

Peter Sheridan

reflection questions & episode transcript

In a typical year, Corrymeela’s meeting rooms — and dining and welcome areas — are filled with people discussing matters of politics, history and religion that have separated them. During this time of Covid, we are providing you with a transcript of each podcast episode, along with some discussion questions, to aid your consideration of the themes which emerge. You may wish to discuss these questions with friends, family, a group you establish on zoom, or use them for your own writing and consideration.

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 within the group. It might help to choose one of the [Very Short Story Questions](#). As with any group process, if you are talking about this episode with others, make sure to check that people feel safe enough, that the time is right for them, and make it easy for anyone who wishes to keep their considerations to themselves, or for anyone who doesn’t wish to join such a conversation.

1. Commenting on the suggestion that Northern Ireland’s police service is one of the most overseen forces in the world, Peter Sheridan speaks about the benefit of an organisation being subject to an outside process that safeguards accountability. Can you think of an occasion when you have seen an organisation, relationship, community, or society benefit from being subject to an external process of accountability? Or suffer for a lack of one? What were the results? How might they have been different?
2. Peter Sheridan draws attention to the fact that peace processes require negotiation and navigation of difference within individual communities, as well as between opposing ones. In the political and cultural identities that are important to you, what are the *internal* divisions that are important to address?
3. Peter Sheridan references some of the leaders who ushered in British-Irish peace, most of whom are no longer in public life. Which British, Irish, or international leaders do you see working towards peace and justice today? In what areas would you like to see such leadership strengthened?

You can [find out more about Cooperation Ireland here](#).

The [“Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland”](#) (also known as the Patten Report) can be read [here](#).

The Corrymeela Podcast. Interview with Peter Sheridan.

Transcript.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama. In this first year of Brexit, and a century after the partition of Ireland, I'm in conversation with special guests, exploring contemporary Irishness and Britishness through the lenses of history, politics, art and theology.

This week, I'm delighted that my guest is Peter Sheridan: Chief Exec. of the peace and reconciliation organisation, Co-operation Ireland. In a career that's now into its fifth decade, Peter tells me about his efforts to secure peace, as well as his years as a great rarity- a Catholic in the police here.

"I mean of course I met rogues, scoundrels, bigots, but they were by far in the minority; the vast majority of people were - happened to come from a Protestant background - but they were honourable, decent people who had similar values to me- wanted the same things..."

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Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Peter Sheridan, a former senior police officer here in Northern Ireland, and now CEO of the peacebuilding organisation, Co-operation Ireland. Peter, thanks very much for joining us.

Peter Sheridan:

Thank you, Pádraig.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Just as we start, what room are you talking to us from?

Peter Sheridan:

So I'm talking to you from my study, which - to make you jealous - is sitting on the edge of the Atlantic. So I look right over the Atlantic ocean into Donegal and into Portrush harbour.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Peter, you were born in 1960 and you've described growing up in a Catholic, Irish, nationalist, comfortable family in County Fermanagh. And then in 1978, you joined the RUC- a police force that was at that stage about 95 percent Protestant and generally seen as 100 percent unionist. Did you face some opposition from family or friends?

Peter Sheridan:

I actually joined at sixteen as a police cadet, which again was unusual in 1976; [I was] literally 16 years of age; my careers teacher was a Catholic priest - Father Peadar Livingstone from Castleblayney in County Monaghan - who I suppose if I was being at my most benevolent I would say he probably wasn't the biggest supporter of all things British. So when I had my Careers' interview and went in to talk to him, I was going in to talk about joining the Post Office or hotel management, but came out after the interview having agreed that he would bring the local RUC recruiting sergeant up to speak to me. And to this day, I don't know how we got there in it, other than, at that time the recruiting sergeant in Enniskillen was a Catholic officer. And whether him and Peadar Livingstone had built up a relationship... But when I went home to talk to my family - 'cause at that time- 1976 was one of the worst years for terrorism in Northern Ireland - but at 16 you know, I was interested in George Best, the girls from the collegiate school up the road. But when I was home - went home to talk to my family about it - there wasn't opposition as such; I mean there was discussions about: would you be better joining the Guards or the Metropolitan Police or the Scottish Police? And I did apply at the time to the Metropolitan Police and to the Guards. And I got a reply back from the Metropolitan Police to say that they weren't recruiting for the next year. I'm still waiting on a reply from the Guards. (In fact, I've asked my former colleague Drew Harris- maybe he'd look into where that letter is). And then I ended up applying for the RUC at the time.

