



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 12. Dr. Peter Coleman

reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Do you think you have a go-to response to conflict? Does it change in different settings or relationships?
2. Try the Conflict Intelligence Assessment (at: makingconflictwork.com). How easy did you find it to select the options? Did you tend to lean towards a particular style each time, or choose a variety of them? Did anything surprise you about your results?
3. Are there issues in your personal life, in your community, or in public/ political discourse which you think are in danger of leading to intractable conflict? Are there issues which you think need to be complexified?
4. Have you ever found yourself in or observing a conflict which felt like it ‘got stuck’? What were some of the dynamics at play?
5. Peter talks about his memories of growing up during a time of political and social turbulence in Chicago. What were the societal changes that were taking place as you were growing up which had a particular impact on you or those close to you? What do you see now about their long-term impact on you?
6. Can you think of a time when you took part in a well-facilitated dialogue? What impact or outcomes did it have?
7. How much exposure do you have to individuals or ideas which challenge your firmly held views on contentious issues? How easy do you find it to engage with people on the other side of important moral or political debates?

Dr. Peter Coleman is a professor of psychology and education at Columbia University, and a renowned expert on constructive conflict resolution, intractable conflict, and sustaining peace. He directs the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution and is co-executive director of Columbia University’s Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity (AC4). Peter is also the co-creator of the Conflict Intelligence Assessment and the Polarization Detox Challenge. His most recent book, *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization* was released by Columbia University Press in 2021.

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

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

*Hallo, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Peter Coleman. Peter is professor of psychology and education at Columbia University in New York City in the United States, and he's an expert on constructive conflict resolution, and intractable conflict as well, and sustaining peace. He is widely published; his most recent book, **The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization** was released by Columbia University Press in 2021. And in collaboration with the nonprofit organisation **Starts With Us**, Peter has recently created the **Polarization Detox Challenge**, which aims to empower individuals to shape new habits and norms for political tolerance and courageous compassion. We'll be talking about that as we go on with the interview.* So Peter, you're very very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.

Peter Coleman:

Oh, thank you so much, it's great to be with you and- although, I have to say whenever I'm introduced as an expert, I think of my siblings' reaction, or my children's reaction. Those that, you know, live with me, snickering in the background, but er, yes, thank you!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

We're interviewing them later on! So we'll get there. You know, so much of your life has been around the psychology of conflict and the psychology of paying attention to how it is that in public life, whether between private individuals or people who are in kind of political life, or voting life, how it is that conflict can be addressed. And I'm curious, can you look at any friendships or connections or experiences as a child that you think prepared you for the work that you do now?

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, I think there are layers of that. You know, I was born in a somewhat tumultuous family, I had a, I had an older brother who was a seminarian who was always held up to me, he was a lovely person, he was very smart, he was very, kind of peaceful in my view of him, and so as a child- he was about, about 13 years older than I. And, so he was an important figure; our family had struggles, there was, you know, alcoholism, and we had to move a couple of times

because of violent threats against our family. And so, so, you know, we definitely grew up, I grew up in that kind of, you know, microcosm space of turmoil. And I grew up in Chicago in the 60s. We fled there, or left there in 1970. But the city of Chicago in the 1960s was the epicentre of a lot of political unrest, and Martin Luther King was there for a time, you know, waging a campaign of nonviolent resistance, and then there were protests and, and my siblings, who were - my older siblings: 10 and 13 years older than I - were plugged into that and involved in that, so I was raised in a space that some would call macro worry; I was aware, even as a child, of the circumstances and the instability of that, um, and er, but also the sort of, you know, the promise of reform and protest, and, so definitely, those experiences, both the kind of personal experiences of the challenges we faced, but also the political context that I happened to be situated in, I'm really, I think, you know, ultimately it informed me and affected my choices later on in terms of my profession.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

There was also desegregation that was happening while you were in school.

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, I was, that's right: I was at one of the first desegregated- I was, went to a Catholic school in Chicago, and it was one of the first desegregated schools in terms of busing in, you know, students of colour into our community, which, you know, to me was kind of fascinating and lovely; I was a big fan of, of *West Side Story*, and, and, you know, and so to have, you know, these new kids come on, who were, frankly, some of them so good at marbles! You know, literally!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Were you seven?!

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, well, I was, it's, it probably started in first grade, maybe, yeah just out of kindergarten, so yeah, I would be six or seven, when that first started. And, you know, again, I'd made friends and they were, I thought kind of interesting and compelling and maybe more interesting than my peers, you know, that were there. So, you know, so again, I wasn't particularly aware of the political ramifications of it. You know, I think the community I was in was pretty open to that: there weren't protests against this. But it was definitely a, you know, a big experience as a

young child in a school to have, you know, basically the complexion of your school change radically. But again, I think that they- this particular school happened to do it fairly well I think so, to me, it was a, a kind of blessing.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I know that in some of your years in New York, after you had been studying psychology or maybe while you were, you worked with, um, you worked in like a social work setting. Um, and then you went from that more into the science of things and the big picture dynamics of conflict. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the, the inroad that you had into the human condition and, and working in somewhat of a social work context, and then moving from that into the larger picture dynamic of examining the trends and looking at the science and seeing what works.

