



The Corrymeela Podcast - Season 3

Thanks so much for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. You might like to discuss the episode and the accompanying questions with friends, family, or a discussion group, or just use them for your own writing and reflection.

If you're part of a group, be mindful and considerate of one another's willingness to engage in the discussion - leave space for people to keep their reflections to themselves if they want to. You might also want to agree on some general principles to stick to, like: everybody's invited to speak once before anyone speaks twice, and: try to assume that everybody is speaking with good intent.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness among you.

You might like to choose one or two of the Very Short Story questions that we like to put to guests at the end of each episode. Your answers to these can be one sentence long, or a few. Belongings are plural, as are identities and nationalities. So feel free to respond to these prompts in a way that reflects your own story.

- What's something important that you've changed your mind about?
- Are there books, poems, films, albums, works of art, etc that you've turned to again and again?
- Tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you.
- Tell us about a time when you felt foreign.
- Is there a very short story you can tell us about a time when you said something that surprised you?
- Has anyone ever said that you were disloyal to one of your cultures or identities? Why?

Season 3, Episode 1. Professor John Paul Lederach reflection questions & episode transcript

1. John Paul recalls a formative time living and working as part of an international community in Brussels. He says: ‘...we had these back and forths that went forever on the challenges of violence and nonviolence, revolution and complicity. It was in many regards, my university’ (page 5). What are the relationships and communities in your life that have been formative for you?
2. John Paul says: ‘my deepest understanding of pacifism was not so much exclusively a viewpoint of how to avoid something, like a military draft, or how to remove yourself from something. But rather, it only made sense to the degree that it found its meaning in locating itself in the centre of difficult, messy conflicts, because the challenge is not so much how do I stay pure and apart ... but the actual life was that you walked into it, you walked toward the messiness, you had to sit with the ambiguities and the difficulties and the complexities that came with it’ (page 6). What do you make of this framing?
3. John Paul notes that we often talk about ‘going in circles’ as a way of saying that we’re getting nowhere (page 12). Can you think of examples from your own life in which ‘going in circles’, (whatever that looks like) has proved fruitful?
4. Can you think of world events which haven’t impacted you directly, but which you nevertheless felt a sense of deep connection to? How did you process that sense of connection? Did it drive you to a particular response?
5. ‘The hardest, it seems to me is, how to keep ‘and’ present, how to keep ‘both and’ all these *and*, this unfolding of understanding that this complexity demands of something of us, that's going to move through a lot more than a simple yes or no’ (page 18). Can you think of any times where keeping ‘and’ present has been important to you? Or times in which you’ve struggled to do so?
6. ‘I’ve said for years that art has always been perceived to be kind of an additional layer at the far edge of what we’re really doing, and I see, mostly art at the centre of social change, not at the periphery’ (page 19). Have you ever seen art, of any kind, used as a key component in transforming a community, conflict situation, or even relationship?

John Paul Lederach is a conflict transformation practitioner, writer, and academic. He has worked with communities all over the world, in countries including Somalia, Nicaragua, and Nepal. John Paul is the author of more than twenty books including *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2005), *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys Through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (University of Queensland Press, 2010), and *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Herald Press, 2014). His writing explores social healing, spirituality, and the role of the arts in conflict transformation. John Paul is Professor Emeritus of International Peacebuilding at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, and a senior fellow at Humanity United.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast: exploring stories and ideas about conflict, peace, theology, and art.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Hello, welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and with me today is John Paul Lederach. John Paul is an American conflict transformation practitioner; he's an academic and writer and his work has made a huge contribution to the field of peacebuilding over the last few decades. He's worked internationally with communities who've been facing violence in places like Nicaragua, Colombia, Ireland, Somalia, and he's written and spoken widely on the central role that art plays in conflict transformation. He is Professor Emeritus at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana in the States. John Paul, you're very welcome to the The Corrymeela Podcast.

John Paul Lederach:

Thank you, Pádraig. It's great to be here with you, and greetings to everyone in the Corrymeela world that I cherish so much.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You are well known in, erm, in Belfast and beyond, in many places, John Paul, and I wanted to start off with a question about your childhood: was there any experiences or friendships in your childhood that you think prepared you for the work that you do now?