My grandmother lived with us at the time, and maybe this is- this sticks in my memory (and maybe it's about faith, or fatalism) but when the discussion was about the safety issues, and would you be better joining the Scottish police or the Guards, my grandmother - she didn't say a lot - but she said: 'if he's born to be shot, he'll never be drowned'. But it's stuck in my memory. And, you know, having been involved in numerous incidents and survived many an attack, it does come back to me that there was an element of truth, in fact there was a lot of truth in that. And, and I'm sure for her - from her perspective - it was a sense of faith.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You said in an interview, Peter, that, you know, maintaining your Irish, Catholic, nationalist identity was one of your biggest achievements. How did you achieve that?

Peter Sheridan:

I suppose in some ways, 'nationalist identity' is maybe not the strongest way of putting it; I would always consider myself to be Irish - and an Irish patriot, in many ways - but not maybe nationalist- Irish nationalist... I suppose I grew up in a strong faith, family faith, so when I went to - was posted to - Derry in the police, you're in a largely Protestant Force (95 percent Protestant) and, you know, [the] vast majority of people that I met were honourable, decent people, but nevertheless, the culture was naturally going to be of a Protestant culture. So it would have been easy to stay in your bed on a Sunday morning. And because it was Derry, and there wasn't many Catholic churches that it would've been easy for a police officer to go into on a Sunday, that also would have caused a difficulty. So I remember saying to myself at the time that I was gonna, you know, maintain my faith in it, because all of these other - I suppose - elements would have easily removed it from you and it could have been easy to have let it go. And maybe the fact that you have to fight for it sometimes makes it more of what you want to do rather than, you know, people who don't have any challenge around it that it can sometimes get lost with people. So I fought for it in that way.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, there'd be a kind of big public story that Catholics, or people with a strong sense of Irishness, would have struggled enormously in the RUC from the '70s '80s and '90s. Was that your experience?

Peter Sheridan:

It wasn't, and I'll tell you why it wasn't. I mean, of course I met rogues, scoundrels, bigots. But they were by far in the minority; the vast majority of people were - happened to come from a Protestant background - but they were honourable, decent people who had similar values to me- wanted the same things. And it was no different than I guess that you're in the BBC or in RTÉ or join any other organisation that you- when you're in the organisation, you get on with people because you like them; you [have] similar characteristics, similar pastimes. And religion wasn't the issue. Of course, around times like the 12th July, you could- you knew the temperature changed. And that was the cultural background. But it wasn't routinely an issue in it, and in fact, you know, I could probably count on the, on the one hand the number of times that I personally received sectarian comments. I mean, there would have been the usual banter around the place, but you know, many of us I think gave as good as I got in that regard. But it wasn't serious by people then, so it wasn't the same issue that people perceived from the outside.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And then within the context of that, and knowing what you're saying that the experience inside the RUC (the police at the time) was not as sectarian as the public story that was being told, what were the reforms like; was there resistance or resentment to the upcoming reforms - we'll talk about the actual reforms in a while - but the idea of the reforms and moving to the PSNI; was that taken as a 'this is a good thing' or was it taken as a something else?

Peter Sheridan:

Well I think it - like most things in society, you know - some people grasp it and run with it, and love change and run at a pace at it; other people are, you know: 'well, I'll go along with it' - they probably don't push too hard to do it, but yeah d'you know, they're getting paid, and it's not going to overly affect them in that way. And then you will have a group of people who don't like change anyway - in life - and may have seen this as betrayal; may have been more political than other people in the organisation. So there isn't one homogeneous view of it; in fact, it's what you would find in most of society out there, you know, different viewpoints, people have different energies around change. As I say, some people loved it, some people hated it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And the PSNI that replaced the RUC- it's accountable to a policing board, and the policing ombudsman; as well as being scrutinised, you know, by politicians and journalists and activists. Queen's University in Belfast released a piece of research that said that the PSNI (the Police Service of Northern Ireland) is widely regarded as one of the most accountable, overseen police services anywhere in the world. Is that an analysis you'd agree with?