Peter Coleman:

Sure, I'm happy to do that. So I moved to New York from Iowa. I'd never lived in, I'd never been to New York, but I moved here right out of college; I had gone to the University of Iowa, and er, I came here to be an actor, and I studied at an acting school for a year, and then I got a job on television: I was doing acting for the first few years of my life here. At some point, I was, I went to Florida to teach acting. And while there, my roommate sort of encouraged me to start to work with- in a psychiatric hospital with adolescents; they were, you know, sort of 12 to 28 year old young people that either were dealing with drug problems, or psychiatric problems, and so I, I volunteered while I was there, I worked part time while I was down there, and then when I came back to New York I started to do that as well, and the hospital that I worked at in New York City was in Manhattan, and it was called the Regent Hospital and part of the population- again, I was working with adolescents, but it was a violent population. And increasingly so while I was there: there were more and more young people brought in basically to try to, you know, largely reduce their sentences; they had been, you know, accused of various crimes, you know, drug possession, drugs, selling of drugs, violent crimes, some even murder. And so there were- the community was inclined to violence. And so I think I, in that space, just, you know, tried to figure out through instinct how to relate to these kids, how to build relationships with them right away. And then I, because of that, you know, when a new young person would come on the unit, I would just sort of sit down and say, you know: Hey, I'm Peter; I wasn't that much older than them at this point, I was probably 20, late 20s. Um and some of them were almost that themselves. So I was a kind of peer in that way, and I would,

you know, talk to them and listen to them and try to hear them and, and in doing so create something of a connection. And so, in the times when violence would spike on the unit, somebody would, you know what they call act out, you know, break something, or attack somebody or, you know, and sometimes those would really escalate where people, some of these, usually young men would barricade themselves into a room and threaten worse violence and threaten the staff, and, you know, because it was a small hospital, they would call in police SWAT teams. And so, you know, my inclination was to kind of knock on the door and say: Dan, it's Peter, any chance you and I can talk because it's getting very tense out here, and the SWAT team is on their way, and if possible, it'd be great if you and I could just, you know, avoid that. And sometimes they would open the door, you know, kind of regretfully; they wanted to fight, they wanted to act out, but they would open the door, and, and again, I had no training and no idea what I was doing; I was in some ways, it was foolish, but I felt like I had a relationship with these, you know, young people; I knew what would happen if the police came in and what that would lead, you know, what the path that would lead them down. So I did everything I could to sort of just connect with them, beforehand, and then, you know, try to, you know, leverage our relationship really to bring things down. And so I was doing more and more of that. But as I said I had no idea what I was doing, frankly.

And so I started to read. I read some work by Carl Rogers, who had been at Teachers College at Columbia. And so I sort of followed up there and then in my explorations at Columbia found a man named Morton Deutsch, who was an eminent theorist in conflict resolution and peace processes and justice and he had this, you know, extraordinary career. He had just retired but was still at Columbia, had just founded a centre up there. So, you know, so basically I met him, I started to learn about the work that he did and the centre did and I got, became very involved: I went there for a master's degree, I then stayed on for my PhD, and today direct that centre, so, it was a kind of circuitous path of randomness that took place. But, meeting Morton- I have to say, when I met Morton Deutsch, when I joined this programme my intention was to do consulting work or, you know, do work on the streets, work with violence, work with young people, understand it better, but find some strategies. But he was a big advocate of the power of ideas. He really believed that if you can identify some critical ideas, and then use science to refine the applicability of those ideas when they're useful, that you can change the world, and he had in fact really done that, he'd lived that, his work was so important. You know, everywhere from schools to, you know, organisations, you know, corporations and the United Nations, right, he'd had a big influence on international peace and peacemakers. So he had

really done that through his work as a scientist. And so I became really enamoured with that idea. And with the power of big ideas combined with science to have an impact.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I know that you've had a lab, a laboratory called the Difficult Conversations capture lab, and you've often- am I right, in that you bring people from multiple, multiple disciplines together: maths and astrophysics, together with people in conflict resolution? What's the aim in such a, what's the aim of such a laboratory, like what are you, what are you hoping to see happen, and then what are you learning from it, like what theories are you coming out with, and ideas, as you mentioned?

