

Shelters and shadows in Belfast

Pádraig Ó Tuama shares his experience of living and working in Belfast, helping groups to speak to and about each other

There is an Irish saying that, rendered in English, is 'It is in the shelter of each other that the people live'. The saying in Irish is *Ar scáth a cheile a mhaireas na daoine*, with 'scáth' being the word translated as 'shelter'.

However, there is a subtlety of meaning that is not easy to capture in English because the word scáth can mean both shelter and shadow. It is in the shelter and the shadow of each other that the people live. It could also mean: our shelter can be our shadow; or even, what shelters me may shadow you. *Scáth* can also be used to mean 'visor'; something to shadow us in the radiance or ravages of another.

We can do beautiful things and terrible things to ourselves and to those we consider to be 'our others'. We know this everywhere; in Belfast, neighbours have known – and sometimes caused – their neighbours' terror and also their trouble; their sheltering and their shadowing; their radiances and their rages.

The word 'shadow' in Old English is *scedu*, meaning 'darkness' or 'protection', and the Old English for 'shelter' might also have meant 'shield'. One of the ancient Hebrew words for shelter is *se/* – it also means 'shadow' as well as 'transitoriness'. The Greek word for shadow, *skia*, implies 'foreshadowing' and its sister word, *skenoo*, can mean 'shelter' or 'tentdwelling'.

Words have meaning. Words have power. Words shape the tents we live in and the places we depart from. They contain and they constrain. But anyway, in the midst of all this multilingual sheltering and shadowing, God talk and babbling, I am remembering that all translations are but what I would consider 'little colorisations'. It's baffling that we manage to understand each other at all.

“It is in the shelter and the shadow of each other that the people live”

Cloudland,
acrylic on canvas,
by Jonny McEwen

The Irish word for border, *teorainn*, is also the same word for limitation. I moved to Belfast in 2003. At that point I had had a nomadic decade, having moved from Cork to Dublin and then Switzerland and Australia, with short and long jaunts in Lithuania, Uganda and the Philippines along the way. By the time I came to Belfast, I was tired of moving, and determined to settle; good thing too – I never experienced as much culture shock in my life. Some people spoke to me as a fellow Irishman; others insisted I was a foreigner.

I stumbled onto groupwork through the Corrymeela community. They were demonstrating their commitment to using the arts in public dialogue, and asked if I would be poet in residence for some new groups that were beginning. I was used to helping people discuss theological or cultural differences, and I was used to helping groups navigate complicated territory. I was a gay man working mostly in the field of religion. On some levels, I was prepared for what I encountered, and on other levels, nothing could have prepared me.

So, we have shelter and we have shadow; we have shade and darkness. We have colonisation, translation, languages, shields and transitoriness. We have visors to shade and we have places to escape from. We have trust and foreshadowing. We have neighbours knowing each other's troubles and we have neighbours who do not speak to neighbours because they share neither land nor story, languages or shelter. Here we have borders and also the limitations of language. We meet each other, and we fumble for words – words that contain and constrain – words we use to tell each other some truths. Welcome to Belfast.

Shadows and scribbles

I worked with Jonny McEwen, an artist and group facilitator, on a course that he had co-designed. The course brought people from neighbouring, but not-neighbourly, neighbourhoods to think about their geography. We typically had a group of 15 people meeting weekly for seven to 10 weeks initially. The project worked best when a group of Catholic people met for a course of their own, while concurrently, a group of Protestant people were also meeting. Following these single identity group experiences, everybody was invited to join a joint programme which would run, again, for seven to 10 weeks.



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People penciled street maps on beautiful, high quality paper; they coloured in the places where they would regularly go, and blanked out places they would not, or could not, go. They wrote the stories of their neighbourhoods on the maps they drew, and then made history markings on their own cartography. They thought about the stories that paved the streets of their own maps, and they told the stories to each other first; and then, eventually, to other groups – once they had met for long enough to feel safe.

