The Corrymeela Podcast

Dr Lia Shimada

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. Lia Shimada traces some of her own story through the lens of migrations: those of her grandparents, and her own migrations too, both geographical and spiritual. What do the migration experiences of your life — as well as your parents' and grandparents' lives — reveal about what's important to you?
2. Lia draws a distinction between experiences where conflict was on the surface — dealing both with racism and sectarianism in Belfast — and where it was more subtle, particularly when working within Christian communities. Where have you seen conflict on different levels? In your work or community settings, how would you describe the culture of communicating conflict?
3. The story of Lia's son Rowan's life and death in 2017 is a powerful reflection on what it can mean to live well with the reality of grief. What are the resources in your culture, community or identity for living with, and learning from, grief and death?

Lia Shimada's website for her mediation work is here. You can purchase Mapping Faith; Theologies of Migration and Community from the publishers here.

The Corrymeela Podcast. Interview with Dr. Lia Shimada. Transcript.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama. In the 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, on the penultimate podcast in our series of twelve, my guest is Dr Lia Shimada. She's an author, a geographer, a mediator and a theologian and in a wide-ranging conversation, we talk about the politics of trees, her book on migration, as well as bereavement and death.

Originally from the United States, Lia spent many years in Belfast working as a mediator in communities riven by grief, and also finding herself negotiating prejudices:

"I think what my experience of working and living in Belfast taught me is that sometimes I just needed to pause and say: is this coming out of racism? Or is it ignorance? Or is it even just ill-expressed curiosity? And so there was a lot of giving people the benefit of the doubt".

"What was really interesting about working and living in Belfast is that the grief, the bereavement, the loss was quite close to the surface. And there was something very real about that".

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Hello, and welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and with me today is Dr. Lia Shimada. Lia is a professional mediator and group facilitator based in London, specialising in conflict, diversity and community dialogue. Lia, thanks very much for joining us.

Lia Shimada:
Thank you very much for having me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Where are you talking to us from today, Lia?

Lia Shimada::
I'm calling in from Kilburn, which is in North London.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Lovely. In a while, we're going to talk a little bit about your most recent book, *Mapping Faith: Theologies of Migration and Community*. But I'd love to hear from you first, you know- you've gone through a number of migrations yourself, and you write about this, both physically and professionally, and also in terms of your spiritual home. What is it about migration and journeying that has been part of your life, but also that you find appealing in terms of a reflection and writing exercise?

Lia Shimada:

I think I've always been aware of my background as a migrant. I grew up in Seattle, in the north west corner of the states. My grandparents all migrated from China and Japan. So from a very young age, I was very aware that my family had not been long settled in the place where I had grown up. And I chose to go to university completely on the other side of the country. So for me, it was always a sense of being rooted in a place, but very much wanting to see/ experience new horizons. And that experience has just kind of stayed with me throughout my life.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Where did you choose to go to university and what made you choose there?

Lia Shimada:

I went to Wellesley, which is just outside of Boston in New England, and I chose there because I had never been to New England. At that point, I'd never really been outside of the Northwest, and I just thought it would be an interesting experience to live in a different time zone, for one thing. Also, I thought, as someone who grew up near a coast, I very much wanted to stay near the water- that was really important to me. And my mother was a primary school teacher, so we grew up with placemats at the dinner table: maps of the country, maps of the world. And from a very young age, I was just fascinated by seeing how the world is depicted, seeing where different places... how they relate to each other, where they were. So I think from a very young age, I just started dreaming about where I'd like to go experience. And that eventually took me all over the world!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I saw that, you know, you got a fellowship in studying environmental sciences; you got a fellowship to work with reforestation projects in Nepal, and Madagascar and Ireland. What an interesting trinity of places- were there other places too or was it just those three?

Lia Shimada:

I had never travelled outside of the US at that point. I just thought, leaving university, it would be a good experience to just practice applying for a grant. So I did: I cobbled together a proposal that really came out of my- at that time of my life I suppose the challenge [was one] of trying to redefine what environmentalism meant to me, and how I would inhabit that. I was also at that point really starting to explore the possibility of being a professional geographer. So I thought: well, it would be good experience applying for a grant, learning how to do it, putting together a proposal. And I just thought: big sky dreaming- if someone gave me that much money, where would I go? And I literally looked at a map and chose three places at random, knowing virtually nothing about any of them.

