



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

Transcript by Otter

Edited by SWF

SPEAKERS

Lia Shimada, Ruth Jampel and Alex Wimberly

Lia Shimada 0:05

We are here today to do a podcast recording about the Theos report 'Ashes to Ashes,' which was published by Theos in April 2023. I'm joined here today by Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel, and our third speaker was supposed to be Hassan Rabbani. But fittingly, he's been called away to attend a funeral matter in his own community. So we'll carry on today with a conversation between Ruth and Alex. Before we begin the conversation itself, I'd love to ask you to each introduce yourself and provide a really brief description of the community that you're part of. Ruth, can we begin with you?

Ruth Jampel 0:42

Yes, thank you. My name is Ruth Jampel. I'm a member of Muswell Hill United Synagogue, which is part of the United Synagogue, which is a kind of mainstream synagogue in this country. I am the women's officer and a member of the executive. And apparently, I'm also a women's warden, which means as well as sort of looking after women's issues in general, it's also helping women take part in and promoting women within the structures of the service. But alongside that, my job is...I have a company called Judaism for Schools. I work in a lot of schools, non-Jewish schools, a lot of faith schools, and I do a lot of interfaith work. Yes, so that's me.

Lia Shimada 1:26

Thank you. Alex, over to you.

Alex Wimberly 1:28

I'm Alex Wimberly. I'm the leader of the Corrymeela Community, which has been around since the mid-1960s and is a Christian community that wanted to really make reconciliation to be seen as what is at the heart of the Christian gospel. The idea that we are to find common commonality with our other human beings, and the love of God is something that leads us into better relationships with others. This became



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

particularly important during the Troubles, the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. We're probably best known for a residential centre that we have on the north coast of Ireland, where we bring people from divided parts of communities, or different parts of our society that wouldn't otherwise be able to meet. Sort of a place that belongs to everyone and no one. But because we have members who are dispersed across the island and further afield, Corrymeela begins whenever we are able to create spaces and moments where people know that they belong, and that they can start to address something that may be broken in themselves. But that together, we might be able to address things that are broken in the wider world together.

Lia Shimada 2:40

Thank you. The theme of this particular podcast is on the theme of community and resilience. One of the things that really struck me, when I was interviewing the two of you for the Theos report, was how you described your communities, and the ways that you moved into and through and out of the pandemic. I was really struck in particular about the pastoral implications of that, but also the theological implications as well. I was hoping that you could recap some of that conversation in this podcast recording.

Ruth Jampel 3:19

Certainly. I was looking, I was thinking about that a lot. In fact, I was really trying to focus on...It's so interesting, how recent history begins to feel like long-ago history and you have to really unpick. I was thinking about those three words you had, 'theology', 'ritual' and 'practice'. And it's interesting because theology, especially in the Orthodox tradition, we don't think that theology will change. Having said that, there are obviously different branches within Judaism. But my synagogue is an Orthodox synagogue. Yet, however, within that, I think we're viewed as pretty left-field within the Orthodox community. So I'd say theology has not changed as such, but ritual and practice definitely adapted, and it has not completely gone back to what it was before. Which I think is interesting. Unfortunately, numbers have not gone back to what they were before, either. So that's kind of a general overview. I don't know how you feel, Alex, with that.

Alex Wimberly 4:22

I think that's right. I'm just thinking about in the terms of COVID. Our community



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

does not live together. We gather a few times a year. People who live more closely to one another may meet once a month. But as a larger community, only a portion of us would be able to gather together here at the site. And that would be two or three or four times a year. So during COVID, during lockdown, we had talked about ourselves as being a dispersed community, but we really were dispersed. And the rituals that we had, we had to reinvent those. We had to reinvent ways of gathering online, as so many did. In the context of the 'Ashes' paper, it didn't always, but it did sometimes centre around questions of death and grieving and the common experience we were having because of COVID, but also trying to make sense of how you grieve in that context, when you can't gather. So that became really important for so many people, not just ourselves, obviously. But also, Corrymeela has always been...We're a faith community. We're a faith community that is made up of Catholics and Protestants. In our history, at least, that's kind of how we've seen ourselves as an ecumenical community in that sense. We've never stressed our theology, because it can be so divisive. We try to find our commonality. Unfortunately, what we have discovered through the conflict in Northern Ireland, but also through our own experience, is that one of the things that does bring people together across divisions, healthy and unhealthy divisions, is grief. And so, you know, COVID was really a place where that became clear to us. We were gathering and we were feeling connected, for a lot of different reasons. Other things sort of stripped away: things as primal as grief, and things as essential as the people who were making society work for us. And the desire to be in contact with people really became more apparent to us, really, I think in healthy ways.