Once, someone scribbled on a street corner of a map. She scribbled so hard that the pencil and the paper wore thin.

The rooms where we gathered were always warm, and we never sat in an open circle. We always sat around tables that were populated with safety – tea, coffee, milk, sugar, pots, biscuits and half-eaten sandwiches. Why this populated space? Because it's ordinary; because it echoes the tables we sit at in our own homes; because too much empty space has been our problem, not our solution. There have been too many lives lost and too many stories blanked.

The Irish word *Trioblóid* is rendered as 'Troubles' in English, but it really means 'bereavements'. During the years of the Troubles, there were too many deaths that were deemed 'so political' that their stories still cannot be told out loud. We have lived with the silence of grief, and the deadening silence of silenced grief. We have lived with the silence of governments, politicians, clergy, community leaders and community members. People have been killed, and sometimes, bodies have been hidden, and in my mind there is too much damned empty space. Now is not the time for emptiness in the centre of these communities; now is the time for discovering, recovering, talking and telling, around tables with cups of tea, food, humanity and a bit of shared normality in the wake of abnormal abominations.

It is a strange thing to run courses of such humanity and courage against a backdrop of a funding climate whose priorities sometimes indicate a lack of knowledge about the complicated dynamics of emerging peace. Facilitators of courses could be changed halfway through programmes, depending on the tendering process. The experience of a facilitator with a group was inadmissible as evidence of the suitability for getting a piece of the peace.

The funding source that paid our wages was complicated, political and generous. We had the chance to bring people together, but sometimes it seemed that it would be best if we could ask individuals to donate an amount of money, however small. We weren't allowed to charge a penny.

So, we tell stories of streets. We remember people long dead and we say their names out loud. We remember streets destroyed and streets rebuilt and renamed. We remember the shelter found in a corner sweet-shop whose owner valued safety. We remember the doctor's surgery that seemed miles from the madness on the street below. We remember the shelter of the woman whose door was always open and whose kettle was always on, and the long shadow of the threat given to a man's family. We gather together in little rooms and speak stories and truth. We voice accusation, grief and glory, we remember shelter and we make room for scribbles whose shadow we may not emerge from.

Belief

For three years I went to therapy. Here is a paragraph from the middle of that story. I was in the quiet, calm and professional room of 'truthtelling' and 'meaningmaking'. 'How was your week?' the therapist asked me, and I described it. It hadn't been a great week, but I was trying not to be melodramatic. I finished my fictions and the therapist said 'that sounds awful'. I remember little else from that session because I heard, in the words of another, an echo of the awfulness I was explaining away. Even worse, I realised that I had got used to it and didn't know how to imagine myself differently.

In the group-rooms of people telling stories of survival, truth and meaning in Belfast, we are aware that the right people are not on a list. Really, it's less about the right individuals and more about hearing the chord, or the dischord, being played by the tension of stories in the room. Sometimes, in a room, you can see it happen. Somebody begins to dare to believe that their story might be believed. In a place like Northern Ireland, everybody is aware that there are many who will disbelieve, deny or devalue a story. So, in rooms of groups telling stories, brave people risk telling the story that most needs to be believed to the ones who, it is to be expected, may find it the most difficult to believe.

There are many reasons to find a story difficult to believe. That shouldn't stop us trying. For some, it is life and death. 'Once a person left the room. She ran for the toilet, and I wondered if she'd come back. When she did, I wondered how best to shelter her in the room where she wouldn't welcome the exposure of a question. One of the other participants said 'I cry in the toilet too'. They shared an exchange of relief, belief and truth that was moving to witness. All that this peace-work can hope for is found in that brief moment. In those generous words, we see people noticing people. We see people moving from their story to validate the experience of another story. We see

how someone can use their own small tools of surviving a difficult day and help create a sense of shelter for someone whose day is crumbling. The tone with which these gestures happen is a humble tone – nobody thinks that one small kindness is going to change a life. But it might change a moment, and in that moment, something small can grow. Funding programmes, mediative skills, opportunities for cultural, political and religious interchange – they all only hope for such moments of when a group inclines itself kindly towards itself.

