



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 7. Richard Holloway reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Richard talks with huge gratitude of Father James Alexander Nigel Mackay, the rector who altered the course of his life when he was a young boy. As you hear Richard speak about the influence of Father Mackay, are there particular people of influence from your own life who come to mind?
2. At one point, Richard describes religion as: ‘a great love affair with the possibility of God’; elsewhere he says: ‘religions summon you to buy their usually very dogmatic interpretation of the meaning of existence’. How would you describe your own understandings of the nature and purpose of religions? Have you noticed those understandings change throughout your life?
3. As he speaks, Richard holds together multiple conflicts and tensions; he describes himself as having found a ‘troubled peace’ and says of a comment he made: ‘it was a stupid, heartfelt thing to say’. Are there are other examples that particularly struck you?
4. Richard says that he thinks a lot about death and dying, and mentions some of the arrangements for his funeral. Do you notice anything about your own response to that? How easy do you find it to sit with the idea of your own death and what might happen afterwards (on a practical or a spiritual level)?
5. Richard mentions a variety of things - people, places, poetry, music - which allow him to access/ reflect on the transcendent. What are some of those things for you?

Richard Holloway was the Bishop of Edinburgh in the Scottish Episcopal Church from 1986-2000. He is the author of thirty books, including *Godless Morality* (Canongate, 1999), *Stories We Tell Ourselves* (Canongate, 2020) and *Waiting for the Last Bus* (Canongate, 2018). His book *Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt* (Canongate, 2012) was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize and won the PEN Ackerley prize. He was chairman of the Scottish Arts Council from 2005-2010, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. A frequent broadcaster, he has presented a number of television series and radio programmes, including *Three Score Years and Ten* for BBC Radio 4.

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

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

*Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Richard Holloway. Richard is a writer and broadcaster and he was the Bishop of Edinburgh for the Episcopal Church in Scotland for the 14 years leading up to the year 2000. He's written 30 books exploring topics including faith and doubt and death and ageing and sexuality and ethics and religion. And apparent throughout all of his work are his interests in story and the arts and poetry and the human search for meeting. His anthology, **The Heart of Things**, was published by Canongate recently. So Richard, you're very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.*

Richard Holloway:

And it's a joy to be with you, Pádraig.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'd like to start off with a simple question, which is: is there a particular experience or relationship or friendship in your childhood that you feel like has been a sustaining thing throughout your life? Maybe it prepared you for who it is you've become. Is there some moment that you look back to in childhood and think: yeah, that was a, that was a door opening?

Richard Holloway:

Well, the big moment was when my wee cousin died of spinal meningitis; this was during the war. And we didn't go to St. Mungo's Alexandria, the local Episcopal Church, but it was the church we belonged to. And, um, my wee cousin died, my mother went up to comfort her, and she said to me: when you come for your dinner (in Scottish that's lunch in the middle of the day) come to Mary up the street, because I'll be there comforting her. So I, I arrived there and the rector of the local Episcopal church, St. Mungo's, was an Irishman, a James Alexander Nigel Mackay, a big tall man with a combover and acne. Um. But he changed my life because he said to Mammy: 'who's that boy' and she said 'that's my son, Dick'. 'Can Dick sing?' 'Aye, Dick's got a great voice'. 'Will you come and join the choir, Dick?' So I went the following

Sunday and joined the choir at St. Mungo's Alexandria, a wee church now closed down, and I preached at the closing only last year- it broke my heart. And within a couple of years, I decided - I suppose because I kind of hero-worshipped him, unlikely as he was - decided I wanted to be a priest, and he sent me to Kelham Theological College, which had a boys' department down in Nottinghamshire in England, and that utterly transformed my life. It set me on the religious route, and I've had a long love-hate affair with it ever since. So that was, that was the biggest life changing event of my life.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It's enormous; there's so much in there, Richard. I mean, you say you 'hero-worshipped him, unlikely as he was'. Could you tell us a bit more about him? I'm so interested in this character whose kind of summoning of you drew something out of you that you didn't know about.

