

# lingua weekly

## Stephen

By Dónal Thompson



Early one Sunday morning in spring in 1982 a young university student called Stephen jumped from the top of a block of flats in Manchester. He landed on grass. My girlfriend Helen and I were the only people around.

While she went to phone an ambulance I covered him with my coat and held his hand. He was drifting in and out of consciousness. He told me his name and his address. Then he died.

Later that day a policeman came to my flat to "take a statement" (a formal account of what happened). He told me that he had been to the address Stephen had given me and spoken to his flatmates. Apparently Stephen was under pressure to pass his university exams. The fear of failure killed him

Failure and success are what we decide they are. We killed Stephen.

So why do we do it?

Why have we created a success driven society?

We don't need it. There is enough food and energy in the world for everyone. Our survival doesn't depend on it.

Would it have been such a tragedy if Stephen had not passed his exams?

Can the morgue be more rewarding than MacDonalds?

In my judgement we should make a distinction between success and happiness. Success is getting what we want. Happiness is wanting what we get. If life isn't about happiness, then what is life about?

When we look at our children do we see future lawyers, doctors and businessmen? Because what we should see is children. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poorman, beggarman...what does it matter?

### The Fisherman and The Millionaire

There was a fisherman sitting by the harbour drinking a glass of red wine when a millionaire businessman passed by.

"Why aren't you fishing?" he asked.

"I've got enough fish for my family today," replied the fisherman.

"But if you catch more fish you can sell them."

"What for?"

"To make money to buy a bigger boat."

"Why?"

"To catch even more and make even more money. You could be rich like me"

"Then what?"

"Then you can enjoy life"

The fisherman sipped his red wine and looked at the millionaire.

"And what," he asked, "do you think I am doing right now?"

Isn't it rude to judge other people? What is it you say in Spanish when someone is impolite? Oh yes. I remember. "Mal educado" - "Uneducated"

Schools with their archaic, competitive examination system, pushy parents living their lost opportunities through their offspring are dangerous. Dressing up avarice as wanting to belong.

Of course we need doctors and bankers and judges. But we need poets and singers and mystics every bit as much. Maybe even more.

*"Life isn't serious. It isn't sombre. It's an adventure, it's almost a game. You have to hide from the seriousness of the idiots." (Jaques Brel)*

That was the lesson nobody taught Stephen.

What a shame! What a pity! What a waste!