

Crossroads: Episode 19

Highlights from a Conversation with Dean Hollerith and Bestselling Author Francis S. Collins

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 on today's episode, we're featuring an excerpt of a live conversation between our dean, Randy Hollerith, and former director of the National Human Genome Research Institute. Dr. Francis S. Collins. Francis served as director of the National Institutes of Health under Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden.

He previously served as director of the International Human Genome Project, coordinating a consortium of laboratories to produce the first ever complete sequence of the human DNA in 2003, which catalyzed landmark discoveries of disease, genes, and a revolution in cancer therapeutics. His own groundbreaking work has led to the discovery of the cause of cystic fibrosis. He continues to lead a research group at NIH focused on diabetes and progeria, a form of premature aging.

They sat down recently to talk about Dr. Collins' most recent book, The Road to Wisdom, on truth, science, faith, and trust.

Randy Hollerith

So let's jump right in. What led you to write this book? How did this come about?

Francis S. Collins

You know, I've been privileged to be, as a scientist and a physician, in the public eye quite a lot in the course of, as you describe, leading the Human Genome Project. Subsequent to that, serving three different presidents as the director of the National Institutes of Health. And I've become increasingly concerned over the course of the past 2 or 3 decades, but particularly so in the last 4 or 5 years, about how many of the things that held our society together and allowed us to have cordial relationships and substantive discussions seem to have gotten rather frayed.

And it was certainly very clear that was happening in the course of Covid, where it was a circumstance where our society was faced with a real threat, the worst pandemic in more

than a century. You could think of that as a common enemy. People would often say, when you have a polarized group, that a common enemy is how to bring people together.

But it didn't. Instead, it seemed to have driven us further apart. And I am increasingly troubled about what is our future. If we're in a circumstance where most people seem to be uncomfortable interacting with those who don't agree with them. Like, we just got to stay with the people that are on the same side of an issue as us.

Otherwise it's just going to be impossible to have a conversation. And it's been made much worse by the rampant incivility that has characterized a lot of our interactions. And I'll say for the first time tonight, but I may say again, I think social media has been a really significant contributor to that deterioration in our social discourse by allowing all kinds of vitriol to spread without consequences.

So if we really want, as individuals and as a community, to find our path forward at a time where we've got lots of challenges ahead of us, for ourselves, for our children, our grandchildren, for the future, and we're in such a polarized situation where everything becomes political when it shouldn't. What's going on here, and how do we figure out how to find a better course?

And recognizing that just one person writing one book is probably pretty powerless to have a huge effect here. I felt like I had to do something. I am so disheartened by what I have seen in terms of what should be a loving society that takes care of itself and each other deteriorate into something else. That I felt the need to do something.

My book is dedicated to my most significant spiritual mentor, the Reverend Tim Keller. He was the founding pastor of Redeemer Church in New York. If you ever had a chance to go to a Tim Keller service, you would be changed by it. Here was a guy who was so deeply committed to his faith, but also incredibly insightful as a high level intellectual about human behavior and human attitudes.

And I learned so much from him. Tim developed pancreatic cancer and seeking an opportunity for experimental therapies that, if they didn't help him, might help somebody else. He came to NIH and spent much of his last two years in clinical trials right up here in Bethesda. And not far from where my lab is. I could walk over and spend time with him.

And we talked a lot about the state of our society and a lot about our mutual sense of distress, about where things were going. And I mentioned the possibility of maybe writing something. And he was relentless in saying, you have to do this. You have maybe a voice that somebody could listen to. I wasn't so sure, but ultimately I agreed.

And that's why the book is dedicated to him. So blame Tim Keller if you read this book and really don't like it. He made me do it.

Randy Hollerith

Well, as part of the Cathedral's programing, we're doing what we call a better way. And this is part of that series trying to bring people together to talk about what is a better way for us to work together, interact together, listen to one another, be together as Americans in this country as the same time. What does it mean to stand up for truth and the like?

And so when I read started to read your book, I was like, he's part of the program. I mean, this is the work we're trying to accomplish. I think your book will be much more successful than the small work we do here, but there were so much on the same line of thought, and I found that very gratifying for the work we're trying to do here.

But tell me, help folks understand you picked wisdom and not knowledge.