Richard Holloway:

He had. He had enormous wit and charm. And he had a wonderful laugh, I remember. He preached very well, too. I mean, he was an unreconciled, old-fashioned Anglo-Catholic, probably nowadays would have opposed the ordination of women, the ordination of gays, though I'm pretty certain he was gay himself. And there was just something- there was a warmth about him. And he clearly saw something in me; he got [me] to do a bit of gardening in the rectory. I started haunting the place, I brought one or two pals with me. Um, I'd never really met an educated man before. I mean I was destined to leave school at 14 as all my contemporaries did. I thought of training to be a motor mechanic; God help me, I mean the, the mortality rate in the Vale of Leven would have shot up because I'm, I'm a klutz when it comes to stuff like that. Um, and he clearly found something in me and I responded to something in him. And it was transformative. Even my father, who didn't do religion, liked Father Mackay as we called him, um, there was a kind- he got on with everyone. He had an unhappy subsequent life: he left Alexandria, the wee town in Dunbartonshire. And he ended up, um, an old drunk in London- I kind of weep at the thought. And it's why I've - I'm gonna bubble, here - it's why I've always had a thing for broken men whose lives have not somehow worked out in a complete way, because often they've touched others. And that broken old drunkard changed my life...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You, you bear witness to him in such a way that makes him very alive. And, it's not only his,

it's not only his intelligence and his wit, but it's also his conflicts that you bring. You know, the conflict about how his life ended, but also the conflicts perhaps, the internal ones that he did. D'you think it was his conflict, too, that even back then that you saw some integrity in and thought that there's space for your own?

Richard Holloway:

That's a wee bit too sophisticated. Erm, I think what I saw in him was a kind of largeness. I saw in his kind of religion a spaciousness; I'd been used to occasionally going to a rather prim Church of Scotland services with the school. And I- he took this wee kind of red sandstone building at the edge of Alexandria, and he turned it into a magical, romantic place. Erm: incense, chanting... And it touched a longing in me I suppose for the large, the transcendent; I walked the hills a lot as a wee boy on my own- I think I was a wee romantic in a way. And I think that his kind of religion was a romance in that sense: a great love affair with the possibility of God, amplified by great music, and incense, and mystery, and silence. And, I mean it just caught me. I've never lost it, although I've had a very complicated relationship with religion. So I think he probably gave me a gift that keeps giving. And it breaks my heart especially to think that he just- he became a lost broken soul. And I've known lots of people like that; I've known lots of gay clergy actually, who struggled with their sexuality. But they also, they had about them a knowledge of forgiveness, of understanding human weakness... Um, and, um, I, I love a snatch of poetry from a Scottish poem: 'Only from our weakness are we kind'. And that to me is what I learned from those guys, because they struggled with their own, their own urges, and it's- it brought something tender out of them. And so since then, I've always had this feeling, mainly for men whose lives didn't work out. God bless them, I think you probably sprinkled a lot of grace around.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Did you ever express to him how much he meant to you?

Richard Holloway:

I used to write to him from Kelham. And I always ended my letters - because I picked this up, it was like in the usage in Kelham - 'Yours affectionately'. I wouldn't have known how to do that from Alexandria. So I think he knew that I was deeply fond of him; he left Alexandria while I was at Kelham as a wee boy, and I kind of lost touch with him. But yeah, I think he

knew that I was indebted to him and fond of him. So yeah, I just have an enormous debt of gratitude to that baldy, odd-looking Irishman who gave me a different life.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What's his name again? It's so lovely, the way that you remember all of his names.

Richard Holloway:

James Alexander Nigel Mackay. Trinity College, Dublin- he was a graduate of Trinity College Dublin.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You speak of some of your engagements with religion, you know, when you were in theological seminary of, you know, incorporating the chores and football, as well as learning, and the way that you write about that makes me think about a particular grounded approach you have to religion, and we will talk about religion, but I'm interested in the insistence that you have in highlighting chores and football as being absolutely incorporated into the theological enterprise.

