This Fantastic Argument of Being Alive
by On Being

What follows is the syndicated transcript of an On Being interview between Krista Tippett and Padraig O Tuama. You can listen to the audio recording of the interview here.

Transcription by Heather Wang

Krista Tippett, host:Pádraig Ó Tuama is a friend, teacher, and colleague, to me and the work of On Being. But before that was true, we took a revelatory trip to meet him at his home in Northern Ireland, a place that has known violent sectarianism and has evolved — not to perfection, and yet to new life and once unimaginable repair and relationship.

Our whole world screams of fracture, more now than when I sat with Pádraig. Yet this conversation is a gentle, welcoming landing for pondering and befriending the hard realities we are given. As the global educator Karen Murphy, another friend of On Being and of Pádraig, says: “We are standing in the middle of a bridge and need to decide how we’re going to walk across it together, and in what direction. ... Let’s have the humility and the generosity to step back and learn from these places that have had the courage to look at themselves and look at where they’ve been, and try to forge a new path with something that resembles ‘together.’ Right now we should be taking these stories and these examples and these places and filling our pockets and our lungs and our hearts and our minds with them and learning, deeply.”

That’s what Pádraig invites this hour.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

Pádraig Ó Tuama is a theologian and poet and the author of an incandescent memoir, In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World. He’s the host of the On Being Studios podcast Poetry Unbound, now in its fifth season. I sat with him in 2016, at the Corrymeela community of Northern Ireland, of which he is a member and at that time was a leader. This is a place that has offered literal refuge and seeds of new life, during and since the violent fracture that defined that country until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Pádraig grew up in the South, in the Republic of Ireland, near Cork.

We’re so happy to be here at Corrymeela, all of us from On Being, and had such a beautiful couple of days in Belfast that have really — really the reason we came is to interview you. So here we are. So how would you begin to reflect on the religious or spiritual background of your life?

Ó Tuama:I was thinking about this yesterday, because I had a little inkling that you might
be asking the question: I mean, a very Irish Catholic background, growing up in Cork — Catholicism was part of everything. Prayers, you said at night — we said the rosary in Irish at night, as a family; in school, preparation for the sacraments.

All of those things, they were just taken for granted. When I was 11, there was a boy in the class who suddenly wasn’t there anymore. And somebody said: I heard a rumor that he went to the Protestant school. And we were shocked. I mean, we weren’t angels, but we were suddenly like, there has been one among us, not telling us! And so there was just this sense that it was part of who you were in that sense. What it meant to be Catholic, what it meant to be Irish — all of those things were all ingrained together.

I think for me, a spiritual background for me is also language. I grew up with Irish and English. And knowing two languages and knowing, I suppose, the language that came from the earth of this Ireland has been very important for me, also. And that, to my mind, over years has grown in its significance, in terms of understanding that that isn’t merely having another language, but actually it goes deep into the bones. It goes deep into the essence of what I have found to be important.

Tippett: There’s a lot of lovely and popular spiritual writing about the notion of “here” and “be here now,” and I mean, the subtitle of your book In The Shelter is “Finding a Home in the World.” You mention your favorite poem by David Wagoner, called “Lost.” And there are these two lines: “Wherever you are is called Here, / And you must treat it as a powerful stranger.” And it seems to me that from a young age you had a sense that there are many worlds within the world. But then you talk about moving to Belfast in 2003 — and you had lived in many countries, right? Where had you lived, at that point?

Ó Tuama: Australia, Switzerland; I’d done some work in Uganda and the Philippines and Lithuania, as well.

Tippett: And you come back here — it’s not exactly where you grew up in Ireland ...

Ó Tuama: No.

Tippett: ... but one might think — especially, I think, one on the outside might think you had come home and this would be a familiar “here,” which you would not have to treat as a “powerful stranger.” But it almost seems like it was your lesson.

Ó Tuama: Oh, totally. And the complication for me was moving home to Ireland after those years away and suddenly being back in Ireland, being north of the border, and realizing that some places that I went, people would say: Oh, you’re from Cork; we beat you in the hurling last weekend. And you’re just a local, just 250 miles down the road, but you’re just local. And other people would say: Oh, you’re from Ireland; what’s it like for you, living in our country? And you’re kind of going, I think I’m in my own country — I can read the etymology of the land, of the place names; I feel at home here. And so, suddenly this question of what is home was really complicated.

