
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Listening to the Call Beneath the Call

[Last week's letter](#)

[Back to all letters](#)

Dear Anna,

Over the weekend, I attended a workshop led by Pádraig Ó Tuama. He spoke softly, with that Irish cadence that sounds half prayer, half laughter. Though the day was about learning to write poetry, it felt, as a friend said afterward, like an intense session of spiritual direction.

The most meaningful moment came during an exercise called “I Am.” It’s meant to explore the many dimensions of identity, belonging, and change — not by defining yourself once and for all, but by noticing the multiple truths that coexist within you. Pádraig asked us to write quickly: seventeen short, simple, concrete lines, each beginning with I am. The point was not to be profound, but to let truth emerge through ordinary detail. The form, he said, provides a container for revelation.

When time expired, he asked if anyone wanted to read aloud. A woman in the front row raised her hand, visibly excited. But when she read, her poem began with I am and then flowed into several lines that developed that first thought without returning to I am again. In other words, she had completely disregarded Pádraig’s instructions.

The room fell silent. Some of us, I admit, had less than charitable thoughts. The exercise, designed to build empathy and shared presence, suddenly felt broken — as if the ninety-nine sheep were turning away from the one.

Pádraig thanked her and started to move on. Then he paused, turned back to her, and thanked her again. He noted that the instructions had been clear, and she had made an intentional choice to disregard them. Then he praised her for recognizing a call to do something different — for paying attention to the truth that was rising within her, a movement the form could not contain.

It was spiritual direction in real time: a witness to her discernment, an affirmation for those who had followed the rules, and a reminder that everyone belongs. The Spirit often nudges us toward life beyond the lines we thought we’d drawn.

The next day I learned that an old friend had skipped Pádraig’s workshop to join a political protest downtown. My first thought was that he had confused his priorities — our doing, after all, flows from our being. But then I remembered the woman’s poem and Pádraig’s joy. Perhaps my friend, too, was answering a truer rhythm, writing his own verse in the streets.

I’m learning — slowly — that discernment is rarely about right or wrong choices. It’s about listening for the call beneath the call and trusting that the Spirit moves through both the line and the breaking of it.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames
