



The Corrymeela Podcast - Season 3

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 3, Episode 6. Sef Townsend reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Can think of a time when a story helped you to think differently about something?
2. How much do you know about your own ancestry? Have you ever discovered something about your family history that's surprised you?
3. Sef talks about how he tries to engage with the local culture when he's traveling. How easy do you find it to be in a new country, culture, or community? Do you have particular ways in which you try to orient yourself in/ become familiar with a new place?
4. 'So much for this period is about crossing over, about even transgressive relationships, and about people being strictly in their identity, but always wanting to know, wanting to crossover and somehow connect with the other identity... And maybe that's what I am doing... I don't want to become something that I am not. But I'm fascinated by something that I might be or might have been' (page 7). What do you make of Sef's statement: 'I'm fascinated by something that I might be or might have been'? Can you relate to it?
5. Have you ever been part of a multi-faith/ multicultural community? What were some of the challenges of that? Were there particular things which made it fruitful?

Sef Townsend is a storyteller and musician. He's collected stories and songs from his travels all around the globe, and has worked with refugees, people in exile and those in asylum detention. Sef's work has included peace and reconciliation projects, and sharing his stories with audiences in schools, museums, churches, mosques and synagogues around the world. He has co-written two collections of short stories: *London Folk Tales for Children* (The History Press, 2019) and *London's River Tales for Children* (The History Press, 2022).

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 the storyteller Sef Townsend. Sef has lived and worked all over the world, collecting traditional stories from many different cultures and people that he's encountered, and he's used storytelling, as well as music, to support children learning English as a second language, and as a way of engaging with asylum seekers being held in immigration detention centres, as well as bringing together multicultural and multi faith groups in London where he lives now. He's co-written two collections of stories for children, the most recent, *London's River Tales for Children*, was published by The History Press in 2022. So Sef, you are very very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.

Sef Townsend:

Thank you very much.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Um, I'd like to start off by asking you whether there was any particular experience or friendship of your childhood that you feel prepared you for the work that you do now.

Sef Townsend:

Ooh, yes, my grandmother. My grandmother and my mother told stories. And I am a storyteller. So my grandmother was married to a man who was born in the wild west of Canada. And he emigrated to England. And my mother was always fascinated by his stories about growing up with indigenous people there, the Métis, who were the French-speaking, partially French-speaking indigenous people who moved from Quebec to the west. And my mother was fascinated by these stories from her father and she told me these stories; she'd never been to Canada, but she was intrigued by her exotic father. And I think those stories that my grandmother - who spoke in a different way, she had an accent, and she was very mysterious - both my grandmother's mystery about her origins and my mother's delight in storytelling connected me to this thing about searching for, well who are my people- we're so mixed, my family is from various backgrounds. And I thought: who are my people, what am I, where do I come from? And then these stories- and then out of that, I became a storyteller who shares,

as you say, traditional stories from all over the world. And I've been so lucky to travel to Mongolia, and to Tunisia, to South Africa, and to Ecuador. So I'm a very fortunate person to have been able to experience all of this, but what led me to go there in the first place, so I think all of that led me to be a storyteller who seeks out things that are not everyday, or experiences that come from places where I always thought: am I connected to these people?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Erm, where are some of the places where you can trace your family line, Sef?

Sef Townsend:

Well, I mean recently I've been doing the DNA and I was very surprised about this- that my mother shares- well, mitochondrial line, my mother's line starts out in what now you'd call, well, it's called South Central Asia. And when I look what's South Central Asia, it's Iran, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan. And of course, these people- erm the Jewish people from there are called the Bukharan Jews, whether from Iran or Uzbekistan, and then also my grandmother always talked about her gypsy origins. I mean she wasn't, she was Jewish. But, and I thought: well, what's all that about, so once more seeking, trying to find out. So, there's that. Uzbekistan, and Russia, and then, 52% of all the people who share my mother's mitochondrial DNA live in the far north of Scandinavia. And I thought: what, what's all that about- we have no idea that we have connections with the far north of Scandinavia, and I thought: well, what is that? It's Sámi, it's nomadic people, but being nomadic is very much part of the way I grew up and the way I've continued to live.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Where did you grow up, Sef?

