

Crossroads: Episode 25

Deep Knowing of the Soul with John Philip Newell

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, I am delighted to sit down with renowned Celtic teacher and author John Philip Newell. He's the author of over 15 books, including his award winning publication *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* and his newest book, *The Great Search*, in which he looks at the great spiritual yearnings of humanity today, in the context of the decline of religion as we've known it.

In 2016, John Philip began the Earth & Soul Initiative and teaches regularly in the United States and Canada, as well as leading international pilgrimage weeks on Iona and in the Western Isles of Scotland. Welcome, John Philip, it is so good to have you here with us. And tell us, where are you joining from?

John Philip Newell

I'm speaking to you from the ecovillage of Fenton, up in the north of Scotland. The Fenton community began about 60 years ago with an eco-spiritual focus, so sort of way ahead of the game in terms of Earth awareness. And they're now putting a lot of energy into the development of a little ecovillage. And my wife and I are transitioning from Edinburgh into hopefully full-time residents here sometime early in the new year.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Oh, that sounds wonderful. I can't wait to learn more about that. I'm so thankful for the work that community is doing. I'm joining today from my home in Cleveland, Ohio. It's just so good to be here with you.

John Philip Newell

Thank you, Jo. It's good to be with you.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I am wondering... so our world is out of balance. And in this teetering, there are some who are just doubling down on what was. They want the rationality. They want the answers. They want this top down model of life where people are just telling them what to think, what to do, what to believe. But there are others who are searching for a new way, or as Phyllis Tickle said it, every 500 years, Christianity goes through this great rummage sale.

We lay it all out there, see what stays and what goes. And this goes for our broader society as well. We're in this period of shift and change, and you offer a beautiful way forward in your book, *The Great Search*. Would you share a little bit about that, how we might be searching in a new way?

John Philip Newell

Yeah. So for many years now, I've been aware of this being a transition moment, a time of religious exile for many, many people. A type of diaspora, hundreds of thousands, I would say probably millions of our brothers and sisters who began life very much within the four walls of our religious inheritance are no longer there.

And I've been very attentive to that through the diaspora and asking, "What is the search? Why this sort of movement outside the four walls of our inheritance? What are the yearnings in the human soul, and especially those who are looking beyond the four walls, as well as the many within, who are yearning for more than what has been traditionally offered?"

And I believe that this is a moment in which something new is trying to be born. And as you quite rightly were pointing to earlier, in any time of transition, whether religiously, politically, or culturally, transition times tend to throw up the fundamentalist within us. Not only within us individually, but within us collectively.

And what this looks like in our own lives is - I can't claim to be well if you are unwell. I can't claim wellness for my family if the family down the street is not being cared for, in terms of their health and their education. We can't claim to be well as a nation, we cannot claim to be great as a nation, if we are exploiting other nations or neglecting the well-being of other nations. And as a human species, we can't possibly claim to be well if the other life forms of Earth are suffering, especially from what we're doing.

So this is an enormous time of transition, but I don't believe that those reactionary or fundamentalist energies are the deep spirit of the age. I think the deep spirit of the age is

that something new is trying to be born. And it relates very much to interrelatedness, and knowing that wellness doesn't come in part, it comes in relation to the whole, and to us really revering one another as life forms, as nations, as religious traditions.

So I think that's one of the big, big yearnings, and certainly one that I give a lot of attention to in the new book.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That leads really well into my next question, because I'm wondering about stances. It seems that we need this shift in stance, and some folks have already made this shift, from a body and soul shift, from binary to inclusivity, from the original sin to original blessing, from dominion over the earth looking like subjugation to cultivation and nurture. So how can we promote just even subtle shifts? What is it going to take for some, those subtle shifts into a new stance, so that we can get to where we need to be?

John Philip Newell

Yeah. I was recently speaking to a wise, old man here in the Fenton community, and asked him what his hope was for moving forward in this time of fairly reactionary fundamentalism, politically and religiously. And his response was, "Well, we need to focus on the immediate and the local." And I think that's an important thing to do. It is quite easy to get almost paralyzed by the sort of fundamentalism of our political systems or of our religious systems, and feel a bit overwhelmed by the sheer extent of transformation and change that needs to happen.

And this wise old man's point was let's focus on how we are to live, and how we are to live in this community, and in that sense, live the change that we're looking for.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I love what Richard Rohr says about prophets and priests, and we need those prophets at the edge to lead us into this new space. But we also need those priests to take it and make it real and to embody it in our lives. And so I love the imagery of both and holding those in tension. And some may find themselves within the four walls and needing that priestly figure, and others might find themselves outside the four walls and following the prophet.

John Philip Newell

Absolutely.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

You talked a lot about knowing. And in *Sacred Earth*, you talk about how when you get the right framework, everything starts slotting into place. And it's just this amazing epiphany, if you will. And that sort of happened to me when I was reading that book. I thought, oh my goodness, all of these things that have been yearnings deep within me, the soul longings that you talk about, suddenly had a home and I could make meaning and understanding out of them.

For example, last summer, my family traveled to Ireland, and I just found myself taking picture after picture of all of the thresholds. And I suddenly, when reading the books, I'm like, "Well, of course this is why I was drawn to these thresholds!" All of the arches bridging heaven and earth. But how do we draw this liminality into our life?

A space of unknown knowing, a space where we can allow those yearnings to be free, but then also find ways to have them have meaning and purpose in our lives?

John Philip Newell

Yeah, I think part of the beauty of accessing a sense of threshold is that every moment is a time of threshold in which we're moving from the past, through this archway of the present moment, into what has never been before. And that's very beautiful, because it enables us to pay attention to both the past, and to be attentive to the new thing that's trying to be born, and to see this moment in time that we are living in, and to see the communities that we're trying to serve and be part of.

And I think you touched on the important aspect of knowing, and I think in a lot of our Western Christian inheritance, as well as in a lot of our Western cultural inheritance, we've had this sense that has been quite, I think, dominated by the Doctrine of Original Sin, which is want to say that what is deepest in us is opposed to the divine, rather than being of the divine.

And what is deepest in this is ignorance, rather than sacred wisdom. And certainly in the Celtic world, from which I've drawn very heavily in my life and in my teachings, the starting point is not the Doctrine of Original Sin, but just the sense of original blessing. Or that what is deepest in this is of God, rather opposed to God.

And this affects how we go about accessing what is true. And I think it's inviting us to pay attention to what the soul knows. As a teacher, one of the most important responses I

ever hear from readers or from listeners is, “Oh, I knew this. But what you're teaching, I've known, but I've never actually heard it said, or haven't heard it uttered so simply.”

And I love it when that happens, because I think that is what my role is. That is what our role is for one another, to try to give expression to some of that deep knowing of the soul. To be made of God is to know that the wisdom of the divine is deep within us. And so our role is to be liberated of that depth of wisdom, not only in our own lives, but for one another, instead of this notion of, “Oh, I have some truth, you don't. Let me tell you what it is.” It's a matter of, “How can I be part of releasing that soul knowing, that soul wisdom that is deep within you?”

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

So in both *The Great Search* and *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, you introduce readers to nine figures in each book who live out different aspects and themes of the books. So some of these folks I knew or had heard of and got to know better, and some were new to me, but I feel like I have 18 new friends to talk to us about.

The decision around choosing is nine embodiments - is that significant? I'm just very curious.

John Philip Newell

Yeah. First of all, I think what I'd like to say is that I long to be a transmitter of great wisdom from those who come before us, trying to speak it and in new ways. And that's helped me shift much more intentionally in my work and in my writing. That moment of awareness, realizing I want to give myself much more intentionally now to consciously transmitting the great wisdom from the past.

So, for *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, I went very clearly to nine great teachers in the Celtic lineage of wisdom from the second century right through to today. And one of the great things about focusing on transmission in the writing of a book, or the teaching of a book, is that I get to spend a lot of time with nine great teachers and, you know, writing and teaching, of course, it involves some work.

But I think it's so important to be really blessed when you're doing your work. So what I set out to do in *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* was to transmit great wisdom within the Celtic stream, within this lineage of wisdom that comes in the Celtic Christian world. And then I've done the same in *The Great Search*, but not specifically from the Celtic Christian world, but drawing on great spiritual wisdom from different parts of the world, different

centuries, and sometimes men, sometimes women, and sometimes Christian, and sometimes from other great spiritual traditions.

So it's a very similar process in my own development. Who are the collectors of wisdom from the past that I think we need to listen to and hear today in a new way? What we've developed in our sort of Earth & Soul retreats is three annual retreats, looking at a particular theme. So in each retreat I'm dealing with three teachers, and then the next year, you know, I'm doing four or five or six. And then then in the third year, I'm doing seven, eight, nine...

So that's sort of how nine comes into being. This is not so much a mystical understanding of numbers, as that's how the teaching has occurred.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That makes sense. I was in a worship meeting recently where we were talking about a threefold blessing to be ninefold, so I didn't know if it had anything to do with that or not. Totally fine that it doesn't.

John Philip Newell

Yeah.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

So in May, speaking of retreat, you will be coming to the Cathedral. Have you been to the Cathedral before?