Richard Holloway:

The man who founded the society of the sacred mission, Herbert Kelly, was a strange genius. He'd actually trained to be an officer, erm, and didn't make it; I think he trained in London. And he, he thought it was odd that in the Church of England - which is where he lived and worked - God only called middle-class men to the priesthood: university men, Oxford, Cambridge, that kind of thing. He thought it odd that God never seemed to call poor boys, working-class boys to the priesthood. So he decided to start a theological college that would take working-class boys young, educate them, and prepare them for the ministry. And he called that the sacred mission: it was his sacred mission to, as it were, deliver this new population of priests. And he founded this religious order in 1893, and they started work in Mildenhall in Suffolk. And then as it grew, the community grew, he saw that there was a big manor house for sale outside Newark in Nottinghamshire in England called Kelham Hall. It was built by the man who built St. Pancras railway station and it looks a bit like that: big red brick building with turrets. And he bought Kelham Hall, and he filled it with working-class boys whom he trained for the Anglican priesthood. They, they were the non-commissioned officers of the Church of England. They never became bishops, they went to working-class communities. And

it was there that Father Mackay sent me, aged 14. Because they had a boys' department called the Cottage. The Cottage was the old stables of the original manor house. And there was a dorm above offices and things and there were about 30 boys. And we slept in this dorm at the top of what were the stables at the old manor house. And it was always cold, but it was a great tough life; we had to have a cold shower every day, that was part of the- you started the day shivering in the cold shower but, but it was a bit like plunging into a cold pool- it invigorated you.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And now these days people consider it a kind of a luxury to do that!

Richard Holloway:

Yes, they do. It was compulsory... And then you had a day that was a mixture of prayer, offices in the chapel, and work, because there were no servants at Kelham; we did all our own work: we scrubbed floors, we polished floors, we kept pigs. And so it was a, it was a total life. And it, um I was there. I went into the army as we had to, for a couple of years, came back, erm, decided to join the community, so I was a novice monk for a couple of years. And then they sent me to Africa; they sent me to Accra in what was then the Gold Coast because Richard Roseveare, who'd been a member of the society in South Africa, was made Bishop of Accra and he needed a secretary, so they sent me. And I kind of came unstuck from the community there. But what an extraordinary gift I was given: a wee boy of 14 destined to leave school ends up going to Kelham, gets an eccentric education, does two years in the army and is then sent to Africa. I mean, it just it was utter- and it was in Africa I discovered politics, because I hadn't been much interested in politics in my religious preoccupation at Kelham, but I was there the day Ghana- the day the Gold Coast turned into Ghana, and Nkrumah became the first prime minister of the first independent African state. History, and I was a witness to it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Wow. I mean, that is a big overlap there immediately of, you know, education and politics and history and theology, all combining together. Yeah, and empire... Um, I will- we'll come on in a while to the question of, you know, religion and public life. But I would like to talk with you a little bit about religion. In *Waiting for the Last Bus*, you wrote: 'I had to remind myself that the story of religion, like everything else in life, is one of constant change and loss'. And there's many things that you've said and written about your relationship with religion;

you've even called it now a love-hate relationship, Richard. I'm curious about how today you would tell the story of religion; you'll be 90 in November so you've got, you've got some decades of reflection. I'm curious how today you tell the story of your relationship with religion.