I chose Ireland, Nepal and Madagascar. And I was absolutely horrified when I kept passing through the interview rounds, and ended up getting this fellowship. The only people more horrified than I was were my parents! They very kindly agreed to administer my affairs while I was away; I left with a one way ticket to Dublin just a few weeks after graduating from university. And really that experience changed the trajectory of my life, because it was during that year that I came to really understand what it is to travel. And again, having never been outside of the US, it was also a crash course in learning how to navigate international borders. I had to get a passport very quickly as well. But of all the places that I went to that year, it really was Belfast that made me think: this is what it means to be alive in another place. This is what it means to really learn who you are through the lens of another culture. And to feel like... In

Belfast, I felt like I could actually make a contribution to the place that had received me. And I think because of that, Belfast has been a really important place to me throughout the rest of my adult life.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah, you ended up coming back to live in Belfast and staying for a number of years.

Lia Shimada:
I did, for a number of years.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
How long were you here?

Lia Shimada:
Well, I came to Belfast initially in 2000. So it was right around the time of the peace agreement. And then I used the remainder of my fellowship money - after I finished in Nepal and Madagascar - to return to Belfast, and I lived in Belfast again until the funding ran out- then I went back to the States for a while. And while I was in the States, I was thinking about what I wanted to do next and where I wanted to live. And I just had a real sense that there was more work for me to do in Belfast, specifically around racism. When I was in Belfast the first time, in 2000 and 2001, I very much was on the pointed end of receiving a lot of racist abuse. But it was something that no one wanted to talk about. And I really felt like there was this whole conversation that wasn't happening, that I thought I could be a part of helping the people of Belfast have, simply by being present. So when it came time to think about doing further study, I was very committed to wanting to study geography. The type of geography that I wanted to study was best done in the UK. So I enrolled at University College London, but with the agreement and understanding that I'd be based in Belfast. So I really spent probably four years (from 2007 through 2010) working in Northern Ireland, and it was a fascinating experience to come back to Belfast - having lived there previously - as Belfast was moving through the 10th anniversary of the peace agreement.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Ireland (and particularly the North) is so parochial, you know, very quickly, people will want to know who are you and where you're from. And you know, you might only be from two miles down the road or half a mile across a peace wall. I've had a bunch of friends come to visit from the United States- come to visit me in Belfast. And sometimes they might say what should I say if anybody asks me if I'm a Catholic or a Protestant? And the answer is always: well, nobody will. And even if they did, you're just an American. And in preparing to interview you, and looking at how you've written about your experiences here, I was struck with how white a response I gave to my white American friends. The idea that foreigners are always treated neutrally because they're outside of the context of aggression in Belfast- that is probably only something that a white person could say to a white person; your experiences, your experience was so different.

Lia Shimada:
I think that my presence, particularly at that time (and bear in mind that this was before say the influx of a lot of the film industry really came into being). I think that my presence really confused people. Particularly the work that I was doing- I was working for a community regeneration organisation and working with different communities all over the

city. So taking public transportation, going into places that were very much not used to seeing, seeing foreigners, particularly foreigners that looked and sounded like me. I think, you know, if you were just to encounter me, without speaking to me, you would assume that I'm- well, you would have probably assumed that I was part of the Chinese community, which at that time was really, I think struggling to find its place. I arrived pretty much at the time when there was a lot of abuse toward members of the Chinese community, and it was quite high profile as well. So I was very, I was very aware of that on a number of levels.

But actually, I think when you live in a place and are committed to being part of it, you just have to take all of who you are to that place. And what I was discovering, while I was working and living in Belfast, is that my- it was precisely the diversity of my own background that oftentimes enabled me to connect with communities. So for example, if I was working in republican communities where there had been a lot of history of people being imprisoned during The Troubles, I was able to speak about my Japanese grandparents' experience of being interned by the US government during the Second World War, for instance. If I was working in Protestant communities, I was able to draw on my family history of my Japanese grandfather having been a Methodist minister. So I was finding that the best way to navigate Belfast was just to be unapologetically myself, and to bring everything that I was and who I was to the table, so to speak.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
That takes a lot of kind of self-disclosure and reflecting in your own story, and allowing - and giving people the gift, really - of them figuring out their own identity questions through a sharing with you. What nurtures you in having that kind of level of generosity and equanimity?

