 1947), the Church's monopoly of education in the Middle Ages, the break with this monopoly in the Enlightenment, the attempts to introduce universal education in Europe and America (Chafy, 1997; Jolibert, 1993; Wagoner, 2004), and the enormous and enduring influence of the Industrial Revolution on the educational mindset in the western world. From this, I argue that a narrow, rigid view of education has been with us in differing forms from the earliest times, and has proved strongly resistant to change. Finally, I briefly outline the history of initiatives aimed at promoting technology integration in education since the turn of the 20th century, up to and including the radical transformation of western society by the technological revolution toward the end of the same century. I find a recurrent pattern in education of high expectations and minimal impact (Cuban, 2006; Hammonds, 2005; Reiser, 2001; Spector, 2000). This would appear to validate a pessimistic depiction of 21st century education as a zealously guarded narrow, "closed world" (Garrison, 2006).

I find intimations of the urge to nourish the human spirit, however, in the prophetic voices that from the turn of the 20th century have spoken to us of the need to transcend ourselves and transform the learning environment. I find them in those educators who seek to open up a discourse of possibility within a global learning environment. Finally, I find these intimations in the visionaries who see cyberspace as

providing enabling hospitality to the convergence of minds interactively engaged in the search for meaning, thus empowering us to transcend ourselves and to consciously play our part in furthering the process of human and planetary becoming.

In Chapter V, I offer a recovered and reconfigured vision for education in the 21st century derived from the ancient, yet, for me, ever new, mindset of pagan and early Christian Irish culture. This vision reclaims the primacy of the spirit as the cornerstone of educational thinking, and fosters a love of learning as a spiritual quest that is best effected by wandering using available technology. It also reveals the importance of a relationship with technology that honors its transformative potential to help us become other than we have been, to have a new perspective of ourselves, our world, and our place and purpose in it. This allows technology to become the means of firing our imagination, and of opening up untold new perspectives, thus appeasing the *"míshuaimhneas síoraí"* (the eternal restlessness) of the spirit that characterizes not only the Irish, but the whole human race. I argue that the more technology evolves, the more it is important to hold this spirit-nourishing vision. Wilson (2001) believes that "through technologies and new ideas, we are always in the process of inventing ourselves. Technologies serve as mirrors of our values and aspirations, as well as our weaknesses and our intractable problems." The same author adds: "we want our technologies to reflect our best selves, and our highest ambitions." This is why we should remind ourselves that we are still under the ancient *geis* (taboo) not to return to the spirit-starving narrowness and rigidity of the single perspective that has dominated western society for so long.

In an Appendix, I seek to demonstrate how the reconfigured ancient Irish perspective of learning informed my personal efforts to introduce the technology of

videoconferencing into the traditional K-12 classroom in my school district in Northern Ireland. Drawing on the metaphor of the *imram* as the motif of my stories, I illustrate how, from this mindset, I used the technology of videoconferencing to bring learning by wandering in real time beyond the narrow geographical and psychological space of this small corner of a small island to learners of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. The heroes of my *imrama* will range from young learners with special needs gaining a sense of themselves, of others, and of place, through older academically gifted learners engaging with sophisticated politicians across continents on serious constitutional issues, to American pre-service teachers exposed to meaningful learning about Irish culture through regular audio-visual real-time access to "embedded" instructors and experts (who live and work in the country being studied). I also use this same metaphor to describe my own inner journey from the confines of the factory school mindset which imbued the learning environments of my youth to my life-enhancing experiences as an adult lifelong learner and educator seeking to learn from others and, above all, seeking to share the passion for learning by wandering made possible by the only technology then available to me – the then emerging technology of videoconferencing.

CHAPTER II

ANCIENT IRISH CULTURE

"I am of Ireland

And the holy land of Ireland,

And time runs on," cries she.

"Come out of charity.

Come dance with me in Ireland."

(W. B.Yeats)

Introduction

I am of Ireland. My self-understanding, my efforts to make meaning of life and of the world, are, to a very large extent, grounded in the noble, ancient culture of this tiny island on the very fringe of continental Europe - an island too far for the conquering Romans, who colonized neighboring Britain, but never stepped onto Irish soil. Though English is my first language, and though I love it dearly, I am forever grateful for the privilege I had as a young student in middle and high school to learn the Irish language, and, through prolonged and frequent summer visits to our western seaboard where the language is still spoken, to become fluent in it, to let its ancient words and syntax help express what is sometimes referred to in Ireland as "the music of the mind." Further study of my native language and culture at university helped me dig more deeply into the ancient story. In so doing, I found, to my immeasurable delight and lifelong enrichment that I was reconnecting more meaningfully with my heritage. This reconnection

empowered me to enter a world imbued with a sense of the wonder and the interconnectedness of life and of all creation, with a restless exuberance and a love of wandering, with an intuitive perception of an "Otherworld" beyond the physical, an intimation of the seamlessness of these worlds, an appreciation of beauty in nature and in the creations of craftsmen, storytellers, scribes, poets and artists, and a love of learning perceived as seamlessly encompassing the sacred and the secular. As I seek to make meaning of our digital world and of the place of learning and the spirit in it, I permit myself in these pages to revisit this ancient world and to reflect on some of the aspects of its story that have helped to shape me.

<p align="center">From Megalithic Tombs to Medieval Europe</p>

Ireland's story is an ancient and honourable one. The island is believed to have hosted human habitation since approximately 7000 B.C. (O'Kelly, 2005), but perhaps the best place for me to start is some 3000 years before the birth of Christ. Clear signs of an advanced civilization are revealed in the megalithic tombs which date from this era and which have been described as "one of the first high points in the cultural story of Ireland" (Harbison, 1983, p.14). The most "spectacular examples of these burial places, the largest and most impressive in Europe" (de Paor, 1983, p.20) are to be found in Newgrange, Dowth, and Knowth in the Boyne Valley in Co. Meath. These were constructed 500 years before the first great pyramid in Egypt and 1000 years before Stonehenge in Britain. In these "passage graves," a central burial chamber is reached through a passage, and there is a covering cairn of earth or stones. Scholars (Harbison, 1983; O'Kelly, 2005) acclaim the sophistication of the techniques used in the building by Stone Age man of these subterranean burial chambers, a feat that has been compared to "the erection of a

cathedral in the Middle Ages or the sending of a rocket to the moon in our own day"
(Harbison, p.15). A particular feature of the Newgrange tomb is the precise alignment of
the 62-feet passage way which allows the rays of the rising sun at the winter solstice to
penetrate to the very centre of the chamber for 17 minutes. This reveals an astounding
and totally unsuspected advanced knowledge in an illiterate people of astronomy,
engineering and mathematics.

Many of the stones bear beautifully carved spiral designs and other symbols, the
most famous being the stone marking the entrance to Newgrange, with carvings which
include a triple spiral, double spirals and semi-circles. These intricately interconnected
carvings on the stones of the burial chambers, probably picked out with flint and quartz
points (O'Kelly, 2005), reflect a "sense of design and a quality of execution which has
few equals anywhere in Europe in the prehistoric period" (Harbison, p. 15). "The
beginnings of Irish sculpture, stylized and abstract, can be seen here on the great carved
stones of kerb and passage in the megalithic tombs built in the neolithic period – before
3000 B.C." (de Paor, 1983, p. 20). The spiral in particular was to survive as "one of the
chief components of ornament, appearing in abundance in illuminated manuscripts and
enamelwork" of later centuries (Richardson, 2005, p. 683).

The First Golden Age

The succeeding Bronze Age, from 2000-500 B.C., added greatly to the lustre of
Ireland's cultural history. During this period, recognized as "the first of the Golden Ages"
of Ireland (Harbison, p. 15), "Irish metalworkers in bronze and gold produced works of
superb craftsmanship and elegant design" (de Paor, p. 20). Here, the influence of
Neolithic art is easily discerned in the intricate and elaborate ornamentation lavished on

elegant jewellery, weapons and tools. This "abstract and highly stylized" art, characterized by "curvilinear forms, stylized animal patterns and insets of red enamel," was to remain a feature of Irish art throughout its history (de Paor, p. 21). By the end of the Bronze Age, Irish metalworkers, "heirs to a thousand years of knowledge and experimentation," had achieved "total mastery in the working of bronze and gold. In many areas of technology, especially in gold-working, they led Europe" (Raftery, 2005, p. 135).

The Iron Age (beginning around 500 B.C.), which witnessed the coming of the Celts from central Europe to Ireland, also saw increasing contact between Ireland and the rest of Europe (Raftery, 2005). The Celts used and elaborated the spiral within their own system of design, and it was a favourite Iron-age work in Ireland (Richardson, 2005, p. 683). Spirals increasingly dominated Celtic pattern-making and were "combined in different ways … in a constant state of evolution" (Filip, 1962, p. 145). During this era, Irish art was influenced and inspired by European sources. However, "foreign impulses were always subjected to the strong island personality of Ireland, and these, muted by environment and filtered by time, soon developed into a new synthesis which was wholly and recognizably Irish" (Raftery, p. 180).

<center>The Oral Tradition</center>

In the strong oral culture of pre-Christian Ireland, the self-understanding and world view of the Irish are revealed in myth and legend. "Myth transcends historical events" and "enshrines their meaning" (Duncan, 1992, p. 23). The creative memory expressed in the four great cycles of tales (de Paor, 1985), later written down in the scriptoria of Irish monasteries, tells of an aspiration to transcendence of physical and

material limitations through the exploits of warriors such as Cú Chulainn with god-like

qualities and powers, through the origin legends which explain the genesis of tribes and

kingdoms in Ireland and the stories of the great legendary kings – part divine and part

human, and through thrilling wonder voyages to and from the Otherworld, over land or

over " a vast sea of flux and constant change" (Sharkey, 1992, p. 19).

The myths help us gain an understanding of the high honor in which learning,

religion, and beauty in all its forms were held in this culture. They are set in the context

of a hierarchical social order dividing the people in each *tuath* (petty kingdom) in Ireland

into three main classes - the king, the nobles and the freemen. Druids, poets and skilled

craftsmen were included in the second class, as were the clergy after the coming of

Christianity (MacGearailt, 1969). Religion and learning were fused in the druids who

exercised great influence, not merely as priests but also as learned men (Carney, 2005).

Their training was arduous and lasted many years. Their learning was preserved by

memory and their traditions were passed on orally.

From the ancient tales, we can infer a little about Irish pagan religious customs

(Cross & Slover, 1936/1969). Sacred trees and groves and rivers were objects of worship.

Four great religious festivals were held to honor the gods and to mark the turning points

of the year in their calendar: Samhain (November 1); Imbolc (February 1); Bealtaine

(May 1), and Lughnasa (August 1). These were also "potentially dangerous moments"

when "the supernatural breaks through" (de Paor, 1985, p. 39) and the seamlessness

between the natural world and the "other" world was most apparent, with gods and

mortals passing freely from one world to the other. The Irish of this era believed in an

accessible but elusive other world located within or beneath the natural world and

inhabited by otherworld beings "endowed with youth, beauty, and immortality" (Cross & Slover, p. 129), who would invite or abduct mortals to their Land of Youth. Dillon (1970) states that the pagan Irish believed in a "happy Otherworld in the western sea, where some of the gods dwell and which heroes sometimes were allowed to visit." He stresses that this is "not a heaven to which men go after death, but a happy island, *Tír na nÓg*, where there is no death or old age" (p. 16).

<p align="center">The *Imrama*</p>

This belief in a happy Otherworld forms the basis of the *imrama*, the great wonder voyage tales where the mortal hero accepts the invitation to the Otherworld, or embarks independently in his currach - a small wood-framed rowing boat covered in cow-hide - to learn by wandering across uncharted seas what lies beyond the world he knows. The *imrama* give the earliest expression to that love of wandering, allied to a love of learning and a yearning for transcendence, which is recognized by later scholars as a distinctively Irish characteristic, and which finds historic expression in the wanderings across medieval Europe of learned Irish monks and scholarly *vagantes* (Bieler, 1963; Ó Fiaich, 1986; Waddell, 1927/1968). The Old Irish word *imram* (plural, *imrama)* - sometimes spelt *immram* and *immrama* - is derived from the Irish *im-ramha,* meaning to "row about." This captures exactly the essence of the concept. An *imram* is an uncharted, but not aimless, voyage undertaken without maps or schedules or planning of any sort. I will use the Old Irish word throughout this dissertation to convey the ancient Irish understanding of wandering.

The *imram* was undertaken by a hero-wanderer usually at the invitation of a beautiful woman to come with her to the Otherworld. The currach in which he and his

companions voyaged was essential to the notion of uncharted wandering. It was often at

the mercy of the winds and the waves, and this determined the course of many a voyage.

Indeed there are moments in two of the great *imrama* tales – the *imram* of Mael Dúin and

the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* (Voyage of Saint Brendan) – when the wanderers decide

to drop their oars and let the winds navigate. In later Christian times, Irish monks were to

follow this example of the open mind and inherent trust in life. The Anglo-Saxon

Chronicle in the year A.D. 891 reports the arrival in England of three Irishmen who had

set out to sea "without oar or rudder, following wherever the winds might take them" (Ó

Cróinín, 1995, p. 222). So central, in fact, is the currach to the tale that the *imram* of Mael

Dúin is actually entitled: *Imram curaig Maile Dúin* – the *imram* of the currach of Mael

Dúin. The implication is that Mael Dúin may be the hero-wanderer, but the currach is the

technology that opens up for him and his companions undreamed of worlds and

unimaginable adventures.

Three of these voyages are particularly representative of the genre: the two

previously mentioned - the *imram* of Mael Dúin's currach, and the *Navigatio Sancti*

Brendani. To these can be added the *Imram of Bran*.Also worthy of note is the tale of

Óisín (Ossian) in *Tír na nÓg* (the land of Youth), though Óisín is transported by a white

steed rather than by a currach.

These *imrama* give us a glimpse of the early Irish vision of the Otherworld and an

understanding of the significance of the voyage itself. In the *imram* of Bran (Meyer &

Nutt, 1895/1996), the focus is on the bliss to be experienced in the Otherworld. A

beautiful woman extols the beauty of "the distant isle," where "joy is known, ranked

round music," a place "without sorrow, without darkness, without death," and she invites

him to "begin an *imram* across the clear sea" toward the Otherworld, which she names as *tír na mban* (the Land of Women). With this she leaves Bran, who, with a group of companions, sets out on the "clear sea" the following day with no directions, no clues as to where the distant isle of the Land of Women lies.

In the *imrama* of Mael Dúin (Stokes, 1889), and of Brendan (Selmer, 1959; Wooding, 2000), the focus is almost exclusively on the voyage itself. They both tell of similar fantastic adventures in a world where events follow no logical sequence and where time and space follow no established rules or limits. In Mael Dúin's voyage to 31 fabulous islands, a tale "unsurpassed in early voyage literature" (Sharkey, 1992, p. 20), we read of fantastic encounters with fabulous creatures, brief sojourns in exotic islands with seas like green glass, islands with "silvern columns" and sometimes large empty houses prepared for a feast. Many similar adventures are narrated in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, probably "the most popular Irish work of the entire Middle Ages," which "took on the stature almost of a European epic and enjoys an undying popularity to this day" (Ó Cróinín, 1995, p. 230). Here, among many exotic and fantastic experiences, we learn of islands of snow-white birds, of sheep as big as cows, of volcanoes, of an island which turned out to be a giant fish, and of one with an empty house in which a feast had been made ready for the wanderers.

The three *imrama* also share features that are common to the *imram* genre. Once the wanderers reach the Otherworld, they experience an altered sense of time that allows them to immerse themselves in the eternal moment and be fully present to the experiences offered. In the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, Brannind tells of his sojourn in the Otherworld with Saint Mernoc as seeming to last for fifteen days, whereas they had in

fact been there for a year. Bran and his companions had a similar experience. It seemed to them that they had been a year in the Land of Women, when, in fact, they had been there for many years. Mael Dúin's companions had an almost comically different experience of time on their island paradise. It seemed to them that the three months they had spent there were three years and they longed for home. The hero-wanderers all return home eventually, and in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, we learn that Saint Mernoc habitually commuted – to use a modern idiom for an apparently age-old concept – between his monastery and the Promised Land of Saints.

Another highly significant feature is that the hero-wanderers were often allowed home only under *geis* – a command or taboo, the breaking of which meant instant diminishment or death. Usually, as in the case of Bran and his men, and of Óisín, the *geis* was not to touch the land of Ireland. In each case, as soon as the *geis* was broken, the punishment was swift. Bran's companion was turned into a heap of ashes. Óisín was transformed into a feeble old man.

The Transition to Christianity

The fact that these *imrama* and other native pagan lore have come down to us through the work of Irish Christian monks helps us to understand something of the distinctive nature of the coming of Christianity to Ireland in the fifth century. It was gradual and, above all, non-confrontational and sensitive to the native culture. For a hundred years after the coming of Patrick, many areas were still pagan, and even when the country became officially Christian many pagan beliefs and practices survived (MacGearailt, 1969), and have continued to flourish "almost to our own day in consequence of the fact that they were accommodated under the capacious mantle of the

Church" (MacCana, 1970, p. 131). As representatives of a pagan religion, the druids were to disappear as a distinct order, giving way to Christian clergy who brought writing and Latin learning along with the new religion. Many aspects of the druidic role were assumed by the *filidh*. These were poets, who underwent the same rigorous training as the druids, and were also responsible for preserving the genealogies of noble families and the native lore, thus providing a source on which the monastic scribes could draw. In fact, the *filidh* established a "remarkable modus vivendi with the ecclesiastical authorities" (MacCana, pp.14-15), gaining a separate but complementary sphere of authority, and retaining their influence down to the collapse of the native order under the English in the 17th century.

Learning in Irish Monasteries

This remarkable tolerance shown by the new religion toward the pre-Christian native culture (Bieler, 1963) extended to pagan classical culture and was a unique feature of the Irish monasteries which were founded within a century of the coming of Christianity to Ireland. From the beginning, these monasteries were distinctive from European monasteries in that they were centers not just of piety but also of learning, encompassing not only Christian teachings, but also classical and native lore. "The heritage of pagan as well as of Christian antiquity was transformed in a way that made them blend with the traditions of their own past" (Bieler, p. 2), thus forming a new synthesis which was later to be introduced to the Continent by Irish monks. This new synthesis was made possible because Ireland, unlike the rest of Europe, had not been conquered and colonized by Rome, and was therefore not "moulded on the Roman pattern" (Bieler, p. 2). "The complete absence of Roman rule in Ireland and the

continuation of a Celtic way of life without interruption meant that Ireland was left as a place apart, with a tradition spreading to antiquity. It was in this milieu that Christianity took root in such an original and vital way" (Richardson, 2005, p. 682), giving rise to a seamless culture of learning and spirituality that led to what became known as Ireland's "second Golden Age, the early Christian period from the fifth to the twelfth century A.D." (Harbison, 1983, p.16). This meant that, whereas continental monasteries rejected all classical pagan culture, becoming "indifferent to things of the mind beyond those that bore directly on the spiritual life of the monk," Irish monks, because of their unique heritage, saw no dichotomy between the two, and pursued "learned studies of all kinds" from the beginning (Bieler, p. 2). Waddell (1927/1968) noted the special feeling of the Irish for classical literature with "their handling, sensitive and fearless, of paganism" (p. 39). The English philosopher, Bertrand Russell (1946/2004), states that in Europe in the latter part of the seventh century, "the thirst for learning" was keenest in Ireland (p.388). Cardinal Newman described Irish medieval monasteries as storehouses of the past and birthplace of the future (Harbison, 1983), responsible as they were for preserving elements of Latin culture and Irish pagan myths and sagas, and through their manuscripts contributing to the beginnings of European culture.

The fusion of religion and secular learning gained for Ireland the title of "land of saints and scholars." It also underpinned the ethos of the monasteries, and was embedded in the triad which dictated the structure of the monastic day: prayer, manual work, and study (secular as well as sacred). The novices were taught how to read and write Latin and possibly some Greek. In addition to the Bible and other religious texts, they studied the computus (the ecclesiastical calendar), and pagan classical authors in a broad liberal

curriculum (Bieler, 1963; Coogan, 1983; MacGearailt, 1969; Ó Cróinín, 2005). The quality of the learning in the monastic schools attracted students from Britain and many parts of Europe as early as the fifth century, in the Dark Ages which followed the collapse of the Roman Empire (Waddell, 1927/1968). "By the sixth century, the Irish schools were the most famous in Europe" and scholars came by the old trade routes to sojourn in Ireland "for the love of God and of learning" (Waddell, p. 31). A feature of the monasteries was adherence to the Irish tradition of hospitality. All who came were graciously welcomed, honored, and granted free accommodation and food. Learning was also considered part of this tradition and therefore to be shared freely. The Venerable Bede, writing in the eighth century, testifies to this in one of the most cited passages of his *History of the English Church and People*: "All these [scholars] the Irish willingly received, and saw to it to supply them with food day by day without cost, and books for their studies, and teaching, free of charge" (cited in Waddell, p. 32).

<div align="center">The Vernacular Literature</div>

Because of their love of learning, the monks regarded copying Latin sacred and secular texts and writing down the treasures from their native oral tradition as a duty and an honor. Priority was, of course, given to the sacred texts, but secular texts also received respectful attention. "The very extensive literature in old and middle Irish that remains today has been transmitted through the scriptoria of the monasteries" (de Paor, 1964, p. 66). Chadwick (1971/2002) points out that although Ireland came late to the art of writing, the country had developed "an advanced body of oral tradition in which were preserved traditions dating from several centuries prior to their committal to writing" (p. 253). In addition to the ancient tales, a rich literature in the vernacular flourished, and in

Irish nature poetry from this era "there is an immediate and fresh emergence from a universal situation in a statement that can be as relevant today as it was a thousand or more years ago" (Carney, 2005, p. 456). Ó Cróinín (1995) states that "Ireland boasts the oldest vernacular literature in western Europe, and the richness and variety of the texts in prose and poetry that have come down to us in Old Irish are without parallel in any other European language" (p. 169). He also stresses that this "flowering of literature and learning in early Ireland is indelibly linked with the rise of Christian monastic schools which came to prominence from the second half of the sixth century" (p. 169).

