

Crossroads: Episode 18

A Conversation with Former Presidential Speechwriter Peter Wehner

Jo Nygard Owens

What do we find at the intersection of faith and the world? Our new podcast, Crossroads, explores this question in thought provoking conversations featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space to discuss politics, technology, and our responsibilities as citizens. Pull up a chair and meet us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads, where we discuss the intersection of sacred and civic. I'm your host, Jo Nygard Owens, and today I'm joined by Peter Wehner. Peter is a senior fellow at the Trinity Forum, a contributing writer at The Atlantic, a contributing opinion writer for The New York Times, and author of three books, including his most recent, The Death of Politics.

He served in three Republican administrations, was formerly a speechwriter for George W. Bush, and a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. His work also appears in publications including The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and National Affairs. Welcome, Pete. It is so good to have you here. We are just absolutely delighted that you're joining us today.

Peter Wehner

Thanks, Jo. I'm thrilled to be here. And I admire the institution you're a part of and everything that all of you are doing to try and bring peace to a world that sometimes is a bit disoriented.

Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you. And tell us where are you joining us from?

Peter Wehner

McLean, Virginia. Which is where we have, my wife and I, have lived with our kids for about 25 years or so.

Jo Nygard Owens

Fantastic. Well, I am in my home office in Cleveland, Ohio. So you are far closer to the Cathedral than I am.

Peter Wehner

It's at least distance, if not in heart and spirit. But hopefully I'm close enough.

Jo Nygard Owens

I think it works well. We brought you here at this particular time because we've gone through this election that has just torn our country apart, and it's no secret our nation is painfully divided, and the gap between one side and the other just keeps growing year after year. Talk to us a little bit about what you believe has led to this widening of the gap.

Peter Wehner

Yeah, it's complicated issue and I think the gap has widened. I think it's probably important to say a couple of things preliminarily. One is that it's been widening for decades. To this this is not a recent phenomenon. They've charted these things, social scientists, pollsters and so forth. And so the divides in America have been happening for decades now.

And then secondly, just historically, of course, America has had moments of tremendous divisions, political and otherwise. You know, from the start of the founding of the country, the first really contested election in American history was Jefferson and Adams. And that was just a brutal, brutal campaign. And, of course, you had the lead up to the Civil War, Civil War, reconstruction, and yet the late 60s, where you had, tremendous sort of generation gap as it was referred to the rise of feminism, sexual revolution, Vietnam War.

So those things are not unprecedented in American history. Having said that, they're pretty acute right now. And, and I would say pretty disturbing for people on both sides of the aisle. There's a sense of anger, antipathy, exhaustion, I would say, in terms of this moment and what's led to it, I'd say several things, kind of a confluence of factors.

One is social media, which is new. When you go back and read the promise of social media in the 1990s, the promise was that it would bring the world together. What we've found out is that in many ways, it divides the world and pushes it apart. It's not totally the case, of course. And there are there are aspects of social media that are good.

But I would say in terms of our civic and political culture, it's really been harmful. One of the reasons is it just gives people a chance to vent and express their first thought or unfiltered thought or reflected thought. And so it's often a home for a lot of anger in people's lives. The siloing of information, I think, is extremely important too, and a relatively new phenomenon.

So it seems as if we live in different realities, that people can go to different sources to confirm whatever it is that they believe, and they can find what they think is empirical evidence to support that. There's the echo chamber effect, you know, it's referred to, I think it's fashionable to use the word tribalism. I think that gets at something in sense a which is much more I would say today than two generations ago.

You can live in a bubble where all you hear is what other people are saying to confirm your views, your fears, your anger. This is also a time of, what's referred to as affective polarization. And what that means is that the thing that unites you to your side is less affinity for your side than hatred for the other side.

So it's that sort of negative emotions. Politics has changed. You know, when I was a young man for the Reagan years, when he was president and before that, you had many more conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans. And that formed a kind of bridge among the party. So, for example, you would have Chuck Percy or Mark Hatfield or Bob Packwood, who were liberal Republicans, or Daniel Patrick Moynihan or Joe Lieberman or Southern Democrats who were more conservative.

