

## **Crossroads: Episode 23**

### **How to Know a Person with Columnist David Brooks**

#### **The Rev. 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. On today's episode, we are featuring portions of the conversation between our Dean, Randy Hollerith, and columnist David Brooks. They recently discussed Brooks' latest book, *How to Know a Person*, which delves into the art of human connection, exploring the intricacies of empathy, understanding, and the profound impact our relationships have on our lives.

Getting to know those around us and understand them is crucial in our fractured society, which is why this conversation is a part of the Cathedral's ongoing program, A Better Way. You can learn more about A Better Way using the link in our show notes. Many thanks to Randy and David for this insightful conversation.

#### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

So before we jump into the book, and we have a lot to talk about with the book, I can't help it. I'm a clergyman. I want to talk with you a little bit about your op-ed on December 19<sup>th</sup>, *The Shock of Faith*. I think people have a lot of interest in you talking about your faith journey. And so much of what you said resonated with many of my own faith experiences. What moved you to write that?

#### **David Brooks**

Frankly, *The New York Times* readership may not be the most religious body in the country. And so when I was hired, my editors said I was as conservative as our readers could stand. And so I thought it was important. My joke is being a conservative columnist for *The New York Times* is like being the chief rabbi at Mecca.

And so there's not a lot of company there. I was sort of off on the fringes, but I didn't have this experience over the last 10 or 15 years of coming to faith. And so I thought I wanted to

try to represent it to people who may not have faith, and to try to make faith seem like something not crazy.

And, you know, it was a journey that happened really right around here. And so I grew up in New York, in lower Manhattan. I went to a nice Episcopal school. I grew up in a Jewish home, and I went to a nice Episcopal school called Grace Church School, which is near the Strand Bookstore, if you know that. And I was actually in the choir.

We were in the chapel every day, and I was in the choir. And because it was New York City, the choir was about 30 or 40% Jewish. And so we would sing the hymns, but to square with our religion, we wouldn't sing the word Jesus. And so the volume in the church would drop down and then it would come back up.

And so I learned the Lord's Prayer. I learned the hymns. I learned this beautiful story of Jesus. And I grew up in a Jewish home. So I knew the Jewish story. And I had these two stories rattling around in my brain for 50 years, almost. And they didn't mean much to me because I didn't believe in God. And so the stories were just nice stories.

I would go to Israel Synagogue right here on Connecticut Avenue. And we kept a kosher home. We sent our kids to Jewish day schools. But I didn't really have faith. And faith didn't come to me the way I expected. When you hear about faith, you hear about belief. What do you believe? Like it's some intellectual thing.

But when I came to faith first, it was through numinous experiences. I had an experience, if you if you know Penn Station in New York City, it's the second ugliest spot on the face of the Earth. The ugliest spot is the subway station next to Penn Station. And so I was on the subway car, and I was looking around, and I was searching at that moment, and it occurred to me that all the people I'd seen, like all the people in this room, had souls.

They had some piece of them that has no size, weight, color or shape, but gave them infinite value and dignity. And I just saw them. The souls were not still. I had the sensation their souls were stirring. They were soaring, some of them. They were suffering. They were sleeping. And if there are souls in each person, and I really don't...

Journalism doesn't make sense to me unless you believe the people you're writing about have souls. They have infinite value and dignity. Maybe there's a soul giver. And so that was swirling around, and it was sort of a swirl. And I had a whole series of these kinds of

transcendent experiences, which many of us have had. And some of them were here on the Cathedral grounds.

I spent a lot of time on the bench over on the North Lawn near Woodley. There was a tree on the south side which was lit up at night in a beautiful way that I associated with the Holy Spirit. And I really spent night after night here. And I was searching. And it turns out when you're searching, and that becomes known, Christians give you books. And so over the course of a couple months, several months, I had 600 books given to me, only 350 of which were different copies of *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. And so I was just searching and searching. And I knew a Christian, and my wife is sitting in the front row. And I would send her questions.