Lia Shimada:
I think that for me, the biggest learning of being in Belfast was that I needed to slow down my initial reactions. So, I think oftentimes - and I think this is a lesson that is something that I've continued to reflect on - it can be really easy to have a knee jerk reaction and to assume that someone's being racist. And quite often it is, you know, and I think- I do think it's important to bear in mind that if someone is experiencing a comment or an action as racist, that needs to be taken seriously. But I think what my experience of working and living in Belfast taught me is that sometimes I just needed to pause and say: is this coming out of racism? Or is it ignorance? Or is it even just ill-expressed curiosity? And so there was a lot of giving people the benefit of the doubt. Sometimes it did try my patience more than at other times.

So for example, I was working in some- in a particular community. And I was really trying to get on the good side of the people who were in charge of that community. So I - especially in the early days of working with them - I would bake cookies, chocolate chip cookies (very American, chocolate chip cookies). And I would take them down to the pub! In the hope of... You know, just sort of easing the relationship, because as you might imagine, a lot of these communities- they did not want to work with me. But it was important that we were able to develop a good working relationship. So in a sense, I suppose I would go and bribe them with baked goods! And [on] more than one occasion, when I would do this, I would get some comments that I think were trying to be funny, but they were usually along the lines of: 'oh, they're probably fortune cookies, and they probably taste horrible'. And whether or not they tasted horrible is not for me to judge, but they were definitely not fortune cookies. And I'm pleased to say - I don't think it's down to doing that - but I'm pleased to say that in the communities that I did work with, over time, for the most of

them, we did develop a really warm relationship. And I was really pleased with the level of trust, I think, that I was able to, to facilitate, I think precisely because I was not from Belfast.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I remember hearing you speak once Lia, and you told a story about a death threat you had when working in Belfast from a paramilitary organisation. And you kind of quipped about a reflection on that death threat.

Lia Shimada:
Oh, it wasn't a death threat it was- they were threatening to throw me into the river…

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
[laughs] OK!

Lia Shimada:
...if I didn't sort something for them.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
'Just' being thrown into the river!

Lia Shimada:
So the river at that point was- I'm not sure what the pollution levels were like, it probably wasn't going to cause any fatalities. But I was quite keen not to be thrown into the river all the same.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And I was struck by the way within which you were telling this story in the context of a training in conflict. And you were telling it in a way that it was detached, where you were saying: you spent some time thinking about the nature of the threat, and being aware that they were being so specific. And then speaking about other communities of people who aren't so specific when they're being nonetheless just as aggressive.

Lia Shimada:
Yes, I was reflecting on that quite a bit in the transition that I did between jobs. So I spent about four years working and living in Northern Ireland, and then immediately from there went to work for the headquarters of the British Methodist Church, where I was working on the national diversity and inclusion strategy. And I think doing that shift from working in community regeneration, to working in a specifically church based context, really gave me an insight into the way that different cultures respond to conflict. I think it's fair to say that clergy- clergy, by and large, can often struggle with dealing with conflict. And that was something that I missed in that transition to being a church bureaucrat, is that in Belfast, if someone was upset with me, there would be no ambiguity- we'd have an honest conversation, we would actually get what needed to be sorted, sorted. Whereas going and working with (not just clergy, but with lay Christians as well) I think Christians particularly want to be nice. So my experience of working kind of in the front row or having a front row view of church administration is that there was a lot of unexpressed passive aggression that seeps out in all sorts of weird and terrible and wonderful ways.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And when you say Christians in particular, I know that your work has spanned - particularly in this book *Mapping Faith: Theologies of Migration and Community* - your work has spanned working very interreligiously, with people coming from different aspects of world faiths.

Lia Shimada:
Yes, that was really the- for me, the heart of this book is that I wanted to do something about migration and theology and about community. But I didn't just want it to be within one tradition. So in putting together the proposal for this book, I was very specific that it needed to be an interreligious conversation, an interfaith conversation. And I think for me, I wanted to learn in the process: I wanted to learn about other faith traditions, but I also wanted the opportunity to reflect on my own; to understand how my own experience of faith had migrated through the course of my life, and how it might continue to migrate as I move into the future.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And what is the story of your faith and its migration for you?