And here — you hear that when people are speaking here, because Northern Ireland, or the North of Ireland — they can be loaded terms. Sometimes you hear people saying: Oh today’s a great day in this part of Ireland. And other people say: Today is a great day in this part of the United Kingdom. So “here” is actually a complicated compromise, also — to be able to say what is happening right here, right now, even if it’s not what you’d choose.
And I think that is one of the things that for me, spirituality, as well as conflict resolution, is about, because so much of things is saying: I wish things were different; I wish I were somewhere else; I wish this were not happening. And what David Wagoner says is the place where you are “is called Here, / And you must treat it as a powerful stranger.” And powerful strangers might be benevolent, but only might. Powerful strangers can also be unsettling and troubling, and powerful strangers can have their own hostilities and have their own way within which they cause you to question who you are and where you’re from. And that is a way within which, for me, the notion of saying hello to “here” requires a fairly robust capacity to tell the truth about what is really going on. And that can be very difficult.

Tippett:I want to draw this out a little bit, just because I know people will be listening from the United States. And this place — you talk about discovering all the many subtle and not so subtle ways people have to signal which “here” they are from and not from.

Ó Tuama:Totally. And that is where language is limited, because language needs courtesy to guide it, and an inclusion and a generosity that goes beyond precision and becomes something much more akin to sacrament, something much more akin to how is it you can be attentive to the implications of language for those in the room who may have suffered.

Tippett:It’s the dark side of the power of language.

Ó Tuama:Totally. Oh my God.

Tippett:Right? How a single word, a name, can wound and exclude. You and I were talking last night, and I can’t remember the details, but about how — I think also around this subject of the Troubles, but it’s equally true in my country right now. A single word — there are so many charged words and phrases that, if someone introduces into the room, is going to set off this cascade of reactions. And part of that reaction is: I know exactly what you’re about.

Ó Tuama:I think we infuse words with a sense of who we are. And so therefore you’re not just saying a word, you’re communicating something that feels like your soul. And it might even be your soul. So the choice of a particular word is really, really important.

And there’s what is in the text, and whether that’s a sacred text or the text of somebody’s life, and then there is the lenses through which you read and interpret that, and those lenses I find to be extraordinarily practical. There is the way within which there is a generosity of listening and when somebody says something, to try to figure out, did I hear them correctly?, because sometimes I’ve heard what I want to hear, and I might be completely wrong.

And that can be healing; one time, somebody came up to me after I’d spoken and said: That thing you said really helped me. And I went: What thing?, because I was curious. And they quoted something; I hadn’t said it at all.

[laughter]

I was delighted to take credit for it, [laughs] but I also —

Tippett:And you don’t correct them, because they heard something in what you said that was their translation.
Ó Tuama: Totally. They probably heard themselves, and I was just lucky enough to happen to be in the way, wittering on about something, Irish language or something, and they happened to hear what it was that their life has been leading them to need to say. And I think — so sometimes it can be extraordinarily healing. It can be very harmful, when it is that we have not listened well and go: Well, when that person said that — and they might not have even have said that — they meant that. So there are at least two violations of language happening there, and language has the capacity to communicate who we are, and so therefore the interpersonal space and the encounter becomes really weakened.

Tippett: There’s this language now, in the States, of “trigger” language, which really, even the image itself is violent.

Ó Tuama: Yeah, it is. And I mean, I find myself in situations where sometimes I will say, just to let anybody know — like, Cathal was my friend who took his own life. I really appreciated if somebody said something about suicide in advance of a conversation, in the few years after that. I thought it would be just a few months, but it was a few years, really, when I just thought, I won’t be able to cope with the ocean of everything that will happen here — partly because I was living so far away and I couldn’t come to any even reconciling relationship with grief, because I was living on the other side of the planet. So I can really respect, and I’ve been the benefit of, times when people have said that.

But the complication is that life comes with no trigger warning. Things happen out of the blue. Something happens, and suddenly, with no preparation, you find yourself in the middle of something that you didn’t wish to happen. And I think that’s why for me, “here” is really important, because that’s the space for — when you are in a situation for which nothing has prepared you, to have the language of “here,” it is not gentle. It’s not even consoling. It just might be part of the truth. And that can be healing, to simply tell part of the truth.

[music: “Marni Swanson of the Grey Coast” by Jonny Hardie and Gavin Marwick]

Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being, today in Northern Ireland with theologian, poet, and social healer Pádraig Ó Tuama.

[music: “Marni Swanson of the Grey Coast” by Jonny Hardie and Gavin Marwick]

One thing you say, out of all this experience you’ve had of being with people in charged situations, having difficult conversations — and this is an important truth, and it’s really hard to take in — that “most people do what seems reasonable to them at the time, most of the time.”