John Paul Lederach:

Well certainly, I grew up in a rural community in Oregon, outside of Portland. And we were part of a small Mennonite church world there. I think my early experiences of what that particular faith tradition represents, particularly the emphasis on community and care for others, and the sanctity of life, and, that leads to kind of our historic stance on pacifism. These were things that without fully knowing it I was absorbing from very early on; it came a little more to consciousness in my teenage years which was toward the end of the Vietnam War. There were a number of people within our community that had done alternative service to the military service and who were in, actually in places at the time that were quite hot conflicts like Congo in Africa. I remember a number of those events being formative and how we held

those people in our hearts and minds who were members of our communities as they faced situations of considerable risk.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And how do you think that that formed your- like, what is it you took from those experiences that, erm- at that stage, I mean I'm sure you've reflected on it since but, at that stage, what were you noticing, when you were younger?

John Paul Lederach:

Well I think, you know, a lot of the key to that was a kind of an ethos that was embedded within our, within our family and within our wider community around service to others. And that you dedicated a portion of your life - this was kind of how it was framed with many of us - that a portion of your life will be given over full time to doing something of that nature and in fact that was my case, by the time I turned 20. Er, I left university and entered into a three-year voluntary service initiative. And those- so there's a notion fundamentally of care not just for those that are close to you, but care for others who are, in one form or another, suffering and need a presence and accompaniment and relief to the degree that some of it can be offered. I think that was, that was a real key; obviously, the- for me, at ages 16 to 18, you started looking very carefully at the Vietnam war era period was, you know, that period was coming to a close but there still was an obligatory military draft, and, um, those became prominent in, in ways that you began to think about: OK what does that mean for my life, and where's it going, and I always had kind of a pretty strong practical bent to that which was, that your words and your ideas of what you profess as core values align with what you actually do. And so it wasn't a light question to be taken, it was something that came early in life: I mean, that's part of the challenges that our, our wars are fought often with the youngest of our population.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You had chosen to study History and Peace Studies at university, John Paul. What made you choose that?

John Paul Lederach:

Well, it came after that, what became roughly a five year period outside of the US: three in Brussels, Belgium and two that were in Barcelona, Spain. And in that period, especially in Brussels, I was, my voluntary service was to live in a household of between 30 and 40,

primarily African university students coming up from Belgian colonies. At the time Congo, now - or at the time Zaire, now Congo - Rwanda, Burundi were the principal locations, but French-speaking Africa. And late nights in those conversations, we had these back and forths that went forever on the challenges of violence and nonviolence, revolution and complicity. It was in many regards, my, my university. And it was in that period that I started looking actively, if I really wanted to study peace and conflict, where would I go to finish a university degree. And there just, early 1970s there just were not a lot of places to go. And so I ended up in one of the few places in the US, about three locations at the time that I recall that had a major in Peace Studies, and that was a small Mennonite College in Kansas, which is- so the pursuit was essentially, this captivated my imagination, from the depth of conversations that I was having with people whose lives were affected by the kind of structural and open violence that they were facing often in their home countries.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I know that there were some particular thoughts of yours about pacifism that developed during that time, John Paul: I wonder if you could say a little bit about that.

John Paul Lederach:

Sure. Every tradition has ways that they express this. Our particular one had a lot of internal debates...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And by 'our' you mean within Mennonite?

John Paul Lederach:

Within the Mennonite world yeah, exactly. Among those, you know, we're sometimes referred to as 'the quiet of the land' or 'a people apart'- kind of a motif that expressed this notion that many in our tradition, who came through the, you know, the birth period that was quite difficult in the, in the 16th century, at the period of the Protestant reformation, the Anabaptist movement took that a step further in a lot of regards, because it separated itself out from both Protestant and Catholic traditions that aligned itself with state structures primarily in Europe, and that probably drove some of this notion that you're trying to find a place just to be who you are separate from the demands that often come.

But my deepest understanding of pacifism was not so much exclusively a viewpoint of how to avoid something, like a military draft, or how to remove yourself from something. But rather, it only made sense to the degree that it found its, its meaning in locating itself in the middle of, in the centre of difficult, messy conflicts, because the challenge is not so much how do I stay pure and apart - as I saw it at least - but rather the challenge that was articulated in all of this, it had a lot to do with the understandings of emulating, you know, the life and teachings of Jesus, not so much as the way that it's been expressed in terms of what you believe, but the actual life was that you walked into it, you walked toward the messiness, you had to sit with the ambiguities and the difficulties and the complexities that came with it. And there is where the struggle's to find a way through what is being presented but in a way that both encourages and creates flourishing life, but also respects the dignity of everyone involved, was really at the core of what I understood to be pacifism. And that's, you know, marked much of my journey I think since in a lot of ways.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You- I mean, there's so many aspects of your peacebuilding work that, um, we're gonna to talk about, but one that I'd like to start off with briefly is your interest in language. You often look at etymologies of different languages in what you write; I know your mother grew up bilingual, and I know you operate in and out of two languages, maybe more. Could you talk a little bit about your interest in language?