Ruth Jampel 6:36

Yeah, we're really coming from quite different places, in that sense, because...Being an Orthodox synagogue, you know, most members do not keep all those rules. But it's local. We are genuinely a community. People walk to the synagogue. We all live... Most of us in my synagogue live within three miles of each other, with a synagogue at the centre. So it's very communal. What happened was there was the actual shutdown, but...I was thinking, we weren't shut for so long. Once you were allowed to open, we opened with lots of different restrictions. So services were only one hour instead of three hours. You have to sit, you know, meters apart. There was plastic around, you know, the bimah, the central area where the singing takes place. There was a plastic sheet all around. Members of the community weren't, couldn't, we



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

weren't allowed to sing. But also we had masks on. The snacks at the end, which is a big part of coming together, we didn't have for ages. Now, I still went to synagogue every week because I love, I genuinely like going to synagogue. My husband was like: 'What there's no snacks, there's no talking, there's no laughing, I'm not going.' And that was completely why he goes. And you know, he goes to the communal. And it's not necessarily the praying. And, you know, he calls me a religious type of maniac. But actually I like sitting in the quiet. I like sitting there. I mean, to be honest, when I go to synagogue, I always put my stuff down either side. I don't really want to chat. And I'm quite talkative person, but I actually do like to go for the connection. I think that he is more typical than me in terms of why people go to synagogue, you know, it's a communal thing.

I think with ritual, I think the COVID thing really did have impact because we have a lot of rules about death. It's interesting, because last week, I was with a friend who is C[hurch] of E[ngland]. She said: 'I had my first Jewish death experience, going to a funeral in the Shiva house.' And another friend said: 'Yes, yes. It's really shocking how quickly it all takes place.' And I was thinking how much with us, you just accept you get buried quickly. You have a funeral. You gather for a week. You continue to pray for a month, you continue praying for 11 months, you gather again at the end. I genuinely don't question that. For me, that's good. That's what I'm used to. But the people who couldn't go to a funeral and who didn't have people gathering in their houses for a week, they felt bitter. I would say they felt really embittered. One man said to me, he felt cheated, that he didn't have that Shiva experience for his mother. Only close relatives could go to funerals. These are kind of set in stone things that Jewish people do. You may not be Orthodox in any way, but it's just what we do. I was thinking, almost, it's a bit like circumcision. Just don't overthink it. It's what we do. We just do it. Yes. On many levels, you might think...But you just do it. So you get buried as quickly as possible. That's what you do. And then you gather, and people come. And if you can't get to the funeral...Going to funerals is not such a big thing. Because you have the week to go to the family. You go in the day. You go in the evening for prayers. So, I don't go to lots and lots of funerals unless it's someone close, because I'll go to the Shiva house, which can be more personal. It can also be rammed for the people. But of course, all that fell away in COVID. I think practices around death are really significant for Jewish people. And now, the online thing happened. I went to lots of online Shivas. And there was a warmth in that. It also



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

meant people from New Zealand and Australia, people could zoom in, and that was a really positive. But I think around the issue of death, and COVID, ironically, that was something that really did have big impact for Jewish people who were bereaved in that time.

Alex Wimberly 10:51

That's really interesting. Lia, this is working; it's making my brain go off in about three or four different directions. But one thing I think I'm right in thinking: Doesn't 'synagogue' actually mean a kind of gathering place or a place of coming together.

Ruth Jampel 11:03

Yeah, yeah.

Alex Wimberly 11:05

That makes me wonder: What do we mean, when we're talking about community? Is it that proximity of space? Is it to be, you know...What's the commonality that brings people together? Is it shared belief? Is it what holds us together? It's a question that we found ourselves at Corrymeela thinking about during this period. I think that's part of this. The resilience of the community is tied up with what holds the community together, and how elastic that may be, how flexible it may be, how certain it may be. That you know you're in for the right reasons, or for a variety of reasons. And then you mentioned, Ruth, your husband's experience, which I know so many people whose experience with church...I think it's fair to say that in Northern Ireland...which has been more religious in many ways, than other parts of the UK, more religious...has seen through COVID, that what would have been a gradual decline become a very much quicker decline in terms of church participation. And just thinking about your husband's experience, I know a lot of people who...What ended up being the breaking point for them was: During COVID, if I can't go to church and sing, then it's not church, and I've gotten out of the habit and going just to go and hear these stories, or be with these particular humans, I don't want to say I don't like it, but it doesn't have the attraction that being able to go and sing with people and being able to have that experience, which I don't get other places or don't get in the same way. So it's really important. But this tipping point, which I think we've reached in at least parts of Christendom that I'm a part of, that we really are seeing that dramatic decline in people's finding ways to practice their faith, and



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

it may not look like the practices that they grew up with. One area that continues to be therefore all the more important are funerals. Then, people who wouldn't be going to the Sunday service, who wouldn't be going to the regular patterns of their youth or what they thought good Christians did or good people of faith, participated in funerals. Whether it be that wake, whether it be that sort of marking of what it is a family, I think there is still that desire to gather as a community in some way, or in multiple ways, to acknowledge the death of a loved one within that community.