I mean, just that — that the people who may be so offending us and may seem frightening to us are actually doing what seems reasonable to them. And it’s not always safe to decide to be curious about that. But I think there’s a big place where it is safe; it’s just going to be really uncomfortable.

Ó Tuama: Totally. And I recognize that sometimes people will need to extend their generosity to me, saying: He thinks he’s doing what’s reasonable to him at the time.

Tippett: Right. It works in both directions.

Ó Tuama: It works in all those directions, and so it’s really an important thing to do. I think — I mean, probably most of us learned most of our lessons for our wider public life from
the private life. And I suppose — for years and years I worked in a really rich, faithful, loving, Christian community environment, where nobody had a clue that I was gay. And so when people don’t know, or think that there is nobody around to hear the kind of things that they’re saying, people say some pretty harsh things. But they loved me; I knew that. And I loved them, also.

And I suppose one of the things that being closeted for many years helped, actually — not that this is good advice, but it is wisdom, retrospectively — it helped me to understand some of the dynamics that were happening underneath the kind of public things people said, in order to then think, when it comes to having conversations about anything that divides us, that understanding itself is a really wise thing.

Understanding doesn’t mean agreeing, but I think sometimes when you ask a question in charged situations, to try to understand a narrative that you might find intolerable, people think, well, you’re being complicit in that by giving that. And I think in situations like here, where people have had so many experiences of terrible difficulty, to understand might actually help us to heal. It doesn’t make it right. It doesn’t make it that you agree.

Tippett:Right. It doesn’t mean agreeing. It doesn’t mean condoning. But when you said, “our words, they hold so much from us, they hold our hopes and fears” — do you remember, years ago I interviewed Richard Mouw, the Christian theologian who ...

Ó Tuama:What were you speaking — I always forget the names, but I always remember the conversations.

Tippett:Well, we were speaking about gay marriage, back when that was a distant, remote possibility, maybe eight, nine years ago, which is amazing.

Ó Tuama:It’s very recent, really.

Tippett:And so he was somebody whose theology, whose reading of the Bible leads him to believe that this is not something the church should sanctify, and yet who understands that the measure of Christian fidelity is about much more than a position you take on an issue, and has tried to walk that — live in that tension. But one of the things he said, and you’ve put a theoretical framework around that, is we have to stop engaging on this in terms of — by calling each other names. And we have to figure out if we can inquire and get curious and connect on a human level about what are the hopes and fears we are bringing to this. But that’s a question we hardly know how to ask, once we’ve turned something into an issue.

Ó Tuama:And it becomes a very, very difficult question to curate in the public space, because suddenly, to ask it is to be complicit. And so maybe that’s why there are a need for really robust private conversations about public matters, but there does need to be this stage, then, where we go: What can this mean for the wider civilization? How is it that we can say — because ultimately, that becomes a way of embedding fear. And I would like that public conversation can be a way within which we can talk about things with less fear.

The Good Friday Agreement from 1998, limited as all those treaties are, has been something that ushered in something quite extraordinary. And one of the things that you hear people speaking about regularly is to say that in perpetuity, the Good Friday Agreement —
Tippett: And this was what brought peace.

Ó Tuama: The peace agreement at the end, to bring 30 years of conflict and murder and separation to some kind of robust framework for moving forward into a better peace and a better living together. And the Good Friday Agreement guarantees that people born here can have access to passports — British, Irish, either, or both — and that that piece of language is a really important piece of language, and it introduces softness and more than just an either/or option into something that could have been tense. And I’ve heard people who find themselves to go: That is challenging, but it is also a guarantee.

And I think that’s a really important thing to recognize. And often our public discourse, whatever the issue that’s dividing us, it needs a wise framing, it needs careful questioning, and it needs a way within which we can speak about these things, recognizing that words have impact. And often, if people use unwise words, they return to their intention: Well, I didn’t mean that, I didn’t mean that — without paying attention to impact.

Tippett: Right. Somewhere you said, “The awful truth is that our mixed intentions sometimes have the unmixed impact of terror.”

Ó Tuama: Totally. And we hear that at Corrymeela all the time, people who would say: I heard something on the radio, where immigrants or Protestants or Muslims or whoever — British people, Irish people — whatever that gathering narrative is, where somebody says something about that, and actually it causes fear. It causes people maybe to close their doors, to feel a little bit more worried.

