

## **From Pádraig's address at the October Community Weekend 2014**

Good evening friends,

As we begin, I wish to say thank you. Thank you for the honour of calling me to this post, thank you for the honour of being a member of this community.

I'm a Corkman who has survived life through a love of language and from one time to another time, a word comes to the fore. These days, I am thinking a lot about the word 'courage'. In British and American Sign Language, the sign for fear has both hands, stretched into the "five" position tapping against the chest. Interestingly the sign for courage begins in the same place - it starts with the sign for fear - but then it moves out into two clenched fists. So, the truth that these languages tell us is that courage and fear begin in the same place - the fear felt in the body. Courage is what happens when we respond to our fear.

I was at the Greenbelt festival this summer and met somebody who has, for now, embodied what I understand to be courage. I was running a session at the youth venue at Greenbelt and there was a young girl there, she was about fifteen, and her name was Bethany. I was curious why twelve young people had chosen to come to a prayer session on a sunny Saturday afternoon at a festival and asked them, as we were beginning, what they thought of Jesus of Nazareth. I was curious and said to them that I wasn't looking for one particular response, just for their own thoughts. Bethany was fifteen, and seemed nervous, and to speak seemed to be an effort - her own skin betrayed her by blushing, but she showed such determination.

"I'm not sure what I think of Jesus," she said, "Because I'm not sure I could respect someone who allowed themselves to be killed without putting up a fight."

Such as is the way of things, one of the others began an attempt to correct, or colonise or modify her words, to direct them into a way of thinking that felt more akin to what they thought. But we didn't let that happen, because Bethany's words were too strong, too powerful, too considered to need any colonisation. Here was a nervous fifteen year old who, in a room of strangers, told us that she had been considering much and she had an important question, an important insight, a point of engagement with the story of Jesus of Nazareth. I was so moved by the event of her words, by her consideration of respect and power, and by her determination to speak. In our worship, our life, our learning and our speaking, let us be as courageous as Bethany.

As we gather here together tonight, I remember a time when I was so overcome with fear that I was running from myself. I was in my mid twenties, and I was falling apart. I did the only thing I knew I could do - I went to a monastery, and I went to Taizé, that ecumenical place in the east of France. There, I tried to remove myself from God. One of the brothers there read the text - or, it more seemed like, told the story - of the time at the end of John's gospel where the disciples are gathered in a place of fear in the upper room and suddenly, without any word or announcement, Jesus of Nazareth was among them. He says to them "Peace be with you". We read this so often, the Taizé brother said, that we forget that this was the simplicity of a greeting. "Hello" Jesus might have been saying to the men who were hidden in fear in the

upper room. Or, if he were from Dublin, 'What's the story?' or, if he were from Derry, he might simply say 'Yes'. Here we see the image of Jesus of Nazareth undoing the gathering of these frightened men, speaking calmly to them to call them into a kind of bravery.

For our time together tonight, I am going to respond to the four aspects of leadership that were highlighted in the paper brought out from the Corrymeela Council earlier in 2014, the aspects that I was asked to respond to during the interview process.

The four aspects are 1/ Worship 2/ Community 3/ Learning and 4/ Witness.

### **Worship**

It's best, as with all things, to start with a story.

The Blessed Virgin Mary visited my mother once. My mum was bedded with grief following the death of her own mother. The afternoon that my mother met the mother of God the house was quiet. My mum woke from an afternoon sleep to the sound of a woman coming into the room. The woman was in her seventies, dressed in ordinary clothes, grey hair. My mother knew her to be Mary, the Mother of God. Mary came and sat on the bed.

It's a tremendously intimate thing to have someone sit on the corner of your bed when you are remembering death. My mother describes the weight of the woman as she sat on the bed where she lay. She said that she felt the depression of the mattress. Those were her exact words.

The woman looked at my mother. She said: "You never liked me much, did you?"

My mother said: "No."

The woman with hair the colour of iron said: "That's okay."

My mother heard a noise, and turned and saw that my little brother had entered the room. She turned back and the woman was gone. The Mother of God. The Star of the Sea. Mother of the Word Incarnate. It didn't cause an earthquake of recovery, there was more time needed and rest, because grief is a tiring thing.

