



The Corrymeela Podcast - Season 2

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

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

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

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

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



Season 2, Episode 5. Veena O'Sullivan reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Veena talks about the complications of describing the work that she does as 'relief and development' work. How do you understand that as a term? What language might you use to describe the work of agencies like Tearfund?
2. Veena talks about the fact that the world has shrunk, and that 'distance has become negligible... what one experiences the other feels very intensely'. Is that a description which you recognise? How have you seen that manifest itself over the last three/five/ten/twenty years?
3. In reflecting on the various areas of need that Tearfund addresses, Veena says that 'it's harder to get attention for protracted crises, but easier when it's war and something very dramatic and quite close to home'. How might you account for and reflect on the varying levels of attention that different crises attract, from the international community, from the media, from the general public, and from individuals?
4. Veena says that she is 'really bothered about change that I may not even see in my lifetime'. Does that resonate with you? What are some of the causes which draw your imagination and attention, but which might not come to fruition in your lifetime?
5. Pádraig and Veena talk about various aspects of faith in the context of Veena's work. What are some of the complexities that religion brings to relief work?
6. Can you think of examples you've seen or stories you've heard about things happening 'on the ground' which counteract widespread narratives about struggle, division and polarisation?

Veena O'Sullivan has worked for the international relief and development charity Tearfund since 2000. She has focused particularly on HIV, peacebuilding, and violence against women and girls. Originally from Bengaluru in the southern part of India, Veena has lived in Ireland since 2015. In 2021, she became the international director of Tearfund UK.

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

Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Veena O'Sullivan. Veena has worked for the international relief and development charity Tearfund since the year 2000, and has particular focuses on HIV, peacebuilding, and violence against women and girls. In 2021, Veena became the international director of Tearfund UK. Veena, welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.

Veena O'Sullivan:

Thanks, Pádraig. Lovely to be here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Um, Veena, I'd like to start off with asking you a question that mostly I ask everybody that we have on the podcast: do you think that there was any experience in childhood that prepared you for some of the work you do now?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Well, growing up where I grew up in India, I suppose looking back, you'd think: ah, maybe that maybe this. Well, can I just say I was a bit of a wild child?! And my wonderful parents: I think that mum didn't have an option, but dad was so free in his mind, that he, you know, growing up in India in those days - talking about my age, now - but he was one who always said: don't worry about marriage, just, just stand on your own feet, you can do anything. So I grew up with a free mind, I suppose. That comes with risks, and a lot of liberation!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It would be another interview, Veena to have 'the wild child interview with Veena O'Sullivan'! We could do that in the next season...

Veena O'Sullivan:

Let's!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Erm, you studied economics and sociology, what led you to choose those?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Oh, geez, can I just confess, I didn't really think about what I was gonna study; I wanted to just be doing design. And at that time in India, you know, I was I think the second person in the entire big Indian family who did not want to do science or commerce. So here I was getting counselled because I wanted to do arts. Really, it was a reaction to not wanting to get into IT, not wanting to be an engineer, or a chartered accountant. It's as boring as that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Interesting. Erm, I'm from a family where there's scientists and engineers too, and myself and my sister, who haven't done either of those, are referred to as 'the humanities department'!

Veena O'Sullivan:

I was referred to as the one that they'd have to rescue!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're based in Ireland now Veena, although I know you travel widely, and you moved to the UK for a long time. You know, what was it that took you out of India? Was it initially for international development work, or did you leave before you went into that career?

Veena O'Sullivan:

No, actually, neither. I met this amazing man called Gavan, who was from Cork, who had been living and working with the most marginalised in Asia and India actually; when I met him, he was working with people with HIV. And I thought he was crazy, living in my country and coping with the madness there. And I remember saying to him: it's like, why, how? And he said: oh, India's just like Ireland. I thought he was insane! I know our flags are kind of similar and all of that, but, you know... Well, that's- to cut the long story short, Gavan and I thought, hey, let's go to London, let's be there for a year; a year became two, and became 12. Life changed, forever...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. And d'you still think he's crazy?!

