

I was desperate to see my youngest child, my daughter, Joanna, who has been studying abroad at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland for the whole year. I had not seen her in six months, which is too long a time for any mother. Her spring break allowed us time to visit and so I went off to Ireland, determined to learn how to drive on the left side of the road and eager to hear the voice of my ancestors, for the Drinan family name is from County Cork and my mother's name of Moynihan, from County Clare.

I had no intention of seeing through the eyes of a health agent. Perhaps you can't separate yourself from that with which you identify. So, off I, the mother, went, not even realizing that the health agent had stowed away in some recess of my mind.

Our trip took us from the bustling city of Dublin, to the smaller city of Cork, driving along the southern coast, with the Dingle Peninsular, the most western town of Ireland, being my primary destination. After several days there, we would drive to Galway, turn in the rental car and return to Dublin by train. It was a good plan but never having been there before, I learned so much. I learned that you could spend a whole lifetime on Dingle Peninsular and still have so much more to learn and enjoy. I learned that much of Ireland has something in common with our local small towns such as Plympton and Halifax. Their treasured rural character and natural beauty are in danger of being destroyed by development and commercialism. Once gone, can we rebuild green fields, stone walls, vernal pools and open space?

Although my trip ended with concerns, it began with an open and curious mind. Wherever I went, the Irish people were glad to be interviewed and happy to express their opinions about this land they love so dearly. And so, I had many a great chat with taxi drivers, B & B hosts and yes, bartenders.

My first of many conversations was with a taxi driver. I told him I noticed all the building with brick and that it looked like they had silty soils. I wondered if Ireland made its own bricks or did they import them. He wasn't sure. He said Ireland was known for not having any of its own industry, other than the tourist industry. He also told me he was very concerned that all the building was going to kill the very thing attracting people to Ireland, its natural beauty. Little did I know that others would echo this concern throughout my trip.

Later that day, there I was, walking around this very international city of Dublin, busy with traffic like a mini Rome and I couldn't help but notice what great drainage they had and it was attractive. In addition to the brightly covered storefronts, wonderful banners and carved signs, even the sidewalks announced each business, for there, in the midst of sturdy stone edging, were tiles and glass blocks. Reminiscent of Pompeii, the stone and tile walkways also included slight swales and narrow grates designed to direct the rain to street drains. This construction achieved what every artist hopes for, a perfect union of form and function.

As we left the city and began our drive into the country, it appeared that every home and landowner had subscribed to some sort of universal understanding: Water must drain from high to low, eventually to the ocean. There were hand-dug trenches along the sides of yards. Streets had swales and there, in the midst of high groundwater, there were no flooded yards or sump pumps.

There also were no mounded septic systems. We might not like the appearance of these engineered devices but they accomplish what they are supposed to. They protect the groundwater. I could not help but wonder if perhaps the groundwater could handle,

by dilution alone, a septic system here and there but would become polluted at some point with further development. This conversational constellation of appearances, groundwater and development would surface again and again during my trip.

(This story will continue next week)

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After only a few days visiting the wild and wonderful west coast of Ireland, My daughter, Joanna, and I headed north up the coast toward Galway. We arrived there sooner by putting our car on a small ferry across the Mouth of Shannon and continued up the coast to The Burren. The Burren means “the stony place” and it is just that. If you want to know what can happen as a result of deforestation, visit the burren. There is not a tree or a shrub or blade of grass. It is thousands of acres of stone. While it might appear to simply be a geological aberration, it abounds in proof of human habitation. It is theorized that the area once had trees and enough topsoil to support crops and livestock but that once the trees were removed, its shallow soils quickly eroded, making it unable to support habitation. Some losses are forever.

Another wake up call as to responsibility for our actions took place on a daily basis as we drove around. Most drivers are driving way too fast. Even the posted limits are too fast. It was not uncommon to see 80 and 100 kph as the posted speed limits. Even newly paved roads with clear markings are still very narrow and it is not often that you see a stretch of straight road. I never did adjust to the surprise of a car coming at me around the bend and my daughter never did adjust to my gasps.