Lia Shimada:
Um, the story of my faith in a nutshell is that I grew up in a family in Seattle where religion was very confusing. So my mother - who was the daughter of Chinese immigrants - grew up with no faith. And my Japanese-American father, being a clergy child, grew up with too much religion. So he is now a card carrying atheist. My mother is agnostic. And it was left to my father's parents to take me to church. So I grew up going to church within the Japanese community in Seattle, which was a wonderful experience in a lot of ways; it really- I think gave me a faith home that was rooted very much in a cultural community. But like many people, faith for me has been something that is constantly in a process of migration. So I grew up, having spent my adolescence as quite an evangelical teenager, I then promptly went the other direction, lost it completely; spent much of my 20s really grappling with what it means to live in the world- like I think many young people do. I came back to faith very slowly, initially through the Unitarian Church, then through the United Church of Christ - which is a, I suppose a more congregational denomination in the US - both from very liberal traditions. And by the time that I migrated to the UK in 2005, I really was ready to be much more embedded in a faith community. And it was the question of when and where and how. So I gave myself permission when I first moved to London to do three months of church shopping, which was a fascinating experience- went to all sorts of different churches and denominations, had a lot of very bad biscuits, had a lot of-

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Nothing like your chocolate chip cookies!

Lia Shimada:
It's amazing what you can learn about a congregation by inspecting their biscuit array! And the place where I settled was the place where I still worship- it's a parish, an Anglican parish in central London: St. James's Piccadilly. And I settled there and felt at home, but also felt like it was a place where I could continue to explore and to migrate in my faith. And really, it's the place that's rooted me while I've been living in the UK.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Your work has this extraordinary combination of theology and geography, you know- both areas that you've given great scholarship to. How did you go about selecting contributors for this book that is a kind of an overlap between migration, theology and community?

Lia Shimada:
I'd like to say about the book- it's a book, so it's full of words. But from the beginning, I was really clear that it wasn't just going to be essays. I also wanted poetry, I wanted art, I wanted different types of ways that people could contribute to it. And I absolutely did not want it to be full of academic voices. I also was very committed to having an equal spread, to the extent possible - and actually I think we achieved it - I wanted to have an equal spread between the different religious perspectives. Other books that have looked at theology of migration have tended to do so from a very academic standpoint; from a predominantly Christian one with say occasional Jewish or Muslim voices thrown in. And I wanted this to be a widespread dialogue. I also wanted it to be a dialogue within traditions as well. So it was really important to me that the contributions, to the extent possible, reflected a range of perspectives within all of those traditions that we explore. And I think it's also important to say that not everyone wanted to self identify as one of those three religions, and that was important to honour as well. So for example, Issam Kourbaj - who is an artist from Syria - agreed to take part only if, in my interview with him, we could talk about why he wants to resist labels of identity. So it felt really important to be able to honour the ways in which people resisted being identified for their religious background.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
What is it about identity that you discovered and that you're, you're kind of revealing and is being revealed through the stories that people offered and the reflections?

Lia Shimada:
I was really struck and moved by the ways in which people spoke about their own religious identities migrating. So for instance, there is a really moving chapter by an Orthodox Rabbi based in London (based in North London) who talks about his own migration of faith and how he came to settle in the place where he is currently practising. Likewise, a young woman Sophia Rehman, who's a scholar, she has done a lot of reflecting on the way that translation - the act of translation - is a form of migration, and what that means for her own faith experience. So the contributors really taught me a lot about their- I suppose the courage that they brought to their own reflective processes, their own reflective journeys; of being people of faith, grappling with this idea of migration, grappling with the theologies behind it. That taught me a lot about- I think about the way that humanity is capable of migrating; that we are not necessarily fixed in the positions that either we believe ourselves to be fixed in, or that other people want to fix for us.

