

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

For the first time, I had no fear of flying. Here is why

IAWOKE to the faint hum of the clock. For more than a decade I have woken naturally. That day, however, I was in denial. It was the morning of our first family holiday abroad. Usually, we holiday in Ireland to avoid the hassle of airports. Now, however, our boys have reached an age when they want to spread their wings.

The prospect of spreading wings invariably sends me into a spin. I have often written of my fear of flying. Hence I was happy to spend our holidays here at home.

I knew, of course, that this could not be sustained forever. What I could not have anticipated was how profoundly our short visit to London last week would affect me. The moment I had been dreading for so long was a life-changing experience.

We made our way to the airport in the dark. Our boys were delirious at the prospect of their trip to Legoland. My smile concealed the fact that I was a bag of nerves.

What if we lose one of them? What if they share their father's terror? At least when I am flying alone I know the are safe and sound.

As we drove, Mrs Dooley tried to console me by saying: 'You have nothing to worry about. This time you are not on your own. We are all here together.'

Surprisingly, we sailed through airport security and were soon at our departure gate. Although paralysed by anxiety, I could not help giggling at the beautiful banter between our two youngest. Somehow, when you hear a six-year-old lecturing someone half his age on the science of aerodynamics, your worries just melt away.

For me, the moments before take off are always terrifying. I think it is the imminent prospect of hurtling down the runway at full speed that causes my palms to perspire and my heart to palpitate. This time, however, I remained remarkably calm.

Perhaps it was the fact that I was responsible for my eldest and could not think of my own cares. Perhaps it was the hilarious chit-chat of our youngest and his brother across the aisle. Whatever the reason, I had found peace on a plane for the first time in decades.

Everything in life is transformed when you experience it with children. Where we notice fear, they see an adventure. Where we see danger, they see excitement. To perceive things through the eyes of a child is to see them with wonder and awe.

Listening to my little sons laugh with their mother as they soared

through the air, I realised I had nothing to fear. Everything I love and cherish was beside me on that plane. Yes, I was far from home, but isn't home where the heart is?

My children loved every second of their first flight. Rising up into the firmament, they were awestruck as they passed through the clouds to bathe in that heavenly morning light. They saw earth and sky from a new perspective, one that revealed the true magic of our world.

To them, this was not a source of fear but one of sheer joy. It was a venture beyond anything they had known, a journey to the edge of paradise. It was only an hour, but it helped me more than I can ever express.

Back on the ground, I knew something within me had changed. Although I could not say how, I knew I was a different person.

It was only on the return journey that I realised the precise nature of that change.

As my youngest slept peacefully beside me, I gazed out the window to see a stunning sight.

We had transcended a band of thick cloud and it was as though we were sailing on a sea of surf beneath a hot summer sun. In the distance, I heard our middle son say to a stranger: 'Oh your children have such beautiful names!'

In that moment, I knew there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

Ordinarily, I count down the seconds to landing. Now, however, I was happy to let it all go.

FOR the first time in my life, I was completely relaxed on a plane. Thanks to my children, my terror disappeared as I contemplated the sensational spectacle outside my window. Thanks to them, I found peace and joy in a place I least expected.

Of all the gifts I have received from my children, the capacity to look at the world with their eyes is by far the finest. In my desperate rush to grow up, I missed so much of life – so much of its beauty and grandeur. In love, they are leading me to places I once believed I would never see.

With the eyes of a child, I am now starstruck by things we so often take for granted. I am no longer fearful of things which once terrified me. That is because, like Bob Dylan, 'I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.'

To grow young while growing old is such a beautiful experience. In more ways than one, it has taught me how to spread my wings. And should my feet never touch the ground again, I won't be sorry.

Landings, I recently learned, are highly overrated.

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We didn't have horrors we saw,

Three Irish nurses flew to famine-hit Ethiopia in 1984 and turned a meagre hut into a medical centre that treated 30,000 starving people. Thirty years on, they recall their journey

IT WAS September 1984. US President Ronald Reagan had just visited Ireland and Dunnes Stores workers from Dublin's Henry Street store were in the midst of a protest against apartheid — by refusing to handle any South African goods.

On the other side of the world, a 'biblical famine' had taken hold in Ethiopia. Thousands of people, mostly children, were starving. Thousands more had already died.

