

Glimmers of Light

By John Pepper

About 2.30pm on Friday 11th September 2020, in the presence of my wife Catherine, I was given catastrophic news by my Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon, the late Professor Michael O'Keeffe, when he told me that I would never see again, never drive again, and that I should take my name off the motor insurance on our cars. This news was to change my life, and by extension, that of my family, especially Catherine, in a manner that was unimaginable up to then.

When we exchanged our wedding vows, 37 years previous on the same day in September 1983, we did not imagine that our pledge on that day - “...*in sickness and in health...*” - would be put to the test in such an abrupt manner. As we sat in the car a short time later, both of us devastated and with tears in our eyes, Catherine reached towards me with her left hand and held both my hands so tightly with a vice like grip saying in the most loving manner - “*John, we'll get through this together and try and make the most of where we are. We'll do the best we can to get through this*”.

This was not the first time that Catherine said those words, or similar, in circumstances when unexpected challenges crossed our paths of life. It was through Catherine's generosity of rock-solid support that I managed to overcome the challenges that came my way. This was going to be the most difficult. Gone was the prospect of a retirement when we would enjoy our time together pursuing activities of interest and leisure that were beyond our reach due to the business of life up to then.

My world had suddenly shrunk, and what remained was dark, dreary, bereft of hope and any meaningful possibilities. I was blessed with the gifts of my scaffold Catherine, a loving family, which - with the generosity of “old pals of yesterday” - helped me stay afloat. The bleakness of the winter months superimposed on my condition is indescribable...there was not the slightest glimmer of light.

My situation remained thus...until... not only did a glimmer appear, but a shining star arrived to illuminate my world. That star was infinitely brighter than the star that led the Three Wise Men to the baby Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem.

On 19th December 2020, all our lives were blessed when our first grandchild came into our world, a baby boy, who was to be named Seán. Words continue to escape me as I attempt to describe the overwhelming ecstasy I experienced when I met Seán for the first time. The magic of that occasion, when Seán held the forefinger of my right hand in his little left hand with a grip matching that of Catherine's, some three months previous, will remain with me all the days of my life. What was unimaginable was suddenly ignited by that glimmer, that was and is the miracle of Seán Pepper, my precious grandson. My first contact with Seán on the afternoon of 21st December 2020, when my son, John, placed Seán in my arms for the first time on the shortest day of 2020, began the journey from despair and darkness to the prospect of meaning and purpose returning to my life.

What has happened since is truly remarkable. From the early months of his life when his mammy, Lisa, faithfully brought him to visit Catherine and I every Wednesday, my Sabbath day! Seán has and continues to envelop us with his precious

affection. From all the memorable moments with Seán, three stand out for me.

First, is the comfort I get by sharing the same bedroom with Seán when he joins Catherine and me for his sleepovers with us. Second, was on Christmas Day 2024 when he whispered to me, *"Granda, you are my best friend"*. Those words whispered by Seán on 25th December 2024, and frequently since, are more melodious than when Don Williams put those to music and song with his famous hit in April 1975. Third, was that special occasion, on Sunday 11th May 2025, when I was blessed to be with my son, John, and my grandson, Seán, to witness Louth win the Leinster Senior Football Championship in Croke Park. This was a momentous occasion as it was 68 years since the Wee County previously accomplished that honour in 1957, when I was four years old - the same age as Seán was in May 2025. The exhilaration I experienced as I grabbed Seán from my son, John's, arms, to raise him over my head when the final whistle sounded is indescribable, and is forever imprinted in my psyche.

I have chosen some lyrics of a song that manifests the meaning of Seán's life in mine, which he sings with the same conviction as Big Tom.

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine;
You make me happy when skies are grey;
You never know Seán, how much I love you;
Please don't take my sunshine away.*

The best birthday present promised to me by my son, John, and Lisa, arrived a day late, on 11th October 2022. While I was disappointed on the date, I have come to realise that another

day is neither here nor there when the present is one that has in its essence a current-day version of my wife, Catherine, when she herself was a child a few years ago! My birthday present for 2022 is our second grandchild, Méabh. Sadly, Catherine and I were deprived of precious time with Méabh during the early stage of her life due to Covid 19. What struck me most when I had the joy of holding Méabh for the first few times, apart from remarking about her dainty feet, was the sense of determination that Méabh's every call and move exuded.....our granddaughter was not only another glimmer of light to further brighten my life... that light was going to be further illuminated by a dynamo!