Illuminated Manuscripts

It was on the sacred texts, however, particularly the Gospels and the Psalter, that the monks lavished their greatest artistry and skill. The illuminated manuscripts, lovingly crafted in the Irish monasteries between the 7th and the 12th centuries, are among the greatest glories of Irish antiquity. Drawing on their rich cultural legacy of the marvellously intricate, abstract and sometimes exuberant artistic carvings and ornamentation of the Neolithic Age and the Bronze Age, the scribes decorated their work with interlacing spirals, scrolls, and patterns. Zaczek (1995) tells that successive generations have experienced the same sense of wonder as Giraldus Cambrensis, the Welsh 12th century historian, who, when he first saw one of the illustrated Gospel manuscripts, declared that, with its "intricacies, so delicate and subtle, so exact and compact, so full of knots and links, with colors so fresh and vivid," it was surely "the work of an angel and not of a man" (p. 11). Bieler (1963) draws attention to the freedom with which part of a letter in the illuminated manuscripts is allowed to "blossom out into some ornamental feature (spiral, cross), into a plant or even an animal." He stresses that

the Irish artist eschews the "closed form" of classical Mediterranean art, and marvels at

the structure of mind that revels in this "lack of constraint, in the ambiguity and protean

gift of metamorphosis of the several elements of a larger composition, and generally in

the trend toward the ornamental and the abstract" (p. 23). Françoise Henry (1965) draws

an enlightening comparison between this type of complex and elusive Celtic art and the

imrama. She finds that the Celts were averse to rigidity and to barren realism in both

artistic genres, and offers an interpretation of the illuminated manuscripts as mirroring

the multiform and changing Otherworld of the *imrama* tales. This interpretation becomes

immediately acceptable when one remembers that the monastic scribes were "creatures of

their environment and quite incapable of abandoning the patterns of thought which had

moulded their own identities and which continued to inform the whole of contemporary

society" (MacCana, 1970, p. 131). The same author concludes that, like the illuminated

manuscript, the otherworld tales of the *imrama,* offered an "aesthetically appropriate

medium for a spiritual quest and vision which had existed before Christianity and which,

centuries later, received … its most celebrated expression in the legends of the Grail" (p.

132).

It was in the eighth century Book of Kells, described in the *Annals of Ulster* of

1006-7 A.D. as the "chief treasure of the western world," that the art of manuscript

illumination reached its perfection. De Paor (1964) says of the ornamentation and

decoration of the Book of Kells that it is astonishing "in its fantastic complexity, in its

profuseness, in its unfailing skill and energy…. The trumpet/spiral ornament is lavish

here as never before; the thousands of spirals within spirals, occasionally relieved by

panels of interlacing, of the Chi/Rho page, are like a strangely and infinitely complex

universe in themselves" (p. 128). Referring to this "glorious manuscript," Simms (1983) claims that "much of the fine detail of ornament and decoration cannot be deciphered by the naked eye" (p. 41) and can be appreciated only thanks to reproductions magnified many times. This same wonderful skill and craftsmanship found expression in such contemporaneous treasures as the Ardagh Chalice, the Tara Brooch, and later in the great stone high crosses of the ninth to the twelfth centuries (Ryan, 1985).

<div align="center">Glosses</div>

An intriguing and distinctive feature of the monastic manuscripts, and another jewel in the treasure house of Irish culture, is the proliferation of glosses in both Irish and Latin from the seventh century onward (Ó Cróinín, 2005). These were "sporadic entries, penned by the scribe or by subsequent readers, sometimes between the lines, sometimes in the margins" (Ó Cróinín, 1995, p. 193). Sometimes the glosses are relatively long commentaries "that go far beyond the text and often go off at a tangent from it" (Russell, 2005, p. 412). Through the glosses, the scribe seeks to engage with the reader. He does this sometimes as a teaching aid - to enlighten the reader on various words, phrases, or concepts occurring in the text - sometimes to share a personal reflection on the content or the original writer, sometimes simply to pen a passing thought, or compose a short poem about a distraction. An excellent example of the glosses as a teaching aid is found in the Wurtzburg codex where the Latin text of the Pauline epistles is heavily glossed in both Irish and Latin (Ó Cróinín, 2005). In one example of the gloss as a passing thought, the scribe's comment gives rise to a brief exchange between him and the reader in the two languages: "*Magnus poeta Virgilius fuit*" ("Virgil was a great poet"), wrote the scribe. To this the reader responded in Irish: "*Ni reid chene*" ("He's not easy either"). Another

scribe, cited in Ó Cróinín (2005, p. 379), bored by a longwinded exposition by the Latin

grammarian, Priscian (circa 850), wrote in Irish at the end of the text: "At last he has

made his point" (Ó Cróinín, 2005, p. 379).

A different frame of mind – exuberant joy in living and learning is revealed by the

scribe who writes about his experience (cited in MacGearailt, 1969, p. 36) of copying a

manuscript out in the wood:

Woodland hedges shadow me;

The blackbird's song sings to me;

Over my many-lined book

The birds' trill rings to me.

The clear cuckoo calls to me

In his grey cloak from the coppice.

Truly God is good to me.

I write well in the forest.

Among the most famous and best loved of the marginal glosses in the form of

creative writing are the quatrain composed in Irish in the margin of a ninth century

manuscript by an Irish monk during the time of the Viking raids on Ireland, and the

celebrated poem about his cat written in Irish by a scribe in an Irish monastic foundation

in Reichenau, Switzerland. In the former, the scribe records the comfort he finds in a

storm on the sea which will keep Ireland's shores safe from the "fierce and sudden raids"

of the Viking invaders that strike fear into the virtually defenceless Irish monasteries (de

Paor, 1964, p. 132):

Fierce and wild is the wind tonight,

It tosses the tresses of the sea to white;

On such a night as this I take my ease;

Fierce Northmen only course the quiet seas.

Even better known and cherished is the poem Pangur Bán (cited in Waddell, 1927/1968, p. 34) written in Irish as a gloss in a ninth century manuscript which contained a Latin commentary on Virgil and a list of Greek paradigms:

I and Pangur Bán, my cat,

'Tis a like task we are at;

Hunting mice is his delight,

Hunting words I sit all night.

'Tis a merry thing to see

At our tasks how glad are we

When at home we sit and find

Entertainment to our mind.

'Gainst the wall, he sets his eye.

Full and fierce and sharp and sly;

'Gainst the wall of knowledge I

All my little wisdom try.

So in peace our task we ply.

Pangur Bán, my cat, and I;

In our arts we find our bliss,

I have mine and he has his.

Such glosses written in Old Irish have not only enabled scholars to reconstruct the grammar of the ancient language, but have greatly enhanced the store of early literature in the vernacular, and have gladdened the hearts of students and scholars down the centuries.

Wandering Scholars in Europe

The author of Pangur Bán also wrote as a gloss a line from Horace (cited in Cahill, 1995, p. 193): "*Caelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt*" (They change their sky, but not their soul, who cross the sea). This seems particularly relevant to the successive waves of Irish monks who crossed the seas to Europe from the sixth century onward. They were impelled by that triad of love of wandering, love of learning, and love of the spiritual that was characteristic of the ancient hero-wanderers of the *imrama* tales and was experienced as a boundless and restless energy. Waddell (1927/1968) comments that the "fierce and restless quality" (p. 30) of the pagan Irish "seems to have emptied itself into the love of learning and the love of God: and it is the peculiar distinction of Irish medieval scholarship, and the salvation of literature in Europe, that the one in no way conflicted with the other" (p. 31).

There is some consensus among scholars as to the reasons for this extraordinary "wandering" movement across Europe that saw Irish scholars migrating to the shores of the continent, "despising the dangers of the sea" (Heiric of Auxerre, circa 876, cited in Russell, 1946/2004, p. 388). Russell notes that "the lives of learned men have at many times been perforce nomadic," whereas, as Heiric of Auxerre points out, with the Irish

"all the most learned doom themselves to voluntary exile" (p. 388). In the ninth century, Strabo (cited in Waddell), notes simply that wandering was still "a second nature to the Irish race" (p. 35). Chadwick (1971/2002) stresses that "one of the most striking and original features of Irish Christianity is the love of wandering, *peregrinatio*" (p. 199), and states that this movement is "quite divorced from mission work, to which in fact there is no ground for supposing the early Irish were ever prone." She suggests that the scholar-saints saw the Continent more as a "natural market for their talents and training" (p .201). Ó Fiaich (1986) suggests as one possible explanation for the Irish passion for wandering that it might be the outward sign of the inner "*míshuaimhneas síoraí ár gcine*" (the eternal restlessness of our race), a restlessness that from earliest times has urged the Irish to break free of the confines of their island home, and to nourish their spiritual hunger by voyaging over the seas, learning by wandering of the "terra incognita" that lies beyond them (p. 3). However, he favors the interpretation that the peregrinatio was "pro Christo" and sees "*cuspóir na féiníobartha … ar mhaithe le grá Dé*" (the goal of self-sacrifice … for the love of God) as their main motivation, with the "*cuspóir na hAspalachta*" (the missionary goal) as the second element (p. 4). Bieler's (1963) view accords in different ways with both Chadwick and Ó Fiaich. He has no doubt that "the Irish monks went into voluntary exile first and foremost with the intention of leading the 'perfect life.'" He adds that "another motive, however, was almost equally strong – the Wanderlust, inherent in the Irish, which then as now would urge them to leave their island for far-off lands" (p. 10). Directly linking the *imrama* and the *peregrinatio*, he cites the "far-traveled sailors like Maelduin … as counterparts of these Christian 'wanderers,'" and sees the legendary

voyage of Brendan and his companions as the "Christian parallel of a mythical sea voyage" (p. 10).

Without doubt, the first great figure in the "wandering" movement – though he never crossed over to the mainland of Europe – was Colmcille (the Dove of the Church, also known by the Latin version, Columba) who left his native shores and his beloved Derry, having, according to legend, lost a lawsuit over the ownership of a copy he had made of the Psalter that had been lent to him by another monk. The king's finding had been: "to every cow her calf, and to every book its copy," and he had ordered Colmcille to surrender his copy. Furious with this verdict, Colmcille had waged war on the king, and 3000 of his followers were slain (Bieler, 1963). Whatever the reason for his self-imposed exile, Colmcille's monastic foundation in Iona revitalized the Church in Britain, led to the establishments of many similar monasteries in that kingdom, and opened the floodgates to the waves of saints and scholars who poured out of Ireland into other lands.

The great names of Columbanus and Gall are synonymous with the expansion of Irish monastic foundations which became centers of spiritual and intellectual nourishment across Europe, and which was recognized as "one of the most important cultural phenomena of the early Middle Ages," unmatched in pre-Carolingian Europe " in either extent or lasting effect" (Bieler, p. 4). The influence of these Irish scholars from the end of the sixth century onward extended to almost every part of Western Europe – modern France, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. Important centers of Irish influence included Paris, Amiens, Rheims, Laon, Annegray, Luxeuil, Liege, Peronne, Cologne, Mainz, Wurzburg, Strasbourg, Regensburg, Salzburg, Vienna, St Gall, Berne, Rome, Milan, Naples, Verona and Bobbio (Bieler, 1963).

Wherever they went, the Irish were revered as much for their learning as for their spirituality. The later Irish *vagantes* who "trod the roads of Europe" (Bieler, p. 120) in the ninth century, many of whom were lay scholars rather than monks, continued this tradition. In an ironic twist of fate, at a time when intellectual culture in Ireland had declined under the impact of the Norse invasions, Europe was experiencing a revival of learning under Charlemagne, and the Irish scholars were attracted to ecclesiastical and secular centers abroad "where learning and learned poetry were welcomed" (Bieler, p. 10), and where they had the opportunity of making a major contribution to Charlemagne's great work of education.

One of the best known and most respected of these wandering scholars was Sedulius who charmed the Bishop of Liege by his learning, wit and poetic talent, formed a nucleus of esteemed Irish scholars in that area, and produced many scholarly texts, among which was *On Christian Rulers*, written alternately in prose and verse in imitation of the *Consolatio* of Boethius. Even more important than Sedulius was the towering figure of his contemporary, John Scotus Eriugena ("Scotus" in the Middle Ages meant "Irishman"), "the one and only speculative theologian and philosopher of this time – a lone figure in the intellectual history of the early Middle Ages" (Bieler, p. 10). Russell (1946/2004) speaks of "the extraordinary freedom and freshness of John the Scot's speculations" (p. 388), and attributes this to the unique Irish culture in which he was nurtured. Although probably a layman, he first came into prominence in Europe when called upon by the Church to defend its position on free will in the controversy about predestination which raged at that time. In his response, he appears to have drawn heavily on "the Neo-Platonic elements in the works of St Augustine" (Bieler, p. 126) and on

Boethian dialectics (Bieler, p. 131). Greatly admired as a Greek scholar, he wrote prolifically in that language, as well as in Latin. His finest achievement, the *Periphyseon* (On the nature of things) is considered to be the first great philosophical production of western Europe (Ó Cróinín, 1995).

When John Scotus Eriugena left France after the death of his patron, Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims, "the Irish star began to wane in the firmament of European scholarship" (Ó Cróinín, 1995, p. 229). Only a few Irish names are known among the scholars of the 10th century, and the 12th century marked "a sad end to a once great and vibrant tradition" (Ó Cróinín, p. 231). Irish scholars in the Europe of the Anglo-Norman era were shaped by a culture that looked toward England and Western Europe, and their writings contain nothing that is "characteristically Irish" (Ó Cróinín, p. 232), while in Ireland, Viking raids and the Anglo-Norman invasion helped hasten the demise of a distinctive "indigenous and unbroken culture" that had flourished for over a thousand years (Ó Cróinín, p. 11).

Conclusion

In the concluding paragraph of her book, *The Celts,* Chadwick (1971/2002) describes the world that succeeded and that broke completely with the ancient Celtic world. It is a world, where "cause and effect follow one another with mathematical certainty and precision and where events follow one another in logical sequence." In this world, "the spaces of reality widened and the time limit became fixed and the human imagination became inevitably curtailed." This was the "threshold of the modern world" (p. 292).

Now that we have crossed over the threshold of another new world, the world of digital culture, I hold a vision of seamlessness rather than disconnectedness, and I look to the ancient distinctively Irish culture to help inform my way of thinking and being in this new environment. I think of the profusion of spirit-nourishing elements preserved in that unique legacy: the ever open mind and heart that delighted in the interconnectedness and endless evolution of all creation; the honor accorded to learning, whether sacred or secular; the perception of learning as seamless with religion and with beauty, and therefore to be shared freely as essential nourishment for the human spirit; the sense of wonder and the liberation of the imagination in the ancient culture, its aversion to rigidity and to any regression to former ways of thinking and being; the refusal of the "closed form;" the urge to transcend the logic and rules of the closed world of time and space; the *imram* vision of life as open-ended wandering to learn what lies accessibly, yet elusively, beyond our familiar world, and the ultimate seamlessness of all these worlds. Finally, I think of the historic expression and outworking of this vision in the wandering scholar-saints in whom the triad of spirituality, learning and wandering were fused and personified, and by whom Europe was so greatly enriched during the second and final Golden Age of distinctively Irish culture.

What have I learned from this ancient mindset about the nature of learning? I have learned that it is an elusive concept that cannot be confined within the box of a conclusive definition. It is like the open-ended spiral of Irish art, in a "state of constant evolution" as, from our various cultures and life experiences, we bring to it fresh understandings and new perspectives. I can, however, share some attributes of learning from the perspective of my unique cultural heritage. From this perspective, learning is born of a sense of

wonder, an inner urge to explore and make meaning, and an insatiable hunger for transcendence. Learning is to be loved and enjoyed for its own sake, as evidenced by the students who flocked to Irish monastic schools in Ireland and abroad. Learning nourishes the spirit as well as the mind, for the early Irish saw no dichotomy between the two. It is inclusive of both sacred and secular sources. It is a curvilinear, open-ended process, inimical to rigidity or stasis in any form, but welcoming change as a life-enhancing constant. It is a thing of beauty, transcending time, space, and cultures, liberating the imagination and expressing itself in wondrous art, myths and legends, and creative writings.

Such learning is best effected by wandering, understood both in the metaphorical and literal sense. Learning by wandering is learning with an adventurous, ever-open mind that refuses the safe confines of the single perspective, a mind that constructs its own knowledge by going where the spirit blows, willing to "drop oars" and travel tangentially or into deeper explorations, to share with and to learn from others. Above all, learning by wandering is a life-long commitment. There is no end point. There is always more to learn. The process is its own reward. The title of an 18th century poem in Irish - *Aoibheann beatha an scoláire* (Sweet is the life of the scholar) - shows us that this view prevailed long after the demise of the once vibrant ancient native culture. A good scholar or student is described in Irish as one who has "*dúil sa léann*" (a craving for learning). The Irish word for student, *mac léinn* (son/child of learning), reveals something of the intimate and enduring relationship between the learner and learning and of the life-enhancing nature of the latter. This may help us understand the significance of the *geis (*taboo) of the *imrama* tales. Diminishment and decline fall on those who falter in their

wandering and seek to return to the previous safe but static ways of thinking and being. In the ancient Irish mindset, the true "child of learning" is called ever to be a "learner-wanderer."

I believe that, following the example of my Irish ancestors, I have the possibility of creating a new synthesis that is "wholly and recognizably Irish" and allows me to enter the digital world with confidence and optimism. The ninth century gloss of a line from Horace – already cited - reminds us that crossing the sea may change our environment, but does not change our soul. I believe that as I cross the seas of change into the new and ever-changing technological culture, I can share with others something of the Irish soul that animated my ancestors, and draw on some of the universally relevant understandings and insights derived from the ancient and honorable story that helped shaped their vision of learning - and mine.

CHAPTER III

CONFESSIONAL WRITING: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in

Thee" (*Confessions of St. Augustine*, Chapter 1).

Introduction: In Pursuit of Meaning

One of the greatest of the Irish medieval wandering scholar–monks, Columbanus,

espoused a "theology of journey," and in a series of sermons depicted life as a "roadway

through a foreign country," separating us from the familiar, and headed always - though,

I would suggest from the saint's own wanderings in Europe, not necessarily in linear

fashion –"for one's true homeland, God" (Clancy, 2000, p. 200). The modern Irish

philosopher, writer, and eminent exponent of Irish Celtic spirituality, John O'Donohue

(2003), has said that "the difficulty in being human is that one can never be merely

human. Whether we like it or not, each one of us has kinship with the divine" (p. 150). I

believe that the intimation of that divine kinship and the consequent yearning for

transcendence of the material and the ephemeral are reflected in the "fierce and restless

spirit of the Irish" noted by Waddell (1927/1968, p. 28), and expressed in the

"wandering" designs and carvings of Irish art, in the restless journeying over uncharted

seas to learn what lies beyond in the Otherworld of the *imrama* tales, and in the

wandering across Europe in the cause of learning and spirituality of the medieval Irish

scholar-saints.

Coming from this cultural perspective, I am drawn to the great confessional writers from Augustine onward with their focus on the search for meaning through inner wandering in the "Otherworld" of the spirit. I see them as giving eloquent and enduring expression to the universal hunger of the human spirit that exercised the minds of my ancestors, both pagan and Christian. I hear echoes of the intimations of our kinship with the divine in Augustine's classic assertion in the opening lines of his *Confessions*: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in Thee."

In this chapter, I trace this wandering in pursuit of meaning down the inner paths of the spirit, as "confessed" by Augustine and other writers from the fourth century to our own time. From a review of the literature, I illustrate that they used the technology available to them – writing and reading – to prioritize the needs of the spirit and to gather a community of readers around them to collaborate in the search for nourishment. This is evidenced down through the ages, first of all by Augustine's inner meanderings in search of peace for his own – and humanity's – restless spirit, and then by other inner wanderings such as Boethius' search for meaning in the face of man's injustice to man, by Rousseau's self-exploration to learn of "a man as he is within," and by the anguished spiritual wanderings of Thomas Merton in the 20th century.

Outside The Box: Technology Nourishing the Spirit

Using the metaphor of the confessional box for auricular, private confessions, I present confessional writing as taking the act of confessing outside the box and opening it to aural readership, understood in the Augustinian sense of reading as "textual collocution" (Vessey, 1996, para.1). I first seek to distinguish between confessional writing and autobiography. I then look at the practice of confession in the Christian

Church, and in particular at the impact on literature of the Christian requirement of

confession, stipulated as annual by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Following this, I

argue that the typicality of the personal inner journeys of the confessional writers gives

their accounts lasting appeal and relevance down to our own time. I note the paradox at

the end of the 20th century of the apparent death of the self and the survival of western

man as a "confessing animal." I suggest that the emerging literary genre of digital

confessional writing that has come into existence with the turn of the millennium,

together with other open, collaborative platforms, holds out the promise of the

resurrection of the self and of reconnecting fragmented humanity.

Given the range of conflicting views about the relationship between confessional

writing and autobiographical literature (Anderson, 2005; Andrews, 2003; Marcus, 1994;

Outler, 1955; Raskolnikov, 2005), I think it is useful at the start to clarify whether we

regard the two as synonymous or whether we would distinguish between them. Anderson

(2005) sees autobiographical literature as helping to construct a "history of selfhood, a

paradigmatic narrative through which the subject has learned to know who s/he is" (p.

18), and regards Augustine's *Confessions* as the best place to start any study of the genre.

Frye (1957) identifies autobiography with the confession form "following St. Augustine

who appears to have invented it, and Rousseau, who established a modern type of it" (p.

307). Kellog and Scholes (1966) describe autobiography as having two usual forms - the

apology and the confession. Marcus (1994) defines autobiography in terms of its

"inwardness," and from this perspective regards Augustine's *Confessions* as the "first

true autobiography" (p. 2). Outler (1955), on the other hand, states emphatically that the

Confessions are not Augustine's autobiography. His interpretation of what they are, as set

out in the Introduction to his translation of the *Confessions,* provides us with a key insight into the nature of religious confessional writing. For Outler, Augustine's *Confessions* are a "deliberate effort" to follow "the windings of his memory" - the inward *imram* - and to recall the workings of God's "prevenient and provident grace" in his life (para. 11). Weintraub (1978) speaks of a proper form of autobiography as being that in which a self-reflective person ponders who he is and how he became what he is. He sees Augustine's *Confessions* as holding a special place in this genre because of his understanding of the "typicality" of his experience.