Richard Holloway:

I actually wrote a book about- um, I was asked by Yale to do a book in their *Little History* series: I wrote a book, *A Little History of Religion*, because religion is our response to the mystery of our own existence. I mean, where did we come from? Where did *it* come from? And we've wrestled with those questions since we started thinking at all as humans. And the thing that constantly amazes me is that we may be the only creatures in this enormous exploding universe that the scientists keep exploring and telling us how vast and tumultuous it is, it may be that only in us this- wee frail bipeds in this very third rate little planet in a corner of the universe, it may be only in us that the universe is thinking about itself. I mean, there's no evidence it's happening anywhere else. We haven't been able to make contact with any other thinking creatures in other parts of this extraordinary explosion that's, that's kind of hurtling through infinite space. In us, it's thinking about itself. And so it asks: where did we come from? Where do we go? I mean, those were Gauguin's great questions; in that painting he's smashed them up: What are we? Where did we come from? Where do we go? These questions come with our humanity, and religion- [a theologian] said religion was the way we have wrestled with these unanswerable questions. And because we're not very good at living without answers, we answer them confidently. And so we invent religions, and think of the millions of religions there have been. And the thing that bothers me about religion- it never actually says: this is how we see it, this is how we dream about it, these are the, the thoughts, the insights that have come to us... No, they say: this is the way it is because God has revealed to us the absolute truth, and if you don't buy our truth, we're gonna burn you at the stake, we're gonna crucify you... And that's why I have a love-hate relationship with religion, because it's filled with toxicity and cruelty, and yet it's filled with poetry, and longing, and insight, and revelation. So, how can you not have a love-hate relationship with it?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I was gonna say like, for all your critique of it, you remain somebody who loves the liturgy and who participates and sits at the back of churches sometimes and enjoys the poetry of the people, the poetry of the language and the- it seems like the, the ritual of gathering and

thinking about forgiveness and participating in some communal activity. You don't seem to be able to leave it behind, much in all as part of you seems to want to leave it behind and also part of you wants to embrace it.

Richard Holloway:

You're absolutely right. I now describe myself as a practising but non-believing Christian; not unbelieving, that's, that's too certain, you know, that's Dawkins: I *know* there's no God, I *know* it's all meaningless; I don't know that. And a bit of me longs that there might be an ultimate meaning. And I still practise, I still go to Old Saint Paul's Church - that mysterious church in Carrubbers Close in the Old Town in Edinburgh, a mysterious building that whispers the possibility of meaning to you - I still go there, and I make my communion, but I'm a practising but non-believing Christian. In that sense, religions summon you to buy their usually very dogmatic interpretation of the meaning of existence. I can't do that. But what I get are hints and whispers, I love the silences; I love the music, the choral music of Christianity: the great anthems, the great hymns, all of that- it came out of us. It came out of this wee frail funny wee animal without a tail, that sings and writes poetry and, yeah, I mean, I can't separate from that; I don't know what it means, ultimately. And I suspect that when I'm dead and gone, that'll be it for me. But my God what a ride it's been!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Do you pray, Richard?

Richard Holloway:

Um, in a funny kind of a way: I, I read a lot of poetry and that becomes a kind of um, prayer for me. I did a wee article for a Scottish newspaper on Christmas last year, and I called it 'Keeping On Keeping Christmas' because there's something about that that moves me. And there's an Eddie Morgan poem about three kids walking up Buchanan Street on a cold Christmas Eve, and I ended with that lovely poem. And again, Eddie Morgan, the great Glasgow poet, he was touched with the possibility of transcendence as well, so yeah, I can't keep away from going to church. I sometimes groan inwardly at occasionally what I hear if it's too confident in the pulpit; on the whole, Old Saint Paul's is a place that, that suggests, that allows space to breathe, and to listen, and, and the music sometimes just takes you right out of yourself, yeah. And I'll be, I'll be buried from there, I'll be carried down the Calvary Stairs. Which is a lovely thing about Old Saint Paul's: you go in Jeffrey Street, because it's built on a

