



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 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 11. Dr. Nóirín Ní Riain

reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Are there teachers or mentors who've had an impact on your thinking, interests, or even on the direction of your life?
2. What examples can you think of of the three different levels of listening that Nóirín describes? (You can find these at the top of page 15).
3. Were there any particular rituals or traditions that were important to you growing up? Do you have any that are important to you now? Or are there any that you'd like to cultivate?
4. Have there been particular moments in your life (perhaps outside some of the more common ones like births or marriages) that you have marked in a particular way? Were there rituals (formal or informal) that helped mark these?
5. Nóirín says: 'We've lost the art of blessing. Blessing - beannacht, as we'd say in Irish - is an integral part of living and being in communication with each other'. How do you understand the idea of blessing?
6. Are there words in, or ideas expressed by, other languages that you think are either captured inadequately or missing altogether in the language(s) you primarily speak?

Nóirín Ní Riain is an Irish theologian and recording artist who has performed to audiences all over the world. She specialises in Irish traditional music and Gregorian chant, and has collaborated musically with the monks of Glenstal Abbey in Co. Limerick, where she lived for many years. Nóirín is the author of *Theosony: Towards a Theology of Listening* (Columba Books, 2011), and the autobiography *Listen With the Ear of the Heart* (Veritas, 2010). She was ordained as an interfaith minister in 2017, and now presides over ceremonies to mark births, marriages, separations, deaths, and other important milestones. Her book *Sacred Rituals: A Simple Book of Everyday Prayer* was published by Hachette Books Ireland in 2023.

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 Nóirín Ní Riain. Nóirín is an internationally acclaimed singer and musicologist and theologian, as well as an expert on Celtic spirituality. For many years, she lived and made music with the Benedictine community at Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick in the south-west of Ireland. Nóirín has performed all over the world for audiences that have included Bill Clinton and Mary McAleese and the Dalai Lama. She's also an interfaith minister, and has used her passions for music and spirituality in the creation of rituals and ceremonies to mark birth and death and marriages as well as all the separations, and blessings for the home. And throughout her life, she has combined passions for singing and Gregorian chant and spirituality and ritual and theology and the Irish language. Her most recent book, Sacred Rituals: A Simple Book of Everyday Prayer was published in October 2023 with Hachette. So Nóirín you're very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. Fáilte romhat a croí.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Agus go raibh míle maith agat, a Phádraig, don cuireadh seo, mar tugann sé gliondar i mo chroí chun bheith leath, i dtús báire, ach chun bheith ag caint le Corrymeela freisiin, mar tá an-mheas agam ag an obair a dhéanann sibh ansan.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Ah, go raibh míle maith agat. Erm, we'll probably go in and out of Irish a little bit throughout the whole conversation, Nóirín, and anytime you or I do, sure one of us can provide a little bit of a, little bit of a translation an 'idir-theangaire' - an 'inter-languaging', an inter-tonguing. Erm, so you were just saying that yeah, you're happy to be here and also that you have, um, deep interest in the work of Corrymeela; we can talk a little bit about the way that your work of blessing and ritual-making overlaps, I think, with some of the work that peace and reconciliation work does. But to start Nóirín, I wanted to ask you a question: was there an experience or friendship in your childhood that you feel prepared you for the work you do now?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

A lovely question. Actually, I suppose it was a certain negative side really, in that I was a troubled child, Pádraig, and so very early on, I developed a connection there with this invisible friend. And so that became very concrete for me when I was a small child, even though of course I was totally unconscious of it then. But I can see now that it really kept me going. And that I had this friend, as it were in my ear, who travelled with me and has, still travels with me actually, now at the ripe old age of 72. And so I think more than that, it was my own internal desires, Pádraig, that created this presence in my life.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. This other to talk to. Um, did they have a name?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Well, I suppose at that time I would have said God, even though now I know, with the nine billion people that we have on the planet, that we'd all have a different name for that presence. And indeed, some of us will say there's no presence there at all. So at that stage it was, erm, God I think, but not a god of Michelangelo, you know, a god of- a man with a long beard, a white man with a long beard... you know, a cruel to be kind god. It was really very much a friendship. And somebody who was, as you know, in Irish, um, Pád, we have this concept of an 'anamchara'...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

A soul friend, yeah...

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yes, which is much more than just a friend that you might go to the pictures with, or you might have brunch with or a cup of coffee; it's somebody who brings out the best in you. Who challenges you, indeed. And that voice did challenge me and did inspire me, and still does, to go beyond myself. Now at my old, sorry-

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Now at your old age of 72, were you about to say that?!