Andrews (2003) concedes that autobiography in its most general sense originated with Augustine at the end of the fourth century, but draws attention to the inappropriateness of applying the term "autobiography" - even retrospectively – to the *Confessions* of Rousseau, pointing out that the term, from its three Greek roots of "self-life-writing," was not coined until 1809 by the English poet Robert Southey. He contends that Rousseau's title would suggest that he thought of himself as writing in the "distinguished confessional tradition" established by Augustine. In the context of Benjamin Franklin's original title of his work as *Memoirs* – later changed to *Autobiography* by his editors - Andrews (p. 8) draws a distinction between the memoir and the confession, two of the "most established genres of life-writing in western literature." He describes the memoir as "an externally focused history and justification of a public life," and the confession as an "inner-directed, self-searching mode of self-examination." The purpose of the latter, the confession, from the time of Augustine onward, is "taking stock of oneself, morally and spiritually," and thereby of one's relationship to God. Raskolnikov (2005) brings the discussion to what for me is a most

satisfying conclusion, defining confessional literature as simply "works using the tropes and methods of the confessional to structure narrative" (Abstract). By combining elements of these descriptions and definitions, we can isolate the defining features of confessional writing. I would argue that it is an inner-directed narrative, written by a reflective person who seeks meaning and understanding of the needs of the spirit by asking the two basic questions, "Who am I? How did I become what I am?" It differs from autobiography in its purpose and format. The purpose is to take stock of oneself spiritually and morally, and of one's relationship with God. The format is the selective use of memory and the tropes of the confessional to structure narrative.

It might be appropriate at this stage to look briefly at the Christian practice of confession, so called from one of its parts – the other two being contrition and satisfaction or penance. According to the *Catholic Encyclopaedia,* all three of these constitute the "acts of the penitent" and are required "for the worthy reception of the sacrament." The same source informs us that confession takes place in the "tribunal of penance," because it is a "judicial procedure." The penitent is both the accuser and the accused. The priest-confessor, mediating the power to forgive sins which Christ granted his church, pronounces "judgement and sentence." Auricular confession – private, secret confession, "spoken into the ear of the confessor" - has been "the practice of the Church from the earliest days" (*Catholic Encyclopaedia*). The metaphor of the confessional box refers to this practice, the "box" being traditionally used to safeguard the privacy, secrecy and sacredness of the act of reconciliation with God effected by the sacrament. From 1910, when Pope Pius X issued the decree *Quam Singulari*, allowing children to make their confession and to receive Holy Communion at the age of seven, going into the

"box" has been the experience of generations of Catholics from that tender age. Frank O' Connor's poignantly hilarious short story, *First Confession*, captures both the bewildering physical experience of being "inside the box," from the child's perspective, and the clear understanding that nothing of the secret auricular confession was to be revealed outside the box. The young boy's taunting sister, who makes his life a misery, awaits him, eager to know if he had confessed all his terrible sins and what the priest had said. She was, however, outside the box, and, therefore, not meant to be privy to the confession.

I posit that what the great confessional writers have always done is to take the act of confession "outside the box." Using the technology of writing, they confess not only to God, but to their fellow men, their readers. They do this consciously, deliberately in what Stock (1996), referring to Augustine, describes as a "type of aural readership" (p. 184), that focuses their readers' attention on what they, the writer-penitents, see as essential in the text – the fragility and vulnerability of the human self and the all-encompassing, re-creative mercy of God. Vessey (1996) describes this process as "textual collocution" (para.1). He sets this firmly within the Augustinian concept of reading, referring to Stock's (1996) perception that Augustine, for whom reading and writing were essentially "social processes," envisages a "community around a text," consisting of himself and others united in the love of God (p. 215). In his testimony concerning his *Confessions* (Outler, 1955), Augustine says they were "meant to excite men's hearts and affections" towards God. He is driven to recount his journey to true selfhood, a selfhood found in God alone in order to draw his readers along the same path (Gutman, 1988). This social aspect, this strong focus on the reader, is one of the most enduring and endearing characteristics of Augustine's confessional writing. Outler (1955) notes that Augustine

"grips our hearts and minds and enlists us in his great enterprise" (Introduction, para. 24).

This enterprise is to seek purpose and peace for the restless human heart.

St. Augustine; St. Patrick

In narrating his inward journey to true selfhood, Augustine does not favor a linear, chronological approach. He chooses instead to wander, to follow the "windings of memory" (Outler, 1955, para. 11), plucking only the confessional moments from that vast repository of the past. Freud's dictum that the present can retroactively recast the past seems to be relevant to Augustine's use of memory to inform his narrative. Pascal (1960, cited in Anderson, 2005, p. 19) adds that, in recasting the past, Augustine reshaped himself. This could be attributed to the transformative power of the technology of writing. Speaking of the *Confessions* in the *Retractations*, II, 6 (Outler, 1955), Augustine tells how they reshaped his relationship with God when they were being written – adding that they still do this when read. Marcus (1994) sees Augustine as having paved the way for Freudian psychology. "Without Augustine, we would have had no Freud" (p. 235). Understanding the typicality of his experience (Weintraub, 1978), Augustine strives "to involve his reader in his own process of inquiry and perplexity" (Outler, para. 23). He is manifestly eager to have him share in "his own flashes of insight and his sudden glimpses of God's glory" (Outler, para. 23). Even in his pondering on issues such as the nature of time and eternity, of being and of evil, which have exercised men's minds through the ages, he seeks "to maintain contact with his reader in genuine respect and openness" (Outler, para. 23). For Augustine, taking confession outside the box is a strategy, not only for celebrating his own reconciliation with the great and compassionate God, but also for

inspiring his readers to come to know the Other as ever merciful and endlessly life-renewing: "*Qui fecit, refecit*" (He who made, has remade) (Outler, 1955).

Written in the same era (circa 450), the *Confessio* of the humble, unlearned Patrick, Apostle of Ireland, bears many traits in common with the more illustrious writings of the great Augustine. Brought as a slave from his native Britain to Ireland, Patrick spent many years of his captivity herding sheep on Slemish mountain in County Antrim. Here, he was much given to prayer and contemplation. In his Prologue to Skinner's (1998) translation of the *Confession of St. Patrick*, John O'Donohue suggests that physical slavery released Patrick into a life of inner liberation. His captors were unaware of "the eternal spring that was awakening in his young mind." In his experience of alienation and exile, Patrick discovers God as his *anam-chara* (pronounced *anam hara*). As O'Donohue explains, *anam* is the Irish word for soul and *cara* is the word for friend. The *anam-chara* is the friend of the soul, the Other in whom your heart could be at peace. This concept permeates Patrick's *Confession*, in which he makes clear, as O'Donohue (in Skinner) points out, that each new direction of his life was brought about, not by logical calculation, but by voices that came to him at that "tender threshold somewhere between dream, prayer, and vision." Patrick, therefore, writes in praise of the merciful and loving God and in awareness of his own transgressions. He too is "driven" to make his confession "outside the box." He "cannot be silent" (Bieler, 1953, para. 4). His purpose in writing is "to tell of God's work in him" (O'Dwyer, 1995, p. 13). He must try to "repay God by confessing his wonders" not just "before his kinsfolk and brethren" but "before every nation" (Bieler, para. 4). These wonders take the form of moments of divine intervention in Patrick's life. His written confessional narrative is constructed

around them. Like Augustine, he selects from his memory – his inner wandering - only

those moments that speak directly of God's goodness and greatness. O'Donohue (in

Skinner) "hears" this confession as "the echo of the inner membrane where the human

soul dovetails into the divine" and sees it as akin to what Meister Eckhart terms "the

Birth of God in the soul." Patrick's attitude throughout the *Confession* is, therefore, one

of wonder and of "permanent gratitude to and trust in God" (O'Dwyer, p. 14).

<div align="center">Boethius; Rousseau; Goethe</div>

Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, written in 525 A.D., seems to me to mirror

"out of the box" confessional writing, though not in the strictly Christian sense. Many of

the same elements are there. Boethius, in prison, confesses to Lady Philosophy his sense

of injustice at the cruel fate that has befallen him. This discourse is reminiscent of

Augustine's encounter with Continence, which launches him on the path of confession

(Sturrock, 1993). Lady Philosophy challenges Boethius by raising his mind to thoughts of

the triumph of eternal values over immediate human pettiness and injustice and the

apparent futility of life, and berates him in the name of "mortal men" for seeking "that

happiness outside, which lies within yourselves" (Beck, 1996, para. 8). It becomes

obvious at this point that the *Consolation* reaches beyond the narrow confines of the

auricular confession and involves a universal "out of the box" audience in the discourse.

Like Augustine, Boethius discusses philosophical questions such as free will,

predestination, human good and evil. Like Augustine, he learns that God knows beyond

time through the consciousness of the eternal present, and, in tones resonant of

Augustine, expresses his reconciliation, through his confession, with the "Father of all"

whom, with his confessor, Lady Philosophy, he addresses as the "bright and peaceful rest

of all our children that worship you" (Beck, para. 13). This reconciliation – like

Augustine's encounter with Continence - is one of those "specular moments" (de Man,

1979) when the author becomes the subject of his own understandings. In the

Consolation, Boethius provides medieval piety with "the philosophical reasoning for its

faith" (Beck, para. 18). Moreover, though not explicitly addressed to readers, Boethius'

written "confession" reaches beyond the box of the prison cell in which it was written. In

his address to the "Father of all," as the "peaceful rest" (Beck, para. 13) of all his

children, he demonstrates his awareness of his "typicality," and his search for meaning in

a hostile world gives expression to the endless quest of all "mortal men." Boethian

influence resonates down throughout the ages. Beck finds it has particular relevance to

our own time. Inflicted as we are with the "disease of materialism," and experiencing a

"lack of happiness" (para. 19), we would do well to "hear" Boethius' "confession."

Religious confession in the Augustinian mode of inner wanderings on a journey to

spiritual wholeness and selfhood proliferated from the 4th to the 18th century. Reeve

(2003) sees a rich vein including Bernard of Cluny's 12th-century, 3,000-hexameter *De

Contemptu Mundi*, Teresa of Avila's *Life* (1565) and *Interior Castle* (1577), and John

Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666). This latter work bears the

particular imprint of the Reformation, a profound effect of which had been to leave the

believer and his conscience totally dependent on divine grace (Hill, 1986). Nevertheless,

Bunyan, like Augustine and Patrick, "retrospectively … picks out those [events of his

life] which reveal a providential design" (Anderson, 2005, p. 29). Like Patrick, Bunyan

experiences moments "when the spiritual impinges on the empirical world" (Anderson, p.

29), as when, also like Patrick, he hears a divine voice calling him to take a particular

path. Interestingly, much of Bunyan's confession was, like that of Boethius, written from prison, and also managed to transcend the confines of that particular "box" to share with his readers his experience of the ultimate relation of the individual to the Divine (Anderson, p. 28). "Boethian" confessional writing – a more secular search for meaning and transcendence **-** also flourished in this period. Reeve (2003) cites Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*, written not long before his death in 1142, Francois Villon's *Lais* (1456), and his *Grand Testament* (1461), Edmund Spenser's famous sonnet sequence *Amoretti* and his *Epithalamion* (1595). Including Russian literature in his broad sweep, Reeve cites the "highly original, confessional, vernacular *Autobiography"* of 1672 by Archpriest Avvakum. Thomas de Quincey's (1821) *Confessions of an English Opium Eater,* written, according to the author, in the hope that his confessions might be useful and instructive to others, might also be added to the "Boethian" list.

Foucault (1976/1978) focuses on the impact on confessional writing of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which made annual confession a requirement for every baptized Christian over the age of 12. According to Raskolnikov (2005), this led to an increased sense of the self - albeit as sinner - and the construction of memory as a repository for narratives about one's sin. Moreover, the numerous texts aimed at helping penitents prepare for confession led to the awareness of the need for a "coherent narrative of sin" (p. 3), based on rubrics such as the Seven Deadly Sins. All of this engendered a "sense of self as private and secret," and exercised an "undoubted influence on the major works of Middle English literature" (Raskolnikov, p. 8). Among these, she notes the 14th century masterpieces of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, all of which either make use of confessional discourse or

have confessional moments. From my perspective, these moments, by being written, take place "outside the (confessional) box" and are shared with the reader.

With the posthumous publication of the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1782 confessional writing comes explicitly "out of the (confessional) box." God becomes peripheral; time, not eternity, is the focus, as Rousseau reshapes and refocuses the genre (Anderson, 2005; Andrews, 2003; Outler, 1955). Rousseau begins his confession by addressing his readers and bestowing on them the role of confessor and judge. He asks the "Eternal Being" to assemble round him "the numberless legion of my fellow men" that they might hear his confession and that each might "judge for himself" (Rousseau, 1782/ 2000, p. 5). This confession is to be a public exposure by the writer of every aspect of Rousseau. The focus is on "a man in all the truth of nature, and this man is myself" (Rousseau, p. 5). What Rousseau celebrates, however, is not his typicality, but his uniqueness, his "atomistic, autonomous self" (Gutman, 1988, p. 1). He emphasizes that his experience does not apply to others. His confessions will be of relevance to others only in so far as we recognize our own uniqueness, "all selves with our individual histories and idiosyncratic perceptions" (Gutman, p. 1).

Before Rousseau, the details of the ordinary everyday reality of ordinary individual human beings were not part of the stuff of confessional literature (Gutman, 1988). With Rousseau, that individuality became center-stage. Rousseau's *Confessions* are stripped of any conventionally religious undertones or motivation. Unlike Augustine, Rousseau does not set out to confess his weakness in order to extol the greatness of the Other. Rousseau's *Confessions* are a resolutely "secular form of the religious practice of confession" (Gutman, p. 3). Their purpose is twofold: to "unburden himself through

confessing" and to create an" indivuated self" which will justify him to his readers, seen implicitly as representing a "hostile society" (Gutman, p. 2). Augustine's strong sense of a unified self, relating to a merciful and life-fulfilling Other, is replaced in Rousseau by a divided self, at once subject and object. The narrated or constructed self, which he refers to as Jean-Jacques, becomes both the subject and object of the confessional discourse. Andrews (2003) see Rousseau's work as an act of justification of this self. In the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it is society, not the self, that is tried and ultimately found wanting.

Rousseau's portrayal of the divided self, together with his valorization of individual selfhood, of feelings over reason, and of nature over society, strongly influenced the Romantic movement of the 19th century in Europe. A well-known example of this influence can be seen in Wordworth's long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude* (1850). In this poem, Rousseauvian themes dominate, as the poet depicts his personal journey back to wholeness. Rousseau's legacy to the realist novel was this "subjective vision of the quest of the self" (Marcus, 1994, p. 235), and the concept of the "unique, indivuated self as subject of observation and description" (Gutman, 1988, p. 7).

The sense of division between the narrated/constructed self and the "true" self is captured vividly in the title of the great autobiographical – or secular confessional – work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1811. This title, *Dichtung und Wahrheit: Aus meinem Leben (Poetry and Truth: From my Life),* demonstrates his belief that "every self-portrait imposes a false coherence on the jumble of history" (Dye, 2005, p. 1), even though he himself had consulted diaries, letters, and friends in an attempt to achieve some degree of "Wahrheit." His statement that all of his works are fragments of a broad confession, and

his use of the third person, rather than the first, when referring to himself, anticipate the confessions of the post-structuralists of the 20th century. Barthes' deliberately incoherently structured, fragmented, and third-person-narrated autobiography "against itself" - *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975/1977), and Derrida's *Circumfession* (1993), with the dispersal of autobiographical details throughout his work, testify to the impossibility of knowing the self or engaging with the reader. Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author seems to me to be the almost inevitable conclusion of the concept, revealed in post-Rousseauvian secular confessional literature, of the identity of the self as ultimately unknowable and its very existence as open to question. The idea that the "subject is dead" had begun to embed itself in critical writings (Raskolnikov, 2005, p.1).

St. Thérèse of Lisieux; Thomas Merton

I feel, however, that I must, at this point, include two instances of confessional writing in the late 19th and mid 20th centuries, which stand in stark contrast to the deconstructionist trend, and which bear witness to the endurance of the Augustinian confessional legacy. The first work is the *Story of a Soul* (1899/1989), written shortly before her death at the age of 24 by a young French Carmelite nun, known as Thérèse of Lisieux. Ordered by her superior to write her story, she prefaces her writing by stating that, having now reached a stage where she can glance back at the past, she will not focus on herself, but on the graces she has received from God, one of these being her conversion during the Christmas following her 14th birthday. I am struck by the way in which this conversion, following directly from a trivial incident after Midnight Mass, when Thérèse hears her father complaining about her childishness, resonates with the similarly trivial incident which led to Augustine's conversion. He had simply heard a

child in a garden say *Tolle. Lege* (Take. Read). Such graces revealed to Thérèse how she could find God by following the "little way," the ordinary road to sanctity, a revelation she yearned to share with the countless numbers of ordinary human beings of whom she considered herself typical. It was this longing that ultimately decided her to write her story. Aware of the emphasis of Jansenism, then still influential in France, on God as judge and avenger, she felt compelled to make the kindness of God better known. In her confession of the "story" of her soul's journey to God, she comes across as an ordinary, real person who sees everything in the light of eternity. So profound was the influence of her confessional writing on ordinary Catholics of the early 20th century that in 1913, only 16 years after her death, Pope Pius X called her *"la plus grande sainte des temps modernes"* (the greatest saint of modern times) (cited in Laurentin, 1972, p. 8). Though she could claim no formal theological or philosophical training, her sharing with her readers of her spiritual itinerary, her profound meditations on God, time and eternity, and the continuing world-wide community of readers around her text earned her posthumously, in 1997, the title of Doctor of the Church - on a par with the great Augustine.

The second is the autobiography in the confessional mode written by Thomas Merton in 1946 at the age of 31. The resemblances with Augustine who wrote his *Confessions* at a similar age are striking. Merton in his work titled *The Seven Story Mountain*, published in 1948, tells the story of his directionless and dissolute early life - including fathering a child as a result of a casual sexual affair while attending Cambridge University – until his conversion to Catholicism at the age of 23, and the peace he experienced as a Cistercian monk on ultimately finding himself in God. Writing of the

"seven-storied Thomas Merton," Royal (1997, pp. 34-38) observes that "Merton came to contemplation partly because of a pure attraction to wordless union with the absolute, partly because of an intense desire to flee a sinful self and world." The typicality of this experience of his search for a renewed self through union with God made his "confession" strike a chord with the directionless, self-searching post-war generation. "It was 1948, and Merton had touched a nerve, not only in America but all over the world. The spiritual exhaustion after the Second World War stimulated interest in inspirational religious stories." Merton is recognized as being "beyond doubt, one of the great spiritual masters" of the 20th century. Royal sees him as providing an "enduring witness" to all of us who seek "to shore up our own fragmentary lives in quest for the 'hidden wholeness.'"

Samuel Beckett

In general, however, autobiographical/confessional writing in the latter half of the 20th century would appear to have travelled further down the road on which the post–structuralists journeyed. Olney (1998, p. 208) sees the Irish writer Samuel Beckett as the third member of the triumvirate (with Augustine and Rousseau) who represent key moments in the history of confessional literature. For Olney, the final disappearance of the "I" is the core of Beckett's writing, as captured in titles such as *Not I* and *The Unnameable*, and as articulated in the dialogue of *Waiting for Godot* which Olney quotes on the first page of his book:

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

The futility of telling these "futile stories of futility" (Olney, p. 2) to non-existent audiences is a long way from Augustine's paean of praise to the God whose gracious, providential presence empowers man to remake and renew himself and gather a community around a text to share in the experience. This celebratory, "social," sound of Augustine's *Confessions* is replaced by the empty silence of the bleak Beckettian inner landscape. Olney explains this as inevitable. Augustine could validate "writing one's life, finding the words that signify the self and its history" (p. 2), and the aural readership to participate in the experience. By the time of Beckett's confessional writings, all that remained of the Augustinian legacy which had served the western world so well from the 4th to the 20th century was the "necessity of finding the narrative, without a first person in sight to perform it or do the remembering that precedes, accompanies, and follows the narrating." With Beckett, the impulse to narrate is "unwilled and unwanted, but not to be denied" (p. 2).

Confession and Technology: Blogging

This brings us to the supreme paradox. In the post-Beckettian world, the "I" is dead, but modern man has survived as a compulsively "confessing animal" (Foucault, 1976/1978). We see traces of this in popular literature, for example, in Fielding's (2001) *Bridget Jones's Diary,* or Matt's (2003*) Peepshow: The cartoon diary of Joe Matt.* It can even be discerned, more risibly, in the life-stories of the "tell all" celebrity "confessional magazines," as well as in the numerous "confessional television" programs. The ultimate pathos is that we are still driven to "search for our 'true' selves, even while agonizing over the impossibility of successful completion of such a task" (Levitsky, 1998, p. 2).

With the turn of the millennium, however, has come a new Internet genre that is rapidly becoming mainstream (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). Initially known as a weblog, but now more commonly referred to as a blog, this form of expression has begun to reveal its potential to effectively break the Beckettian silence by enabling people to explore their inner selves and to "confess" openly to one another in a virtual space – the blogosphere - that is the direct antithesis of the barren landscape on which the Beckettian anti-heroes were stranded.

A blog is basically a webpage on which an author publishes pieces with the intention of starting a conversation. It is updated frequently with postings published in reverse chronological order. It also quickly finds a space in the "blogosphere," the name given to the networks of bloggers. Anyone with internet access can publish a blog, and free blogging software, available since the beginning of the 21st century makes blogging increasingly popular (Wijnia, 2004).

This ease of access also leads to a wide range of content and quality. "Examples of the genre exist on a continuum from confessional, online diaries to logs tracking specific topics or activities through links and commentaries" (Walker, 2003). Though there is a "growing cluster of weblogs used by professionals as personal knowledge repositories, learning journals or networking instruments" (Efimova, 2004, section 1), the vast majority of blogs are written by "ordinary people for much smaller audiences" (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz, 2004, p. 41).

The motivation for blogging is as wide-ranging as blog content. In a study on blog motivation, Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz found that this fell into five major categories: documenting one's life, providing commentary and opinions, expressing

deeply felt emotions, articulating ideas through writing, forming and maintaining

community forums (p. 43). Most of these "motivations" are related to the confessional

type of blogging by "ordinary people." They also neatly point up its resonance with

traditional or classical confessional literature.

