

'Syringes prevented me cleaning up dog mess'

A DOG walker who claimed he was unable to clean up after his pet in a Dublin park because of the number of syringes left behind by drug addicts has avoided a €4,000 fine.

Liam Nolan was prosecuted for dog fouling by Dublin City Council after he refused to accept an on-the-spot fine on June 14 last at St Audeon's Park, near Christ Church. However, he avoided a conviction and a fine after arguing his case at Dublin District Court where he faced a charge under the Litter Pollution Act.

He represented himself during the trial and told Judge John Brennan that he always uses the local park for dog walks and cleans up after his pet. However, on the date in question he tried to remove his dog's faeces but

By Tom Tuite

noted within a 'hair's breadth' of it there was a syringe.

He said he could not remove it and refused to accept a €150 fine from a warden whom he claimed 'did not want to hear me'.

After waiting with the warden for ten minutes he left. He said that a garda then approached him about it on nearby Thomas Street. He returned to the park a day or two later and took photos of the needles he had seen which he showed to the judge.

He said he had made reports to gardaí about the syringes in the park and claimed there was a used-needle bin there which has made the problem worse.

In cross-examination it was put to him it was his responsibility to

clean up his dog's mess and dispose of it in a suitable manner.

Mr Nolan, a carer from Oliver Bond House, Oliver Bond Street, Dublin 8, told the court he showed pictures of needles to a council official who told him that specialist equipment was required to clean up the needles.

He told the judge children from the local school cannot go to the park which he claimed is used by hundreds of addicts who attend the Merchants Quay homeless and drugs support service.

Striking out the case, Judge Brennan said the litter warden had acted professionally and he had no doubt that Mr Nolan was belligerent but he was satisfied that this was because of a risk to his health and safety and his reason appeared to be genuine.

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Will this death open our eyes to social media?

LAST week, I heard a radio discussion while sitting in the barbers with my boys. I didn't know whether it offered me vindication or if the matter was worse than I previously thought. The topic revolved around people trying to wean themselves off Facebook.

In the old days, it was conventional for many Irish people to give up alcohol for January. What I learned when listening to that programme was that they now seek to give up Facebook for a month. So hooked on social media are they that many of its users now consider it a narcotic.

I say 'vindication' because, for many years, I have used this column to warn of the dangers of social media. I even wrote a book on how people could escape their virtual existence for life in the real world. It now seems that even the most committed netizens of 'Cyberia' are discovering the dangers for themselves.

People texting the programme told of their joy in rediscovering reality, real people and real communication. There were stories of those who, having given it up for a month, decided to have a 'Facebook-free life'. It was as though they had suddenly been liberated from prison.

It reminded me of those programmes featuring recovering drug addicts. They spoke of 'getting back my life', of 'spending time with real people' and 'feeling fabulous'. At last, I said to myself, people are finally coming to terms with the fact that social media is both addictive and potentially ruinous.

Now, I realise there are many who use Facebook sparingly and for good reason. Like alcohol, in using it wisely and moderately it can serve a good social function.

However, in a world where moderation has given way to excess, it has the potential to destroy lives.

Take, for example, the tragic case of Jayne Pearce, a 23-year-old British mother. When two other mothers hacked her Facebook page to falsely allege that she had tried to smother one of their children, Ms Pearce was not only jailed for three months but viciously trolled online.

Even though she was eventually found innocent, Ms Pearce took refuge in alcohol and drugs, dying of an overdose just two days before her accusers were due in court.

In jailing the two women at a Manchester court on Monday, Judge Angela Nield observed: 'Social media has a great deal to answer for. It does do a great deal for good for bringing together friends who have not met each other for many years - but sadly, as is often the case now, people find it to be a tool for evil, a tool for wrong and a tool for criticising each other.'

She added: 'In this case it was a tool to bring down upon the head of an innocent person the wrath of social

media by way of public opinion.'

As I have said so often, there is no rule of law in Cyberia. It is a no-man's land where the aggressive flourish and the meek are made to suffer. At its worst, it is an anarchic sphere where the mob has free rein to target the innocent for sheer pleasure.

The fact that even one person has perished due to cyberbullying is morally reprehensible. The fact that so many have taken their own lives as a result of online intimidation, is nothing short of criminal. Yet again, this terrible case highlights why we need to do much more to protect innocent people and children from, what Judge Nield rightly condemned as, the 'pitchfork mob'.

A good starting point would be to follow those on the radio show in seeing social media as a drug. Like excessive alcohol consumption, social media blurs the boundaries between reality and virtual reality. It divorces people from the real world of commitment, responsibility and genuine communication.

Most people are moved to pity at the sight of someone being harassed or bullied on the street. But when you don't have to witness a person's pain, see their tears and torment, it is so much easier to make their life a misery. Fuelled by the frenzy of an online mob, in a zone ungoverned by decency or law, the bully preys on his victims without mercy.

I DO not say, of course, that all social media users are potential bullies or trolls. However, waking up to the fact that social media is potentially no less harmful than any other addiction, is the first step towards tackling those trolls. It is to see the need for regulations and restrictions where there are virtually none.

The fact is that our addiction to Facebook has consequences which are not limited to Cyberia.

Online bullying, harassment or even criticism of a person, is not without repercussions in the real world. That is because when the trolls finally fall silent, when the smartphone is cast aside, there is a real victim left sobbing on the floor.

You can have all the 'friends' you like on Facebook, but in that terrible moment you are all alone. You are back in the real world where the demands of decency stand in sharp contrast to the lawless world you have left behind. It is then that we need real human love, affection and care more than ever before.

None of those people on that radio show were anything like trolls or online bullies. Yet, they were all self-confessed addicts of something which is rapidly transforming the way we relate to the world and to each other.

Confessing to our addictions is, of course, the first step on the road to recovery - a road which leads us back to reality and the only place where we can truly be at peace.

mark.dooley@daily@mail.ie



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