Ruth Jampel 13:42

That was so interesting, rereading the report, how many people want a religious funeral, how people come to church, who part of them...They've not discarded it, but maybe never had a connection in the first place. But how a religious element of funerals is...The statistics vary, didn't they? Different people seem to have different statistics in the report, but it was very much a thing.

Alex Wimberly 14:07

That's right. There's certainly a noticeable increase in Northern Ireland and elsewhere for humanist services, funerals. It's interesting to see that rise. It's also interesting in terms of how the form of that, and the ritualistic sort of exercise of it, is very similar to a lot of services from faith contexts. So it's in some ways scratching that itch of ritual, even if it has been altered to make it more accessible to people who are not coming from the faith context.

Ruth Jampel 14:50

And that, I guess that, I don't know how rituals evolved thousands of years ago, but that shows, I imagine, on one level, we need the eulogy, we need the singing, we need a structure, we need to know what it is we're meant to be doing. I went a few months ago to a friend's memorial. She didn't have family. She was cremated in a private thing, and we gathered to remember her. But then...I had assumed there'd be some kind of scattering. I had assumed there'd be some kind of physical connection with her. And there wasn't. It was people reading poems and talking about her. I felt, I don't know, I felt like there was something lacking there of some kind of a goodbye. But I saw that in the report that more and more people are having these closed cremations, and maybe things aren't happening with the ashes. But I don't know, because I think you know, that thing of people, you might need



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

to see the body or see the coffin or...I just felt...But maybe that's just me bringing my perceptions. Because I know when people, if someone dies at sea, and there's no body and people may not have closure, or when people are, you know, missing, you never know where they are, there's no...It's hard to have closure. And I kind of thought; It would have been nice to connect with her, even though we were talking about her. But then I'm aware that I'm kind of fixed in what I think we do. I'm aware. I like to think I'm an open minded person, but I'm probably not.

Lia Shimada 16:32

Within your communities, how do you think that sense of a lack of closure is continuing to play out?

Alex Wimberly 16:39

Well, we did talk about during COVID, that weird waiting, and not having that closure, because it would be weeks or months before more than just a handful could gather. And so there's these delayed memorial services, and that was weird. I think my sense is, as you were saying, Ruth, it sort of feels like ancient history. We have, I think, caught up to the point where we don't have that same sort of blagged period, between the death and the ritual that's going to be held, if there is going to one. The lack of closure, to me, it speaks in some ways to that cultural dynamic that Ruth was saying. I do...It makes me wonder whether or not the particulars of the ritual are going to be so tied to the culture of the community. But if we're going to make any broader statements, it's really that ritual, whatever it is, the ritual is in there. There needs to be something, some sort of a ritualistic idea, because...In contexts that I've been a part of, the idea of having the body present, or you know, to be able to have a tactile touching of either the casket or even the body, is less likely and becoming less regular. The move towards cremation is really noticeable perhaps more so in the Northern Ireland context than in the American context in which I grew up. There is a real question for a lot of people here as to whether or not in the Protestant, particularly, whether or not you bring children to funerals, and why you wouldn't, and why you would. And where the question of closure is for those younger people, or the people who are just a little bit further afield from the or proximity of the individual. How do we register and process that closure for people who we don't recognize may need it, or we don't know exactly how to provide it? I think that's an ongoing question in our culture.



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

Ruth Jampel 18:42

Yeah, and that's, I guess, part of that fear of death or talking about death of course, When you do see children, or if a child's been bereaved of a parent, you know, it's so emotive. It's so painful. I was struck by...I did Zoom in, because a very good friend of mine, her dad lived in Croagh near Limerick, and I Zoomed into his funeral, a Catholic funeral. Everyone was there. The people filing to the front. It was astounding. It was so impressive. And there were young people there. Everyone was there. It's a small town. And that really struck me. I thought that was so powerful. It kept going. It kept going on Zoom, how everyone was coming. He was an older man. He'd lived a long life, he was a very lovely person. And there were children there. Not loads, but I'd say about 10% of the people there. And I guess it is that thing of the community. I mean, with us, children don't go generally. Unless it's someone really close to you. And they don't go to the Shiva house either. I think in the older generation of Jewish people, there's a lot of superstition. When you're sitting Shiva, when you're having the week of mourning, you don't wear shoes, you wear slippers. The person who is bereaved, you sit on a low chair. Growing up, if I didn't put my slippers on, just walked around in socks, my dad was like...My dad was not a superstitious person. But he didn't like me doing that. Again, I think it's this thing, these rituals that are just so connected. Anyhow, I've digressed. But I think yeah, children...As adults, we tangle with this idea of death. So we don't even know how to maybe...