rocky bit of the Old Town. And you go up, what are called the Calvary Stairs, built by Canon Laurie, who'd spent World War One in no man's land ministering to kids that were dying, and he came back and he built what he called the Calvary Stairs, the Calvary being World War One, and he built a wonderful chapel, called the warriors' chapel, with the names of all the dead of the neighbourhood. And, there's a story- I'll try not to cry. He used to come along at night, late at night when the church was closed, maybe even as late as midnight. And he would swing a wee thurible and whisper the names of all the dead boys. Yeah, how can you not? How can you separate yourself from that tradition? I can't.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is the theologian and writer, Richard Holloway. Richard, I'd like to talk to you about forgiveness, because it's a theme that you have returned to multiple times in various books, um, that there seems to- as I read you, I see in you that forgiveness is almost an artistic, ethical response to the possibility of something new emerging, rather than the predictable rehearsing of, of old story plots that are entirely likely to reoccur and reoccur. You seem to have an interest in, in forgiveness as a deeply embodied ethic. I wonder if you could talk about it.

Richard Holloway:

Well, I'm interested in forgiveness on two levels: my own need for it, erm, and I've been forgiven, I would go to confession as a wee boy and hear the words: 'I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' and that's a beautiful experience, it's a kind of- it releases you from the burden of your own mistakes. But more importantly, as I've gotten older and thought about the messes we make, and the- I mean just look at the world at the moment: all the killing, the blowing up and the shooting and the, that we keep doing. And I became very interested in what I think of as political forgiveness, the ability of communities to stop this insane warring with each other. What political forgiveness does, it stops the onrush, the consequential onrush of past offences. It says: OK, we've hurt each other, we've done terrible things to each other, but unless we're in this permanent offence/counter offence continuum, we're gonna have to interrupt this somehow, we're gonna have to put it behind us; and that's what forgiveness gives you. It gives you back the future. Without it, you simply have the repetition of the past, the constant rehearsal of offence and grievance and counter offence. And it's beautiful. I mean, it's, it interrupts the grimness of history, and where it's allowed to happen in personal lives, where I've offended someone, I've

deeply offended someone in my own personal life, and I'm given forgiveness, it gives me back the future, not the, not the repetition of the past; it's a beautiful, beautiful thing. I mean, it's, it's the biggest gift of Jesus to the human community, this ability to forgive and be forgiven. It gives us back a future that we've otherwise destroyed and mutilated. And yeah, I mean, it's- and it's been a deep experience in my own life, but I love it when I see it happening politically; I wish we could do something with all the tumults in different parts of the world, all this inability to put the past away and work towards a peaceful future. Um, how would you apply the doctrine of forgiveness to wee Putin in Ukraine? It would liberate him as well, the funny wee psychopathic soul. God, you want to forgive him, and you want him to say: yeah, I give up. Let's embrace, let's be peace-loving, let's- och nae, I'll stop cause I'm ranting here, but you know what I mean.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I do yeah, I can hear, I can hear the tension in yer, you know, 'the wee psychopathic soul' as you talk, you know, putting that adjective in front - or those two adjectives, there - I can hear the tension. I'm curious as to what you see the cost of forgiveness being, Richard, like, here's, here's something that you wrote, as you spoke about having been the Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, that, erm, and you had spoken really about, you know what you're now talking about being a practising but non-believing Christian, even if you mightn't've used these terms 20 years ago, but, you'd spoken about this and you picked up the Scotsman and found yourself the headline. Some of your colleagues - prominent among them were some people that you knew well - had called for your resignation, and you say 'I felt no anger, only sadness and an increasing weariness. It was not their fault. It was mine. I was a disappointment to them, a lost leader. Rather than sheltering them from the blast, I had broken open the windows and blown in the door. Who could blame them for their anger?' And I'm curious about what- and you speak about that with, with graciousness toward, you know, colleagues and friends and acquaintances of yours who called for your resignation because you were being open about your lack of certitude when it comes to the question of God. I'm curious about what the cost of that forgiveness was, or forgiving, or being forgiven, also. What was the equation and the cost of forgiveness for you there?

Richard Holloway:

It was a funny, erm, it all happened over a weekend. I mean, I'd become increasingly vocal about gay rights, about the ordination of women, stuff like that before it, before it happened,

and I was also aware of the groups that were in tightly kind of ramparted versions of religion that said: women are subordinate to men, they could never be ordained...um, sodomy is a curse, homosexual activity delivers you to hell. All that side religion just became impossible for me. I mean, I did my first gay wedding a way back in 1976 when I was at Old Saint Paul's before, before the debate had even happened.