Oh, what is true?

Is it a good question to ask whether something happened or not? Is information recovery enough to mine this story for meaning? Is it true that it happened? Or is it true that it helped? If it's true that it helped does it finally matter how it happened?

Worship is an encounter with something that might tell us something true about our selves, something that will draw us into truth, courage, recovery, change, life, celebration and gathering. As I've been thinking about it, it occurs to me that Corrymeela's worship often encompasses a number of elements - not by a strict formula, but in a number of flavours.

We always seek to tell everybody that they are welcome. Sometimes we may feel this more than others, but it's important to welcome everybody.

We seek to have a space of participation where people know that their voices are heard, and that they have a contribution to make to the space we are creating together.

We reflect on story - often a scriptural story, other times both a scriptural story and the story of our responses.

We acknowledge our own complicity in the violences that undo us and that both define and fail us in our own lives, our community and our society.

And we also look to hope. We look to that which, in light of our incapacities, also has the capacity to hold us together, to bring us to each other, to turn us toward God, toward life, toward change and courage.

I was in mass years ago and at the time that the priest consecrates the bread and wine, there was a small child - he couldn't have been more than three years old, who yelled out "Halloooo Jesus!" He was so filled with the possibility of everything that he'd been told that he seemed to be overwhelmed with the joy of welcome. His mother, who was holding him, had a look that seemed partly mortified but mostly delighted. He shouted again, "Halloooo Jesus", and I thought of the exuberance of his welcome. I can't remember a thing about that mass apart from that small boy and his giggling mother.

In my role with and for you, I will be requesting that we see everything as part of our worship. That in our welcomings, our participation, the texts we read, the violences we manifest and in the hope we gather around that we can do all of these as our act of worship.

## **Community**

The second part of the brief for Corrymeela Community Leadership speaks about our community life. Our life as people in our ordinary lives who commit to a way of life with each other. We seek to do this in our homes, in our lives, in our work on Corrymeela councils or committees, in our volunteering work here at the centre, in our friendships amongst each other, in the relationships between community members, staff members, volunteers, community associates or friends.

The psychoanalyst Lacan, when defining what a group is, said "A group is where people say all kinds of things to each other."

I find that to be both accurate and somewhat unsettling, because the participation in community requires that we do - sometimes with difficulty - say all kinds of things to each other.

Once, for a theology exam, I had to write an essay on what a hypothetical political discussion between the prophets who wrote Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the middle part of Isaiah would have been like. It was a spectacular question and it opened me to the truth that these men would probably have despised the others' perspective on what

faithfulness looks like. It was a welcome into the argument of being alive at the heart of worship. Another time, at the Greenbelt festival, a person came up to me and said “When I first saw you speaking, I thought you were beautiful. Then, I saw you more close up and realised that you’re not beautiful. But now that we’ve been speaking with each other for a while, I know that you are beautiful. On the inside.”

A group is where people say all kinds of things to each other.

We as the Corrymeela community have all kinds of opportunities to say all kinds of things to each other. We have community weekends, we have meetings to support the work of the community, we have volunteering opportunities, we have gatherings in our own homes where we discuss our lives, our faith, our failures and our work.

My request is that we continue to say all kinds of things to each other. I know that mostly, when we have something difficult to say, we find somebody easy to whom to say it. That’s understandable. But my request is that we act like Bethany. We take the moment of courage and we speak our words to each other, especially when that may take bravery. Some of us find it easier than others, and there have been things said and things unsaid. We must find ways to say what needs to be said, in a way that works, to each other.

Once, I co-facilitated a group of people who were up at the centre. They were women from Belfast. Catholic and Protestant women who knew each other well and who had been led by Susan McEwen into the kinds of relationship with each other where they said all kinds of things to each other. One of the Catholic women spoke of how the priest was always used as a mild threat in their family life. “If you don’t finish your homework, I’ll tell the priest on you” and other such hollow threats were used, sometimes successfully. A Protestant woman in the room said that firstly, had her mother used the threat of the local Methodist minister at her, she’d likely have laughed. But she said something much more interesting. She said also “If that’s what it’s like to be Catholic, I’m glad I’m not. I’d have hated that.” And the Catholic woman said “I know what you mean.”