Peter Sheridan:

Yeah, and do you know what, it is no bad thing. If you look across the world at policing; just look at America at the minute and some of the challenges around policing. Too often, people see the police as something separate from the society; it's everybody's responsibility in society to be policing that society - there happen to be some people who wear a uniform to do that - but it shouldn't be seen as some separate identity because it's about improving people's lives. And

I always felt that that accountability was a good thing. I mean, I even would have described the fact that myself - as a Catholic - sitting in the back of a police Land Rover, was also an act of accountability, because people moderate their behaviour when somebody else is in the room, or somebody else was in the back of that Land Rover, you know, and I had been very alert that people would have been conscious of that. So particularly in Derry - mainly Catholic city - and if you're in the Shantallow Estate, I'm sure my presence in the back of [the] police Land Rover as people attended events and calls would have acted as an accountability.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Do you think that models of accountability for policing - in effect, 'policing the police' - is a model that could be taken up elsewhere around the world?

Peter Sheridan:

Yeah, and in other organisations. You know, I was a senior officer in the complaints department at one time, investigating complaints against the police. And, you know, I had a number of police officers [who] went to prison as a result of some of my investigations in it. But no matter how you would have tried to convince the public and the outside that the police investigating themselves- we would do it honourably. It was never, you know, the perceptions are always different in it. So having an [independent body] look into it... I'm not sure that if you examine the statistics, there would be much difference in the number of people who have been either disciplined or convicted with the external bodies, than there was in the internal body; and I watched colleagues who I think - police officer colleagues who were in the department with me - who would have been even more ruthless against colleagues who broke the rules, than probably an outside body was- they may've got more sympathy from an outside body. But I think just in perception terms, it is good for organisations to have somebody to look in from the outside. And that we don't all- the power is not all held within.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And at the time of the reforming of the police from the RUC to the PSNI, there was a 50/50 recruitment policy that was introduced for about 10 years, whereby the intake would be evenly balanced between, you know, the two main communities that make up the historic sectarian division in Northern Ireland: Catholics and Protestants. Is that a model that you think is useful in terms of a recruitment policy like that?

Peter Sheridan:

I think you have to be careful on it, Pádraig. And it was required of its time to make change fast in it, but it did you know, to some extent, discriminate against people, because the way the system worked is that... So if there were 200 vacancies, anybody could apply from any community; you filled in a community background, which identified you as Catholic or other, and people [who] were other were obviously the Protestant community. But everybody went through the process and it was only at the end of the process - when out of say 4,000 people [who] applied, 2,000 people made the cut - that you opened the two forms, and then they divided them into bundles. And then you took the top off each bundle. But that meant that somebody from the Protestant community could have been higher up in it, whereas somebody in the Catholic community could be further down - although they'd passed the listing - so you took a selection from both of them so it- to some extent it discriminated. But I also think that, you know, five percent of the community could be Chinese; two percent of the community could come from the traveller community, and at what stage do you try and, you know, balance out a police service by being reflective of the whole of society? Ten percent of

the population are gay and lesbian, you know- should we separate them? So I think it has to be carefully done. And I think that the police did right, in that it was required to do that change and do it quickly. But it should come to an end, and we should select people based on their skills and abilities and not on their identity and background.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm hearing you say that it's complicated, perhaps intrinsically flawed, but also necessary and good enough for the time that it was in.

Peter Sheridan:

Yeah, no it was- and there are discussions at the minute that the numbers of Catholics at times in the police have dropped so we should bring it back in again. I just think you have to be careful about that, because my view is that we should pick the best people for the job, not what colour they are or what background they come from; it's the best people you want for the job. But humanity as it is- you have to be reflective of society.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'd like to talk about Co-operation Ireland, because despite being hailed as the leading contender for the next Chief Constable, you left the PSNI in 2008. And you became the head of Co-operation Ireland. Could you tell us about that organisation and why you made that move?

Peter Sheridan:

Yeah, well, at that time, I mean, I had completed 30 years' service; I was still 48 years of age, and yes, there was a lot of pressure on me to apply for the Chief Constable's job. But there's such a variety of life out there, and sometimes I'm a bit of a risk taker and I don't do the orthodox. You know, the fact that I came from a Catholic background, joined the police; have an inter-church marriage, you know, I never ever followed the routine path. And I guess, you know, when people were pressurising me or suggested [to] me to stay, then I kind of work the opposite direction. And I thought it would be a great opportunity to do something, do something different in life and do something new. And every time I look back on it, it was absolutely the right decision. It opened so many other doors and so many other opportunities for me in it. And I suppose, looking back- and it's a risk, of course it is, to make such a jump.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I mean, you brought so much of your experience from policing into the work in Co-operation Ireland; you helped to broker agreements between the unionist Apprentice Boys- (marchers) and then nationalist residents in Derry. And that was a great success alongside other attempts that would have not been so successful, or would have faced more resistance. Why do you think that some areas are amenable to negotiation and other areas aren't?