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, well, you're right that my mother did grow up on the Texas-Mexico border. And as a young child and throughout her life was bilingual, and we often had, in Oregon especially at a younger age, I remember our home being opened to many of the migrant workers that were coming through and the families that were locating. Um, and Spanish, French, Catalan, these were the languages that kind of captured my imagination and became working languages at different points in life. And I was struck so often by how rich and interesting the images were of words used by people in everyday life- in fact my PhD dissertation focused, not exclusively, but almost primarily on a sociolinguistic understanding of everyday language around conflict. And, so I, I suppose I developed an appreciation, a kind of a joy in the way words create, not just kind of the platform of communication, but a landscape of imagery that people carry with them; and from that, a deep conviction that in conflict, people are typically less interested in, quotes, how you 'define' a conflict, like what does the word conflict mean, than they are in

finding ways to express an experience of, of hurt, harm, pain, separation, that sits somewhere in the world of, of the unspeakable, that is not- we feel it before we can say it, and we often wander around trying to find ways to say it. And that takes us into a metaphoric language, that people mostly make sense of the world around them by way of association, by metaphor, by image. And within that it becomes a kind of a poetic, a landscape artist's, you know, portrayal of what's emergent. And, and embedded in that is the - I consider it - the wondrous journey of finding meaning together requires us to explore images, as much or more than particular content. And often the stories of a particular word are stories of an evolution that are metaphoric in nature. And that's, you know, not always captured by rote dictionary definitions, but it often is hinted at in the etymologies. Because they go back and they show kind of the root journeys by which a word came forward and what it's associated with, and I find that revealing in so many ways, both in terms of my work, but also in the meaning making that we do as- in the human community.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Erm, briefly, do you have an example of a word like that that you've found fruitful?

John Paul Lederach:

Well, certainly as I cross languages, part of what happens when you cross a language is that you're finding people using a word that if you, if you go to the immediate - if you will - literal translation, does not capture anywhere close to the story, so for example in Central America, uh, one of - you know, any number of these that I could pick - but one of the most common words for conflict was the word 'enredo', which is - for the English language speakers among us - e-n-r-e-d-o. And, in the middle of that word 'enredo' is the word r-e-d, or 'net'. And the story essentially is of a metaphor in which conflict is understood to be something akin to a fisherman's net, that when everyday life tangles it, as they do when they go on a daily morning fishing trip, they spend hours untangling and repairing what has been broken, but ultimately, the net remains a knotted whole. And it's- for me, it was an extraordinary image of a way of understanding conflict in the relational context of being connected, but that we get tangled and that almost the image of a fisherman sitting in a boat untangling and repairing feels akin to how people experienced and thought about their conflict...they did not immediately head to: what's the perfect solution; they headed to: who do I know that knows the person I'm disconnected with?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So the way of, yeah, the metaphor that's being used can sometimes hold a key for something for exploration.

John Paul Lederach:

Yes, exactly. And usually a story or two!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Well, we're gonna talk about stories in a while! This is The Corrymeela Podcast and my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama; with me today is John Paul Lederach, writer and peacebuilder. John Paul, I want to talk broadly about the peacebuilding field and then we'll come back to talking about storytelling within it, but, erm, like the peacebuilding field - if field is the right word, or building is the right verb - you know, within that there's people doing all kinds of work. They're doing research or policy change or historical inquiry, or they're seeking justice or land reclamation or reparations, as well, or educational projects, erm, employment projects, erm, human encounter projects. What are the things would you say are part of the big project of peacebuilding - there's the arts as well, of course - I suppose I'm particularly thinking of people who know and deliberately say that they're doing peacebuilding work, what other, what other aspects or demonstrations of peacebuilding would you populate that field with?

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, it's a great question and I, you know, within the academic world, our emphasis tends to be toward narrowing: we like concepts like, you know, disciplines and departments, kind of a fragmentation, breaking things down into smaller and smaller pieces. Er, I've tended in the opposite direction to have a very expansive understanding. Um, that this is really about, in the widest sense, a holistic understanding of human relationships and the journeys through both those things that have created harm and those things that create healing, in the widest understanding, because healing ultimately, I think, as - coming back to our notion of metaphor and image - healing really is about finding a way to stay whole while we know we remain wounded, that we have things we carry that have been hard in life. And that seeking of wholeness I think is precisely what pushes me toward a more comprehensive understanding of the concept. So I've, I've, you know, just in terminology, I've tried to expand away from sometimes the narrowness of resolution toward the more expansive understanding of transformation...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

OK, yeah.