Nóirín Ní Riain:

I was about to say it still tells me: look at, you're still not too old to follow your dreams- go on, go on, there!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Where was it you grew up, Nóirín?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

I grew up in Caherconlish, a little place in south-east Limerick, quite close, five miles, from where I'm actually living now, near the monastery at Glenstal Abbey, County Limerick- so quite near to Shannon airport, for anybody who would know Ireland, to travel to, or whatever. Erm, so a nice area, and very particular; I was born- I was conceived and brought up for the first four years of my life, Pádraig, beside one of our oldest sacred sites, which is Lough Gur, the oldest stone circle in the British Isles, indeed. And so that place still calls me home. I have wonderful memories. No, you see I was- we left when I was four. So I really haven't that many concrete memories. But when I go back there, I know that I am at home in another space, you know?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

For years now, you've lived very near to Glenstal Abbey, the Benedictine monastery in County Limerick. But I know you visited there as a child, as well. What, what are your memories or your experiences of having visited, as a child, the place that you now live very near?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Peace, I think. And even though I didn't know the monks here, because I was five, or six, or seven, or eight, before I went to boarding school at the age of 12, I would cycle over here, which is just five miles from here. And I felt at home; I'd drop my little bicycle and walk up the avenue. And then, much, much later, when we married, we came to live here. And when Mícheál - my husband, my former husband, who passed over in 2018 - when he was on sabbatical, we actually came to live in the monastery in the little house there. And then when we separated, erm, I went to live there for 16 years, Pádraig, on and off. Until 2016.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And you collaborated musically with the monks of the abbey. There's a variety of recordings and writings that came from that time. I want to talk about music in your life, but maybe to go back a little bit, you went to University College Cork to study music, and Seán Ó Riada and Pilib Ó Laoghaire were two big influences on you there: I wonder if you could talk about the influences of Seán Ó Riada and Pilib Ó Laoghaire on yer in terms of your musical training.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Well without Pilib I wouldn't have done music at all, Pádraig; he came to examine me in my final year in high school, or secondary school, as we'd say. And he said: 'What are you going to do next year?' I sang for him and I played the piano, and then he said: 'What are you going to do?' I said: 'I'm going to do law in TCD'. And he said: 'No, you're not. Yeah, you're coming to do music in UCC'. And so I said: 'But my parents would not consider that at all'. And he said: 'Leave that to me!' He drove down - yeah it was quite a miraculous story - he drove down and into my parents' house, and convinced my parents that they should allow me to go to UCC, which is where he was teaching part time. And so he said he'd give me his books. And he would teach me choral conducting. And he would look after me, which he did. And then of course our first, that first year, and our second year, we had Seán Ó Riada, who was a very important figure in Irish music. And he it was that opened up the whole treasure trove of the Irish language. Because - I don't know your own experience, I'd love to hear that, too, Pádraig, of learning the Irish language - but most cases, it's abominably taught, and, very badly, with no love, and no- not the music of it, the poetry of it, not at all. So Seán Ó Riada really sparked that in us. And so we all changed our names. I was Noreen Ryan at that stage, and went Nóirín Ní Riain after that, because of course that's what Seán Ó Riada had done himself, he was John Reidy, and so he changed to Seán Ó Riada. Micheál Ó Súilleabháin was Michael O'Sullivan-Mick Sullivan, and he changed to Micheál Ó Súilleabháin.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You told me once that Pilib Ó Laoghaire used to invite yer to a class - was it every Saturday morning? - and he would get you to memorise something and that you weren't allowed to take notation, you had to have it by ear and by heart by the next week is that- do I remember that right?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

You've a great memory, Pádraig, absolutely, I would go out to visit his house in Bishopstown. And so I'd sit at his feet, nearly quite literally, and no recordings at that stage. And if I got a note wrong, that was the end of it, Pádraig- he was a difficult taskmaster! I learned so much from him, but he was a very, very eccentric man, too. And er, then he had this 'stór amhrán' as we'd say, this repertoire of songs that he'd collected in his youth in Ring, County Waterford in Gaeltacht na nDéise and, which is a beautiful Irish-speaking area. And canúint, the dialect, is beautiful, and it has a huge repertoire of wonderful songs, wonderful.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And what is it that these songs are addressing- are some of them religious, and some of them agricultural and then everything in between, or, what, what kind of things was he teaching you?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

A lot of them were just songs of course as I said that he would have had collected at the time, big songs from the Déise* like [*sings*] which is about herding the goats. Then of course about the Blackwater river, erm, 'Cois Abha Móire na nDéise' [*sings*]. But when you ask about religious songs, he taught me one religious song. And I used to say to him: Pilib, why is it that that song comes so easily to me, all the rest of the songs, I have to work my head off to get the pronunciation, erm, the ornamentation, but this one, which was 'The Seven Sorrows of Mary', and so it's a very beautiful hymn to Mary, where it would be- what'd be known as what we call a numerical carol, which came to Ireland with the Franciscans in 13th century. And this is how they taught the people through these songs. The first rejoice, the first sorrow Mary saw was when she saw her son being, being, what would we say, being, erm...suffering under the hands of his people, and so on. And so that's a very beautiful song, the very first religious song I ever learnt [*sings*].