Francis S. Collins

Talk a little bit. Yeah. What's the difference here between those? Knowledge is an awareness of established facts. This is epistemology, and there are many debates about when does something become part of agreed upon knowledge. If you want a really thoughtful discussion of that, read Jonathan Roach's book called The Constitution of Knowledge, which makes the case that we have a constitution of laws, but we also have a constitution of agreed upon facts that have been well-established.

Some of them are history. Some of them are science. Some of them are geography, but they are things that society has tested and found to be true. But they don't have moral value. They just are. Wisdom has to go further than that. Wisdom needs to be grounded on established facts, on knowledge. But it adds to that. It adds insights.

It adds judgment about how to make a decision in a difficult circumstance where the answer isn't clear. It adds this moral compass that really matters whether something is on the path towards being the right thing or the wrong thing. It adds common sense. It adds experience. So it's got all these other layers. If you really want to know about wisdom, read the book of Proverbs.

Because Solomon had a lot to say about this and many, many chapters in that wonderful book. Or read. James. My favorite quote about wisdom is from the book of James in the New Testament. Chapter one, verse five. If any of you lack wisdom, then ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to you.

I count on that when I'm lacking in wisdom, I need that kind of help. Another way to think about this, if you're a science fiction fan, is think of who are the icons of knowledge and wisdom. Well, the icon of knowledge, of course, is Spock, right? Okay, let's all do this.

Randy Hollerith

I just I think we just showed our geekdom.

Francis S. Collins

We did. I didn't realize it was going to happen so quickly. But if you want to go beyond rationality and knowledge, which is what Spock was, to get the wisdom, then you got to go to Yoda. Because Yoda had the facts, too, but had all this other stuff about judgment and a moral compass so that that's why it's not the road to knowledge.

It's the road to wisdom. Although we need knowledge to get there. And let me be clear. Maybe it sounds a little presumptuous for me to write a book that says, I'm going to teach you about the road to wisdom, because I'm so good at it. I'm not. I'm regularly hitting potholes or ending up in the ditch myself, but I think I would like to argue it's an important road for us all to travel, and if there are things that are getting in our way, we ought to recognize them, diagnose them and if possible, start to do something about getting back on that track.

You're never really all the way there, but it's worth going. I'll tell you another story about what wisdom is, because I kind of like this as another way of explaining it, and it certainly resonates with my own experience. There was a young man who wanted to know what is really the source of wisdom, and so he asked all the philosophers and the academics and some of the theologians, and they all had various answers, but he didn't feel like he really got it.

And somebody said, well, you know, go up there in the mountains. There's that very thoughtful master up there who really knows what the answer is to your question. So he climbed up in the mountains and he found the master, and he said, master, I'm here. I'm really wanting you to tell me what is the source of wisdom. And the master says, oh, well, that's very easy.

It's good judgment. I thought about that for a minute. The young man did and thought, well, you know, I'm not sure I completely understand how I could get that. How do you get good judgment? And the master says, oh, well, from experience. Okay. But all right, that story makes sense. But how do I get experience? The master says, oh, very simple.

Bad judgment. Think about I think that's how I got a lot of my wisdom is by making mistakes. And that's part of the very first chapter of the book and the very first pages talks about a colossal failure I had and research for not having done a careful survey of the facts of the matter before starting on an experiment, which, after six months, turned out to be a completely unsalvageable disaster and almost caused me to leave science.

So yeah, bad judgment experience. It happened. I was more careful after that in terms of how I thought about a scientific experiment. So yeah, that's all in there. And I don't know,

too many people would say, I don't care about wisdom. I think we all kind of aspire to that, but maybe don't realize the parts of it that have gotten frayed right now for ourselves as individuals and for ourselves as part of society.

Randy Hollerith

You could have picked up a whole list of constituent parts of wisdom, and you picked, truth, science, faith and trust. Yeah. Talk a little bit how you got to those four.

Francis S. Collins

It might seem a little random, but it wasn't for me. And others may have a different list they'd want to add or subtract, to mine. First of all, truth. I don't know how you can really have an aspiration to wisdom unless you accept there is such a thing as objective truth and that we are creatures who are ill-served, to ignore it.

And it's important then to kind of figure out what do we mean by truth, because that's all gotten a bit blurred as well. There are various levels of information, some of which is really firmly established and some of which blurs over into opinion. But I think we have to say there is such a thing as objective truth.

The Earth really does go around the sun. Okay. The Earth is really, almost circular, but kind of elliptical. That's true. Right? Well, not for the 3000 members of the Flat Earth Society. That's not a good thing to have a circumstance where you can take something that is so firmly established and say, well, it's not true for me and haven't you heard more of that lately?