And so the parties were less polarized. There was a chance for people to work across the aisle. So I think that's a new phenomenon. And then there's just a general, I think, antipathy and anger or feeling of alienation, and isolation. That explains a lot. That's a very complicated phenomenon. I think it's particularly pronounced among the young, but not by any means exclusively there.

And so people try to find community in response to that and the communities that are often finding themselves a part of are motivated by politics, and even in some cases by hatred. So it's very complicated. And then, of course, you add the fact that political figures come to the scene too, and they play a role in that, as well, you know, throughout American history and even recent American history, there are people on both sides that have made things worse rather than better.

Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you for that wonderful summation of many books' worth of information.

Peter Wehner

Sure.

Jo Nygard Owens

I'm curious, in your book, *The Death of Politics*, you talk about how we're actually getting politics wrong. So I'm curious, how are we seeing it wrong and how are we getting it wrong? And how can we move beyond the idea that our political system is beyond repair? Because that's something we hear a lot of.

Peter Wehner

Yeah, I think where we're getting it wrong is I think the people are, in a sense, too cynical about politics. And I don't mean to suggest that there aren't reasons that people are cynical or unhappy with politics. There are, but that's always been the case. I mean, politics is a human enterprise, like any human enterprise. It has its failures and its faults.

And there are aspects, I would say, to politics that are somewhat *sui generis* in terms of the way politics is done. I think where we're getting it wrong is that politics is still, I think, at its heart, a noble profession and calling. Or it can be, and I have always believed that politics is most fundamentally about justice.

And that's not all it's about. And it's an imperfect means to pursue justice. There are a lot of other ways to pursue justice, but justice matters and politics is a manifestation of it, and we see it throughout our history. I mean, the civil rights era is one example. There are many in this country and there are many in other countries.

So I do worry about people being fatalistic, cynical, indifferent to politics, because if politics really goes wrong, there can be human catastrophe. And so if you care about human flourishing, I think it's fair to say that you should probably care at least to some degree, about politics, you know, in terms of getting it right. I mean, there's just an ongoing process.

I'd say that probably the instinct for reform is a good thing to bring to politics. Not destruction. There are two very, very different things. I think some people look at institutions and they just want to take a wrecking ball to them. And that I think is as unhealthy. But I do think that the best moments in politics, for many of the best moments of politics, are when people who are reform-minded have the capacity to look at political institutions and detect when they're not working.

Maybe they're obsolete, they're out of touch, with what the needs of the country are, with the changing circumstances of the country. And you begin to advocate reforms that makes them more responsive and more humane. That's hard because all the institutions

change slowly and not easily. People who run them get ingrained in their ways, or habits form.

And often we become blind to how our institutions are failing. So I, I think if we were more alert, all of us from all sides of the political spectrum to self-reflection and to reform, we'd be in a better place than we are.

Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you. I'm going to switch gears just a little bit. So I'm curious, as someone who has been in the DC area for a long time and who works in the public square, what is your perception of the Cathedral and what's drawn you to the Cathedral, and how do you see its role both in DC and in the nation as a whole?

Peter Wehner

Yeah, I mean, it's beauty. It's aesthetic beauty. It's appreciation for the sacredness of things. I mean, you just for one thing, you just walk in and just the majesty of it. And it's a reminder, you know, there are these moments in life in which the presence and the imprint of God are particularly vivid. And often you see in music and in art and in architecture, and the Cathedral is that.

I think it's a touchstone for a lot of people in life. It's a place that they can come to. I think it has, as its core ethos, sort of a peacemaker. And I think it draws people who are healers rather than dividers and who understand the complexity of human life and human experience and know that at the end of the story, for people of faith, that there's healing and redemption.

Grace, I think, is a marker of what the life of the Cathedral is, the people there and the Cathedral itself. You know, in my experience, the language of grace is the most resonant language of anything that I've ever come across, both in my own life and also in the lives of others. And you've had leadership like you do now, with Randy, who personify kind of, I think the best of it and you and what you all are doing.

In a society that's so deeply riven and angry with each other, it's just important to have institutions that are going to be true to what they believe is right. And, you know, there have been moments of the national tragedy and the passing of important people. And it just... it's a gathering place. It's a gathering place to express grief and gratitude and hope. So that stuff matters.