There was a remarkable man in the congregation who came up - he was a nurse, a highly qualified nurse - he came up to Edinburgh (he was erm, from London) because he applied for the job of sister tutor at the Royal Infirmary, his name was Peter, he became sister tutor. And he, while he was up for the interview - and he won the post - he wandered into Old Saint Paul's, this strange, mysterious, brooding building. And he found a guy called Richard - not me; a parishioner - who was doing the brasses. And he asked Richard to show him round. And by the end of the hour or two they spent doing that, they'd fallen in love. And he came, he came to Edinburgh, took the job, and he and Richard decided to live together. I preached a series of sermons about Christianity and human sexuality: the complexity, the terror of it all. And he came up to me, and he said: 'What about us? Are we allowed to commit ourselves to each other?' And I said: 'Yes, I'm sure'. 'Will you marry us?' And it was, it was against the law. I said: meet me in the lady chapel after evensong tonight. And then I read the prayer book wedding service over them, just the three of us. It had no status in law, or theology, um, and they spent the rest of their lives together. And I, I buried them both. And that was 1976.

And when I became bishop in 1986, I started- I'd had a very conservative phase, although I'd never been conservative about Christian ethics; I wrote a book called *Keeping Religion out of Ethics: Godless Morality*, because I'd seen what dogmatic ethics can do to people: women can't be- women can't vote, the Bible says they're subordinate to men, they, they can't be ordained... gays are evil- if they commit sexual acts, they should be stoned... All of that was in the past as well. And I started saying this kind of stuff. And one day I went down with Jeannie, my wife, to a service in the borders; I won't name the town. And all of this had gone kind of public: I'd been writing these dangerous books and I'd been saying these dangerous things. And I noticed there was an icy atmosphere in the church: when it came to the kiss of peace, no one would give it to me. At the end of the service, no one would shake my hand going out the church door. I said to Jeannie afterwards: we'll skip the lunch because there's something going on here, they clearly don't want anything to do with me. And so we drove home and then the next day, the front page of the Scotsman, Edinburgh's newspaper: 'Clergy Call for Holloway's Resignation

and Declare the Diocese of Edinburgh Vacant'. And er... About a year later, I said: yeah, I've let them all down, I've disappointed them, so, I kind of, I went: I resigned and walked the hills and I, I felt I had let them down and yet, I couldn't, I couldn't kind of help it...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And do you feel like you let them down because of your increasing clarity about the mystery of belief and the lack of certitude?

Richard Holloway:

All of that, but yeah- all of that, but also because, och the wee souls, I mean, a lot of people have a need for an authoritative religion that tells them exactly what to think, and how to behave, and they get frightened if erm, if people appear to contradict that. And I'd gotten into trouble even over- I went, I was invited to a meeting about the ordination of women in England, which was just beginning to happen. And at the end of that I said a stupid thing, at the end of it, looking at the people who couldn't accept it, I said: 'Och, the miserable wee buggers, the poor wee sods', I said. And my God that got me into trouble; I mean, it was a stupid, heartfelt thing to say, and it meant that the bishops in the Scottish Episcopal Church had a kind of trial about me, and they found me guilty of 'un-Episcopal inappropriate language', so I, I decided, I mean, I kind of... I retired, I resigned, I walked away; I walked away from church, I felt I needed a long sabbatical from it. I walked the Pentlands, I walked the hills. And then one day, I walked back into Old Saint Paul's into the wee lady chapel that's been so important to me; it sits like a wee boat, above the knave. And I found a kind of troubled peace. And it brought me back to this strange, semi-detached relationship I have with a church I love and can't separate from, though I've wounded it and it's wounded me. It's, um- and that's kind of where I am now.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm struck by how, as we started, you spoke about the way that your heart goes out really to men who at various stages of their life feel lost, and I'm sure you must have felt lost walking the hills. You know, it sounds like there was a sense of having, having, I dunno, been- become lost yourself.