And when you begin to feel that, you begin to look for it. And the awful thing is that you might find it then, even if it isn’t there. And that can cause a real limitation in a life, and that fails us. And that really does fail us. So the question is, how is it that language, simple language — I don’t mean complicated language that you need a dictionary to plow your way through, I mean plain, good, wise language — that can be the thing that might help us.

Tippett: Do you want to read a poem along those lines? Something come to mind?

Ó Tuama: So one of the complications of here is, do you call it Northern Ireland or the North of Ireland? And in a bid to irritate everybody, I wrote a poem called “The Northern of Ireland.”

“It is both a dignity and a difficulty to live between these names,

perceiving politics in the syntax of the state.

And at the end of the day, the reality is that whether we change or whether we stay
the same
these questions will remain.

Who are we to be with one another?

and

How are we to be with one another?

and

What to do with all those memories of all of those funerals?

and

What about those present whose past was blasted far beyond their future?

I wake.
You wake.
She wakes.
He wakes.
They wake.

We Wake and take this troubled beauty forward.”

There’s another one that happened — if you don’t mind.

Tippett: Sure.

Ó Tuama: This is just a short one. The poem is called “The Pedagogy of Conflict.”

“When I was a child,
I learned to count to five
one, two, three, four, five.
but these days, I’ve been counting lives, so I count

one life
one life
one life
because each time
is the first time
that that life
has been taken.

Legitimate Target
has sixteen letters
and one
long
abominable
space
between
two
dehumanising
words.”

[music: “Öldurót” by Ólafur Arnalds, featuring Atli Örvarsson, and SinfoniaNord]

Tippett: After a short break, more with Pádraig Ó Tuama.

[music: “Cnocán an Teampaill” by Ensemble Ériu]

I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, the first public conversation I ever had in Northern Ireland with Pádraig O’Tuama, a poet, theologian, and esteemed conflict resolution practitioner. He is a longtime member — and was at that time a leader — of the Corrymeela Community, which helped bring peace to Northern Ireland after generations of violence. It remains a beacon and refuge for people around the world. Pádraig is the author of books of poetry and a memoir, In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World.

I want to keep going on this work of — of this wisdom you have, and actually this wisdom this place has, about understanding who we are to each other and how we are to each other, because as I’ve said a couple of times in these days that we’ve been in Northern Ireland, it’s very striking to me that we’re in a place that has in living memory moved away from sectarianism, while at this particular moment in history in these early years of the 21st century, many places, including my country, feel like they are gravitating towards sectarianism. But I want to talk about the fact that you’re gay. And —

Ó Tuama: Really? [laughs]

Tippett: Yes. [laughs]

[laughter]

Here’s the thing, Pádraig, that really strikes me. Reading you and reading about the work you’ve done around this — and also just how you’ve inhabited this part of your identity in the work you do, whether it’s the focus or not; and it, I think, rarely is the focus — you are in an interesting position, because this is culturally a time when there have been these huge, transformative, revolutionary shifts. I mean, Ireland voting to —
Ó Tuama: Yes, I know. I wept for a day.

Tippett: You wept for a day?

Ó Tuama: And then drank for a night. [laughs]

[laughter]

Tippett: The Republic of Ireland voting to legalize same-sex marriage, this Catholic country — I mean, before it happened in the United States, I believe. And yet, because of who you are and where your “here” is from year to year, you are right in the thick of the spectrum of how this encounter, this awakening. So you’ve been in places like Uganda, where you are in fact talking about these things — about sexual identity and how churches respond to that — where you have very actively stayed in the closet, in fact felt that you would be — were pretty sure you would be unsafe.

Ó Tuama: It was more than just feeling. It was just the truth. [laughs]

Tippett: Right. And you talked about this Christian community that you were part of for many years, where you felt deeply loved. Was that the same one that also made you undergo exorcisms?

Ó Tuama: Totally, and reparative therapy, too. That is an important part of my story, that for a year I went weekly to reparative therapy or change therapy or some way within which somebody who’d done a weekend course somewhere thought that they could call themselves a counselor now. And I was 19 and frightened and thought this might help, and I was told this is the kind of thing that will help.

This is a slight precursor, but language was the thing that saved me, because I remember at one point plucking up the courage to say to this therapist — or whatever he was being called professionally — “I’m not even sure I want to want to have sex with a woman,” because it was all so erotically focused, in the sense of the kind of the mechanics of what success would look like. And that was the awful thing, and I was trying to put that into language.

And he said: That’s because you’re saying really poor sentences. And he goes: What you should be — and little did he know, the idiot ...

[laughter]

... but he said: You shouldn’t be saying “have sex with a woman.” You should say, “I want to give sex to a woman.”