When there's a fact that somebody just doesn't really like. Well, okay. What's not true for me? Sorry if it's actually true. It's got to be true for everybody. And it does not care how you feel. That's the thing about facts. They really don't care how you feel. But in the current climate, where everybody is in many instances, so attached to a particular perspective, which I'm sorry to say is often driven by politics, then a fact comes along that doesn't fit.

And it almost seems like it's permissible to say, well, it's not true for me. So this is a fundamental part of wisdom is to get to that point of recognizing objective truth and recognizing that sometimes it comes to you from somebody who's not part of your bubble. And sometimes the stuff that somebody in your bubble tells you that they claim to be truth isn't.

You can't rely upon that kind of social grouping to be a clear litmus test for what's true and what isn't. So truth has got to be in there. I can't imagine a path to wisdom without that. And science, you know, maybe science could have been a subset of truth, because it is one of the means by which we arrive at truth about nature.

But being a scientist, I kind of had to elevate it to being one of the main points, because I'm worried about that. If you look at all the surveys in terms of what people's attitudes are towards science, science distrust has been growing pretty significantly in the course of the last 4 or 5 years, especially, it seems, since Covid.

So science has to be in this book, because if we really want to deal with issues, whether it's a pandemic or whether it's climate change or whether it's how do we deal with cancer in a more effective way, which we're doing, we're at this amazing moment scientifically, particularly in biomedical research, the things that are possible. We're hearing sickle cell disease.

We have people with stage four cancer who are now getting cured. Do not just help. All of that's happening at the very moment where people are saying, I'm not sure if I trust those scientists anymore. And science has become polarized and politicized. Science and politics should not generally be mixed together. And yet everything is mixed together now. So science had to be in there.

But faith did too. And here we are in a beautiful place of worship. And I'm a Christian. At age 27, after being an atheist. Up until then, I met Jesus. And Jesus is the foundation of everything I know that really matters. And I've never found a conflict between a being, a person of faith, and a person of science.

I think they answer different kinds of questions. And if you think there's a conflict, let's look closely at what kind of interpretation has been made of the science or of the scriptures. And you can almost always find a pathway of recognizing that they're both a gift from God. And God doesn't usually make mistakes or conflict with God's purposes.

So you would think, and, Randy, I know you've worked hard on this at a house of worship and a faith community ought to be in the best possible position at a time of this kind of divisiveness, to be the source of bringing people back together. We are called by the sermon on the Mount to those words of Jesus, not just to love our neighbors, but to love our enemies, the people who don't agree with us.

We're not doing so well with that in the world as a whole. And I'm afraid in our churches not a whole lot better with exceptions, but some of the most heartbreaking examples of people going after each other seem to be in the context of a church that can't seem to agree on something like whether or not you should have to wear masks.

I mean, really, is that a reason to have this kind of falling apart of our love for each other? So I both, in that chapter, I want to talk about my concerns about what has happened to faith communities that have, in some instances, been overtaken by political messages that are kind of the opposite of the sermon on the Mount and also be an exhortation.

This is our best hope. If we can bring our faith traditions back to where they started, where they are grounded, and all of us, and those values and those principles about love and grace and goodness, then maybe this could be the best catalyst for some healing and what has been generally a really serious case of societal illness. And then the fourth one is trust.

And I think it's probably one that overarching is the other three, because part of the reason we're in trouble about truth issues is because we aren't quite sure who to trust, and we take on board information from a source that really doesn't deserve that trust. Some posting on Facebook from somebody who maybe does not have your best interests at heart.

I'm saying, well, that's got to be true because it kind of resonates with where I am today. We've got to work much harder on the trust side of things to figure out how to do that assessment and to grant our trust to the appropriate sources, people or institution, ones that have integrity, that have competence. They know what they're talking about.

They've actually studied the issue. They have humility. They're not stretching beyond where their expertise is. Those three things integrity, competence, humility those ought to be your watchword, it seems to me, for how to make a decision about trust. But right now there's this fourth issue which has emerged even larger. And many of these decisions, which is that source part of my bubble?

Because if they are, I'm going to let my guard down and say, yeah, that's probably true. And if they're not part of my bubble, I'm like, I don't think so. Even though what they're telling me is actually an established fact. Again, the polarization has gotten in the way of so much of what should be the road to wisdom, whether it's in the establishment of truth or science or faith or trust, it's all gotten frayed.