"Blogging as confession" is, in fact, the subject of discussion in a series of blog

posts in an online journal (Infocult, 2005) which discussed the recently published *The*

Political Mapping of Cyberspace (Crampton, 2004) dealing with this subject. One

blogger sees "blogging as confession" as referring not just to the "Catholic practice, but

also to Western speech practices influenced by it." He quotes Crampton's view that "the

West is a highly confessional society. We like to make confessions and to listen or watch

them on TV, in the news or at church," and cites from a source referenced by the author

describing confession as "deeply imbricated with our sense of the self, its interiority, its

capacity for introspection, self-knowledge, self-evaluation." He further emphasizes

Crampton's assertions that "cyberspace offers boundless opportunities for the extension

of confession," and that the disembodiment required to enter this space helps us focus on

the needs of the mind and the spirit. A blogger interviewed in the study carried out by

Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) stated, in almost Rousseauvian tones, that

blogs should be called "be-logs," because "blogging is used to 'log your being'"(p. 43).

Bloggers who confess their "deeply felt emotions" also resonate with Rousseau's ringing

prioritizing of feeling in his *Confession*s: "I had feelings before I had thoughts"

(Rousseau, 1782/ 2000, p. 8). Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) found that the

cathartic effect of confessional blogging with an audience was "especially powerful"

(section 4.3.5). They note the "sense of openness" that is common in the confessional

elements of blogging, even in "sophisticated users" (section 4.5). Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz draw attention to the flexibility of blogging which moves easily from the personal – and sometimes trivial – to the professional and profound (p. 44). Those who concentrate on documenting their lives will also find a kindred spirit in Rousseau whose avowed aim was to tell even the petty details of his life.

An opposing viewpoint is strongly expressed in another blog - *The Bicycle* in - 2005. Here, the blogger claims that though the confessional mode of blogging has "significant antecedents in literature" - mentioning St. Augustine and Rousseau as examples – the fact that bloggers are generally unaware of this literary tradition and make no contribution to its further development means that modern blogging is generally "wads of narcissistic drivel," written by the unhappy and the self-absorbed (blog posted June 10, 2005). An interesting illustration of the open-endedness of blogging and the way in which those who think by blogging can achieve greater clarity of thought and articulation is that some 11 days later, the same blogger sought to "modify" his statement, saying that blogging is in fact a form of literary activity, "despite the fact that the author is unaware of it" (blog posted June 21, 2005). In the same post, the writer further evidences the significant development of his thinking when he distinguishes between the individual blog which he sees as "episodic" - the "mere presentation and portrayal of an individual's life" – and confessional blogs taken as a group. In this latter category, he perceives "online confessionals" as "providing an encyclopaedic vision" which "offer us information about the psychological landscape of modern, mainly urban society." This process of developing higher order thinking by writing is reminiscent of Augustine's "confession" that, for him, writing was a means of revealing what he did not know that he

knew. "*Egoque ipse multa quae nesciebam scribendo me didicisse confitear*" (And I myself would confess that many things that I did not know I learned through writing) (cited in Vessey, 1996, Note 7).

Blogging, however, gives writers an advantage over those who wrote their confessions in manuscripts or whose work appears in print. According to Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004), some bloggers find that thinking and writing with computers for a potentially responsive audience helps them clarify their thoughts before sharing them. They also find that readers' responses further help shape their thinking and their writing (Efimova, 2004). In fact, blogging exists in order to open dialogue with readers. "Most bloggers are acutely aware of their readers, even in confessional blogs calibrating what they should and should not reveal" (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, p. 43). One is again reminded of Augustine, this time of his wanderings down the pathways of memory to select episodes revealing his search for spiritual nourishment in order to share these with his readers, of his awareness of the typicality of his search, and of his desire to "gather a community around a text."

As Ong (1982) makes clear, however, the technology of writing distances the writer from his readers. It also gives the written word a Delphic quality, a form of closure, a quality of "autonomous discourse" (p. 77), as the author cannot be directly interrogated. Wijnia (2004) reminds us that Plato's Socrates criticizes the written word, since it offers no possibility of dialogue - the only way in which people can communicate. Through digital technology, however, blogging is helping to restore that possibility by making the author almost immediately accessible in a way beyond anything Augustine could ever have imagined. It also perhaps merits for this electronic era the title

of the "second orality" in ways that not even Ong could have predicted. In the

blogosphere, writers expect their readers to check in regularly. Each person is both sender

and receiver of postings, both writer and reader. They find their individual and communal

voices by reading and responding to blog postings on a range of issues from the personal

to the profound. In addition, recently developed software now allows bloggers to go

beyond the text and enrich the word through incorporating "text, pictures, graphs, video

images" (Wijnia, 2004, section 4.3).

Perhaps the major advantage that digital technology gives confessional blogging

over written and printed confessional literature is its inherent democratic quality. Much

classical writing – confessional or otherwise - was written in learned Latin, and used by

an exclusively male elite (Ong, 1982), since basic education for the masses was not

available until the late 19th century. Confessional blogging is at the opposite end of the

accessibility scale. It is a totally democratic form of self-expression, open to all who have

an Internet connection. It crosses all barriers of age, education, gender, and culture.

Wijnia (2004) compares blogging to Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, London, where

anyone can climb on a soap box and express himself freely to those who care to stop and

listen and dialogue – or heckle (engage in what Ong terms "agonistic" debate). Blogging

restores some of this "agonistic" quality of oral give-and-take, by allowing anyone to

stand on a virtual soap box and initiate a discussion with a voluntary audience. Froomkin

(2003) describes this as "using democratized access to a new form of mass–media – the

Internet." Here, "individuals engage first of all in self-expression, then engage each other

in debate. In so doing they begin to form new communities of discourse" (p. 857).

It would seem to me that the democratization of confessional writing through blogging can therefore be seen as continuing seamlessly and extending – albeit unwittingly – the confessional process begun by Augustine. I suggest that blogging in general, and the confessional element in particular, are indications of what Cobb (1998) calls our "thirst" for "a sense of belonging and purpose" (p. 22), and what Thieme (1997) calls "digital humanity['s] hunger for wholeness and meaning, redemption, deliverance, and healing, in short for spiritual transformation" (p. 2). Indeed, Thieme looks specifically to evolving digital constructs to mediate spiritual transformation in new ways. Writing in 1997, just before the Weblog came into existence, Thieme suggests that the vital digital constructs may emerge "out there on the edges of virtual life," that perhaps "MUDS, MOOS, and MUSHES…are habitats in which they will evolve" (p. 4). All these constructs do offer some mediation (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004, p. 46; Wijnia, 2004, 5.2). For me, all this resonates strongly with what I identify as the core legacy of confessional writers from the fourth century onward – using technology to help us explore and express the hunger of our human spirit, and looking to technology to connect us to one another as a community in search of nourishment.

I see this as having significant implications for education. Here, as in the corporate world (Efimova, 2004), one observes at present only the outcomes of knowledge work (e.g., test results and reports), but not the learning or creative process. Both worlds are still marked by Taylor's studies on improving productivity and by the consequent demand for measurable outcomes (Efimova). Blogging can offer one way of using technology to move away from this paradigm in education. Wijnia points out that certain characteristics of blogging – self-expression, feedback and dialogues in the

blogosphere – can make the learning process visible and enrich the learning experience in any environment through enabling learners to share, evaluate, and develop their ideas.

I suggest that blogging has led to a new form of learning by wandering. Bloggers have the facility, unknown to readers of manuscripts and printed texts, of being able to wander through the weblog, starting at any point in the dialogue - at the most recent post or at an older one accessed via a search engine or a link from another site (Walker, 2003). Indeed, I would submit that, through adding blogrolls (peer-filtered lists of recommended sites) to their own sites, bloggers actively encourage their readers to learn by wandering further through the blogosphere. One blogger interviewed in the Efimova study claims that this wandering - or "networking" - has led to the experience of "learning a lot of new stuff through reading other blogs" (section 4.1). This type of reading helps move learners away from the closed, linear, sequential approach to learning favored by the printed text, toward the open, non-linear, creatively chaotic approach of digital hypertext and other digital literacies.

Wijnia (2004) asserts that, in addition to brief diary-like blogging, weblogs can handle a high complexity of information – long pieces of text combined with video, audio, and graphics. This makes blogs very useful for reflection and critical discussion (section 5.2). She also states that blogging can be used for reflection on three domains: the subjective for self-expression and reflection; the objective for sharing knowledge, and the inter-subjective for dealing with societal issues. However, according to Efimova (2004), "what makes weblogs different is not the publication of content per se, but the personalities behind them" (section 3). Efimova states that most weblogs are authored by individuals known as bloggers, and are perceived as "unedited personal voices" (section

3). In line with Vygotsky's theory of the social nature of learning, Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) highlight blogging as social activity that allows "the presence of the audience and the writer's consciousness of the audience" to "clearly introduce the social into an individual's thought process" (section 4.3.4). The similarity of this view with Augustine's perception of writing and reading as a social process is striking. The same authors found that the cathartic effect of confessional blogging with an audience was "especially powerful" (section 4.3.5), and they note the "sense of openness" that is common in the confessional elements of blogging, even in "sophisticated users" (section 4.5). Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) draw attention to the flexibility of blogging which moves easily from the personal – and sometimes trivial – to the professional and profound (p. 44). In addition, because of the open-ended nature of blogging, which, unlike the printed text has no "noetic closure" (Ong, 1982, p. 129) and can continue as long as bloggers want it to, learning by wandering in the blogosphere also creates a sense of the ongoing nature of the learning process. This process includes "learning about oneself and developing connections with others" (Efimova, section 3).

Some examples already exist of the successful application of this approach in an educational setting. Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) cite the case of a teacher who introduced a class blog as part of the learning process. He aimed to take advantage of the "nature of Weblogs as 'public journals'" by using them for "personal reflection, in the context of a learning community, on issues that arise in the course" (p. 45). Students were required to post weekly blogs on assigned topics related to field studies, and to read and respond to one another's posts. These electronic conversations encouraged shared meaning making, and helped create a sense of a learning community

among students "that would be less likely to emerge in a conventional classroom setting" (p. 45). A study conducted by the same authors in an informal education setting found that "the community exerted 'peer pressure' to post regularly and that there was a kind of reciprocity expected" (p. 45). In this context, it should be noted that any blogging community that is not password protected can receive posts from readers anywhere in the blogosphere (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). This adds value for most bloggers who welcome the "increasing network of easily reachable 'intelligent' people" (blogger, cited in Efimova, 2004, p. 7). As with the Internet in general, however, others may be fearful of the potential danger of this openness, particularly for young learners. In Tunbridge (1995), Barlow argues on the other hand that "harmful material is considerably easier to get in the physical world than on the Net." He adds that "if you want to raise good, sensible adults, you let them know as early as possible what adult life is like and trust their judgement a little bit" (p. 2).

Digital humanity has been diligently blogging since free software became available at the turn of the century. According to studies reviewed by Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) the majority of blogs are of the "online diary" or confessional type (section1). This confessional element remains a feature of many professional, educational or special interest blogs, where the "personality, passions and point of view" (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004, p. 43) of the bloggers injects a sense of humanity into the community of discourse. In the context of learning, Siemens (2005) notes the impact of "blogs, wikis and other open, collaborative platforms" on reshaping learning as a two-way process that recognizes the learning process as "messy, nebulous, informal, chaotic" (p. 25). I posit that addressing learning in this way is part of the process of

healing the human spirit, constricted for so long by the understanding of learning as linear, sequential, transferable, competitive, and conducted mainly in the closed world of the classroom (English & Hill, 1994; Friere, 1968/1993; Garrison, 2006; Hodas, 1993; Kerr, 2004; Papert, 2006; Pea, 1998). Blogs in particular allow for a confessional or human element in learning, allowing learners to express their feelings as well as their ideas, thus setting up relationships with computers and with peers within and beyond the classroom through which collaborative learning can flourish and the spirit's capacity to know is increased.

Ong (1982) tells us that "writing, print, and the computer are all ways of technologizing the word" (p. 79). Confessional writers have provided a model for using the technologized word to express and to seek to address within a community of discourse the needs of the human spirit. The important thing in this process is to honor the available technology, to "interiorize" it by "learning how to make the tool do what it can do" (p. 82) – just as the heroes of the Irish *imrama* tales did with the currach. Interiorizing also includes allowing technology to transform our way of thinking and being. This idea finds expression in Ong's metaphor of the modern orchestra, where gifted musicians interiorize the instruments that sublimely technologize their music, enabling them to envision and express "something poignantly human that cannot be expressed without the mechanical contrivance" (p. 82). To approach technology in this way is to unlock its potential to "enrich the human psyche, enlarge the human spirit, intensify its interior life" (p. 82). Such a vision, which resonates with the ancient Irish understanding of learning as a spiritual quest for transcendence, could inspire educators

to develop a relationship with technology that will empower them to guide education

toward achieving its most noble goal – that of nourishing the human spirit.

CHAPTER IV

CRITIQUE

And still they gaz'd and still the wonder grew,

That one small head could carry all he knew.

(Oliver Goldsmith: *The Village Schoolmaster*)

Introduction

For me, these lines, penned in 1770, encapsulate an understanding of learning far removed from that of the open, uncharted voyage in search of transcendence that I have derived from the perspective of ancient Irish culture and from confessional writers down through the ages. In the "village schoolmaster" paradigm, learning is the transfer of a pre-determined, conventional body of knowledge from the "one small head" of the teacher - the repository of knowledge and the main technology - to the learner – the empty vessel waiting passively to be filled.

A brief look at the history of education in the western world would suggest that this understanding of learning, which still informs much of modern educational thinking, has been with us from the earliest times and has proved strongly resistant to change. Classical education was generally a closed world - the preserve of a wealthy male elite. It was based on the acquisition of a prescribed body of skills and knowledge, delivered through a rigid curriculum comprising two parts: the Trivium and the Quadrivium. The former consisted of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric, and the latter was devoted to the study of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy (Sayers, 1947). In the Middle Ages,

the world was part of a stable, perfectly ordered universe. Education, which was the monopoly of the Church, generally adhered to the classical format, and offered a narrowly religious view of the universe and of man. Although significant technological advances such as the clock and the printing press took place at this time, this happened outside universities, and did not motivate Europeans to rethink their world view or their understanding of human purpose (Chafy, 1997).

It was not until the outright rejection of this limited classical Christian perspective during the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe that there was any radical transformation of the western world view. Interestingly, it was philosophers, scientists, and political theorists, not technology, that wrought the transformation. Thinkers like Descartes, Pascal, Newton, Hobbes and Locke challenged the traditional ways of thinking, and offered a scientific method of arriving at the truth. In this, they were building on the work of Copernicus whose heliocentric theory had been supported and refined by Galileo, Kepler and others in the 16th and 17th centuries (Russell, 1946/ 2004). All of this was deeply disturbing to religious sensitivities. All of it brought into question the traditional thinking about the Christianized Graeco-Roman tradition of education, with its emphasis on an educated elite supporting the rightness and permanence of the established order (Chafy, 1997).

The move, however, from an elitist view of education toward education for all was slow. In France, Condorçet was the most resolute opponent of the Church's monopoly over education and the most determined champion of universal education. Like other Enlightenment thinkers, he believed that there were no limits to the learning capabilities of the human mind, that progress meant the advancement of science and

technology, and that reason alone was the path to knowledge. Given the spirit of the time - the period of the French Revolution - it is understandable that his greatest insight was that knowledge should no longer be elitist, but should be shared among all through the liberating power of education. He drew up a plan for a universal form of education. "Since instruction is the price to be paid for freedom, it must be compulsory and free of charge so that it is accessible to all: to the poor as well as to the rich, to the less gifted as well as to the more gifted, to women as well as to men" (Jolibert, 1993, p. 207). He presented his plan to the new French Legislative Assembly in 1791-1792. It was rejected, but his faith in technology and his idea of education for the masses were to influence the course of education in Europe and also in America (Chafy, 1997).

Since the American Revolution of 1776, there had been a focus on education as a right of all people within the context of republican citizenship. This view was largely promulgated by Thomas Jefferson who had been American Ambassador to France, where he was greatly influenced by Condorçet's views, and sympathetic in general to Enlightenment thinking, including that of the English thinkers, Bacon, Locke and Newton, who helped shape his "scientific, rationalistic, and optimistic outlook" (Wagoner, 2004, p. 26). He believed that human reason was capable of understanding the workings of the universe and of discovering its universal laws, and held that the spread of general knowledge was essential, not only for this, but for the very survival of the ideal of republican citizenship. From his European experience he learned that "it is safer to have a whole people respectably enlightened, than a few in a high state of science [knowledge], and the many in ignorance," and campaigned for a "system of general instruction which shall reach every description of our citizens, from the richest to the poorest" (Wagoner, p.

13). His Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge was, however, rejected, and education remained in private hands – generally run by the Puritan and Congregationalist churches (Thattai, 2001). Jefferson's influence, however, like Condorçet's, bore fruit gradually. The Christian classical view of education still prevailed – especially in higher education. Jefferson had, however, bequeathed another viewpoint, one that was secular and democratic. This gave rise to a creative tension, which, in the 19th century, had other voices – chief among which was the voice of Horace Mann – calling for free, compulsory education for the masses. Dewey, who was described as Condorçet's interpreter (Chafy, 1997), was to add his voice. He strove to finally dislodge the elite, classical type of education. He promoted schooling as a form of community that would enable the civic, social, and personal development of the child in the light of rapid modern technological changes. According to Butts (1973), Dewey's influence was such that it made it more difficult for "advocates of a closed intellectual system and conventional body of truth to hold their own" (p. 471).

It was not, however, until a revolution of a different kind was experienced in Britain that free education for the masses became a reality. Britain's Industrial Revolution of the 19th century was to help change the face of learning not only in Britain itself, but also in the other three emerging industrial powers - France, Germany, and the United States. In Britain, though university education continued along the elitist, classical route, Gladstone's Education Act of 1870 enshrined free, public, and compulsory education at elementary level. Schools were consciously based on the model of the factory. The technologies were teacher, text and blackboard. The teacher transferred the required knowledge and skills to the students. Freire (1968/1993) was later to call this

model of teaching and learning "banking education," likening it to the transfer of money at a bank. It was influenced more by the still lingering classical passive pedagogy than by Dewey's philosophy of education. The curriculum was narrowly focused on the acquisition of the basic literacies of reading, writing and arithmetic. It took place behind the closed door of the classroom, was confined to one type of pedagogy – though there must always have been a small number of innovative teachers who thought and taught "outside the box" - and to one set of values. The factory school provided an enduring model and mindset that continues to influence society's understanding of education and of the purpose of school. Friedman (1998) suggests that such stasis may be explained by the concept of "a behavioral constraint imposed by the flow of information that was once useful." His explanation is that "the traces of this information remain in the system long after its uses are gone" (p. 59).

<center>Audiovisual Technology</center>

An overview of the history of advances in instructional media in the 20th century illustrates the constant pattern of high expectations and low impact due to school resistance to each new technology (Cuban, 2006; Reiser, 2001; Spector, 2000). In the first two decades, new technologies, especially visual media, held the promise of completely transforming schools. Instructional films were the first new tools to be taken up in the classroom. In a statement richly illustrating the folly of predicting the future, Edison claimed in 1913 that the motion picture was destined to revolutionize the American school system, and would probably supplant the use of textbooks within the next 10 years (Saettler, 1990). The visual instruction movement did grow over the next 10 years, and by the 1920s and 1930s had incorporated sound to become the "audiovisual

instructional movement." However, while the technology advanced and its usage increased, there was a "recurrent pattern" of high expectations and "minimal impact" on "instructional practices" (Reiser, 2001, p. 61). This was the first clear evidence of a phenomenon that is still with us.

Audiovisual technologies did, however, make a significant impact on the military services and on industry during World War 2. Training films and film strips proved extremely effective and time-saving both for training troops for battle and for preparing civilians to take on new roles in industry. In both cases, large numbers of trainees from diverse backgrounds were involved. Several intensive research programs were conducted after the war with a view to making audiovisual materials, based on principles of learning, available to schools. Schools in general tended either to be unaware of these studies, or to ignore them (Reiser, 2001). Education remained closed in terms of learning space and learning perspective. Factory school/transfer learning was still the dominant model.

The Shannon-Weaver model of communication (1949) breathed new life into the audiovisual movement by focusing on the communication process rather than on the technology itself. When Berlo (1963) stated that the process was central, and that the media, though important, were secondary, he was stating a major principle of effective use of communication technology that should have echoed throughout the 20th century, and might have paved the way for a much needed shift in the teaching and learning paradigm. Instead, however, it seemed to fall on deaf ears. This was particularly evident in the drive to use the new technology of television for instructional purposes. Here again, hopes were high, and were further buoyed up by massive federal and private

funding. The process was ignored, the pedagogy unchanged. The instructional quality of

the programs was often mediocre, and was based mainly on the factory model of

lecturing. In 1967, the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television concluded that

the role played by instructional television in the classroom had been a small one, and that

nothing approaching the true potential of instructional television had been realized in

practice.

<div align="center">Instructional Technology and Education Reform</div>

Even when "instructional technology" replaced the term "audiovisual technology"

to denote the application of technology for instructional purposes, this did not herald a

change of mindset. This remained true when computers took on the mantle of the

transforming technology. The mindset of "mechanistic enthusiasm" (Kerr, 2004), a

legacy of the industrial era, still prevailed, and the transformative power was perceived to

reside in the technology rather than in the process of communicating and in the way the

technology was used in the classroom. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, various

Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) systems were designed for use in schools, but the

Commission on Instructional Technology (1970) reported that instructional technology

had very little impact on educational practice. Neatly summing it all up, Cuban (1986)

wryly remarked that those who tried to promote the adoption of technological innovations

throughout the 20th century discovered "the durability of classroom pedagogy" (p. 109).

The Information Age is said to have begun in the mid 1970s with the marketing of

the first personal computer. The technology was maturing fast. Soon education was in the

era of third generation integrated circuits and desktop applications. Again, expectations

were high. Papert (1984) saw the computer as "a catalyst of very deep and radical change

in the education system" (p. 422).Yet in 1983, schools in the U.S. were perceived to be failing so badly that an "Open Letter to the American People" was published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Entitled *A Nation at Risk: The imperative for educational reform,* the "letter" alerted Americans to the education crisis in their schools. The response to this was the Effective School Movement, which stressed efficiency, effectiveness, measurability of outcomes, and accountability (Lezotte, 2003). It aimed to deliver learning for all, and endeavoured to do so in the context of the traditional classroom, where the pedagogy was informed by the "factory model" that was still embedded in society's understanding of learning (Kerr, 2004). At the same time, the similar "outcomes-based" approach to education was gaining momentum. This was increasingly influenced by the demands of the global market place, the language of which became the language – and hence the values - of school reform. It led ultimately to the schools-as-business model that became the "solution" of the 1980s (Trend, 2001). By the end of the century, the "marketization and commodification" of education was a distinctive feature of education in the western world. In keeping with the corporate ethos that was by now largely espoused, school leadership was encouraged to become managerial and urged to "reframe the problems of education as exercises in delivering the right outcomes" (Smith, 2002). In this climate, technology was used to support the teacher's role and authority in order to help achieve these outcomes.