I want to have God's grace. How do I earn God's grace? What do I have to do? She was like, "No, it doesn't really work that way." And so we had exchanged these emails. And slowly, I would love to say there was a moment, when I was living up on Newark Street here, where God came through the wall and said, "Come, follow me."

That did not happen. But it was like you're driving in a train. You're just sitting and reading, and nothing dramatic is happening. Reading the paper, the people around you drinking coffee. And you look out the window and you realize that there's a lot of ground behind you, and you're a long way from atheism, and you've come into the land of belief.

So I realized I'm a believer. And to me, it's the Beatitudes that are the moment where the celestial grandeur pokes through. And so around 2013, I became a believer, and it came to me as Christianity, as to really revere Jesus the Jew. Jesus the Jew, which I talked about in that sermon, is not the fair-haired guy with two fingers in the air.

He was the guy who emerged from revolution and strife, and he went into the power structure. He upturned over all the tables at all. And I think the biggest surprise for me is that faith, to me, doesn't feel like belief. Because belief implies you possess something. Faith, to me, feels like a yearning, a longing, a desire for something, a desire for the infinite of which we were all a part.

### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

A homesickness.

### **David Brooks**

Yeah, the true disease some people call it. And so it felt like this longing, this yearning. And so, for me, my favorite definition of Gregory of Nyssa, the early church leader, was that heaven is endless longing. And it turns out the thing you long for determines the nature of your longing.

So if you yearn for money, you'll always be a little greedy. If you yearn for power, you'll always be insecure. But if you yearn for generosity itself, that's just a beautiful form of longing. And so it's felt like a joyous and strange adventure. But it really was getting over, getting out of my head and getting into the world. And when you come to faith, you're assenting to put your heart at the center of your life.

Which for a newspaper columnist is not the easiest thing, but it's been a nice journey, I really have this structure, this place, this community to really thank for it.

### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

Thank you for that. That was a gift. I appreciate you sharing that. Now let's go and talk about *How to Know a Person*. You've had *The Road to Character*, *The Second Mountain*, and now *How to Know a Person*. Three amazing books. You've talked about this before, but tell us who do you write these books for?

### **David Brooks**

Well, we writers are working out our stuff in public. And my life journey is a journey from superficiality and an attempt to get toward depth. And in this last book, as I mentioned, I grew up in a Jewish home in New York City. And for those of you who are not Jews, if you saw the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, you know how warm and huggy Jewish families can be.

They're always laughing and dancing and singing. I come from the other kind of Jewish family. And so the saying in our family was, "Act British, think Yiddish." And so we tried to be clever, but very stiff upper lip, showing no emotion. And so we were somewhat emotionally reserved. And then, you know, I went off to the University of Chicago, which is a very intellectually serious place. It's not the most emotional, fun place.

The saying about Chicago that everybody knows, "it's where fun goes to die." My favorite saying, "it's a Baptist school where atheist professors teach Jewish students St. Thomas Aquinas." And so super cerebral. The kids actually wear these t-shirts, "Works in practice, but does it work in theory?" And so I fit right in at Chicago.

And I had a double major while I was there in history and celibacy. And so super intellectual. I'm living up in my head. And then I got a job as a newspaper columnist to become a writer, which is somewhat lonely. And then I got a job on TV. And you would have thought that would loosen me up.

I would, you know, TV is an emotional medium. But I get a job on the most intellectual part of TV, which is the PBS NewsHour. And so we do these 12 minute segments on electrification in Nigeria. And so we have a wonderful audience. It's very thoughtful. It's very deep. It's somewhat seasoned. And so if a 93 year old lady comes up to me in the airport, I know what she's going to say.

"I don't watch your program. My mother loves it." And so all which is to say, I was living in my head, and that way of living is symbolized through one moment of mine that I had. My family were all big baseball fans. And I've been to thousands of games. I've never caught a foul ball. But one day, I took my youngest son up to Baltimore, to Camden Yards, and we were watching an Orioles game.