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, so the, the background is that, you know, with- by Mort and others I was trained as an experimental social psychologist, and what most, well many, scientists do is they sort of zoom in on a particular piece of a problem. So I was studying things like the toxic emotion of humiliation and the effect that has in perpetuating conflict, or identity formation, or, something called ripeness, which is what are the conditions under which people that are warring will actually come together and negotiate and take a different path. So I was studying all these pieces of these, you know, difficult problems. But the more and more I got interested in what we'd call intractable conflicts: long-term, protracted, seemingly impossible conflicts to solve like the Middle East, or, you know, at the time certainly Northern Ireland, I was awakened by the fact that the micro studies we were doing, as important as they are, and as much insight as they can offer, were insufficient to the problem, because these problems are so complex and multilayered and generational, and there's so many things that are interacting, that a typical scientific approach of taking a psychological approach and, on a variable or two was insufficient. So I started to really hunger to have a better understanding of what is going on, and how do these things, why do these things become so impossible to understand or to address? Um, and so I started to read systems thinking kind of work, and I read the work of John Paul Lederach, and others that were using systems metaphors. But I felt frustrated that they were mostly metaphors, they were saying: yes, these are complicated problems, a lot of things are happening. But it was kind of a dead end in terms of empirical science until I read some work by a man named Robin Vallacher and a colleague of his, Andre Novak, who was Polish social psychologist, and Robin is at Florida Atlantic University. And they were doing work that was really informed by sort of physics and hard sciences, and their approach to

thinking about, you know, problems, was to understand them as complex systems that settle into strong patterns that start to resist change. And they would take those ideas and develop, you know, kind of robust theory and then do empirical studies that would challenge that, and then they started to try to connect that to practice and what to do about changing these kinds of difficult problems- what we call wicked problems. And so I reached out to them and said: any chance you wanna work on world peace?! And they said, because, you know, they hadn't really ventured into this domain before. And they said: absolutely. And so we kind of got together.

And this is a long-winded response to how did we develop the difficult conversation lab, but, so we got some funding, we spent, we put together this kind of multidisciplinary team: there's an astrophysicist, Larry Liebovitch, and there were industrial psychologists and anthropologists, you know, Andrea Bartoli, who is a world class peacemaker, and anthropologist, and so we put together this great team of, you know, smart, well-intentioned people, and it was a multidisciplinary team, and the idea was, you know, you can't understand something like intractability over a hundred years through just psychological lens or political lens, or anthropological cultural lens; you have to really sort of have some sense of the gestalt, the whole, like, how does this whole thing settle into these patterns? And you need to eventually, once you have a theory, so we've developed some theoretical models based on what we call attractors in physics, which are patterns that draw us in and sort of trap us. But we needed data. We needed to then move into the science and actually track the dynamics of conflict as they unfold over time, and as they settle into these patterns. So, we built what we call now the Difficult Conversations Lab. And that was done primarily with my colleague, at the time was a student, Katharina Kugler from Munich, brilliant student who came to do her PhD at the centre. And we said: OK, let's build a lab where we can actually capture the ongoing dynamics of two people in, trapped in a kind of moral conflict, and study the conditions under which those conversations go well or go poorly. And that began a, you know, decades-long paradigm of research. But basically it allowed us to collect the kind of data of real conflicts over time, that could, where we could start to test our assumptions and test our model, our theory and our hypotheses, because otherwise you just have a, you know, another sort of set of ideas that are kind of informed by another discipline, but you don't really have evidence of it. We needed both, and that's why we built the lab.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What's the response to people, you know, a) people who are in conflict in being, in being analysed for data that would be, you know, considered then to see if there's any findings, and b) conflict practitioners as in, you know, peace workers who might be- I'm curious as to whether, what the resistance from peace workers to a more empirical approach to studying peace might be? Or is there, or do people find it supportive, or... Yeah, what are the dynamics in those two relationships?

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, good question. So, so for the participants, again, you know, we are, we have a lab where we study- you know, and again, just to be clear, when you do research like this at a university, you have to be very careful to protect the subject. So the idea that you would actually bring in actually conflicting parties over an intense long-term conflict like Israelis and Palestinians into a lab, it's oftentimes a taboo now. We used to be able to get away with it, but now, it's, they really protect the subjects or they protect the participants. So we basically had to find a way to do it that was real enough, but not so heated and so contentious that the potential of violence or, you know, real, genuine harm was there, so we, our paradigm is that we measure people on divisive issues. We find people that have strong preferences that are opposing, and then we match them to come in; so these are not relationships like ongoing relationships, these are people that oftentimes don't know each other, but, you know, discover that they're different- they differ on, you know, pro-life or pro-choice or on Trump, or anti-Trump or something that they're passionate about, and then we study those conditions. So it's a real conflict morally between two people, but, you know, in some ways, it's, it's, it's not real life, it's not ongoing relationship. So, so, you know, again, it's, er-

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So relatively easy to walk away from afterwards, 'cause they're unlikely to see each other again, unless they come back to the lab... OK.