Richard Holloway:

Yeah, yeah. But there was- there's a poem that's very important to me by you Yehuda Amichai:

I called a book, *Doubts and Loves*, after it. 'From the place where we are right, flowers will not bloom in the spring...

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

Where the ruined

House once stood.'

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is the writer and broadcaster Richard Holloway. Richard, I'd like to talk to you about the arts. Poetry comes from you with such ease, poems not only that you know by heart but that you've lived with, poems that read you back as you read them. And I know that you've been a patron of the arts, been involved with creative Scotland; you have set up arts charities- Sistema Scotland whose project, Big Noise, equips children from working-class areas with musical talent for deepening confidence. And, you had a radio programme about books, too, and you've had affiliations with galleries, and, you know, you mentioned Gauguin earlier on, and his painting. What is it about the arts that appeals to you so much, and what is it about the necessity of the arts for all populations that seems to be so important to you?

Richard Holloway:

A deep, and a searching question. Um, it's partly because there's something imperative and imperious about the arts; they draw out of humans that other, creative, grace-filled side of their nature that wars with the violence, I mean- and, what I think we do with the arts somehow is we, we project ourself into the puzzle of the universe, and seek and find another kind of meaning: something is kind of revealed back to us. And I think in great music, great tragic music, great tragic poetry, we're visited back to us, we get a return on the sorrow and wonder and mystery of our own existence. I've said earlier that we are the thinking creatures, and we are the creative creatures. We put all this back and just think of what will be lost when we go.

All the poetry, all the music, all the sad ballads, all the singing, all the dancing, all the eagerness. It's- it kinda breaks my heart at the thought that if the universe came from nowhere, goes nowhere, means nothing, we will have been, we will have created all this, we'll have put all this as well out into this meaninglessness that apparently surrounds the universe, because it may indeed simply be a mysterious explosion that that singularity 50 billion years ago that explodes through space and time, and then, I don't know when, we appeared, we crawled out of the mud in the mist, we funny wee frail creatures. And we sat in our caves and we started painting the cave walls. We started repeating, representing: that's what we do, we are representors of the world, we funny wee feeble creative creatures, and so on the back of the walls, in the caves, millions of years ago, we painted the hunt. We started whittling designs on spears that we used to kill antelopes. We started singing to ourselves. I mean, when was the first song? Sitting there round the campfire, someone would start chanting, I mean, isn't it stunning, isn't it astonishing? All this came from us, this funny wee- in many ways, the least equipped creature on our planet to deal with itself, and out of us poured all of this.

I went to a concert in the Usher Hall not very long ago (the Mozart Requiem, just as a concert piece) and I sat there at the back of the hall and thought about this as well- where all that came from, and it came from us: funny wee creatures. So it, it makes you kind of hopefully baffled that [there] may be more to it than we give it credit for. But let's, let's stop hurting each other, let's stop condemning and damning each other; and I've done a bit of that, I've had a lot of it: I've had some terrible letters, and stuff like that. And you worry about the wee creatures that sit down and pen the vile thing that's come through your letterbox. Come on, let's love one another before we die. Was it Auden that said that? Anyway... No, no, it was Larkin (was it Larkin?) Anyway. They're all wonderful. And so are you: you're a pretty good one yourself.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Um, you know, you're gonna be 90 in November. Um, how do you think about age and death and life and living? I mean you mentioned already, you know, your plans for how it is that you'd like to be carried out. What else comes to your mind as you think about this? I've noticed in your most recent books that you're kind of whimsically playful and also serious at the same time about age and death, and writing about it as a companion and a certitude. I'm curious what else you're thinking about death and, and living before death?