And the batter loses control. The bat, it flies in the air and lands in my lap. Now, getting a bat is a thousand times better than getting a ball. Any normal human being is standing up in the air, waving his trophy, high fiving everybody, hugging, getting on the jumbotron. I took the bat, and I put it on my feet, and I stared straight ahead.

I had the emotional reaction of a turtle. And so eventually you get to this point where you don't want to live this way. Frederick Buckner has a great line where he says that if you shut yourself off from the pains and agonies of life, you've also shut yourself off from the holy sources of life itself. And so I just wanted to get better. And some people go to therapy, but I write books.

And so that first book was called *The Road to Character*. And I learned writing that book, that actually writing a book on character doesn't give you a good character. And even reading a book on character doesn't give you a good character. But buying a book on character does give you a good character. And so I recommend that.

And so then *The Second Mountain* was about my season in the valley. And then this book was about hopefully trying to induce in myself a kind of emotional openness. And I can prove that it works because a couple of years ago, after the book came out, or maybe a year ago, I was at a conference in Nantucket and the guy on stage said, "Okay, everybody in the crowd, I'm going to hand you a piece of paper which had lyrics to a love song.

And I want you to find a stranger. Gaze into their eyes and sing the love song to them.” And I did it. I found some old guy. I gazed into his eyes I sang love songs.

**The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

What'd you sing?

**David Brooks**

I can't remember the name of the song now. But there was no chemistry between us. There were no sparks. Nothing happened. So we write books in order to help ourselves.

**The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

So let me let me ask you a question. As you know, and as many folks here know, it's been an interesting week here at the Cathedral. Things have been busy, as they say. And I've been really interested at the number of emails and letters and phone calls that I've been getting around the end of Bishop Mariann's homily at the Prayer Service for the Nation.

There are so many emails that I have gotten that talk about what she said as being a diatribe, as being attacked, as being so regrettable. Never should have happened. Awful thing to do, cornering the president. And then I get so many other people who write in and say, “Good for her to speak gently to the president about having mercy.”

And two radically different understandings of what she said from good people on both sides of this. Given what you talked about in your book, how do we make sense of that?

**David Brooks**

Yeah, as you were just speaking, I'm reminded of something a friend of mine who's a pastor, a Baptist pastor, in Northern Virginia said to me. He said his church has gotten so politicized, and it's about 50/50. And he just... it was just hard on him. And it is a problem, the core problem in our society and in that story you just told, is seeing everything through a political lens.

**The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

Yeah.

**David Brooks**

And to me, one of the problems in our politics is it has become a religion for a lot of people. That if you leave people naked and alone, if you leave people with a sense of

existential anxiety, they're going to seek some form of social therapy which will fill their void. And politics gives you the illusion that you're going to get what you get from religion or community.

It gives you the illusion that you're on the team. You're a member of a community. Team red, team blue. But you're not in a community. You're not serving each other. You're just hating the same people. It gives you the illusion of righteous action. But you're not sitting with the widow or serving the poor. You're just indignant on Twitter.

And so politics is a form, a failed form, of social therapy, which gives you the illusion you're going to solve your loneliness and your anger and your isolation, but it just wants you in a period of culture war. And so to me, the over-politicization of life, the over-politicization of sports, of churches, of everything... If you're asking politics to fill a hole in your soul, you're asking more of politics than it can deliver.

And another friend of mine, who's also a pastor, said, "In my church, the people who are most spiritually healthy are quiet, and the people who are spiritually unhealthy are loud." And I think that is part of what's happening in this country, is that public conversation is being dominated by the unhealthy, tiny minority.

And that's true on the right. And as someone who was teaching at Yale off and on for 20 years, it's very much true on the left.

### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

Yeah.

### **David Brooks**

That these are small minorities of people who are working out their own issues in the form of politics or in the form of religion, but it's a pretty small minority, I found. I remember when Pope Francis first came on the scene. Remember a lot of people were really taken with him, including a lot of non-Christians. And it was striking to me at that moment how much people respond to anybody who acts like Jesus.

Well, he took a guy who was deformed, and if you remember, he hugged him face to face. That's a Christological moment. And it doesn't matter what faith you have or no faith. There's something beautiful about that, and people are drawn to it.

### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

In that in that vein, I'd love for you to read what I think is such a beautiful part of the beginning of your book. On page 16, if you'd read about beholding, since your lovely bride is sitting right out there right now.

### **David Brooks**

Okay, I'll read this. I'm embarrassed to do this with Anne right there. Okay, here we go.

*One day, not long ago, I was reading a dull book at my dining room table when I looked up and I saw my wife framed in the doorway of our house. The door was open. The late afternoon sun was streaming in around her. Her mind was elsewhere, but her gaze rested on a white orchid that we kept in a pot on the table by the door.*

I should mention that she was standing there in that doorway, the light streaming in behind her, and she didn't even notice I was there in the room, because that's the kind of charisma I have.

*I paused and looked at her with a special attention, and had a strange and wonderful awareness ripple across my mind. "I know her", I thought. I really know her. I know her through and through. If you'd asked me what it was exactly that I knew about her in that moment, I would have had trouble answering. It wasn't a collection of facts about her, or her life story, or even something expressible in words I'd used to describe her to a stranger.*

*It was the whole flowing of her being, the incandescence of her smile, the undercurrent of her insecurities, the rare flashes of fierceness, the vibrancy of her spirit. It was the lifts and harmonies of her music. I wasn't seeing pieces of her or having specific memories. What I felt I saw was the wholeness of her. However, consciousness creates her reality.*

*It's what happens when you've been with someone for a while, endured and delighted together, and slowly grown an intuitive sense for then how that person feels in response. It might even be accurate to say that for a magical moment, I wasn't seeing her. I was seeing out from her. Perhaps to really know one other person, you have to have a glimmer of how they experience the world.*

*To really know someone, you have to know how they know you. The only word I can think of in the English language that captures my mental processes at that instant is beholding. She was at the door, the light blazing in behind her, and I was beholding her. They say there*



*is no such thing as an ordinary person. When you're beholding someone, you're seeing the richness of this particular human consciousness.*

*The full symphony, how they perceive and create their life. I don't have to tell you how delicious that moment felt. Warm, intimate, and profound. It was the bliss of human connection.*

And I should say that I told the story after it happened to a friend of ours. This concept of beholding. And he said, the couple said, "Yeah, that's how we look at our grandchildren. We're not observing them. We're not inspecting them. We're just beholding." And it was just a beautiful, beautiful moment.

### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

That is a beautiful way that you have described it. And for me, from a theological point of view, I think it illustrates so beautifully what it means to move away from sin to a sort of... a reconciliation that, you know, as Christians, we believe that sin really is separation. We're separated from God. We're separated from our true selves.

We're separated from one another. And that overcoming sin is a process of overcoming that separation. And in a very fundamental way, Christ does that with his life, in his death. But I thought the way you described that beholding, if we could look at each person in that kind of way, that that to me would be the kingdom of God just about.

### **David Brooks**

Yeah. And I do think when you go through the Bible, we realize how many traumas of missed recognition, where people don't see each other, right? Jacob or the disciples not recognizing the risen Christ, or the parable of the Good Samaritan. Everybody sees the guy on the side of the road, the injured guy, but only the Samaritan really sees him, sees with the eyes of the heart.

And this is expressed constantly throughout the Bible with the images of light, of vision. I see, I know, and in many ways, the biblical language is wiser than our language. Now we draw this bifurcation with what we think of as knowing, as an intellectual act. But of course, in the Bible, to know is an intellectual act, but it's also to enter into covenant with. To be in community with. It's a whole body experience.

### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

Also in the flip side of what I was talking about of separation and reconciliation, you say really clearly that evil happens when people are unseeing, when they don't recognize the personhood in another human being. And then you go on to say the essence of evil is the tendency to obliterate the humanity of another.

### **David Brooks**

Yeah. There was a book called *Machete Season* that came out after the Rwandan Genocide, and a French journalist went down to Rwanda after the genocide and started interviewing the people who'd committed it. And he's interviewing somebody who had macheted his neighbor of 25 years. And he asked the guy, "What was it like when you did it?"