Méabh was only a few months in our midst when she put down a marker around the terms that would apply in any relationships anyone wished to have with her. As a first, Méabh decided that the consumption of fluids by her would be purely on her terms. And, to make the point, she took a unilateral decision to decline all fluids. In so doing she forced her mammy to come up with a variety of alternative and creative strategies for her required fluid intake. So, Méabh had to be given generously diluted solid baby food for several months. Eventually Méabh took the decision, in her own time, to spontaneously take a drink from a beaker which Catherine had left for Seán when both were staying over with us. Her sense of adventure, determination and independence was a cause for vigilance at all times. As Méabh's view of the world expanded, we began to witness the most beautiful feminine qualities emerge, complemented by the most loving attributes of compassion, concern and generosity. While my condition curtails my capacity to engage in many routine activities of daily living, these limitations have not escaped Méabh's attention. Even when she is engrossed watching her favourite cartoon, while singing along with "Elsa",

Méabh notices when I'm in need of assistance, and she abandons what she is at and promptly comes to my rescue. Touching examples of this are when she senses that I am looking for my shoes, or that I've mislaid my white cane. Not only does Méabh find essential items, in the case of my shoes or slippers, she places them in front of the correct foot and puts the cane into my hand, with the words "There you go, Granda". Méabh's expression of the words "There you go", are the words Catherine has been using when she is exercising hospitality when giving a guest or myself a mug of tea, a habit I never noticed at any time during more than 41 years of married life. It took Méabh just over two years to identify and model verbal expression with that of her granny, and by all accounts, bears a striking resemblance!

It is no surprise, therefore, that I find myself choosing lyrics from the famous chart-topping hit by Elvis in 1970 to capture the essence of the light and hope that my loving, caring and generous granddaughter has brought to my being.

*You give me hope and consolation,
You give me strength to carry on;
You'll never know the reason why I love you as I do, Méabh,
It's the wonder, the wonder of you.*

On Wednesday 8th March 2023, Catherine accompanied our daughter, Máire, and her husband, Daniel, for Máire's pre-natal check-up. Thankfully both mother and baby were in perfect health. Although I was unable to see the image of our next grandchild on the screen, I could hear with incredible clarity the heartbeat of the little human being, who, in a few months, would not only bring a glimmer of light into our lives, but would ignite a magic never before experienced by me. The reality of

the existence of the wonder and mystery of this miracle was brought home to me on the following day, 9th March, at Dubai airport, when, before Catherine and my departure home, Máire took my hand to feel her baby's movements as it made its way into a new comfortable position. Hearing the baby's heartbeat on the previous day was truly special for me - I was within a few centimetres of this wonderful little person when I felt the baby move, who would bring so much enlightenment and enrichment to my universe.

Shortly before midday on Wednesday 21st June 2023, Stephanie, a very special friend to Máire and Daniel, knocked on the door of the room, set up to be the nursery for the new addition to their family, where I was reciting to myself the joyful mysteries of the Rosary. Stephanie enquired if I would be ready to leave for the hospital in a half hour, and we could stop for food enroute. Coming towards the end of our meal, at 2.15, Stephanie's mobile rang. The caller was Daniel, with the wonderful news that Stephanie was now an aunty, and that I was also a grandfather to my second granddaughter, and to my third grandchild. Stephanie and I immediately stood up, she shook my hand and we joyfully embraced, and left in haste, almost overlooking the slight matter of paying the bill!

