

## POETRY AND FAITH IN PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA'S *KITCHEN HYMNS*

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*Poet and peace-builder Pádraig Ó Tuama invites us into the everyday sacred. Through poetry as prayer, questions without answers, thresholds that teach stillness, and kitchen liturgy, we learn to listen, pay attention, and discover God in ordinary life.*

1. **God Between the Lines: Poetry, Prayer, and the Places We Begin**  
(September 14)

Poetry can hold our questions about God without rushing to answer them.

2. **Do You Believe in God? And Other Questions Worth Answering Slowly** (September 21)

In a world that demands quick answers, Ó Tuama invites us to sit with life's deepest questions—long enough to hear what they're really asking.

3. **In a Garden by a Gate: The Sacred Work of Standing Still**  
(September 28)

A journey into the spaces between—waiting, watching, and discovering God in small, overlooked places.

4. **Kitchen Hymns: The Liturgy of Kettles, Cups, and Quiet Blessings**  
(October 5)

In Ó Tuama's world, even making tea can be a prayer. Daily life becomes liturgy when we pay attention.

5. **The Prophetic Voice of Poetry** (October 12)

Discover how poetry unites spirituality and justice, calling us into deeper compassion.

## TALK 2

### DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD? AND OTHER QUESTIONS WORTH ANSWERING SLOWLY

Do You Believe in God?

I turn to you,  
not because I trust you,  
or believe in you,  
but because I need a direction for my need. You—  
the space between me and death; you—  
the hum at the heart of an atom; you—  
nothing; you—my favorite emptiness; you—  
what I turned away from and will turn to; you—  
my ache made manifest in address; you,  
silent you, what my friends saw as they died; you  
contain what's not containable; you—  
shape of my desire—

## ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

### 1. *I turn to you,*

- 1.1. The poem begins in direct address, an orientation toward a “you.”
- 1.2. We see in action what is described in the sentence: the poem is this act of turning to the ‘you’.
- 1.3. The tone of the poem is prayer-like.

### 2. *not because I trust you, / or believe in you,*

- 2.1. the denial does not aim only at ‘belief’ but also at ‘trust’
- 2.2. ‘belief’ can be seen as the propositional aspect of faith (the creed, the teaching of the church etc...)
- 2.3. ‘trust’ is the adhesion to God (the formal aspect of faith in classical theology)
- 2.4. In the poem we saw last week with the same title it looked as if the disavowal only concerned belief – now we are told that ‘trust’ too cannot be taken for granted.

### 3. *but because I need a direction for my need.*

- 3.1. Appearance of the first expression of longing in the poem – it is echoed by “ache” and “desire” later in the poem.
- 3.2. “need” is repeated twice, “the need needs”
- 3.3. The *need* needs direction, the *ache* needs manifestation, the *desire* needs shape.

### 4. *You—*

- 4.1. First of a series of several yous each followed by a dash.
- 4.2. Each attempt to ‘address’ God propels towards another you, and another, and another – instead of assuaging the need, ache, and desire, each address intensifies them.
- 4.3. It is like being constantly thrown off balance and looking for another place to land.
- 4.4. It is unsettling and yet means that one is in motion.
- 4.5. Is there a direction (“I need a direction for my need”)? If any can be detected it lies in the ‘address’ (“ache made manifest in address”), that is in addressing this you, over and over again.
- 4.6. Importance of the dash (at the end of line, within the line, and at the end of the poem):
  - i. It suspends the reader, making the silence as important as the words.
  - ii. It functions like an intake of breath, a pause of awe, or a hesitation before one is hoovered by the next address. It is like a domino effect.
  - iii. Each address, “You”, takes me elsewhere, suspends me in mid air – that suspension I just as important as the words, if not more .
  - iv. The closing dash leaves the poem deliberately unfinished: no full stop, no resolution, just an opening into the next “you-”.

### 5. *You— the space between me and death;*

- 5.1. First of a series of metaphors of void and absence: space, nothing, emptiness, silence, container.
- 5.2. First of a series of semicolons:

- i. they connects two closely related complete sentences without a conjunction (and, but, so).
  - ii. They are stronger than a comma, but softer than a period.
  - iii. They balance contrast or connection
  - iv. They can create pause without finality — a space of reflection.
- 5.3. They hold together images while signaling that they are distinct.
- 5.4. Unlike the dash, the semicolon gathers fragments without fully uniting them.
- 5.5. The rapid succession of semicolons and dashes is intriguing: the semicolon seems to introduce balance, while the dash throws a spanner in the works.
- 5.6. By ending with a dash instead of a semicolon, the poem refuses closure, leaves us off balance, in movement.
- 6. ***you—the hum at the heart of an atom;***
  - 6.1. One of the most suggestive metaphors in the poem.
  - 6.2. Atoms are mostly empty space: if an atom were the size of a football stadium, the nucleus would be a pea at the center, and electrons would be tiny specks orbiting at the edges. The rest is almost entirely empty.
  - 6.3. At the quantum level, particles are not hard objects but probability waves. They are fluctuations, excitations of fields, with no fixed location until measured.
  - 6.4. The solidity of matter is an illusion; what we touch as solid is mostly void.
  - 6.5. The emptiness of the atom is not nothingness, but a restless field of possibilities – it is not barren but generative (like *need, ache, desire?*).
  - 6.6. This image crystallizes the poem’s movement: God is hinted at in the deep structure of reality.
  - 6.7. The “hum” is subtle, continuous, nearly imperceptible — a sound that is more vibration than voice.
- 7. ***you—nothing; you—my favorite emptiness; you—***
  - 7.1. here the ‘you’ and the ‘dash’ are in the middle of a line
  - 7.2. the appearance of ‘favorite’ means that this is not any kind of emptiness, but one that can be embraced, bring comfort.
  - 7.3. it suggests a contrast with other forms of emptiness that are not favored.
- 8. ***you—what I turned away from and will turn to;***
  - 8.1. the pull to turn to God seems always more powerful than the inertia that pulls us away from him.
- 9. ***10. you—my ache made manifest in address;***
  - 9.1. Up to now the You was something external: space, hum, nothing, emptiness. Here it becomes “my ache”: at the deepest level of intimacy.
  - 9.2. An echo to Augustine’s declaration that God is “interior intimo meo et superior summo meo”, “More inward than my inmost self and higher than my highest self” (*Confessions* 3.6)
  - 9.3. The ache is manifested in address – God is talking to God through me.
- 10. ***you, silent you, what my friends saw as they died;***
  - 10.1. death appears for the second time in the poem: “You- the space between me and death;”

- 10.2. not “what my friends saw *after* they died”, but “as they died”: the liminal places, the thresholds are the place where God can be perceived
- 10.3. each or the dashes of the poems can be seen as one of these thresholds: each of them is a place of manifestation (“manifest in address”).
- 11. ***you contain what’s not containable;***
  - 11.1. Need, ache, desire cannot be contained
  - 11.2. The way God “contains” them is by being open ended, never ending (that is, by *not* containing).
- 12. ***you—shape of my desire—***
  - 12.1. Does this mean that God gives shape to desire, direction to it?
  - 12.2. But ache (desire) is God – which could mean that God is manifest in the very shape my ache, my desire takes from the outset,
  - 12.3. that is the fact of being endless, never satisfied, always in search for more?
  - 12.4. This is suggested by the poem ending not with a full stop but with a dash – open ended. Once the floodgates of need, ache, desire are open, the address (“You\_”) never ends.

## Quotations by the author

“In many ways, *Kitchen Hymns* is an exploration of the lyric address, the word you. How is it that the word you occurs? “Do you believe in God?” and then what’s evoked from that.”<sup>1</sup>

“Need is another way of saying prayer. Another way of saying desire. Prière, from French, means ask. In order to ask, there has to be some experience of need.”<sup>2</sup>

“Partly what I love about the shape of a poem on a page, and also the shape of a recited poem, is the enjambment, the line breaks, the empty space, the stanza break—but also the necessity for breath, which is a sonic demonstration of enjambment. That is a communication of all of the “nothing” that can’t be contained within the “something” that’s being recited in the poem. And that, too, is a physical thing that goes down to our atomic level. One of the speakers of my poems talks about the “hum at the heart of an atom.” An atom is so filled with nothing that it seems surprising that it makes something at all. All of those are physical manifestations for me, for all poetry. I think it’s impossible to separate poetry from the body.”<sup>3</sup>

“So this is an overlap between one of the functions of prayer and one of the functions of poetry: to imagine that there’s an experience of listening at the end of it. Even if this character is unsure, or reframing, or in doubt, or decided that there is no such thing listening, there is nonetheless the yearning to be listened to, and the need to create on the page that which you may not believe exists.”<sup>4</sup>

“Ó Tuama has become a shepherd in the shambolic tradition of contemporary spirituality, treating poetry as a form of agnostic prayer. “My

<sup>1</sup> Kate Millar’s interview of Pádraig Ó Tuama, <sup>a.</sup> [“Beyond the “Burden of Belief”: Pádraig Ó Tuama on Religious Trauma, Eros, and Poetry as Prayer”](#), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Millar 7

<sup>3</sup> Millar 16

<sup>4</sup> Millar 11

interest in prayer is where it comes from, not where it's going," he told me. "The heart, rather than God." Poetry, for him, is the language the heart speaks not when it reaches for some externalized divinity but when it seeks to understand itself."<sup>5</sup>

## THE UPPER ROOM - THURSDAYS BOOK READING

*Praying, breaking bread, reading, and reflecting — a space to grow in fellowship and faith.*

***Borders and Belonging.***  
***The Book of Ruth: A Story for Our Times***  
by Pádraig Ó Tuama and Glenn Jordan

In a world anxious about borders and strangers, Ó Tuama's poetic reading of the Book of Ruth invites us to move beyond suspicion and scapegoating to a society where belonging is reimagined.

**Thursdays 6:45-8:15 pm**

September 18

September 25

October 2

October 9

In person only.

Registration required

