

November 29, 2020, North Universalist Chapel, Gwen Groff
“Fall in love”

“...What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.
It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude...” (attributed to Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ)

A wise minister once told me that we fall in love with people who reveal to us what we want to become, the next thing we need to develop, the part of our selves we didn't know we had within us until we saw it projected outward onto some unsuspecting Other we find ourselves in love with. We may not need to be with them at all. We may just need to fall in love with them for a season, in order to learn to be more like them and become more fully ourselves.

So I will say, just by way of example, that I fell in love at the beginning of this pandemic with an Irish poet named Pádraig Ó Tuama. I suspect I'm not alone in this. I met him on line. And when I say “I met him” I should admit he didn't meet me. This is an unrequited love.

The timing was perfect in that the program *OnBeing* released their new podcast, *Poetry Unbound*, at the end of February, just before lockdown. Pádraig Ó Tuama hosts that new program. Each Monday and Friday Padraig reads a poem, and then he talks about it. He notices a few details, makes some connections between the poem of the story and his own personal story. He may say a bit about the poet who wrote it and maybe something about the form of the poem, but it's not really about analyzing poetry as literature. He uses the poem to make you come alive to your own life and to the world and to the music in spoken word. Then he closes by reading the poem again, and you hear it differently than you did the first time.

And his voice and his accent are so beautiful — as one listener commented, “It would be a fine thing to listen to him read the phone book aloud.” So I know I am not alone in falling in love with him.

At the beginning of the pandemic I needed regular rituals to keep me sane and grounded. I looked forward to *Poetry Unbound* every Monday and Friday, but then its first season ended. So then I read Padraig's memoir (you see we're on a first name basis now) and I read his collections of his own poems. I watched his Ted talk, I found his story on the Moth Radio Hour. I read and listened to everything I could find. Besides being an amazing poet and story teller, he's also a wise theologian and a trained conflict

mediator in Belfast. He was the director of Corrymeela, Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation community. He speaks eloquently on LGBTQ justice issues. He's a 45 year old gay Catholic who was subjected to three exorcisms and years of so-called reparative therapy to try to change his sexual orientation. He grew up during the Troubles in Ireland, in more ways than one. And he shares from his deeply examined life.

One day I learned that Pádraig Ó Tuama was coming to Eastern Mennonite College. I'd spent my first two years of college at that small Mennonite liberal arts school in Virginia, and even though it's not where I eventually graduated from, I still get some alumni communication from them, and I was delighted to learn that Pádraig Ó Tuama, without leaving Ireland, was doing a week of lectures and poetry readings and chapel reflections for Eastern Mennonite.

That was wonderful news, and *so necessary*, because Pádraig Ó Tuama carries, in his areas of expertise and in his very body, a whole bunch of things Mennonites need to learn. We Mennonites need to get a lot better at dealing directly with conflict, not just Pacifist passive aggressive conflict avoidance but brave conflict transformation. Pádraig knows about real peacemaking. And we Mennonites need to get so much better with LGBTQ inclusion. Our denomination is broken and still breaking and continuing to harm people, and we need to be humanized with a new story. Pádraig knows healing stories. *And* we Mennonites need to get better at poetry — language that creates us, nurtures and energizes us. We Mennonites need to embrace not only the sacred text of the Bible but to discover poetry as “sacred scripture.” And Pádraig knows about poetry.

One of its gifts of this horrible pandemic is that so many things that would have been accessible to only a few people in person have been made available to a lot more people online. So I registered and for a week I scheduled my life around Pádraig Ó Tuama's “Zooms” from Ireland.

When I confessed to a friend that I'm a little bit in love with a gay Catholic poet from Corrymeela whom I've never met, she wisely asked, “What is it about him you most love?” That's the *right* question. “What is it about him that you love” cuts through any illusion that it's about him and gets to what it is I've projected onto him. What is it I need to learn that I can only see when it's outside myself? What is it already seeded *in me*, that I had kept hidden from myself, that I'm now ready to discover and become.

I think I said first that I love the way he is so fully embodied. Not that I love his body but I love that he so freely at home in it. Every movement seems authentic. Every gesture and facial expression, every sudden laugh and silent pause, his posture, his pronunciation, his word choices, even his eye contact. (on Zoom!). It seems like he is completely at ease in his own skin. That's what I see and think, I want to be more like *that*. I want *my* inside and outside to be so completely congruent.

Here's one of his poems that I think speaks to that.

“How to be alone”

By Pádraig Ó Tuama

It all begins with knowing
nothing lasts forever.
So you might as well start packing now.
But, in the meantime,
practice being alive.

There will be a party
where you'll feel like
nobody's paying you attention.
And there will be a party
where attention's all you'll get.
What you need to do
is know how to talk to
yourself
between these parties.

And,
again,
there will be a day,
— a decade —
where you won't
fit in with your body
even though you're in
the only body you're in.

You need to control
your habit of forgetting
to breathe.

Remember when you were younger
and you practiced kissing on your arm?
You were on to something then.
Sometimes harm knows its own healing
comfort its own intelligence.
Kindness too.
It needs no reason.

