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<sup>†</sup>From price based on October 26, 2014 from Dublin

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# Dr Mark Dooley



## MORAL MATTERS

# Love conquers all... even the signs of age

**L**AST Sunday, I awoke to find myself one year older. At dawn, Mrs Dooley and our boys kicked off the festivities with a tender version of Happy Birthday. A perfect start to what was a wonderful day.

Getting older has never bothered me. I am not one of those who desperately cling to youth, dressing like a teenager in middle age. Believing there is a time for everything, I try to live as my years dictate.

This does not mean I enjoy the fact that age is taking its toll. With each new facial line, grey hair and physical ache, I shake my head in disbelief. It is as if I have been tattooed by the decades, scarred by the eternal footman as he beats a hasty retreat.

Still, it is consoling that people still recognise me from the image at the top of this page. 'You look just like your byline photo,' they exclaim. I don't dare reveal it was taken eight years ago.

Few of us relish the physical mutations that each birthday brings but who can deny that age delivers its own rewards? One of the best birthday gifts I received this year was an email from a dear friend in France. It contained a link to a Wikipedia profile of me she had just compiled.

As a proud technophobe, I have steadfastly resisted using the web to highlight my activities. With trepidation, therefore, I opened the link. There was my life laid out before me, a carefully crafted synthesis of 'my back pages'.

It is strange to read about yourself in the third person. Yet there I was, on my birthday, wading through the life and times of 'Mark Dooley'. But how closely did this person resemble the real me?

All biographies are somewhat incomplete. To write about a life is to rely on memories and stories that are mere snapshots in time. If there can be no such thing as a definitive biography, it is because memory is no less subject to decay.

There is so much about my life I have already forgotten. With each birthday, I endeavour to recall the highlights of the past year. Yet, before long, I find myself bemoaning the futility of the exercise.

My new Wikipedia profile provides only a partial picture of who I am. It did, however, make me very grateful for the opportunities I have been given. Looking back across the years, I was struck by how much I owe to so many.

No person, no matter how talented, achieves things unaided.

Behind every life story there is a host of unsung heroes. Such people shape our values and open doors that might otherwise have remained locked.

My life is simply a product of those who nurtured and sacrificed on my behalf. I am a product of those who afforded me love, support and encouragement. I am who I am because others believed in me.

As the great poet John Donne wrote: 'No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, A part of the main.'

By this, he meant that each person is not only shaped by others but is reliant on them at each stage of existence. To think differently is mere egotism.

Not surprisingly, the line in my new Wiki profile that gave me most joy came at the very end: 'Dooley lives in Co. Dublin with his wife and their three children.'

Reading that, I was reminded of James Shirley's observation: 'The glories of our blood and state are shadows, not substantial things.' No matter what we do with our lives, no matter how much we achieve, the only thing that ultimately matters is that you are loved.

**U**NDoubtedly, the best thing I have done is marry Mrs Dooley and have our three boys. In so many ways, they have taught me to view the world with fresh eyes, to see beauty and wonder in the ordinary things of life. Living as husband and father is proof that age does indeed deliver its own rewards.

If I am spared, I know that future birthdays won't herald the pitter-patter of little feet, of angelic voices singing at dawn. I know such precious moments will then be but distant memories. But isn't that a small price to pay for a life filled with lasting love?

Nobody likes getting old. Nobody likes the physical and mental ravages of age. But it does no good to resist the inevitable by seeking to live in the image and likeness of your children. It does no good to defy nature by cleansing your complexion of its marks of maturity.

In the end, those marks testify to the fact that you have lived and reaped the rewards of age. In some, they are signs of experience and wisdom. In others, they signify survival against all the odds.

More importantly, they are monuments to our most enduring memories, reminders that, while the flesh will fade, the most beautiful things in life will never die.

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