Jo Nygard Owens

One of the things Randy emphasizes is how important each individual is, whether they are coming through our doors or joining us online. It is the individual person that matters. And I think by focusing on all the individuals, that's how we care for the country as a whole, because we're a country made of individuals and each person matters.

Peter Wehner

Yeah, that's beautifully said and deeply true.

Jo Nygard Owens

The Cathedral and this podcast in particular functions at the intersection of sacred and civic. So if we parse those words, sacred is connecting to God. And civic is connecting to one another and the public square. So how do you believe those of us standing at this crossroads, which just happens to be the name of our podcast, this crossroads of sacred and civic are to engage in public life?

Peter Wehner

Well, I'm glad... well first I'll say I'm glad you're engaging in it, because I don't think they're separable. And I think if the civic sphere is cleansed of the sacred spaces and sacred influences, it's harmful. And I mean that as a person of any faith or even people of no faith, I think that the sacred can influence the secular spheres, the civic spheres, by bringing, let's say, I'd say for those of us of the Christian faith, imago dei, the sense that people are made in the image of God.

And there's an intrinsic humanity for all people. And that people are owed certain things merely by the fact that they're human beings made in the image of God. Or if you don't believe in God, that there are certain things, inalienable rights, that are rooted in something other than the deity. In terms of what can, you know, those who are in the more sacred spaces bring to the civic sphere in this moment?

I'd say it's a combination of things. That is to be a truth teller. A person who cherishes truth speaks truth, speaks truth to power, and doesn't pull your punches on that and gives voice to justice. And that's particularly important to do at times of injustice. So that's on the one hand. On the other hand, to do it in a way, that doesn't cross lines, that doesn't dehumanize, that isn't ad hominem, that isn't driven by an impulse to hurt or destroy or dishonor the other person.

And that's very easy to get caught up in. And it's easy in politics, and it's easy in areas other than politics. And I think most people at some time in their life, on some issues, really felt a kind of anger when people are on the other side of an issue, maybe religious, maybe political, it may be something else.

And there's a feeling sometimes where you just want to shake them and say, "Don't you see where you're wrong? Why don't you see the world the way I do? Don't you know the damage that you're doing?" And you know, those are powerful emotions. Often, they're understandable, but they need to be filtered. They need to be reflected, and they need to uplift the human personality.

Jo Nygard Owens

One thing that we talk about is that righteous anger, that holy anger, letting it activate our compassion so that we're acting out of the compassion side rather than the anger side. But the anger is filtering to that compassion to create change in the world.

Peter Wehner

Yeah, that's a very helpful formulation that, yes, to catalyze good rather than bad. Is there something more to light than darkness? And it's not easy to do. I mentioned earlier that, you know, the civil rights era, Stephen Carter's professor at Yale said of Martin Luther King, Jr. that that his great contribution wasn't in giving voice to the pain of the oppressed people, but it was to take those very people who were oppressed and to have them react with love, and compassion in response to their oppressors.

And that's just a very, very difficult thing to do. But when you see it, it cuts through the din like almost nothing else. So that's where I think faith, at its best, and sacred spaces and people who work at institutions that care about the sacred, can make a great contribution to our public life.

Jo Nygard Owens

Indeed. And I think about Paolo Ferri, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, same sort of thing. How do you fight back out of love and compassion rather than out of hate, but still challenging the oppressors and recognizing that God has a preference for the weak and for the orphan and the widow and those who do not have a voice.

Peter Wehner

You know, it's interesting, I've thought about this too. So as I've gotten older as a person in the Christian faith, I've put increasing weight on the importance of discernment, which is

a kind of wisdom. It's knowing what is called for any particular moment in time. And that's true in an individual life. You know, when you're talking to somebody and trying to discern what is it that they need at this moment.

And even in Jesus, who, of course, reacted different ways at different moments, there was this, you know, the Beatitudes and the sermon on the Mount, the reaching out to the poor, the dispossessed, the people in in the shadows of society, the forgiveness, the tenderness. And there was Jesus with the moneychangers, and, you know, you brood of vipers and you whitewashed tombs.