Veena O'Sullivan:

He, he is insane! But he's one of those who appear so sane, and, you know, and looks so calm and unfazed, and- but he's actually the crazy one. Looks are deceptive.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So, I'd really like to talk about your career in Tearfund; I suppose broadly, first of all, like, even bigger than the organisation, I'm interested in relief and development, and then faith-based relief and development. I'm curious about how it is you'd say to somebody who mightn't know what those things are - or somebody who thinks they know - like, how would you describe what those things are? Relief and development first of all, and then faith-based relief and development.

Veena O'Sullivan:

Well, I think, you know, we're living in a world where there's so much need. So much of the world lives without anything, or very little. So I think there is this incredible force in our humanity that really imagines that it can do good. And I've joined that group, and really think that: oh my, if we could change something with, so that they experience the freedom I have, so that they experience even basic food that I have. It's like a dream. And it's, it's a dream and a drug, because you imagine that, and you really want to make it happen with them. So, relief and development, we- I mean, those were the old words, but nowadays it's just about seeing people really build a different kind of life for themselves where they have power to do that in the way they want to do it. And people like us come alongside and try and make it happen with them. That's what I do.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. And so relief and development are the old words; what- how was it kind of formally described now? Is it 'international development' or are there other terms?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Yeah, even that, you know, language is so - I mean, you know - language is so powerful, and can be so toxic and emotive and wonderful. So I don't even use the word 'development', because it infers that some people are developed, and some are not. So I just work in a sector, that- part of this community that tries to do good with those who want things to change.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Well I can hear the word 'with' there as a very powerful word, by speaking about 'with' coming alongside. That seems to be a marker of your work in the times that I've encountered your work before.

Veena O'Sullivan:

Yeah, I can't- I mean, I am changed because, you know, I am because of the other. I did not grow up poor, I did not grow up wanting; it is because of the other that I even realised what the world is like for

majority people. What an extraordinary experience and opportunity to be changed, to be able to see finally, and not- I still don't think I see it all, but to see a lot that I never saw before. Definitely with.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

When did you begin to work for Tearfund, and maybe you could say a little bit about Tearfund?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Tearfund- the organisation I knew nothing about when I came to London, and was stuck at home because my passport was stuck at immigration! I was home office and just very frustrated. I left India, having worked with people with HIV (and this is going back now- late 90s). And you know, at that time, it was a phenomenal movement that was charged- this is before ARVs became a reality and all of that...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Antiretroviral drugs...

Veena O'Sullivan:

...yes, antiretroviral drugs. There was no treatment, there was massive discrimination, fear, angst, hatred. And having been with people like that for about, er, nearly four years, and then to come to London and be stuck at home, because I did not have permission to work. Gavan was in London, we got married there, and then I found myself stuck at home. And then I joined- I was desperate, because you can't go from that kind of intensity to zero. And so I- a wonderful human being called Stuart had got me into The London Lighthouse, which was a charity that worked with people with HIV. And I started volunteering there. After the study of sociology and economics that was er, had nothing to do with choice for me, I actually went on to study design. And so, you know, life was amazing, as it is, you don't even plan this. And then, at The London Lighthouse, I was working with - predominantly gay men - wonderful people, doing art therapy. So helping them imagine, draw, as a way of releasing emotion. So that's kind of how I started in London, and Tearfund was literally an advert in the Guardian, I think. Talking about- because I was so homesick, and it was an advert saying: looking for someone to lead our work in south Asia. It was literally that much. And then getting all the material about Tearfund and discovering it was a faith charity. And sometimes incredible, weird, wonderful things happen and I found some words there that were words that someone had said to me, just before I left home.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So you felt a connection?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Felt a connection, felt I didn't have a choice. But also I was desperate to be back home, involved in stuff.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. What would you say- I mean, like, so words like 'charity' are rightly complicated these days. And you've already been complicating, you know, words like relief and development and that. Erm, because, in the midst of people wanting to do good, there is a question as to how much good is achieved by people who want to do good, you know: is the good helping; is the help helping? How do you bring yourself to that now, and I'm curious as to whether your study of sociology and economics influenced that too, you know, rather than just thinking about the individual experience of charity to think about the broader economic or systemic or sociological features.