What interested me was their demonstrated capacity to say all kinds of things to each other. They knew each other well enough to know that the story shared was only one small part of religious or community identity, but in the moment of the story, they lived out a courage that I wish was more widespread in our civic life - a capacity to say all kinds of things to each other and to stay in the room and to even have the possibility of understanding each other’s critiques of us, and to continue to share the room of dialogue, of community, or exchange and support. They had been facilitated well by Susan McEwen.

## **Learning**

It is a poverty of our civic life if the word “Learning” is seen as somehow antithetical to the word ‘imagination’. For so many people, the moments of their greatest learning occur when their imagination is captured by an idea, a possibility, a story, an instant where something new is contained. The role of Corrymeela Community Leader as outlined by the Council’s paper puts learning as one of the key roles of the leader, and as I work in this role, I am interested in how our imaginations can continue to be nurtured.

I have a lot of time for the 'skills learning' that comes from our lives together. We will make time for the learning of skills. However, skills for skills' sake may not serve us as well as skills learnt for the purpose of engaging with and seeking to embody the possibility that our imaginations offer us.

For me, I have lived many of the last years in the understanding that the deepest part of my imagination - the one that is nurtured by words, and tension and faith - could not be acknowledged in a formal faith setting because of the fact that I am gay. The only way to work within a formal faith setting had been to be relatively quiet about this truth, and when truths are denied, all kinds of deaths happen. I have lived by the power of the truths that my imagination knows well but that our society denies. I have loved being part of Corrymeela because I do not need to juxtapose the truth of faith with the truth of sexual orientation. It is a testament to the imagination of the community that this is not seen as a controversy, merely an expression of our diversity and difference. It moves me and other LGBT people - in our community and in our society - to see imagination enacted in your calling of me to this role.

(Here, let it be said, was a small moment of weeping. This is also part of the imagination and part of truth.)

Mary Oliver writes a poem where, sitting under a pine tree at dawn, she encounters two beautiful deer. They approach her - without fear but with curiosity - and then one of the deer nuzzles the hand of the poet. She says:

And what can my life  
bring to me that could exceed  
that brief moment?<sup>1</sup>

Her imagination was enveloped by something she didn't think would happen. Sometimes our imaginations are the guiding lights, and other times, our imaginations are wrapped in the possibility inherent in what is simply before us.

Once I was part of a group of theologians in a discussion. One of the group members said something about how gay people are a threat to society. In order to ground the conversation in human story, I said that it'd be helpful for them to know that I'm gay. He became very upset, and used strong language to imply that his beliefs were being quashed. It is a complicated thing to know how to learn in moments like this. How can we each learn about the other? We spoke over a cup of tea, him and I, and I asked him to find words to describe what he was feeling when our exchange had happened in the main session. He tried some words, but I couldn't understand. He tried some more and I still couldn't grasp why he had responded in such a way. Finally, he tried again "I felt like you were going to laugh at me" he said, "and I hate being laughed at." And then I understood. Who likes to be laughed at? What a feeling of humiliation. In the event, nobody was - or was going to - laugh at him, but that didn't matter because his imagination said it did, and so this dark side of learning was what was guiding him in our interaction.

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<sup>1</sup> The place I want to get back to. Mary Oliver, *Thirst*. Beacon Press, 2006.

Our exchange helped us learn about each other. Sometimes our imaginations are the guiding lights, and other times, our imaginations can be wrapped in our own fears and they need to be welcomed into the spacious possibility inherent in what is actually before us, not the fear that is within us.

When I was a teenager, I was given to praying zealous prayers “God, send me anywhere, tell me to do anything,” I used to say, and one time, I believe I had an experience of an answer from God. Unsurprisingly, an answer came as a question. The question came to me, clear as a bell, in my prayer “Will you work with the travellers?” I was shocked. In my imagination, I had seen myself as the one who’d give, not the one who was in need of fundamental repentance - I needed to learn truths about the diversity around me, I needed to learn about the hollow heart of fear, and I needed to be converted to something greater than the sum of the prejudice I’d inherited.