Alex Wimberly 20:33

Yeah, yes, I agree. And it's so difficult. It is so culturally constructed. I mean, I am aware...I'm not from Ireland, but death, funerals, wakes, it's almost like the national pastime of Ireland. I mean, it really is. But they do it so well. It is so important. And not alone in that, across the world, but particularly in my observation, it's just such a central part. It has to do with that community. Also, there are those rituals, there are those superstitions, there is all of that. And I do think that there is a healthiness in terms of what the ritual provides in terms of closure. There is a being able to contextualize death within the larger frame, and also to honour everybody with that sort of similar ritual or that similar practice. It really is a lovely thing to be able to witness.

Ruth Jampel 21:31

Yeah, it's interesting. It's almost like...Obviously, there's the close family. It's not just close family who connects with a funeral. Its people...Having that ritual is important



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

for anyone who feels connected with that. I remember reading...There was quite a well-known author, her partner drowned at sea. And he was from Afro-Caribbean heritage. She's English. She quickly got on with a funeral. And then people from his community were so upset, because it is a big thing. They felt really cheated. She had like four people there. And his heritage, it's a huge event. And actually, she came to reflect that she regretted that. It's almost...I mean, of course, the person who's bereaved, they need to...They're at the center of it. But I think many people relate to that. So when a good friend of ours, who was elderly, she died in COVID. She died of COVID, which I felt very bitter about, even though she was 96. She caught COVID in hospital, and that wasn't good enough. And she had her Christian funeral. We were very...I was her next of kin. She was a very close friend. And we had to count heads. It couldn't be more than 30 people, all of that. But at least we had that. And we could only have 45 minutes. The next funeral was literally waiting. But at least we still had that. And I sent the link, sent the booklet. All these people could connect with it. And I think...It's almost for anyone who knows that person. I know there's different levels, but you do want to feel part of the saying goodbye, don't you?

Alex Wimberly 23:16

Yeah, definitely. I'm wondering. It's just fascinating to talk to you about this because, you know, I'm coming from an American context and I'm a Presbyterian minister living in the North. When I think about death and dying, funerals, traditions on the island of Ireland, my mind usually goes to kind of the Catholic practices, because they're the most, you know, there. But it strikes me that COVID and the funeral... The practice is...Even though the allowances...My memory, and someone will have to have to be careful that I'm not making things up, which I do, but my sense is that the Catholic Church moved towards having Mass, having funerals, with mitigating the risks of contagion, but with a move that was closer to normality during lockdown, than other areas of society, other areas of of Irish life. That was seen as so central to doing what the Catholic church needed to provide in terms of regular Mass and in terms of funeral traditions and rituals, that there was allowance there in a way that... Other communities were less likely to gather in large numbers, for funerals, or, you know, just for worship or for that sort of thing, until the government said: 'This the standard.' The church has sort of moved to that, rather than: We're going to be an exception to the norm. And it also makes me realize that COVID or not, the cultural lines, and even the political lines, are in some ways set by the way that we grieve,



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

or will become noticeable in the way that we practice things like funerals. Here in Northern Ireland, a lot of people, if they go to university, or if they go, in particular careers, end up in England, Scotland, Wales, and may not come back. And they die in England. And the people here, who are their closest relations, then have to deal with the fact that unlike in Northern Ireland, it may be weeks before the service in England can take place. This becomes often but regularly as a surprise, you know: What are they doing over there that it takes so long to have this funeral? And so there's...Almost...What marks us as community? I was asking you earlier. Is it proximity? Is it belief? Is it the way we prioritize funerals? The way we prioritize, the way we structure the rituals around death is actually one of the key markers of where you know: I'm in this community and you're in another community.

Ruth Jampel 25:58

Is that because...My friend's father was buried a week later, which I think here, the Christians, is really quick. Is that because in Ireland you do death better, your systems are better? Is that it?