Richard Holloway:

Yeah, I mean, when you get to my age- although I'm still pretty fit, apart from a kinda gammy right knee which means I can't do the high hills, um, I get, I still get a kick out of a lot of things, but at nearly 90 you inevitably confront the reality of death. I hope that I can still, when it comes I can, I can go to it quite cheerfully; I think about it a lot. And I'm a funny kind of religious creature because I neither desire nor expect anything after it, anything beyond it, in fact I'll be, I'll be a bit annoyed and surprised if I do walk through into something and something else: oh God, here we go again, have I not had enough at 90, come on, d'you want me to start up again?- I don't really expect that to happen. And yet, I can see why it's death that produced religion. Because it's the big question we ask: well, why, what was it all about? Where did it come from? How do we creatures reconcile ourselves to our own ending? And that is a tough one. And as I contemplate my own mortality, I don't expect to be going anywhere, after death. I'll be very surprised and perturbed if I do, as I say, but, but I don't know. It's the ultimate mystery. But I hope I die a reconciled death. I hope I can look back to some things done well, and the bad things all forgiven. So I'm actually quite a peaceful character now, although still getting a wee kick out of what's left.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Richard Holloway, writer, broadcaster, thinker, ethicist, patron of the arts, and beholder of the strange mystery of being alive, thank you very much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Richard Holloway:

You're very welcome.

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:

What's something important that you've changed your mind about, Richard?

Richard Holloway:

Religions. Wouldn't that make the story of my life? I change my mind about it constantly; when I, I was brought up in a fairly orthodox Anglo-Catholic tradition. My first book was called *Let God Arise*: it was a call to orthodox Christianity against the liberalism of the day. And as I said in my farewell sermon at Old Saint Paul's when I resigned as bishop, I became the kind of bishop in my 60s that I preached against in my 30s! So, there's a paradox for you: just be careful what you want, right, because it brings in its revenges! The whirlygig of time, my God, yeah, but you've got to laugh as well.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Of the many books and poems and works of art and music that have accompanied you throughout your life, what's one that you would say you turn to again and again?

Richard Holloway:

Well, oddly enough, you know Auden's poem when he talks about the Breughel Icarus painting, I love that. Because again, it's about the momentous and the inconsequential going on at the same time. I love old Auden anyway: I discovered a thing about him recently - I've written about him in a book I've been putting together - I discovered recently that he secretly funded a couple of poor boys, and he didn't want them to know where the money came from at the end of their lives. He was a funny, dishevelled, slovenly old man, but there he was doing good by stealth. And so I've- the way he ended that poem: 'If equal affection cannot be/ Let the more loving one be me'. That's not a bad way to live.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What are you reading these days, Richard?

Richard Holloway:

I'm reading a lot of diaries, I'm reading Alan Bennett's diaries again, I love that man, and he produced volumes of diaries, and I'm wading through them again. I don't read much in the way of fiction, so I was reading Larkin's letters, his collections of letters: things like that, things about a lived life, and the struggle with meaning, and pain, and conflict, and all of that. That's the stuff that nourishes me, so I, I kinda chew my way through them. And the Edinburgh public library is full of 'em, so it's- there'll be enough to see me out.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What about a time, Richard, when your national identity felt important to you?

Richard Holloway:

Oh yes, yes, we moved to erm- I was invited to a job in Massachusetts, in 1980. And my wife's American, so we, we thought, yeah, let's get in touch with our American side. So we went, and I was immediately, profoundly homesick; I think it's a thing that the Scots and the Irish have in particular, the deep longing for the mother. And I was there, I was away from Scotland for six years, because I came back to Oxford for a couple of years. But I've been writing about that recently, this- is it a longing for the mother? A kind of mother sickness or mother need? And it may just be a Celtic thing, but I knew I couldn't leave my bones in America. And I'm back in Scotland, funny old tumultuous Scotland, riven with religion, the kind of stuff we've been talking about, and a very tough reformation, and all of that. But yeah, I was pulled back home. And here I'll stay until I'm done the stairs in my coffin.