John Philip Newell

I have been to the Cathedral, but not to make any offerings, and just to love the space and then to pray. But no, I haven't done any sort of work as such.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Well, we are so excited, and we'll have more information about that in our show notes. But will you tell us a little bit about what you plan to offer at this time?

John Philip Newell

Yeah. Well, you know, in keeping with our conversation and this last part, it's going to be transmissions for transmitting wisdom for this moment in time. And my sort of personal starting point is always Celtic Christian wisdom, because I've been so blessed by it in my

own life, and I've seen many others blessed by it. So that's the place from which I approach great wisdom from other spiritual traditions as well.

So there will certainly be some of the sort of essence of Celtic wisdom that we'll explore. And also drawing on sort of resonant wisdoms from other traditions. The other thing I should say, and it's a really important part of my practice, is that I think that teaching should never just be offered on its own, it should always be offered in tandem with spiritual practice, so that the teaching can address the mind and the conscious self, that the spiritual practice really so opens the heart and allows the teaching to move to a deeper place within us.

So when I teach on Iona or at one of our retreats, for instance, I never move from teaching directly into a Q&A or sharing time. I always invite us to move into simple spiritual practices. Sometimes it's silence, sometimes it's sort of walking meditatively outside, but allowing the teaching to settle at a deeper level so that before we begin to hear from one another, and before there's a question and answer time about the teaching, there's been opportunity to really sort of listen to the soul and listen to what the soul knows.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

That's beautiful. I try to do that in my teaching as well. Well as we close our time today, I wonder if you could offer us a word of hope, whether that's from the Celtic tradition, whether it's from any of the other friends that we meet in *The Great Search*? What wisdom and what hope do you have for a hurting and broken world?

John Philip Newell

I remember a number of years ago watching a recording of an interview with the Dalai Lama, and he was asked by his interviewer if he had hope. And first of all, he laughed. And that's part of the beauty of the Dalai Lama. It was part of the beauty of someone like Desmond Tutu in our Christian tradition, there's something very beautiful about these great teachers who know about laughter, and I think it's pretty significant that both someone like Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama have known great suffering in their people.

They've witnessed it in life, so their laughter doesn't come out of a shallow place. I think it comes from a deep place. And part of laughter, I think, is remembering never to take ourselves too seriously. So first of all, he laughed, which was great, typical of the Dalai Lama. And then he said, "Of course I have hope for the future."

He said, “The future has not yet been decided.” And I think that this is so important. We sometimes live as if the future has already been decided, and we sometimes live as if all we have to access is ways of knowing and ways of being that we've already experienced. And I think that it's really important to see that we're being invited into a moment, every moment, that has never been before.

So let's allow ourselves to open to what has never been before. And the first teacher that I draw from in *The Great Search* is Thomas Barry, the eco-theologian. But he preferred to specialize in geology, and such was his love of earth. But one of the wonderful things that Thomas Barry says is that the universe is so amazing, it must have been dreamt into being.

And then he goes on to say, “We're in such a mess, politically, religiously, ecologically. We're in such a mess that we need to dream the way forward. We need to allow ourselves to imagine ways of being, ways of seeing, ways of into relating that we've never known before.” And I deeply believe that. And this is one of my reasons for having such hope, as not to downplay the enormity of the challenges that face us as a human species, as nations, as religious traditions.

But as to say that we are made of God, we are made of the great dreamer, the great imaginary, and we have the capacity. This is not to inflate ourselves. This is to say that this is the gift of imagination and dreaming that we have to live in to what we've never known before. So that would be what I'd want to say about hope.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you. Those are truly wonderful words about hope, and I just want to say one more thing about laughter in the Western world. We get into a fight or flight stance physiologically, and there are ways to close that cycle. And laughter is one of the ways that we close that fight or flight cycle, that when we laugh, it tells our body that we're safe.

John Philip Newell

Yeah, that's right. And, you know, sometimes it's truly laughing at ourselves as well.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Well, JP, thank you so much for your time today. This has been just an amazing conversation. I have been blessed by being here with you, by reading your books, and I know our listeners will as well.

John Philip Newell

Thank you. So many blessings to you.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you. I hope you enjoyed this conversation with John Philip Newell as much as I did. Check out our show notes to learn more about his retreat at the Cathedral in May, when he'll be transmitting more wisdom from the world's great teachers.

Our next episode will celebrate Women's History Month by looking at how women have been important in Cathedral history, and the ways they appear in the Cathedral's iconography.

To celebrate the one year anniversary of Crossroads, we are inviting you, our listeners, to help with a special Ask Me Anything episode, which will air on April 16th. Using the form found on our website, "cathedral.org/podcast", submit a question for us to answer on the air. We ask that all questions are submitted by April 4th. Thank you for listening to Crossroads and until next time, peace be with you.

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