This same mindset seems to have informed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 – the Bush Administration's response to the need for school reform which it had made " a centrepiece of its domestic agenda" (Sunderman & Kim, 2007). The boldness of the vision encapsulated in the title of the Act has been described as "epic,"

and its "noble goals" as "unprecedented in American education" (Armor, 2006). This has

translated in many instances, however, at state level into increased emphasis on

stultifying high-stakes standardized testing, demotivation of teachers pressurized by

demands to meet what many see as the unrealistic expectations of the tests, and the

demoralization of those schools publicly identified as failing to make adequate yearly

progress (AYP) towards the perceived unreachable goal of bringing 100% of their

students at least to academic proficiency by the end of the 2013-14 school year. Berliner

(2006) criticizes the "impoverished view of educational reform" that focuses rigidly on

improving classroom practice and learning outcomes and ignores the fact that "school

reform is heavily constrained by factors that are outside of America's classrooms." He

believes the NCLB reform to be "a near perfect case of political spectacle, much more

theatre than substance" (p. 949).

Interestingly, in Britain, the same problem evoked a similar response. The Labour

Government whose stated priority, according to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, speaking

at the Labour Party Conference in 1996, is "Education! Education! Education!" launched

a range of measures such as massive funding for technology and a number of top-down

initiatives to raise standards, particularly in literacy and numeracy. While these latter had

some initial success, Fullan (2004), who evaluated the two initiatives, found that they

soon reached a plateau, due, according to his findings, to a lack of school ownership and

systems thinking. The government also sought to identify "beacon" schools as models of

good practice, and set up alternative, funded "independent" schools (known as "city

academies") outside the control of the school district. It enacted policies aimed at raising

standards and widening the choice for parents through a strict regime of accountability -

testing and publishing a "league table" of results, ostensibly to give "stakeholders" (parents) information on which to base their choice of schools. In reality, this was perceived as a "name and shame" game, to push schools harder to achieve better measurable "outcomes" (examination results). A recent report by the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics (Policy Analysis, February 2006), suggests, however, that while results for the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education examination held at the end of secondary education) in specialist schools - which have extra resources to concentrate on teaching a particular subject area such as arts or languages - have improved faster than those in non-specialist schools, the millions of pounds spent on flagship school policies by the Labour government had so far had little real impact on raising standards. The report also suggested that better test results may be "because teachers get better at teaching what is on the test rather than imparting more 'real' knowledge." With regard to parental choice, the report found "little evidence of a link between choice and achievement." Even more damning evidence of the lack of impact of Labour policies and massive funding is found in the November 2006 report of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) which, after a decade of reform, stated that "one in twelve schools inspected was judged to be inadequate and that in the secondary school sector this proportion rises to around one in eight" (Ofsted, 2006).

The Northern Ireland situation may offer some grounds for hope. Here, massive government funding to provide a managed technology infrastructure for all 1200 schools in the region and training in its operation for all teachers has been accompanied by pilot projects throughout K-12 - including Special Needs schools - to explore the impact of the technology and foster an appropriate paradigm shift in pedagogy. In addition, the policy

makers recognize that the existing curriculum is no longer relevant to students' needs, in that it is "heavily prescriptive and doesn't allow teachers to tailor the scope and pace of learning to their pupils' individual needs" (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 2005). As a result, following a very extensive consultation exercise with all the "stakeholders," a major revision of the school curriculum is currently being introduced on a phased basis. This revised curriculum which will be introduced in September, 2007, will be less prescriptive, and will focus on learning and life skills (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 2005). This would seem to indicate a genuine effort to move away from the mindset of the factory school model.

In general, however, the literature of the past decade makes it clear that, in spite of noble ideals, lavish government funding, the acquisition by schools of an abundance of educational technology, and a plethora of new initiatives and school structures, the move away from the factory school mindset is barely discernible. Steinkuehler (2006) states that "American schools largely remain locked within a Ford type factory model of industry and efficiency." Many schools continue to fail students by maintaining what Hodas (1993) aptly termed their "comfort with stasis," a phrase that is sadly still relevant 14 years on. Stasis, in the classroom context, means teaching that deadens the spirit by doling out learning in an add-on, linear, "assembly-line" manner, and that uses technology simply to reinforce this approach. From this perspective, technology itself is an add-on, not something to be seriously integrated into teaching and learning. Failure to unlearn the linear approach inevitably means, as Bigum and Lankshear (1998) confirm in their report on a two-year study of literacy, technology, and learning in Western Australia, that school practices remain essentially the same, in spite of all the "push" for

technology in the classroom. It is a question of the same substance in "electronic drag."

One of the major concerns of these authors is that teachers, caught in the linear mindset, are unaware of the relevance of complexity theory to meaningful technology integration in the classroom. As a result, they fail to understand how, when a new component – technology - is added to the classroom, it causes existing elements to rearrange around it. This, in turn, means that classroom practices, including changes in roles, work patterns, and use of space, have to reorganize themselves around the new complex situation. Teachers, however, tend to see their classroom as essentially the same, only with some added technology. Pea (1998) argued, in the context of ongoing societal transformation, against schools conducting "business as usual," and simply using the new technologies to make "the learning of the past achieved through greater efficiency" (Introduction, para. 3).

The focus, however, tended in general to be on the improvement of the computer-student ratio in schools. Hopes were again high that this would radically improve learning outcomes. However, Reiser (2001) indicates that although the average computer-student ratio in the U.S. in the mid-1990s was one computer to nine students, the impact of computers on classroom practice was again "minimal," and the use was "far from innovative" with "drill and practice" and teaching computer-related skills being the main use to which the transformative technology was being put (p. 60). Bailey (2003) suggests that U.S. schools were in fact experiencing the "achievement paradox" when more computers did not translate to better outcomes. Kerr (2004) notes the "mechanistic enthusiasm" with which schools embrace such technologies, and sees this as a legacy of the 19th century industrial mindset – that the transformative power resides in the

machine, and that it needs only the right program for the great school machine to function smoothly. Cuban (2006) claims this is still the case today. In his stimulating paper, *1:1 Laptops transforming classrooms: Yeah, sure,* he states that the "uncritical embrace" by many educators of this dream 1:1 ratio is similar to earlier responses to new technologies that promised to transform teaching and learning, but that led to "limited and unimaginative use" in the classroom. Yet we continue to have "implicit faith that technology will make education better and to invest large resources into technology enhanced learning" (Spector, 2000). Spector's belief that "such faith is ill founded" is borne out by the fact that Papert's (1993) scenario of 19th century teachers feeling quite at home in a modern classroom is still largely true. The core function of the institution, reflected in its use, or non-use, of the new educational technology at its disposal, generally remains that of "producing" students equipped with a body of largely inert knowledge, and capable of passing tests and exams which require a memorizing and regurgitation of "19th century knowledge" (Thornburg, 2003). This stultifying use of technology, reflective of the persistence of the old factory school mindset, has led to school being "increasingly seen as irrelevant by many students past the primary grades" (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005).

Prophetic Voices

Ironically, independently of technology advances and government policies and initiatives, pleas for a new approach to learning that would liberate and nourish the spirit had been coming from educators since the early 20th century. Dewey, long an opponent of traditional passive education, holds out a vision of learning that can capture "the substance of truth that nourishes the spirit" (Dewey, 1900/1990, p. 178). Freire in a

discussion with Papert (Papert & Freire, 1980) speaks of his belief in a "pedagogy of curiosity," while Papert describes the child's way of "learning by exploration" as the way creative people recover from the school experience of being taught. Such people become "very much like the baby again… [They] explore: it's driven from the inside." McCombs (2000) speaks of the new understanding of "real life learning" - outside school - as being characterized as "playful, recursive and non-linear, engaging, self-directed, and meaningful from the learner's perspective." She points out the consequences, as reported by students, of the continuing passive, linear learning that they experience inside school. They perceive school as irrelevant; they feel disconnected from their teachers and peers; they just don't want to be in school when they can be learning outside of school - from real life experiences or from technologies such as the Internet. Riel (2000) indicates that this need not be so. She also points out that our understanding of the variety of learning styles and the way the human brain functions has increased throughout the last century and continues to develop, thus helping us better understand how to use the new technologies to transform the learning experience and to break out of the confines of the school's physical territory.

Although learning in the early 20th century was dominated by the behaviourist theories of Skinner and Thorndike, which paved the way for the acceptance of drill and practice use of technology, humanists could see in technology the possibility of creating a learning environment that fosters personal development and learning through collaboration. Throughout the century, many voices were raised in support of this view. Addressing the nature of learning, Dewey (1900/1990) drew up four categories – inquiry, communication, construction, and expression. Vygotsky (1978) formulated the concept of

the Zone of Proximal Development, and drew attention to the importance of play in the

learning process. Papert (1987) prioritized the need to address classroom culture before

seeking to integrate technology, and pointed out that computers serve best when they

allow everything to change (1993). Fullan (2001) called for a total reculturing of schools.

Barab, Hay, and Duffy (2000) focused on a constructivist approach that utilizes current

and emerging technologies to support students in the construction of personally

meaningful and conceptually functional understandings. All speak, implicitly or

explicitly, of the need to use technology to create a learning environment that nourishes

the child's spirit of inquiry and innate enjoyment of the learning process.

      The exhortation of English and Hill (1994), based mainly on Deming's (1982)

"14 Points" for transforming the workplace, was even more radical. It amounted to what

Senge (1990) called for in the business sector - "metanoia," a complete change of

mindset. From the perspective of English and Hill, this involved turning away from the

factory model of school - from a narrowly prescribed body of knowledge to a flexible

curriculum, from teacher as transferor of knowledge to teacher as guide and facilitator of

learning, from competition to collaboration. In short, English and Hill called for the

transforming of schools into "learning places," where the spirit is nourished and where all

children are, therefore, winners. This perspective seems much less radical when

compared to Senge's concept of "learning organizations," to Drucker's (1994) vision of

ever-changing, just-in-time "knowledges," requiring lifelong learning that would take

place, not in traditional schools, but at the point and place of need, to Claxton's (2003)

call to place "learnacy" or "learning to learn for a lifetime of change" at the top of the

school curriculum, to Wagner's (2001) assertion that "the educational problem is

obsolescence, not failure," and to Papert's (2006) similar claim that technology is "obsoleting the model of a learning environment in which teachers-who-know hand out knowledge to students-who-know-not."

At the turn of the millennium, scholars began to look more closely at the relationship between the new and emerging technologies and learning that nurtures and liberates the spirit. Garrison (2006) speaks of the limitations of "perfect closed worlds," where there is no perceived need for change, and where stasis reigns. This could be seen as a metaphor for traditional schooling today, rooted, as it still is, in the factory model. Gustafson (2002) stated that technology's role was to facilitate the "new" view of learning which had a "long and honourable tradition from Dewey onward." Bruce and Levin (1997) drew up a technology taxonomy based on Dewey's four categories. Shaffer (2000) suggested that technology now gives us a chance to revisit and implement Dewey's ideas. Hayden (1999) reported positive findings from her Delphi research into the capability of videoconferencing to support constructivist learning. Riel (2000) sounds a cautionary note about the mindset we bring to technology in education. She asserts that technology itself is not the solution to the complex problems that schools face, and predicts that it is the community of people brought together by the Internet that will cause "fundamental change" over the next decades, rather than simply access to the technology. In similar tones, Spector (2000) states emphatically that "technology is not what learning is about. Learning is about change."

Change is the defining characteristic of our knowledge society. Furthermore, change itself has changed. It is no longer linear, incremental, additive. As Hitt and Ireland (2002) remind us, change, fuelled by technology, is "discontinuous, abrupt, seditious." In

terms of learning, because of the continuously accelerating pace of technology development and its potential implications for the classroom or learning space, "the future is discontinuous with its past" (Ausburn, 2002). The learning environment is already both stretching beyond the boundaries of space and time and shrinking to the size of the palm of the human hand as convergent technologies, including handheld electronic devices, are poised to bring learning to the learner any time, any place.

Ultimately what matters is not what technology will be like in the future, but the mindset that we will bring to it and what we will become through our relationship with it. The main barrier to the long-promised transformation of learning is, as Thornburg (2003) identified, "the human challenge" – getting educators to change their mindset, and abandon their efforts to domesticate and demean technology, by using it solely to implement more effectively and efficiently an essentially factory model style of education.

This is the mindset of those whom John Perry Barlow calls "immigrants" in cyberspace. "They just don't get it," he says in an interview with Tunbridge (1995). This refers not so much to a lack of knowledge about cyberspace, but to a way of *being* in the virtual world that requires a completely different mindset. This has a lot to do with age. "At this stage, if you're over twenty-five, you're an immigrant. If you're under twenty-five, you're closer to being a native, in terms of understanding what it is, and having a real basic sense of it." Barlow believes that immigrants, coming from "the industrial-era model," simply do not get this sense. Networked learning, like the networked economy, turns familiar paradigms and practices "completely on their head." This is particularly relevant to information in terms of "transfer education." In this paradigm, the teacher is

the main repository of knowledge, understood in "industrial-era" terms as a commodity, and therefore valued according to its scarcity. In cyberspace, however, with regard to information, "familiarity has value, not scarcity." Information is not a commodity. According to Barlow, "it's a relationship," and, "as in any relationship, the more going back and forth, the higher-value the relationship." Transfer of linear, add-on knowledge clearly has no place in this knowledge society, where knowledge is constructed through "going back and forth" in a global relationship of collaboration and sharing.

New tension threatens in today's classroom between immigrants and natives. The latter are those whose second home is cyberspace, and who might understandably resent attempts by immigrants to tell them how to live in their own space. Educators, especially in higher education, are beginning to be aware of this tension. In an email call for papers to be published in a special issue of the online journal, *Innovate,* on the implications for teaching and learning of the advent of the "Net generation," the editor, J.L. Morrison (personal communication, February 14, 2006), speaks of the "tsunami of very different people headed for our campuses." He sees the situation as "the ocean having just retreated from the shore, with the mass of the real wave just about to appear."

This is a timely warning. The problem needs to be recognized as acute and immediate. "Natives" will also soon be heading for elementary and secondary school campuses. To ignore the magnitude of the problem now facing us is to allow ourselves to be trapped in comfortable, stultifying stasis, satisfied with taming technology to the narrow limits of our imagination. It is, as Kerr (2004), drawing on McLuhan, states, "to see the future through the rear-view mirror of familiar approaches and ideas from the past." Selinger (2004) refers to these "natives" as heralds of the new era of "homo

zapiens." Recognizing the problem is itself a sign that we are moving toward a "metanoia," resulting in a new understanding of our education problem in the western world. Writing of current reality in New Zealand, Hammonds (2005) reflects that, like their peers in other western countries, New Zealand educators "still genuflect toward the altar of standardization, efficiency and accountability," and that their response to the education crisis is predictably one of "timid improvement - fewer but higher standards, obsession with literacy and numeracy, standardized testing and auditing anything that moves." Significantly he added that a love of learning features nowhere in this response, and that teachers, apart from the creative minority, are "imprisoned" in the structures and ethos of their archaic learning environment. His plea is for a "discourse of possibility" that will seek to transform this environment.

Discourse of Possibility in a Global Learning Environment

We can see signs that this discourse of possibility is beginning to happen. One such sign is the beginning of a rethink of the purpose of education. Smith (2002) sees this purpose as having, at its core, a commitment to "human flourishing in its fullest sense," to a vision of "being" rather than "having." Brighouse (2005) believes that "education should aim at enabling people to lead flourishing lives" (p. 15). Another sign is the emerging new understanding of the concept of the learner, and a blurring of the distinction between the teacher and the learner. "Wanting to learn is a basic human desire" (Papert, 1993, p. 67). Everyone is now able to fulfil that desire. Teacher and students are co-learners; the teacher is the master learner; the student is the novice learner (Bogden, 2002).These roles are reversible, because the new technologies are "learners' technologies." Papert (1993) speaks of children's "love affair" with the computer, and

their sense that the computer is of their generation, whereas earlier instructional media were "teachers' technologies" (Preface, ix). Papert (2006) cites instances of role reversal, where students teach teachers about using technology, and sees in this a "model in which the old teacher/student relationship is replaced by learning together." Students also learn from one another as this technology-facilitated collaborative work becomes the norm. Thornburg (2004) uses the metaphor of the meeting for informal learning at the "watering hole" where everyone is both teacher and learner in turn.

There are other signs of efforts to break out of the prison of the archaic learning environment. Bailey (2003) applauds some charter school experiments in using technology as a transformative tool to "break the traditional educational mold." Illich (1971/1976) described this "mold" as schools teaching the need to be taught, and fostering a dependence on it as an institution. Papert (1993) suggests that "strong feelings of dissatisfaction within society at large" may make it impossible to "save education as we know it by continuing to tinker around at its edges." He advocates replacing the traditional "single way of knowing" by "epistemological pluralism" (p. 6), in particular, by a way of learning using technology as children instinctively do with their computers at home. Here, as they "play" with videogames, they become involved in a process "much more demanding than any homework assignment," and demonstrate "an industriousness and eagerness that school can seldom generate" (p. 3).

Stager (2001) describes "computationally rich alternative-learning environments" based on Papert's theory of constructionism now emerging in various parts of the world. Constructionism, closely allied to the constructivist theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, is based on the dual belief that knowledge must be built inside one's head and also

expressed outside one's head in the form of "something tangible, something shareable" within "a context of use" (Stager, p. 3). The same author describes a particular alternative learning environment for at-risk learners based on the constructionist perspective that people learn best when engaged in a "personally meaningful pursuit, while sensing that their work is valued as part of a larger enterprise" (p. 4). Describing a similar environment for promoting technological fluency in the inner city, Resnick (1998) stresses that computer access alone is not enough. What matters is the new mindset that views the computer as a way of empowering learners to express themselves fluently through technology. Papert (2006) states that today's learners need a level of technological fluency equal to the level of reading fluency we now regard as a basic skill. He also emphasises that technological fluency should be valued "less as something needed for the workplace, than as a language in which powerful ideas can be expressed." This is a strong statement of the need in this technological age to prioritise the needs of the spirit over the material, and to use technology to meet those needs. The alternative learning environments are designed to support this aim (Resnick, 1998). I believe that the field of education would benefit from further research into these environments.

All of this speaks to us of the need to transcend ourselves and transform the learning environment. This message is reinforced by innovative thinkers such as Barlow (in Tunbridge, 1995), who speaks of wandering in cyberspace as changing the feel of what it is to be a human being; Turkle (1984), who claims that "technology changes people's awareness of themselves, of one another, and of their relationship with the world" (p. 13), and Papert (1993), who sees current global crises as a wake-up call "to learn new ways of thinking" (preface, viii), and to use technology as a facilitator of that

vital metanoia. Handy (1998) tells us that "we cannot forget the connectedness of our world." Distance learning makes us keenly aware of our connectedness. Kuriloff (2005) argues that technology-fuelled distance learning, which makes an ally of time and space and facilitates interactive communication and collaboration among learners, may prove to be the optimum learning experience, and break down barriers to learning encountered in the limited and closed world of the traditional classroom. A connected global learning society is already in the process of formation in many parts of the world (Kearns, 2002), making cyberspace the meeting place of minds interactively engaged in the search for meaning through the co-creation of knowledge.

Such co-creation meets a fundamental spiritual need. "We were created to be creators" (O'Donohue, 2003). Papert (1993) yearns for ways of using technology in learning to meet our inborn need to be creators rather than consumers of knowledge. The more we consciously and respectfully use technology creatively to dislodge education from the traditional "schooling" approach based on disciplines "derived from medieval scholarship and constituted within schools developed in the Industrial Revolution" (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005), the more we will interact with one another across the globe and the more our minds will converge, thus allowing us to transcend ourselves. In doing so, we nourish not only our individual spirit but the spirit of mankind.

We may be coming to an awareness that learning, as symbolised by the spiral motif in Irish art, must be kept in "a constant state of evolution." The Zeitgeist of the late 20th and early 21st century is capturing a sense that we are being precipitated along an unparalleled evolutionary path on which "there is no going back" (Friedman, 1998). Visionaries have been coaxing us toward such awareness for much of the 20th century. In

1961, the French priest and palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, spoke of humanity's role in building the "noosphere" - his concept of the living membrane, nourished by human thought and information, with which the earth is enveloping itself. He also foresaw the role that might be played by what we now call the Internet, which he envisaged as a vast organic system, made possible by electronic machines through the emerging science of cybernetics. Barlow (in Tunbridge, 1995) describes cyberspace – both the Internet and the community that frequents it - as "a paradigm that has never been seen before on earth." It is non-hierarchical and evolutionary. He likens it to the capture of fire, in terms of its effect on "the basic look and feel of being a human being." He does not hesitate to state – in terms that resonate with the Teilhardian vision - that "what we are doing is creating the collective organism of mind, the planetary nervous system." Hefner (2003), following Teilhard, claims that "technology belongs to our becoming; it belongs to nature's becoming, and to the becoming of the universe." For him, as for Teilhard, the main issue is not what we are doing with our technology. The first question must always be: "what are we becoming with our technology?" (p. 9).

With the simple technology of the currach, the heroes of the *imrama* tales became wandering learners, seeking to transcend themselves and their world. This might prompt us in education today to ask ourselves the question: With the sophisticated technology increasingly available to us in the 21st century, what is our vision of our becoming and, consequently, of the becoming of our world?

CHAPTER V

AISLING - AN IRISH VISION

Ag Úr-chill a Chreagáin, sea chodail mé aréir faoi bhrón,

Is le héirí na maidne tháinig ainnir fa mo dhéin le phóg.

Bhí gríos-ghrua ghartha aici, is loinnir in a ciabh mar ór,

Is b'i íoch-shláinte an domhain bheith ag amharc ar an ríon óg.