Peter Sheridan:

Interesting when you say that. You know, when I left at the time, the most - singular most - regular comment I got was: that's some change, you know, from policing to practically peacebuilding. And it always confused me- I said: no, it's not actually, because policing should be about community building and about peacebuilding. And I didn't feel it the same way as people perceived it to be. I think if you take the example in Derry, I suspect that part of that, Pádraig, is that you had a Protestant community that lived alongside a majority Catholic community, so almost had to get on with them. But also a lot of the - in the early '60s, you know - the shirt factories and people work together and they kind of

knew each other, which is very different than Belfast, even though the city in Derry is divided. When I went to the city, first of all police officers lived on the west bank of the Foyle. Now, within a few years, that was no longer the case and they moved to the waterside. But it's still a city where people knew each other; knew their families; knew their backgrounds. And I think that makes a difference in it; Belfast's a much bigger conurbation - not the same neighbourliness simply because of the size of it, and not the same background of working together or knowing the family - and I think that had a big part in it. You know, I remember being in some of those meetings with the Apprentice Boys - and whether it was Billy Moore, general secretary of the Apprentice Boys or Donncha Mac Niallais - they knew each other's families, they knew about each other, as opposed to just knowing about their politics.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That strikes me as something that you have brought into lots of your work in Co-operation Ireland. I mean, I was an employee of Co-operation Ireland for a wee while (which is where we got to know each other) and it strikes me that you use human connection so often within the context of your work - by building human connection in communities; by building human connection cross-border - but also then in terms of your own connections, in politics, and in senior civic society organisations; relationship seems to be a very key thing for you within the context of your work and your work of peacebuilding.

Peter Sheridan:

Yeah, no, and I absolutely agree with that. And I'm passionate about that- even [if] you take it from a faith perspective: 'love your neighbour as yourself' you know, that was written for a reason. And yet we don't live it out in normal circumstances. And, I'm not saying that from a hugely- you know, from a religious perspective, but I genuinely believe it's the right thing. And I've constantly seen how it works and works to the betterment of it. People know that I was the police commander in Derry; Martin McGuinness was a commander of a different style. He and I shared a platform one time in the United States and I was asked to introduce myself first. And I had said as part of my introduction that I had spent more time in Martin McGuinness's house in the last 30 years than he had. And he acknowledged [it] and it got a bit of a laugh, but that connection, and then, in deeper conversations with him... We came from, to some extent, similar backgrounds, you know, working class Catholic backgrounds - from pretty religious families - and Irish backgrounds. But we then, you know, went different ways. And there are all sorts of reasons how that happens in life.

But I remember having a discussion with him about some of the more difficult issues and I had said to him at one stage: Martin, I'll make a deal with you. I said: I'm willing to accept that you have an understanding of the last 35 years. I'm not willing to say it's right or that I agree with it. But I'm willing to accept it's yours, on one condition: that you accept that I have an understanding of the last 35 years. You don't have to agree with it, or say it's right, but accept it's mine. And then we can talk about the future. And you know, out of all of them, he got that. And he got it not just with me, but he got it when he met the Queen; he got it when he met other political- other politicians from a Protestant background. And I think that that's why- that there was some ability to get on in it you know, just that acknowledgement of: the other had a different path - we don't always have to agree with them, or say they're right in it - but an acknowledgement that that was their path in it, and then you can talk about the other things.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, one of the things you're highlighting there, Peter, is that it isn't just British-Irish negotiations [that] are part of a peace process. Because this was you (as an Irish Catholic) disagreeing with and challenging Martin McGuinness (as

another Irish Catholic), who was disagreeing with and challenging you, and the two of you were in negotiations in that way. Partly at the heart of the question of British-Irish relations is the question of internal distinctions in Ireland - north and south - about what a peaceful Ireland can look like. Where do you see that happening now; where do you see people of maybe nationalist - even though that mightn't be a word everybody would use - or Irish or Catholic persuasions or affiliations? Where do you see the debates happening internally about what Irishness is worth working for?

