

Son of Patrick

By Peter McFadden

The arrival of St. Patrick's Day brings me back to a time when, with alarming frequency and increasing intensity, the words "it's impossible" were ringing out in my head.

A born-and-bred New Yorker, I was living thousands of miles away in that former crossroads of Carpathian commerce, the city of Kosice in eastern Slovakia, today a modern urb of some 250,000 people on the rebound from four-plus decades of communist misrule.

I had moved to this obscure city, somewhat on a whim, to fulfill a life-long ambition of mine. I wanted to put into practice what I had learned years before, as a mere lad of seventeen, in a high school political philosophy class.

But, in far off Slovakia, I was discovering that dreams are often harder to realize than visualize.

What had thrilled me those years before was that brilliant book, the French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. In particular, I was stirred by his observation, penned in 1831, that what made America a great country was our propensity as citizens, spontaneously on our own, to form voluntary associations.

These independent groups Tocqueville so admired met a whole variety of public needs and advanced a wide range of private interests, and their organizers never gave a moment's thought of seeking government approval or assistance.

Inspired by the self-reliance of the founders of these groups, who we should be proud to call our forebears, I resolved right there, in that classroom, to work in my lifetime to keep alive their great spirit with which they infused American democracy. But I did not anticipate the detour I would take barely a decade later.

In November 1989, the Czechs and Slovaks gleefully concluded their Velvet Revolution, and a month later my mind was to surprise me with this question: why not head out across the Atlantic and work alongside them as they sought to build a new democracy?

So, as a kind of missionary for what I consider the best part of the American way-of-life, and with appropriate zeal, I soon found myself selling my car, quitting my job, and boarding an aircraft bound for Prague.

I was to work overseas for eight years, and I certainly underestimated the practical difficulties involved, but I never lost hope during that time of finding some way to assure on that foreign soil that America's Tocquevillian spirit truly took root.

I am not much for giving lectures. I wasn't much interested in appealing to intellectuals anyway. I wanted the people themselves to understand what it meant to be democratic citizens, and I wanted them to understand it in their bones.

I constantly plumbed my mind for ideas that could demonstrate in practice the democratic habit Tocqueville had so admired in us, and from time to time I did hatch some inspired initiatives, but the small triumphs I was to enjoy did not fully satisfy me.

Until my eighth and last year. Long in search of a "dramatic local success story that can inspire and show the way for others," I had moved to obscure Kosice, a city I would describe in a funding proposal as a "sleeping giant" because of the proud, independent streak of its people and its old town square, which I pronounced one the "great potential public spaces in the region."

I threw myself into the task of waking this giant of a city up. And, one day, walking across its beautiful square, I hit upon the big idea that would do it. Our local voluntary association, the Kosice Forum, was going to fill that historic expanse with young and old dancing the Macarena. And, we were going to break the Guinness Record as we did so.

The book said we would need 48,000 participants, and the city's largest celebration each year, New Year's, barely drew a third of that, so we had not selected for ourselves the easiest of ambitions. Our odds were not improved by the lack of money on our account or the slight depth of our full-time staff, which numbered only three. But, you only live once.

Organizing the dance would prove to be a difficult and agonizing ordeal. Given our tenuous existence, it was either succeed or go under, and just about everyone predicted our deep disappointment. The lingering influence of the long since disbanded secret police, I was told, had made people uncomfortable socializing in public. Too few would show up.

And the volunteers we needed, they would not come forward to offer their services. A friend explained that the communists had long forced people to "volunteer" for such tasks as harvesting potatoes. They had grown to resent the term and would recoil at the suggestion.

Fielding this steady stream of pessimism was not made any easier by our worries about making our quarterly rent payment, not to speak of our monthly payroll. Our sense of foreboding was only deepened by the slow pace with which people registered for the

dance. Only a few thousand signed up early, far short of the forty-eight we would need.

On our staff, tempers soon flared. We had already been operating "on edge" for some time. Our association's manager, one day finally completely exasperated, angrily asked me, "Why are you always making us do the impossible?" I had to agree, in my heart, that I had not chosen for us the most standard of lives.

Our torment only grew deeper, to the point where one morning our manager was to greet me, when I arrived at the office, with a glare in her eyes and this sharp question on her tongue: "Why are you here?" Confused, I could only look at her with a blank stare. "Go home and pray," she commanded. "When you pray for things, they happen." I left without saying a word.

When an atheist tells me to pray, I listen. Back home, I did my best to plead our case to God, but I was in tremendous pain myself. The worries of the preceding eight years had left a cumulatively corrosive mark on me. We had often been on the verge of bankruptcy, and for years, as we had gone about trying to do good, I had also carried about within me the heavy burden of fear that one day, perhaps soon, I would be forced to fire my staff, who had become my good friends.

I was emotionally and physically exhausted. And I was beset by that indescribably beautiful but nonetheless haunting breed of loneliness that perhaps only missionaries can appreciate. The choice to live among a foreign people had been mine, and I was trying to make a gift of the best of myself to them, but I was not of them, and I was far away from home, both in miles and in years, where I could be understood and could understand. I wondered for how much longer I could continue in this chosen, solitary life.

I pondered the not-yet-fulfilled dream of the seventeen-year-old boy I once was, the pain of our present existence, the anger of our manager, "Why was I always asking the impossible of her?" I was angry at myself, too, "Why was I so driven to ask the impossible of myself?" I had turned down a high-paying job and now found myself with a host of headaches working for free. The sleek car that could have been mine instead was a dumpy old Czech Skoda, which I had to give away because it did not work.