Veena O'Sullivan:

Well understanding economics was helpful definitely I think, but, the experience of people- and for me the biggest thing was shifting power, giving away power, because I knew I was powerful, just because I had language and education and resources and people and all of that, but learning to give that away. And that's what I learned with people with HIV at that time, but they would lead, they would be my teachers, they would tell me what I could or couldn't do, what this word meant or didn't mean. That is an extraordinary experience because you realise when you, when you are powerless, but you're led by the most vulnerable, because I feel like that's the most beautiful because when you experience so much, there is a refinement that I don't have naturally.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. And within the context of like a faith-based charity or faith-based organisation, working alongside and with people who are living with HIV, obviously there's a lot of landmines in the context of that in terms of faith's public voice about the LGBTQ+ community, and HIV: would you be able to talk about the fine line that you've been trying to hold and ways within which you've done that, or learnt, or things you've changed about the way you go about that work?

Veena O'Sullivan:

There are landmines everywhere, Pádraig. I mean, at that time, yeah, definitely landmines, you- I mean, you experience more closed doors - in the faith community, but also outside - but my goodness, how many closed doors and how many landmines in the world today, where everything is contested. I think the, you know, the freedom that I mentioned, that I experienced, that I had the blessing of growing up with thanks to my family, and then that freedom that got charged into a bigger sense of liberation because of my faith journey... I think that really sheltered me because I really did not care or worry, I

only cared or worried about: was I holding myself to account? Was I doing the right thing, was I doing the best thing by the people who I seek to do it for and with? And I never- there was a strange kind of fearlessness that I've lived with for a long time. And that fearlessness meant: ah, if it's not Tearfund then I'm meant to be doing this somewhere else, so: so be it. That's quite an extraordinary sense of liberation to live with.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to the The Corrymeela Podcast, and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is the international director of Tearfund UK, Veena O'Sullivan. I wonder briefly, would you be able to sketch the kinda distinctions that can come with, you know, working alongside, and then engagement in disaster, and war relief, and, you know, those big sectors that can happen within the context of the work that you do? Just so, for people who would hear them and go: I'm familiar with the language, but they may not be- they may not have had the opportunity to think through what the distinctions are.

Veena O'Sullivan:

Yeah. I mean, there are many ways to look at it. I think, what we see if we just bring it to where we are today, what we see is an extraordinary amount of war, conflict, breakdown of freedoms politically; a domination of the minority economically over the majority who are without; climate chaos, which leads - has led and is leading - to so much, so much deprivation... Pain upon pain. And those lines are very, very blurred today. Because, you know, you think: oh, these are the 50 poorest countries. And then you have Ukraine... Syria... You just- it just has shattered all of those divisions and definitions, because what we have going on, for all kinds of reasons, is: [a] few of the powerful, who don't have good intentions, not really bothered about majority of the powerless, who are losing out more and more.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And when you say 'not really bothered', what do you think the solution to that is? Is it for, you know, international agencies and international coalitions to come in; d'you hope that those who aren't bothered will become bothered? Like, how do you go about imagining change? Or are there kind of 20 different things and you try them all, or try them in an order?

Veena O'Sullivan:

You do try them all, but you know fundamentally, for me what I believe again, the experience of people with HIV- my goodness, we have treatment because of them. We have rights because of them. So I really believe in the power of good, of the movement of people who, when they know they can stand up, when they lose fear and they stand up, change will come.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So it's about giving platforms and opportunities; or not even giving but co-sharing or co-making platforms and opportunities.