The initial process of pulling this book together was very frustrating, and it was slow. But then there was this point - maybe six to eight months in - where there was a viable number of contributors from different backgrounds. And all of a sudden, it felt like the book took flight. All of a sudden, it felt like this was something that people would want to be part of. It meant that I had to be quite creative in terms of how I would have people contribute, because not everyone is a writer by nature. So I did a lot of interviewing people, and I suppose ghost writing their chapters, or we would do an interview, and I would record it, and then we would work together to get a text in their voice that they felt comfortable with. But for me, it was about participation as well, and I wanted it to be something that people who for example were

not native speakers could be part of. So the book itself has a variety of different forms of getting people's voices in there and across. I think the other thing that I want to say about the book is that it is just a starting point for the conversation. A 280 - how many pages is this? - a 285 page book is going to, by necessity, be limited, and it's going to leave out a lot of voices. So I very much hope that in time, another editor will come along and say: ‘that's a really great set of themes. But Lia's book left out this, this and this. So I'd like to commission another set of contributors with a completely different set of voices. And, and continue the conversation’.

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 second-last episode 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’d be really grateful. We’d love to know how you’re finding the podcasts, if you’re making use of the transcript or discussion questions, 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 discussion 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 and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is theologian, geographer and community mediator, Dr. Lia Shimada. I wonder if you'd be able to tell us a little bit about the reforestation initiatives and looking at reforestation as a tool toward reconciliation that you've done? Again, that's a very interesting way where you bring geography into conversation with a discipline like conflict resolution.

Lia Shimada:
Yes, so I spent my teenage years in Seattle planting a lot of trees. I was involved with a group of other teenagers and we were part of this, I suppose, community outreach initiative that really tried to bring more trees into Seattle. So most Saturday mornings, when I was a teenager, you'd find me in a high vis vest, going around with my friends, with a shovel, planting trees along streets, in traffic circles, in parks. And when I started thinking about what, what kind of environmentalist I wanted to be... So in my movement toward becoming a geographer - and toward becoming a cultural geographer in particular - it was about bringing an awareness of how cultural identity and about how cultural diversity can intersect with the way that we engage with the land. And for me, it was about, I think, loosening up some of those narratives that were very prevalent at the time when I was a teenager and a young adult. And actually, as I reflect on this, I can see that these are the same questions that I brought to my work in Belfast as well. How do identities shape the way that we experience land? How does land shape the way that we experience our identities? I am still quite fond of trees - I don't write about them academically anymore - but I think trees are a wonderful metaphor for thinking about the ways that we engage with the land around us. The trees migrate as well. I mean, obviously, they don't get up and move! But they do- their meanings migrate over time. And I think, Pádraig, you’re referring to some of the articles that I wrote about the cultural identity of trees, in relation to the conflict in Belfast.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah. It's so interesting what you've written, in the way that you tell stories of communities and identities of people through the relationship with trees, and through the, through the experience of trees being present in a city or not.

Lia Shimada:
Yes, and I have a wonderful collaborator named Mark Johnston, who was the original urban forester of Belfast. So he and I have collaborated on a number of projects together- initially focusing on Belfast, but we've also looked more broadly at other places of conflict and the way that trees have shaped or reflected the process of peacebuilding.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And what are some of the ways that you say trees do that?

Lia Shimada:
Before you can ask the question about how can trees contribute to peacebuilding, I think you do have to ask the question: how are trees politicised? And I think that that's a really important question to ask because it can be very easy to move too quickly to the nice solution. So as a mediator, you know, one of the things we're often trying to do is to help people resist moving too quickly to a so-called resolution. And I think from a community regeneration perspective, it can be a really nice photo op to get a tree planting organised; to get some politicians and some school children involved, to get some nice sunny morning and people digging a hole and putting the tree in. But then actually, I think, in order for that to actually have any meaning, you have to ask some really tough questions about what is the history of this place? What is the politicised history of the trees in this place? And actually, what is this act that we're doing? What does that really mean for the ways that we want to be part of the land, to engage with it, but also how do we want to move forward with each other?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I think for some folks, they might think of the idea of the political identity or the politicisation of a tree: that might be the first time that people have thought about that. But I remember being struck years ago doing some community mediation, and somebody was talking about trees having been used for cover with people who were using guns. And that was a particular way within which a tree had a political identity - that was put upon it really, by how that tree was used or not - and then eventually it was knocked down, because people thought that it would contribute to increased safety by not having the tree there. What are some other examples about ways within which trees are politicised in places of conflict?