Peter Sheridan:

I constantly say as part of Co-operation Ireland that it's not our job to put two fields together between Fermanagh and Leitrim. But it is our job to put people together, and if ultimately people decide to put the fields together, then that's fine. If they decide not to, that's fine, too. I think we have to be open to the possibility of a range of options that we cannot even see yet. And, you know, simply saying: oh we want to get a united Ireland. I just disagree with that as a simple concept, because if you're open and genuine and you want to love your neighbour as yourself, then you have to be prepared to listen to what your neighbour has to say and what might work for your neighbour, and therefore not having any fixed end result in this until we have genuinely talked it through. And this has been going 800 years, so what's the rush that it has to be done by the end of next year? I'd much rather that, as a people, that we get on because we're here for a short space of time anyway. And we don't own the place. And none of us own any of this place around here; we're here for- on loan or for a holiday or whatever way you want to put it for a while. And so in that period of time, having these fixed viewpoints as if nothing changes in life... And that's- if we get to a place that's either a united Ireland or it's as it is now that that's utopia. I don't subscribe to that thinking.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, some of what you're saying there about the question of Irishness and trying to have a fixed imagination about what something could be rather than negotiating with differences; that also could be used to address the questions that Brexit arises. You know, the UK has now left the European Union. And Brexit is something that's been very important on this podcast: that's partly why we're doing it this year you know, the centenary of partition and the first year of Brexit. What challenges does Brexit bring to the question of Irish co-operation/ Irish engagement/ British-Irish co-operation that you see from your point of view?

Peter Sheridan:

Well, what I think you can see already since the referendum decision four and a half years ago, was that the heyday of those good relations between the governments have largely gone. And that conflict is- we've almost separated out again, whereas a lot of the progress was made because the British and Irish governments collectively and collaboratively wanted things to change, and they were able to do it - to some extent - through Europe. And that has changed, you know, so, even in recent weeks, we have a Shared Island unit set up by the Taoiseach's office. But then the British government now are talking about appointing a cabinet minister for protecting the union or supporting the union. And there are almost two polar opposites in that, and the danger is- and there's nothing wrong with either of those two places. But it's that bit in the middle that, you know, the tendency will be that, to some extent, most people from the Protestant community will want to line up behind the cabinet minister in the UK government about protecting the union and supporting the union. And Catholic, nationalist, Irish people will want to work with the Shared Island, so then we end up polarising again. And so it's: how do you find that middle ground now? And be able to have both of

those conversations because both are legitimate conversations. And maybe the richness in those conversations gets you to a final place.

Corrymeela is Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation. Working with thousands of people a year, Corrymeela supports groups to deepen inclusion, peace and belonging. This is the ninth of twelve episodes of The Corrymeela Podcast. We've been delighted to bring these conversations to you, from our kitchen table to yours, in this important year.

If you had three or four minutes to give us some feedback, we would be so grateful. We're currently wondering what people are picking up on in these episodes; if you're making use of the show notes or the discussion questions or the transcripts, and what questions the podcasts are raising for you. So we have a feedback form. You can find it - as well as the transcript and questions for this episode - on corrymeela.org/podcast or linked through the show notes in your podcast app.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama and my guest today is former senior police officer and now CEO of the peacebuilding charity Co-operation Ireland, Peter Sheridan.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Peter, I'd like to ask you a question about peace processes. Like, they're started - and signed - by people who, at the time, were the heads of government or state, or dignitaries or cultural figures or community leaders of some kind. But then, you know, those people move off the stage; they finish time in politics or go to other jobs or all kinds of reasons. I wonder sometimes what it means to see a peace process as something that can last generations, rather than just be tied to one cycle of government, or to particular leaders of the time.