Sef Townsend:

Well, initially in Yorkshire, and then because I was rather a sickly child, and I had a very bad eye condition, um, and so we moved down into, near to Nottingham in Nottinghamshire, because they had the best eye infirmary at the time in the country. And every day, once I started going to school, I had to take time out from school - an hour at the end of school every day, I had to leave early - and I went to the eye infirmary to have corrective eye exercises, so that was Nottinghamshire. And I've lived in the Netherlands, I've lived in New Zealand... Um, so, you know, I've been around a bit!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You have been around a bit! And, how do you go about gathering stories, Sef? I mean so much of what we're going to talk about today is about your storytelling work: um, I'm curious about how you gather a story.

Sef Townsend:

Well yes, so, they are traditional stories. I was in the Northwest of Argentina, in a place called the Quebrada de Humahuaca, which is an extraordinary place: beautiful, in the high Andes, a valley in the Andes, and um, there the indigenous people are of Quechua origin, and so I would go to the market - this is just one example - and I would try and make myself...well, I mean, I did stand out to a certain extent, but I tried to sit in the corner of a very indigenous eating place, you'd sit on benches made of boards, and it was out out of doors, and I just sitting in the corner just listening to the people who speaking in, half in Spanish and half in Quechua, and I just wanted to get a feeling of the culture, and eat their food, and some of it had bits of things that I found quite difficult to eat like the gristle and the things that we don't normally eat. But there was a dog around, so that helped me. Um, I would just like to get a feel to start off with, and then if I managed to talk to somebody in Spanish, I would usually end up telling them a story- the best way to gather a story is to tell a story. And then occasionally I get half a story, or maybe somebody else knew a similar story, and so I get two different versions, and then I might be able to research it and find it somewhere written down. But I've, I would feel that I'd have an authentic connection with this story- very important for me. Very often I find stories in books, but always from the places that I've visited. So I feel that I've got a handle on what, what these people are and what their culture is. But I think the main point is, as I said, to hear a story, it's very useful to tell a story.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, could you tell us a story? I'd love to hear a story that you've been working with recently.

Sef Townsend:

Ooh... Well I mean the thing is, when I'm working with stories they can be quite long. But I'll just tell you, I'll tell you around this story- at the moment, I'm working on stories from the Convivencia, or the Ata'ayush as it is in Arabic, or the Coexistence, as it is in English. And this was 800 years of comparative, harmonious, side by side living in medieval Spain, in what

was known as Al-Andalus in Arabic, or Sepharad, in the Sephardic Jewish language. And Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived side by side, collaborating, cooperating, and yet at the same time being quite distinctly Jewish, Muslim, or Christian- quite separate. But in that period there was such a flourishing of the arts, of science, of philosophy, of music, because people realised that this, this cross-fertilisation of ideas really created something special. And for example, some of the Arabic poetry that comes from that place connects to Jewish liturgy; some of the Jewish poetry connects to Arabic poetic styles. So you get a new third thing arising. So that was happening a lot. For the first hundred years- um, first 400 years, most of the area was controlled by Muslims, they were the dominant, and the second 400 years, the Christians seemed to take over, still with this crossover of, for example, the court of Alfonso X, the - Alfonso el Sabio 'the Wise One' - he was a Christian monarch who encouraged Muslims and Jews to spend time in his court, and from the influence of their musicality he created this thing called the Cantigas de Santa Maria, I don't know if you've heard of them, they're extraordinary, chronicles in a way, sung chronicles about life in, in medieval Spain. And he also fostered and encouraged the school of translation in Toledo where, very often Jewish, and sometimes Arabised Christians, and Muslims themselves, would translate lost texts from the Arabic. Many of the Indian, Indian sciences and philosophies, the Persian sciences and philosophies, things that were lost in Greece, things that were lost when the great library in Alexandria was burned- they had been translated into Arabic. And these people translated from the Arabic into, initially into Latin, and then into the Spanish which came, which became the standard Spanish. And it's Sephardi. And arguably, you could say that this 'Convivencia', this coming together, this coexistence, led directly to the Renaissance in Europe, 'cause so many new ideas were coming out of this place, and people would come from northern Europe and go to Al-Andalus, to Sepharad, to medieval Spain, to pick up on all this wonderful buzz of intellect and, and new information. So, that's not a story, but it's telling you about, so I'm sharing stories about the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians who lived at that time.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. I mean, it's a story about how stories came about. It's moving, and I mean, I'm struck as I listen to you Sef of the ways within which there's, you know, there's history here that you're talking about, there's intellect, and there is also something that I've noticed in, in your work, and I've been, I've known you for maybe 15/20 years, and I have been always struck by how you're interested in a theme of coexistence throughout your work.