John Paul Lederach:

...resolution being trying to find a fix to something that's hurting right now, and transformation keeping centred the question that what do we, what do we understand of change and how it works and what, what needs to change, not just what needs to be solved. Um, peacebuilding across that- those, you know, terms that you were using from repair and the specificity of say negotiation, all the way across to ways that we cultivate relationships, bring in the meaning making endeavour, which ultimately for me really led to understanding how significant the arts are. The arts I think are in many regards yet the untapped depth of how we as communities help to move from the unspeakable to the speakable, move from that which is not fully understood, through the ambiguities of making visible pieces and chunks, whether it's by way of painting, or fiction, or a play, theatre, music; how music, for example in particular, is a whole body experience, how sound and vibration enter the pores, every, you know, cell of our body, not just our ear canals, these are... So for me, I tend to come at it writ pretty large...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Really?!

John Paul Lederach:

Sometimes I critique if people wanna narrow it down, but I'm really after the question of: what unleashes aliveness, what brings back this human capacity for creativity and generative relationships?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Um, I suppose where I was going to go with this, and we can change the direction, but where I was going to go is, like, by thinking of all of these areas, and you've added some there with that in terms of what unleashes aliveness and all the projects like that, and the arts and, you know, negotiation and diplomacy and politics and treaty makers and, um, together with, you know, people working in reparations and justice and policy. Sometimes it seems to me that the peace field, everybody involved in that, that sometimes that can be a place of, of particular conflict as to who it is that should go first, and, how it is that those different aspects of working on peace interact with each other while they're trying to transform the conflict, as you talk

about. Erm, what have you found are helpful models for collaboration between people who are doing stuff that does unleash life, but doing it in very different ways? What have you found as models of cooperation between each other, as people have different priorities and approaches?

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, it's a great question Pádraig, because, I have- erm, well just a small side note: one of the books that I wrote, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation In Divided Societies*, had a chapter embedded within it that was on the topic of coordination. And I, for years, would, would tell classes and people that I was with that I think it's the weakest chapter of the book, because we are, we are coordination-challenged in our field, whether it is the incentive structures that are set up that drive us toward areas of specialty, or, as is the case for many people that the forms by which grantmaking or resourcing is done, often places us in some form of competition. What I find to be more common is that, it's like we're all a part of this big complex thing, and we all have one strand, one strand of a giant spider web. But we're convinced that our strand is the one that's more important than anybody else's. And by virtue of that, we tend to do two things that I think sit at the basis of what we need to change. One is that when we lock down too much on our particular piece, we actually function as if we're blind, unaware, of the other pieces that may be there. And if we're challenged about our piece, then we come back to make a case that ours must go first or ours is more important.

And I think er, at the core of it, um, is something that I've struggled to know how best to both approach, much less nourish or teach, which is a fundamental way of being in the world that embodies some form of humility. That is that, an- humility as I understand it, is the way to be present in the world where you recognise that you don't understand it all, and that you don't have access to control it all, and that there is a deep need for a form of interdependence that links up things that are not directly tied, and may in fact appear initially to be opposite or even contradictory. And yet that's precisely I think what's most needed: peace emerges in the unexpected, and in the unlikely, and in the improbable, and when we're able to hold those, that ability to both be aware but also contribute rather than, you know, force ourselves into forms of attribution, that what is the one cause/effect that makes everything else work, I think we understand how these are very complex endeavours and that we're a small part of something that's, that's really big.