Alex Wimberly 26:11

It may be a really practical thing that in this province that gets to have a similar level of governance for a smaller population. I'll make this up but I think the population of Northern Ireland might be the population of Birmingham. But there are more civil servants here trying to operate an entire structure. They're just able to process things quicker than they can process in England. The things here that are interesting is that we've only now in the last year or two had a second crematorium. So for a while, there was only one crematorium in Northern Ireland. So if anybody wanted a cremation, they had to go through that bottleneck. It used to be before COVID that you would get a one-hour slot, you know, eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock, you'll get one hour. In COVID, that got reduced to like 20 minutes, so they could have the time to turn the place over for the next. So it was just this conveyor belt, you know. How were you able to do that well and do that in a meaningful way for family? It really upset a lot of people and, you know, again, that was such a such a touchstone of what's important and what needs to give and not.

Ruth Jampel 27:26

Was it a twenty minute funeral service?



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

Alex Wimberly 29:29

Yeah, so, I mean it was just, yeah. It was amazing. And they may have been able to do something in a different place in terms of a service. But if you are going to have a cremation, the only option was this 20-minute service. In the one crematorium.

Ruth Jampel 27:44

Yeah. Wow. Yeah, that's interesting, isn't it, how rituals around death, they can sort of viscerally get you. When my friend said...I found myself...I had to check myself...going on, psychologically, on the defensive when we're talking about these two friends who aren't Jewish, and one who had just been to a Jewish funeral, and the other one said: Oh, I think it's really brutal. And I thought...But of course, I have the other reaction. When I hear of, you know, a body being buried four or five weeks later, I'm kind of a bit aghast. I guess we have to be honest with ourselves. On one level, we always think what we do is the right way. And of course, there isn't a right way. But you know...I know a few people have said...She said to me: 'How do you prepare the eulogy? How do you get to speak about the person?' Well, the reality is in an Orthodox, traditional funeral, you don't speak. The rabbi will speak. But of course, not all rabbis know the person who's died. It's at the Shiva house. The grandchildren will speak, the friend will speak, but it's quite formulaic. And it's what it is. And you literally...I know when my dad died...I didn't really know until my dad died that I was...Luckily I hadn't had such a close bereavement before. You know, you literally do things like the bereaved people: walk up the room, walk back through the room. You cut your jumper to show you're bereaved, you're grieving, which goes back to the Old Testament. Jacob rips his clothes when he thinks that Joseph's died. So the literal theatricals...the walking up, the walking back, the ripping, the this, the that...And to me, that's, it's what it did. To be honest, my dad was dying. I had thought a lot about what I would say. My mum at the moment is really not good. And I've been staying with my mum, like, eight days in a row now, and she's not as she was. And when my friend said to me: 'Well, how would you know? How would you know a eulogy? What would you say?' And I thought, I said: 'Well, actually, you think about it when they're still alive.' That sounds awful. But I guess a part of me is: Well, someone dies tragically overnight, and you're in shock. But then you see, the rabbi would say the words, and then maybe at the Shiva house, you'd have time to think about it. But I think I think if we're honest, so many things as human do, we do what we do, because that's what we've done. And



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

we make judgments about other people. And of course, there's lots of different ways of doing death. There's different ways of having these rituals. It's interesting, how these new rituals, like you were saying, Alex, are mimicking the old rituals in a way. It might be humanist, or it might be in a woodland. But what actually is happening is the speaking, the singing is kind of culturally what's happened. So we hold on. We have this gut reaction to what we might think is the way to do it. And there are so many different ways to do it, aren't there?

Lia Shimada 30:39

One of the big findings of the research project was, not surprisingly, that we just need better conversations about death for society at large. It's been fascinating listening to the two of you talk about ritual. What do you think society could learn from faith communities about doing death better?

Alex Wimberly 31:02

I mean, it's interesting to me that...Can faith communities do this any better than others? I mean, we do not have the monopoly on honest conversations. But I think the ritual is...The ritual is particularly powerful within the faith context, if it has... It holds on to a hope, which may be a supernatural hope, for those who have that. But it's also a chance to simply be honest with really raw emotions, and to do that in a way that you feel held by a community. You feel held by, perhaps, a sense of something larger than any of us, you know, the Almighty, you know, something that continues on past death. I think if a ritual around death is going to be helpful, it has to be able to contain the space to be raw and real and honest with the emotions that human beings are going to experience in the midst of a death and grief. And that's why the questions for me about, you know, whether or not you bring children...What are you depriving of children? Are you depriving these children to be able to see that adults can break down, lose it, and life will go on, you know, they will come out of that and still be the same person that went in. There's so much that death will bring up in terms of what is final, what is real, what lasts, that to actually have a ritual that sees people go through the real hardship and pit, the depth of grief, and then being able to come out of it is, I think, a real gift that not just faith communities, but I think communities in general need to be able to have the courage to undertake.