Peter Sheridan:

Tony Blair, John Major, Albert Reynolds, Bertie Ahern, Bill Clinton- I think they owned this baby - the peace process - and they loved it, and they looked after it and really cared for it. But all of those guys stepped off the stage almost at the same time. And then in came Gordon Brown, George Bush, Brian Cowen, and whilst they kind of still liked this child they had to adopt it; it wasn't theirs, and they adopted it. But then as you get further out again, with David Cameron, Enda Kenny and Barack Obama... The child was supposed to be growing up by this [point] and so they didn't feel that they had to have the same input into the child's growing up. And so they got further away and I think in hindsight, all of that probably was a mistake. Now, of course, they would say: well, you know, like most children growing up, you expect them to mature and so it was an expectation that we would mature here- maybe a false expectation. But I do think that because of that, we lost some of the momentum around it and we lost some of that interest that was required to really prosecute at home. And of course with the economic collapse around the world, just at a time [when] we needed 6,000 jobs into West Belfast or North Belfast, or 6,000 jobs into Derry that gave people hope - young people in particular, hope - what happened was their mother and father just started to lose their jobs. And we didn't get that - what people euphemistically talk about [as] - a peace dividend. But I think that's right in it. But because the people in charge at the time didn't have the same love for that child [as] the people who birthed the child, if you like.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, from around 2011 onwards, there was almost like a- the initiation of a decade of gestures, you know, to go alongside the decade of commemorations. There were the visits of the royal family to Dublin and Belfast as well; the handshake that you were instrumental in supporting; and then reciprocal visits by Michael D. Higgins (who was the president of Ireland at the time) and unveiling of portraits and inviting of unionist speakers and members to the Seannad in Dublin. And even the commemoration of 1916 had all of the dead listed alphabetically, rather than listed according to their politics. What's the importance for you of gesture when it comes to addressing long term divisions between British and Irish relations; and then building on that, what needs to happen after gesture to make it even more meaningful?

Peter Sheridan:

I do think pinching the peace process from both ends - from the top down and the bottom up - so the good work that's done by lots of groups and communities on the ground is critically important. But you know, the symbolism of when the Queen went to Dublin (and we were closely involved in that state visit). But when she went to Dublin- if you remember that once she was driving through the streets of Dublin, they were desolate, and the Guards had sealed it off. But all of those gestures of wearing green, shamrocks, bowing at the garden of remembrance; all of those things you could feel growing on people in Ireland, to the extent that by the time she got to Cork, where the Sinn Fein mayor met her, and she got to Cork, and she was able to walk about Cork city. And that came because of how it changed people's perceptions. I would suspect that a lot of the people who turned out in Cork that day never envisaged that they would be turning out in Cork that day. But the Queen grew on people because of those genuine gestures. And you know, that phrase in her speech in Dublin - even the fact that she spoke Irish - reached out to people; that she was wearing green, that she was wearing shamrocks. But when she's talked about: 'you can bow to the past but not be bound by it'. You know, I think it's the single most important phrase that I have heard - probably in my lifetime - around the peace process. And it sticks with me every day, and I still think about it. Because a lot of us could reflect on that- you can bow to the past but not be bound by it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And does the energy of that stay with you? Or d'you think that's lost in terms of the way that British-Irish relations have been negotiated through Brexit in the last while? D'you think there's still a chance to hang on to that kind of hope?

Peter Sheridan:

Well I mean, there is a chance because you saw Prince William and Kate talking in Irish for St. Patrick's Day. Prince William reached out again, and I think - irrespective of people's view about monarchy and so on - I think the royal family have walked the extra mile to try and reach out and have probably had more impact than politicians have had (I'm not taking away from some of [that] because obviously politicians have all the hard work to do in it). But that symbolism is critically important because it sends a message that ripples right down through society - as it rippled from Dublin to Cork that day - you could feel that growing of acknowledgement of the Queen as she travelled that route; you know it was almost a growing acceptance because of those gestures.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And what do you think needs to be done now to build on these gestures- more recent ones and ones from further back in the last ten years?

Peter Sheridan:

I think we have to look for ways and opportunities... we're going through the centenary at the minute. And there has to be opportunities for people to acknowledge that their neighbour might think about the centenary different; that for some people, there is no reason why they can't celebrate the formation of the state, because that was to them important. For other people, it was a sense of loss. And that should be acknowledged, as well. And if we're ever going to mature in this place, it's that ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes, to have sympathy with the other person without abandoning your own loyalties. But too often in this place, we hold our own side dear, to the exclusion of other people's views. And, you know, if we want to make this place work, and we want to get on, then we have to be prepared to accept that there are people who have different viewpoints, in the same way as I had that discussion with Martin McGuinness: you don't have to agree with me, but accept it's mine.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I think it's an ironic thing that in places where I've read you - you as somebody who spent so much of your career in policing - you bring phenomenal subtlety to the question of justice. There were three attempts on your life. And when somebody was asking you about justice - what justice might mean - you said, like: what does justice mean, you know, is it the person who planted the bomb? Or who mapped out your route to and from Mass, or who staked out your home; or who would have driven a getaway car like... and so you were saying - even within those incidences that were just particularly about you, traumatic as that is - you were saying even here, the question about what justice looks like is not going to be straightforward. That's kind of an introduction, really, to asking you: what do you think justice looks like within the context of peace? And how do those things speak to each other?