And I remember thinking, that is a terrible sentence.

[laughter]

In terms of a conjugation of a verb into a sentence, that fails.

And I had been through three exorcisms in the year previous to that and had gone to this — I used to get the Number 16 bus from the north side to the south side of Dublin, petrified, and leave burdened, like with a damp blanket of dismay on me. And I said to him: That’s not a good sentence. I never went back. And that was the exorcism. It was
amazing.

And I remember getting back on the Number 16 bus, elated with delight, and I had no one to tell, because to tell anybody about this exorcism into freedom would have been to have caused complication in terms of that. And so I’m really — it’s important to recognize, I think, when it comes to LGBT people’s identities: causation, cure, and consequence are some of the public fixations around people who are cautious about the inclusion or the pace of change. But I am bored, often, by ways within which it can turn into something where I have received insult, where I then give insult back. I have never had a situation where that’s been fruitful, much and all as it might feel lovely for me afterwards, or somewhat vindicating. It isn’t fruitful. It doesn’t help to bring about change.

So I suppose I’ve been really interested in curating spaces of dialogue — here in Ireland, in Scotland, in the States and Australia and England, as well as in Uganda — where people who believe very deeply that their faith and their social conscience causes them to be concerned — that there is the possibility within the Gospels for us to be brought into a deeper kind of belonging with each other. So in Uganda, we looked at this text of the woman in Luke 7, who makes her way into the house of Simon the Pharisee. And she was not welcome, but she actually did the duties of the host. And it’s amazing, because Jesus would have been lounging on the floor. And then in Greek it says he turned to her and spoke to Simon, who would have been the host; so his head was now to the host, turning to this woman. And he says to Simon, “Do you see this woman? And what do you see?” And these are the ways within which the Gospel text calls us to look around us, in an amazing way.

And once, in one of these encounters, there was an amazing situation where about nine or ten of us in a room, people who had chosen to come and to — they came from fairly — with deep caution about lesbian and gay, bisexual, trans people.

Tippett: And where was this?

Ó Tuama: This was in Belfast. And at the end of the two-day encounter, one of the men who had — he had chosen the word “fundamentalist” for himself, to describe himself as a Christian. He said: I have a question for all the homosexuals in the room.

Part of me wanted to go: We don’t really like that word. But anyway, I thought, let’s hear the question first, because — and he says: I want to know how many times since we’ve met together in the last while have my words bruised you.

And somebody next to me went: Ah, you’re lovely. You’re very nice.

And he said: No. Don’t patronize me. How many times have my words bruised you?

And the fellow next to me started to count: One, two, three, four. And then he goes: I’ve given up after the first hour.

And then this man, who had gone to the edges of his own understanding and asked others to help populate that edge with information and insight, said: Are you telling me that it’s painful for you to be around me?

A woman in the room went: Yeah, it is.

And he was the one who chaplained himself into that space. And I couldn’t have made
that happen, as the facilitator of the room. Like if I had said, Do you realize that your words are bruising?, none of that would have been sufficient, because what he was being brought into was the transformative power of human encounter in relationship.

We were on a residential, and curiously, we were talking a few nights previously about television, and he was saying that his absolute favorite show was this political show on the BBC on a Thursday night. And I said: Oh, my partner produces that. And he was like: What?

And then he went through all the names, because he’s that kind of a geek that he knew all the names of the production team. And he mentioned him by name, he mentioned Paul by name. And then suddenly, he was like: Do they enjoy it? And he had all this information that he wanted to ask, and curiosity unfolded between us.

And I think that, and shared cups of tea, was one of the things that contributed to the fact that he demonstrated — and I was converted by his capacity to ask that question. I came away just going: I want, in the ways within which I am the perpetrator of real hostility and lack of understanding and lazy thinking, I want to be someone like him, who says, Tell me what it’s like to hear the way I talk, because I need to be changed. I want also to be converted in terms of that.

Tippett: But I think that also speaks to another idea that you and I have discussed and explored together and that’s come up in these days in Northern Ireland, which is the urgency of creating spaces where that kind of human connection can be made — even just that normalizing thing of, Oh, I know the TV show that your partner works on, which wasn’t about the issue but it flowed into the relationship — but also where you could come to that moment of conversion for both of you. I mean, Corrymeela is a place, is the creation of a place where people whose lives were threatened during the Troubles literally fled here, physically, to be safe. I think what you’re talking about is so relevant and resonant for American life right now, and this question of getting the right people in the room. How would you start to give some counsel on that from what you know?