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

Ruth Jampel 32:46

Yeah, I mean, you get those people who think you should never argue in front of your children. I mean, that would not have worked in this family, where it's one big argument. But actually, children need to know that people get angry. And people do shout, and then you stop being angry. I don't know. I feel like...You're right. I mean, do you remember that image of when Princess Di died, and her sons are walking there, without...Obviously, I imagine they were told not to show emotion. They're just like little adults. And it's so evocative. And, I mean, maybe they were in shock, but it wasn't such a quick funeral, was it, as I recall? It's this idea that we don't show emotion and we, you know...Kind of a Dickensian, stiff upper lip thing. And then when we saw that...I think one of the things that touched us there was, like, these are young boys, but that possibly being told that you need to act like adults, containing your emotion. And then you have that cultural thing, you know, in the women...It's in a lot of Middle Eastern countries. I don't know enough about other countries who...You know, the grief, the crying out, that ululation, and, you know, you see that in Muslim countries. You see that in terrible scenes in the Middle East, you know, people arms up, crying out to God or to the world. And of course, that's what you probably feel like doing. And that is...We would think, a lot healthier than being in that suit and walking down and keeping it all together. So what you're saying, you know, about keeping children away from grief...

Alex Wimberly 34:25

It's really interesting. We have, I mean, in the Irish context, we'd have the keening, you know, really that wailing, that sense. And this is a little off topic, Lia, but my mind keeps coming back to...One of the things that Corrymeela has done in the last few years is to hold a service of lament for the wider public, to...We are deliberate about this. We want to create, or at least create the possibility of a ritual on the longest day of the year, which is the day of reflection about the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, so that people can gather in a space together, Catholic, Protestant, religious, not, and have a public, shared sense of lament. We have talked a great deal about lament in terms of lament is this being honest before God or being honest, publicly. That this is not the way it should be. This is not just. This is not right. To end with the sense that if we can name that, then we can begin to think together about what the future should be like, that can move us forward and together. And part



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

of the thinking in that is that without such rituals, there's a concern that we might cycle back into violence. That's the particular context in Northern Ireland. It's not true in the family setting, or the congregational setting, synagogue setting, you're not worried about that in the same way. But what we have found in that service is bringing people together, who...The deaths may have divided them; the grieving is tragically something that they can do together. And that grieving separately is another form of segregation in Northern Ireland, that we don't have to participate in. And so in other contexts, maybe not the family context, maybe not the church context, though it could be...But in societal context, it may be that the practice of lament, the practice of grieving something, be it a death or be it an injustice, actually allows people who wouldn't otherwise be together to come together and say: 'I may disagree on what caused the problem. But I share a sense of grief with people that otherwise I wouldn't be in connection with.'

Ruth Jampel 36:45

So did you implement that? And do a lot of people come to that?

Alex Wimberly 39:49

It's growing. Our hope is that it's centralized in Belfast, and what we would like this year, actually, is we're going to be inviting key people to say: Is this something that we could replicate in other places around the province so it's not that you have to come to Belfast on that particular day, but something that can be recreated, replicated elsewhere. But on the same day, maybe in the same hour, if we were really ambitious. We instigated that, based on research we had done with post-conflict societies. The societies that were able to move to a fuller sense of reconciliation were those that had rituals that acknowledged the past. And in fact, one of the key parts of reconciliation is that you're able to form a vision of a shared and interdependent future. You're able to acknowledge the pains of the past. And you're able to have those spaces where you can share each other's stories. It has to be...I'm getting a little bit more theoretical here. But the idea also is that reconciliation...Peace might be imposed. You can have peacekeepers and kind of impose a peace, but for reconciliation to actually take place, an act of peace, not just the cessation of warfare...For active peace to happen, reconciliation to take place, it...The reason it's tricky is because it has to be from the ground up. It cannot be imposed from on high. It has to be organically, something that people choose for themselves to



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

take on. And so we have been offering this, and I'm glad to say that it has been well supported. But it's a trick. You can invite people to things, but people have to have the desire to come to it of themselves. Rather than be told: 'This is it. You have to come to this.'

Ruth Jampel 38:31

But it's on June 21st?

Alex Wimberly 38:33

June 21st, which is...To give you a little bit of background on that, it comes from an organization that was formed after the Good Friday Agreement called Healing Through Remembering. They set the 21st of June, the longest day of the year in the Northern hemisphere, in part because there was no day on the calendar that wasn't touched by someone's death in the Northern Ireland context. So if you chose one date or another, you'd be choosing one side or the other, you'd be choosing this...So they chose the longest day of the year, in part because it felt like it was kind of giving the fullness of a sense of: We're all in this. But also there is that...As the sun hits its zenith in the sky, there is sort of a natural pause. So what we do in part of the ritual is then have that moment of silence, that really holds for five minutes over the noon period, in acknowledgment of the sun is stopping in the sky. And now we're moving into a different phase.

