



A BLUR: Public speaking is still a terror

Emerging from the pandemic into terror that is public speaking

ACCORDING to a slew of press reports, the Covid pandemic has left a legacy of widespread anxiety. I've come to the conclusion that reading them has merely exacerbated it.

Prolonged isolation, the disruption of 'normal' life and the convoluted and constant revision of safety sanctions would get on anybody's nerves.

Even children these days are not free of lurking apprehensions. I came across a storybook lately called *The Worry Box*, superscribed "perfect for children's occasional anxieties." It was aimed at 4-6 year olds. So much for 'carefree childhood'.

God be with the days when people kept their doubts and fears to themselves and not all over the Internet. My generation believed our parents hadn't a worry in the world because they shielded us from inappropriate knowledge of their concerns. Nor did we express our own childish unease of fears. Well, I didn't anyway.

I was afraid of animals, the dark, the sea and getting lost, to name but a few. Now, several decades later, I'm afraid of losing my marbles. The shapelessness of days has thrown me out of kilter. I go to the supermarket, leaving the shopping list on the hall table. I tidy things away and never find them again. I leave keys in odd places and go round the house at night double-checking that everything's switched off, even if it hasn't been switched on. I forget phone numbers. I'm perpetually anxious and constantly stressed.

Now that a modest semblance of normality has been restored, I've a couple of long-postponed and forgotten-about speaking engagements. Despite years of writing for radio and this august

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newspaper, 'public speaking' is my nightmare, but being a spineless people-pleaser, when asked, I'm afraid to refuse.

Having committed myself, I wander about wringing my hands and wailing, "Why, oh why did I say yes?" The Loving Spouse used to remark somewhat drily, "Because you do so love the clapping."

Usually I know little about the group I'm addressing, their business or interests, so it's a whole research job for relevant material that takes forever, the knot in my stomach tightening by the hour. And what if I pitch it wrong? Apparently, the trick is to sail on smoothly dog-paddling furiously underneath. Many politicians have honed this skill to a fine art.

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order (several times) and set off feeling sick. The number of excellent dinners I've picked at – each forkful as ashes revolving in my mouth and a single glass of wine, dreading the Chairperson's tinkling spoon against a glass, the cessation of conversation and the anticipatory hush as my heels click across the floor to the podium, utterly persuaded that I've pitched the whole thing wrong.

I offer a fervent prayer. "Please let me die now, so I don't have to do this." Unfortunately, God is engaged elsewhere, probably with another hapless public speaker. I begin. "Mr./Madam Chairperson..." One of the many hazards of public speaking is a dicey sound system which hisses, crackles and pops like Rice Krispies, necessitating a man to bound up from the audience to fiddle with cables and boom "AH-ONE-TWO-ONE-TWO!" into the microphone. Fortunately, as an ex-teacher of mixed infants, I can always make myself heard.

I return, numbly, to my seat, only to find (on one occasion) that a senior executive at the BBC has scoffed my uneaten dessert. Well, they laughed in all the right places. Nobody sneaked out to the loo midstream.

They applauded and said complimentary things – except at the Institute of Management who didn't like my 'sending them up' one bit.

Almost inevitably, a well-lubricated gentleman will buttonhole me on my way out with the words "I do a bit of public speaking myself..." and offer valuable advice on how I might ginger up my discourse. I thank him profusely.

Back home with the hurty shoes off, there's a message on my answering machine. A nice lady wonders if I'd like to come and talk to her group? Must stop now. I've a speech to write.

ON THIS DAY

JUNE 8 1921

South Armagh Murders

A COUPLE of terrible murders were perpetrated in the Camlough district of South Armagh yesterday morning, the victims being two respectable farmers named James Smith (45) of Keggall and Hugh O'Hanlon (54) of Eshwary who in his time was a well-known long distance runner. O'Hanlon got a threatening letter within the past month and was given permission to carry a firearm for self-protection.

About ten o'clock on Monday the homestead of O'Hanlon was visited by about eight or more masked men. They forced their way inside and took the revolver and ammunition with which O'Hanlon had been provided for his protection. When O'Hanlon came along the road later, he was shot dead. He was a cousin of Mr H J McConville, JP, chairman of Newry Urban Council, and a brother of Constable Lynch, RIC who was recently ambushed at Greenore.

The home of James Smith of Keggall, overlooking Camlough Lake, was visited by men who described themselves as police. He was hauled out on to the street and shot dead.

More Dublin Hangings

THREE more executions took place at Mountjoy Prison, Dublin yesterday. The men executed were Mr Patrick Maher, Knocklong, County Limerick and Mr Edward Foley, chairman of Fermoy Board of Guardians. Both these young Irishmen protested their innocence to the last. They were condemned by Courtmartial to death in connection with the fatal shooting of Sergeant Wallace at Knocklong [1919]. The third execution was that of an Englishman, William Mitchell, serving in the RIC for murder.

Devlin's Holiday Hostel Survives Attack

IN BANGOR yesterday a function marked the second formal opening of 'The Grand' Holiday hostel for Belfast working girls. The hostel – the idea of the West Belfast MP, Mr Joseph Devlin – was realised last year when the building was opened to guests. Women and girls flocked to it in crowds. Unfortunately the [sectarian] outbreak last July, when a deliberate attempt was made to burn it down, meant that the Hostel had to be closed.

Fr Patrick Scally, pastor of Bangor, remarked that, instead of taking a much-needed holiday himself after the recent strenuous election campaign, Mr Devlin was vigorously pushing on the good work of giving a holiday to the hard-toiled women and girls of the city. (On the very day that Craig announced his cabinet, two men were assassinated in South Armagh, apparently by the IRA, while Republicans continued to be executed in the south. Meanwhile, Joe Devlin reopened his seaside hostel for Belfast's mill-girls following a sectarian attack on the building the previous summer. 'Wee Joe' had raised the money through his personal generosity and the support of friends.)

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