

17.02.2012: "I feel within myself that I have a right to move on"

"The protestant community is very insular too. They are very tight-knit communities. I come from a Presbyterian family, Presbyterian ideals are that do as you are told. Many people were brought up that way - the area where we come from we all did exactly the same thing - don't get me wrong a lot of us ended up in prison at the start of the troubles - we all came from the same little street and same little houses.

We did view the Catholic community with suspicion. There was one Catholic family in about fifty households. But if my granny made a pile of stew, she would end some over. They were OK - but they were OK at arms' length. The son was OK, but I wasn't allowed to play with him. There was that suspicion and fear.

To go back to the unionist politicians and church at that time, it was all about division and fear, to keep them in power. And hence in the late 50s and early 60s you had these anti-catholic marches. There was all that sort of hysteria. You see footage in Iraq and Syria now, and that's the way it was. That's how we were brought up. I'm not blaming the church for anything.

5.28: There always been a reluctance within the protestant community to take part in the arts here and creative writing. From a working class protestant perspective that was the domain of the middle classes or of catholics.

But if you go back down through the years you can point to some great protestant writers and authors. How do we get the protestant community connected to the arts? I think it's very important in many ways. The most important thing is that it gives you a voice that previously hadn't been heard.

On a personal level I had been a young paramilitary within the UVF and loyalism who had spent a long time in prison. I went in as a 17 year old and came out at 34. The 20 years I've been out of prison I've always worked. As a pastime I started to write.

In 2005, I'd put together a couple of short stories, and then I had decided to start writing a play. Like most of my stuff, I was reluctant to show it to people because I didn't want them saying it wasn't very good. I kept a lot of stuff hidden. But I'd given the play to someone to read, and it was passed on to a freelance creative writer.

She took the project on, and it was finally produced in 2009. Which meant a lot to me. It really increased my confidence that I could do this sort of thing. It also broke a barrier for me that the arts and the drama and theatre isn't the domain of someone else, I can take it, I'm good enough.

The night the play came out, the family of the person I murdered approached me and accused me of making a name for myself on the back of the relative who had died. It became quite a hot, heavy thing. It went to the press and the press exposed me for being this monster from the past. Which led to this discussion - am I not allowed to move on now?

In Northern Ireland society, if you don't move on you're classed as a dinosaur by the media, if you do move on you're not allowed to move on because you don't have the right. I voluntarily moved into a mediation process with that family that very, very few people knew about. I wanted it kept low key. The press didn't know about it. The press coverage had the effect of putting off other aspiring writers.

In July 2009, I went into mediation, and in August 2009 the mediation ended with me meeting family members, including the one person who had approached me, who was the

brother. The mediation was done under proper mediation network by the Victims Commission for Northern Ireland. I wanted it done properly.

It was quite traumatic. But I thought because they were victims they had a right to know what I knew. And I didn't have a problem telling them what I knew about the killing of their brother and son. That was 2010. I haven't had any media coverage since then. The family member who approached me has since died. The paper used that as an opportunity to put more stuff in about me. Not knowing at that time that mediation had taken place, and they still don't know that mediation had taken place.

So that's sort of behind me. It was quite traumatic for my family probably more so than me because they were putting photos of my family in the paper. Around that time last year I got together with a few other people who are all ex life sentence prisoners, and have very similar backgrounds to me. We had this notion to say look, we need to create a platform here for people within working class areas to have a voice, to train them up, to give them training in creative writing to train them in drama, to give them opportunities.

On a personal level (for me), it's about personal betterment. For me to move on by being creative in some way negates everything I have done in the past. It doesn't take away anything I've done in the past, and I would never suggest that.

What I did in the past I served 17 years for, I hold my hands up. I don't know what else I can do to say look, I'm sorry. I went to the family and said I'm sorry. I find doing something creative helps me as a person and if it gives others pleasure, that's good.

The mediation process hardened that resolve in me. Going to that mediation process, I had five demands from the family. One of those demands was that I stop writing - and that's what hardened my resolve. I'm going to go to this family and say look, I regret what happened to your son, I regret what happened to your brother, and if I could undo it I would, I'll tell you what you need to know. But why should I stop writing?

By the end of the process, that request was withdrawn. They had got to the other four things that they had listed, and at the end of the mediation they said look, we really don't care if you write again or not.

