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**Dr Mark
Dooley**



MORAL MATTERS

His first day at 'big' school... it's hard on us fathers too

IT is at times like this that the words of the great German philosopher Hegel come to mind. 'The end is the beginning and the beginning is the end,' he famously wrote. It is a cryptic saying, but one that goes to the heart of what the Dooleys are currently experiencing.

Tomorrow, our youngest begins 'big school'. Unlike his parents, he cannot contain his excitement. It is the biggest adventure of his life and he is all set and ready.

We, on the other hand, are in mourning. His new beginning signals the end of a beautiful phase in our lives. It will be the last time we shall bring one of our little boys to primary school for their first day.

For a parent, there is nothing nice about a child's first day in school. Of course, you are proud of your little one and happy to see him progress along life's way. However, going to school is the first significant moment of detachment.

The end of the summer holidays heralds the beginning of a new life for our little boy, a life of learning and new challenges. It is also the beginning of the end for our eldest, who, this morning, begins his final year in primary school. They are at two ends of the spectrum and face two vastly different journeys.

It is true that a parent's worries for their children never seem to cease. From dawn to dusk, you fret about their welfare, their future and their happiness, and never more so than at seminal moments like this.

For one year only, our three boys will be in primary school together. The eldest is heading for the door, while the youngest is just about to enter for the first time. Their paths will cross, but only fleetingly.

We like to pretend that this life contains certainty and stability. The fact is that we have short periods of stability which are invariably ruptured by change. And change, no matter how great or small, always leaves a lasting legacy.

Mrs Dooley and I are anxious that our little son's precious innocence will be wiped away within a week. Beyond the home, the ways of the world are often rough and uncompromising. There is a harshness that is unsettling to the pure of heart.

In such moments, I take great comfort from our eldest who, despite everything, has survived the system. Naturally, he has had his bumps along the road, but has come through with a solid understanding of life.

Observing him, I am confident that our youngest will also weather the storm.

Life is full of ruptures. Each end brings a new beginning, and each

beginning signals the end of something old. We bridge the gap by trying to adapt to our new circumstances as best we can.

The first day at school is the end of the 'baby stage' in life. It is as if early childhood suddenly vanishes in a haze of anticipation, excitement and tears. Parents launch their children out into the deep, very often not knowing what lies beneath.

To adapt means embracing the new while learning to live with loss. With each new beginning something is lost. New situations painfully remind us of what has passed into memory.

Regular readers will know all about our youngest. He has featured here many times since his birth and, judging by your letters, has been a constant source of joy and amusement to many. Today, however, I gaze upon him with the eyes of a father who fears to let go.

Letting go, detachment and setting free are all necessary for a full human life. We cannot perpetually cling to people or things without doing them or ourselves lasting harm.

True love means standing back and letting people go, no matter how painful it may be.

Tomorrow, I will have no choice but to stand back and let him go. He cannot wait to 'meet all my new friends' and his excitement is infectious. Then, at the end of his first day, I will have to adapt to the beginning of a very different life.

I am, of course, mourning mainly for myself - lamenting the fact that my years as a father of young children are at an end. Even with all its ups and downs, its trials and tests, fatherhood has been the greatest privilege of my life. To give life, to nurture and see it grow is much more than a stage: it is a miracle.

I KNOW that our primary purpose as parents is to make ourselves redundant. Our vocation is to wean our children off their dependency on us. Our goal is to give them the gift of freedom. Going to school is a vital stage in that journey towards full independence. In the broader scheme of things, it is a small rupture, but one that is no less momentous for all involved. And that is because it signals the moment when parents and children truly begin their slow advance towards separation.

The end is the beginning and the beginning is the end. As our youngest child's new life begins, we look longingly back to those years of love, gentleness and togetherness. We look at all our boys decked out in their uniforms and smile with relief that they have come so far.

And then, as the gates of the school shut behind us, we begin again in silence.

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