Peter Sheridan:

Well, I do think there's a danger that we try to frame a peace process just through the lens of justice. We will never do justice to the scale of the injustice on any side in this place over 35 years. And that's not to say- you know, I remember in discussion with Martin McGuinness at the time, him saying: we were all in this together ([it] was a part of a conversation we were)... And, and I took a minute, and I thought to myself: no, we weren't all in this together. Because I didn't go to bed any night in life wondering who I could shoot, kill, bomb or maim. Nor did I get up any morning in life thinking of anybody as my enemy. And I said to Martin: that included you- I didn't think of you... Now, if you're content to say that, well then maybe we were all in this together. And that's not to take away from the fact that there were some police officers, some soldiers who did think like that.

But, I suppose human beings as we are, with all of our failings and faults - we will make mistakes, some deliberate, some genuine mistakes - but there was a phrase I recall listening to (I think it was through Clonard Monastery one day) and it constantly sticks with me: 'you and I are one'. And, you know, it was about somebody who was on the street as a homeless person. And the priest used to go out for a walk, and he would have almost walked to the other side. But he passed by constantly because, you know, the guy was normally intoxicated - loud, shouting - and so he kind of avoided him. But when - after maybe six months of seeing this guy regularly - he said that he wasn't there one day, and he missed him. He missed him even though he didn't have any contact, but he missed him. And he said: he realised that he

and I were one you know, and I think that goes for us all. Whether it is somebody who tried to take my life; whether it is somebody I wronged in it, but ultimately behind all of that you and I are one.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Stories are something that you continually come back to; I know that so much of your work has been about building connections between people who may not have a natural opportunity to be connected to each other, and then creating stories; stories that are shared and told between them. Why are stories so important for you?

Peter Sheridan:

I think it's part of Irish culture. We didn't have a television probably 'til 1968. So I- that céilíng in houses and people telling stories and yarns and as we say, nothing gets lost in the telling of something. But I also think it comes back to the parables in the Bible- that's how Jesus at times explained things. And I think that that's what we do in modern day. Sometimes it's - rather than an academic paper - it can be easier explained through a lens of a story. And I've found that when people tell me stories, I kind of listen harder. And think more about it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, I think we have - I don't know - much more retention for the details of a story than we do for the details of an analysis. I think I read some research about that, but I'm forgetting now, the percentages.

Peter Sheridan:

There's a personality in a story that you don't get in academic research. Or personalities in the story.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

In so many of your answers, you return to the question of religion- even just there returning back to parable. Religion and Catholic practice has been a strong part of your life. Could you talk a bit about that, and the role that that's given to you?

Peter Sheridan:

I obviously grew up in the Catholic faith, but it's probably wider than that- it's Christian faith. It's a belief in God, who - I think in my grandmother's words: 'if he's born to be shot he'll never be drowned' - so I had a protector there. And throughout life, I felt that at times; there were incidents... As one example, when I was in Derry, I was sitting in the police- front of a police Land Rover as a sergeant [and] we're called up - sent to a call - of a burglary up in the Rosemount area. And as we drove up the hill towards the burglary, something said to me: there's a car parked there. And I asked the driver to stop. And we sat at the top of the hill, and this car was down in a layby in a hollow - and there's a number of other cars passed by - and then all of a sudden, it exploded. Now I don't know why, what, (you know- whether it was the Holy Spirit) but something stopped me, and stopped that Land Rover going down with four officers in it. And maybe a passerby passing at the same time when somebody's waiting to detonate it. And, you know, I could give you umpteen examples of it.