So I found, as an example, recently, you know, about a decade ago or so I came across this work by entomologists in the 1940s, who were asking what they called the paradox of coordination. And the paradox of coordination was framed as a question, and their question of inquiry - which they were focusing primarily on communities like ants and termites and bees, etcetera - their question was: how does, how do whole collectives cohere around a common purpose without centralised control? And I found, you know, their, their inquiry into specifics of the communities they were studying like a termite colony, interesting things came out of it, but I found that framing absolutely extraordinary. You know, the coordination paradox: how do we do these things knowing that there isn't a particular control? Posit that beside an image that I heard a very well known diplomat make with reference to his work in a given conflict. Erm, I won't go to names because it wasn't a place that we could attribute all of that, but it was a very high level, very significant diplomat who said: the key to mediation is like a funnel. A funnel, it comes down to a small little space where everything else must pass and you want to be at the funnel that controls what goes through. And, you know, so there is an image of the exact inverse, that, that somehow this work is about controlling everything through me. Or through us, our particular piece of this. And I think that those have been, in my estimation, the biggest challenges: how to live with both the, the uncertainty and ambiguity of not being in control but the absolute aliveness that comes from understanding that there are many things that are happening at once and I have a small part in it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Well, you're, you're sketching something about control and chaos being held together. I want to, I suppose there's two directions I want to go, and the first of which is to just pick up on something you said about, you know, the surprising, the unexpected. I know that a key part of what you suggest for solutions to intractable conflicts is that there would be unexpected gatherings of people coming together for risk and creativity when it comes to what solutions and relationships might look like. How, what are the conditions that can help, contemporarily, an unexpected grouping of people to come together where there's been something of profound polarisation happen? Sometimes it seems to me like we, we punish anybody who would be seen to be taking the compromising move of meeting with the enemy, or the other side, because to do so would be capitulating and risking the possibility of being ousted by your own side. What are the conditions these days that you think lend themselves to such unexpected relationships and gathering in situations of polarisation?

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, it's such a great question. So there's two or three elements that I think right now are quite prevalent when we attach this to really toxic polarisation. The first is that it's, it's pretty rare that you can just throw people in a room and expect that to happen. It requires a kind of erm, a cultivation and a preparation that comes through many conversations, it's sort of like the thousand conversations as opposed to the one. And I've been doing a lot of thinking about how significant over the years my observation of what people are doing more naturally, but also my observation of my own work, of how much time is spent circulating around conversations compared to convening them into some space that's more formalised. And I think that we have underestimated the power, I've referred to it as the hidden power of going in circles, compared to what we assume to be the powers of the direct conversation. And what I find in really toxic polarisation is that the direct conversations are hard, if, if even possible. Circulating, however, remains constantly open: that is, the big difference is that rather than bringing people to you, you go out to where people are and where they live and how they see the world from their lived experience and their lived location- it's in placement. It is a move from individualistic toward more collective empathy: how does, how does the world look from that street corner, from that patio, from that place where we, you know, we take our afternoon tea or whatever? That going to and seeing the world from there offers something that's quite different than trying to bring representatives of a particular thing to a, quotes a table, and I actually believe that we need to do much more in those, those directions.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

For a previous episode of The Corrymeela Podcast, I spoke with Christine Bell, who's professor of constitutional law at the Edinburgh law school, and she highlighted that most peace treaties take 39 iterations - that's the average - before they land, which is in a certain way reflecting something similar to what you're saying that even peace negotiations also have the necessity of going round in circles, which, which isn't a futile exercise but important things are happening and in peace treaty number 1 to 38 that that will contribute to the longevity of number 39.

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, well we come back to our interesting notion of metaphor. Because in the English language, we often say: we're going in circles, which, we mean we're not going anywhere. But we found, my daughter and I in a book that we endeavoured to look more carefully at communities navigating toward healing, you know from a context of violence, local

communities, how their everyday language reflected the understandings of healing, and one of the things that we found was that going in circles isn't that it's not going anywhere, it's that it's creating the conditions to go deep before going expansive. So, metaphors often have directionality to them. And the directionality that's more common is that you're making progress if you're moving from point A to B.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Going in a straight line...

John Paul Lederach:

But going in circles is actually, it shifts the metaphors to two metaphors that are not linear. The first is that of depth, retouching a sense of self and purpose and community and connection. Those are things- that's why we repeat rituals: we want to go back, to be reconnected, so it's, it goes to depth, but then it goes expansive. So it has, if based on sound and vibration, it's like something is happening that is going outward in multiple directions at once, not exclusively, like from A to B. And it's quite intriguing, exactly what you say: the 39 could be considered, you know, the 39 trips around the rosary, the 39 trips around the singing bowl, um, and there are things that are happening there that are not well captured by the normal ways that, especially the main fields of sociology and political science and international relations, wants to understand what they refer to as realpolitik. Actually, what's real is going in circles!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

OK!