I thought of all this, I thought of my life, and I thought of the nearly fifty thousand people we would need to make the "SuperMacarena" a success. And I thought to myself, "it's impossible," and I repeated to myself, "it's impossible," over and over again.

I had found throughout the years that it helped to have a distraction, something completely unrelated to

any pressing challenge, to give my mind a break. Being of Irish descent, but born in America, I had decided that in those moments when I needed to think of something else I would explore what it meant to be Irish. I had brought to Slovakia with me a small library of books on Ireland for this very purpose.

On this morning, with the refrain "it's impossible" ceaselessly pounding through my head, and prayer to God a difficult proposition to sustain, I picked up from that library, in a desperate attempt at diversion, Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (a book, I now like to joke, that is at least partially true).

Through the piercing anguish that occupied my mind, I learned how Ireland was thought to be so insignificant that the Romans never bothered to make it a part of their empire. Conversely, when the barbarians were later to ransack their realm, they left isolated Ireland alone.

How fortuitous for the world, as I was to discover from Cahill's book that St. Patrick should be known for more than green beer. He loved learning, and it was under his influence that Irish monks began their painstaking work of transcribing so ornately the classic texts of European philosophy and theology. When the barbarians burned what libraries existed throughout Europe, thankfully, much of the canon of Western literature remained, in ignored Ireland, secure.

I was proud to learn that we Irish, so often looked down upon, had made such a crucial contribution to world culture.

As I continued with Cahill's book, I learned that the Irish church after Patrick flourished, in part because the only possible way an Irishman could lead a life of the mind was to become a monk. Aspirants joined communities and, according to tradition, once these grew to thirteen members, a monk would leave to start a new one. Soon enough, there were thriving monasteries scattered throughout the Emerald Isle.

It was not long before St. Columba set forth from Ireland to start a new colony, on the island of Iona off Scotland's shore. In the centuries that followed, scores more Irish monks would spread out across Europe, and with them they would bring back to the continent its lost civilization.

As I sat there reading this book, in pain, alone, and thousands of miles away from home, it touched me deeply to learn that my missionary footsteps were not my own. They had first been laid by my Irish forebears, blood of my blood, more than a thousand years before. Through the pages of Cahill's book, it was as if these itinerant Irish monks had strained forth across the centuries to share with me my loneliness.

I marveled at the wonder of this, but it was still hard to perish from my thought the urgency of the present situation. In fact, it was "impossible." And, the more I sought to concentrate on the pages of Cahill's book, only more fiercely did the words "it's impossible" ring out in my mind. The pressure grew so intense within my head that I feared it might burst.

At the very moment it seemed I could no longer take it, when those words, "it's impossible," were pounding me with their sharpest thrusts, I reached the bottom of the 104th page of Cahill's book, where this 1500-year-old exhortation from St. Patrick leapt out at me: "From the bottom of your heart, turn trustingly to the Lord my God, for nothing is impossible to him."

Stunned, I stopped reading right there, put the book down, and asked myself, "Do you believe in God?" My heartfelt answer: "I do." I knew, at that moment, that the SuperMacarena would work. Calm descended upon my soul, and the next day I was able to report at the office that I had prayed and that everything would be okay.

St. Patrick's fifth century supplication, which is of course legend (but we Irish believe legends), was meant to admonish a cohort of his frightened compatriots, who were lost on a journey and in fear of starvation. At the saint's urging, they attempted prayer, and a herd of pigs stampeded into their presence. As Cahill would write, "Not just food, but the best food of all!"

We were to experience a stampede of our own, upon my return to our office. Defying all projections, five hundred volunteers would come to our aid, and the steady pounding of their footsteps on the wood staircase that led to our door was, for me, an eerie echo across those 1500 years.

And let's not forget Tocqueville, he would surely have approved of the forty-four companies who, with little prodding, came forth to offer needed money, goods, and support. We were to lack for nothing.

Not long before the dance, I was once asked what we would do if it rained. Without hesitation, I responded that there was no need for a postponement date, that it

might rain the morning of the dance, but by nightfall, when the show was to begin, the weather would be perfect. I knew this, and I wondered how.

When I awoke the morning of the big day, it was cold and wet outside, not auspicious weather for an outdoor event that called for thousands of small children to participate, but my faith held firm. And by that afternoon, indeed, the sky had cleared up and the mercury had risen. That evening, as I stood on center stage, each time someone was to tell me the weather was perfect, a chill would run down my spine.

The dance officially began at 8:00 pm, and at 9:34 the newspaper *Pravda* would be able to report that the published record of 48,000 had been broken. By evening's end, a total of 67,156 joyful Kosicans had joined in.

As the outpouring of spirit from this assembled crowd washed up over the stage upon which I stood, I raised my sights, looked deep into the night sky, and asked God, "What's next?"

When I finally returned home to live in New York, it was not hard to find a small statue of St. Patrick in my house. In thanks, I gave it the place of honor on my windowsill.

Through Cahill's book, St. Patrick had reached out from on high and across the ages, had put his hand on my shoulder, and had given me the strength to go on.

And why shouldn't have St. Patrick interceded on my behalf? It's not only that I'm Irish, or even that I was leading a kind of missionary life. Isn't it only appropriate that a saint who so revered learning, who had done so much to keep the classics of literature alive, would come to my aid, when my work had itself been an effort to revive an old masterpiece of political philosophy?

And St. Patrick had his other reasons, as well. He knew during that dark period of my life what I was only recently to rediscover: I was baptized on March 17th, his day.

And my last name, McFadden? In Irish, it means "son of Patrick."