Sef Townsend:

Oh, totally...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That seems to be a string, but not in a, not an easy, facile, silly way, but in a way where it's costly.

Sef Townsend:

It is costly, and it costs me, but before I go into that, which I'd like to, you asked me for a story- I could sing you a song!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Oh, perfect, let's hear a song!

Sef Townsend:

Now this, this song is typical of what was going on at that period in medieval Spain. And it's called Abenámar- it's a Jewish song. But it's a Jewish song about a Muslim monarch- er, about a Christian monarch who is singing to his Muslim slave. Now, that's interesting already: a Jewish song, about a Christian monarch, singing to his Muslim slave.

[sings]

...and the song goes on. And the song says Abenámar, you were born under such significant signs: the sea was calm, the moon was growing, and these, these meant that- a person born under these significant moments, these signs, would never tell a lie. And then he goes on to say: what do you see out there? And Abenámar, the slave, says: I see the glorious towers of the Alhambra Palace. And then curiously, the song seems to change that Abenámar, the male Muslim slave, is addressed as a female. So, so much for this period is about crossing over, about even transgressive relationships, and about people being strictly in their identity, but always wanting to know, wanting to crossover and somehow connect with the other identity. So, so many of these stories are about that very thing. And maybe that's what I am doing... Yes, it's, I don't want to become something that I am not. But I'm fascinated by something that I might be or might have been. I don't know if that makes sense to you.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Imaginative possibilities... I mean, you- I would love to hear more from you about the cost of coexistence, and the cost of imagination in the context of this, because in order to tell these stories, you imagine yourself in different circumstances where your loyalties might be different, or your point of view or perspective might be, and that can seem transgressive, I know.

Sef Townsend:

Yes, I mean at the moment, it's... There are so many horrible things going on in the Middle East. And, so, recently I was just at a synagogue in Milton Keynes telling these stories. These stories of Jews and Muslims and Christians coexisting, and actually, that was an extremely forward-looking, progressive, tolerant space. Apart from the Jewish congregation they'd brought people who were just interested in stories who weren't Jewish at all. And there were very, quite a few people from the Milton Keynes interfaith communities, and they all came together, and that was marvellous. But, it can be difficult because, this idea that because I'm Jewish, that I'm somehow- well, as Netanyahu has said: 'I'm the president of all Jews', it's the only country in the world that claims a whole population; the majority of Jews live outside Israel. But, um, they say that, I mean Israel claims that - oh, Netanyahu claims that - he's the president of all Jews. And so he claims me as one of his, and I'm not at all. I mean sometimes people see that and think that's what's going on. And there's so much misinformation about, um, so many things at the moment, I mean a lot of it coming out of a propagandistic nation at war- or, yeah, mounting war on another people. I mean you know, I'm getting to the point of being quite, er, you know, at that point of thinking: well, this is, this is what's going on. Israel has a complex, and violent, history, I have to say, I cannot hold back from saying that. Even Ben Gurion himself in the 1930s said: we are the aggressors, and the Palestinians are a people defending their homeland. He's recorded as saying that, although he publicly, he didn't say that sort of thing; he said it to his fellow Zionists. So what I'm trying to get at here is, um, there're a lot of people coming at you because of identity, and there's so much identity politics at the moment, and there is so much sense of people having single identities - and of course, I'm a multiple-identity person - uh, they see you as one thing, and I think this is the cost. But, by the same token, I was there last week at this synagogue, where I didn't feel any of that at all. I mean, very often I'm criticised more by Jews than I am by Muslims. But, um- and I work a lot with young Muslim men, with people who are not quite men, I mean, officially they're children; I don't know whether children is to the age of 16 in the UK, or to the age of 18....

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

They're youth, yeah...