Veena O'Sullivan:

Yeah, a co-imagining, co-imagining, co-dreaming. You know, when we started the peacebuilding work, I chose the Middle East. The Iraq crisis had started and people thought: you're crazy. Why are you going to the Middle East, where it's the toughest? But I thought: imagine if people here can reimagine what peace means and feels like- job done. Because once you taste and once you taste of that, once you begin to see, even in the midst of what they went through... Gosh, you can't stop that, you can't unsee; they can't unsee, they can't unfeel.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I'd like to- there's so many different directions that I'd like to go in the conversation; in a while, I'd like to come back to Ukraine- you mentioned Ukraine earlier on. But first of all, I'm curious about what for you, you see as the overlap between the work of Tearfund, and other organisations like it, and questions to do with conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. What's the overlap? Are they sometimes seen as distinct fields, or do you see them being deeply involved? And then, of course, you also mentioned climate crisis. So like: climate crisis, peacebuilding, war, and then, you know, famine and hunger- are they all separate, or, how do you go about looking at those systemically?

Veena O'Sullivan:

They've become more and more interdependent. I was in Beirut when the Ukraine war started. And the third day of the war, there were queues- long queues outside the petrol stations. And the price, the currency exchange, skyrocketed in a bad way. And there were- there was crisis around the bread, you know, that they love in this part of the world. The world is so interconnected, I think. Erm, we cannot separate them- distance has become negligible today across the world; what one experiences the other feels very intensely, deeply, in ways that you don't even imagine. I remember also going home from Beirut then to Ireland, and the panic that one sensed in the media and around you: will the war come to us? And there was this thing about the Russian ambassador being called to task and everything. The world has shrunk. I love that, because you cannot stay far away and protect yourself in a way that we could before. At the same time, it gives open spaces to come together as well.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And like, with all those overlapping features of, you know, war, and climate crisis, and economics, how in your role do you go about thinking: here's what an intervention can be?

Veena O'Sullivan:

I guess you really have to keep the main thing the main thing and just a sense of, you know, what is it that you can do? You have to fix your eyes on that; I think for me, you know, I'm really bothered about change that I may not even see in my lifetime. You know, but I'm very close to River Jordan here, you know, sitting in Amaan. And we know there's Mount Nebo, there's a, you know, place here where, according to the biblical scripture and story, you know, Moses went up that mountain and was shown the promised land, and you can see the promised land, but Moses never entered, and he was the leader of the people at that time. I'm very comfortable with that. I really feel I want- I've got my eyes fixed on the long haul. And I know short-term stuff is not, you know- I may never be able to achieve that, but I want to work for, for people to really experience the fullness of life the way I imagine it was meant to be.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Would you say that, therefore, is the promised land that you hope for through all this work, is that to work alongside people for life as it's meant to be?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Totally, Pádraig. I mean, sometimes- especially, I remember coming back from Bangui when there was a horrific war going on in the Central African Republic, and I was there when it was, it was terrible, really. And I was sitting with all these women, because rape and killing was endemic. And, you know, all these women had run to a church; you know, they ran either to churches or mosques, because they expected to be protected. And, they were there and these women were just pouring out their experiences: it was so hard to hear. And we were documenting the stories to come and tell the world and I came back and I - just to enable others to experience a little bit of it - I got our board members to read a little bit of the testimonies, and they couldn't after a while because it was too tough and too emotive. And [they] said: how do you do this? And I said: I think I've learnt, I've learnt, I think, that this is true- I think I'm able to do it and able to, um, really be hopeful, and live with joy in the midst of all of this just because those people do. And I was telling someone else this just a couple of days ago...um, this incredible woman called Patricia Sabo, a woman living with HIV, and I remember standing with her, in Nigeria, and she hadn't disclosed her status to these church leaders who are there. And not just church leaders, all the faith leaders, and they were talking sin and damnation, right? And I was angry, I had to leave the room, I was crying, I was- and then she came out with this beaming smile - she's beautiful anyway - and she comes out looking like, looking like untouched, and actually looking so full of love and [I] said: how, how, I can't bear it? And she said: it's OK, they don't know. I'll never forget that, that was the most humbling experience, made me feel very small, but I thought if Patricia can smile, how can I not? If Patricia has grace, how can I not have? I learnt the hard way.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Like one of the things that's going on in some of these anecdotes that you're telling us, Veena, is that there's questions to do with the experience of women and girls, and gender-based violence and the power of masculinities; I wonder if you'd be able to bring us into some of those conversations, 'cause you've been really leading that work through Tearfund, bringing a gender-based focus into your work as an international organisation.