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, easier. Absolutely. And we have all kinds of safeguards in place: if things get really ugly, we shut the conversation down, we debrief, we have resources to, you know, help people if they really get triggered or get outraged. So, you know, you have to sort of be careful to do this kind of research, but it seemed to us so critically important to have some sense of real

conflict in these, in this lab, and not just, you know: OK, pretend you're a Palestinian and pretend you're an Israeli and, you know, which so much of research is- it's simulations or games or...and again, there's, there's value to that, but, but for these purposes, particularly studying intractability, we need it to be real enough for people that we would see these patterns. So, so that kind of, I think, answers to some degree, the relationship with the people, you know, and I have to say, you know, there's often a misunderstanding: I've had colleagues contact me and say, OK, we want to bring in, you know, a divided community into your lab and see you solve it. And I'll say: nope, we don't do that, you know! We are a research lab, yeah, we study the conditions where things go well or go poorly in order to generate insights that then can potentially be used by practitioners, but we're not a magic bullet place that you can bring anybody in and we'll solve it, so, there's always, often that miscommunication.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and with me today is Dr. Peter Coleman, professor of conflict and cooperation and peace studies at Columbia University, particularly looking into the conditions for deepening cooperation and engagement. Peter, what would you say are some of the reasons why, why peace dialogue - if you want to call it that, and maybe you'd want to amend that title I'm giving it - what do you say are some of the reasons why it might fail from the findings that you have over the years of research, and what are some of the conditions that you think: well these might help?

Peter Coleman:

Right, so, I guess we, you know, part of it is we have to just define terms. In my world, people talk about dialogue, but what they really mean is debate, that it's really about debating a political issue. And debate is a particular form of communication that certainly in the US we're highly socialised into. It is a game to win, right? When you debate with others, you listen carefully to the flaws in their argument so you can weaponise them and get points. And ultimately, it's about winning the debate. And dialogue, my experience, or in least the peacebuilding world is a fundamentally I would say different and even opposed process of communication, because in dialogue, if you're really sitting in a facilitated dialogue, where you're sharing your personal stories and experiences of an issue or a problem, and others are doing the same, and you're not interrogating or challenging each other, but you're listening, oftentimes, you discover new things, right? It is about learning and discovery; it's about, not only learning about 'them', and their history and their background, and the immense

complexity of the issues that we're talking about and the fact that we don't really understand these issues very well, but oftentimes, when you're in a dialogue, and you're sharing your stories, you start to connect the dots for yourself and learn things about yourself that you had forgotten or maybe didn't even realise. So it's a very different kind of process, this dialogue process, but, and most people that refer to it are actually referring to debate. And so part of what we've been trying to do is encourage a movement away from debate, at least initially, and moving into a dialogue process that allows a kind of human connection and a human understanding and a bit of rapport and perhaps even semblance of trust, which, which establishes the conditions where you might be able to move into, you know, a political debate or a political conversation with a little less vitriol and oversimplification.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Is there, is there resistance to that ever Peter in the sense of that people might think, oh, this is just the soft side, you know, you're just trying to do contact theory on us. I mean, I hear that you're saying that, you know that actually this gives the possibility for deep, deep disagreement perhaps, fruitful disagreement. But I'm curious as to whether some people would think that the early steps of that just feel a little bit like daisy chaining?

Peter Coleman:

Absolutely, absolutely. Again, there- usually in a time like this, just think about political polarisation in the US right now, which is so acute and so intense, or what's happening, you know, in terms of the political polarisation here around what's happening with Israel and Gaza right now, which is immediate and extreme. And so people have a lot of energy for the fight, and for being right and on the right side and making your points. And there's not much energy for listening and learning about the other and about the nuance of the situation, so you're absolutely right, there's, there's a lot of resistance to that. And I will say, I wanna be very clear about this: dialogue, to me, as a process, is a critical, early process to establish conditions for other good work to happen. But in order, for me, for that work to be sort of practically fruitful, oftentimes it requires time. It requires that people spend enough time together, that they can move through dialogue, start to explore some of their differences, and ideally move together into action. I think some of the best dialogue programmes that I'm aware of such as the group Hope in the Cities, which sprung up in Richmond, Virginia, which is, you know, the sort of birthplace of American slavery, they initially came up to address racial divisions and now they work on other divisions, but their model is that you start with dialogue, stories, sharing and

connecting with each other, to establish that as a foundation, you then move into a discussion of differences and issues that are concerned and have a more informed, you know, constructive conversation about that. And then ultimately, the community finds structures, institutions, you know, policies in their community, that they together have some capacity to mobilise and address. So they move from dialogue to debate to action. And to me, that is often a critical process if you're really going to see, you know, practical outcomes and effects of these dialogue groups. Let me just say, is it good to sit with somebody else who's different, fundamentally different from you and hear them and learn from them? Yes. And is that sufficient to changing our society? No. But it plants seeds of doubt, it breaks down our certainty of them and our certainty of our own groups and so that, that is an important piece of this, but for dialogues to have kind of longer-term sustainable effects, I think they need to move past dialogue into debate and action.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I am aware that much of what you propose when it comes to the imagination of thinking about polarisation these days, is you, you propose this idea of complexify to simplify, you know, often what we try to do is to think: OK, break it down for me, give me the nuts and bolts of side a and side b. And you seem to be critical of that and say: actually no, what we need is side a, b, c, d, and e, and see some of the really deep, painful complexities that require some study across five different points of view, rather than just 'the good side' and 'the bad side'. Could you say a bit about the importance of that view, and, again, I'm curious as to whether there's tolerance for that in an age where there can be an enormous amount of rhetoric to say: this is the side that is suffering the most; no, this is the side that is suffering the most; like, is there, is there tolerance for a point of view like what you're proposing through the research, which is to say: let's spend time doing the difficult conversation.