Outside the former Irish Press office on Burgh Quay in Dublin, three strangers — all named Mary — met for the first time.

John O'Shea [former sports journalist and founder of humanitarian agency, Goal] was based there,' recalls Mary Scully. 'Goal didn't have an office back then, John was more or less it.'

'We had never met before and everyone was very nervous, but there was also a real sense of excitement. Then, once we got to the airport, the three of us were on our own.'

Mary Scully was 24 when she left Dublin to go to Ethiopia and work as a Goal volunteer. As a newly qualified nurse, she had always wanted to do charity work abroad.

In 1984, she was joined by Mary Moher, from Cork, and Mary O'Sullivan, from Sligo, as they embarked on a life-changing year in famine-ravaged Africa.

'I was in my early 20s,' says Mary Moher. 'I was working in the Mercy hospital in Cork at the time. I was engaged, but I had always wanted to volunteer abroad and it suited both of us. When the opportunity came up, I was happy to take it. I had no idea what to expect.'

AT THE time, media reports on what was going on in Ethiopia were virtually non-existent. It was only in October, by which time all three women had already landed in Ethiopia, that Michael Buerk's groundbreaking BBC news report on the famine was broadcast — bringing the unfolding horror into Irish living rooms. As such, the three Marys — as they became known — had little knowledge of what lay ahead when they left.

'John O'Shea phoned me in the middle of August,' says Mary O'Sullivan. 'He just said, "There's a famine in Ethiopia, Mary, would you go?" Initially I thought, where exactly is Ethiopia? I had to look. I knew it was in Africa.'

After their tense and awkward meeting on a Dublin street in September, the three women said goodbye to their families and boarded a flight to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.

'There were moments of quiet on the flight,' says Mary Scully. 'We were chatting and getting to know each other but we were also a bit nervous. Thankfully, we all just gelled straight away.'

Goal was only seven years old when the three women signed up to help victims of the catastrophe that cost nearly one million lives. They were the first three Goal volunteers to arrive in Ethiopia — a strange and foreign land they knew little about.

Today, Goal is still helping people in Ethiopia, particularly in Gambella where there are some 180,000 South Sudanese refugees based



by Catherine Fegan

due to the civil war in South Sudan. President Michael D. Higgins visited the Goal camp in Gambella yesterday — as part of his three-week official visit to Africa — and appealed for the international community to intervene.

The Government announced €2million in funding for the camps but there's still a shortfall of over €300million to feed the refugees arriving in Gambella.

It's a scene the Marys are, sadly, only too familiar with.

'When we flew into Addis Ababa I could see the shanty towns below,' says Mary Scully. 'What struck me was the scale of the shanty towns. There was this huge sense of poverty. I remember getting off the plane and it being chaotic. The heat just hit you, I'd never experienced that heat. Then, there was the smell of all these exotic spices. It was a very sensory experience.'

Initially, the women stayed with the Sisters of Mercy in Addis Ababa, before they made the nine-hour journey to Wolaita Sodo, in south central Ethiopia. A tiny, isolated rural location, Wolaita Sodo was miles from any town and had no nearby hospitals or medical centres. There, the women stayed in the basement of the house belonging to an Italian priest.

'The locals knew that three people had arrived,' says Mary Scully. 'I just remember arriving and seeing people already walking towards

the centre and when we actually got there people — sitting and waiting. None of us had any experience of this and it was a case of "where do you start?"'

'Every morning you would go out and the women would be sitting with their children, or sometimes the men, and some of them might have been dead, or some of them dying. It was like a triage, we would go out and walk through the crowds and bring in the people who were ill and try and do something for them. Sometimes the children were at a stage where we knew there was very little we could do, there were always very tough decisions you had to make. It was constant decision-making, it was very subjective in many ways. You faced it every morning.'

BY MID-1984, it was evident the drought, and resulting famine, had started to spread to large parts of northern Ethiopia. Just as evident was the Ethiopian government's inability to help.

The almost total failure of crops in the north was compounded by fighting in and around Eritrea, which hindered the passage of relief supplies. Although international relief organisations made major efforts to provide food to the affected areas, the persistence of the drought and poor security conditions in the north resulted in