Veena O'Sullivan:

Yeah, I mean, it's, er- no country. No country is free from this, wherever you go, isn't it? I mean, if we think fundamentally you know, power, the intersectionality of power, and, you know, with that, wealth. And I don't just mean financial wealth. I think it just bodes for all kinds of things. But it is really- as a woman, as someone who was even growing up in India, which has probably got one of the worst records, right, with gender-based violence, it is just shocking. But having grown up in, even in a country like that, and having experienced freedom, somehow, because of my family (my father, especially) I suppose I was meant to do this. I suppose, as a woman who, who can- you know, speaking with some of the women and friends in the United States, I remember - I won't go into the names and details - but I was shocked by their experiences. And I come from India. I just think toxic masculinity- there's a wonderful side to masculinity - Pádraig may I say that you're part of that side - but there is a toxic masculinity that people don't even recognise.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

D'you think that, I mean, on a broad level, even psychologically stepping back one of the things that you're talking about is change. Like, you know, change in terms of how people imagine their agenda and power and reciprocity... What do you know about the, the embrace of change or the resistance to change in terms of the work that you do over these decades?

Veena O'Sullivan:

There's both, right. You know, the most incredible thing when you've- when people like me have had so much, and oh my goodness, what privilege to be able to travel and to commune and be community with all kinds of people in all kinds of places. Erm, I'm blessed because I can see, I can tell the story of the group of people here in the Rohingya camp to- and recently, you know, I was talking about them to the people from Myanmar who had fled the violence in that country. I think change is- everyone wants good. You know one of the- and, I don't think I'm being biased as a woman when I say this, but women want to do everything, to see lives change for their children. I think if we think the world, you know, time is almost irrelevant in this world, and, but we want to have a world that is so safe, so secure, so good, so full of food, so full of, you know, peace, for our children; I think we have a tremendous role to play and women will be the first ones to say yes. So I would say that's where I've always started. Of

course, there are some incredible men who will come along. But women will always put their children first. So I think in terms of, you know, resistance to change comes from those who have- who sense they have too much to lose, because they hold too much. That's where the resistance sits.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I can um, I'd like to go back to faith within the context of this then as well. Do you think a relationship with a scripture - whatever the scripture is - do you think that opens people towards being helpful in the world? Or do you think it can sometimes close- I suppose the answer is: depends, really, but, does that lead you to optimism? Or lead you to despair, when it comes to the question of working deeply and on an engaged level with faith communities, and as a person of faith yourself?

Veena O'Sullivan:

There are so many things that, like you say, it can close or it can open spaces up. For me I trust, you know, what the world may say instinct, but, my intuition, my sense of, you know, OK, there is something here that's more powerful than me to enter into a space. And then when you study scripture - any, any religion really - because that means so much, especially to faith communities and faith leaders. You have to engage with scripture, but I'm not- I'm no theologian - because I'm of Christian faith, I say that - I'm no theologian, but where scripture becomes so lived is when you read about it in context, when you replace the names in the bible (in my context) with names of the people in that village, suddenly it changes. That is very powerful.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and this is The Corrymeela Podcast. Today I'm speaking with Veena O'Sullivan. Veena, I'd like to ask you a question about money. 'Cause I know that you know, you wrote that after what's been happening in Ukraine in the last number of years, that there was this massive outpouring of extraordinary generosity. And when that happens, do you find that other crises that are, have been trying to raise money d'you think- can there be internal resentment in the kind of communities of people who are trying to raise awareness- can there be jostling and resentments and competition, and a sense that: well, here's the ones that are in the public eye; here's the ones that aren't. From the point of view of a professional working in that field, what do you notice about that, and how do you hold it together?