At Creggan Church graveyard, I slept last night under sorrow,

And with the rising of morning a maiden came to me with a kiss;

A maiden of beautiful blushing cheek and hair glowing like gold,

And it was the health of the world to be gazing at the young queen.

Introduction

The lines quoted above are from an 18th century Irish *aisling* (pronounced *ash-ling*). An *aisling* is a vision or waking dream. Similar in concept to the *imram*, it is the name given to a form of poetry in the Irish language written in the late 17th and 18th centuries in which the poet is visited by a beautiful Otherworld woman, a manifestation of his longing for transcendence or for freedom from imprisonment of any kind. In the second stanza of the *aisling* quoted above, the maiden urges the poet to break free from the shackles of sorrow, and to come with her to the "*tír dheas na meala*" (sweet land of honey) – the Otherworld in which sorrow and shackles have no place.

I believe that the western world in this first decade of the 21st century is sleeping "under sorrow," and that this applies particularly to education. In this chapter, I will briefly reflect on that "sorrow," which I interpret as a form of what in Irish mythology is known as the curse of *serglige* (pronounced *sherrig-liggeh*) – a wasting sickness of the spirit that depletes and diminishes the hero, robbing him of his will to flourish in his hour of greatest need. I will then present the remainder of the chapter as an *aisling*, offering what I hope will be a vitality–restoring vision of learning derived from the ancient, yet, for me, ever new, mindset of pagan and early Christian Irish culture.

I will begin my reflection by referring briefly to a poignant testimony, written 80 years ago, to the perceived last days of that life-enhancing culture in Ireland. It comes from the autobiography of an old peasant woman, Peig Sayers, written in the Irish language (Sayers, 1936/1974), and deals with her life lived among the last of her kind on the remote and wild Blasket Islands off the south-west coast of Ireland. Here, until the islands were abandoned in 1953, the Irish language and the ancient Irish ways of thinking and being in the world had survived pure and uncontaminated by the culture of the neighboring conquering island of England or by the encroaching materialism and utilitarianism of the western world. Here, Peig had imbibed the ancient culture which still lingered among the beehive cells and oratories of Sceilg Mhichíl - the remote and barren monastic site dating from the seventh century – and which was still sensed among the shadows of nearby Mount Brandon on the mainland from where St. Brendan is said to have embarked on his wonder voyages. Thus it was that, amid the gruelling struggle for survival in that inhospitable environment, Peig's spirit - and that of the other islanders - had been endlessly nourished by a life filled with meaning and purpose, a life little

shaped by formal learning, but lived in openness to that wisdom which is the highest form of knowledge, and in ever increasing awareness of the seamlessness of the natural and spiritual world. Her autobiography testifies to a way of life that her fellow islander, Tomas O' Crohan (1929/1978) predicted, would never be seen again.

<div align="center">The Sorrow of Serglige</div>

This prediction is sadly proving to be true. Ireland, as elsewhere in the western world, is under the sorrow of *serglige*. In the early years of the 21st century, an Irish mystic and writer, John Moriarty, speaking of the western world in general states that "life in our time is uninspired" (Moriarty, 2005, p. 21). Another Celt, an eminent Welsh architect, Christopher Day, tells us that our western utilitarian culture is starving the spirit (Day, 2006). For all our technological advances, we are in a time warp. Poets try to warn us about what we are doing to our world and ourselves. Wordsworth's depiction in the 19th century of the soulless, disconnected existence of industrial man still rings true to our ears in the frantic pace of this consumer age:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;

Little we see in Nature that is ours.

The literature indicates that this *serglige* is equally evident today in our schools, where, with the exception of a creative minority of educators, we are still functioning under the spirit-starving, utilitarian mindset forged in the industrial age. This has left our students unready for "the great test of life" (Norris, 2006, p. 53), ready only for what Claxton (2003) refers to as "a life of tests" – though, even that "readiness" is highly questionable. The irony in this current age of high-stake standardized testing, publication

of results, obsession with accountability, and lavish funding of education initiatives –
including literacy, numeracy and the computerization of education – is that in the U S.
and the U.K., schools are still failing a large minority of students. Drawing on the
writings of the French philosopher, Pierre Thuillier, Handy (1998) focuses our attention
on a futuristic scenario toward the end of this millennium when the western world has
collapsed, having lost its culture and succumbed totally to utilitarianism and materialism.
As long as their material needs and desires are satisfied, the people readily accept
spiritual poverty and are incapable of "facing fundamental questions concerning the
meaning of human life" (p. 50). This is the ultimate scenario of *serglige*.

I firmly believe that in this first decade of the 21st century, in terms of education
in the western world, we are fast approaching our hour of greatest need. The English
poet, Blake, has said: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear
to man as it is, infinite." In more prosaic terms, I read this as a call to seek a way to cast
off our *serglige*. This resonates with the many calls made in the last decade of the 20th
century for a change of mindset (metanoia). My hope in writing this chapter is that,
having uncovered the perspective of learning in ancient Irish culture, and having seen the
universal relevance of that perspective in confessional writings from Augustine onward, I
may now endeavour to cleanse the doors of perception of the layers of static dust from
rigid mindsets that have accrued over many centuries, and so offer my *aisling* – a
recovered vision of education that might help progress it from *serglige* to *sláinte* (health).

The *Aisling*

My *aisling is* grounded in the ancient Irish mindset formed from both pagan and early Christian influences. My purpose is to help recover a largely forgotten vision of learning as a spiritual quest for transcendence, meaning and purpose, and of a relationship with technology that honors its transformative potential to allow us to break through our largely self-imposed barriers to human becoming. I will present the mindset as revealed in the two main aspects of ancient Irish culture: the pagan and the early Christian. In this context, I will focus on the perception of learning and the relationship with technology, and reflect on the relevance of these perceptions to learning and technology in the 21st century.

Irish Pagan Culture: Myth and Megalith

From pagan Irish culture, we gain a perception of learning as something worthy of the highest esteem for its own sake rather than for any utilitarian purpose**.** Druids, as priests and men of learning, were accorded a place of honor in Celtic society. Myths such as the *Bradán Feasa* (the Salmon of Knowledge) reveal how greatly learning was prized. In this tale, the young Fionn Mac Cumhaill (McCool), future leader of the heroic band of the Fianna, but not of the priestly caste – and therefore representative of Everyman - is given the task of cooking the salmon of knowledge for the chief druid. The latter was to have the first taste of the salmon when it was cooked so that he alone might possess the highest knowledge in the land. When Fionn touched the salmon to see if it was cooked, he burned his thumb, and instinctively sucked it for relief and healing. This gave him the first taste, and he became the wisest and most esteemed man of learning in Ireland. This story is capable of many interpretations. My personal reading of it is that, for the pagan Irish, true knowledge can never be a commodity. It exists only when "eaten" i.e.

internalized and transformed, becoming nourishment for the human spirit. The story also speaks to me of the dawning understanding that learning belongs to every one, not just an elite priestly caste, and that learning at this intimate, internalized level becomes wisdom worthy to be loved for itself as it empowers all people to hear the music which Fionn later described as "the finest music in all the world." This is "the music of what happens," the wondrous music of the spirit animating all life.

A superb example of the ancient Irish understanding of the spirit animating all life - even in the shadow of the grave - is the great megalithic passage tomb at Newgrange, where the precise alignment of the stones (the only technology used) in the long narrow passage-way still catches the first rays of the sun in the shortest and darkest day of the year - the winter solstice, and still raises man's heart 5000 years later. Newgrange provides a striking metaphor of the spirit's insatiable hunger for life, as well as evidence of man's ability to use technology to think creatively in order to address that need. The same understanding can also be discerned in the artistic endeavors of Bronze Age craftsmen to express the spirit's need for transcendence through beauty, by using the technology of bronze and metal to transform utilitarian everyday ware into the glorious creations that still have power to uplift our spirits. This same need of the spirit for beauty inspired the monastic scribes to use the technology of writing, not only to preserve ancient lore, but also to embellish their manuscripts by pushing that technology to the limits of its artistic possibility.

Imrama

The *imrama* tales of pagan and early Christian Ireland provide us with another peculiarly Irish perception of learning, that of learning by wandering. They also offer us an illuminating way of thinking about the role technology can play in that learning. From the perspective of the ancient Irish mindset, we begin to see that learning by wandering is a response to the human spirit's hunger for transcendence, to its impatience with the confines of the single perspective, and to its innate sense of wonder at the vastness and interconnectedness of creation. The "wandering" element in this type of learning is not confined to physical wandering. The significance of the concept lies in the mindset with which such learning is undertaken. This mindset refuses to bow to the tyranny of the single perspective. It actively seeks out other ways of seeing and knowing. Its pursuit of these ways is always non-linear. It is ever open to the totally other, to the unexpected. It is ever willing to travel tangentially or to explore more deeply in response to the spirit's needs. It delights in sharing with and learning from others. This understanding of learning was also shaped by the ancient intuition of an Otherworld beyond the western seas, in another domain from the world we experience empirically, yet seamless with our world and accessible from it. In the ancient Irish tradition, accessing this Otherworld was perceived as essential for expanding the creative imagination and liberating the spirit.

This was what drove the hero-wanderers of the *imrama* tales to build the currach – the small, simple, wood-framed, skin-covered vessel that was the only technology available to them - to help them undertake the challenging voyage into the unknown. From the *imrama* tales, we can glean a perception of technology that is hugely relevant to our time. In our utilitarian age, we tend to use technology in education soullessly, starving the aesthetic, the creative, the spiritual aspects of our being, caring only that

technology should enable the traditional production and consumption of learning to be effected more speedily and more efficiently. The *imrama* show us a different way. Because their focus was spiritual – the quest for transcendence - the hero-wanderers used technology in a way that nourished their spirit. They honored what they saw as the transformative potential of their basic technology – the little currach. Their focus was not so much on what the currach could do - i.e. simply sail the seas - but on how it could help them change their way of thinking and being in the world To this end, they adopted an attitude of trust in their technology. This allowed the technology to become the means of firing their imagination, of opening up untold new perspectives. They used it to its fullest potential to help them burst through all barriers, limitations, confines, to seek out other-worlds, pushing beyond the limitations of where they had ever been before, not knowing their destination, not knowing the route, taking enormous risks, unafraid of failure, moving in a non-linear, tangential way, rather than in a fast-track linear way to reach utilitarian aims.

The *imrama* tales are also replete with depictions of exotic adventures and fantastic creatures encountered in the course of their often chaotic, and always non-linear, voyages in their currach. However, underlying all the chaos of the *imrama,* can be glimpsed an order born of the steadfastness of the hero-wanderers' commitment to their initial aim of learning by wandering to nourish the spirit. There is also a strong suggestion of a spirit of serious playfulness in the attitude of the wanderers to their experiences - a sheer relish of the whole unpredictable, "messy," but spirit-nourishing process of technology-facilitated learning by wandering. In my *aisling,* this experience of technology-enabled learning as serious fun does much to re-engage dispirited learners. It

helps heal them of the *serglige* caused by constant exposure in many of today's schools to using technology to facilitate the linear acquisition of a prescribed body of "assessable" knowledge.

An interesting feature of the *imrama*, which again could cause us to call into question our still prevalent notion of learning as framed by a closed syllabus implemented behind closed classroom doors, is that of the open-endedness of learning by wandering. As artistically expressed in the ornamental spirals "in endless evolution" on the stones at the entrance to the megalithic passage tombs, this wandering never actually ends – not even when the wanderers reach the Otherworld. The crews of both Bran and Mael Dúin became afflicted with that *míshuaimhneas síoraí* (eternal restlessness) that characterized the ancient Irish but is also typical of the human spirit, and insist on undertaking the perilous voyage home. Significantly, when they do arrive home, they are under *géis* – a taboo against returning to old ways of thinking and being. Another version of this restlessness has very modern overtones. In the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, we learn that St. Mernoc habitually commutes between the Otherworld and the physical world. This would obviously prevent his breaking the *géis* against returning to old, lesser ways.

For us in the 21st century, the Otherworld has a new name. It is called cyberspace. Cyberspace is a world that resonates in many ways with the mythical Otherworld of Irish mythology. Like that world, it is not an after-life destination. It is "out there" beyond the physical world, but accessible through technology from it. Cyberspace is the virtual space created by the technology-enabled interconnecting of human thoughts - regardless of the geographical locations of the thinkers. It has no boundaries and is "in a constant state of

evolution." Its significance, in terms of nourishing the human spirit, lies not in the content it presents to those who navigate its virtual seas, but in its affordance to the navigator of ever greater opportunities for learning by wandering through opening up seemingly limitless possibilities of encountering the unknown, the unexpected. The *imrama* tales of such endless wandering speak to us of the need to allow technology to keep us seeking the yet unknown in our pursuit of learning, to liberate us from stasis wherever we encounter it, to understand the seamlessness of the virtual and physical world, and to allow our sojourns in the one to enrich our appreciation and experience of the other. In other words, we too need to remember that, with the limitless world of cyberspace now open to us and the increasingly abundant sophisticated educational technology now available to us, we too are under *géis* not to return to old restrictive and spirit-stultifying ways of thinking about education.

The Early Christian Era: Irish Monastic Schools

A unique feature of the coming of Christianity to Ireland in the fifth century was the almost immediate establishment across the whole country of great monastic institutions. A remarkable element of many of these institutions was the monastic school. By the sixth century, these schools were regarded as the best in Europe. The scholar-monks, who taught, studied and copied precious manuscripts in the monastic schools were heirs to an understanding of learning as a spiritual quest, to the concept of "wandering" inherent in that quest, and to a great legacy of love of learning dating back to pre-Christian times.

The introduction of Christianity into Ireland was effected in a way that was sensitive to the local culture. The monks, therefore, could passionately embrace the new

religion, without forsaking the treasures of their ancient native heritage. Thus it was that

from the *imrama* tales they understood learning by wandering as being born of our

spirit's hunger for transcendence, purpose and meaning, and of the irresistible urge to use

available technology to nourish the spirit through learning by wandering beyond the

confines of the familiar.

All of this informed the culture of their schools. This culture was one of an

energizing love, expressed as a great triad - love of God, love of learning, and love of

wandering, with each love flowing seamlessly into and enriching the others. The

seamlessness of this triad of love was unique in the western world at that time, and

students from all over Europe flocked to Irish monastic schools. When love of wandering

impelled many scholar-monks to establish schools all across Europe, the culture of love

of learning was equally irresistible to students of other countries, and its contribution to

the renaissance of learning on the continent in the Middle Ages is a fact of history. This

demonstrated that the Irish monastic model struck a universal chord.

I suggest that a reculturing of our 21st century schools on the model of the Irish

monastic school culture of the triad of loves might help pave the way for a much-needed

renaissance of learning in the western world. From this perspective, love is an energy that

exerts a "future pull" toward continuing change, welcomed as necessary for the lifelong

quest for nourishment for the human spirit. This future pull of love seems to me to be

exactly what we need today to dislodge the factory school mindset and its comfort with

stultifying stasis. Deprived of the oxygen of a culture of love of learning, many students

experience only *serglige*. In the U.K. and Ireland we describe such students as

"disaffected" – "out of love with" formal learning. Given that students were attracted in

great numbers to the learning offered in the medieval Irish monastic schools, we have reason to hope that the proposed reculturing along the same lines could go some way at least toward re-engaging such students with the learning process.

<div align="center">Anam–Chara: Transforming Learning Relationships</div>

Fostering a culture of love not only creates a learning environment hospitable to the learner's spiritual needs**,** it also leads to a transformation of relationships in the learning place. That place can be virtual as well as physical, because technology enables the transformative culture of love to transcend the boundaries of distance and time. From this cultural perspective, teachers and learners view learning as a spiritual quest for transcendence on which they are all embarked and in which they all care for one another. What is crucial here is not the technology itself, but the attitude and spirit which informs its use and application. The technology can be a powerful transformative force, but only if it is used in the context of love of learning as a spiritual quest. *Spiritus (non technologia) est qui vivificat* – it is the spirit, not the technology, that gives life.

The Irish concept of the *anam-chara* – the soul-friend – comes powerfully into play here. The *anam-chara* is one who is on the same spiritual journey as you, though possibly further along the way. The *anam-chara* empathizes with you, and cares for your spiritual well-being as much as for his/her own. In the context of education, it is no longer a question of whether the learning experience is teacher-centered or learner-centered, but whether it is spirit-centered and therefore love-centered. This reveals itself in a loving engagement by all learners with all the means – teachers, peers, text, and technologies - by which learning is mediated. The *anam-chara* approach resonates in some ways with the valuable insights of Moore (1989) in relation to transactional

distance in learning. Referring specifically to distance education - though his theory is equally applicable to traditional face-to-face learning - Moore describes transactional distance as psychological, and proposes three types of interactivity to mitigate it: interactivity between teacher and students, between students and students, and between students and the text or learning material. The *anam-chara* approach that I am proposing would add a fourth type of interactivity – between the learner and the technology. More importantly, it would be firmly grounded in the central spiritual dimension of learning, and would emphasize relationships of love rather than types of interactivity.

This is particularly true of the relationship between the teacher and the student. The teacher becomes the *anam-chara* of the student. For the teacher this means that the primary factor in the whole learning experience is the spirit of the student. The noble role attributed to the teacher in this ancient-yet-new learning environment is to honor that spirit, to befriend it. This means adopting what I would term an "incarnational pedagogy" that seeks to nourish the spirit's dynamic incarnating in each learner. This pedagogy fosters the sense of wonder innate in every learner, and, above all, nurtures that intimate and enduring relationship of love between the learner and learning that is captured in the Irish word for student**,** *mac léinn* – a child of learning. The concept of the teacher as *anam-chara* is, therefore, richer, more challenging and more complex than the "new" understanding of the teacher's role as that of coach, guide or facilitator of learning. While it subsumes these other important roles, its focus is primarily on the student's spirit. Everything else follows naturally from that.

The *anam-chara* concept includes the befriending by students of the spirit of the teacher, who is also perceived as being on a learning and spiritual journey. In today's

classroom, the befriending can take the form of students acting as agents of change.

Teachers, whose first serious experience of technology is likely to have come in

adulthood, tend to engage with it less enthusiastically than young people. The latter have

grown up with technology, are characterized by their "love affair" with technology

(Papert, 1993), and have seamlessly integrated it into their lives outside school. They can

transform their teachers' engagement with technology by modelling that same

relationship of love in the formal learning environment**.** In this context the technology

itself can be perceived as an *anam-chara* that can foster a love of learning and be

experienced as spirit-nourishing. This could offer one possible way, in the context of a

culture of love, of seamlessly integrating technology into the learning process.

The loving engagement with learning fostered by the *anam–chara* ethos

transforms two other important sets of relationships in the learning place – that of

students to one another, and the relationship of the students to the texts or other learning

resources. Students come to see themselves as the *anam-chara* of one another, realizing

that the learning and spiritual advancement of each benefits all. Equally, any regression

in these spheres diminishes everyone, since all share the same human spirit. Students also

engage lovingly with their learning materials. The model is the often serious playfulness

of the monastic scholar personalizing or internalizing through his glosses the learning he

is deriving from the sacred or secular texts, and sharing with the reader his delight in his

work, his own interpretations and reactions, his non-linear wandering in pursuit of

tangential ideas, and, of course, his own compositions often born of creative distractions.

To the modern scholar, fired by the same spirit of loving engagement and serious

playfulness, hypertext, hypermedia, and the World Wide Web in general offer

opportunities for pursuing words and ideas beyond the confines of the text that the author of Pangur Bán could never have dreamed of.

Through transforming the full range of relationships in the classroom, the *anam-chara* ethos helps build a caring community of learners in the classroom. It also transforms collaborating schools into a network of caring, learning communities, sharing a common ethos of love of learning and mutual loving support. The outcome of such situations is not just "win-win." It is actually "win-win-win." Collaborating learners – individual and institutional – obviously win, but humanity is the greatest winner. This outcome is the result of what the confessional writers called the "typicality" of each individual questing experience, which is what drove them to share their inner wanderings for the benefit of other human beings. "Typicality" is also what motivated Irish monastic schools to offer learning and the necessary hospitality as a free gift to students from other cultures. They saw this atmosphere of love and openness as a necessary part of nourishing the human spirit in which they and their students shared. Evidence of the effectiveness and success of this spirit-centered and love-centered approach was that, not only in Ireland but throughout Europe, these monastic schools swiftly became highly esteemed centers of spiritual and intellectual nourishment, the one enriching and complementing the other. This prompts me to add a fifth line to a four-line "hospitality" rune common even to the present day in the Gaelic culture of both Ireland and Scotland:

A stranger came the other day.

I put meat for him in the eating place,

Wine for him in the drinking place,

Music for him in the listening place,

And love for him in the learning place.

A Curriculum for Wandering Learners

The love of learning by wandering that was second nature to the Irish has implications for the "what" of learning in today's classrooms and other learning places. Flowing out of, and into, the other two loves – love of God (and therefore focused on the primacy of the spirit) and love of learning, this love of wandering challenges us to conceive of a curriculum that prioritizes the dynamic quest for learning over the passive transfer of knowledge. Such a curriculum would promote a culture of learning by wandering in search of other perspectives and richer learning experiences in "otherworlds" that expand the mind and liberate the imagination. Learning by wandering is uncharted, in the *imrama* sense of following no precisely mapped course or route. It eschews the linear approach to learning, seeing it rather as curvilinear and unpredictable and always enticing the learner to wander further. The metaphor for this is pagan and early Christian Irish art. Here, the impulse to escape the closed form is dramatically expressed in the megalithic era spirals "in a constant state of evolution." It is also gloriously revealed in the illuminated manuscripts where initial letters seem to be escaping from their traditional fixed outline, and wandering through a range of shifting anthropomorphic and zoomorphic embellishments, as the liberated imagination of the artist-scribe seeks to convey the wondrously exotic and exhilarating beauty hidden in the essence of the letter. Indeed, it is that very seeking that gives purpose to the wandering. Learning by wandering is uncharted, but never aimless. Its aim is to embark on a spiritual quest for transcendence, for nourishment of the ever-hungry human spirit.