Peter Coleman:

Well, of course during acute times of misery, stress, tension, conflict, people lose tolerance for that; this is a well known psychological concept, when there are demands, stressors, threats on us as a human species, we oversimplify. We're to some degree hardwired to do that, you know, it is a sort of survival mechanism, you need to kind of quickly understand, under extreme conditions, who's on your side, who's not on your side, and move in that direction, right? So, so we are to some degree hardwired to simplify or even oversimplify under certain conditions. But what our research has told us - so this is probably the main finding from our Difficult

Conversations Lab, which we've been doing for 20 years - I would say one of the main findings is that, if we take a divisive issue, let's just say pro-life/pro-choice, which people can become extremely passively divisive on and even, you know, sort of violent. If you take an issue like that, you bring people into the lab, and you have a sense that these people are on different sides of that issue. And if you present them with what I would say are kind of pro/con talking points, right, the pro-life would sort of suggest this, the pro-choice would sort of suggest this, and you present them with this kind of dichotomous view, what people will do, is they pay a lot of attention to the side of the argument that resonates for them, that's comforting, it's something called confirmation bias, it just, you know, feels good, and it makes sense to you and you, you, it's hard to process the other side, and you kind of ignore it or skip over it or deny it. And so, if you present both sides of an issue to an individual before these conversations, they go in prepared for an argument and a debate, because now they've kind of rehearsed their talking points. So it leads to worse conversations, difficult conversations, people get stuck, enraged, and oftentimes the conversations have to end.

If we take that same information, those talking points, and we don't present them as one side and the other side. But we say: there are many dimensions to this issue of abortion and life and choice. There are legal dimensions, there are spiritual dimensions, there's sort of secrets and shame, there are, you know, family mores, cultural mores... If you take the same content, and say this is a complicated set of issues, and present the content to the dialogue that way, they go into these conversations in fundamental, with fundamentally different views and feelings and actions in terms of how these conversations go. So it's not denying the content or avoiding the content, but it's presenting it in a way that's frankly more accurate to the problem, which is that it's complicated, and there are difficult dimensions here, and so when people enter those conversations, they're less pitted against the other side and oversimplifying, they're moving into the ambiguity and the complexity of the problem. And that leads to very different kinds of conversations. But again, I want to stress your point, which is that under stressful conditions, we all- our capacity to do that is impaired. All of us. It's a very challenging thing to hold on to. But what the science tells us is that if we can do that, if we can do it proactively, if we can frame- and let me say, a shout out to: there's a group called the National Issues Forum in this country that does a great service, which is that they take a divisive issue - I imagine they're doing this right now around Gaza - they take a current divisive issue, and they research it and say: what are the most important points of view on this, and then they put together kind of community-based information packets, that's, you know, that say: this is a complex set of

issues. And then they, you know, share those, they're on their website, and then they convene community groups where, to have those discussions, not informed by two sides, but informed by multiple dimensions, and again, those lead to very different kinds of conversations, and reintroduce nuance into this oversimplification that we're so attracted to.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I would like to talk to you about your Conflict Intelligence Assessment, which you have up on a website. I took it the other day- I was curious to see what it was like and I'll tell you a little bit about that, like, I saw something back in myself that was, it was very very helpful; I've thought about it, probably every day since I took it. But like the, the assessment basically puts the person in 15 different scenarios, and says, and in each scenario gives you five options. Am I right, with five options? And, just asks: what would you do? Could you talk a little bit about these and you know, you can talk about what the, what the five options are, if you want to give the ending away!

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, happy to. So I have to say, Pádraig, I'm not surprised, but I'm very impressed that you've done your homework! And that you've, you've done it yourself to take it seriously personally. Very important. Yeah. So this, this is a somewhat different project, we basically studied and elicited five kind of different types of situations that people find themselves in when they're navigating power differences in conflict, and then five strategies that actually work most effectively in those situations. So the assessment you took, which we call the Conflict Intelligence Assessment, is a sort of exploration of, you know, of these five strategies, which is your, which ones are your go-to? Most of us, because of our upbringing, or our culture, gender, all of those things combined, we're attracted to certain strategies, and we would never consider other strategies, right? But, what we found in our research, is that people that have more options available to them, and are able, able to basically ask themselves three questions... We have an app for this, which I would, you know, encourage people to download; it's free, it's called the Making Conflict Work app. And basically, what it does is it says: if you're about to go into a different conversation, ask yourself these three questions. One is: is this conflict important? Is it worth engaging? Is this relationship important? Do you need to do this, or, no, you know, can you just choose not to? - A. B - what's the nature of your history of relationship with this person or these people? Is it generally cooperative and trustful and there's rapport? Is it the opposite, which is more undermining and contentious? Or is it some kind of mixed thing?