Ó Tuama: I suppose Corrymeela’s practice for all those years has been to be a place of story, and that within that, the society, the religion, the politics, the pain are all held within those stories. They don’t exist in an abstract way. These concepts, like civic society, exist in people next to people next to people next to people. And sometimes that’s a very fractious experience.

And one of the things that I think is really important, for lots of organizations of goodwill — and Corrymeela is one of them amongst many in Northern Ireland, that’s really an important thing to say — is the recognition to say: Where are the limitations of our understanding? Do we have friendships? And I really appreciate when people contact. So the question, often, is to say: Are there human connection points where quietly you can say to people, Can you help me understand this? And maybe then you’ll participate in this fantastic argument of being alive in such a dynamic way that it’s great fun or really enlivening, and you can have a really robust disagreement. And that is the opposite of being frightened of fear, because you can create that.

When Corrymeela began in ’65, somebody who didn’t have a great understanding of old Irish etymology had said: Oh, “Corrymeela” means “hill of harmony.” And people were like, How lovely; amazing; “hill of harmony” — isn’t that delightful? And about 10 years later, somebody who actually knew what they were talking about when it came to old Irish etymology said: Well, it’s kind of like “place of lumpy crossings.”
And by that stage, there’d been 10 years. People were all like, Oh thank God. [laughs] The place can hold us so, because we haven’t been great at harmony, apart from the occasional song.

Tippett: Yeah, well, who is? [laughs]

Ó Tuama: Yeah, but that gives — and people do sometimes say, when we’re in community discussions, say: This is a bit of a lumpy crossing for us. And it gives space and permission to say: Yeah, it is.

And actually, even the naming of that is part of what might help us and be a lovely, wise understanding about what success is, because that in itself is a really good place to get to — to say: The “here” is that this is difficult.

[music: “Fáinleog (Wanderer)” by The Gloaming]

Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being, today in Northern Ireland with theologian, poet, and social healer Pádraig Ó Tuama,

You mentioned at one point that — I think you say that you didn’t love the book The Zen — what is it?

Ó Tuama: Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.

Tippett: Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, but that there’s this word —

Ó Tuama: One lovely word. I’d been reading Henri Nouwen, and I thought, When I read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, I will become as wise as Henri Nouwen.

And then I read the book, and I was like: I’m bored — partly because I don’t understand motorcycles. So I suppose that was the beginning. I should have paid attention to that.

Tippett: But this one word, “mu” — M-U.

Ó Tuama: There’s a Buddhist concept where if you’re asking a poor question — if a question is being asked, Are you this or that?, that what Robert Pirsig says is that you can answer — according to his telling of the Zen tradition, you can answer with this word “mu,” M-U, which means: Un-ask the question, because there’s a better question to be asked. The question that’s asking is limiting, and you’ll get no good answer from anything. This question fails us, never mind subsequent answers.

And I think that’s a really delightful way to understand the world. And I think questions about Jesus sometimes, that are posed in our public rhetoric about Christianity — what do we do here; what do we do there; is this right; is that right — am I allowed to be gay and Christian, for instance, was the question that plagued me for years. And I think that in a certain sense we’re being told by God, perhaps in silence, in our prayers: Mu — because there’s better questions to ask. And asking a wiser question might unfold us into asking even more, wiser questions, whereas certain kinds of questions just entrench fear.

Tippett: Well, also, wiser questions will elicit wiser responses.
Ó Tuama: Yes, you’re right.

Tippett: And so that will lead us together down a different road.

Ó Tuama: Totally, and maybe towards each other and into human encounter and into the possibility of saying: I will learn something from somebody.

I used to be a school chaplain in West Belfast, and I trained, and I did some Ignatian spirituality training. And we used to do reflections, prayer reflections, with 11-year-old, West Belfast, hilarious young people. And we’d gather around and light a candle and have a prayer bowl and just create a little bit of quiet. And then we’ll do an imaginative Ignatian reflection where the young people would take a walk with Jesus. And it was only a year that I had that job, and that year — I loved that job, because every day I thought, I am going to meet Jesus as curated and narrated by 11-year-olds from West Belfast.

And they were hilarious. One young girl said: Yeah, Jesus came walking over the water, wearing a purple tutu and a coconut bra.

I was like, Oh my God — [laughs] that’s not the Jesus that I know.

And then they had to make a drawing for the Bishop. She said: I’m not very good at drawing. I was like, Thank God, because I’d like to keep my job.

[laughter]

Maybe it was for me.

Tippett: The other kinds of story — and I think these were younger kids in a different setting in which you were teaching — you also got this question: Pádraig, does God love us?