*an abbreviation for Abha Móire na nDéise - the Blackwater river - in Co. Waterford

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Nóirín, I've heard you talk about these as hearthside hymns, that there's something that's less doctrinal and less formally hierarchical about them, that they came from, they came from the people who sang them in the kitchen, rather than, you know, somewhere where they were taught formally. Is that true, and could you talk a little bit about that?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Absolutely right, Pádraig, because course you see, at the time when a hymnology would have evolved in Ireland, in the 18th/19th century, as it did in England and America, or other places, we had the penal laws. And so going to church was totally forbidden; going to Roman Catholic church was forbidden. So, but, Catholicism wasn't repressed, Christianity wasn't repressed; people kept it alive in the homes, in what we call the Carraig an Aifrinn, the mass rocks where people gathered to say mass outside. And of course, that's lovely, too, because we don't need any temple or structure to pray, really. But again, it was a very sad time in our history, and so of course, there were no hymns at that time, but people did sit around, and particularly after rituals like the rosary, they would break into song like that: the seven sorrows, the seven rejoices of Mary. And so you've got a very feminine tradition, too, because most of these songs, I would claim, were written by women, because they were anonymous. But of course, that's the great saying, isn't it, Pádraig, that if something is anonymous, you can assume it was written by a woman?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, anonymous equals woman, for most of history.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Exactly. So this is a very feminine aspect of Christianity, where Mary is seen as the mother keening her son at the foot of the cross. And so you have her sometimes saying: Ailliú ó Íosa, ochón ó Íosa* crying as a keening woman would have done long ago in Ireland.

*Alleluia oh Jesus, Pity oh Jesus

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. There's that particular one you're talking about: 'ochón' this, this kind of sound of lamentation: 'alas', I suppose is how I've seen ochón translated from Irish into English but alas feels very melodramatic, whereas ochón feels very primal, really, in terms of the sound it makes in the throat, a sound of sorrow. In that particular hymn there's a time when Mary is holding the corpse of her dead son and she's remembering and lamenting his ear and his little nose. There's something almost of the infant in the, in the corpse that she's holding. I've always found the poetry of that hymn to be almost overwhelming in its simplicity.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Ah, beautiful, beautiful: 'is that the wee babe I bore nine months in my womb m'ochón 's m'ochónó* that was born in a stable when no house would give us room'. And that Christ is talking down to her again, as a mother: mother, be quiet...your heart be torn, so there's great intimacy, isn't there, Pádraig, in those?

**alas and alas*

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I know, and there's a way within which this comes from a tradition that isn't frightened of lament. What is it about lament, do you think, that is, in a certain sense, its own comfort?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Well of course, we Irish are very good at lamenting, aren't we, we're very good around dying. Constantly, it's a constant theme that we have, you know, it seems as if, because I suppose of our sad history too, death has always been before us, we've never been afraid to welcome in death. And of course, we've so many beautiful phrases, and proverbs Pádraig, as you know, around death, like: 'Is fear díreach é, ní cuireann sé scéal ar bith roimhe' - 'Death is a direct man' - and death in Ireland is always a man - 'Death is a direct man, he never sends a message before he comes'. Or, you know: 'Death is as near to us as the door'. And then of course, you know, there's that beautiful tradition too that, when we were born, Pádraig - you know this - when we were born, a candle is ignited in the heavens. And that burns constantly for us until we're called back. And when we die, that candle is extinguished. And so we would never say in Ireland that somebody has just died, in the Gaeltacht, we'd never say somebody has just died, we'd say: 'Tá coineall múchta roimh bhreacadh an lae' which means: 'His or her candle is extinguished before the dawning of day'. And the dawning of day of course is resurrection. There's that lovely idea that we're just here- a dress rehearsal, for the next life.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Are a lot of the, kind of the religious elements of these very old songs- I know that you said that plenty of them go back to pre-Christian times and so they predate a certain kind of theology; they, they indicate a broad and particular spirituality that was in Ireland and other

parts of Europe and other parts of the world, too. Would you say- why would you say that our music often veers towards both the agricultural but also the spiritual?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