I can't deny my past. I didn't make money in writing the play - this wasn't the issue. The issue was that I'm writing for me and other people. I think I've got something to say and I think I've got a story to tell. If that can open up a discussion then great.

Through the whole process, it gave me that resolve to keep writing. I feel that I've served 17 years in prison and I've done everything that's been asked of me. I feel within myself that I have a right to move on. Otherwise I would throw my hands up and say I'll never have any peace.

We were looking for people to work with; and Chris was suggested. He's a member of the clergy; he commands great respect for his work during the peace process here so I thought he would be a great addition.

The experience was great. Jo arranged a reading with professionals, and to hear them reading it and dissect it, it gave me a good feeling as well.

Starting to hear the words that I have written come out of peoples' mouths was a good feeling. On the first night, it got a standing ovation. I was really chuffed, I have to say.

We're trying to encourage people to come forward creatively.

For one reason and another they don't want to be heard or seen at the moment. There's a community that feels as if they're being damned. There's a lot of guilt by association within the Protestant working class at the amount. A lot of problems have been brought by themselves - and that can't be denied. But there's a lot being people being tarred with the same brush that they didn't deserve.

There's good people that don't deserve that; (being told that) they're knuckle draggers or they're dinosaurs or that they don't what to move forward.

But here's a project - we will show you we can move forward. The skills are there in abundance - but either people are being suppressed or they are holding themselves back. but I think we'll get it done.

The community is very insular and very low in confidence in general. The protestant working class community, particularly in Belfast, feel they're being trodden upon, feel they're being scapegoats, and feel they're being blamed. They feel like they're being cast as the baddies - which is not true.

We need some positives to come out of the working class protest community - there's not enough of them. And I feel like this could be one of them. I think the what people feel - that they just need to keep quiet and get their head down. And I can understand that.

If you look at the rate of recidivism among political prisoners it's very low compared to the normal population, and compared to the mainland; they've all seen the error of their ways, they've all seen that violence's futile. They've all seen that it achieved absolutely nothing.

Most to the man realise this in prison during their long sentences. They are never going go back to that. They find it very easy to slip into everyday life when they come out.

Most of the people I know who are the same age as me are all middle aged men, mid 50s going onto 60; they are all normal guys living in the suburbs and they've got a family and they've got a car.

I was in a paramilitary organisation called the red hand commando which was affiliated to the UVF. I was in that organisation from when I was 15. I was arrested for possession of explosives and I was sentenced to four years at 17. I came out from that in 1974. I went back into the organisation and I was instructed to kill a person within that organisation. And I did that. And I was rearrested in February 1975 and was released in 1980.

It was easier to join than it was to opt out. The area I came from was a very staunch loyalist Protestant area it was very close to a very staunch Republican catholic area. There was a lot of tension, there was a lot of violence. These were two areas stuck together. And even in the late 60s leading up to 1969 there was always a lot of sectarian tension around. I became involved in the riots. I was 14. When you're involved in rioting there's always someone in the background who is keeping an eye on you, seeing who's a good shot with a stone, who can throw a bottle further. So sooner or later you were being nurtured. And that's exactly what happened to me.

You've got people saying he's quite brave, he's always up near the front, so they swapped stones for a petrol bomb, and then a petrol bomb gets swapped for a nail bomb, and there was a steady progression through the ranks. There were a group of teenagers who became the Red Hand Commando, like a junior UVF; they were very secretive, very active and very violent. The attraction to a 15 year old buoy who was making his own glass bombs and nail bombs....I wanted to do something.

I'd seen people getting shot dead on my street. It was a daily thing; and our form of defence was to attack - to act on those people who were destroying my community.

I would hate to be a teenage now for lots of different reasons. You still have a great deal of peer pressure. There's no reason to join the cause now....it's over. I would certainly tell people that. My friend told me that the only reason he didn't join an organisation was because he was afraid of his dad giving him a thump. Unfortunately I didn't have a dad in the house.

Nowadays kids don't want for anything, but somehow I feel their life is more difficult and the pressures - particularly around drugs - are a lot more prevalent. When the trouble started I started stopping out of grammar school and spending my time with my friends who weren't at grammar school.

The troubles changed my life and the way I thought. I thought had to do something to protect my community. I'm not sure they would have the support I had then - the support of the community. There was a great network, a great community, and a camaraderie that I don't think that's here now."