Ó Tuama: Oh, yes. That was actually in the same job.

Tippett: So why did he create Protestants?

Ó Tuama: She was hilarious. She was one of my favorites. She was amazing at football, and she just said everything that she thought. I was wittering on about something, and she was clearly bored, and she goes: Pádraig, answer me a question. I went, OK. And she goes: God loves us, right? I went, OK; she was setting out her premise. And then I said: OK, I’m with you.

Tippett: [laughs] She was a philosopher.

Ó Tuama: Yeah, totally. And then she goes: And God made us, right?

OK — I knew that these weren’t the really important questions.

And then she goes: Answer me this — why did God make Protestants?

I said: You have to tell me a bit more about your question.

And she goes: Well, they hate us, and they hate him.
And because I knew she was brilliant at football, I said: I know a lot of Protestants that would want you on their football team.

And she went: Really? — because she, in that little half-comedic, half-frightening incident, is telling a story of an entire society, because she has been educated, and she is reflecting something. And this is 2011, so this was 13 years after the Good Friday Agreement had been signed. She hadn’t been born when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and nonetheless these are ways within which these stories — and you mentioned sectarianism, earlier on, and one of the best definitions of sectarianism comes from a book by Cecelia Clegg and Joe Liechty, and they say sectarianism is “belonging gone bad.”

Tippett: Belonging gone bad. And they — in that book, you mention —

Ó Tuama: The scale of sectarianism.

Tippett: The scale. And so what is that? And the scale?

Ó Tuama: The scale for them begins — I think there’s about 14 or 15 points. The first part of the scale is going: You’re different; I’m different; fine. And the 15th point is: You are demonic. And that’s the word they use, and all the scales down to that.

One of the pieces that they —

Tippett: And the farther down that scale you go, the more violence —

Ó Tuama: The more danger.

Tippett: Dangerous it becomes.

Ó Tuama: And the more you justify it, because if somebody is the devil, well, then, you get rid of them, don’t you.

One of the scales, and that is: In order for me to be right, it is important that I believe that you are wrong — and ways within which that is really alive to how it is. And I think what you’ve been saying in terms of recognizing that fragile and limited as our process has been here, Northern Ireland has transformed itself. And involved in that has been politicians and peacemakers and victims and perpetrators and all these limited words like that, people who have said: I was caught up in something — and have now given extraordinary contributions. So many people of goodwill and courage and protest saying: We can find a way to live well together, and this can be the hope.

Tippett: And that’s very hopeful, to think that you have collectively — including people who were violent, who were — “terrorists” is one of those words, but who actually collectively moved from that place on the spectrum of demonizing others, back towards not necessarily agreeing or loving, in terms of feeling jubilant in each other’s presence, but making that move.

Ó Tuama: And giving committed guarantees to the other’s safety, and finding ways within which we can say: This can be a place where our disagreements will happen in a tone that is wiser and in a tone that is safer.
And I think that’s a really helpful place to be, because the implication that to agree with each other is what guarantees safety is immediately undermined by every experience of family. [laughs] Like, family — we just know that. And friendships — that’s what we know. Agreement has rarely been the mandate for people who love each other. Maybe on some things, but actually, when you look at some people who are lovers and friends, you go: Actually, they might disagree really deeply on things, but they’re somehow — I like the phrase “the argument of being alive.” Or in Irish, when you talk about trust, there’s a beautiful phrase from West Kerry where you say, “Mo sheasamh ort lá na choise tinne”: “You are the place where I stand on the day when my feet are sore.”

And it’s so physical, that beautiful understanding. And you can find that with each other, even when you think different things about what jurisdiction we are or should be in. You can find “you are the place where I stand on the day when my feet are sore” with each other. And that is soft and kind language, but it is so robust. And it is part of the firmament that upholds what it means to be human, that is what we can have with each other.

And we are failed by headlines that just demonize the other and are lazy, and where I might read a headline about myself and go: I don’t recognize myself in the language that’s being spoken about there. We are failed by that. But we are upheld by something that has a quality of deep virtues of kindness, of goodness, of curiosity, and the jostle and enjoyment of saying: Yeah, we disagree. But that curates something and in a psychological context contains something that actually is a vessel of deep safety and community.

Tippett: I am going to skip over all of my other brilliant questions.

[laughter]

I just want to read this, on the power of the idea of belonging: “It creates and undoes us both.” And you also wrote, “If spirituality does not speak to this power, then it speaks to little.” I think what I’d love for you to do is read the very end of your book. I have it — or, you have it?