The road signage is a very telling indication of the reality of accidents and deaths from car accidents. In addition to what might seem humorous warnings of sheep crossings, there are also the signs reminding you of the road’s dangers in a cryptic language. These highway signs have a black circle and the words “Black Spot” on them. Police cruisers are a rarity. (I saw two in ten days.) While the Irish (and tourists) might be following the law without the police presence in many other ways, driving speed is not one of them. In fact, the country is spending millions on surveillance cameras at the “black spots” and will begin ticketing violators soon. For now, there is a preliminary safety promotion campaign reminding people that speeding will result in a ticket.

Another health promotion campaign I noticed is concerned with the high rate of cigarette smoking. The language is quite blunt here, also. Cigarette packages say, “Smoking Kills.” Billboards read, “Smoking results in earlier death.” O.K. I guess that sums it up.

The government is also bringing attention to the inherent dangers of some tourist destinations. The Cliffs of Moher are such a place. This tourist attraction of sheer cliffs facing the strong ocean winds is the site of accidents and suicides each year. In an attempt to save lives, a handrail and signs have been installed several feet in from the

edge. These safety precautions, along with touristy amenities such as gift shop and expensive parking, had been added only recently in the months since my daughter last visited here. On the day we visited, it was not enough to deter many people from crossing the line, stepping past the signs and standing at the edge. I had to look away, not wanting to see someone fall off or be blown off, as the wind is incredibly forceful along this whole coast. Sometimes, a campaign is not enough. Some people will continue to make bad decisions, despite enough education that would seemingly deter them from doing so.

My trip ended in the area of Doolin, County Clare. I wanted to visit here because people had referred to it as “Darling Doolin”, with a fond, far away look and wistful sigh as they pointed it out on the map. But just as Joanna was so surprised to see the commercialism of the Cliffs of Moher, we were saddened to see all the recent building taking place in Doolin. Two brand new hotels and new housing greeted us, rather than the quaint village I was expecting. I asked my B & B host, Carole, about this and it sparked an emotional response as she recounted her and her neighbors’ futile efforts to at least require these new buildings to aesthetically fit the locale with such traditions as a stone front to the building. She recalled the lengthy process she had complied with when building her house twenty-three years ago. She had to have a perc test and an engineered plan for her septic system. (Ah, music to my ears! I had wondered!) She recalled that it took months and, yet, it seemed these new buildings appeared over night. She could not help but wonder what corners were being cut. I could not help but wonder at the price to the environment. They currently all have individual septic systems. As these get closer to each other and more concentrated over a certain parcel of land, pollution will be the result if someone is not overseeing seeing such factors and groundwater mounding and nitrogen loading.

Carole countered with, “But so much land here is agricultural and will always be that way. Surely that will offer some protection.” I told her that this is what the people of Halifax and Plympton thought for so long, also, but we were seeing our cornfields sold and developed.

As we spoke of drainage in the area, I was once again marveling at the fact that I did not see any signs of flooding, as we had recent heavy rain. She told me that Doolin sits on an extensive area of honeycombed caves. When there is heavy rain, the water quickly drains down and out to the ocean. This may protect the groundwater but allows pollutants to reach the ocean.

I thanked Carole for her time and information and wished her well in her efforts to protect the countryside. We offered to exchange some zoning, planning, board of health and conservation information pertaining to protecting natural resources.

I am concerned that the very attributes attracting visitors to small towns such as Doolin or national sites such as the Cliffs of Moher will be overshadowed by, if not lost to, the developments intended to welcome visitors. If Doolin is no longer quaint and charming, why would people stop there? I recall my first conversation with the taxi cab driver who worried that they were killing the country’s most valuable asset, its natural beauty.

As we approached Galway, we kept hearing reports of a boil water order, as the city’s water supply was tainted with the micro parasite, cryptosporidium. Oh, well, bottled drinks only and no ice, I explained to Joanna.

It is great fun to leave home and visit other places and it is also great to return home. I return feeling appreciative of this country's health promotion successes and the infrastructure of public health needed to face ongoing challenges.

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