

One Way God Conversations

The wheels of Brother Bede's van sent a rhythmic report as it moved southward, at exactly sixty five miles per hour, between the connecting points of the twenty- four mile bridge across Lake Pontchartrain. He never tired of the perfume emitted from his cargo. Carefully stacked in every available cranny of his vehicle were hundreds of loaves of bread baked by Bede and a couple of lay volunteers while the rest of the monks at the rural abbey slept.

The concentration demanded by his vehicle left room for glances at the bloated white clouds that sent his mind to those Irish skies, at once of threat and promise, of his youth. His task, Monday through Saturday, was the charitable delivery of his loaves to soup kitchens of all and no faiths in New Orleans. Only three months into his assignment, the recently turned thirty Benedictine was happy in his work but longed for the prayerful chants of matins. In their place, he would recite the five decades of his rosary that concluded precisely with his arrival at the south toll plaza of the bridge. But this morning the sacred mysteries did not deliver their accustomed level of spiritual concentration.

“Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” his lips indicated speech but no sound emitted. It being a Friday, his contemplative subject would be the sorrowful mysteries, one for each decade of his beads. But Friday was also cranberry bread day and the enveloping aroma was his first distraction from the agony in the garden, sorrowful mystery number one.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,” a Causeway Police car blew by him lights flashing. Instinctively to him, the passing vehicle conjured a competitive challenge; in this instance, one not to be met.

As early as age twelve he had narrowed his vocation to two divergent paths. The religious life and the race track beckoned to him equally creating a torturous ambivalence. The conclusion of his mother's troubled pregnancy that produced him had coincided with his father's fatal fall in a construction mishap. “Margaret Mary,” the dour physician announced to her, “you have a son that will survive.” Taking a glance at his pocket watch to gauge how tardy he was for his next call, he continued: “He is not likely to be very big or very bright. I pray he will provide the affection that will be missing owing to the untimely departure of your dear Brendan.” Dr. Fennelly's prognosis would prove unerring on all counts.

Margaret Mary Keenan's years of service as an oblate to the nearby Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick moved the monks there to provide full tuition for young Kieran at the boy's school they operated. His intellectual growth was substandard but steady. But his spirituality intensified with each passing year as did his skill with the monastery's livestock, especially horses.

His faith lacked the pillar of intellectual inquiry but he embraced the revealed truths pressed into his consciousness by his mother and later his teachers at the Abbey school. His catechism told him who made him and why; nothing within its frayed cover ever need be questioned. Kieran's genuine and intense piety was without sophistication or arrogance.

The untimely passing of his Da, known to him only from photographs, he accepted as providential. He took comfort from his living family's reinforcement with those wake-worn phrases "he's in a better place" and "the good die young."

Brendan Keenan always had a way with horses said the locals at the Limerick Racecourse. Young Kieran was thus welcomed warmly when he sought part time work as an underage stable lad.

"It'll be good for his Ma and him as well," the trainer Clancy had told his staff when Kieran was brought in. Kieran's transition from mucking stalls to riding work was swift. Off of a horse, his appearance was unremarkable but not unattractive. His freckled nose and blushing cheeks were in total harmony with his Celtic genes. His altar boy countenance would have fit nicely on any Irish postcard. An instant transformation occurred once his feet met the stirrups. Experienced eyes marveled at the adolescent's soft hands and his elegant seat. Kieran Keenan was a natural indeed.

The now much rounder Liam Clancy had known success as a jump jockey decades earlier and was an ideal mentor for Kieran's talent. A maimed right leg, the result of a fall, combined with his portliness limited the trainer's instruction to commentary without mounted demonstration. Clancy's lectures brought forth his charge's talent so rapidly that he dispatched the youth to the Curragh on his sixteenth birthday to gain a rider's license. Kieran completed the test with borderline perfection earning a rare compliment from the Chief Steward of the Irish Turf Club.

The imperious Anglo-Irish Peer of the Realm arched his wildly protruding eyebrows and announced "Young Keenan, if you conduct yourself with integrity, there is no barrier to your success. Clancy has schooled you well. You are now eligible to compete."

