

Returning to Sleah Head

Category: Recovering

written by Steve Wilson | September 10, 2025

Halfway round Dingle Peninsula rises dramatic Sleah Head. The narrow coastal road hugs the cliffs, makes a sharp turn, and continues on through the amazing green landscape.

Rumbling precariously along that road, our coach driver, Martin, playfully warns the students we might fall off the cliff at any moment. We're nearing the end of our Ireland study abroad trip, so my wife and I ask Martin to stop and let our students photograph the stark, roiling Atlantic; the distant Blasket Islands; the gulls buffeted by the churning, cold winds. Last pictures. Last glances across the steel-gray surge.

We had almost canceled the program in May. Facing a recent cancer diagnosis and its attendant treatments, I'd wondered if I could delay the procedures until our return in mid-August—without the disease spreading and with some of my sanity intact.

So every moment of the trip that August bore a patina of loss and longing. For five weeks I said my goodbyes. I looked at familiar places feeling I might never see them again. As Martin pulled into the Dingle lay-by, I felt I needed to mark what might be my last moments in the wilds of a landscape I'd come to see as my own. I decided to walk the final mile along the road to Coumeenole Beach, where we would stop for lunch. I closed my windbreaker against the cold and set off, listening as the bus—the voices of the students giddy with anticipation—rolled away.

The startling blue of the sky, the rough green of the fields sloping down to the shore, the sober gray of the rocks, the eternity of the wind and waves: I let romanticism sweep over me, felt fully and solemnly, deeply. Eventually, the students' distant laughter reached me again as they ran toward the ocean's sharp cold, shrieking and calling to one another. It was perhaps the most forlorn sound I'd ever heard—that youthful call, with my thoughts so many decades away, and sinking fast.

Surgery in late August revealed positive margins and the need for seven weeks of daily radiation. We paused our planning for the next year's program, unsure what lay ahead. Months became a year of anxiety. For the first time, I sensed myself not in control, my days troubled by uncertainty's billowing swells. How broad the darkness, what depth winter's chill, from what dreams a cipher to worry and unknot?

And then, at last, I was there again.

At Sleah Head's white, wind-blasted, holy grotto.

Another August.

Another group of students sharing unreservedly something that means significance, and faith, and being.

Shaking Martin's hand, I stepped down off the bus and, bundled in a confusion of wistfulness and persistence, set off.

Along the road, clouds cast shadows onto the far fields, the water.

Home, again. Home.

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