I suppose it brings in our closeness to nature, too, and to the music that's in nature, and to the, the natural connection that we have in Ireland to nature. You know, Ireland is a wonderful little country like that, that we've still maintained a huge belongingness to the soil. And so, the music even, you know, because even when you would think back to the lovely mythological stories we have, Pádraig, around Fionn Mac Cumhaill, that one time, he's asked: what music does he like most- he's asked by his warriors: what is the music that you like most? Is it the wind through the trees? Is it the birds in the air, the sound of the ocean, the clash of stones, what is it? And Fionn says: no, it's the music of what happens. The music of what happens. So that music and spirituality go beyond words, you know, they, it's- I mean, that's the pleasure of being with you today, you know, we could spend the whole- the rest of my life talking about God and nature and Ireland, and all of that! It's such a privilege... But anyway, I won't get carried away on that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Oh, get carried away! You're grand! You, I've seen you perform a couple of times where you sing some parts in Irish, but you're also playing a shruti box, or some form of harmonium, incorporating that with music from India. Um, I know you've studied lots of sacred music from around the world. What is it that you find that's particular about the different traditions and do you think that there's anything that, that holds them together as well?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Pádraig, there's about 10 questions there, but I'll try to address them all one at a time! But certainly, yes, India has been a huge influence on my life because I think Indians and Irish are very, very similar. You know, when you go to India, Pádraig- I've been there several times now as a cultural exchange between the Irish government and the ICCR, the Indian Council of Cultural Relations. And the minute you go there, there's almost auras around people there, you know? And yes, of course, there's a huge lacuna there between the rich and the poor that is so staggering when you're there. But yet, in the poorest of the poor, you see the face of God. And so, you know, even with the spiritual songs of India, I'd sing a lot of the bhajans of Mirabai: she was the 16th century Rajasthani saint. And so when I went there for the first time in 1982,

erm I was- my mind was just blown away by the instruments there, which are reed instruments not unlike- are the same as our own uilleann pipes. But these shruti boxes, which you mentioned, which are just simple drones. And a drone is wonderful - I haven't got one here beside me, let me see - because the sound keeps going on. Erm, it is constant, there, you know; very often when I started singing in, in, in America, I'd go there, and people would say: erm, where's your harp? And I'd say: well, actually, I don't like the harp. Yeah, I don't, now, because the sound is- doesn't...it doesn't keep going. So if I play you- I'm over here now playing you a little harmonium here *[music]*. Do you know what I mean?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yes, I hear, it's like something's breathing underneath yer.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

And keeping you grounded too, whereas the harp it's gone. The sound is kind of too angelic, too ethereal. Erm, Seán Ó Riada used to always say: oh my goodness, you know, Bunratty singers wearing white nighties and playing the harp, you know!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast, and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is the singer and theologian Nóirín Ní Riain, and her latest book: Sacred Rituals: A Simple Book of Everyday Prayer was released from Hachette Ireland in October 2023. Nóirín, I'd like to talk to you about, erm, religion and theology. Erm it's clear that you've had a long-standing relationship with religion, but I know that that relationship has been one that's been marked by knowing what it's like to be on the outside and that there was enormous aspects of it that were closed off to yer. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that and then we'll move into talking about theology.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yes, it's true. Erm, being a woman in the Roman Catholic tradition is painful. And it strikes every woman at some stage. Erm, I suppose, in my youth, of course you take- I grew up in the 50s and 60s, of course, and then you take everything for granted, Pádraig, it's a different time to now when we question everything. So we accepted all of this, and I am so pleased that I can retrieve some of the treasures of that time. And some of the rituals, which is what this whole book is about, too, you know, so the, the cliché of the baby going out, thrown out with the

bathwater, erm, didn't really apply. But yes, of course, for any woman, it is terribly painful, and nonsensical, actually, Pádraig, it's really crazy- the poor church.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I was gonna say, you, you ordained yourself as a priest to animals when you were a child. How interesting that you went to animals for sacred ritual. Could you tell us a bit about that?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Well, being a troubled child, I didn't have anybody else, really, to convert.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

OK, so it wasn't, it wasn't for choice. It was just, they were your single audience!

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yep, and later on, sure I tried to convert everybody: my friends in UCC, the boys- my sons, everybody, now, you know, not conversion but you know, trying to share things with them, but the hens- oh the hens were my most receptive, I'd go out with the- with my little stool, my little Súcán stool, and I'd sit in the middle of them, and I'd teach them the 'Our Father'.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

To sing it, or to say it?!

Nóirín Ní Riain:

To say it. Yeah. And I thought that they were really answering me because they'd be talking away back to me, you know?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

How old were yer?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Seven. Not seven.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That's lovely!