So knowing what is needed at a particular moment and, and then not letting your own emotions, your own sensibilities be warped and that you always act in what you think is the best interest, even of the person you're opposed to. Like, what do they need to hear and what do they need from me, for their good and for the good of the whole.

Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you. At the Cathedral this year we've been engaging a theme called A Better Way. You may have heard about it from Dean Randy. And its underlying premise is that every person is a beloved child of God. And that as Americans, we yearn for a better way to be in relationship with one another. And that better way starts by learning to see our neighbor beyond our partisan labels or political beliefs might not agree, but we can always find ways to treat each other with humility, decency, and generosity of spirit. Your writing suggests that you want a better way forward as well. And what better way do you envision for the nation and for each of us as individuals?

Peter Wehner

Yeah, I'd say I'd put awfully high on that list that we, all of us, and here I'm speaking to myself, to learn to listen well to others. I found in my own experiences, even with people with whom I have disagreements, even profound disagreements with, to genuinely enter their story, to ask questions out of authentic curiosity.

Tell me how you've come to believe what you've come to believe. Tell me about your story that that shaped who you are. And then to listen to those stories, those experiences in their life, why they feel the way they do that is caused them to act the way that they do. I think that that that can be a huge gift.

I think when that happens, when you really do feel that somebody has listened well to you, that creates a kind of intimacy and vulnerability that I think lets the guards down and

creates the capacity for mutual understanding and even feelings of affection. I'll tell you, there's one other story that resonates with me. It's in *Surprised by Joy*, which is by C.S. Lewis, and he's describing his friendship with Owen Barfield.

So he sets up this discussion about halfway through in *Surprised by Joy*. And there were talks about first friends and second friends. And he says his first friend was a person named Arthur Reeves, whom he had known since childhood. And he says the first friend is your alter ego. That's the person where you begin the sentence, they can complete the sentence, and he uses the imagery, which is people who are standing shoulder to shoulder, sort of seeing the world the way that you that you do.

We all need that. We all need first friends to understand us and to, in a sense, complete us. But then they are second friends. And Lewis says, a second friend is not your alter ego, but your anti-self. It's the person that, he said, reads all the same books that you do and withdraws all the wrong conclusions from them. And he described Owen Barfield as a second friend.

What's interesting is that in one of the earliest books that Lewis dedicated, it was to Owen Barfield. He said he was my first and greatest teacher, and Owen Barfield and C.S. Lewis had pretty intense and public debates on theological issues. They seemed sort of esoteric to me, but not to them. And Lewis describes these conversations with Barfield, and he said, you know, we would go at it hammer and tong late in the night. Over time, you would begin to feel the power of the punches that, you know, were being delivered, and you would begin to kind of sense yourself seeing things that the other person didn't see. And what was most interesting about that relationship, and what Lewis describes, is that they both treasured their relationship more because they saw the world differently, because they felt like they helped each other see things together that they wouldn't see apart.

And Barfield later said that Lewis and I never debated for victory. We always debated for truth. And I think if we thought about that, internalize that more, which is a point of debate. Discussion and dialog is to better see truth, not victory. We would be much more open and actually much more appreciative for people who may refine our view. Recalibrate our understanding of things. So I take it that, the National Cathedral, as I understand it, is trying to open those lines of communication, which I think is terribly important thing to do.

Jo Nygard Owens

We're doing our best. Hopefully it's making the difference in the lives of people around the country and world. I know that we have people following us from all over, and the issues that we're seeing in the United States, while so pronounced to us, are the same issues that we're seeing everywhere.

Peter Wehner

Yeah, I think that makes sense. It's often these things are global phenomenons, or at least phenomenons of, in this case, sort of off in the Western world.

Jo Nygard Owens

This episode will drop the day before Thanksgiving. And I'm going to guess that many, many of our listeners will be at tables with family and friends who all have differing views on what's happening in the world. I wonder what words of wisdom and faith that you have for folks as they navigate these Thanksgiving conversations.

Peter Wehner

Yeah, well they're not easy. And particularly, I would say in this era, there's been more splitting of families and friendships over politics than any time that I can remember. So those are real concerns. And I think it's wise to think in advance how to deal with them. You know, I would let, in large measure, facts and circumstances guide it.