The curriculum, therefore, must not be limited to closed, easily "assessable" forms of knowledge. Focused on the needs of the human spirit, the curriculum must place before learners opportunities for learning by wandering mediated through a culture of love. This is exactly what happened in the Irish monastic schools which produced the greatest scholars in early medieval Europe. Their curriculum wandered beyond the confines of the traditional sacred learning practised in European monasteries. The continental curriculum had little place for pagan classical learning in particular or for things of the mind in general, electing to focus almost exclusively on things of the spirit. In Irish monastic schools, however, scholars saw no dichotomy between sacred and secular learning. They perceived both as nourishment for the spirit, and in their scriptoria they lovingly used the new technology of writing, introduced alongside Christianity, to preserve their native pagan lore and precious classical texts, and they drew on their inheritance of pre-Christian art to lovingly embellish their copying of sacred texts. The advent of Christianity also opened to them the "otherworlds" of Greek and Roman cultures, and so they wandered freely and with love into and through these realms, internalizing their new learning. In so doing, they attained a level of scholarship that was renowned throughout Europe, and was the glory of the monastic schools founded by them in their wanderings across the continent.

At the opposite extreme to the glorious period of Irish learning in the Middle Ages was the wretched, yet noble, phenomenon of the 18th century Irish hedge school. At this time, under the Penal Laws, Catholic education was effectively prohibited and Catholic teachers were forbidden to teach in public schools. The quest for learning continued, however, and led to the setting up of "hedge schools," so called because they

consisted of a handful of ragged students taught - often behind hedges to keep out of sight of English "redcoat" soldiers - by a wandering teacher whose meagre salary was paid by poverty stricken parents. The respect for education was so great that, as in the ancient Irish culture, the hedge school teacher was held in high esteem in the community. The language and culture of these makeshift schools was Irish, the remnants of a way of thinking and being that stretched back into prehistory and that had flourished in the monastic schools. Although there were obviously great differences in the levels of learning experienced in the various hedge schools throughout the country, at their best, they were places in which much good learning took place in a culture of love of learning, and many of Ireland's writers of the time were hedge school "alumni" (McManus, 2004). As was the case in the early monasteries, these schools offered a broad curriculum that included both native and classical learning (McManus), with students wandering easily and with love between the two, finding nourishment for their spirits despite the abysmal state of physical and material wretchedness to which the Irish peasantry were now reduced. This is evidenced by the comments of 19th century English historians about the quest for Latin learning by the ragged poor in Ireland, and by the statement made by Robert Peel, then British Home Secretary, in the House of Commons in 1826 about the unsuitability of hedge school education for the Catholic Irish. His objection was that this education led to a situation where "young peasants of Kerry run about in rags with a Cicero or a Virgil under their arms" (McManus, p. 126). Brian Friel's great play, *Translations*, set in a hedge school in Donegal in the 19th century, portrays vividly the native hunger for learning and the love of "wandering" through lands of classical antiquity. The schoolmaster explains to a young English soldier that the Irish are a

spiritual people, and make up in their richness of culture and classical learning for the poverty of their material lives. He asserts that Irish culture and the classical tongues make a happy conjugation, a claim that appears to be borne out by the ready responses given by his students in the appropriate language to questions he puts to them in either Irish or Latin.

The acceptance by the Catholic Church of the new public National Schools, set up by the English government in the 1820s to provide free formal elementary education in the English language to all, heralded the demise of the hedge schools and the gradual erosion of the status of the Irish language and the culture of love of learning as a spiritual quest that it enshrined. It was replaced by a utilitarian mindset that – understandably in the harsh historical context of the time – increasingly equated the native language and culture with poverty and inferiority, and looked to English as the language that held out the promise of a better future.

A Technology Perspective for Wandering Learners

In terms of resources to mediate learning, the increasingly highly technologized 21st century learning places in the western world are as far removed from the early medieval monastic school and from the 18th century Irish hedge school as one could possibly imagine. They are even further removed from them in terms of the perception of learning and attitude to learning technology. Our modern perception is still rooted in the 19th century utilitarian factory model when the only technologies were the teacher and the text. From this perspective, the new and emerging technologies are seen as simply means of doing more effectively what schools have been doing, through teacher and text technologies, for the past two centuries – namely "banking education."

The great monastic schools and, at their best, the small, precarious, resource-deprived hedge schools, approached these same technologies from the perspective of the "*imrama* mindset," and used them to awaken in their students a love of learning for its own sake, and, in particular, a love of learning by wandering to and from "otherworlds" that nourished their souls by exposing them to other perspectives. I see this as having major relevance to the "no significant difference" paradox in our schools today, as these institutions find little return in terms of assessable learning on the heavy investment in technology for the classroom. This outcome persuades me anew that the core problem in schools is not the technology. It is the unchanged utilitarian factory model mindset. Papert (2006) speaks of a culture of timidity inherent in education, which everyone working in the field today inherits, and which deprives us of "participation in the evolution of the future." I am convinced that only a new – or, as I am proposing - an uncovered/recovered ancient way of thinking about learning will resolve that problem. It would allow available new and emerging technologies to change our way of seeing our world and ourselves by taking us into the most fantastic virtual worlds, and opening to us hitherto undreamed of opportunities for learning by wandering through cyberspace.

Our challenge is clear. It is to realize that the transformative power does not reside in the technology itself, but in the mindset with which we approach it. Sadly, however, from the lethargy of our *serglige*, we tend to look at technology and ask merely what it can do to help us do better what we are already doing. The *imrama* tell of a dynamic mindset that looked on learning as a spiritual quest and asked how technology could help learners be other than they were. With the focus of this mindset firmly set on nourishing the spirit in a culture of love of learning by wandering that eschews closure or

stasis in any form, available technology, whether primitive or sophisticated, can be seamlessly integrated into the learning experience, and can help change the way learners think about the world and their place and purpose in it.

All this leads me to respect the ancient notion of the *géis*, the taboo that, under penalty of continuing diminishment or *serglige,* prohibits our going back to the "banking model" of education. In today's highly technologized learning environment, this translates into a paradigm shift from the factory school utilitarian approach to education and to technology, to the perspective of the recovered ancient Irish mindset. The first priority in the new scenario would be to boldly reclaim spirituality as the cornerstone of our education philosophy and to foster a love of learning as a spiritual quest that necessitates wandering beyond the confines of the familiar. The second priority would follow naturally from this. It would be to honor the transformative potential of technology – as in ancient Irish culture – and to use technology to facilitate this quest, to allow us to be other than we have been.

We do not know how fast and how far technology will develop in the future. All we know is that it is going to be beyond anything we can even imagine now, so we must be prepared to open our minds to new ways of thinking and being. Even the transformation wrought in these domains in the past 10 years can only give us an inkling of what lies ahead and of the challenges education will face. It has made primary sources of knowledge available to everyone who has Internet access. It has enabled us to have access to experts, mentors, anywhere in the world in real or virtual time. It has allowed us to collaborate audio-visually with people in every corner of the globe. It has made our planet a place of interconnectedness. It has empowered us to create our own Otherworld,

the world of cyberspace, where we can learn, work, play - and to do so in new ways with new names such as blogging, podcasting, vodcasting - with virtual friends and colleagues and interconnected global communities of learners within that Otherworld. It has enabled us to hypernavigate the seas of cyberspace, learning - *imrama* fashion - by wandering in a complex non-linear world, "dropping the oars" of linear thinking, and travelling tangentially for richer, more soul-nourishing, learning experiences. It has introduced young learners through micro-worlds and video games to "hard fun" learning (Papert, 1996, p. 6).

This idea of learning through "playing" with the computer is exciting many current thinkers in the field of education. Gee (2003) claims that "games, not school are teaching kids to think." Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, and Gee (2005) argue that to understand the future of learning, we have to look beyond schools to the emerging arena of video games. Steinkuehler (2006) claims that MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) enable young people to enter a range of virtual worlds – a process I see as akin to the exhilarating *imrama* adventures of the learner-wanderers in the otherworlds of Irish mythology. Steinkuehler calls these otherworlds "third places," where the modern counterparts of these heroes of old are engaged "in rich intellectual practices," while building social capital, and hanging out where "everybody knows your (screen) name" (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Hartley (2007) points out that such social and learning activities can now be experienced "wherever one wants" as enabling mobile technologies - such as palmtops or personal digital assistants (PDAs)) - are becoming commonplace. Small wonder then that schools as learning places are being seen as irrelevant by many young people, with even those who do excel there valuing school simply for

"credentialing" (Steinkuehler, 2006). The challenge now facing schools seeking to re-engage disaffected students is to use technology to help the institutions themselves be other than they have been, and to respect the *geis* that prohibits their returning to old ways. The "real world" is becoming ever-more radically transformed through technology. This challenge is, therefore, urgent, and will be ongoing.

We can hardly even dare to speculate what technology will have made possible in the next 10 years. All we know is it will be faster, more sophisticated, less expensive, more easily accessible, in general use in everyday life, and that it will go on changing and developing in ways that are beyond our wildest imaginings. What will not change is the need to approach technology in education with a mindset that prioritizes the needs of the human spirit, that promotes a culture of love of learning as a spiritual quest, and that honors the transformative potential of technology as a means of nourishing the ever hungry human spirit.

Toward a Conclusion

I would anticipate strong resistance to this type of reculturing from those educators and policy makers who favour the utilitarian approach to education. At best, they would see it as a luxury that schools in the pressurized and competitive modern world cannot afford. At worst, they could find it an actual impediment to the quite proper aim of preparing students for today's challenging and constantly changing market place. I would argue that far from being an optional luxury, this reculturing, with its ethos of love of learning and its focus on nourishing the human spirit, is essential to human flourishing in all spheres of life. I would also argue that there are no grounds for the fears explicit in their worse case scenario. The paradigm shift to a spirit-centered education in a context of love of learning

does not preclude "success" either in examinations or in the work place. As the Irish monks saw, there is no dichotomy between the culture of the mind and culture of the spirit. Speaking of the built environment, Day (2006) says that beauty and utility, which were traditionally inseparable, are now usually disconnected, leading to a focus on utility that starves the soul. He argues for buildings that are beautiful and functional at all levels from the materially practical to the spirit-nourishing. I believe this is equally relevant to the learning environment. Indeed, the proposed reculturing would actively foster all the attributes and skills necessary for learners to take responsibility for their own learning – and to love the process – as well as to contribute meaningfully, willingly, and caringly to the upbuilding of the community of learners that technology-driven change makes necessary in the modern workplace and in other living, learning and working spaces. Schools that have truly recultured themselves as spirit-centered learning places would use technology to honor and build on the learning that takes place outside school, and to co-operate seamlessly with all informal learning environments in the local community – including, of course, the home, and, increasingly, cyberspace.

Given the accelerating pace of technology-driven change in our 21st century world, we need now, more than at any time in the past, to refuse to acquiesce in the dominance of a single perspective in education, particularly one that, as in the western world, takes an almost exclusively utilitarian view of learning, and seeks to use technology to perpetuate stasis. Failure to recognize this need will bring its own punishment in the form of the impoverishment of learning and of learners. I would see an urgent need, therefore, for theoretical research from different cultural perspectives into the nature of learning and the role of technology in the learning process. We need to

treasure the wisdom that resides in other cultures; otherwise we risk allowing utilitarianism and the dark side of globalization (Smith, 2002; Trend, 2001) to defeat ancient and noble ways of seeing, knowing, loving, and *growing* the world - and ourselves.

I would hope that my reconnecting with my own ancient culture helps make this point. In doing this, I have moved toward a conclusion, but I am aware that I can never come to a final destination. I have come by an open-ended, curvilinear path to a place of paradox. I recognize that our vision for the future of education should be grounded in the reconfigured wisdom of our cultural past. I know that this process of reconnecting, reconfiguring and re-envisioning must remain, like the spiral design in Celtic art, "in a constant state of evolution" if it is to meet the challenge of that ongoing change which is our only constant.

From the perspective of Irish culture, I have become keenly aware of the need for our current – and future - thinking about education to be informed by the triad of loves that served our scholarly ancestors so well: love of God, love of learning, and love of wandering. I offer, therefore, as a mnemonic the following acrostic formed from, and summarising, the main aspects of my new-yet-ancient *aisling* or vision.

Ancient Irish mindset; *Anam-chara.* The ancient Irish mindset offers a vision of learning as a spiritual quest for transcendence, meaning and purpose to be undertaken with love, and honors technology's role in that quest. *Anam-chara*: the soul- friend. This concept, based on an understanding of the primacy of the spirit in education, has the potential to transform all relationships and learning experiences in the 21st century classroom.

Irish monastic schools. Animated by a triad of love experienced as a boundless and restless energy, seeing all learning as seamless and spirit-nourishing, and using an "incarnational pedagogy," these schools had universal appeal and attracted students from all over Europe. They are offered as a model for reculturing that could help transform today's educational institutions into environments hospitable to learning and, therefore, to learners.

Spirituality; **S**ense of wonder; **S**eamlessness. Spirituality is central to the world view in the ancient Irish mindset. It is offered as the cornerstone of the proposed reculturing and revitalization of learning in the 21st century - an antidote to the utilitarianism and fragmentation of modern education. *Spiritus est qui vivificat*; it is the spirit that animates the learning process, brings learning to life, urges learners ever onward on in the quest for meaning, purpose, transcendence. The spirit is manifest in man's innate sense of wonder, his intimation of otherworlds and of the seamlessness of all worlds. This holistic, spirit-centered vision of learning can help heal the sorrow of *serglige*.

Love of God, love of learning, love of wandering. The culture of love in early Irish monastic schools attracted and developed the finest scholars in medieval Europe and helped bring about a renaissance of learning throughout the continent. This "template" is offered in the hope of inspiring a "reculturing" in similar vein – and with similar outcomes - of educational institutions in modern western society.

Imram; Interconnectedness; **I**ncarnational pedagogy. The *imram* tales offer a metaphor for learning by wandering using available technology that has much to say to 21st century educators. Essentially a spiritual quest – pursued through inward as well as outward wandering - the *imram* tells of a restless search for transcendence that resonates with the

great confessional literature. It speaks of the need for liberation of the spirit from the tyranny of the single perspective which deprives us of the vision of the wondrous interconnectedness of creation and of our place and purpose in it as beings incarnating the human spirit.

New technologies. These offer the 21st century learner means of learning by wandering beyond the wildest imaginings of the heroes of the *imrama* and the monastic scholars. As the phenomenon of change inevitably accelerates at a mind-dazzling pace in this new century, the relentless emergence of new technologies will be a constant in our everyday lives, including in the field of education. What will be important will be to bring the ancient Irish mindset to bear on these technologies, so that, in the context of a culture of the triad of love, they may play their noble role in nourishing the human spirit.

God; **G**eis. **G**od is the Love that vivifies and unifies, the ultimate *anam-chara* in whom the spirit delights, and for whom the spirit endlessly yearns. This yearning exerts the "future pull" that resists stagnation and welcomes change as essential for that dynamic growth that seeks to close the gap between the human and the divine. **G**eis is the command to retain the new vision derived from the ancient Irish mindset, and not to return to the drab and soul-starving confines of the single utilitarian perspective.

Together the initial letters form the word *Aisling* – the Irish word meaning "dream" or "vision." My dream is that by making present the ancient Irish mindset of spirit-centered, and therefore love-centered, learning, I may contribute to providing a vision for 21st century educators that will help inform their thinking about learning and technology's role in the learning process.

Looking at the field of education today from the perspective of the ancient Irish mindset impels us to take seriously the challenge of boldly reclaiming the primacy of the spirit as the cornerstone of our learning culture. It urges us to ground that culture in love, and to honor the role of technology as an *anam-chara* that supports us in our lifelong vocation or calling, that of nourishing our common human spirit.

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Appendix

My Personal *Imram*: Videoconferencing

My Personal *Imram*: Videoconferencing

Introduction

In this Appendix, I demonstrate how, inspired by the ancient Irish vision of learning, I used the technology of videoconferencing to help transform the learning experience of K-12 students in traditional classroom settings in my school district in Northern Ireland.

My Irish Celtic heritage - pagan as well as Christian – gave me from my earliest days a strong sense of the Otherworld as a place to which we are endlessly drawn in our insatiable spiritual hunger for knowledge, and meaning, and purpose. My heritage also inculcated in me a reverence for learning as the spirit-fuelled means to that end, and awareness that learning has no destination, that it ever beckons us to wander further, even as it tantalizingly recedes from our sight. I understood that our *geis,* our solemn injunction, is not to yield to the lure of comfortable mediocrity, but to keep wandering in search of that elusive Otherworld. The punishment for infringement of the *geis* would be diminishment, something akin to what T.S. Elliott in *Murder in the Cathedral* calls "partly living," or as the Nigerian writer**,** Ben Okri (1997, p. 52) describes it, "living without asking questions, living in the cave of your own prejudices." With varying degrees of intensity, I have felt myself under that *geis* throughout my life. I experienced it at its strongest when, after over 20 years as a teacher of modern languages, I took up the post of International Officer with the local education authority (the equivalent of a school district in the U S. system), and assumed responsibility for helping to extend and enrich the learning experiences of the students and teachers in the schools in my district.

My initial brief in my new post was to promote the European dimension in education. My first priority was to connect our schools with schools from different parts of Europe, so that they could explore together their common heritage, while being enriched by their diversity. Under certain conditions, the European Union (E.U.) funded face-to-face preparatory meetings anywhere within its boundaries for teachers from networks of schools involved in collaborative work. This was extremely helpful, but I knew more was needed. There was no funding to allow K-12 students to learn by travelling to meet and work with their peers in other countries. I turned to the technology then available. This was in the mid 1990s. We were still using snail mail for international contacts. Some rural schools did not even have a fax machine. Technology, in the form of computers, was just beginning to make inroads into our classrooms. The networking of computers was established as a priority. Videoconferencing as an educational technology was not in the collective psyche. I had stumbled across its use at a European Education conference. I was intrigued.

This emerging technology allowed real-time, interactive visual and verbal communication between people anywhere in the world. This seemed to offer a time- and cost-effective way to break down the barriers of distance and cultures, to bring people together so that they could see and speak to one another, experience their common humanity, be enriched by their diversity. I felt an urge to know more. In *imram* terms, that was my invitation to procure my own cyber-currach and embark with like-minded learners on a voyage into the unknown, to gain an experience of learning by virtual wandering across Europe. In retrospect, I realize that the blood of my Irish pagan sea-

faring learner-wanderers and my Christian wandering scholars, whom I had loved since

my youth, was stirring in my veins.

<p align="center">Ireland</p>

I began my *imram* somewhat cautiously. The cyber-currach came in the form of a

very small, very basic, and now obsolete videoconferencing system, the cheapest then

available. Having persuaded my school district to purchase two systems, one for our

technology center, and one to offer on loan to schools that would participate in pilot

projects, I launched my cyber-currach on the relatively safe waters close to home.

Instinctively, I had been thinking initially in terms of connecting people and knowledge

on our own divided and fragmented island. I thought of isolated small rural schools, who

inevitably offered a more limited curriculum than larger urban schools. I thought of our

polarised community in Northern Ireland, where the religious and political divide is still

largely reflected in the education system. I thought of the divide between schools in

Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, which, at that time, worked in well-nigh

complete isolation from each other. I thought of the need to bridge those gaps. I thought

of the knowledge and wisdom distributed out there in these disparate institutions, and felt

a strong urge to explore whether the relatively unknown and untried technology of

videoconferencing could help connect the people and motivate them to share that

knowledge for their mutual benefit, by setting up little networks of learning communities.

Recently, I felt a thrill of recognition when I learned how very similar concepts are

embedded in the theory of connectivism or "network learning" (Siemens, 2005). Back in

the mid 1990s in Northern Ireland, I did not have the comfort of a supporting learning

theory. We were still very firmly entrenched in what Freire (1968/1993) called "banking

education" - the passive transmission approach to learning, where a prescribed body of knowledge and skills was transferred from teacher to students behind the closed doors of the classroom. There was only one way to assuage my urge. In *imram* terms, I gathered my little crew; we embarked on the currach, and found ourselves sailing toward the islands of *Connect, Cross-Connect* and *Reconnect* - the names I gave to my earliest small projects. We did not know where these islands were. I knew they were out there somewhere. The important thing was that we began our *imram* with an open mind and a sense of wonder.

  Connect was the simplest of projects. With a view to using videoconferencing to enrich the curriculum of small rural secondary (middle and high) schools, I invited educators at the Magee Campus of the University of Ulster (U.U.) to take part in a pilot project to provide a module on Business French to two rural secondary schools (one from each side of our community "divide"). The school district provided the videoconferencing system on loan - and the necessary technical support - to the school that was to host the joint distant learning class. This mini-project was a great success on a number of fronts. It enabled rural schools to experience how new technology could help enrich the curriculum and provide an enjoyable learning experience; it connected them to a major university, which helped raise student aspirations; it helped connect students and their schools in a particularly polarized community; it taught us important lessons about the need for a paradigm shift when using videoconferencing from the traditional teacher-centered approach to an interactive, learner-centered pedagogy; it gained for me the support of my school district in my efforts to explore or "voyage" further; it brought the University of Ulster (U.U.) on board as enthusiastic and highly proficient crew members.

Cross-Connect and *Re-Connect* were the first fruits of that collaboration. *Cross-Connect* was closely modelled on its predecessor, *Connect.* Emboldened by the success of the latter, we successfully applied to the European Union's Program for Peace and Reconciliation for funding for multi-media equipment, including videoconferencing, and set up a network of twelve secondary schools drawn from both sides of the Irish border and from both communities in Northern Ireland. Again the aim was technology-facilitated curriculum enrichment. This included the provision of tutorials in oral French by native French students attending Magee College, U.U., under the E.U. Erasmus program which had been set up to encourage European university students to spend a year of their program studying at a university in another E.U. country – I like to think of this as a legacy of the Irish wandering scholars. We provided the French students with training in distant teaching methodology, based on what we had learned in the *Connect* mini-project. They then conducted weekly classes in oral French, helping students prepare for the oral component in their final examinations. A welcome additional outcome of this project was that the teachers used the technology, particularly videoconferencing, to work together and plan and discuss enrichment in other areas of the curriculum. Such inter-school collaboration was not – and to a very large extent still is not – normal practice in our education culture. I was discovering that technology was already beginning to change the way teachers were thinking and acting. According to Shaffer (2001), this is the "heart of the matter" regarding technology in education: "what matters is not what the computer is doing, but how it changes what we are doing." This networking and sharing of ideas provided substantial professional development, reduced

the feeling of isolation often experienced by rural teachers, and led to a better

understanding and appreciation of their different education practices and values.