And he says, "That moment, he did not look like the person I'd been living next to all those years. His face got blurry, and he just had no features." And that's what dehumanization is, to not see the face. And as someone, you know, like anybody in semi-public life, you get attacked. And as soon as you turn around and treat the other person with civility and generosity, the attacks stop.

As soon as they realized another human being at the end of their attack, they immediately turned into the kind of person they are most of the time, which is kind and generous. So it's that rekindling, that sparkling of, "Yeah, I'm a person, you're a person. What are we going to do here?" And it's magical that it turns around in an instant, no matter how nasty they've been in their email or whatever comment it was that they approached you with it.

### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

What's the old saying? It's almost impossible to hate someone when you've heard their story.

### **David Brooks**

And I would say that one of the ways we can all do better in the world is to do that. And so one of the ways, I have a buddy named Nick Epley, who's a psychologist at Chicago, and we were doing an event like this, and we're about 45 minutes into it. And then he says, "Okay, you and the audience, we're now going to shut up here. I want you to find a stranger, and I want you for the next ten minutes, tell them about the high point of your life, the low point of your life, and the turning point of your life."

And there's a big groan that goes up across the crowd. And he says, "How many of you don't want to do this?" And 80% of the hands go up. And he says, "Go." And so for the next ten minutes, they all find a stranger and they start telling the intimate stories of their lives. And after ten minutes, we can't get them to shut up. And after 20 minutes, finally, we bring them back to attention. And he says, "How many of you enjoyed that?"

And 80% of the hands go up. And one of his research findings is that we underestimate how much will enjoy talking to strangers. How deep people want to go, and we don't do it enough. And so I don't always do that. I try to live up to my word, but I don't always. But some of the time, when I'm on a flight, I'll put my headphones in and work for the first chunk of it.

But then, when there's an hour left in the flight, I'll take the headphones out. I don't want to have too long a conversation with the person, but an hour I can handle. And so we'll talk for the last hour of the flight. And there's never been a time where I remembered my reading more than I remember the conversation I had with the guy.

It was a short flight from JFK down to DCA. And he was an older guy, and he'd come to America from Russia. When he was a kid, he swept floors. He started a company. He'd started companies that went bankrupt. He showed me his vacation photos with him and a bunch of very good looking young people on a yacht.

I didn't quite know where that came from. And he wasn't my cup of tea. But it was fascinating to hear the guy tell the story of his life. And I've never met anybody whose life story is boring. And when you do this, you realize that nobody fits into the stereotype we have of them.

### **The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith**

And that's also the essence of community, isn't it? And in our culture today, there's such a lack of community. I always say that the church or the synagogue or the mosque or the temple is one of the last places where people can find inner intergenerational community, right? And when we can listen to one another's stories, it's an amazing thing.

But David, I want to thank you for all the gifts that you have given us over the years with your columns and your books and the way you make us all think and lift us to a better place. You're a good friend of this Cathedral and someone we admire, and we're so grateful for the work that you do. And we hope you'll keep doing it. Thank you for being with us tonight.

### **David Brooks**

Thank you.

### **The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens**

Thank you for joining us today for this excerpt from the Cathedral's Evening with David Brooks. I appreciate the wisdom and perspective Brooks offered us, as well as the encouragement to make a difference in relationships right where we are in today's individualistic society. There is a hunger for community, but our society provides fewer and fewer opportunities for people to come together.

Our churches are one such place where we gather in community, and I hope you know that you and all those around you are welcome at the Cathedral. If you wish to see the full program with David Brooks, the link will be in our show notes.

On our next episode, we will talk with Martin Luther King III and his wife Arndrea Waters King, about their initiative, Realize the Dream, which was born from the belief in the power of service, not just to help others, but to also build understanding, empathy, and unity between people and communities. The Cathedral's Canon Missioner, the Reverend Leonard Hamlin, will also be joining us for the conversation. Thank you for listening to Crossroads. And until next time, peace be with you.

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