Lia Shimada 39:34

That brings us really beautifully to the last idea I was hoping you'd touch on, which is crafting hope. Crafting Hope is the larger theme for this entire podcast series. I'm really struck by what you're saying, Alex, about the longest day of the year, and a ritual that's very much about community coming together in grief. Either, or both of you: Can you share any thoughts about how the theme of crafting hope might speak to the work that you do around death in your communities?

Ruth Jampel 40:04

Not just because Alex and Alex's work, but...This isn't about COVID, but obviously the absolute dire situation in Israel and Gaza...It's really hard to feel hope. I've got to say...At my synagogue, again, I think the fact, it's...People live within the area of a synagogue, and so we have that shared geographical. We also have...I think a lot about my synagogue. We are generally a meeting of minds, because we're in a



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

relative liberal area of North London. Muswell Hill, East Finchley. We think we're so liberal. Actually, we are. We're very open. We are on the left, politically. People joke that we're the only reformed synagogue in the United Synagogue. I do a lot of work with a mosque. We do a lot of interfaith work. I think for a community like ours, with this situation, when...It's so painful. It's so painful. I mean, I was out for dinner with a friend last week, who happens not to be Jewish and happens not to be English and doesn't live in London. They said to me: 'Oh, Ruth, what you think about Gaza?' I'm thinking: 'This is dinner on a Saturday night! This has been in us every single day.' It's so bleak. It's so hard to feel hope.

I do stuff with my local mosque. There's a group called Bereaved Parents. Thinking about what you were saying, Alex, it's an organization. It's an Israeli bereaved parent. It's a Palestinian bereaved parent. They go and talk. They don't talk about politics. They talk about bereavement. Even before this current war, we had bereaved parents in our synagogue. And then we took the bereaved parents to the mosque. I think of it as my mosque.

We have so many...I'm thinking, as well, when you said about the question about theology, ritual and practice. During COVID, lots of prayers got pruned out, if you like, because the services got shortened. Synagogue services on a Shabbat, on a Saturday, they are long. Lots of prayers got pruned out...Some of them are coming back in. But now, synagogue is about 25 minutes even longer, because we are having so many psalms for peace, for Israel, for hope. I mean, again, it's ritualized. So you could say: 'Oh, we got three more of them, and then we've got that, and then we've got that till we get to that, until we get to the snacks.' So there's all this praying, and it could become formulaic, but these psalms are chosen because they all have the word 'peace' in them. At the moment, you know, you're asking me about hope. It's so bleak. It's so upsetting. And all the work you're doing, Alex, it's years on from the Good Friday Agreement. I'm still...We're hearing of soldiers who need to be prosecuted. We're hearing of families who haven't had a chance to grieve. And death is still going on as we speak. We have to hope for a better world, but this reconciliation...When we're talking about death, and when people die...People in Gaza, actually, where can they be buried? If Muslim people get buried quickly, but things have been blown up. But I've got to say, on the same side, you know...It is the same side, being bereaved. People who lost people...Some people, they buried their cars after October the seventh, because if you're ultra-Orthodox...I mean,



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

there's a group of people who go in after every bomb attack anywhere in Israel. They collect every little part of the body. It's so important to bury all of you. And, again, when I was looking at the report, and Googling, you know...There's a whole thing of someone ultra-Orthodox who had to have his leg amputated. The hospital cremated his leg. That was a huge thing. No, you have to be buried. All of you has to be buried. So some cars were buried, because that was all that was left of those families who were incinerated in their cars. And I think...

You can't have the rituals, that anger. How many years, how many decades, till we can get hope in this situation? That's not what you're asking me, I know, Lia, but it's so there in my mind. It's so there in a lot of our minds. And in my synagogue, where people tend to be on the left, we've had lots of different wordings. We have a prayer from the Chief Rabbi for peace. We've tried out different wordings, because we need in that hope and peace for Palestinians, too. And that is always in there. We talk about, you know, I can quote it: 'Put a spirit of wisdom and understanding into our leaders and into all the leaders of the nation of Israel, and for all the people in the region.' And so...I know with COVID, there was the COVID wall. There was the hearts with Grenfell. I drove past Grenfell yesterday, Grenfell forever in our hearts. And it takes so long to come to terms with things. So it's so upsetting, at this moment, when there's a whole new area growing all the time, of a lack of hope. And that's why I really feel this whole war, it's so not about religion. It's about politics. It's just so upsetting. And actually, what a shame that Hassan couldn't be here. I know we're not talking about current politics, but it's always interesting to hear from different faiths. He's up in Glasgow, which has...There's a lot of stuff going on in Scotland, that always has been about this issue. And I know as well, if you go to Northern Ireland, I know that those murals...It's so...People take these positions: If you're Catholic, you're going to support Palestine, and if you're Protestant, you're going to support Israel. And it's like: Where's the hope in all this? The people...People are people, and two rights don't make a wrong and there's raw grief. So I'm sorry, I don't know what I can say about hope. Sorry.

