

Hunger striker, 1981: Laurence McKeown

Ireland in Schools

Laurence McKeown, one of the IRA hunger strikers who survived the 1981 campaign because of his mother's intervention on the seventieth day, 6 September 1981. The strikers were protesting at the UK government's refusal to grant them special status as political prisoners. Such status would have given them improved conditions, including the right to wear their own clothes meet with other prisoners, and to avoid prison work duties.

What it felt like

You're very sleepy and very, very tired and you're sort of nodding off to sleep but something's telling you to keep waking up. This was the thing that kept everybody going through the hunger strike in trying to live or last out as long as possible. I knew death was close but I wasn't afraid to die - and it wasn't any sort of courageous or glorious thing. I think death would have been a release. You can never feel that way again. It's not like tiredness.

It's an absolute, total, mental and physical exhaustion. It's literally like slipping into death.

Meeting my family

My mother came in, sister, brother, my father and different uncles. And I think all of them, except my mother, asked me to come off the hunger strike. I was still lucid at that time. There was a lot of crying and a lot of silences.

I can remember the morning of the sixty-ninth day, when I got some time with my mother. I was probably just dozing off, sleeping and waking up, and when I was waking up I was lucid. My mother had been a bit religious, not in a bits way but she had a sort of quiet faith, I suppose, you would say. I remember her saying to me, 'You know what you've to do and I do what I've to do.' That was the way it was left between us. I think what my mother meant was that it was God's will and if it ended up in a situation where I was in a coma, then she would act to save my life. I didn't pursue it any further, as I thought I would just die instantly.

Apparently, on the evening of the sixty-ninth day I was talking to people who weren't there, and calling people by the wrong names. On the morning of the seventieth day the doctors were looking for certain reflexes and I wasn't responding in any way. And I think about noon, my mother authorized medical intervention. There had already been several people this had happened to: I was the last one that it happened to because the hunger strike ended a few weeks afterwards. I had a whole mixture of motions. I can't say I happy to be alive, but I certainly couldn't say I was sad to be I wasn't even thinking about what was going to happen in the future.

How did I feel about my mother after she had taken me off?

I didn't feel any way different about her because I just knew that she had stood by me all that time anyway. I could understand her point of view. A number of people had made interventions. She wasn't politically committed to my ideas but she was committed to me as a son. I certainly didn't ever say anything to her that would have been hurtful. I think much was left unspoken.