What does 'believe' mean? There's a lie in the middle of it, that's the first thing. My dictionary of etymology notes a Germanic rootword that contributed to 'believe', and which means 'to make palatable to oneself'. Curiously the next entry is 'belittle'. To be believed and to feel believed; these are deeper forms of the same thing. And when the story of your country is not believed, then things are exhausting. We share so little here – some see the Troubles as beginning in 1967, others go back to the 1600s. Some see us as an outcrop of Britain, others see us as colonised and occupied land. Some call it Northern Ireland and others call it the North of Ireland. These are not word games either. Depending what you think, death was called murder or legitimate aggression.

In the shelter and shadow of story

'We are more than our biography', John O'Donohue used to say². This phrase was one that he used frequently in interviews and public talks in the last year of his life. I don't know if he wrote it, but he said it a lot in the months before he died. However, while we are more than this story, it is a damned good place to start.

Sometimes, in the telling of stories, we injure and cure at the same time. Once, a group of people who were recovering from the injury of a traumatised village in the wake of a murder gathered and told their stories of their trauma. They got telling other stories too, and one night, we told stories of a time when we realised 'I will be able to measure my life before and after this moment'. People told stories of jobs, divorces, marriages, children, bodies, changes and death. Some of the stories told were told with aching and they were heard with an echo of that ache. At the end of the night, one of the participants looked around at the room. Up until that point, the group used to call itself 'the two groups' – the Catholic group and the Protestant group. "Well," the woman said looking round, 'we're one group now.'¹ And she was right.

Story is a word that some people use with fairy stories. My dictionary of etymology tells me that the history of the word holds meanings of 'wise-man' and the verb 'to see'. To tell a story well is to see wisely, I say to myself. I don't know if it needs to be true, but I believe it. If a story is a beginning, there might be a place it leads to, a deeper truth-telling about the essence of our selves, and the essence of ourselves-in-relation-to-the-other, particularly the feared other. Some stories start off in rooms and end up in Narnia, Never-Never-Land, Wonderland or other

little hells. But if we stick with the story, it will tell us something.

We can never tell the whole story – and we never try. I don't know if this story has an ending, only a next chapter, or perhaps, the careful telling and retelling of the recent chapters. We tell stories in groups so that people can be believed, so that people can make meaning, so that people can carve and create kindness for another and eventually themselves.

Linguists are divided on the answer to a question. The question is: do different languages carve out unique systems of thought, meaning and value because of the cadences, histories and concepts within that language? Some say yes. The ones who say 'yes' say that because Irish has a particular word, *ochón*, to croon in grief, leading to a particularity of grief expression in Irish culture. Others say that there is a deeper set of meanings indigenous to all humans, and all languages circle this deeper set of meanings. For the latter group, it doesn't matter that the Irish language has no word for 'no', we're still stubborn bastards.

Myself, I don't know how to know an answer. What I do know is that I believe the woman who said 'It's good to talk' and I believe the man who said 'I hate it when you say that' and I believe the group who said 'I'm glad the talking has begun'. These groups are often battered by murder and double battered by the disbelief of the story of the murder. They feel far from caring, and feel far from therapy, health and encounter. The ones who come to hold the story-spaces come with time and techniques, but these can only go so far. It is in the shelter of the storytelling that the people live, and that the people see their shadows. And sometimes the shadows are very long.

Once, in a group, somebody said 'Let's have something like communion'. So, we did. We read words that were nearby. We read words from the prophet Ezekiel and we read words from Ted Hughes. We had the Gideon Bible and we had Ted Hughes' *Crow*. We ripped bread, talked, and instead of wine, we drank whiskey. It was cheap whiskey. It burnt as it went down. We found shelter in sharp words and the shadows were made sharper by fire whiskey.

Biography

Pádraig Ó Tuama works as a poet, theologian and conflict mediator. He is based in Belfast. www.padraigotuama.com



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