Sef Townsend:

Yeah, I'm working with young, young unaccompanied asylum seekers. And they are from Afghanistan, from Iran, from Iraq, from Kurdistan, from Eritrea, from Sudan, from Mali, from Egypt, the majority of whom are Muslim. They all know that I'm Jewish. I've been to Morocco eight times over the last two years. For three festivals, the Rabat festival where I represented the UK, to the Marrakech festival. They know I'm Jewish, I tell Jewish stories; I just came back from Tunisia, everyone there knows I'm Jewish, no problem at all. I was in the United Arab Emirates, they know I'm Jewish. So for the last six months, and suddenly, during this period of this horror that's happening in Gaza, I've been out there being a Jewish person in Arabic countries, and not once have I received any negativity. But here in the UK, I have received negativity for my identity. Or rather, not from people who are attacking my identity, but from people who think I'm letting down one of my identities. So that's the cost. That's the cost where you're constantly aware that somebody could come at you at any time and accuse you of all sorts of things.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama; with me today is the storyteller Sef Townsend. Sef, you're talking about how it is that multiple identities can be held in a person, at any one time, and that storytelling in a way is a trying on of identities and engaging with identities sympathetically, and transgressively sometimes. And you, as you mentioned, have many identities- we all do. I've always been curious to hear you talk about - if you'd be willing - to talk about an experience that you had in 1992 in London while you were studying when there was an IRA bomb.

Sef Townsend:

Yes. Um, at the time I'd been to a dress rehearsal of the English National Opera- afternoon, lunchtime dress rehearsal and then I was going to have some sandwiches after it had ended. I was very interested in music at the time, and I was invited to these dress rehearsals. And it was a very nice October day; I thought well, will I go to the park there and eat my sandwich, or will I go to this pub, where they've got tables outside, right by the door. So I decided to have a

sandwich on one of their benches right outside the door on a corner, the door was on a corner. And I thought already: ah, they're gonna come and hustle me and say you've got to buy a drink if you want to have your sandwich, and I thought: well, I don't care, I'll deal with it when it happens, I'll have my sandwich and then I'll go and get a drink. Well, that in a way saved my life. Because I'd just finished my sandwich, I was about to go inside, and a tourist came by. Being a Londoner, we let tourists get on with what they're doing, and we get on with what we're doing, we tend to ignore tourists- horrible, grumpy Londoners as we are. But, for some reason - this man had a map - and for some reason I thought: ooh, this man doesn't know where he's going. I said: do you need any help, which is uncharacteristic of Londoners because- well, no actually we can be friendly. And I'm far more friendly these days than I ever was...

Um, and at that time, at that moment, there was an explosion: the door came off its hinges, there was glass flying everywhere. There was this huge din, and then suddenly everything seemed to be under water. And, um, the tourist disappeared. I learned later he had- nothing had happened to him, he just disappeared. Um, and for some strange reason I went into the pub, which is an odd thing to do after an explosion, because sometimes there's secondary explosions- didn't think about that. So it was absolute mayhem and horror. And, yeah, it was a very, very surreal experience, a huge thing where I, I could so easily have died. I ended up with huge damage to my ears, and so I don't hear in one ear, I wear a hearing aid for the other ear. But it was like, I'd escaped from this. It hadn't happened, I was so close. So I was thinking whilst this was a big thing, now what I see around the world, all over the world in Yemen, in Gaza, in the Ukraine, you name it, in Sudan... Um, people are experiencing this sort of thing every single day, multiple times. And for me, it was once. But it was a big thing in London. And I suppose from that, it did change me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm curious as to whether you'd ever been to Ireland before this bomb, Sef?

Sef Townsend:

Oh, yes. Um, now let me think. Yes, actually, that's a really interesting question. I had been to Ireland, I'd been to Ireland in the 70s with a friend from, from the Netherlands, so I was living in the Netherlands at the time. And er, so we toured around the south of- the Republic of Ireland, in a hired car. But actually, yes, I hadn't been again until this bomb. And, the first, the first reason for going to Ireland was meeting um, Wilhelm Verwoerd, and, um, Alistair Little.

And I happened to be in a church in the East End of London that had lost its roof in the same bombing campaign that I lost my hearing. And a long time had passed 'til I had come out publicly that I'd lost my hearing in this bomb, although there was a newspaper article which was all over the place at the, in the interest, at the initial time of the bomb blast, but I tended not to talk about it. But because someone was talking about this, this church lost its roof and we, we'd lost our insurance the week before, so we weren't insured- it became the St Ethelburga's Centre for peace and reconciliation, you probably know it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I do know it, yeah.

