

Sally Morgenthaler

“When the Inside Is the New Outside”

Episode 19 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Sally Morgenthaler is an innovator in religious practices, catalyzing new trends in worship, congregational systems, gender relations, and leadership. Known best for her work in *The Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, Morgenthaler’s “Leadership in a Flattened World” called for a major shift in how clergy lead congregations: from command-and-control paradigms to radical collaboration.

HIGHLIGHTS

This episode is the ideal platform for learning about and discussing the implications (especially for **children**) of, what has come to be called, “**nature deficit disorder**.” The allure of **digital technology** is not, however, scorned as entirely malevolent; indeed, Sally Morgenthaler pinpoints several important benefits. Why **the arts are absolutely vital for worship** experience is another theme, as is the title topic: “Why the Inside Is the New Outside.” Here “inside” refers to **our inner experience of thoughts and feelings**. The deeply subjective realm is now regarded as “outside” because, thanks to **brain imaging technologies**, it is now available for **objective scientific exploration**. An additional highlight of this episode is the telling of **her personal faith journey**, in which she **struggled for authentic spiritual experience in church settings** and to express her evolving faith identity.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Because this is one of a half dozen episodes that focus, at least in part, on challenges and opportunities for evolving Christian worship styles, this episode is recommended for church leader discussion contexts and seminarians. Lay religious or secular groups will probably want to focus on the first three discussion questions, which deal with “nature deficit” emanating from the rise in digital technologies.

BLOG COMMENTS

Richard Powell says:

I appreciated this conversation on a few levels. First there was the recurring

theme of humility (loved the term and concept of a “Hermeneutics of Humility”), which I think is so important; and it is just so encouraging to hear it talked about. Secondly, the idea of stages of faith tied to the wider canvas of evolution. Wow! Thirdly, the sense of a mysticism based in an examination of wonder. That term Sally used, “Mystical Existentialism,” really resonated for me and I would like to know more about that.

Sally described her shift to evangelicalism, which I think is common for those of us seeking a more authentic spirituality. I have commented to friends that my time in evangelicalism was long because it was the closest thing to a living mysticism I could find. Her description of growing out of the mythic tradition, her passion for the outdoors, and her new sense of God as a becoming rather than a being was very relevant to me.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Lutheran, nature-based childhood, reverence for nature, mentors, science and art, music, Thomas Berry, environmental degradation, reconnect faith with life, passion for life, outsider’s view of church, wonder (the need for in worship), meeting God in worship, worship evangelism, Christian exclusivity, experiential faith, Evangelicalism, Emerging Church movement, emergent faith, evolutionary faith, re-enchanted faith via trans-rational, multiple intelligences, Integral philosophy, “the rise of the interior,” moral development, neurotechnology, Jean Piaget, Carol Gilligan, Lawrence Kohlberg, Howard Gardner, “Google Earth on the inner world,” Don Beck, Clare Graves, Jean Gebser, worldview, children (lack of nature experience), “people of the screen” (digital), inner world, social networking (as real relationships), Joseph Myers, technomads, redefining family and community, bioregion, dualistic thinking, worship experience, wonder (as cornerstone of religion), consumerist religion (as pathological), arts (as crucial in worship), incarnational forms of worship, “mystic evidentialism”

BIOGRAPHY

Sally Morgenthaler is recognized as an innovator in religious practices worldwide, catalyzing new trends in worship, congregational systems, gender relations, and leadership. Best known for her book, *Worship Evangelism*, and her contribution to *The Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, Morgenthaler’s “Leadership in a Flattened World” called for a major shift in how clergy lead congregations: from command-and-control paradigms to radical collaboration. For the past two decades she has been a trusted interpreter of post-religious culture, as well as a prophetic voice — calling North American Christianity out of its inward-focus to become a transforming, generative presence in the world.

In early 2010 Morgenthaler left her work with religious institutions to explore the convergence of a developmental view of life (evolutionary) and spirituality. *Interior Design:*

When the Inside Is the New Outside is her current book project, which explores the exponential rise of interiority vis-a-vis social networking, story-hunger (an increasing obsession with story, worldwide), the rise of the right brain (cultural creatives), advances in neuroscience, and an accelerating trend toward holism (the both/and). She is also co-authoring a book with Joseph Myers, titled, *Technomadics: How People Belong and Behave Now*. *Technomadics* reveals the shift into 21st century's neo-nomadism and maps its effects on everyday life.

Morgenthaler has been adjunct professor of worship at Yale University, Asbury Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, George Fox University, Gordon Conwell Seminary, Mars Hill Graduate School, and Baylor University. She has also been a featured speaker at numerous conferences, including Catalyst, The American Society of Church Growth, The Beeson Institute, The Emergent National Conference, C21, The National Pastors Convention, Net Results, and National Worship Leaders Conference. She is also a professional nature photographer and resides in both Denver and L.A.