And C - who has more power here? And of course, that can mean authority, that can mean charisma, that can mean wealth or strength or you know... But who, essentially, in this particular conflict, has a leg up? Are you in high power, low power or kind of, you know, combined- peers? And those, the answers to those three questions then put you in one of these five situations. And what the app says is: OK, well, this is the situation you've found yourself in, this is the strategy we've found to be most fitting and effective in those situations. So it's, it's in that way is, again, this is 15 years of research, that we've oversimplified in, you know, three questions in an app. But it is the idea that if you can read these differences in situations, make an assessment of the kind of situation you're in and then respond in ways that tend to fit in that situation, that people thought, you know, what we found is people feel better with conflict, better with your peers, less emotional stress, less intention to quit their job. You know, it's it's, it's good. It's good to have options, is what we find! And that's what this assessment offers, and, you know, people have found particularly useful.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. When I took it, I was, you know, it kind of gave me some feedback based as to, you know, what I'd entered in and gave me some feedback. But one of the critical pieces of feedback it gave me was to say: it seems like you struggle to change tactic of response to conflict halfway through conflict. And I thought that was annoyingly accurate! So I might have sworn at the computer a little bit.

Peter Coleman:

How dare you?!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

... How dare it be?! I mean, in a certain sense, I found myself thinking: am I sometimes in the middle of some small or some large conflict, just basically doing the equivalent of saying the same thing louder and slower? Rather than thinking: oh, it's not working. I need to, I need to try something different.

Peter Coleman:

Yeah. Which, which most of us do...

Pádraig Ó Tuama

That's kind of you to say, Peter!

Peter Coleman

Yeah, well, it's true. I mean, again, what the data says- we've studied this in China, we've studied this in South Korea, we've studied it in the US over about 15 years now. And the patterns are that about two-thirds of the time most of us take, choose strategies that are adaptive, will, that work, that fit, but about a third of the time we don't, and that's can be that we're not comfortable with certain strategies, you know, there is one strategy of the five that we call appeasement, which is basically you're in a situation where you're in low power, you have a kind of competitive or difficult relationship with the person with more power, but you need to stick in it. You need the job, you need the relationship, you need to, you know, learn something, you can't leave it. And so you have to kind of suck it up for a period of time and tolerate it and maybe look for a way to exit or change the relationship, but, you know, it's a hard one. And what's interesting is, you know, of course, most Americans hate that option. Rarely choose it. But in other places, particularly in South Korea, it's a very common strategy. Right? It's recognised as culturally appropriate and useful and effective. So again it, this is just about, it is to some degree about you, but it is interesting what you're suggesting because what you're suggesting is that you may be in a situation, you may assess it, you may be responding in a way that you're comfortable with. But the situation might change. Person may change, you may say something that triggers them, and then you're kind of in a different space. And then the question is: can you sense that and can you make an adjustment, right? Can you make an adjustment in terms of- and that's this thing we call adaptivity, which is really just reading how the situation has changed and responding in kind. And that's, that's, you know, an advanced thing. Not all of us are great at it. But, but if, if you, if you expand your repertoire, about a third of your life will get better.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. *You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and with me today is Dr. Peter Coleman* talking about conflict and peace, and my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and I have to expand my options, apparently! Peter, I'd like to talk to you about the Polarization Detox Challenge. I think we've already been kind of talking around some of the dynamics of this, but I'd love to hear you talk a little bit more about that.

Peter Coleman:

Sure. Thank you. So yeah, the, the story behind this is, again, so I've been studying what we call, you know, seemingly intractable long-term entrenched conflicts for 25 years. And about five or six years ago, as, in this country, as the political rhetoric became more and more vitriolic, hostile, intolerant, and extreme, I became worried that we are on a trajectory towards intractability; I started to look at the data, and in fact, in this country, political polarisation, you know, Red and Blue America, has gotten more and more tense and escalating at an increasing rate since the late 1970s. And so you see evidence of this in Washington, in DC in terms of, you know, the lack of bipartisanship and more obstructionism. But you also see it in the attitudes and feelings of people who, you know, the public. And, you know, the Pew Research trust tracks this carefully. And so there are all kinds of consequences of this, one of which is at least half of America today is, feels estranged from someone in their family or close friend group, because of political differences. So it contributes to our sense of alienation from one another, and our loneliness, and other kinds of pathologies. But it also, just as we can see, it impairs our capacity as a society to solve problems. So it's, it's a, what I call first order problem: our political polarisation here today impairs our capacity to solve other problems that we agree on, you know, 90% of Americans think that there should be background checks before you sell a gun - 90%.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

90%? My God.