What I mean by that is, you know, one has to try and make a judgment on whether politics or cultural issues would be a fruitful line of discussion. Sometimes they are even with people who disagree, but sometimes they're not. And if you feel like you're dealing with somebody who is angry or is just not in a place where they can hear contrary views, or if you feel like you're in that place, you're wounded, you're upset, you're sad. Then it's probably worth avoiding politics.

If you do engage in political discussions, and I've done that my entire life, I do think what I was talking about earlier, which is to ask questions and show genuine curiosity, give people the space to talk about where they have come down, how they see the world. It doesn't mean that it's a therapy session per se, or that you're never supposed to offer a contrary view or speak up for things that you care about. It's just the way in which you do it and the context in which it happens, and whether people feel safe and they feel trusted. I mean, the worst thing of all to do is for folks to feel like they're under assault. They're being badgered. They're being overwhelmed because that leads to feelings of shame. They may

feel condescended to or patronized, and they may even feel that their core identity is under attack.

And any time any of us feel that our core identity is under attack, we tend to lash out and we become very defensive for understandable reasons. Because our lives are constructed based on ways that we view the world, view ourselves. And you have to be very careful, even if you think somebody has constructed their world on false ground.

One has to be very careful about deconstructing that because it can unnerve people. So, you know, all of that has to be taken into account. And I've often thought that the debates that we have, public policy debates, cultural debates, are proxies for other issues, like, I don't know if you've ever had these conversations and you've kind of dawned on you, we're not really debating this issue.

There's a lot underneath it that's going on, and this is just the manifestation. So you can spend a lot of energy and time and research on a particular issue. And in the end, it's almost a shadow debate.

Jo Nygard Owens

In your book, *The Death of Politics*, you recount an especially poignant series of interactions with a friend, showing both how difficult and how important it is to stay in dialog with people who believe differently than we do. Will you share this story with our listeners?

Peter Wehner

Yeah. In my own experience, I've had conversations with people who have views that are very different than mine. And I've had experiences where, I think I've acted in ways that have been helpful. In the latter category, there was a situation, I had written a column and it was 2017, in the *New York Times*.

And I had a friend in the talk radio world, who had different political views than I did, and he had read my article in the column in the *Times*, and he was upset about it, and he emailed me to express his unhappiness. And so I wrote him back. And so we were going back and forth in the emails.

And about the third iteration, I don't know if you've had these experiences before, but you can just feel the temperature going up, even through the emails. And he was getting angry. So, you know, I thought, well, I'm going to, you know, I need to respond to this. And I think

probably 15 years earlier I would have done a ten page point-by-point rebuttal, which I'm quite capable of doing, and it would have been totally useless.

It would have strained the relationship, and then I would have had to spend some amount of time trying to repair the relationship. So I jettisoned that idea, and instead I wrote him an email in which I said, I think we're just talking past each other. And let me tell you how I think you're viewing things. And then let me tell you how I'm viewing things, and why I think that phenomenon is happening.

And so I just, as best I could, I gave voice to what I thought where he was coming from. And I said, look, in this particular case, you're defending a person that you think is being waylaid by the mainstream media, and you feel like that his success is tied to the success of the country, and you kind of view yourself, you know, as an offensive lineman protecting your quarterback, and you don't think that one should throw any more logs on that fire.

And in addition to that, you feel like that I once was on the right side, the right team of what was best for America, and that I've now left that that team. And in some ways, it's painful for you, because you felt like, at one point, you know, we were together and now we're apart.

And for you, I think the primary virtue that you're focusing on is loyalty. Loyalty to a person, loyalty to a tribe, loyalty to a cause. I said for me, the way I view it is, I'm trying to strive for what I view as intellectual integrity. So I'm asking myself the question, if this person did this thing and he wasn't in my party, would I react differently if he was in my party?

Am I making my moral judgments or my political judgments based not on the act themselves or the person themselves, but which political party or which political philosophy they're identified with? And I went through and explained my view and I said, I just think we're talking past each other. And I didn't put a value judgment on which was better.