As Stephanie linked me through the hospital entrance, swiftly past reception, we were joined by a nurse to accompany us to the ward where I would have my first contact with our latest gift from God. It was during the course of this fast-paced journey that Stephanie remarked on the item I was carrying in my left hand, and wondered aloud why I was bringing a visibly well-worn sock with me into the hospital. Fortunately, the nurse failed in her vigilance around infection control, as the sock was still warm from the sweaty heat of my left foot, having swiftly

been removed from that foot some three hours earlier, when Stephanie announced our departure within a timeframe of half an hour! My well-worn and recently worn sock, to my great satisfaction, managed to escape Catherine's procurement of it for the washing machine, or worse, for its destiny in the recycling waste! Securely contained within the garment in my left hand was a gift of sentimental worth given to me by my grandmother in 1957, when I was barely four years old.

During my early life, I was blessed to experience the loving warmth and affection of my granny, which I recall with gratitude, which I believe contributed in a significant way to my formation. It was during one of those times that she gave me the gift of a small toy donkey that shook its head when wound with the key permanently in its abdomen. This toy donkey, which my grandmother could ill-afford to buy for me at the time, presumably as a symbol of her love for me, was shortly to find itself transferring from its custodian for the previous 66 years, to a new owner, my newborn granddaughter, 3 hours of age. Granny could not have imagined that her extravagant investment, all those years ago, would find its way, carried with the same love from her grandson to his granddaughter, as she had for her grandson in 1957. On entering Máire's room, Stephanie handed me over to Catherine and Daniel, and both escorted me to the gorgeous little baby, my latest gift of life, and the person who had given me another glimmer of light, with the brightness of the rising sun. As I kissed Sienna's left little cheek as she rested in her mammy's arms, I began to once again count my blessings which were multiplying. I gave the sock with its contents to Sienna's mammy for safe keeping, with love from both Sienna's great great granny and granda. This was a truly special event and a cherished occasion, not least because of the presence of my wife Catherine, Máire's

mother, and midwife at the delivery of her second precious granddaughter, Sienna.

Despite thousands of miles between us, Catherine and I have come to enjoy dedicated periods of time with Sienna in both Dubai and at home in Ireland, as well on family holidays together. We are privileged to witness and experience at first-hand the development of her unique personality.

Stand-out experiences for me were when I felt Sienna's heartbeat as she fell into a deep sleep while lying on my chest, and I felt the invigorating stimulus from the purity of her breath arriving on my skin. It touches my being when, on hearing the tap of my white cane on the steps as I descend the stairs, Sienna makes her way to the gates at the bottom, to assist me opening the gates, and then lead me carefully by the hand to the nearest bean bag where she plonks me down, and goes off about her business having taken possession of my cane!

The magic of Sienna's tight embrace, and the velvet feel of her hug when I arrived unannounced as she was having her breakfast on Saturday morning, 5th April 2025, will remain forever in my treasured memories. Sienna's concern for my need for sustenance, in preparation for our train journey from Dublin to Cork later that day, was borne out by her generosity of insisting that she feed me not only her little slice of toast, but every other piece on her mammy and daddy's side plates!

The person who wrote the lyrics for Joe Dolan's record that topped the charts in 1993, was prophetic, as thirty years later, these lyrics [slightly adapted], speak to the unique person that is Sienna Crouchman:

*I can hear your heart beat,
As you rest on my chest, Sienna,
That brings rays of light,
To my mind's eye. Your endless magic is beautiful, Sienna.*

While I am afflicted with a life-limiting condition that greatly limits my independence, giving rise to recurring frustrations for me and those around me, the glimmers of light in the persons of Méabh, Sienna and Seán have each, in their unique and special way, taught me so so much. They have become, and will always be, unique role models for me as I try to follow their examples of never giving up. I am both blessed and privileged to have Sienna, Méabh and Seán combined as the lights that illuminate my universe, and clear the pathway of my life, so as to enhance my appreciation of what is really important. Through their being in my life, I have come to realise that the pleasure from certain accomplishments, as well as the acquisition of sought-after material possessions, only provide transient gratification. The love, warmth, care and gentleness showered on me by Seán, Méabh and Sienna, will always remain in my reservoir of Treasured Memories that will radiate my existence for the remainder of my life's journey.

To conclude, I say to my Three Treasures, "The happiness of having you, Seán, Méabh and Sienna, makes my world a place worth living in".