



Tribute to an Irish Mother

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On March 16, 2006, the American Ireland Fund awarded Senator Biden "The Distinguished Leadership Award." That evening, Senator Biden paid tribute to his mother, Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden.

Thank you for this honor, and for the wonderful work of the Fund.

The Troubles. I first heard about them from my grandfather, Ambrose Finnegan. All Irish Americans have heard the tales of decades of carnage and division. And we have been heartened by the last decade of remarkable progress toward peace.

But as much as we Irish Americans want peace, we can't want it more than the Irish of Ireland.

Last year, the Provisional IRA made a historic decision to end the armed struggle.

This year, the Democratic Unionists face a historic choice: will they share political power with the nationalist community?

Next year, when we meet here again, it is my hope, and my mother's prayer, that you will have taken government back into your own hands - and Ireland will again be on the road to a permanent peace.

What was it that Yeats said? "Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart." Don't wait until hearts turn to stone. I challenge all political leaders: follow what Lincoln called your better angels. It is in our nature. It is the 21st century. Look forward and write a new chapter of Irish history.

I want to thank you all again for this honor. I know my mother has always loved and adored me -- but this is one of the few awards I've ever been given that makes me feel totally worthy within my mother's eyes.

Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden is the soul, spirit, and essence of what it means to be an Irish American.

She is spiritual. She is romantic. She honors tradition, and understands the thickest of all substances is blood, and the greatest of all virtues is love.



She has taught her children, all her children in my neighborhood who flocked to her hearth, that you are defined by your sense of honor and you are redeemed by your loyalty.

She is quintessentially Irish -- a combination of pragmatism and optimism.

She also understands as my friend Pat Moynihan once said, there is no "point in being Irish if you don't know that the world is going to break your heart eventually."

But she is more. She measures success in how quickly you get up after you have been knocked down.



She believes bravery lives in every heart, and her expectation is that it will be summoned. Failure at some point in everyone's life is inevitable, but giving up is unforgivable.

As long as you are alive you have an obligation to strive. And you are not dead until you've seen God's face.

My mother is a living portrait of what it means to be Irish - - proud on the edge of defiance. Generous to a fault. Loyal to the end. She made not only me believe, but scores of my friends and acquaintances believe in themselves.

As a child I stuttered. She said it was because I was so bright I couldn't get the thoughts out quickly enough.

When my face was dirty, and I was not as well dressed as others, she told me how handsome I was.

When my wife and daughter were killed, she told me God sends no cross a man is not able to bear.

And when I triumphed, she reminded me it was because of others.

She was watching through the kitchen window as I got knocked down by two bigger guys behind my grandfather's home. She sent me back out and demanded that I, to use their phrase, "bloody their nose," so I could walk down that alley the next day.

When my father quit his job on the spot because his abusive boss threw a bucket full of silver dollars on the floor of a car dealership to humiliate his employees, she told him how proud she was.

No one is better than you. You are every man's equal, and every man is equal to you. You must be a man of your word, for without your word you're not a man.

When I was in eighth grade, I was a lieutenant on the safety patrol. My job was to keep order on the bus. My sister and best friend Valerie acted up. At dinner that night I told my mother and father I had a dilemma. I

had to turn my sister in - it was a matter of honor. My parents said that was not my only option. The next day I turned my badge in.

I believe the traits that make my mother a remarkable woman mirror the traits that make the Irish a remarkable people. Bent, but never bowed. Discriminated against, but always looking down at their discriminator. Economically deprived, but spiritually enriched. Denied an education, but a land of scholars and poets.

As I look out at those massive Corinthian columns, I see my 5 foot, 2 inch mother, who stands taller in my eyes than any pillar in this room.

And I think of the Irish poem "Any Woman" by Katherine Tynan:

"I am the pillars of the house;
The keystone of the arch am I.
Take me away, and roof and wall
Would fall to ruin utterly.
I am the fire upon the hearth,
I am the light of the good sun,
I am the heat that warms the earth,
Which else were colder than a stone."