"Your Lordship will not be disappointed I promise," Kieran answered with a bow executed with a genetically perfected if only apparent subservience and submission to authority.

Balancing riding work with school work made for long but satisfying days for the boy. The pre-dawn regimen riding exercise on the Limerick gallops left just enough time for a full breakfast at home before studies.

Mary Margaret Keenan's material benefits from Kieran's labors fostered feelings of maternal guilt. She dreamed of his entering Glenstal's cloistered community as a brother knowing his academic limitations made the priesthood, her first choice, beyond reach. Kieran's interest in the Abbey life was considerable but upon graduation he

accepted Clancy's offer to be full-time stable rider.

"You can do this job and still find time for your prayin', young Keenan," spoke the trainer, "and yer Ma will be the better as well." Like countless males of his generation, Liam Clancy had long ago abandoned religious practice if not a nominal association with the faith expressed in the religion blank contained in medical forms. Never did faith impede their team work. Liam did not criticize and Kieran did not evangelize.

The ten year Clancy-Keenan association served both members well. They competed successfully in the upper reaches of the lesser levels of Irish racing. The trainer commanded a loyal, if financially limited, complement of local owners. Riding first call for Clancy's stable provided nearly as well for Kieran and his mother as Brendan's work had in the building trade. The Keenan cows still produced, the chickens laid, and an old workmate of Brendan's arrived regularly with fresh game.

The trainer also possessed an awareness of the American flat racing game acquired as an assistant for three years on the New York circuit. His initial puzzlement at huddled men fixated on handheld stop watches during early morning work was quickly solved. At home horses trained competitively within groups. In America where a horse might on occasion have a companion, the value of his work was largely a function of time and the degree of labor required to accomplish it. Breezing, handily, and driving were words that quickly became part of his vocabulary. The disparate training protocol translated easily into race day difference. America was all about speed while Europe was a strategic system of gallop and finish where early leaders seldom lasted.

Liam's older brother, a bond trader for the Bank of Ireland, had been promoted to a position on Wall Street and brought Liam with him. Another move upward involved a transfer back to Ireland for the brother and led a reluctant Liam back home as well. Without the brother's accommodations, New York was an economic non-starter he knew at the time. The younger Clancy carried with him a keen knowledge of the subtle contrasts and nuance of training and racing thoroughbreds on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The only self promise he held within him was a vow to return someday to the American game.

Clancy's worldly experience captivated Kieran for whom a trip to Dublin marked the end of his earth. Ten years into their partnership, a trip to Dublin almost marked the end of Kieran's stay on his earth. Clancy had a two year- old colt that had far outrun its pedigree winning his first three starts against escalating competition. In all three wins the colt had been partnered by Kieran with increasing levels of confidence for horse, trainer and rider. Clancy decided the time had come, recalling from childhood the quote from the poet Robert Browning, for his "reach to exceed his grasp."

"Shine your boots, Kieran, we're off to the Curragh for the 2000 Guineas."

"I keep 'em shined, boss. They're as ready as myself."

Although dismissed at 20/1 by the bookmakers, Kieran's mount was a hard-held fourth

midway the mile race, but trapped on the fence. Patiently waiting for an opening, he saw his chance turning into the straight. Normal spring rains had recently gone missing and the already firm ground had moved to hard. The accustomed soft sound of hooves striking a giving turf had given way to a harsh echo of hammer on anvil.

Competing in his first Group I had reduced the rider's confidence none. When opportunity emerged, he clucked and his colt accelerated toward the small, widening gap being left by the tiring horse ahead that was bearing out. Simultaneous with that commitment, the colt nearest to the rail moved suddenly leftward clipping its back heels with Kieran's mount's front feet. The offender was knocked narrowly off course but Kieran catapulted over his colt's head tumbling hard to the ground directly into its path.

The thrust of an inadvertent hoof produced a fault line in his helmet, a severe skull fracture, and cranial bleeding. Days of unconsciousness in an induced coma followed. Margaret Mary was ever at bedside with Liam Clancy and a steady procession of Abbey monks alternating in support. Multiple surgeries followed surrounded by rosaries, novenas, and hand wringing. Liam Clancy participated only in the latter. All his thoughts toward the almighty were resentful ones at the horrible injustice visited on an innocent. Similar events in his lifetime had extinguished whatever inclination he had toward one way God conversations.