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yeah, and you see, I used to be saying mass, too, at that stage, in my parents' bedroom, my- both my parents, my mother was a schoolteacher. And my father was a businessman. And so very often they'd be gone, you know my mother would be gone into town to meet her friends and my father was away all day. But I'd steal into their bedroom saying mass. And that was- I tell that in one of my old books, that I came out one afternoon, out onto the landing to put back my stole, which was one of my mother's scarfs, a green scarf. And my brother was there. And he said: what are you doing? I said: saying mass- Noel I'm going to become a priest, I said, when I grow up. And he said: Nóirín, don't be ridiculous, he says, you can't even be an altar girl! An altar boy. An altar boy. And so that was the first time Pádraig I'd realised that when I'd go to mass next Sunday, it would always be a man.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What a thing to notice at that age. What was it therefore that continued to draw you about theology and about that, even though formally an avenue to that professionally was closed to you in the tradition that you were from?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

I suppose that very strong connection to the Divine, through what I'd call I suppose now the Holy Spirit. That I feel you see, Christianity- all religions, of course, have their treasures and their dark sides, every single religion; there are 4200 religions in the world that fall into the eight branches. There are the main religions, and they all have dark, dark sides, but treasures, too. And so it was, I think, one of the great- when I think of Christianity, I think it's a very balanced religion, Pádraig. Because it's got the creator there, the creator, that created the world. Then it's got the human one, which is what Christ was, what a human one, who laughed and cried and, you know, prayed, like you and I. And then you've got the Holy Spirit, which is that energy that's going around the world...always there, you know, whereas in Buddhism, there is no deity. Hinduism: there's a plethora of- a load of them. But I think in Christianity has some marvellous balance about it. And I see the Holy Spirit as being the feminine principle: the Sophia.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. You were the first person to receive a PhD in theology from the University of Limerick. And you wrote your PhD about a theology of listening. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what it is for you that is involved in listening and, and listening as some kind of sacred practice in theology.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

And it's been neglected, actually Pádraig, you know, well neglected generally, not just in, in theology, but we're much more sophisticated when it comes to seeing, you know, I see what you mean, instead of I hear what you mean. And so I suppose that really then I was picking up on a lifelong experience, too, that goes back to early childhood, where the God presence was through my ear, was always talking to me, always listening, and in the silence there because I spent a lot of time on my own when I was young. So that course, because of course you can't talk about sound without talking about silence, too. And so my, I spent all my time trying to—and then of course music too was just, it's a form of listening too, isn't it, that you're both listening when you're singing, you're listening to your own voice: when we're speaking, we're listening to our own voice. Whereas when we need to see ourselves, we need a mirror. But, we, our voice never leaves us, you see, it's one of the beautiful biological facts about our hearing: it doesn't have to leave the body to be heard.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. There's the presence of absence in, I suppose in lots of forms, but like, when, when you've been singing there unaccompanied, Nóirín, you know, you have to stop every now and then to take a breath in, much as I do as I'm just talking to yer now. One of the lines from your PhD says: 'The failure to recognise the transmission of mystery in the space between the words has resulted in a fetishistic obsession with precision and perfection in the words themselves'. You seem to be pointing at something that is in between the words, something, whether in music or in language, something that is, um, undergirding it all.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

That's beautiful, Pádraig, I really like that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And what is it that you'd say it takes to, to, to attend to that, to listen to it?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

See I think there are three levels of listening. And now again, this is all, I'm just being a little magpie, a little plagiarist, now here, too: picking up on various mystical traditions, and on scientific ones too indeed, like that there's a first level of listening, which is listening to the sounds around us. I'm here now listening to a crow outside the window. Heating system here at home. Erm, so that's the first level: where sound is just sound per se. Then there's the second level, where a sound brings you a cognitive thought, brings you into recognition of a message. So for instance, the words we're speaking now: we're making sound intelligible, hopefully! Or, you know, a sound of a bus could remind you of an accident you had; the sound of the trees can remind you of the rustle of spirit, or, anything that brings you into- gives you a message, which I called kerygmatic Theosony. I developed a little name for the whole area of listening to the sound of God. And then of course, it's third level of listening, Pádraig, which is the level you've just described beautifully there, which is where a sound goes beyond the world, goes into the area of mysticism: a sound becomes existence. A sound just brings you into a brilliant image of yourself and of the Divine, carrying you beyond that sound; music, of course, is the language beyond all language, as Rilke would say, is probably one of the great great conduits of this kind of listening. But again, this is a listening that has to do with the spiritual, that has to do with the non-cosmic, which has to do with the non-profane- I love that word profane: pro (outside), fanum (outside of the temple). Anything secular is something that relates to the, to the secular, the nonreligious. So that's, there's the three levels of listening that I was trying to define in my stammerings.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You, you coined a phrase where you said, you know that some traditions speak about the third eye of perception, but you talk about the third ear.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Mm, yep, and of course, we talk about the chakra there, the third ear, too, the third eye. And of course, it's also the third ear: listening beyond the ear, listening- St. Benedict, who wrote a rule for his monks in the sixth century - much like the times that we have now: troubled times, sixth century Italy - and he says, the very first word in that rule for monks and indeed for us now centuries later, is: listen with the ear of the heart. So that's it Pádraig, which, poetry of course, is the great vehicle for listening with the ear of the heart. Because you poets, you see, you poets

