



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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[Home](#) > [Tablet Newsletter](#) > [Printer-friendly PDF](#)

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Aisling (pronounced Ashlin) is an Irish name meaning beautiful dream or vision. That she was, for her parents Jack and Anne Sullivan, her four brothers and all who knew her. She was a blonde-haired sprite, perfect, filled with an infectious love of life and adventure and innocently certain of her irresistible charm. She loved pink. She loved to dance, to make candy floss, to meditate, to have her favourite stories re-read to her, to tumble with her four adoring brothers.

A few days before her fatal accident, aged five and a half, she got out of her mother's car by the pier on Bere Island. To Anne's horror she leapt up on the wall overlooking the water and began to walk on it, poised over the long drop with the blissful exuberance and self-confidence of her nature. She was talked down and later, to teach her the lesson, was grounded for five minutes in her room.

An accident, unpredictable and unpreventable, ended her days in this world, when dancing around in their sitting room, she pulled down a mantelpiece on her golden head. As soon as her mother, an intensive care nurse, saw her she realized, as a nurse and a mother, that her spirit or at least her brain was gone. For a few days the residual activity of a small amount of electricity in the brain stem kept her on life-support. The technology surrounding her frail, peaceful frame seemed out of proportion compared with the older inhabitants of the other beds in the Cork ICU. Nature and science were opposed. The scans showed her brain was irreparably damaged. Breathing support and IV kept her breathing.

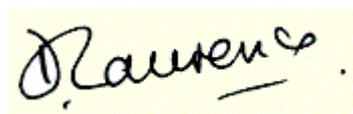
But the technology was just part of a bigger picture. It gave time, precious time, for the family to gather and for her parents and brothers to begin to adjust to the abyss that had so suddenly and treacherously opened up before them and that had in an instant changed their lives forever. There are not many moments in life you know instantly you will never be able or, however terrible, even want to forget. When they happen you are humbled before the immensity of the cosmos through which we are passing, of which we are citizens, and the tenderness and beauty of life seem unbearable.

When nature and technology agreed and Aisling died in the arms of her parents her brothers, already carefully and wisely counseled to deal with the unprecedented loss, helped to wash her body. This was Ireland where death is not airbrushed out of life. On their return home to the island they found that neighbours and friends had cleaned the house, cut the grass and

prepared extra beds for the American relatives. The priests in the picture were talking hard behind the scenes and preparing for the liturgy, integrating particular wishes of the family.

The wake lasted a few days as so many came to pay their respects and sit and talk. Old patients of Anne's from town who hardly left their own houses except to go to the doctor made the ferry trip to the house of grief. A neighbour in feud was reconciled. Dormant friendships leap back to life. A look, a hug, a few words communicate. When a heart is broken it shakes up all surrounding hearts. How else but through a broken heart may Lord Christ enter in? Heart-break makes ways to open other centres of consciousness with which it seeks union and as they are touched (our hearts are touched) they escape from the encrusted memories and bad feelings that keep them shut. For this reason perhaps, we feel a strange gratitude and reverence for those in the direct line of tragic suffering. Unknown to themselves, just as Aisling unknowingly blessed others with her blissful life, those who suffer teach and lead. Human empathy is a natural force and when it is awakened an unpredictable - and what may seem at first an inappropriate - energy is released into the system that we call grace. Tragedy impels us to the terrifying cliff-edge but as we fall over it we find ourselves borne on unseen air currents.

It is those mysterious, ineffable but tangible touches of grace in the midst of tragic loss that demand expression. The funeral mass and the local traditions were that language, a blend of the ancient, impersonal and the wholly individual and spontaneous. People filled and spilled out of the island church. Those outside had the island DJ's loudspeakers set up to hear what was happening inside. It would have been a rebuke to the cold abstractions of the aggressive atheists if anyone had felt it worthwhile to argue with them. The many ways people responded to the tragedy was itself the healing and meaning that human pain calls for. God does not make things happen. God is with us.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" with a small flourish at the end.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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