Sef Townsend:

At that point, I, I said: well and this is the same bombing campaign I lost my hearing, and then I talked about work that I was trying to- already trying to do. Er, and Alistair and Wilhelm came over to me, and invited me to Corrymeela. And so yes, indeed, I've been to Ireland, to Northern Ireland and the Republic so many times since. But that was my return to Ireland, to Northern Ireland initially, and then to the Republic of Ireland, many, many times since then.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

During which, one of those times I met you, yeah. I mean, there are many different ways a person could go after having been the victim through injury of a bomb, or even just the experience of it - nevermind acquiring injury like you have - being bereaved, being affected, the trauma and shock of it. And you've been influenced into storytelling, and storytelling with children and, I can imagine that sometimes somebody might think that, you know, gathering stories from around the world and employing those stories for the purpose of building imaginations of coexistence with children and young people could seem like a soft skill. And yet for you it's been very hard won, and you are determined and committed, for your entire life, to do this, since this terrible bombing. I wonder if you could just, erm, I suppose I want to hear you - maybe some of this is repetition - but I'd like to hear you say it again, and ter, maybe go a little bit deeper about your commitment to storytelling in a world and in a life that has known violence.

Sef Townsend:

Well, the thing is that I realised through stories- and it's not just children I work with, or young people, I work with, I'm, right up to retirement age and beyond to work with old people. And I have to say, the adults are more difficult to work with than children; the children are totally open. The thing is that you can actually reach somebody far more deeply than going into a political explanation of something. I mean there's a story I tell that really, it stops people in their tracks, and it's one of my go-to stories about conflict, which very often people don't understand until- and when I tell this story, things start to change, we work around the story and see what could come out of it and how we feel about it. I'm going to cut it down very, very short. There's a village in the- high up in the mountains, there are two sides to the village and the people cooperate because on one side, they've got water, on the other side, they've got sun, because the water side's in the shade of the mountains. And they cooperate by sharing the water and sharing the things, they sit at the road at the end of the day facing each other. It's just a path- nobody knows where it comes from, nobody knows where it goes to, because their life is content: they've never argued, they've been cooperating like this for years, they've never argued, 'til a stranger comes past.

And on the day that the stranger comes past, they'd been so busy with- on one side the water has burst and that they've been trying to fix a leak, and the water is going all over the place and they were busy, busy busy; on the other side, where they're growing fruit, and trees, one of the men falls from the trees and breaks their leg and a terrible bone is coming through- oh, terrible terrible! So they're both, at that time, distracted when suddenly on this path - which nobody knows where it comes from, nobody knows where it goes to - a stranger walks along. Very, very determined, straight along, straight past both sides. Now both sides are too busy to take in what they're seeing. But on one side, they look very quickly, and then they go back to their work; on the other side, they look very quickly and go back to work because they're so busy, and they don't realise 'til the end of the day that they saw this stranger. 'Oh, yes, well, oh yeah, there was a stranger wasn't there?' And it happens that this stranger has a coat of two colours. One side is red, one side is green. And they say: 'yeah we saw a stranger, he had a green coat'. 'Yeah, we saw the stranger too but it wasn't green, it was red' and then they start arguing. They've not argued before. Then they start fighting and then their fighting gets really bad, and a child falls over, hurts its head, and blood is there, and the father gets so angry the, this spade that he's been digging and bringing life to the village with becomes a weapon of war: he hits out and knocks this person over and the spanners and pipes that they've been using to build