are very special. In Irish, the word poet is ‘file’, which has got to do with the word féach ar, which means to see. And so you have an insight, you poets, have an insight into something that you can put words on. And then you bring us with you into that insight or into that aural perception of what you have perceived. That’s why I love poetry.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I sometimes feel like poetry is trying to see and feel at the same time, that somehow you're making noise with language, but somehow you're seeing something, and underneath that there's, there's like an onomatopoeia of experience and feeling that's occurring in it, um not to draw any conclusions or to put across a thesis but in a certain sense to share some visual experience that is occurring.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yep, and you see you’ve said it, Pádraig, there: onomatopoeic, and sound, because I really believe that prayers and poems should be spoken aloud. That they, you know, they only come alive through the sound, when you take that visual sign which is only a symbol, and you bring it into your body, you’d sound it out. You know, I always teach people to say a little prayer by Hafiz (who was 14th century lyric poetry, you know his poetry) and I get people to say very often: ‘I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being’. I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being’. That says it all in four little lines, you know. Or Emily Dickinson, you know, Emily is a great great, er, mystic friend of mine, her poetry I've been reading for years, you know, like ‘Hope’: “‘Hope” is the thing with feathers -/ That perches in the soul -/ And sings the tune without the words -/ And never stops - at all -’.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Um, I was at an event in Dublin last year and asked people to name a line of a poem that they loved and somebody mentioned that very one by Emily Dickinson, you know: “‘Hope” is the thing with feathers the perches in the soul...’ And then somebody replied very quickly, very wittily, a pure Dub and said: ‘I'm not sure about feathers, but it's certainly got claws’.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Ha, that’s lovely!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. When it comes, I mean, you mentioned Emily Dickinson there as a mystic friend, Hafiz, you know, you go in and out through so many of the religions that have been your study. And, mysticism is a term that's often used, and sometimes it seems to me that mysticism is described and kind of it invokes an idea of something vague and misty. Er, how would you describe mysticism, what would you say the mystical traditions are, not to try to make them all the same, because so many traditions do have mystical characters who tried to say something about the ungraspable, but, what would you say mysticism is?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Well, first of all, a friend of mine always says mysticism begins in the mist and ends with a schism. But no, if you take the actual word then Pádraig, the Greek word 'μυέω' [muéō], muéō means, you know, to see through something, you know, myopic of course too is, you know, the opposite of that. But in our tradition, certainly Einstein, of course, said that on his deathbed. Somebody asked him: have you any regret? And he said: yes, that I didn't read more of the mystics. I didn't read more of the mystics. Because they go beyond, you see, they go straight up; I always say that about religion, you know that- and God, you know, God must, you must go straight up, no mixers- the gin and no tonic. Because, you know, so many, when institutions come in, of course, they interfere with and they dilute our connection, our natural connection with the Divine.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is the singer and theologian Nóirín Ní Riain. Nóirín, I'd like to talk to you about ritual. I know you've been writing a lot about this and, more than writing about it, you've been performing and doing and sharing ritual for decades. Could you talk a little bit about the role of ritual in a life, and then talk about some of the specific rituals that you think can be very important to have in a person's life.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Lovely. Yes, I am a great fan of ritual, and the name even might put people off, but actually our whole life, Pádraig, is in a way, a ritual: getting up in the morning, or a cup of coffee or a shower. Erm, but we can make it, we can make ritual much more present in our lives, just as we often talk about wakefulness and mindfulness and all that; ritual-ness, we can also be more

conscious of it, because it enhances the imagination, I think, as I've been thinking about writing this book now, and just defining what is ritual. And I would put the three things together: ritual, prayer, and blessing. And when I talk about prayer, I'd also [be] talking about poetry. Because for me a poem is a prayer/ a prayer is a poem: I think you can use those interchangeably.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Over the last number of years, as there's been fewer and fewer people who have a, an interest in any formal affiliation to a religious tradition, I've seen so many people who nonetheless want everyday rituals, maybe for the birth of a child, or for a marriage, or for the ending of something, or for a funeral, or other kind of transitions of life, too, that they're looking for something, you know, that can actually be pretty secular, but nonetheless uses words of meaning and words of precision and maybe tenderness and clarity, to try to gather people together to bear witness to something that's happening.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