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, yeah, there's tremendous agreement on that specific policy, and yet, you can't move the needle on that, and part of that is, again, the sort of acute partisanship that happens, and the, you know, there's other problems as well, obviously, there's a lot of money behind that policy, or the lack of regulation, but nevertheless, it's a, polarisation is a first order problem, because it, it impairs our capacity to solve crises, other crises that are coming our way. And so, and, I will also say that political violence in this country is been on the rise and there are good historians like Jon Meacham and Doris Kearns Goodwin who have studied American history who really see strong parallels between today and the 1850s in the US where we had a horrible civil war. And political scientists like Barbara Walter, who is a CIA analyst and tracks instability around the world, and they've been applying their algorithm to the US and they really believe- you know she put a book out a year ago called *How Civil Wars Start*, and documents

that what is happening here is that we're on a trajectory towards civil war, and that civil war won't look like you know what it, like the 1850s with muskets and uniforms, but, it will be armed militant groups taking out power substations, destabilising communities to build, you know, outrage and chaos. Um, and we're seeing that. We're seeing strong evidence of that in communities. So, concern is acute; I pivoted to focus specifically on polarisation because of this, and, but I was concerned that a lot of good-intentioned organisations that do bridge building were basing their approach on a model you've referred to called contact theory or the contact hypothesis; this came out of the 1950s- somebody named Gordon Allport applied it to race relations in this country, and ethnic relations. And it is the idea that if you have large groups of people that have no contact with each other, bringing them together in conversation to humanise each other is good. And the vast majority of time, that's the case. And it's a, it's a very powerful thing. But, what Allport realised and subsequent research has told us is: under certain conditions. And I did feel like part of what was happening in well intentioned groups bringing Red and Blue Americans together is they didn't understand the conditions where it works and the conditions where it backfires, and if you look at Pew research, what they find is that the vast majority of Republicans and Democrats that sit down with the other side today leave feeling more alienated and more frustrated and more agitated. Because it's not just contact, it's contact where you have enough time with one another, which means it's not just to sit down for an hour, but it's some kind of ongoing communication that you have. It's contact where you share some kind of common goal. Oftentimes, these kinds of processes need good facilitation, because if you have someone that lives in the, you know, MSNBC, liberal media world, and or you have someone that lives in the Breitbart, you know, rightwing media world, they have completely different sources of information and fact patterns. So there's almost a psychosis in our community. And so you'll say something, and I'll think that's ridiculous, right? And they the same and so just encouraging people to get together and have a cup of coffee is unethical under these conditions.

So, long-winded response to say I wrote *The Way Out* because there is good science. We've studied societies that were deeply divided, either in a civil war or on the precipice, and stopped and pivoted and chose a different trajectory, and what I do in the book is just kind of pick five principles from that research that are practices that you can do in your own life, but that scale up to your relationships into your workplace and your community and even at the international level and policy level. But these five principles can help us find the way out; I mean the good news is, what we learn from the study of deeply divided societies is that most of them change

in times like these. Well, so, times like these mean, we're coming out of Covid, there's an extreme awareness of racial injustice, there's been a huge economic downturn for a lot of the population, there's a lot of pain and suffering and resentment, confusion: we're a destabilised society. And what we found from the study of other societies- this is a theory out of biology called punctuated equilibrium, which is that when things really get rocked, it can lead to people really reconsidering their life and their choices and their values and who they're talking to. It can lead to that, if, and this is the important if, they have some sense of the alternative. How do you change your patterns? What, what, what do I do to move in a different direction; and that's why I wrote *The Way Out*- it's actually a concept from ripeness theory, which says if you have enough miserable people in society that really wanna stop, you have to provide them with a sense of the way out, and what that is, and what that looks like practically, and so, so I wrote this book to do that; I lay out it, I provide some stories in the book about, you know, examples of it in personal life and in, you know, sort of the macro level policy level. But it's a book and nobody reads books anymore; I mean Pádraig, you read books, you know, there's probably a handful of folks listening... But about a year ago, it really struck me and my students and my daughter Hannah and I, that this is not something that's going to stick because it's not- it's too hard for people to read a book or hear ideas or hear a podcast and change their life. So, we created what we call a challenge, which is really just something that you could sign up for, in fact, the 2.0 version of this goes up today.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Oh, amazing!

Peter Coleman:

It goes up on a website that's been funded by a group called Starts With Us, which is a nonprofit that's trying to depolarise the world. And this version, if you go into it, sign up for it, it will send you a, you know, a text or email every day. It's a four-week challenge. It's something we strongly encourage you to do with others. With a friend, with a sibling with a, you know, someone that you work with, someone that you feel that you could comfortably do this with, because it's a four-week experience; every workday, so five days a week, we send you a text or an email or both, that says: OK, here's, here's a couple of options for today. And we basically have taken these five principles and translated them into, you know, a five-minute thing you could do right now. And so in some ways, these are, it's like, it's like, like a mindfulness exercise, or it's an exercise.

