

Conway, Michael A., 'Preface,' to *Foraging for the Spirit in the North Wall Community*, ed. Martin Byrne (Dublin: Scribbles from the Margins Press, 2016), 7-11.

A community is known and knows itself by means of a boundary. This boundary is at once a matter of place, personal choice, politics, and even spirit. It is about belonging: you simply know that you belong, and others know that you belong too. Yet, belonging has changed and is changing. In the not too distant past belonging was built on a foundational unity: there was a commonality of place, of social and economic circumstances, of struggles, of aspirations, and, of course, of religious faith. There was, if you like, a form of stability, which, although not always positive, automatically fostered community in that it reflected significant unity: everyone was together in the same boat! This foundational unity that was at the heart of community is, however, no longer to be had. Rather than beginning with such unity, we now begin with diversity. And this can be quite disconcerting, especially when older practices and understandings no longer function for us as they did in former times. Communal life no longer seeks out or rests on uniformity as it might have done, say, some fifty years ago, but calls now for a commitment to something new at the level of building community, of living together, and of inhabiting a common place and time.

This change in the background, so to speak, to community life is a new and even exciting challenge in the present. It is now a matter of working towards a new form of unity, that is built on the foundation of diversity and that does not strive for uniformity. This aspirant unity—a unity in diversity—is now something to be achieved, and it requires, among other energies, imagination, generosity,

dedication, and, dare I say it, hard work. This common-unity does not simply and indifferently respect diversity, but, rather, welcomes it as a richness that enhances the life of each and everyone. In a contemporary context diversity of vision, of lifestyle, of commitment, of mind-set, and of spiritual need has become the norm, and with this a greater need to be attentive to and ~~to~~ nurture in new and appropriate ways the very dynamic of building community. This is true for every community, and the North Wall is no exception. We are witnessing enormous change in how community is constructed and held together, in its leadership, in its organization, in its family life, and, of course, in its spiritual life. These are exciting times, and they call for a special creativity and awareness of new requirements, of other possibilities, of different ways of doing things, and of new responsibilities. We have left behind a configuration of communal life that was indebted to a unity and stability of structure and power that at one time appeared to be forever fixed, unchanging and unchangeable. It was a world view that was built on specific positions in the community, on patronage, and on polarities that functioned well for another time, but which no longer serve our understanding of what it is to be and to live together.

There is, clearly, a real challenge for us in this changing environment: to achieve what was achieved in the past, namely community, but along very different paths. At North Wall such new paths of social connection and of communal living are being actively pursued, oftentimes against darker dynamics that would threaten the very community that belongs in this place. This thought-provoking collection of stories and reflections only underlines the challenge and the serious concerns that are being confronted, sometimes on a daily basis: 'issues of drugs, regeneration, gentrification, early school leaving, globalization, crime, and the lack

of affordable houses for local people' are all examples that are listed in the insightful introduction (p. 20).

As we move away from older stabilities (including those of Church life) and seek new ways of establishing identity (both as individuals and as community), a significant feature that is emerging is the realization of the power of story. Identity and story mirror one another. You might even say that each one of us is a story. We come to know and understand ourselves in telling our story to others, especially to those whom we trust. We are increasingly aware that everyone has a specific story to tell: it is in telling my story that I come to know; who I am, why I am here, and what direction I need to follow. For each and every individual there is a unique story, replete with anecdotes of celebration and of joy, of pain and of sorrow. I am all of these at the same time: it is my story, my path, and my destiny. This is, now, perhaps, the most important way in which I become aware of and learn to recognize my own self and my be-longing. It is far more powerful than any teaching or theory that I might encounter about life. **In terms of our emotional, psychological, and spiritual health, it is vital that I tell my story to someone, ideally in community.[we tell our stories to each other, in community]** As one writer in this book reminds us, quoting the poet Maya Angelou: 'there is no greater agony than holding an untold story within you.'

If this is true for each person it is so too for each community. We recognize who we are as a community and where we belong in the stories that we tell ourselves about, and in, our community. We grow together in this telling and in this listening. The theologian Paul Tillich remarks that 'the first duty of love is to listen.' This insight is at the core of every relationship, of every family, and of every community. And in this telling and listening we formulate the story that will to

some degree become our future. This is an essential way of thinking about and understanding each person and each community in our current psychological, social, political, and spiritual climate. There are stories to be heard, to be narrated, to be imagined, to be formulated, to be lived, to be validated, to be written, and so on.

One way of understanding community is to see it as a story or, better, a collection, or even an 'anthology of stories.' The stories that are told in and about the community serve to fashion the emergent common-unity. They constitute its remembered past, they characterize its narrated present, and they prepare for its awaited future. These stories are of all kinds: personal, familial, communal, political, and religious. They structure, stabilize, and substantiate the world of the community. It is for this reason that communication is essential to building community. Antoinette Dunleavy puts it well when she observes: 'as a community it is through hearing and telling our stories with honesty and humility that we find a way to answer our deep questions and to overcome our pains.' Places of exchange within the community, whatever form that they might take—social clubs, centres, schools, places of prayer, etc.—are absolutely vital. The telling of and the listening to the simple and, indeed, more complex stories that found community are not a superfluous luxury in communal life. If a community does not imagine together the possible story (or stories) of its future, then there will be no future for that community. If there is no new story to be told, time will gradually erode whatever has been achieved. If there is no commitment to realizing the imagined stories of a community, the bonds that hold people together will weaken and dissipate to be replaced by anonymity and isolation. Such is the end of community: lives lived in parallel with no inter-connection, no neighbourliness, and no communication.

Communities can and do lose their identities and die out along such lines.

The community at North Wall, happily, is choosing another direction that appreciates the stories of the past, that nurtures the emerging stories of the present, and that is prepared to imagine and to fight for the stories of the future for this sometimes embattled community that is in-bound by railway line and river. I would like to think that this book reflects such a spirit and, indeed, contributes to the future of this community.

It is, of course, important that our stories are not just inward looking or, indeed, self-centred. Stories from without are important too, particularly the ones that have a direct bearing on the community here and now. In a world that is increasingly globalized, there are multiple stories to be considered that have a role to play even in our community life. Outside political and economic narratives, for example, have an enormous impact on a community such as the North Wall, and it is, therefore, vital that leaders and community representatives actively engage with these outside stories on behalf of the emergent needs of the community.

There is one particular story that has been and, I would hope, will continue to be life-giving for the community in North Wall: it is the Christian story. No matter what our circumstances might be, we are, I believe, ultimately saved by this story. There can be no doubt that much of community life—schools, credit unions, counselling services, women’s centre, youth clubs, meals for the elderly, etc.—is directly linked to the local Church and to the Christian ideals of responsibility for communal living. The Church of St. Laurence O’Toole has been a vital centre for this community: it has been a place of presence for families at all times and in all seasons, in their joy and in their celebration, in their grief and in their sorrow, in their longing and in their hope. I would wish that it would continue to be such a

place of presence for all peoples at the heart of the community. Notwithstanding the dynamics of changing relationships to and within the Church, I would hope that it will continue to be a place where the unique story will be told of God coming among us through his son, forgiving us whatever might be our trespasses, and, in so doing, welcoming us back into his unfathomable love.

It is a distinct honour and, indeed, pleasure to read this book that now marks twenty volumes of North Wall story -telling, -listening, and -realizing. Drawn from over a thousand voices, the words expressed here give a real sense of this community, of its energy, of its dynamism, and of its enduring commitment, at times against the odds, to a brighter future.

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