There is a you
telling you a story of you.
Listen to her.

Where do you feel
anxiety in your body?
The chest? The fist? The dream before waking?

The head that feels like it's at the top of the swing
or the clutch of gut like falling
& falling & falling and falling
It knows something: you're dying.
Try to stay alive.

For now, touch yourself.
I'm serious.

Touch your
self.
Take your hand
and place your hand
some place
upon your body.

And listen
to the community of madness
that
you are.

You are
such an
interesting conversation.

You belong
here.

A lovely thing about that poem is that the title is printed as "How to belong" and "belong" is crossed out and corrected to "How to be alone."

"Also," I said to my friend, "I love that he is so generous." He shares his life. He freely offers many words. He grew up speaking both Irish and English, so, he says, he has the Irish notion of "Why use 5 words if you can say it in 50?" He tells stories. His stories are sometimes hilarious and sometimes achingly raw. His Moth Radio hHour story is as good as it gets. His generosity with his own story comes out most in unscripted interviews, the question and answer times, his responses to the chat box. He's not without boundaries of privacy and time limits, but it's as if he wants to make as many real connections as possible. If it's an online forum, whenever he receives a question from the moderator, he asks the name of the person who posted the question and thanks them for the question. If he reads the comments himself from the chat box he says the name of the person who offered the comment. *He* knows the power of a name, pronounced correctly.

In one interactive poetry lecture he asked "When do you feel most alive? Something simple, mundane that you experience in your body. Drop your answer into the chat box."

I thought what the heck, and I typed my answer into the chat. And then he started reading them. And I heard him read my answer. He said, “Waking up, remembering a dream,’ How magnificent. Jung is a great friend for that, Gwen, although maybe you have other friends that accompany you in the imagination of what a dream can be.” And then he moved onto the next answer in the chat box. And after I recovered my breath, I thought, I want to be more like that. I want to become more generous with my listening. More free in conversation. I want to not just be silent and ask questions and hold space but also to respond with kindness and spontaneity and enthusiasm.

Here’s poem by Pádraig Ó Tuama,
“Narrative theology #1”

And I said to him
Are there answers to all of this?
And he said
The answer is in a story
and the story is being told.
And I said
But there is so much pain
And she answered, plainly,
Pain will happen.
Then I said
Will I ever find meaning?
And they said
You will find meaning
Where you give meaning.
The answer is in the story
And the story isn’t finished.

Pádraig Ó Tuama is also incredibly generous with his gratitude. It seems he too is someone who falls in love with people in the hope of becoming more like them. I heard an interview with him this week in which the host asked him about Rumi. So Pádraig told a story about Rumi. Pádraig said that many people today try to strip Rumi of his Muslim identity, which is a great injustice to Muslims as a people, as well as to Rumi and his work. Translators today try to make him more universal by erasing his difference. But in the 13th century different faiths were in conversation. Rumi was asked by a Christian Church in Iran if he would give them an inscription for putting over the door of their church. And Rumi offered these words for the church entrance: “Where Jesus is, the great hearted gather. We are a door that’s never locked.” Pádraig said, How can we be more like that? When someone asks us for a kindness, how can we find a way to say something that elevates the kindness of the other without trying to dominate or subjugate or colonize? How can we ask someone who isn’t part of our practice, “somebody who admires but is not an adherent of it,” to offer us something that could help us be more of ourselves? We need the kind poetry that can help us see the parts of ourselves we can’t see. There’s such reciprocity in Rumi’s work, and I find that to be so moving.” That’s what Padraig said.

And I want to say to you, North Chapel congregation, that his observation about Rumi is what I have found to be true of you. I don't know all of you but those of you I do know do not practice the kind of universalism that tries to erase differences. You practice that "reciprocity" that says: Let's invite our differences to speak to one another. Let's invite those whose traditions we "admire but don't adhere to," into conversation with us to help us be more of ourselves. This is what you do with each other, among yourselves, and it's your outward facing stance, in the community. You say: Knowing we don't believe the same things, please help us see the parts of ourselves we can't see, and become the parts of ourselves we've not yet grown into. You respect the differences. You project kindness. You fall in love in order to learn, in order to grow.

I'd like to close with one more of Pádraig Ó Tuama's poems, called "The Facts of Life"

The Facts of Life

That you were born
and you will die.

That you will sometimes love enough
and sometimes not.

That you will lie
if only to yourself.

That you will get tired.

That you will learn most from the situations
you did not choose.

That there will be some things that move you
more than you can say.

That you will live
that you must be loved.

That you will avoid questions most urgently in need of
your attention.

That you began as the fusion of a sperm and an egg
of two people who once were strangers
and may well still be.

That life isn't fair.
That life is sometimes good
and sometimes better than good.

That life is often not so good.

That life is real
and if you can survive it, well,
survive it well
with love
and art
and meaning given
where meaning's scarce.

That you will learn to live with regret.
That you will learn to live with respect.

That the structures that constrict you
may not be permanently constraining.

That you will probably be okay.

That you must accept change
before you die
but you will die anyway.

So you might as well live
and you might as well love.
You might as well love.
You might as well love.

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