

Speech! Speech! by Ian O'Malley

The cry goes up. The call for words. This need to verbalise the communal experience. Yep, Irish people love speeches.

I was sitting in the passenger seat of Andrew's green van. We were turning right over Graiguecullen Bridge when he asked me to be best man at his wedding. He was nervous about asking me. For reasons explained below.

Survey by Philadelphia State University, Department of Humanities, 2007: 'People's Top Ten Greatest Fears': Number 2: 'Speaking in Public'.

The average Irish person doesn't necessarily love standing in front of a large group of people and making a speech themselves. But the average Irish person does seem to have an inexplicable compulsion to make other people make speeches. Think of any event. The birthday party, the farewell dinner, the table quiz to raise money for the local camogie team...At some point the crowd will bay at the poor victim who happens to be the centre of attention for the night, 'Speech! Speech!' Mumble a few embarrassed words or grab the moment and let it all out there. Either way, you have to say something; they won't let you escape.

While living in Italy, I noticed a different phenomenon. I was at a joint birthday party for two Italian friends; I was the only non-Italian present. The moment came for the big presentation of gifts and subconsciously I was expecting to hear it: "Speech! Speech!", the familiar refrain. 'Nudi! Nudi!' they all shouted instead. No call for speeches at all. Just, 'Nude! Nude! Get your 40 Ian O'Malley clothes off!' Has its merits.

I was at a Spanish wedding. The meal went on for hours, five courses. The drink flowed. There were flamenco dancers, cigars brought around for all the men, countless noisy toasts to the happy couple, a Spanish guitar serenade, more food, music till 6am. No speeches.

Speeches are central to an Irish wedding. You know what the average outlay on a wedding was at the height of the Celtic Tiger? €30,000. Yes, €30,000. Yes, the average. Ice-sculpted swans and bows on chairs, chocolate fountains and bouquets of flowers coming out your arse, whatever it took to make the most important day of your life absolutely perfect. (Be honest with yourself, how many of those absolutely perfect weddings you attended did you find incredibly tedious?)

Regardless of the expense, one thing Irish people invariably comment on after a wedding is the speeches. These stick in people's memories, especially the bad ones. Remember the speeches that went on for far, far too long? Remember the 'ems' and 'ahs' and the 'Where was I?' The fumbling with notes. The jokes that fell flat. The throw-away comment that left some female relation in tears.

A speech I particularly enjoyed was one by the father of the groom at a wedding I attended. He had (and this resulted in a certain amount of controversy) missed his

son's marriage ceremony because he was still drunk from the night before. His speech consisted of just three words: 'Let's get pissed.'

Andrew had been my best friend since we were teenagers. He was nervous asking me to be his best man because he wasn't sure what my answer would be. I might have said no. We weren't friends any more. It wasn't that had we drifted apart or anything. No, we'd fallen out badly and suddenly and our friendship had never recovered.

The best man's speech. The most anticipated one of all. You know the format: the best man drags up every old story to humiliate the groom. I'd never really understood why that is so. But now? Now, I had the chance and the means, the vehicle, to express all the hurt and resentment I'd felt for so long towards Andrew. On this day of all days, in front of everybody. And he'd given me this chance himself. Vengeance...

Nah. Obviously not. Andrew asking me to be his best man was all the gesture of reconciliation that was needed. I embraced it.

I had a look at some books on best man's speeches. All crap. I thought about previous speeches I'd heard, thought of all the clichés and lazy jokes I wanted to avoid. I wanted to do this right. Make people laugh. Get the right mix of jokes and being genuine. Andrew deserved for me to come up with something original, worthy of him, of the gesture he'd made, worthy of the glorious, transcendent friendship we'd once had and hoped to have again.

So, on a sunny day in September, I stood up nervously in front of everybody at Andrew's wedding: his new wife, parents, his brother, his sister, all his friends. No pressure, I told myself. The expectant faces were all looking at me, waiting for me. People will remember this for years to come only if you mess it up, I told myself. Someone said to me beforehand they'd be watching to see if my hands were shaking. They definitely were shaking. Andrew said to me with that smile of his, 'Don't hold back, lad. Let me have it.'

I began. 'Being Andrew's best man and thinking what advice I can offer to him for his future married life is kind of strange because when we were young lads he was always the one giving me advice on love and girls. And on the basis of that advice, I didn't have my first proper girlfriend until I was twenty-five. So cheers for that lad...'

All the jokes worked. I didn't insult anyone, didn't go on too long. I expressed sincerely-felt sentiments without being mawkish or clunky. Afterwards, one uncle of the bride gave me a score of ninety-seven out of a hundred for the best speech he'd heard in ages. Andrew gave me a big hug. So did his wife. It felt so good. Relief. And a wave of exhaustion. Much later on, one of the pretty bridesmaids, who thought my speech was 'hilarious', let me walk her back to her hotel-room door and gave me a kiss goodnight on the cheek. Yippee! I was easily pleased.

Making that speech as Andrew's best man was the thing that did most to heal the estrangement from each other we'd experienced for so long. Putting our friendship

into words made us both realise how much it meant. How much we'd missed each other and still liked each other... if that all doesn't sound too trite.

The end.

No, not really.

Nine months later, there was a call for another speech.

Survey by Philadelphia State University, Department of Humanities, 2007: 'People's Top Ten Greatest Fears': Number 1: 'Fear of Death.'

Four o'clock in the morning, the room silent. Andrew's father was huddled in an armchair opposite me. His eyes were scrunched closed and there was a cup of cold tea in his trembling hands. He asked me if I'd make a speech about Andrew again.

Ten hours before, Andrew had worked and chatted. He was still a bit hungover from a party the night before. He called his wife to say he was on his way home. Then, he just died. Heart stopped. Fell to the ground. Mid-sentence.

On a rainy day in June, I stood up in front of everybody to speak at Andrew's funeral. His wife, his brother, sister, his mother and father. Everybody. The same faces from nine months before. Nobody said to me they'd be watching to see if my hands were shaking. My whole body was shaking and grief-stricken and determined. My knees were buckling inside my stupid black suit.

How do you put this into words? No books to guide you now. Jokes? Genuine? Does it matter? It mattered to me.

I felt the crushing weight of this responsibility as I'd never felt anything in my life. Being asked to deliver this speech gave me a sense of honour that will never leave me – ever.

Put words on your friend's life. Open your mouth. Go on. Speak. They're looking at you, waiting for you. The expectant faces. Pleading for you to say something. You're good at this. You know you are. Go on. No one else has the strength to do this now. This one little thing you're good at. Make a speech. Go on. Get it right.

'Don't hold back, lad. Let me have it,' Andrew would have said to me with that smile of his. 'You're my best friend. I'm glad it's you doing this.'

I began, 'I first met Andrew when I was thirteen years old...'