Alex Wimberly 46:01

That's telling.

Lia Shimada 46:02

That's the most honest response I think we could have heard.



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

Alex Wimberly 46:06

Yeah. I'm struck by the fact that Corrymeela began in the 1960s, mid 1960s, by university students, mostly. It was a community full of optimism. They had all the answers, and they were going to change the world. They were all, you know, lovely hippies, and, you know, Jesus freaks with their kumbaya guitars and stuff like that. It was fantastic. And then the civil rights movement, turned into a more violent movement, and the conflict broke out in 1969. And they were ill-prepared for it. And they then became...They said that they moved from optimism, from a movement of optimism to a community of hope. Sort of in that Noah Ark sense, that they would hold hope, and be a witness that there was something different that could happen. That it could be a community of contrast. That while the outer world was being marked by its divisions and its certainties, that Corrymeela would be a place of doubt and of people coming together. Not having the answers but hoping together and living as a community of difference, and contrast, that could show that it was possible to be committed to people, even if you were different, even if you did have different backgrounds, views, perspectives. We failed as many times as we've succeeded in that. But we've carried on for 60 years trying to be this community that can host hope. And to this day...When I think that people are experiencing something at Corrymeela that's noticeable, and noticeably rare, it's not because we've come up with some answer, and this is the solution, and we're going to go in and impose the answer, and this is going to sort out the problem. It's that in a community, we experience something when we actually get to know other human beings who are different. We realize that my way of being doesn't have to prevent you from being the way that you need to be. And in fact, I learn more about myself, the world, God through this relationship. If we're doing something that's worth hanging on to, it's that people are able to experience something that feels like hope, particularly when they aren't experiencing it in other parts of their life. And to try to recreate that, again, in different pockets of the world. It's the only thing that we really know how to do.

Ruth Jampel 48:37

I think I'm already feeling guilty, because I think: 'You know what? You're right, because you've talked about the move from optimism to hope.' And then I feel really guilty, what I've said, because, you know, you always think that where there's



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

life, there's hope. And we have to be hopeful. But you're right. I guess you can be not optimistic, but you can still be hopeful. So I immediately want to take back everything I said, because I feel like you're always meant to have hope. I shouldn't feel bleak. Because like you're saying...It's so interesting: semantics. Because you're so articulate, you're summing that up. They were optimistic, and they are hopeful. And I suppose they are different.

Alex Wimberly 49:20

And it's not particularly clear to me, the difference between being optimistic and hope, it's a context. But I do think it goes from being: 'We've got the answer, and we're going to solve this this way.' Versus: 'We don't know the answer, and all we're going to do is take the next right step as we see it.' And trust. Have the faith, the assurance that whatever comes, somehow they will be at the next right step after that.

Lia Shimada 49:45

And it's not something that just lands automatically. It is an active pursuit.

Alex Wimberly 49:50

Yeah.

Lia Shimada 49:51

There's the crafting of it. Well, I think that is a really great place to pull the conversation to a close. I'm so grateful to both of you. I wish that Hassan had been able to join us as well. But obviously for a podcast about death, we absolutely understand that he needed to tend to the bereavements in his community. But it's really been a joy to be with the two of you, and I've learned so much by just witnessing the two of you in conversation.

Ruth Jampel 50:22

What you just said, Alex, yeah, and what Alex just said is that from talking to other people, you can go forward. Not being in an echo chamber is so important. So what you just said, Alex, that really hit a note, that it's through the talking with other people you can build your own faith, if you like, but also become more aware of become more hopeful. So you've done that for me.

The Susanna Wesley Foundation



Podcast 19:

The next right step: community, resilience and death

Alex Wimberly, Ruth Jampel and Lia Shimada

Alex Wimberly 50:46

Oh, good.

Ruth Jampel 50:47

Thank you.

Alex Wimberly 50:48

It's easy to be hopeful up on the north coast of Ireland. It's harder in other places of the world, I can tell you.