Those anchors aren't as anchored as they should be. And if we want to fix that, I think we have to figure out ways to address all four of those.

Randy Hollerith

You know, you talk a little bit about and I think this is for people who are who are grappling with faith or trying to understand faith or maybe even reaching for it themselves. You, like many of us, like myself, you went through a little bit of a dark night of the soul in the midst of after coming to faith and continuing your science work and then being sort of overwhelmed by doubt again.

And talk a little bit about that, because I think that's a very common experience, but that people don't talk about.

Francis S. Collins

Yeah, Randy, I think people don't talk about that. Maybe there's even a subtle message that you shouldn't talk about that, that if you're a person of faith, well, then that's rock solid. It's never been that way for me. I think. Was it Paul Tillich who said doubt is not the opposite of faith? It's an element of faith feels that way to me.

And I have, over the course of my life, many instances where a particular area caused me to feel a little doubtful about, that doesn't feel quite right. And oftentimes those were motivations to then dig a little deeper and to understand something about that issue that I hadn't really spent enough time on. But I did have that one dark time.

It was about a year after I became a Christian, and I was finding out that this is a tough road to go, and I was encountering a lot of people who are deeply skeptical that this was just a phase, just sort of an emotional thing. And it felt like God was just so far away. And I my prayers felt like they went nowhere.

I was in a little church in Carrboro, North Carolina that for the first few months had just nurtured my soul. And suddenly it felt like, I don't know any of these people and I don't know what's going on here. And even singing, which has always been the thing that has lifted me the most, just feels so completely flat.

And I was ready to give it up. One Sunday at the end of the service felt like absolutely the most despondent participant in anything. That related to faith. And I went up to the altar to just see if some kind of prayer answer could be obtained and nothing was happening. And then there was a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up and it was somebody I did not know.

But I realized I had just been admitted to the church that day, and he asked, it looks like you're having some kind of a struggle. Maybe I can help. And I said, I don't think you can. I'm a scientist. I came to Faith. I'm not sure they fit together anymore. And he said, well, maybe I could as he knelt down next to me because I'm a professor of physics.

I just arrived at the University of North Carolina, and I've gone through a lot of those struggles, too. Let's talk. Okay. God, thank you for providing the perfect person to show up at that moment. And that little church in Carrboro, and we went off to lunch and then we got to know each other better. And I got through it.

And, you know, what helped was basically going back through the experience. It had brought me to faith in the first place, which was a two year journey. And recognizing that it was true, it was valid. It was not something I made up for me. It had to not be purely emotional. Although it was okay to have a revelation or part of it, and it did, but it also had to make sense. It had to be consistent with my view that God didn't expect us to abandon our intellect in order to become believers.

Randy Hollerith

Brain at the door.

Francis S. Collins

Or park your brain at the church door. So it brought me back again, and I never had since then, a period like that. Although I suppose I could still. I'm still here.

Randy Hollerith

And thank you for that. One of the things I thought was most impressive about the book, many things I really liked. But, you know, we talk about the polarization and how people are not talking to one another. People are staying in their bubbles, as we would like to say. But the work that you did with Braver Angels over the whole Covid issue that had been politicized, and the fact that you stepped up in conversations with Adam Wilkinson, I believe, is the name, on two very different sides of the issue. And yet you were willing to make yourself vulnerable in the midst of that. Talk about that with that was that experience?

Francis S. Collins

Yeah, I learned a lot in that experience. I'm curious how many of you have heard of Braver Angels? Okay, that's a reasonable number of folks. But let me tell you, this is an organization that was founded in 2016 when the founders recognized that this divisiveness was really getting worse and needed to have some kind of approach. One of the founders is a marriage counselor, Bill Doherty, and he sort of looked at America and he said, America needs marriage counseling.

We need to get these people who can't agree with each other to actually sit down and listen to each other. So the whole goal of Braver Angels is to bring together people on opposite sides of a contentious issue in equal numbers. So there's no imbalance, usually with a moderator who's going to kind of keep things from deteriorating into any kind of personal attacks, and each side gets to say exactly what their feeling is about that issue, and the other side has to listen.

They have to listen so well that they can then speak back to the original speaker and say, here's what I heard you say sound like marriage counseling? And then it goes the other way. And I've been part of these, probably a dozen of these now on various topics that most of them have been about the public health response to Covid, an area that I've been obviously really troubled about.

And I have learned so much. And one of the people I got to know is this guy, Wilke Wilkinson. Wilke runs a trucking company in Minnesota, and he was absolutely livid about

the way in which the public health response to Covid played out, causing him to have to close his business. Having his kids pulled out of school. He's in rural Minnesota.

It's like, I don't really see the reasons for this. In my environment, it looks like this is all about the big cities. It doesn't fit with me here. And he saw other things that he thought were confusing about the vaccines, about masks, and he pretty much wrote off the whole bunch of government speakers, including me, because I was one of them and simply not worth listening to, and decided instead to take his answers from other sources and in ways that sometimes are helpful and sometimes work so well, might have seemed when I first met him.

Like the last person you would ever want to spend time with. If you're me and he's him, and we had these interactions that were absolutely gloves off, but not personal attacks. But here's how I feel. Here's how you feel. And I began to understand where he's coming from. From his perspective. Out there in the middle of rural Minnesota, there was a lot of stuff that happened with Covid that did not make sense.

We didn't have time to begin to do this modification based on geography, because things were happening so fast, and we had a very poor public health local system. But still, he had a really good point that this was not ideal. And the closures that went on of businesses and schools, at least in many places, went on longer than they should have because everybody was just uneasy about starting back up again.

He's right about that too. And he was right also that some of the communications that were done by people like me failed to explain that what we were putting forward was our best guess at that time. And we might be wrong. You didn't want to say that. You just wanted everybody to actually do something to try to protect themselves.

And sometimes you were wrong, and you had to say the month later, well, actually, we need to change that now. But without having prepared people for that, they basically kind of figured out we didn't know what we were talking about. I wish we had been more clear about the imperfections of the recommendations. So after doing this a while, we kind of got comfortable with each other.

And then we ended up in a debate in front of 600 Braver Angels members, coordinated by the leadership and located rather symbolically in Gettysburg. I could feel it in the air. And we had this very intense debate about the public health issues in front of the audience, and then a lot of questions. And I must say, I it felt really good.

I was comfortable defending the things that I think were really important from the public health perspective, like the safety and efficacy of vaccines, but also comfortable saying, and some of the stuff wasn't done as ideally as it should be. And he was comfortable saying, you know, I started out just being really angry and ready to say all kinds of terrible things about people.

Now I kind of understand. In fact, he's now started a podcast called Direct the Hate to try to tone down all of the nasty comments. And Wilkin and I are good friends. We enjoy going for a beer together. I still think he's really wrong about some stuff, and he still thinks I'm really wrong about some stuff, but that's okay.

That's what we need to do a lot more of. That's what I'm trying to argue in the last chapter of this book, is something that we can all take the opportunity to reach out to somebody who maybe they used to be your friend, but now you can't talk to them anymore because of this issue about abortion or immigration or gun control or something.

Randy Hollerith

And remember Thanksgiving's coming with all that family.

Francis S. Collins

I'm not sure. Around the Thanksgiving table is the moment to introduce this, but maybe with somebody at the Thanksgiving gathering, you can take a walk and say, hey, you know, we're on a different side about this. Let's I really want to understand where you're coming from. I'm not going to yell at you. I'm not going to plan my snappy response as soon as you start talking.

I'm actually going to listen. Listen so well that I'm going to tell you what I heard you say, and then I hope you'll do the same for me. Try it. If we could start doing that, if we the people began to take it into our hands to say the politicians are not going to solve this, believe me, they're not, the media are not going to solve this.

Believe me, they're not. Especially the social media. It's up to us. And start small and then build that into something that you do with your book club or your church to try to follow that same model. Look up whether Braver Angels has a chapter near you. They have more than 100 across the country, or there are lots of these other bridging organizations that you can explore, get involved.

It's so tempting to just check out now because it's so unpleasant, but it's going to stay unpleasant unless we all figured out how to turn that around.

Jo Nygard Owens

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt of the conversation between Dean Randy and Dr. Francis S. Collins. I appreciate Dr. Collins integration of faith and science. Some of life's big questions can be answered by science, some by faith, and many are answered at the intersection. Our next episode will release on Christmas Day. Since we wanted to bring you an episode filled with Christmas cheer, we invited Cathedral Vicar Dana Corsello and Associate Director of Music Julie DeBoer to join me and share their favorite Cathedral

Christmas memories. Thank you for listening to Crossroads and until next time, peace be with you.

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