Kieran's shut eyes belied a dreamy state of mind that replayed life events real and imagined. There was Dr. Fennelly's gentle tug on the infant's head as he left his mother's womb. There were tutorials from his Da, Brendan, on proper gripping of a heifer's teats in milking and securing the hens' coop from itinerant foxes. Another mind scene was Margaret Mary offering a willing Kieran into the cloistered life at Glenstal Abbey. Even more fanciful was Clancy's legging him up on a Breeders' Cup winner at an unfamiliar track.

Nearly a month passed before Kieran's survival was assured. During that time, Abbot Padraig of Glenstal twice anointed him in the belief that death was imminent. The degree of recovery remained an unknown even at his discharge and any thought of a return to riding distant.

Prior to the incident, his jockey's medical record book contained a single entry of a broken collar bone suffered in a starting gate. His name had appeared nowhere in the official fall book kept by the authorities on all riders. The severe spill at the Curragh was entered as a standing down injury barring Kieran from riding until the very unlikely issuance of a medical clearance.

During his long convalescence, Kieran reached a point of functionality that enabled him to return to limited grooming tasks for Liam Clancy's stable. At the same time he was speaking intently with Abbot Padraig about a vocation at the Abbey. Padraig Scanlon offered serious but flexible observations on life's purpose to Kieran during their meetings in the garden within the ancient cloisters.

Those conversations, held with Margaret Mary's blessing, moved Kieran to take temporary vows and enter the Abbey as an uncommitted postulant where he would be known as Novice Bede. In a departure from protocol, the Abbot allowed his new member to continue his morning stable work, now including riding limited exercise. Liam had secured a medical clearance for his rider's reinstatement in hopes of a return to competition. Before that could happen, Liam's long awaited American opportunity resurfaced.

Liam's vow to return was fulfilled when the elder Clancy, flush with financial accomplishment, not only returned to Wall Street, but privately purchased a few racing age thoroughbreds for the younger brother to train on the New York circuit.

An offer to come along was politely declined by Novice Bede whose life was complicated by his budding spiritual vocation and his seriously ill mother. He would continue riding work for the locals at Limerick and eventually a few races.

Liam's brother, called Conor, found his success accompanied by loneliness and generosity. Underwriting Liam's American venture provided needed companionship as well as fulfilling the nurturing instinct he felt toward his younger by five years sibling.

Five of the six members of the Clancy string were reliable upper level claimers. The lone exception was a four year old colt named End Around, whose grandsire, Pass Catcher, had been the improbable winner of the 1971 Belmont Stakes. End Around had sold for \$500,000 as a yearling but had managed just one win in nine starts. All of the colt's starts had been on dirt but in spite of the absence of grass runners in his pedigree, Liam saw in his lithe stature the picture of so many turf runners he had trained in Ireland.

End Around's grass debut came in a non-winners of two allowance contest at the end of the Belmont fall meet. The colt won by daylight in a stunning wire to wire effort. There being no winter racing on grass in New York, Liam decided to move the entire string to New Orleans for the winter in pursuit of opportunity on the turf.

Liam was in the midst of early morning training at the New Orleans Fair Grounds in preparation for the meeting beginning on Thanksgiving Day when his cell phone rang. He reached deep into the pocket of his parka nearly dropping the phone made slippery by the steady rain. A deeply grieving Kieran was on the other end informing Liam of Margaret Mary's passing.

"Jaysus Kieran. Jaysus, Mary, and Joseph." He crossed himself instinctively. "A terrible thing it is."

"The Abbot buried her yesterday. She always had a fondness for you, Liam. Especially for all you did for us after Da went."

"And I for her Kieran. A lovely lady in every way. I knew she wasn't well but," his voice trailed off momentarily. "A terrible loss for all of us indeed. I'm not a prayin' man but yer in me thoughts." He paused once again. "The offer to join me is still open. I'm in

New Orleans with some pretty good stock. The riders are all Spaniards and Frenchmen. They don't understand a thing I tell them. I'd send a ticket if you were of a mind to come."