Ó Tuama: Right here.

Tippett: So it would be starting at “Neither I nor the poets I love ...”

Ó Tuama: Sure.

“Neither I nor the poets I love have found the keys to the kingdom of prayer and we cannot force God to stumble over us where we sit. But I know that it’s a good idea to sit anyway. So every morning, I sit — I kneel, waiting, making friends with the habit of listening, hoping that I’m being listened to. There, I greet God in my own disorder. I say hello to my chaos, my unmade decisions, my unmade bed, my desire and my trouble. I say hello to distraction and privilege, I greet the day and I greet my beloved and bewildering Jesus. I recognize and greet my burdens, my luck, my controlled and uncontrollable story. I greet my untold stories, my unfolding story, my unloved body, my own body. I greet the things I think will happen and I say hello to everything I do not know about the day. I greet my own small world and I hope that I can meet the bigger world that day. I greet my story and hope that I can forget my story during the day, and hope that I can hear some stories, and greet some surprising stories during the long day ahead. I greet God, and I greet the God who is more God than the God I greet.
“Hello to you all, I say, as the sun rises above the chimneys of North Belfast.

“Hello.”

Tippett: I just love those pages. I love that image of you praying and how you pray.

Ó Tuama: I do love praying; like “prier” from French — “to ask.” And what I love about that word is it doesn’t require belief. [laughs] It just requires a recognition of need. And I think the recognition of need is something that brings us to a deep, common language about what it means to be human. And if you’re not in a situation where you know need, well, then you’re lucky — but you will be. [laughs] That won’t last for too long. Need is happening in so many ways, in so many levels, in people and in societies and in communities.

And I suppose I really think that prayer is also not only naming or asking, but just saying hello to what is and trying to be brave, trying to be courageous in that situation, and trying to be generous to your own self, also; to go: Here’s a day when I feel intimidated. Or: Here’s a day I’m just waiting for the end of it. Or: Here’s the day when I have huge expectations of delight — because those can also be troubling, and Ignatius cautions people to have an active detachment, recognizing the things that will cause you great distress, as well as things that can cause you great delight, can be things that distract you from what he calls your “principle and foundation” — which I suppose I ultimately understand as love — and that that is the principle and foundation of the human project, of the human story, of the human encounter, is to move toward each other in love.

In Corrymeela we talk about living well together; that that is the vision we have, to live well together. That doesn’t mean to agree. That doesn’t mean that everything will be perfect. It means to say that in the context of imperfection and difficulty we can find the capacity and the skill, as well as the generosity and courtesy, to live well together.

And I think in the morning-times, I say hello to all those things, and then I try to say hello a little bit to what I know won’t happen. And in that sense prayer becomes a way within which you cultivate curiosity and the sense of wonder so that you know I’ll be returning back to this and can say hello, tomorrow, to something that I wouldn’t have even known about today. And that’s how I understand prayer, in that way. Every now and then, Jesus shows up and says something interesting [laughs] through the Gospel.

I read the Gospels in Irish, too, because there’s something about reading the text in Irish. It’s a lovely thing to do in that sense, because you realize the way within which these translators have found a way to say something that really unfolds something really delightful.

Tippett: Thank you so much.

Ó Tuama: It’s a joy, Krista. It’s a joy.

Tippett: Thank you.

[applause]

[music: “Belfast” by Brian Finnegan]
Pádraig Ó Tuama is the host of On Being Studio’s podcast, Poetry Unbound. Season 5 is now underway, wherever you like to listen. His books include a prayer book, Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community, a book of poetry, Sorry For Your Troubles, and a poetic memoir, In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World. And you can already pre-order his newest book, coming out in October: Poetry Unbound, 50 Poems to Open Your World.

And friends, you may have heard that we are bringing On Being’s two-decade run as a public radio show to a close. We are right here as before, until the end of June. And On Being is not ending. New adventures — of easy-to-find listening, by podcast, and creativity and community — are commencing. It has been such an honor to meet you here first, on this public radio station. And we’re making this transition ahead a celebration of these two decades and of you, our listeners. So I warmly invite you to go to onbeing.org/staywithus to be part of what lies ahead. Again, please take just a minute to go to onbeing.org/staywithus and say hello.

[music: “Belfast” by Brian Finnegan]

The On Being Project is located on Dakota land. Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing at the end of our show is Cameron Kinghorn.

On Being is an independent, nonprofit production of The On Being Project. It is distributed to public radio stations by WNYC Studios. I created this show at American Public Media.

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