water pumps and, and pipes to bring life to the village, they become weapons, and they fight and they fight until they're absolutely war weary and they can't go on. And they, they've, so many people have been killed, and they just sit at the path staring ahead as they're used to, at the end of the day, they'd always come to the path and stare, stare ahead, and look ahead and talk to their opposite side. But they weren't seeing because their eyes were glazed over, they were war weary, they were traumatised which I've seen so often, children who are traumatised with war, it seems that they're not focusing. And these people were facing each other, not seeing each other until the stranger comes back. But coming back, the red is on the side where the green was, and the green is on the side where the red was. And the question is - which I always pose - what happens next? Do they start fighting again? Do they disagree, do they realise, but they, they really didn't know that the stranger had a two-coloured coat. So where's all this coming from? It's coming from the thing about a story getting so deep into where conflict comes from: it comes from a different viewpoint, it comes from a- telling a different story, feeling you know a different story, feeling you know the truth 'cause you've seen it with your own eyes. But seeing something with your own eyes doesn't mean you've seen both sides of the story. I think that's essentially what I get from stories, that they can take you to a place you wouldn't otherwise go.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast, and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is the London-based storyteller Sef Townsend. Sef, in 2014 you helped to set up an initiative called COJAM, an acronym that stands for the Community of Jews and Muslims, and there's cross cultural events and social events and meetings and dialogues that happen as part of that: I remember spending a very moving day with COJAM once in London. And I know from the group that there are people who are very devout to their particular religious practice, there's people who have more of a cultural connection to their religious community, there's people who've converted from one religion to another. Could you tell us a little bit about COJAM and what it means, especially in rising antisemitism in Britain, in rising aggression globally towards Arab populations, could you tell us a little bit about the witness of COJAM, during this?

Sef Townsend:

Well my main part in COJAM was just to create events where people could come together and share food, come together and share a party, come together in a park, be together, come together. Initially, the reason we set it up was because of one of the first huge bombing

campaigns on Gaza, where, as is happening now, merciless bombardment of people in order to find this sort of elusive Hamas, which incidentally wouldn't exist without Netanyahu's acknowledged support of- that's just by the by. Um, so this awful campaign was going on, and, I had a friend Jumana who you've met, Jumana...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah.

Sef Townsend:

...a Muslim. And I and she, we said: we want to just be together, witness something, maybe we'll invite a few friends, just to live with what is going on. We can't do anything, say anything, but maybe we can just witness together and be together. And we invited some people, we hired - well we got for free - the hall which belonged to the Quakers. And, almost miraculously, 30 Muslims and 30 Jews - as if we'd planned it, it just happened! - we happened to come together. We said a prayer, we sang a song, we had a poem, we had food, we lit a candle or two. And all that we wanted to do was just enable people to be together in that space and say: this is happening somewhere in the world, and it's awful, and here we are, and we, as it were, represent, to a certain extent, the religion of these peoples. But of course, it was much bigger than that, the conflict is bigger than religion, but we happen to be Jews and Muslims. And it was so moving to everyone- we'd hardly done anything, but just the act of being together at this time and sharing with the other side was almost a magical event. And from there, my main thing was to just make sure that we have more of these in the summertime, there's a party, there's a, there's a picnic. And to me, that was enough, and actually more than enough, and some of the members wanted to talk about: this is how we are as Jews, this is how we are as Muslims, which is all very well and good. But for me, when that happens as a sort of side, er, it's a sort of, what just happens by chance, rather than being planned, it's almost more important. I'm not saying that we shouldn't share these, these almost instructive lectures 'this is how we are' so I wasn't quite into that, and over the years we've had occasionally these, these picnics, these gettings together, these, these, er, coming together; sometimes we've shared Eid, you know, the Muslim festival, Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim festival after Ramadan. And sometimes we've shared a Passover, a Seder, or something from the Jewish point of view, and that, without lecturing - just come along and be, and let's see what happens - to me is the most profound and significant part of what we have done, and people go home feeling that they've experienced something they didn't know about. And they can ask questions, but we leave it to them to ask

the questions. And I think that that has been what has been most successful in the Community of Jews and Muslims, in COJAM.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And, are there times when, are there times when gatherings like that, for whatever reason, shouldn't be happening, or do you think that when hostility rises, that that's especially the time when something should happen?

Sef Townsend:

I think it is the time when something should happen, and COJAM has a little bit lost its way, I have to acknowledge that at the moment, because even within our, even within our own group, where we want to stand together as friends, there are certain things that- unspoken things. As I say, Jumana's doing stuff and I'm doing stuff, and some people have sort of pulled back and, not doing so much. So, it's traumatising, this horrible conflict, and the sort of ramifications that come into our own politics. You know, our government's support of the Netanyahu regime, um, and the difficulty of the people in Gaza to get their narrative out, mean that people are very, very affected in a worse way than I've ever seen before. So it is very hard, and to come back to your initial question, I think it's very much at this time when it needs to be happening.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. It strikes me that, you know, a community like COJAM that's been going for about 10 years, that, it's inevitable of course that during a time of heightened hostility and polarisation that a community like that would struggle and need to take a break for a while because it simply might be too difficult. That, that adds to its integrity for me, rather than thinking: oh no, we go ahead and do it and it's all easy, that makes me trust the fact that, you know, that group isn't trying to say that they're going to propose a solution to what's going on, but they're trying to enact relationships that might be part of a solution at least, and that those relationships are under strain, of course.