Kieran promised a quick reply but first sought the advice of Abbot Padraig, who sensed his charge's desire to join Clancy again and offered a solution. An old seminary classmate of Padraig's was abbot at St. Joseph's Abbey just an hour's drive from Fair Grounds Race Track. He would contact Abbot Etienne and broker an arrangement for Kieran that would permit him to continue his Benedictine formation while resuming his association with Liam Clancy.

Abbot Etienne Rouillier greeted Kieran and Liam warmly. Though nearly forty years separated them, Kieran and the Abbot shared an identical physical structure standing eye too eye. A youthful Etienne had ridden quarter horses at bush tracks in southwest Louisiana. Racing stories flowed freely until Liam's departure.

Though Kieran's commitment was bound by simple temporary vows not life vows, Abbot Etienne said he would be known as Brother Bede not Novice Bede. He would have responsibility for the charitable bread distribution route in New Orleans. This would still permit time for him to ride work for some of Liam's string each morning. Race riding would be restricted to the Clancy horses.

Abbot Etienne was taken with the new addition to the community. So often he had seen aspiring ascetics that were running away from their worldly lives. But the new Brother Bede seemed to hold a genuine attraction to their life without fear of the outside.

With Liam's help, the schedule was fixed. Brother Bede, by leaving the abbey by five, could make his twelve stops and be at the track for the second half of morning training after the track was harrowed at eight. He made a point of saving several loaves for the track chaplain who used them for sandwiches used to encourage attendance at his bible study classes.

From limited opportunity, the Clancy barn was in ascendance. By the end of January, the trainer-jockey team had six wins from twelve starts including End Around's wire to wire score in a Grade III stakes race. A steady flow of jockey's agents seeking Kieran's services left the Clancy barn in amazement once learning that, for confidential reasons, the rider rode exclusively for Clancy.

The adage of there being no secrets at race tracks held true as the details of Kieran's dual identity were soon known. And worse, a newspaper story on the forthcoming \$750,000 signature turf race featured a picture of End Around winning his last race under the caption "He Ain't Heavy He's My Brother."

When the article came to the attention of the Archbishop of New Orleans, a strongly worded suggestion was made by phone to Abbot Etienne that Brother Bede should choose at once between race riding and the religious life.

Kieran had feared the wholly expected moment for weeks. His deep reflection and prayers for guidance had produced nothing but confusion. Where was the God of his catechism? For the first time in his life, doubt entered his spiritual orbit.

Should he honor the memory of his mother with a lifetime commitment to the Order of St. Benedict? And if he did, should he stay at St. Joseph's or return home to Glenstal? Should he repay Liam Clancy for all his generosity by remaining a rider? Many were in the world and living Godly lives. Why couldn't he?

There was little in the secular world that attracted him except the life of the race track. His unsophisticated mind captured euphoria with equal measure from a photo beat and a Gregorian chant.

As he reached the end of the Causeway and the conclusion of his rosary, he had no idea what he would say to Abbot Etienne later that day. He completed his deliveries dropping off the last ten loaves in the empty office of the track chaplain. He then galloped two horses for Liam Clancy and worked End Around a half mile in 48 flat.

"He's never been better, Kieran, and we know he'll run for you."

Liam Clancy said no more but placed a paternal hand on his rider's shoulder. They both knew that entries for the \$750,000 race would be drawn the following morning and in the meantime, the jockey he hoped for faced the decision of his life.

The noon meeting with Abbot Etienne would be conclusive. The monastery life and race riding could not occupy the same orbit. Surely one must exclude the other. The deep affection held for this simple man by cleric and horseman alike had pushed the art of rule bending to its limit. If he remained Brother Bede, there could still be bread deliveries to the track and the odd training gallop for Clancy. But the competitive realm would be history.

As he got out of his van next to the abbey bakery, the fading scent of that morning's work blended with the lingering incense from a just concluded funeral. The clock on the Abbey chapel read 11:58 a.m.

As Abbot Etienne opened the door to his office, Kieran Keenan, hungry race rider, and Brother Bede, dedicated Benedictine, strode with indeterminate purpose to an awaiting destiny that neither could foretell.