Lia Shimada:
I think one way is where particular types of trees become very much associated with one type of community. So I'm thinking in the Belfast context of the - for instance - the oak tree, the Irish oak- really long history of being a tree of the island. And wonderful- really, really wonderful mythology and language around that. But what does it mean when someone from, say, another community, wants us to plant an oak tree? Is there a way that the- I suppose the very firm association of the oak tree with Irish cultural history, could that also be shared with other communities? Another way I think in which trees and plants in general can be politicised is when we talk about invasive species.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I've never thought about that before with 'invasive'. Yeah, what a strong word...

Lia Shimada:
Quite often, whether it's conscious or not, the landscape can be politicised in ways that people may or may not be aware of. But actually, I think that the language around alien species, invasive species is one of those.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I know that the physical geography of cities, d'you know, in terms of the geography of forestation in cities, as well as the geography of roads and access roads in cities can be very politicised. Does that- do you bring yourself to looking at maps of cities when you come to reflecting on a city and its experience of peace or the opposite?

Lia Shimada:
I think roads are really fascinating. They- roads have a history as well. I think in general, I'm less interested in the whole urban infrastructure question than I am just more about what I suppose the cultural meaning of what a road means. Belfast was really interesting, because it's a very radial city, isn't it; you've got City Centre, and then you've got these big roads radiating out of it. When I moved to Belfast, I spent just a lot of time just hopping on buses, sitting on the top floor of a bus - at the front window if I could - and just learning the layout of the road system. And I did that in London as well- it's a really good way to get to know a place is to, to move across its surface. But also I think when you're taking public transportation, you are having, you're having encounters with other people as well.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I'm struck in what you're saying about roads - and what you were saying about migration, too - that, you know, migration isn't just the means of getting from one place to another. And roads aren't just the means of getting from one place to another, but they are a cultural identity in and of themself, to be a migrant - to be a national migrant or an intellectual migrant or a religious migrant - as well as then to have time on roads as cultural experiences; in both of these, I hear an interest in you in paying attention to the process. And giving that process an identity rather than seeing it simply as a function.

Lia Shimada:
And I think that very much speaks to the whole question of what mediation does. Mediation is a process. And I think if you were to look at, look at the shape of my work, and my passions as a whole, it is about dialogue and process. Pádraig, you would know this being a mediator yourself, that there can often be so much pressure to get to the endpoint. But actually, that end is not going to hold - whether it's a mediation between neighbours, or whether it's something that's much broader - unless actually, people are willing to move through the difficult bits; to tread the road that is rocky, in order to get to the places that feel like it's the happy ending. And I think as a mediator, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves and on the process to get to that point. But sometimes that's just not the case, that's not the way it pans out. And you really have to say that the process of moving through this experience, of moving through these difficult discussions, and the courage it took to have the conversations: that needs to be honoured just as much as the endpoint that we did or did not reach.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Lia, I'd like to talk about grief. Because I'm so aware that when you work within the context of conflict, that you're dealing with very real griefs that are present in the room. Some of them - you know, I know that you'll have worked in communities in Belfast where people are bereaved and so they're bringing that grief into a room - but even where there hasn't been murder, when there are people in situations of conflict, there are unnamed griefs that are present. And we'll get on to talking about Death Cafes, but I'd be really interested to hear how you notice grief within the context of conflicts that you mediate.

Lia Shimada:

I think at the time when I was living in Belfast, I had not yet experienced the really sharp griefs that I've experienced since that time. But I think that history - my personal history - of being part of two communities that had been bereaved- of people, of land. I'm thinking specifically about the Japanese-American community that I grew up with, many of whom had lost their land when they were interned by the government during the Second World War. You know, these are things that- these are memories that persist, and as a heritage that is very present, whether or not it's spoken.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And d'you think that griefs that are not spoken are particularly difficult to speak? What are some of the rules or experiences around unspoken griefs that you see in places and communities that have lived through trauma?

Lia Shimada:

I think that sometimes what happens is people feel like they don't have a right to speak of grief, especially if it is something that is more amorphous for them personally. And I think what was really interesting about working and living in Belfast is that the grief, the bereavement, the loss was, was quite close to the surface. And that there was something very, very real about that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're involved in doing Death Cafes, which is such an extraordinary title: 'Death Cafe'. I mean, there's no getting away from what you're talking about in 'Death Cafe'. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what those experiences are and how you go about facilitating those?