There will be times when we as a community need to learn things about each other - learning does not mean agreeing, not by a long way, we know this. But learning is also more than the low bar of ‘agreeing to disagree’. If we think that a room full of disagreeing people have nothing to learn from each others’ imaginations, then we have failed our commitment to the thing that gathers us as Corrymeela. James Alison, when addressing a room of people said “I know what I believe and you might be believe me wrong, but I also believe this - if we think that must leave this room, then we have failed.”

My request for us as a community is that we engage with our learning - and indeed, that we seek out possibilities for learning: from each other; from voices that we have not heard, or actively ignored.

### **Witness**

As I think of the final part of the paper that called a Community Leader, I think of David Stevens, of blessed memory, who, writing about the three symbols of Corrymeela - the candle, the open bible and the cross - said that the Cross is indeed a question mark, but that we need to earn the right to pose that question.

One of the things I love about the story of the good Samaritan is that the injunction seems less to “go and be kind to people you think are more unfortunate than you” but, rather, to consider that you yourself may be in need of help, and you may be the one who needs to reconsider the agents of help toward you. You may be in need of repenting - changing your mind - about who is “beneath” you. Your learning will come in this upsetting experience. But it is a good experience.

Corrymeela, as part of civic society, manifests everything in ourselves that we may see outside, and the substance of our engagement in the public space will be related to the substance of our engagement with each other - our own fractures, our own ignorances and suppositions. Our engagement with our own society will also be influenced by our gifts to each other, our life of community and our life of learning.

We are honoured to be part of a Community that has members, associates, volunteers, staff, visitors, participants, funders, critics, partners, prayers, questions, doubts and hope.

There are plans afoot for continued and new public engagements.

Continued Community gatherings at weekends.

A call for new members of our Community Life Committee.

Mark McCleary and I have long been interested in recording some of the many voices that honour Corrymeela by their membership and presence, and so we will begin a series of podcasts that tell some of those stories.

Building on the work done by Corrymeela's engagement in the Irish Peace Centres, we will continue our engagement with Theology students - in Ireland, UK and farther afield - to ask questions and nurture vibrant conversations about matters to do with theology and the common good.

At our gatherings and in our business as Corrymeela, I am interested in our ongoing reflection on how our business dealings are manifesting - in content and tone - the commitment to Corrymeela. I will ask, often, of myself and ourselves whether our interactions bear witness to our commitments.

For moments of public learning, we will begin a series of public lectures - four per year, probably in February, May, August and November.

A new series of public worship gatherings - once a month each in Belfast and Ballycastle - will begin after which we hope folks will invite each other out, or to their homes for shared food. We've booked the Chapel of Reconciliation in Belfast Cathedral for the Belfast events and will have them on Thursdays and Sundays to figure out which works best. We've booked four dates for 2015 so far: Jan 29, Feb 22, March 26 and April 26.

For 2015, we will take the theme of "Dialogue and Argument in the gospels" as a theme for the texts suggested for daily reading in our prayer books. We will engage with each other - via emails, conversations, perhaps in cell groups, and at community weekends - to hear how we are understanding and learning from these texts. We will compile some readings and reflections at the end of 2015 and offer these readings as resources of how we have learnt to engage with our own hostilities, fears, imaginations and arguments to the wider church.

So, my request is that our witness to our own world mirrors our worship.

May we be voices of and recipients of welcome. May we welcome people and be welcomed by them - especially when the giving and receiving of welcome is untested or undone.

May we create meaningful and powerful human exchanges in our participation with our world, its troubles and imaginations.

May we find ways to hear stories - stories that confirm what we hope and stories that undo us.

May we witness to our own complicity in the violences that undo our human community.

May we always find ways to bear witness to the hope that we hold onto. The hope that our life as a Christian community will be nurtured and enlivened by engaging with our selves, each other, our texts, our faith, and our neighbours who live differently to us. May our faith be the door of welcome through which we go to the wide world with courage, to engage with imagination and learning, to bear witness to the possibility of being human together, to nurture our lives, our friendships and, ultimately, our love.