John Paul Lederach:

This is, I mean, this is much more our experience with it, that we go round and round, we- and so I, when I talk about circulation, I have three qualitative terms that I often use: the first is that you iterate, you go out, you go to rather than bring to. And the second is you iterate, you go over and over again. And the third is that in the iteration, and the iteration, there is the space of evocation, it evokes something that's not fully yet known. And it becomes then, you know, a part of an ongoing set of conversations that doesn't require exclusively a primary centralised control.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

This is The Corrymeela Podcast, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and with me today is conflict transformation practitioner and writer and professor, John Paul Lederach. John Paul, we're recording this in early 2024 and, it won't be broadcast probably until May. Um, and so I'm reluctant to talk about what was happening yesterday and today when it comes to Palestine and Israel, and Yemen, and Lebanon, then of course there's Russia and Ukraine as well. Um, but it would be remiss not to try to say something. What is it that from your point of view, what do you see is, is necessary, both in terms of on the ground and the local areas, but also in terms of global responses to what's happening? 'Cause, one of the interesting things that's clear is that global responses are part of the theatre of what's happening, and the disarray that happens within governments about what it is that somebody says about their, their stance towards ceasefire makes them electable or unelectable. And this, surely we to God is known by those who are involved in the disarray or involved in the promotion of or resistance to whatever it is that's going on. So I'm curious to hear what it is that you could say, both in terms of addressing specifics, as well as addressing broader global cultures that gather themselves around addressing war.

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, I mean, first, I agree with you about the difficulty of speaking to this and yet not wanting to be remiss in finding ways to express the dilemmas that we're living through. So a starting point would simply be to say that my experience has been, that since October 7, and the horrific events of dehumanisation that emerged in the course of those days and in the days that followed as a response into Gaza, have created, at least in my experience, zero degrees of separation from our everyday life. I'm finding in my own organisation, in calls that have come to me from many places both within and outside of the peacebuilding world, that there has been a touch from that situation such that the polarisation has been experienced is extraordinarily powerful and fast moving, maybe more so than any conflict that I've experienced in my four plus decades of work globally. The second is that the systems that we have established I think have perpetuated- the exquisite outcome of many of those systems has created a form that many people, many of us, have felt a kind of a deep sense of paralysis: the system produces a feeling that we have to wait to see, we have to wait 'til, and then the pushback is that we have to do something, but in the doing something it's created, um, it's created a kind of a deep chasm of choosing one or the other in reference to what the options are that only then feed back into both, either the toxicity of the polarisation or the sense of paralysis that's often coming. The

third is that, you know, a great poet from your land, Pádraig, Seamus Heaney in the midst of the Troubles in the Cure of Troy, I believe it was, maybe it was a different location the Cure of Troy, but he had this extraordinary line of: 'whatever you say, say nothing'. And I think there, there, that's part of that paralysis, that sense that even the first utterance will locate you somewhere while you may in fact be going in circles to find how to make sense of this and what is the best way to move forward. And I think that's, those are dynamics that I've experienced.

Now with reference to your notion of what now and what to, I come back to to the idea that complexity exists but not as an excuse, and that we have to each of us find ways to be true to the deepest convictions we have and to hold strong to the relationships even when those are intentioned and are pulling in different directions. My own sense is, I guess partially confessional - I guess it would be equally true in early, late '23 as early '24 and probably into even later - I tried, um, in the immediate aftermath of the first unfolding events of October 7, I was trying to put together a small set of thoughts in an essay, parallel perhaps to one that I wrote in the day or two after September 11 that circulated fairly widely. Not that I had that as a model in mind, but I just felt compelled to try to put something down. And I soon discovered - in fact, I put the first sentence of the essay, eventually, with the words: 'nobody is going to like this essay'. And it was, it was this deep feeling, but what I found was that I was struggling to find the words that were forcing me into a place that I, I wasn't yet ready to go in exactly the way that I had clarity, and so I took a step back, and decided not to try to put this into a public, you know, as, a set of words, article, op-ed essay - they have been coming in droves, I've noticed - instead, I began to simply reach out to everyone that I knew that was either in or proximate to the situation, offer words of encouragement, encouragement mostly in the direction that holds the space for a level of grief that I don't think any of us fully comprehend how deep that is. And at the same time, encouraging people to be true to those things that they do know to be true for them wherever they're located. And, um, that I wanted them to know that I was both committed and convicted to stay alongside.

And, we, as one of my colleagues said, you know, he used a phrase in this conversation, it was probably October 12 or 13, in which he just said: 'your finger, too, is on the trigger', which he was, what he meant was: we are all connected to this. And so start with where you have access and expand from there, but stay true to holding with care and love the relationships that you actually have, even when those may diverge in what you would expect. Because I think, um, it

is, the key long term is that we have to find our way back to humanity, to the rehumanisation of these relationships and we must understand that we're a part of it, not an outsider looking in.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I suppose I'm struck by, you know, how complex everything is, as you said, you know, I liked your phrase: 'complexity exists, but not as an excuse'. And at the same time how saying something is complex can seem like an insult to people who are saying: you're just using that as a self forgiving excuse to be on the fence, and that can be, is seen as giving a kind of the luxury of neutrality in something that is not neutral for, for people who are involved.