Sef Townsend:

There's another group that I'm involved in, and in a way, it's not quite as- it involves Muslims, it involves Jews, it involves Christians, it involves- it's called East, it's the East storytelling project, and I cocreated it 10 years ago- we just had our tenth year anniversary. And it was a cultural event at Rich Mix, a cultural centre in the East End of London. And, er, we're working

with all the communities in East End of London, so it includes religious communities, there are Jews, there are Muslims; there are Bangladeshis, there are Koreans, there are Somali, there are Irish, there are all the communities, and the idea was to bring the stories and songs, specifically stories and songs, of all these communities, and initially, it was just to share and to hear different stories, and to have all this, all these different wonderful cultures, and then people wanted to perform, so we did occasional performances. And then out of it has come an online archive, it's called the East archive- East Storytelling Archive, and we just had our tenth anniversary. And it was wonderful because there, at the time of all this horror that's going on in Gaza, that we had all these people just sharing stories and singing songs, and doing nothing more. And that in a way was absolutely right, because the stories that people tell and the songs that people sing are the breath of the culture. I love the idea that a culture has a breath, and I get it from the Armenian word for the Bible, which is 'Աստուծոյ շնչ', 'The Breath of God', and I love that idea that the breath of the culture is spoken through its stories and through its songs. And in a way it's not accusing anybody of anything, it's just sharing. And so in a way, my difficulty with COJAM- and as you said, we do need to take a break from that very focused approach to things, to the East storytelling project, which is lighter in a way, but still doing that crossover, still crossing over and going and being with the other culture, it seems that that is the thing that has been the most successful in this awful last four months.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Sef Townsend, you've spent an entire life, really, being committed to stories before and after this bomb. Erm, and especially since, being committed to storytelling, bringing people together in the complexities of the stories as well as the artistry of the stories. Just as a last question to you, um, and I really want to enliven the question of art: what is it that you think art does beyond the question of repairing damage and division, but what is it that art enlivens in us through the stories that we have and the music and the dance- I've seen you online doing all three at the same time!

Sef Townsend:

Well, art speaks to the soul. It speaks to the deeper, the deeper part of our being. It's the unspoken joy. And it can be, it can be spoken through something quite tragic at the same time. But it's the need to express, and art enables you to say the unspeakable in a way, it enables you to voice things that you otherwise couldn't express. It's a translation of difficulty into something that's moulded and crafted, and, and cried over, and the delight and pleasure when you finally

feel you brought it to something: that's what art is, that's what art does; art is not easy, but, but working towards crafting something, and, you know- you're a poet, and the words, they just slip off your tongue, they don't just arrive, you have to work at them. But when, when you've created it, it's not only you who feels that you've expressed yourself, but you've enabled other people to feel they've expressed themselves. I think that art, even if you experience it, you feel you've expressed it. Working with refugees, very often telling a story, they say to me so often: this feels like the first time I've been heard. And I'm the artist who's doing the speaking, and they're the audiences doing the listening, but they feel they've been heard. And I think that's what art is.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Sef Townsend, thank you very much for your time coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Sef Townsend:

You're very welcome, it's a delight, thank you, Pádraig.

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 Sef, as part of our Very Short Story questions, I'd love to know: is there a book or a film that you have turned to again and again throughout your life?

Sef Townsend:

Well, not necessarily a book but there is- you asked also at one time about poetry I think, is that right- book, or film, or poem? And maybe Hillel, the Jewish philosopher/sage who lived in the first century, or the first century BCE. He was a sort of poet, but he was so wise and, I always go to him, and he said, among so many wise things: 'If I'm not for myself, then who is for me? And if I'm only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?' I constantly go back to that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

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

Sef Townsend:

Oh, so often! I don't think there's a single time. I feel very much part of, of the UK, of England, of being English, but at the same time, I'm not exactly the way that most people that I meet are, and often I feel foreign in the UK.