

I first heard this story in Ireland so I can honestly say that it is now Irish American. I have seen or heard many versions of and it is always a good story. It has an original author long lost in the development of a good folk tale. To the original author, I tip my hat and lift my glass. You have done us all a great service.

The Secret to a Good Life **By Ray Aumack**

Though the constant cold and damp of the Dublin springtime was depressing, Professor McCarthy was very satisfied on this the penultimate day of his semester. He felt that he had taught his Philosophy class extremely well and his students had also done very well. To reward his students he announced, "Tomorrow, in the last class of the semester, I will share by demonstration the secret of a sane and sober life. You may bring guest, if you like."

Students crowded into the amphitheater early the next morning anticipating McCarthy's penchant for the dramatic. And indeed, their preparation for the unusual was rewarded, because of a long table on the lecture platform. In the center of the table was a clear plastic bowl, about three times the size of the average punch bowl. On one end of the table was a pile of rocks, some large enough to be used in building one of Ireland's famous walls. Next to it was a pile of much smaller stones. The bowl was prominent in the center of the table but next to it was a pile of gravel and next to that, a pile of sand. Curiously, at the end of the table stood two pints of Guinness, each with the famous foam head clearly visible with a shamrock carved into the foam.

The students settled into their seats and McCarthy slowly walked to the center of the lecture platform and stood in silence in front of the large bowl. When he knew that he had their undivided attention he began his demonstration. "This bowl," he said, "represents your life. Many things will, fill your life. There will be achievements, successes and failures, you may experience great wealth and you may achieve fame to go with your fortune. I dare say that most of you will marry and have children. You will accumulate many things that will reflect your accomplishments, a home, automobile, and all the accoutrements of a successful life. Ah, but with all your probable success, there will be an equal amount of stress and it is the stress that can kill you."

He called two burley students to the platform and asked them to start putting the large rocks into the bowl. "Fill it up," he said. As they worked, he continued speaking pointing out that each rock represented something very significant in their lives. "The rocks represent the big things," he said. He reminded them of Maslov's hierarchy and used the examples of shelter, sustenance, education, faith, and love, to demonstrate the absolutely essential role of these things. "They are the foundation of your life," he said.

The students had finished filling the bowl and McCarthy asked his assembled audience, "Is the bowl filled." The group responded in unison that it was.

“Thank you,” he said. He then asked two other students to take the smaller stones and put them in the bowl. “They won’t fit,” stated several students at once. “Ah, we shall see,” said McCarthy. He instructed his volunteers to gently vibrate the bowl as they put in the stone. Sure enough the stones fell into the many air spaces among the rocks.

“These also represent some very important things in your life. For instance, your work, the community you choose to live in, and the kind of house you will build, the essential possessions that will make your house a home. The car you drive, the clothes you wear, all of these things are important.”

He looked at the bowl and asked if it was filled. Everyone shouted, “Yes. It is filled.” Again he asked student volunteers to pour the gravel into the bowl. “It won’t fit,” they all said. As the gravel was poured in, again they shook the now heavy bowl and sure enough, the gravel fell into empty spaces among the rocks and stones. “These are the things that you really do not need,” said Dr. McCarthy, “but they are nice to have. See, they fit into your life without adding any stress. The gravel did not add anything to the volume of the bowl. An example is the nice vacation, the opportunity to travel, the opportunity to take continuing education courses for personal enrichment, a vacation home in the mountains or near the strand. You can live well without these but if you can afford them, they are nice to have.”

Finally, the only thing left on the table was the fine sand. Again, he asked for volunteers to pour the sand into the bowl. “The bowl is filled, it won’t fit,” they all shouted. The volunteers shook the bowl and the sand fell into empty spaces and did not add any more volume to the bowl. “Is the bowl filled now,” asked the professor. “Yes,” they all shouted. “I think you are right,” said McCarthy. “The bowl is quite filled.”

“The sand represents things in your life that you really don’t need. A fine leather bag will do fine instead of a Gucci. A good car that uses fuel economically will do fine instead of a Porsche. A good watch will work just as well as a Rolex. That sailboat is a big hole in the ocean into which you throw money. But, you see, you can even have some luxuries you really don’t need if they fit into your life like the sand fits into the bowl.

The secret to a really happy life is to prioritize and balance. The four elements filled the bowl without spilling over. The spill over is stress. You do not need it. It might even kill you. Pay attention to the important things. Everything else will follow.”

The crowd of students and their friends stood up and with applause and cheers lauded the presentation of their professor, until a student shouted, “Professor, what about the two glasses of porter? What is that all about?”

“Ah ha,” said Dr. McCarthy. “Someone one has discovered the most important point of this lesson. No matter how much you achieve; no matter how much you own; no matter how busy you may become; you are never to busy to ignore the opportunity to sit and have a pint with a friend. There is no life without friendship and good craic.”