Mostly what I think is that those who emerge from Gaza and from Israel, who will - and from the West Bank - who will have the possibility of being in the room with each other, they will have as much to worry about from their own community and the international community who will say to them that they are compromising to a level that they shouldn't, as they will from the so-called other side. And that worries me, because we're in an age of such quick communication, and it seems to me sometimes an age of ideological Puritanism, where unless somebody has exactly the right opinion, and can assert that before they go into the room, therefore the room itself is deemed invalid before anything has happened in the room of negotiation. And that, if I'm right in that and I may be wrong, but if I'm right in that that's a trend that would seem to me to not be beneficial for the possibility of however many more peace treaties are needed until something lasting and just can happen for Israelis and Palestinians.

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, no a hundred percent and the stitching that will need to be done, within and across and around, 'within' meaning within each of the communities that's most proximate to this conflict; 'across' meaning across those frayed frayed frayed relationships, loaded epigenetically with generational trauma; um, and 'around' meaning, the global community that has both contributed and exacerbated, and continues to do so within the context of this situation, is almost unfathomable. But it is, what we must find ways to do, to find both the threads and the connections that make something transformative possible, not just the solution, but what is it that change will require of us. And this, you know there's a part of me that wants to, not exclusively, but speak to the global community, and to, in particular, the countries of greatest

privilege and production. That, if anything, this situation begs for us to change our investment into things that exclusively are produced, to, you know, take human life, the level of commitment to militarism, and the production and transfer of weapons; it is this wider global context that constantly fuels from all sides the very things that are, you know, unfolding. And that we, we must find a way to understand that this is requiring a much bigger look at a much wider situation of why the conditions are ripe for ceaseless, ceaseless cycles, unending cycles of violence to be repeated. And is this now not the moment when we can find a way to actually begin to shift our priorities and our commitments, and without which we seem to all participate in reproducing the very things that fuel these, fuel these fires.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm so aware like, neither of us are involved in the circumstance, you know, we're both white men of privilege. While both of us have worked in conflict resolution, and been affected by conflict in particular ways, there's a danger too of thinking that we have something to say, as well as a danger too of thinking we don't have. Um, my hope is that I can, I can learn, and at the same time not be frightened of saying something, you know. For me, the idea that calling for a ceasefire is controversial itself is, is an indictment on language. Like I want the conditions to be right where people can be politically committed to lives of love across the lines of Israel and Palestine, across the lines of Britishness and Irishness, across the lines of wherever/whatever these binaries are; ceasefire is only the beginning of the conditions where you can have the political negotiations where love might be possible, not where everybody will love each other, but where you think: I'm committed to people on the other side of the border having the safety enough to love each other and to expect that, unless outside things intervene, they can have a reasonable life, um, civically, and democratically and personally, er, artistically, educationally, economically, that- and with movement and civil rights and, um... So the idea that calling for a ceasefire is controversial fills me with horror at what it is that language, how it is that language is being policed. Ceasefire is just the beginning of the work for me. There's far more controversial things to come than ceasefire.

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's a- the early part of what you're saying: we both pay a lot of attention to language. So one of the things I've been noticing lately is how, my, my focus, my ears seem attuned to the conjunctions. It seems an odd thing to say obviously in the midst of something so dier as we're talking about, but the conjunctions are three: the word 'or', the word 'but', and

the word 'and'. And the word 'or' is how quickly language is either manipulated or mobilised to push people to the binary in the most complex of situations. And the word 'but' is- I hear it quite often as the back and forth between the ways that interpretation and meaning making happens around what is emergent. And so people will say something and a response will be: 'yes, but' and then the other side of whatever it is of that complexity comes out and the experience of receiving the 'but', I think is that people feel: you're not listening, so I won't. And there's a kind of a lack of validation. The hardest, it seems to me is, how to keep 'and' present, how to keep 'both and' all these *and*, this unfolding of understanding that this complexity demands of something of us, that's going to move through a lot more than a simple yes or no. And that's, that's been, I find it, very difficult for people to navigate.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is academic and conflict practitioner and Humanity United senior fellow, John Paul Lederach.