Lia Shimada:

Gladly. So I came to the Death Cafe movement fairly recently. The backstory is that in 2017, my first child was born in very, very horrendous circumstances, before we could get to the nearest hospital. He was born alive - we're really proud of this, he lived for 39 minutes - and his brief life and death just utterly transformed who I am: who I am as a parent; transformed my way of being in the world. And it gave me my- I suppose, the most personal experience I'll ever have of carrying a grief with me for the rest of my life. There's something about losing a child, and especially a first child, that utterly imprints on your soul.

We - actually coming back to your, your musings on land, Pádraig - we searched really far and wide for the right place to bury him. We looked at cemeteries and burial grounds all across Greater London. And, you know, some of them were nice, but too far away. Others were just- were close by but horrendous. And we ended up choosing Brompton

Cemetery, which, which is run by the Royal Parks. It's an easy tube journey from Kilburn, where we live. And as soon as I walked in there, I just thought: oh, this is the right place. I think at that point, it might have been the seventh or eighth cemetery or burial ground that we visited in quick succession. It was just two or three weeks after Rowan's birth and death, actually. But what I loved was the sense of history about the place. Also the way in which that history seemed very much alive and in dialogue with the present. So Brompton Cemetery was one of those historic early Victorian cemeteries that you find around London (I think there are seven of them if I remember correctly). The iconography is fabulous. And, and it's still, I think, known primarily as a Victorian burial ground. But there are some contemporary graves as well and Rowan's is among them.

So we buried Rowan in this plot, and what I like about it is that it's a place where there's a mixture of really old historic graves, but also some very contemporary ones from throughout the, throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. I didn't realise it on the first time we went, but when we went back to sign the paperwork, the place where we had chosen was between a cocktail inventor on one side, and a nanny on the other. And I thought, what better place for my first child than between a cocktail inventor and a nanny? So the cocktail inventor had died in 2014. I did some research and we've become friends with them - with his family - which has been really lovely. The nanny was born in 1900, and died in 1980. So she really had an extraordinary life that spanned much of the 20th century. A bit of research revealed that she was the nanny to the Churchill family during the war. So I actually was able to make contact with Churchill's great grandson, who was one of her last charges. So with his permission, we actually tend Nanny Miriam's grave. And it's really lovely to think that she- if she's looking out for Rowan, we're also looking out for her grave. And all three graves are at the base of an enormous evergreen oak tree. So again, we have trees coming in as well.

But back to the Death Cafes: I- the experience of losing a child (losing an infant in particular) brought me up quite sharply and closely to the fact that a lot of people do not want to talk about it. And I think a lot of that is people not knowing what to say. But more than that, it’s people being scared of their own deaths. Rowan's birth and death changed my life in all sorts of ways, and one of the really practical ways is that inadvertently, my husband Jonathan and I ended up purchasing our own graves at the same time. Rowan technically is buried in a cremation plot, but because he was tiny, we didn't want to cremate him and the cemetery said: he's an infant- he'll fit nicely into this space. Rowan is buried in a- just in a simple shroud in a very eco-friendly coffin. And there's space for six or seven more sets of ashes as long as everyone else is happy to be cremated. So the plan is for Jonathan- Jonathan and I will, when the time comes, be cremated and buried with Rowan. So there's something about knowing where I'm going to end up at the end of my life - hopefully later, rather than sooner - that has given me, I think, a different perspective on how I want to live the rest of my days. And one of those is to help people have more honest and courageous conversations about death, full stop.

So about a year or so after Rowan's birth and death, I approached the cemetery to say: I really think that it would be helpful if the cemetery could be a place where we could do some community outreach- where we could start hosting the Death Cafe project. And quite simply, Death Cafe is a chance for people to come together over tea and coffee and cake if that's possible, and to have an honest conversation about death. It's a facilitated conversation- for all sorts of reasons it needs to be held safely because people bring all sorts of vulnerabilities and fears and quite sensitive things to say to the table. But unlike other programmes, the conversation always emerges from what people want to talk about. So there's no agenda, there's never a guest speaker; it simply is people introducing themselves, saying what it is that they wish to speak about. And the conversation unfolds from there.