That's true. Very true.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Um, do you find yourself in those situations where it's people who are saying: look, I have no formal interest in religion, but nonetheless, I want something to mark this change in a life.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yep, 'meaningful', I think you put your finger on it there, people are looking for that now, because in the church, long ago - and again, we're not bashing again - everything was done for us. The ritual took place there on the altar, and out you go. Whereas with rituals now, and I can see that from my own ministry, it's so meaningful for a couple to come and create their own ritual around their marriage; to create their own ritual around their naming, around divorce, indeed and separation, because of course, the church never recognised separation and divorce. It was always something that, you know, eyes flickered at if you said you were divorced or separated. Whereas there's a ceremony for marriage, and a ceremony for all of those, but nothing for separation and divorce. That was a great motivation for me, to go down the path of proving that separation and divorce can be a blessing, and is a blessing in a lot of cases. In my case, I was, I had a beautiful relationship. And, but there came a time that we both knew we were holding each other back. And so we remained great friends, right up until his death in

2018. But without separation, I would not have done a doctorate, I would not have gone for ministry. We were holding each other back. And now you see Pádraig, we're living so much longer now. You know? 50/60/70 years together, you know, and you're very lucky and fortunate if your relationship withstands that. Not to hold each other back.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You mentioned the word blessing earlier on. And you know, I hear a lot of people asking, you know, what's an Irish blessing or what's a different blessing? I know in Judaism there's a great tradition and almost a great particularity about blessing. I had a rabbi friend once who was staying with me, and we were taking a little tour of the whiskies of the islands of the west of Scotland- I had a selection out in front of him. And I almost like a dare said to him: here, what's the blessing for whisky, and he thought through to kind of go: would you bless the grain or the water first or, you know, and he said this gorgeous blessing in Hebrew. And then we proceeded to drink whisky from the various islands! But, I wonder if you could talk about, erm, again, what you see the role of blessing is, and I suppose I'm really interested in this more from an agnostic point of view, that it's less about pointing towards a heaven or an afterlife. I'm curious about what the 'this life' is that it points towards, a blessing.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yes, you see, again, we've lost the art of blessing. You know, blessing - beannacht, as we'd say in Irish - is an integral part of living and being in communication with each other. Yeats has a beautiful poem, there. I'm just going to get it now, where he talks about blessing there. That one time, he was in a, in a coffee shop in London, and he had an epiphany, you know, one of these moments of great insight. It's called 'Vacillation'. Is it coming to, coming to mind here? No, it's not. But anyway, it's just a moment when W.B. Yeats is in a coffee shop, and he's sitting before his coffee, and he looks and he thinks- he's had this moment. And he says, in the last line: 'I was blessed and could bless'. And so, you know, it's, we have to retrieve that idea of blessing each other. And we have that of course, in the Irish tradition, and we say: Go mbeannaí Dia duit- may God bless you, you know? And Namaste, as they'd say, in, in India, and just being able to bless ourselves first of all, because, like the golden rule would say we must start with ourselves, that self love of blessing ourselves, and then we can bless other people. So it's a beautiful concept actually, the idea of blessing, that we have to retrieve.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Um, what is it about the Irish language for you, Nóirín, that holds something important, 'cause you go in and out of Irish so fluently and so easily in everyday conversation. I think this might be the longest that you and I have spoken in English anytime we've ever spoken! But, I'm struck by your love for Gaeilge and your, your need really, it seems to me, to bring it to life in conversation.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Absolutely, Pádraig, you know, it is such a sacred language too, you know, I've a friend- I always say, a friend, and he says that you couldn't speak Irish and be an atheist.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm sure plenty of people would disagree, but...!

Nóirín Ní Riain:

But you know, kind of what he means, really is that Dia Duit comes into everything.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

God be with yer, yeah.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

'Dia idir sinn agus an olc' - 'God between us and all harm'. All of that is you know, and then of course, seeing nature, seeing God in nature too, it comes across beautifully in the Irish language. You know, it's the most special language in the world... I mean...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Speaking in an unbiased fashion, of course!