So he wrote me back and he said, "You know, I've read your note 2 or 3 times. You said it was like a light bulb was going on." And I remember the sentence that he said, "You're right, I'm not interested in objectivity. I'm interested in subjectivity. I'm an activist." So that really kept the relationship and got it back on track in a healthy way. So fast forward, I'm driving on the GW Parkway, which is a beautiful drive here in the Washington, DC area, and I was listening to his radio show in the morning, and he was talking about a school shooting that had happened in Florida.

And he was very pro Second Amendment, and he was telling his listeners, you know, what was happening is that there was a student who had survived the attack who was leading a gun control effort. And so this person happened to have a different view on gun control, very pro-second amendment. And so he was on the radio telling his listeners, “Look, absolutely make your case for the Second Amendment, and against what these proposals are.”

But he said, “Don't personally go after these students.” He said, “I have socks that have holes that are old to some of these students.” And he was basically saying, “Show some grace and humanity to them.” So when I got to my office in DC, I wrote him an email, and I say, “I was listening to your show on the way in, and I just wanted to thank you for what you said to your listeners not to go after personally these students.”

And he said he, you know, he thanked me for it. And then he said, “But you know, that voice that you heard on the GW Parkway wasn't my voice alone. It was your voice, too.” And that was a sign to me that even though we had and continue to have significant political differences, there is something about having people in your life that see things differently than you.

If there is a measure of trust where you do understand the point of view of another person, not only understand it, but in some respects can even be shaped by it.

Jo Nygard Owens

You two were second friends to each other.

Peter Wehner

Yeah, that's exactly right. And I don't want to pretend that, you know, those are always easy to navigate. Both of us have strong convictions on issues. So you have to be intentional about it. But it's worth the intentionality.

Jo Nygard Owens

We close all of our episodes by asking our guests about hope. And so today we want to ask you, how can we cling to authentic hope in our current political climate?

Peter Wehner

It's a great question. I mean, I think I was just reading recently an essay by Vaclav Havel, in a book called *Disturbing the Peace*. And he has actually a chapter on hope, and he articulated it in a way that I thought was very helpful to me. He said it's, above all, the

state of mind, not a state of the world, and that it's an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart, and that it transcends the world that we immediately experience.

And it's anchored in something beyond the horizon. So hope itself is not a prisoner to events. It's not detached from events. And it doesn't pretend that they're events in life. Havel would have known because he lived in a repressive communist Czechoslovakia at the time. But it's something about the notion of the human life, human experience, that we need hope. That there's a basis for hope, that you have to remain faithful, even if you don't necessarily believe you're being successful.

We don't have control over whether the things that we are a part of, the movements, the efforts, are going to be successful. But we do have some measure of control, whether we're faithful or not. I think it's also the awareness that life, the road to wisdom is, as Francis Collins said, and it's the title of his new book.

It's not a straight line. They're zig zags. They're steps forward and they're steps back. And that moments that may seem hopeless can turn around. And often they turn around for reasons that we don't fully realize or fully anticipate, kind of inflection moments in the life of society, just like in the life of an individual.

So you just... I think we just need to keep hopeful, keep anchored to reality, and believe that our actions matter. And in my case, as a follower of Jesus, that my life and human history has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and an author, and ultimately that ending is an ending of justice and all things are made new again.

Jo Nygard Owens

That's beautiful. The way you talked about hope made me think of a Rumi quote that I recently came across, which says, "If everything around you seems dark, look again. You may be the light."

Peter Wehner

Yeah, right. Human agency.

Jo Nygard Owens

Yeah. And we don't know what impact we're having on the world. So by holding that hope, we can be those beacons of light.

Peter Wehner

Yeah. That's very well said.

Jo Nygard Owens

Well, thank you so much for this conversation. I know that our listeners are going to love this.

Peter Wehner

Well, it's been great to be with you. And thanks for all of you there at the National Cathedral are doing and, we need what you're doing more now than ever.

Jo Nygard Owens

It was such a pleasure to sit down with Peter today and talk about bridging differences, politics and faith. This episode is right at the heart of sacred and civic. On our next episode, we are featuring an excerpt of a live conversation between our dean, Randy Hollerith, and former director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, Doctor Francis Collins.

They sat down recently to talk about Doctor Collins's most recent book, *The Road to Wisdom*, on true science, faith and trust. Thank you for listening to *Crossroads*, and until next time, peace be with you.

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