I play a bit fast and loose with the rules. Officially, you're supposed to say quite clearly that Death Cafe is not for bereavement, it's not therapy, and I think when I started off I played by the rules and you know, had all of that in the publicity. But that felt wrong to me. It felt wrong that you were saying that so explicitly about what the space is not for. And what seemed more important to me was to say what it is for, and crucially to say that any aspect of loss or grief is welcome at this table. So obviously, you know, if someone is really in distress, I want to be able to signpost them safely to appropriate resources. But for me, the big shift has been to say: no actually, rather than, rather than saying what Death Cafe is not, it's to say what it is, and for me that's about being a space where death and grief and loss in all its forms are welcome conversation partners.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You have been a migrant intellectually, religiously, internationally, and your interest in migration and geography and land is so clear. Does it change your relationship to place to know that you have a son buried in a city and to know that you have a plot in that city? What has that done for you, in more recent years, as you think about migration and place?

Lia Shimada:
As my family and I think about the fact that we will not be in London forever, it's been really important to me to know that there will always be this tiny child who anchors me to this city. And again, as I said, knowing that wherever I migrate next, I will return to London at the end of my life really makes me think I could never have imagined that this would be the place where I will be buried. But it is, and what it has done I think is to really emphasise the idea that London is my home. That wherever I go next, London will always be home to me. I was born in Seattle, I've lived and travelled to many different places. But at the beginning of my life was Seattle, and at the end will be London. And who knows what will come between.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Lia Shimada, thank you so much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Lia Shimada:
Thank you very much for having me.

Our guest this week was Dr Lia Shimada. Be sure to listen right to the end when Lia reveals why the creator of the muppets would make a great house guest.

If you had three or four minutes to give us some feedback, we'd be really grateful. This has been our first year making a podcast, and we know that if we're to do a second season, it'll be made all the better based on your feedback. So we'd be delighted with a few minutes of your time on the form. 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.

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

The Corrymeela Podcast comes to you with the generous support of our funders: the Fund for Reconciliation of the Irish Government; the Henry Luce Foundation; the Community Relations Council of Northern Ireland, and the support of the friends of Corrymeela, who give monthly or annually.

The Corrymeela Podcast is a FanFán production. The researcher and producer is Emily Rawling, and the podcast was mixed by Fra Sands at Safe Place Studios.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Could you tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you?

Lia Shimada:
Yes it was when I was living in Nepal. No one would believe I was American. It became very frustrating. They'd never seen an American who looked like me: someone who was Japanese, Chinese and very tall. So I used to have a lot of arguments with people about whether or not I was American. And frequently, I would just give up and tell people I was Swedish.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
What three people from your cultures' present or past would you want to be in a lockdown bubble with?

Lia Shimada:
Well, I should first start off by saying the single thing that would improve the quality of my lockdown experience would be more childcare. We have a toddler, who's now nearly 22 months. He's beautiful, but he's all over the place. So my three people with whom I would like to form a lockdown bubble would all be very useful for childcare. They are Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets, because Brecon is really into the Muppets right now- that would buy me a lot of time to do work. Also, Michelle Obama. I think she is extraordinary in terms of being able to juggle a working life and a public role and also raising children- I think I'd have a lot to learn from her. Plus, she could also help us plant a vegetable garden. I think I would choose Nanny Miriam who's buried next to Rowan. She's, I think culturally very, very different from who I am. But we have a deep connection with her. So I would bring her back to life and give her charge of Brecon every now and then.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Has anyone ever said to you, Lia, that you were disloyal to one of your cultures or identities?

Lia Shimada:
Yes actually it was in Belfast. I said earlier, I was living in Belfast at a time when there was a lot of anti-Asian sentiment. This was- I suppose [it] would have been the 2007 period. And I... It's a combination of microaggressions but also actual aggressions, so I actually was physically assaulted a few times. You know, nothing that required hospitalisation, but for instance people spitting on me, calling me names, you know- people throwing eggs at me, again with some racist abuse. I decided not to go to the police, partly because I was trying to do this really delicate work of building relationships with an array of communities and I didn't want to shake anything. But one of my friends - actually, a fellow American expat who was living in Belfast - was dismayed that I chose not to do that. And I don't think she would actually say that I was being disloyal, but we had some quite interesting conversations about why I

was not ready and willing to go to the police over those incidents. And in hindsight, I don't know if I did the right thing or not by not going and reporting them.

Transcription by FanFán Ltd.