John Paul, I'd like to talk a little bit about, erm, storytelling and the arts, 'cause sometimes these are discussed as the soft side of conflict resolution work. But I've heard you - even already in our conversation today, but in many situations - iterate over and over again, that these seeming soft sides of, of peace negotiation, conflict transformation, of humanity and the arts are, are anything but soft, and are in fact quite vital.

John Paul Lederach:

Yes. I, you know at the core of much of what we do in conflict is, is the reality that we sit with kind of multiple unfolding landscapes at the same time. One certainly is the level of the, the content of anything that we're dealing with, whether it's policy or proposal or a way of framing the history of something. And those words get formulated in a way that almost immediately takes us to the, you know, to the other landscapes, the landscape, the emotional landscape of what associations are drawn up by those words, the landscape of, of what has been lost, and the harm that has come from that. And those things all sit, I think, much more in, in the arena of where meaning making is about story making, and how we story, how can we hold space for different stories of even, you know, commonly lived events, people are going to have different ways that they, they bring those forward. And I, over time, I just found consistently over and over again that we had in the fields professionally, that I was trained in, there was insufficient attention given to the core nature that most of what happens in our relationships is actually the work of art, the work of creating something that is unfolding and not fully known,

but coming forward. And that that happens over and over again, that we are in fact more like artists than, you know, technical experts in a given thing.

I've said for years that art has always been perceived to be kind of an additional layer at the far edge of what we're really doing, and I see, mostly art at the centre of social change, not at the periphery. Because if we understand the fundamentals of what we're doing as an artistic endeavour, that we're working to create with curiosity those things that are hard to bring into the world of understanding, that we're working to bring forward something that does not yet exist; we are in fact working at the core of everything that happens around repeated cycles of violence in particular, in conflict that's toxic, we are building out of this current situation something that does not now exist: this is at the heart of what we're doing. And that's, er, so it's been kinda my push and my emphasis for years, although obviously it unfolds at different times and paces, as you'd know.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I've been thinking a lot lately about how the word naive is sometimes used when somebody puts forward a creative idea to go: well that's just naive, and how that would be seen almost like you're saying, you know, we're going in circles as to say, well, that's, therefore it's invalid, 'cause it's going in circles or because it's naive. Like naive means, you know, 'just born'. So think, yeah, it's a new idea, it is naive, 'cause it's just been born, what, what would it be like to create conditions where this idea can, can grow and mature, rather than the imagination that something has to arrive fully formed. If we're looking for the possibility of the new in a cycle of predictable escalation of polarisation, violence and threat, well then we might be saved by the naive rather than damned by it.

John Paul Lederach:

Yeah, exactly. I, for a while I wrote, in fact I may have an article somewhere, too, that explores this- the idea of divine naiveté.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Oh! Maybe I stole that idea from you, then. You never know!

John Paul Lederach:

No, probably not, but what I was playing with the word divine it was that if you connected something that taps people's association in the direction that the unexpected is arriving in our life. This actually is, you know, it's exactly what it is, it's beginner's mind, if we use other traditions' notions of it, yeah, you must become like a child. Wonder and wander are actually core elements of seeking the pathways of reconciliation.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

John Paul Lederach, thank you very much for giving us so much of your time for The Corrymeela Podcast.

John Paul Lederach:

Absolutely, it was wonderful, Pádraig.

The Corrymeela Podcast is created in partnership between Corrymeela and FanFán. It's produced by Emily Rawling, with mixing, editing, and theme music by Fra Sands at Safeplace Studios, and presented by me, Pádraig Ó Tuama. The podcast is generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Community Relations Council Northern Ireland, and the Irish government's Reconciliation Fund. Thanks to them, and thanks to Corrymeela's friends and supporters, and thanks to you for listening.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So, John Paul, some Very Short Story questions for you. When was a time, John Paul, when your national identity felt important to you? In a sentence!

John Paul Lederach:

Nicaragua, when accused of being a agent of the CIA and a Sandinista spy at the same time, almost in the same day.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And when was a time you felt foreign?

John Paul Lederach:

In Brussels, in that period of being a volunteer when I lived in a house of étrangers- the strangers, that's actually the French word for foreigners.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And are there books or poems or films or any kinds of works of art that you've turned to again and again; I'm sure there might be many but I'm curious if there's one that comes to mind right now?

John Paul Lederach:

‘The Way It Is’ by William Stafford:

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.

People wonder about what you are pursuing.

You have to explain about the thread.

But it is hard for others to see.

While you hold it you can’t get lost.

Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.

Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.

You don’t ever let go of the thread.