

Gabriel Byrne, Cultural Ambassador for Ireland 01

Gateway Ireland Seminar

May 26, 2010

When I was asked to take this job, I had been doing work because it interested me. As Simon says, I really liked the brand. So, I was in New York, in the Irish arts world in New York, trying to find connections in New York between Dublin, Ireland, Galway, Los Angeles, whatever, and I realized that, just as I had a fractured identity, America and the Irish in America also had a fractured sense of identity. They knew of a past, they shared the same history, they sang the same songs. But somehow, there was a disconnect between the island of Ireland and the rest of us, those people who went away. That is why this project is so exciting. People have used two words this morning, over and over: "diaspora" and "culture." What does the word "diaspora" mean? Well, it's a Greek word and it means "a scattering of seeds." That's a powerful meaning. Some people would argue, I think that Ireland forgets about the seeds that have gone away, but the seeds that have gone away have never forgotten about Ireland. Because Ireland is not just a place, it's a state of mind, it's a part of your soul that you belong to.

There are two things that we possess, two things that I think about a lot, and I think one is our memory, our shared memory of who we are. We didn't just begin like 20 years ago with the digital revolution. We go back hundreds, thousands of years. We have a civilization that pre-dated Christianity and we adapted to Christianity, we took those ideas and the monks in their round towers weren't just defending themselves, they were defending the manuscripts, the knowledge that people had gathered up to that time in old stories. And then we moved through oppression, through hundreds of years of oppression, and a Holocaust, and there are people who would debate that word, but I would say a holocaust in 1845, when the Famine happened, and less than thirty years after that famine, that psychic scar on the soul of Ireland, came the generation of Yeats, of Lady Gregory, Edward Martin, Douglas Hyde, Edward Bunting, John Millington Synge, people who imagined a new landscape, a new cultural landscape. Because Yeats, who was also a businessman, wasn't just a guy who sat around writing poems. He was actually the manager of the National Theatre and he counted the takings at night-time and he knew the importance of markets. And we may think there is a difference between the artist and the businessman. Well, there are some things that we have in common. The artist, the aim, the function of art is to provoke, to spread ideas. It's also about taking risk. A businessman will say to you I took a risk and it paid off, I took a risk and it failed.

What are artists looking for? They're looking for markets. What are businessmen looking for? They're looking for markets. In a way, the cultural vanguard that went out prepares the way for business. So among artists there is a certain tendency, I think, to vilify corporate thinking and corporate investment and so forth as being alien to the spirit of the artist. And there is a suspicion on the part of business that artists just lie around on yoga mats and chant all day. But I think we have much more in common. This forum is about connecting the dots. I think that, if we can get business and the arts to sit down and see what they have in common, it will be an awful lot more than "you have a business" and "you have a painting." We actually have so much more to offer each other than we take for granted now.

When I lived in Los Angeles, I was fortunate, or unfortunate, I should say, to arrive there on the sixteenth of January in 1994. On the seventeenth of January, 1994, there was a massive earthquake in Northridge, in California. I don't know if any of you have been in an earthquake, but it's a pretty devastating experience. The day before, people were talking about how the dogs had started to bark in a different way and the birds on the trees had started twittering in a different way, that they knew something that the people in the buildings didn't know. And that's what I think the artists do. They are the dogs that bark before the earthquake. They are the birds who are on the trees saying "This is coming." Because the ideas we accept as business ideas have often been predicted and pre-acted on by artists. You look at someone like Paddy Moloney who, for fifty years, fifty years, has been going around the world playing Irish music. Not just playing Irish music, but collaborating in South America, Russia, China. That kind of global cross-fertilization is essential and cross-fertilization between business and the arts is essential.

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I think of home as a place that I carry within me because, as an emigrant, as an emigrant, you no longer belong in the place you've left and you don't quite belong in the place you've gone to. But home is each other. The connection that we make with this scattering of seeds, this family that we've forgotten about, is a spiritual one. That's what the arts do, they address things of the spirit and you cannot put a price on the things of the spirit. I don't mean religion. I mean the things of the soul. And what connects that

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diaspora, that family, together is a spirit. And what connects them to us is a spirit. And what connects artists to each other is a spirit. And I think that part of the healing that we have to go through, if I can use that word, is that we must, we must look to the spiritual sides of ourselves to begin healing this problem that's not just economic. And that can be done by, I believe, artists. Artists who provide vision, provide leadership. There seems to me to be a space now at the moment. Historically, I think that that space is recognizable. There is a crisis, there's a detachment, and then there's a vacuum between, and that's where a leader can emerge. Maybe it's not one leader, but maybe it's the artist with the help of business who will emerge as the real leaders of the future.

Yes, in 1880, what Yeats created, Yeats and his contemporaries, created was essentially not just an artistic movement but it's debatable that it didn't change the political, social, and economic structure of the 20th century. That's debatable. It may not be absolutely right, but there's a good case to be made for it. Even Yeats in his old age was wondering if his words had sent young men out to die. The power of his art was so powerful, so strong that people could go out to die because of it.

So art isn't something that exists over there, some elite thing that is in the corner there. The reason it became art, our art, our culture, our story, is because when people went away, they sang about home, they sang about the things that meant something to them. It was the expression of their soul and the expression of their spirit. That's what Irish culture is: it is the expression of our spirit. And as that, it is extremely, extremely precious. The other thing that I would say that we have, we have the memory to tell the narrative of our past, to remember the famine, to remember the struggles that went before that, to know that we are survivors, that we have survived as a people. And we have survived, to a great extent, through the people who went away. They have continued that family into--70 million of them--that's what Gateway Ireland will do. It will connect that family who remembered the story together and that gives you such a tremendous sense of self esteem, when you know your story and you know it's shared with the people around you.

The other thing that you cannot put a price on--and this is the beginning of every idea in this room and beyond--is imagination. When we were sitting by firesides and we were oppressed, the one thing that they could never oppress was imagination. Because we imagined worlds before those times and we are also now in a place where we are being asked to imagine a world beyond this. And if we can remember and imagine...we are who we were and we will be what we imagine. And "imagine" is one of the strongest words in the English language, it is a call to arms. It says "Imagine something" and if you imagine something, you're a good portion of the way towards being there.

I had the misfortune once to play Columbus in not a great adaptation of his life, but Columbus was obsessed by horizons. And when he was in his ship he would say to the guys: "No, no, we're not going to fall off the edge. We're not going to get eaten by sea monsters. Keep going." And he forced them over the horizon to confront another horizon, and another horizon. Because it wasn't just a line between sea and sky. It eventually became land. But my favorite definition of Columbus is one that an Irish guy told me when we were making the film in Malta. He said: "Christopher Columbus. Hmm. He started off and he didn't know where he was going. When he got there, he didn't know where he was. And when he came back, he didn't know where he'd been." I love to think of that, but...horizon and Christopher Columbus, imagination and memory, and I think if we take anything out of this room, it is that we also have, not just a duty to the future, to preserve the spirit of who we are, but to remember the people who have gone before us.

Thanks.