And I'm not talking about it, this sort of religious perspective that I... I do all the things- enjoy life like everybody else. But I do think that in the Christian faith, that sense of hope that it gives you, I think helps you deal with a lot of things. I mean, I have a brother-in-law (who doesn't have that) and we have a constant discussion about it... I said: but what's

at the end of all this, what's at the end of yours? And he thinks he's coming back as a dog or a cat or something. It's this sense of ... something about knowing that there's something beyond this and something more than this. And, you know, it just gives you that sense of hope in life that- rather than it's the cliff edge whenever we fall off it. And I don't suggest that other people have to believe in the same way. But it came from a number of factors. One is that that's what I grew up in. But growing up and then joining the police and seeing... You know, even in the last two years, when I was in the police, I was at 52 murder scenes (not terrorist related); the murder of an 87 year old woman; the murder of a nine month old baby. And I always used to think that despite all of those acts of badness that you saw, there were a thousand acts of kindness around all of those murders that people didn't see on the television or the media, but because you were close to [the] investigation, you saw them, and that sense of goodness that's in humanity out there. So I am more comfortable believing all of that than believing nothing. Maybe that's a fear in me. Maybe the fear is that if you don't believe - you know - but I don't think so. All of us this last year haven't been able to go to church. But I go out for a walk and put my podcast on, and it has opened up the possibility of listening to Mass in Cork, or Clonard or in London, you know, and has opened up all of that to us, instead of sitting in the same seat and the same place every week.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Peter Sheridan, thanks very much. It's been a real pleasure to talk to you.

Peter Sheridan:

Thank you, Pádraig.

Our guest this week was Peter Sheridan of Co-operation Ireland. Don't forget to listen right to the end when Peter tells us who he'd like to have in his lockdown bubble.

And, again, if you had three or four minutes to give us some feedback, we would be so grateful. We're currently wondering what people are picking up on in these Corrymeela podcasts; if you're making use of the show notes or the discussion questions or the transcripts; where you're listening from, what these episodes are revealing to you, what questions you have, what ideas you have for future guests... So we have a feedback form. You can find it, alongside the transcript and questions for this episode on corrymeela.org/podcast, or linked through the show notes in your podcast app. It'll only take a few minutes, and you only need to answer the questions you want.

Thanks for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama, and I'll be back with another episode next week.

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Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I know that people have different and multiple identities - national identities - would you be able to tell us a time when your national identity felt important to you?

Peter Sheridan:

Yeah, well, I suppose the first thing to say is, you know, I don't find national identity a fixed thing- I know a lot of people do, I think I'm different than I was [at] 20 years of age, or 40 years of age than I am now at 60. And for me, it's about a sense of belonging, you know- it isn't about a flag or a symbol, or who's head of state. Those are parts of it but that's not what it is. I suppose the one that automatically comes to mind, Pádraig, when you asked me is that issue of you know, I used to try and attend Mass every Sunday. But on the one hand, you had somebody who was going to try to plant a bomb under my car. Even though my kids were going to be at Mass on Sunday, so you'd somebody attending Mass on a Sunday, who instead of saying their prayers, was noting down details of my movements. So you had that, but also at the same time, I was in an organisation that was 95 percent Protestant. And the potential of losing that, you know, your sense of faith that I grew up with, and I fought hard against it: I remember going to see Bishop Edward Daley at the time, he says: 'Peter, you can pick any day in the week to go to Mass, you don't have to go on a Sunday'. Which was good, but I fought to retain that for that reason, that I felt that somebody else was trying to take it from me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And what three people from one of your cultures ('cause you have plurals), what three people from your cultures - present or past - would you want to be in a lockdown bubble with?

Peter Sheridan:

Yeah, well, first of all, I have to say my wife and my grandchildren; what I noticed when we weren't able - [I] to have two grandchildren [who] live close by - when you weren't able to see them, I mean, there was a huge hole in your life. Whereas when they come in - they're only six and four, so lockdown doesn't mean a huge lot - so they bring a bit of humour and fun to it. And sometimes there's a tendency to think: oh, wouldn't it be great to have, you know, Nelson Mandela in your house or, I don't know, the Queen or whatever. And I have met all of those celebrities and presidents [of the] United States... But I discovered that as good a people as they are, they're ordinary people. They might do extraordinary roles, but they are ordinary people in it. And I think I might be bored with them in a lockdown after a while. So I want people who share the same values [as] me, have the same respect, have a sense of humour; who have hopes for the future, have a sense of loyalty and, and probably have the similar worries and fears that I have that you could talk to in a lockdown. So hopefully I wouldn't be limited to three, but I'm willing to take a stranger in that if they have those same values and same characteristics, because I think that would be entertaining.

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