Pádraig Ó Tuama

Yeah, I was gonna say a muscle building exercise!

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, it's muscle building, it is but the first week is about you. And you reflecting on your tendencies, inclination, habits, you know- Pádraig it sounds like you've already started that work!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, just last week, yeah!

Peter Coleman:

The first week is, is about you. The second week then pivots importantly, to, not the other group, but your own group. 'Cause part of what we've found with these polarising tendencies is that our own groups have gotten tighter and tighter and unwilling to basically disagree within our groups. We don't, we're not honest about our own ambivalence about issues. And so the question for the second week is: how do you maybe carefully introduce more nuance and tolerance into the conversation on your own side. The third week is finding ways and places to reach out across the divide and, you know, to people that maybe you've become alienated from and, you know, do that more effectively. And then the fourth week is finding these groups and organisations that are across this country and across the world, like Corrymeela, that do good work at bringing people together across the divide, and engaging them in practical actions in their community to change the community, you know, to change incentives or policies or regulations in the community, that might help decrease the tendency towards polarisation. So it is this four week thing. Again, it's as little as five minutes a day. It's best if you do it with other people, because I've found- I've done it a couple of times now, and we've done it in groups, and at the end of each week, it's very important to be able to complain! Say: I did this stupid thing, and it really aggravated me, but you know what it was worth it. And those kinds of conversations are helpful to have, to reinforce learnings, to hear what other people have learned and other struggles that they've had. So this is just, again, the second version of this- it's been up for a year, this is a streamlined, cleaner version, the tech is better. So we point people to it, because, it's not a training, it's not a one-time encounter with another group, it's a set of things that take time, but that encourage and recognise the complexity of this problem

and the different layers to this problem. It's not just me, it's not just you and I and our relationship, but it's also our in group and how do we start to, you know, complexify our understanding of the outgroup and who they are and what they are, and, and then ultimately, ideally move into some kind of action.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, I was so struck by, you know, what you said in your early childhood that there was a time of chaos in personal family life as well as civic life, and time also of protest and action and movement for change. And it seems like those, the recognition of chaos and dedication to action, both of those things really do have, do seem to have informed your life. Peter Coleman, thank you very much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Peter Coleman:

Oh, such a pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

The Way Out by Peter Coleman was published by Columbia University Press in 2021. And The Way Out also has a dedicated website where you can find additional exercises and resources. There's a link to that in the show notes, and we'll include a link to the website of the Polarization Detox Challenge also, in our show notes.

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:

For our Very Short Story questions, Peter, what's something important that you've changed your mind about?

Peter Coleman:

The US military. I have to say I, about 15 years ago, started to teach West Point mid-career captains, and in doing so they were sort of recruiting us, and I, raised as a very progressive leftist, was very suspicious of West Point, and the military in general...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Military academy, yeah...

Peter Coleman:

Yeah, just believed that it was going to be a place of dogmatism and certainty. And I was shocked and surprised at what I found, which was thoughtful people struggling with important issues, and, so it really did affect my view of them: it significantly changed my mind.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Could you tell us about a time when you felt foreign, Peter?

Peter Coleman:

Um, yeah, I think, um. Well, I had a close friend for years who passed away a while ago named James Williams, who was [an] African American man, and he was older than me by about 10 or so years, and, he taught me a lot of training in conflict resolution; I travelled with him quite a bit. And, er, you know, so I became close friends with him and his children and his family and would be in these spaces in America that were all Black, except me. And that was also a very critical, important experience for me; in fact, I happened to be travelling with James the day that the OJ Simpson verdict broke. And we had a dinner that night that I'll never forget, because he schooled me on the different levels of that decision in terms of not just, you know, the guilt or innocence of this man, but of the justice system as a whole. So yes, so, I, I certainly felt foreign, but always welcomed in these communities that James invited me into.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And are there works of art that you've turned to again and again, you know, it might be a book or a poem or music or anything?

Peter Coleman:

Well, I think the poetry of someone you may know, named Pádraig Ó Tuama-

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

We're gonna edit this bit out!

Peter Coleman:

Well, I just have to say, you know, I, you know, I was being, joking to some degree, but, um, Pádraig, your capacity to translate poetry into- poetry has never been something I've had much of a portal into. I appreciate it to some degree, but your capacity to translate it for those of us that are not familiar and not embedded is really profound and moving, and so I, I started it as a joke, but I mean it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That's very kind, thanks, Peter. I thought you were gonna talk about the Beatles, in which case, we'd have been here for another hour, I know that about yer...

Peter Coleman:

Well, that's true...!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

...But I'm gonna- shut up, shut up!