Veena O'Sullivan:

See I fundamentally believe right, that we have enough wealth and enough resource to feed everyone, for everyone to have a home, for every girl to go to school, etc. So, we have enough, and more, actually, in this world, it's just that it's disproportionately allocated. That's the problem. So, because I believe that, you know, anyone who gives to a cause...we know today, it's very socially charged. The

extraordinary generosity, even with the Turkey/Syria earthquake that we've seen in the UK, is amazing, considering people are feeling vulnerable, and you know, cost of living is going up, etc, etc. But for me, that's the goodness that I totally believe in. But also at the same time, I know that how much can people who don't live this every day, unlike me, how much can they hold emotionally? That's tough. So I understand. I understand when there's reticence to give. But I also know that media drives the agenda. So, you know, it's good when it's good, but it's not good when you have... For me, it was very stark when the Afghanistan- when Taliban took over Afghanistan, when I was new in this role at that time, and the generosity of giving was extraordinary. The Haiti crisis happened right after that- earthquake happened, literally within two weeks after that. We couldn't get any traction at all. And, you know, and Haiti has suffered deeply for a long time. So it's really hard. We had the Horn of Africa hunger crisis, where it's literally people just dying because of lack of food, again. And, you know, no fault of theirs, climate chaos, etc. Struggling to get attention for that- it's harder to get attention for protracted crises like those, but easier when it's war and something very dramatic and quite close to home.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I mean, those are stark words, Veena, like: it's harder to get attention for a protracted conflict, but easier when it's war. I mean, what language to hear; that, like, do you find yourself wanting to appeal to the everyday person who's going to give what they can afford? Or, like, do you find yourself wishing that governments and, like, powers with great resources could be the ones who are doing the response? How do you hold together both of those priorities?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Absolutely. Yeah, I think, you know, I want everyone to care about everyone, knowing that we are interdependent. We may not feel it, but I really think we are. But with governments, I find it really difficult when they give to war. And when they give to themselves, or when they do things out of fear for, you know, losing what they have. That's really hard to see. Really, really hard to see. Colonisation, and the damage of that... Because so many, so many things have their roots in that, where, because of the dominion of some, we've left so many powerless. For a long time, too... For a long time.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Veena, as we come to a close in this conversation I'm curious about what the focuses of your next few months are: like, what's your day to day work now in terms of what you're building and what coalitions you're creating?

Veena O'Sullivan:

I have a really exciting year ahead, Pádraig; I'm here in the Middle East, really looking at doing something like I was saying, long-term to seek peace here. You could laugh and say: what, how are you going to be able to do that? But, the- some of the people who inspire me here really want that. So I'm gonna be here. I'm gonna be here and be in this region and see if I can help them do what they wanna do. So that's what, that's- I'm so excited about that. And, you know, excited- even in the midst of the terrible, terrible earthquake, we've seen people come together; we've, we're seeing things happen that we didn't see when the conflict in Syria started, you know, so it gives me hope. So that's here, but obviously, my, you know, I'm, I am responsible for the work that we do in, in the 50 countries around the world. So, you know, I'll be keeping an eye and really watching the space about how things are changing. And there's some extraordinary stories all around. Really, we're seeing some phenomenal research that is saying that, you know, investing in faith communities: when you invest a pound, you're seeing return on investment that - this is a scientific study actually, that Tearfund's done - your, your return on that investment is £28. That is something else.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That's an extraordinary return. I mean, in a world where there's increasing attention given to polarisation and populism, and those dynamics of communities being driven apart politically, it sounds like you're seeing a different side of things that's potential on the ground - you're not denying the power of polarisation, of course you're not - but I'm, I'm interested in what it is you're seeing on the ground. What do you think nurtures that?