Re-Connect was a small project that was very dear to my heart. It was

implemented in the context of *Iomairt Cholmchille*, the Columba Initiative, set up in

1994 to promote links between Irish and Scottish Gaelic-medium schools, where all

teaching and learning is done through the medium of the Gaelic (Irish or Scottish)

language. We aimed to use videoconferencing to connect an Irish medium primary

(elementary) school in Derry, Northern Ireland and a similar school on the Isle of Skye in

Scotland. Because of fifth century migrations from Ireland to western Scotland (Ó

Cróinín, 1995), Irish has been spoken in western Scotland from that time onwards

(Carney, in Ó Cróinín, 2005). As modern Scottish Gaelic still has "clear dialectical links

with the Northern dialects of the Irish language" (Russell, in Ó Cróinín, 2005, p. 409), I

was keen to use videoconferencing to re-connect these two elements of the ancient Gaelic

culture that was personified in Colmchille (Columba), the first of the Irish wandering

scholar-saints who crossed over from Ireland to the western isles of Scotland in 563 A.D.,

and founded his famous monastery on the island of Iona. During the videoconference, the

focus was on social encounter and the sharing of legends common to Scottish and Irish

Gaelic culture. The young students clearly enjoyed the virtual encounter. From this, I

began to perceive how videoconferencing and other interactive technologies could

change how students were learning in the classroom. These technologies could enable a

shift from passive transmission learning toward meaningful and enjoyable collaborative

learning. The merit of this is confirmed by Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, and

Haag (1995), who state that, with interactive technologies, "the most valuable activity in

a classroom of any kind is the opportunity for students to work and interact together and to build and become part of a community of scholars and practitioners" (p. 7).This was a lesson I was to bring to the wider virtual wanderings across mainland Europe, the next stage in my *imram* to which I would soon invite a number of our schools.

Europe

In this still early phase, I was fortunate in being able to align my vision to that of the E.U. education programs which aimed to promote collaboration between networks of schools from different E.U. countries. As International Officer, I encouraged schools to take advantage of these funded programs, and to use videoconferencing and other available interactive technologies (the main one at this time being email) to sustain collaborative working as part of their network. This meant that participating K-12 schools and Further Education (vocation-oriented) Colleges in our area were soon using videoconferencing to "meet" and work collaboratively at both student and teacher level with their partner schools in France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Belgium, Holland, and other parts of Europe. The experience was inclusive of students of all ages, academic backgrounds, and abilities, and of a wide curricular range. Math, literacy, history, geography, music featured as project foci. As a result, students were experiencing spirit-nourishment in the form of increased self-esteem, enjoyment of learning, and higher motivation. Teachers noted the improvement in problem-solving skills and higher order thinking. The doors of the classroom were opening, and, as one principal stated, students who had never been out of Northern Ireland before, and were not likely to be in the near future, were now experiencing real-life learning and being

exposed to other perspectives, by virtually travelling to other European countries, and seeing and talking with real people (Martin, 2000).

Collaboration between schools took a very concrete form when engineering students from a local College of Further Education used weekly videoconferences, supplemented by a document camera, to connect with a similar college in Finland for the purpose of designing and building an environmentally friendly waste disposal unit. These videoconferences were remarkable for the strong sense of social presence, variously defined as "a sense of shared *presence* or shared *space* among geographically separated members of a group" (Buxton, 1993), or "the feeling that the people with whom one is collaborating are in the same room" (Mason, 1994). Friendships flourished, so that when the groups eventually met in Finland and later in Northern Ireland, they were already relaxed in one another's company.

It was at this stage in my personal *imram* that I felt again the stirrings of the *míshuaimhneas síoraí* (eternal restlessness) that Ó Fiaich (1986) describes as a defining characteristic of our island race. My urge now was to sail further than Europe. With memories of Brendan the Navigator stirring within me, I felt impelled to test the capacity of my cyber-currach to bring us across the Atlantic Ocean.

<div align="center">America</div>

In true *imram* fashion, my urge soon evoked an invitation to "begin a voyage across the clear sea" (*Imram Brain*). I received an email from an American educator with extensive experience of videoconferencing in business, who was interested in exploring its potential in education. He had somehow learned of my work and wanted to discuss possibilities for collaboration. I accepted immediately. We came up with the concept of

using videoconferencing, supported by other technologies, to promote two-way learning voyages involving joint "crews" of Irish and U.S. students and teachers across the Atlantic Ocean. Wonderful adventures resulted from this collaboration, which we extended to include the Northern Ireland Office in Washington, DC. All of the adventures involved the combined crew members drawn from schools in New Jersey, and schools from my district in Northern Ireland. One of our first ventures was to set up a three-way link to join the geographically separated students to each other and to the House of Representatives in Washington, DC. From here, to his amazement and delight, a senior U.S. Congressman was enabled to hold a "town meeting" with students from the two continents, answering their questions about the U.S. constitution and the workings of the House, while an Irish expert on the British and Irish situation responded from the Irish site to the questions of the U.S. students. The two sets of students also had the opportunity to discuss their new learning, to clarify misconceptions, and to build on previous knowledge. The whole "meeting" was a superb example of how videoconferencing can be used to support a constructivist view of learning (Hayden, 1999), to promote higher order thinking skills, and to develop communication skills. Email was used to continue the conversations between the schools and with the Congressman's office.

The success of this encounter led to a request from students in other local schools, who were studying the Irish constitution, for a meeting by videoconference with a member of Dáil Éireann, the Irish Parliament. This was arranged and proved extremely fruitful. The Dáil member, a former Minister of Education, dealt with aspects of the Irish Constitution that were undergoing major change at this time, thus illustrating how

videoconferencing can offer a learning experience that has immediacy, currency and authenticity.

The two-way trans-Atlantic learning voyages included many other curricular areas involving students of varying abilities (Martin, 2000). Grade 8 students of moderate to low ability in an Irish urban school who were studying Native American history and culture were linked with a school in New Jersey which was also doing a unit on different cultures, and with the Deputy Chief of the Cherokee Nation who was visiting the U.S. school as part of their project. Prior to the videoconference, the Deputy Chief had engaged with the students through a series of emails and through informing them of Cherokee websites which they had to research before their virtual meeting with him. This had, in the words of one student, "whetted their appetites," and had meant they were highly motivated in advance of the videoconference. The project was extended to include Irish stories, with an accomplished Irish storyteller sharing some of our ancient lore with the American school. It also included stories from African culture, as many of the U.S. students were African American.

The ensuing videoconference was highly interactive. It resulted in a very rich "real world" learning experience, from which, according to feedback from teachers and students, the students were spiritually nourished through gaining a greater understanding of, and respect for, cultural diversity, through increased self-esteem derived from improved presentation and communication skills, and through enhanced motivation for learning. They also gained a positive experience of using technology to learn how to learn, and to become part of a global learning community. I learned that, like the Politics project for academically gifted students, this experience in learning through simple

storytelling illustrated the ability of videoconferencing to bridge the geographical and psychological gap between expert and students and between students and students (Moore, 1989).

There followed many other equally wondrous *imrama* - distant teaching from the U.S. into our classrooms, virtual field trips to sites and institutions across the U.S., virtual shared classrooms where teachers team taught and students from each side of the Atlantic worked in cross-school groups, and eventually the emergence of a technology-enabled global youth forum between students in Ireland, the U.S. and South Africa (Martin, 2002; 2005). I then began to turn my attention to the use of videoconferencing for a collaborative approach for the professional development of teachers. In this venture, I was greatly facilitated by Carlow University (then Carlow College), Pittsburgh, with whom I had established links in the late 1990s. I invited Math specialists from Carlow to deliver part of a professional development program for primary Math teachers in our school district. A number of elementary teachers from Pittsburgh also agreed to participate. The Head of Mathematics from Carlow College gave presentations on similar initiatives carried out by the College and on the lessons learned from these. Teachers at both sites shared examples of good practice and arranged to share resources. The evaluation highlighted the part played by videoconferencing in stimulating and motivating the teachers, widening their horizons, and promoting their self-esteem. As a result, as part of the Parental Involvement in Numeracy (PIN) Project, a follow-up videoconference was organized enabling teachers, parents, and elementary students on both sides of the Atlantic to take part in a highly interactive virtual workshop. The

videoconference-enabled training program was later extended, with similar outcomes, to post-primary (grades 8-12) math teachers.

Perhaps the most powerful and poignant illustration of the use of technology specifically to heal and nourish the human spirit came in the wake of the terrorist attack on the U.S. in 2001 (Martin, in press). I received a specific request to help some schools in New Jersey and New York deal with the experience and the aftermath of the atrocity. I had been approached because in 1998, during the time of the IRA ceasefire in Northern Ireland, my small home town of Omagh (population: 25,000) had been bombed by a dissident Republican (paramilitary) group. Thirty-one people, including unborn twins, were killed, and hundreds were injured, some horrifically. The idea was to use videoconferencing to enable peer healing to take place. I had no lack of volunteers from young people keen to help young Americans.

The first of the videoconferences was with Grade 9 students in a school in New Jersey. These students had not directly experienced the events of 9/11, but were still shocked and disoriented by what had happened. The Irish students involved on this occasion were young people in a similar situation. Through exchange of stories and empathetic listening, the young people entered into one another's experience. The Irish students also shared some coping strategies that they had found effective. A U.S. Congressman, who was visiting the New Jersey school and who took part in the videoconferencing, commented on the effectiveness of videoconferencing in making virtual face-to-face peer mediation available in real time to students in real need. In a letter of appreciation to me, the principal of the school spoke of how the virtual contact had helped his students "begin the process of mending their spirits." He explained that

the videoconference was broadcast to most of the classrooms in the school, thus extending its beneficial effect. He also said that an indication of the effectiveness of the technology in this particular instance could be measured by the fact that "based upon the videoconference," teachers had designed assignments requiring students to further examine their thoughts and emotions, as well as to "explore ways in which they can contribute to the world."

The second videoconference was with Grade 12 students in two schools situated only two blocks away from what became known as Ground Zero in New York. One of the schools was badly damaged. Both had just reopened. The videoconference took place on Global Youth Services Day, April 26, 2002. This time, I had invited young people who had been injured in the Omagh bomb to take on the role of wounded healers. The students from the Ground Zero schools had witnessed the atrocity as it was happening. They wanted to tell their story. They wanted their "young voice" to be heard. The videoconference gave them that opportunity. It also allowed them to listen to other young voices telling of very similar experiences. The conference opened with a letter of support from Senator Hillary Clinton. She expressed her hope that, by coming together through videoconferencing to share their painful experiences, the young people of New York and of Omagh would be healed and their spirits strengthened. The healing process had already begun in Omagh. A 19-year-old girl, who had lost both her eyes in the explosion, spoke of her sense of wonder at the gift of life, and her determination to make a difference by "moving on" and helping to create a better future. At the time of the videoconference in April, 2002, she had become the first blind student of music at Queen's University, Belfast. Her testimony made a tremendous impact on the New York

students. I was aware of the strong sense of social presence apparent throughout the videoconference. This was corroborated by statements from the young participants at the Omagh site – to whom the technology was a new experience – that actually seeing and interacting with their U.S. peers in real time made all the difference. They felt the technology enabled them to realize that they were dealing with "real people" and could genuinely empathize with them.

<div style="text-align:center">Outer and Inner *Imrama*</div>

The videoconferences relating to 9/11 were perhaps the most striking example of the way technology can be used to heal and nourish the human spirit. But our fragmented humanity will always need healing and nourishing. That is why, today, after a lifetime in education, I am still on my *imram*. The difference is that it now takes two forms - the outer *imram* where I continue to use videoconferencing in a learning-by-doing approach to push back the boundaries imposed by traditional classroom practices, and the inner *imram* where I voyage vicariously through research, so that I can learn from the experiences of other practitioners and theorists in the field.

In my inner *imram* through the literature, I have had my own learning confirmed, clarified and extended. I was confused and somewhat disheartened that, in spite of my efforts to persuade our schools to integrate videoconferencing in the classroom, there has been little sustained uptake and ownership in our district. The literature confirms that this is not untypical. In the U.K., a recent report (Comber, Lawson, Gage, Cullum-Hanshaw, & Allen, 2004) states that while there is "clear evidence of [its] educational potential," videoconferencing is currently "a relatively underused technology in schools" (p. 3). On the other side of the Atlantic, in Canada, Anderson and Rourke (2005) claim, in very

similar terms, that "until recently its role in public K-12 education has been marginal" (p. 5), and in the U S., Heath and Holznagel (2002), while evaluating it as "one of the more interesting current technologies from both a technical and a social viewpoint," also point out that most research on videoconferencing has been conducted primarily at university level, with "only a limited number" of studies at K-12 level (pp. 2-3). It would appear that videoconferencing, like education technology in general since the early 20th century (Reiser, 2001), has, as yet, made only "minimal impact" in the classroom. However, my reading of the literature has made me aware that the traditional educational mindset that has been with us since the Industrial Age and that has fiercely resisted change (Bigum & Lankshear, 1998; Cuban, 2006; Hodas, 1993; Pea, 1998)) is beginning to weaken to some extent with the advance of technology-driven societal change and the influence of our "increasingly connected world" (Greenberg, 2004, p. 5). Signs of this connectedness in education are evident in the movement toward connected learning societies (Kearns, 2002), and in the ICT League - a cooperation platform of the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Canada in the area of ICT in education (Gudmundsson & Matthiasdottir, 2003). Anderson and Rourke (2005) also indicate that "recently, the situation has begun to change as several large scale national and international projects have introduced videoconferencing to the K-12 system**"** (p. 5).

I have been greatly encouraged in my study of the literature to learn that my vision for the educational uses of videoconferencing and my exploration of its potential resonate with many renowned educators throughout the world. I think in particular of Pea's 1994 project *CoVis,* "one of the earliest and most extensively studied in the field" (Anderson & Rourke, 2005, p.9). It used videoconferencing to put science students in

touch with working scientists. At roughly the same time, in a small way, on the other side of the world, I was using the same technology to put Politics students in touch with working politicians, as I have described earlier in this paper. I have been confirmed in my approach to the use of videoconferencing in other projects to increase access to learning, expand learning options, and to enable students and teachers to experience a wide range of beyond-the-classroom authentic learning activities by the findings of a number of recent studies (Amirian, 2002; Anderson & Rourke, 2005; Arnold, Cayley, & Griffith, 2004; Cavanaugh, 2001; Greenberg, 2004; Comber et al., 2004; Heath & Holznagel, 2002; Pachnowski, 2002). These studies have also confirmed my own findings, based on personal observation and reflection, participation, and oral and written feedback from participants (Martin, 2000) of the potential of videoconferencing to foster the social nature of learning and to create community. The E.U. projects and the earlier *Connect-*related pilot projects can align easily with the findings of Cifuentes and Murphy (2000) that videoconferencing is an effective technology for promoting cross-cultural awareness and appreciation, while the merit of using videoconferencing technology to connect second language learners to native speakers (Comber et al., 2004, para. 4.3) is exemplified in the specific focus on French language and culture tutorials of the *Cross-Connect* project and subsequent similar projects.

My study of the literature also deepened and extended my own learning. Although I had been dimly aware of the need to use other technologies alongside videoconferencing, and although I had actually done so, I gained a deeper understanding of the merit of this approach. The combination of media greatly "increases the chances of positive learning outcomes by increasing the range of learning styles that can be

accommodated" (Irele, 1999). Heath and Holznagel (2002) suggest that "using several technologies to meet different instructional needs and learning styles results in a richer, more 'effective' instructional experience" (p. 11). Without weaning me from my first love, videoconferencing, this has helped me take a broader view of the liberating potential of educational technology in the classroom.

I have also been persuaded by Jonassen (1994) of the importance of designing learning environments rather than instructional sequences. This provides learners with a supportive environment which fosters, rather than controls, the learning process. A similar point is made by Barth (2001) who pleads for environments "hospitable to profound learning by young and old alike" (xxv). Siemens (2005) argues for the creation of a "knowledge ecology," an environment that scaffolds learners while freeing them to form the links and connections themselves.

I have tried to bring this new understanding acquired during my inner *imram* to bear on the projects on which I have recently been working in the course of my ongoing outer voyage – a distant education course on Irish studies for pre-service and inservice teachers at Carlow University, Pittsburgh, and a multimedia project involving Grade 7 students with severe learning difficulties (SLD) in two schools in Northern Ireland. The students in the Carlow program had never been outside the United States. Most did not have passports, and few had ever travelled beyond Pittsburgh. With my renewed awareness of the value of a multimedia approach and of the importance of designing a dynamic environment that would serve to foster the learning process, I helped design a learning environment based on the concept of "embedded" human resources - instructors and experts living and working in Ireland. Using a combination of text conferencing and

videoconferencing, students were thus enabled to experience real-life beyond-the-classroom learning about Irish culture, ensuring currency and authenticity, by connecting both asynchronously and face-to-face in real time with the network of instructors and experts, and with materials and artifacts supplied or suggested by them. As indicated in the literature, the combination of media also proved effective in reaching the range of student learning styles, in encouraging interactivity, and in forming a sense of community.

In the SLD project, the aim was to raise students' awareness of the world around them, beyond their immediate formal classroom environment, and to give them a sense of place. The environment design was basically that of a virtual shared classroom, using text conferencing and videoconferencing for the purpose of engaging the students with their remote peers and facilitating real world collaborative learning activities. I evaluated the project, basing my study on personal observation conducted on a weekly basis, regular oral and written feedback from teachers, and personal engagement with the students. I found that exposure to the two technologies and to the new virtual learning environment helped liberate the students from the confines imposed by their particular learning disabilities. The more able students were motivated to use symbol-assisted text conferencing for the authentic and meaningful tasks of communication and information exchange with the partner school.

Videoconferencing brought great enjoyment of learning into the classroom, enhanced motivation and concentration, and was inclusive of all students, even those with poor or no oral skills. These latter engaged happily with their remote peers through body language and peer mentoring, and friendships flourished. This gave me an insight into

how videoconferencing could nourish the spirit of these "special" students, by enabling them to learn by wandering outside the limits normally imposed by their learning disabilities. It was no surprise that videoconferencing was the much preferred technology of the two participating classes. This is in line with the findings of Thorpe (1998), Austin, Abbott, Mulkeen and Metcalfe (2003), Comber et al. (2004) and Anderson and Rourke (2005). The new learning environment encouraged students to take ownership of the project which, according to teacher feedback, they did to an extent unusual in SLD classrooms. It also enabled them to experience themselves as part of a learning community composed of themselves and their remote "friends." An unexpected outcome was that it led to a shift in the students' way of learning from a totally individual to a more collaborative approach.

This tendency toward a paradigm shift was due, at least in part, to the teachers' approach. Cyrs (1998) tells us that "students never learn from the technology. They learn from the way instructors communicate through the technology." Tammelin (1998) emphasizes that "it is the presence of the teacher, not the presence of technology, that determines the learning process" (p. 229). The teachers in this project were enthusiastic about the potential of technology, particularly videoconferencing, to open up the world beyond the classroom to their students. They instinctively adapted their methodology to maximise the benefits of the technology and the stimulation afforded to students by the new virtual environment. This included adopting a new role as facilitator, designing activities that are learner-centred, interactive, collaborative, and inquiry-based. This latter is most important, because SLD students are generally incurious or passive learners. The enlightened approach to the videoconference-based learning environment by the teachers

in this project allowed their students to construct their own learning about their own town and about their partners' town.

This confirmed my belief that the most important thing with regard to videoconferencing is to honor its inherent unique characteristics of enabling real-time, interactive, visual and verbal communication. Used in ways that maximise these benefits - as in the SLD project – videoconferencing can indeed "bring new ways of learning into the classroom" (Amirian, 2003). Dallas (2001) speaks of videoconferencing as enabling "whole new levels of interaction, and precipitating entirely new communication and ideas." This supports the view that technology can induce change, and prompts me to suggest that videoconferencing may well be what Wilson (2001) calls a "disruptive technology." This term refers to an innovation that causes us to look anew at conventional practices and contributes to new ways of thinking (Archer, Garrison, & Anderson, 1999). This is particularly significant in view of the fact that technology integration is often undermined by being limited to simply improving traditional classroom practice (Bailey, 2003; Pea, 1998).

Above all, my understanding of the nature of learning has been extended and deepened by my study of the literature. In *imram* terms, I had learned experientially that, with videoconferencing as my particular currach, and by honoring its transformative capability, through metaphorically "dropping oars" and being open to not just what it could do, but to how it might change the way we think and learn (Shaffer, 2001; Turkle, 1984), we could free ourselves from the spirit-numbing understanding of learning as hierarchical, sequential, linear, controllable, and transferable. I recognized the truth of Heath and Holznagel's (2002) statement that "learning is dynamic and unpredictable." I

learned that learning is now recognized as "a rich but messy process" (Siemens, 2005), that it cannot therefore be contained solely within the confines of the formal classroom. It is "out there," distributed among people and places.

This has greatly strengthened my belief that all learners need to use technology as a barque or currach to enable them to cast off from the comfortable stasis "of the perfect closed worlds" (Garrison, 2006) of traditional classrooms, and begin the process of learning by wandering. I have learned that the capacity to learn is more important than what is learned (Claxton, 2003; Siemens, 2005), that what distinguishes the human from all other forms of life is the capacity to "learn prodigiously from birth to death" and that education's primary purpose is to "nurture that capacity" (Barth, 2001, p. 12).

Going outside the literature into some restorative reading, I was refreshed by the thought that "out of the mouths of poets speak the yearnings of our lives" (Okri, 1997, p. 4) and by the same writer's "poetic" belief that "human beings are blessed with the necessity of transformation" (p. 49). I believe that learning helps us realize our yearning for transformation, that this "yearning" or "necessity" is a manifestation of the hunger of our spirit, and that technology-facilitated learning can help us assuage that hunger in ways that hitherto could not have been imagined.

As I continue my *imram* today, I am profoundly aware that in these outer and inner wanderings with my various crews I am following in the wake of my pagan and Christian ancestors. The ultimate lesson I have learned from them - and that I try to spread - is that it is the *imram* itself that matters, the learning by wandering in response to an inner urge to nourish our hungry human spirit. Recognizing that "learning is no longer a destination" (Siemens, 2005), we find a kinship with another legendary learner

wanderer, Ulysses, the eponymous hero of Tennyson's famous poem, who is believed to

have been inspired by the *imram* of Mael Dúin (Ward, Trent, et al., 2000). Like Ulysses,

we are impelled to roam "with a hungry heart" that is ever "yearning in desire / To follow

knowledge like a sinking star/ Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."