

JOHNNY FROM BALLINTUBBER

by Jean Tay

A Verbatim Monologue inspired by the interviews and writings of Brother Joseph McNally

(Lights up on Brother Joe who holds a piece of wood in his hands.)

So this, this is ancient bog wood. It inspires me. In its growth it was “incarnated” through the Spirit of God thousands of years ago. It died, was buried by nature and now is resurrected through the same Spirit into a new beauty.

Now, the bogwood yearns for the recognition inside, of a spirit of the thing. And I have to peel away the outer layers to allow the inside to show itself for what it is.

(Lights change. A spotlight, on Brother Joe.)

You can call me Johnny from Ballintubber.

That’s who I was in the beginning, that’s who I’ll be at the end. Little Johnny from Ballintubber. County Mayo, Ireland. Number eight in a family of ten.

My family lived in a small village with just five houses. Our house at the foot of this little hill, where the old oak was, rising above the bog, surrounded by bog lands. If you don’t know what bog lands are. That’s the marshy country where the bog has grown for the last 10,000 years.

First, the soil became too acidic, then the trees fell and the acidic soil grew over it for many feet. In early summer we’d go and cut that marsh, what we call turf, and spread them on the bank. We’d wheel these sods of turf away to dry for a few months. Then we’d bring it into the house to make a fire. There was a fire in the house, the whole year through. Even in summer, there was a fire going, in the kitchen. And every night the family would gather around the fire, the centre of entertainment.

The Irish are great storytellers, and they’d recreate the past for us kids, and we’d listen to every word. Record it in our little brains, that’s how we pass it to the next generation. We’d gather with our instruments and sing together, and the ghosts of the stories, oh they were right there with us. Sometimes, we’d find pieces of timber, ancient trees lying at the bottom of the bog.

Of course, in those days, we’d let the wood dry to make a fire. I mean, that would make a beautiful fire, but I much prefer it as ... as a work of art

(Lights change. An image of the sculpture, “Creative Hand” comes up.)

Creative hand, 2000.

This piece here, is from ancient bog oak. There was some decay I had to remove, but then, I saw what looked like a human arm emerge. I inserted red glass into the cavity and placed a green crystal globe in the hand. To me, it symbolized the creative energy of God. But when it comes to describing the inexpressible, what words, what materials can we use?
We can only stumble.

(Spotlight goes up on Brother Joe again.)

As a kid, there was a stream close to our house, and a clay nest which we used to call ‘doeb’. I’d scoop that clay out with my fingers and turn it into little animals.

Later I studied Art in school in my teens. But it was only after I had done my teacher training, that I began to take it seriously. I took evening lessons and submitted a painting for a nationwide competition and won. And that confirmed in me the desire to take art more seriously.

I came to Singapore soon after that. On the first boat bringing teachers out from Ireland to Singapore. Six of us came on that boat. We landed in Oct 1946, and I started teaching at St Joseph’s Institution. In those days, I used to be called paint-pot-Joe, because I spent all my free time painting. I didn’t do many sculptures then. But one day, I found this clay on Sentosa, along the seashore, by the rocks. I was amazed when I put my hand up and felt this soft clay, exactly the same kind of soft clay that I had found in Ireland as a boy. So I brought some of that back and used that for my own work.

(Lights change. An image of the sculpture “Bogwood Fish” comes up.)

Bog Wood Fish, 2000.

Much of this piece of oak had decayed and had to be removed. That helps explain the form. Certainly no fish ever took this shape. But somehow when I placed the marble globe where it now is, the top began to look like a fishhead. Imagine what the curry would be like!

(Spotlight on Brother Joe again.)

When I returned to Singapore after completing my dissertation, I went to teach at St Patrick’s. GP and a bit of art. That was a fruitful period, and I loved teaching. You are not just a teacher while you are in class. You are the same person in and out of class and you have the same concern for others. I remember taking my students to Ponggol and Tampines, near the beach, for weekend camps. Even if I was teaching, I was still an artist, and I’d use my aesthetic skills on them.

Recently, I met an ex-student who told me something I’d totally forgotten. She had picked up a nail on the beach and I pointed out how that nail had certain encrustations on it, probably coral and other things. And I showed her the beauty that was in that particular

nail. Years later, she said that had a powerful influence on her.

So it's the little things often that make the greatest impact on young people. Because when you give the whole of your personality to them, their personalities then blossom in response to you.

(Lights change. An image of Yoga Man comes up.)

Yoga Man, Bogwood, 2000.

I struggled with this piece of bog oak for many weeks, it refused to cooperate! The more I tormented my mind about it the more it seemed to sulk. It refused for example to be a ballerina. So I threw it in a corner upside down and left it there for several days, glancing in its direction every now and then while working on another piece. Then it began to glow.
Yoga man.

(Spotlight on Brother Joe again, his sculptures around him.)

When I do art, there is the desire to communicate, in a different way.
I communicate through my works, through this sculpture.
Sometimes, it doesn't please everyone. Sometimes it can be a harsh communication.
You are trying to communicate a truth about yourself.
This is me. This is what I am saying. This is a symbol of me. All these are symbols of me, as I now am, in my entirety. And that includes my faith.
Because it is always truth that you are communicating. And in the final analysis, God is truth.
Truth, beauty, these are qualities to be associated with God.

I am communicating the truth as I see it now. I'm still the same boy I was 70 years ago, the very same Johnny from Ballintubber, but I have added all kinds of dimensions, a better understanding of other people and a greater love for the people of the world.
I have all of that, and I communicate with all of that.

(Lights change. An image of the last sculpture, "The Kiss", comes up.)

The Kiss, 2000.

To some it may look unseemly of me, celibate that I am, to sculpt a kiss.
But a kiss is not necessarily erotic and this is not a kiss.
It is only a piece of wood which made that suggestion to me.
Come to think of it, we humans kiss what we love. I love wood.
If you look deeply into this wood, you'll understand why.

You see, ancient bog oak in its resurrection inspires strange visions.
Not unlike the flames of a turf fire on a winter's night long ago.

THE END