Veena O'Sullivan:

I think because that is reality, you know, when you move away from the drama and the, you know, the powerful spaces; when you come down, when you're walking the streets of some of the places that I am so privileged to walk, and you see, even in the midst of fighting, that they are collecting all the plastic, and they're recycling the plastic in a very crude way. And they're making stuff out of it. Streets are clean, drains are cleaned, and this is all young people. Oh, my goodness, that's exciting. And you, you see that, but, but those stories don't dominate, don't dominate our world. But actually, those are the stories that are going to hold our future. We need to start just looking, looking- look down. Look small.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I was gonna ask you - and I think you're already answering the question - what keeps you going? You've been doing this work for a long time. What keeps that fire burning in you, that interest?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Love it! Love it. I mean, simply because of the people I work with. I think seeing that excitement when the water comes through that they haven't had, you know, through- in a tap for a long time. Those kinds of things. But you know also Pádraig, when you- I think, I wonder because I have not been in that place where I've had nothing. But when you've had nothing, I wonder though, where even the gift of being able to sing - not, I don't mean sing well - but just sing with your friends. When you're walking like, you know, four hours to collect a bucket of water, there must be something extraordinary about that, isn't it? They can sing. They sing faster, quicker, sooner, than even my team of people I work with in the office. There's something astonishing about that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And how do you make that, the link between that, and then the huge priorities in terms of governmental change and economic crises, and some people making choices that are keeping other people far away from water? You know, I know I've heard you speak before about, you know, you don't want people to be distracted by, by the joy and culture of a community: that culture and community is still suffering from lack of access to water and, how do you hold all that together- there's a tension in that, I know?

Veena O'Sullivan:

There is a tension, but also when you realise, you know, we are not that powerful. And when you realise: oh, I'm able to do this much today. I don't even, I don't even think long-term in terms of myself or what I can do; but step by step, that faithfulness that I have to hold myself to, then, then I experience enough here on the ground, that I- that drives me to be able to speak up there. So, you know, or speak with: take someone with me and bring them into those spaces. I think, I genuinely think sometimes, you know, things may not change at the top, and we've seen that in so many places. But when things change on the ground and that means everything, how people carry on.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Veena O'Sullivan, international director of Tearfund UK, thank you very much for your time.

Veena O'Sullivan

Thank you, Pádraig, you've taken me on a tour, just sitting here! Thanks so much.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Pleasure!

The Corrymeela Podcast is created in partnership between Corrymeela and FanFán. It's produced by Emily Rawling, with mixing, editing, and theme music by Fra Sands at Safeplace Studios, and

presented by me, Pádraig Ó Tuama. The podcast is generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Community Relations Council Northern Ireland, and the Irish government's Reconciliation Fund. Thanks to them, and thanks to Corrymeela's friends and supporters, and thanks to you for listening.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Are there works of art that you've turned to again and again over your life?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Yeah, I love, I love the art, the kind of art that's really simple. In my country, we have something called Warli art, which is very tribal, and it's done painted on huts and doors and it depicts everyday life, but from the perspective of the one who's drawing it and painting it using, you know, natural materials. It's so much fun. I love that. Constantly doodling pretending I'm one of those.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Another question for you Veena is: could you tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you?

Veena O'Sullivan:

Yes, my- I am so mixed up: I'm as Indian as they come, Pádraig. But you know when I- I got on this flight, travelling from N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, going back home to Ireland. And you will not believe it- the plane was full of Irish peacekeeping troops. And I was the only non-Irish person, but with an 'O'Sullivan' in my name. So they sang to me, and they regaled me with stories, and they adopted me as one of their own. It's- you know, when you have a surname that tells a story, and you have a passport that's Irish, but you look like the way I look... Your identities just keep, you know, changing all the time. So I feel as Indian as they come, but when the Ethiopians say that they- I am one of them, I feel Ethiopian.