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Exactly, we're a little biased yourself and myself, but there is certainly a magic to it that even you know, very often, I might be addressing some foreigners, and you'd start in Irish and you keep going maybe for five minutes. And they become mesmerised. You know, they don't get upset, or: 'Jesus has she any English?' you know, they just become, as I say, kind of hypnotised, because it is, it's the sound of the language that's so important. And that's where we go wrong

and still go wrong in Ireland today in education, in that we teach it by its sight instead of its sound. Yet there's so, it's such erm, you know, writing this book now, all my subtitles are in Irish, in the book, and I was only thinking there, it- they came back to me - Hachette Press who're a wonderful publishers -they came back to me and they said: index, have you an Irish word for index? And of course, I knew exactly what it was- *treo leabhar* which is 'the way of the book'. How much nicer, Pádraig, than 'index' for God's sake! You know.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That is lovely.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

And then of course the Irish, it's very clever then too you see, because, you know, we've a great sense of humour of course as you know, and you have yourself and, like, so we'll say, the word for God, Pádraig, 'dhia', and you have the word for the devil 'diabhal' - d-i-a-b-h-a-l. And the word or for the church is 'eaglais', the 'eaglais' is the church, or of course 'teach Dé' as we call it as well: 'the house of God', but also 'eagla' is the word for, em, 'fear'. And then of course fear, you see, when we look at the word fear in Irish we see 'fear' [*pronunciation different*] which means 'man' so we have fear coming out there, and people will pronounce that as as, will pronounce- erm, 'fear' as fear, too.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Um, my favourite in that category is 'fan' and 'fán' 'to stay' and 'to wander'. Those are- I find those very important- both of those are important to me. To stay and to wander.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

They're just fabulous, and so it's much easier to talk philosophically in Irish than it is in English.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

As we come to a close, Nóirín, are there any rituals or words from the book that you'd want to read, um, that you feel might be something that you'd like to bring to this conversation?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Let me see. So I just got for the very short little last word, the ‘focal scoir’ as I call it- ‘the last word’. ‘But today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well therefore to this day’. That’s an ancient Sanskrit proverb...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Beautiful...

Nóirín Ní Riain:

‘As we take our leave from each other's companies, there are two underlying mysteries of this book of prayer. One is that you're not alone in this. Others have gone before us. Our ancestors the mystics have already provided the signposts. Yet, it would be a great mistake to limit the world of prayer to the mystic, for prayer, ritual, and blessing belong to everyone. The motto is not that the pray-er is a special kind of person, but that every person is a special kind of prayer. Secondly, although you now know my way of being at home in ritual, you will have your own way of being in prayer - customs, practice, behaviours - that I never thought of at all. May you discover hundreds of ways to express this and add your own habits of existence and growth’.*

*From *Sacred Rituals: A Simple Book of Everyday Prayer* (Hachette Books Ireland, 2023).

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Nóirín Ní Riain I want to thank you very much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast. Thanks for your time and for your singing and for all the richness that you've shared. And Nóirín Ní Riain’s latest book is *Sacred Rituals: A Simple Book of Everyday Prayer*, and it was released from Hachette Books Ireland in October 2023.

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:

So Nóirín, what's something important that you've changed your mind about?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Certainly the Irish language. Because as a young child, I was- I hated it. And then coming on now, it's my passion.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Could you tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to yer, Nóirín?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

I suppose it feels important to me all the time, actually, Pádraig. I love being Irish, you know. And I love sharing the Celtic wisdom and the language with people, you know. We're a great little country.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And is there a time when you felt foreign?

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yes, probably the first time I went to live in the Gaeltacht with Mícheál, when I couldn't speak the language.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

An Irish-speaking area, yeah...

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Yes, an Irish-speaking area. And, I was, my heart was broken, that I felt a foreigner in my own country, that this language, which is the language of our country, it's the language of our constitution, I was foreign ter...you know?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Nóirín, would you be able to share with us a little bit about the background of the Beatitudes song that you often recite, by yourself or with others, I've been so moved by that; it's in English

which is unusual sometimes for hearing from you. But I'd love to hear some of the story of it and then some of the song.

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Well, Pádraig you picked up on one of my favourite scripture pieces, of course, because the Beatitudes of course comes from Matthew. Like if you're ever looking for a bedtime reading, Pádraig, I think Matthew, chapter 5-7, you won't get better.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Cause it puts you to sleep?!

Nóirín Ní Riain:

Exactly! No, but it's a whole lesson in life. It's Christ's first sermon- on the mount. And so he goes into everything, you know: 'Ask and you shall receive'; the golden rule- do unto others... Erm, how do you pray- you simply say: our creator, whatever, and he goes through that. And then he does say the Beatitudes then: blessed...and of course, nothing to do with God, really, it's all kind of a way of just the eight great blessings of Christianity. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the gentle... It's very very beautiful. So we've- I've recorded it several times and, er, so, you know, I'll sing it for you now, and I'll intersperse it with a little antiphon: something that comes in between every two beatitudes, or blessings- beatitude is the word, the Latin word, for blessing. And so I'll intersperse it, each time with: 'Amen, truly I say to you gather in my name, I am with you' [*sings*].