Sally is currently in transition professionally. To get a feel for where she's transitioning from, see this 2007 *Rev!* magazine article, titled "[Sally Morgenthaler Rethinks Her Own Paradigm](#)."

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones added, at the following url: <http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/sally-morgenthaler-nature-photographer-thought-leader/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **A childhood of wonder in nature.** Sally Morgenthaler regards her **wonder-filled childhood experiencing nature** and her youthful "**passion for life**" as shaping her adult emphasis on **bringing authentic spiritual experience into Christian worship**. She contrasts her focus on nature and life as a child with the Bible-based faith of her parents. She recalls,

My parents were and are still quite conservative in their faith and views, and are devout. My mother, especially, reads her Bible every day, and she lives her faith. There is no doubt. This is not just an institutional thing for her, or for my father. They really are good Christian people. For me, however, **the church was never the place where I seemed to meet God**—at least primarily. I was out climbing trees and running around and catching the polliwogs in the pond across the street.

Later, she laments how our culture has become so much "**people of the screen**" that **children are missing out on the free-ranging nature experiences** that were such a draw for her own generation and those before. She tells this story:

I was visiting **Bryce Canyon** this summer. As a child, I visited national parks with my family all the time—and yet this summer I didn't see many children. The children that I did see were from Europe or Japan, or somewhere else. And I asked a couple who owned a general store at the gate in Bryce, I asked them, "What changes have you seen?" And they said, "**We are not seeing the kids**. And when we do, they are always connected to something. We have seen that for twenty years."

The children are not experiencing this. So here in my mind, of course, is a **pathology**. But to step back and not immediately have this arrogant attitude that, “Well, the way that I grew up was the best way, and that external experience was the best way to experience life.” **My grandson, at twenty-two months, already knows how to work an iPhone.** And so he’s got several programs that he plays. He will get into it and he knows how to switch back and forth.

And so, we are “**people of the screen.**”

Question 1A: *Depending upon whether you are among the born-digital or pre-digital generations, to what extent did **your own childhood experience** mirror the norm for your age cohort, as described by Sally?*

Question 1B: *To what degree, if at all, was **unstructured playtime in nature** an important part of your childhood? If nature experience played an important role, is there **an echo of that experience in your adult life**? If nature experience was not a big part of your childhood, see if you can nevertheless recall a single key experience in nature that affected you powerfully in the moment — and then reflect on the degree to which that experience may actually play some role in your perspective or your priorities today.*

Question 1C: *Although neither participant in this interview mentioned, what has come to be called, “**nature deficit disorder**,” to what extent do you regard this as a real problem — both for individuals and for society at large? What about in your own life or in the lives of your family members?*

2. The upside of digital technology on psychological health and relationships. Sally Morgenthaler looks for balance, not abstinence, in partaking of screen time and nature time. Here is how she paints the upside of the new technologies:

We are mobile physically. But we are also mobile with our psyche, with our identity. **A part of why war does not work so well is that we are so connected across our nation—and we can be in any part of the planet.** So I can actually *be* in Afghanistan. I can actually *be* in Ethiopia. I’ve got relationships there, people I have never met. But they *are* relationships. For a while, **people tried to tell us, “Well, those relationships aren’t real.” Oh no, no, no. They are very real.** They function in the same ways as all of our best physical relationships. There are differences, of course, but those relationships are very real.

So my identity, who I am, isn’t so much anymore, “I grew up in Denver; I grew up in Poughkeepsie.” Here’s my **Facebook** address—and I have seven hundred and ninety-three friends. This is my identity.

I’ll never forget when **my daughter** was in high school, I was traveling, speaking around the country, but I would come home and we’d spend a lot of time together. (I am a single mother at this point.) So any time I had with her was very precious. Well, she would come home from school and was immediately on the computer. And **she’d be on her phone texting** or she’d be IMing. And I said “You know, I would like to be with you. I don’t really understand; you just left those friends at school.” And she said, “Oh no, no, no. **We are always together.**” And she said, “They’re family.”

And you know what? For about ten seconds I felt slighted, and then I realized we have redefined what it means to be *family*, and **what it means to have community**, and what it is to be

connected. **We have redefined who we ourselves are, and what it means to be human on this planet.** And it's all generations. My eighty-something parents are on the web. They are trading pictures and urban legends. We do this. **This is our new life.** And I love this term that Joseph Myers came up with: **technomadics**. It really does describe where we have moved. And so our sense of place is not as strong.

Question 2A: *In your own view, what are the benefits of participating in the digital world? And how has the advent of “screen time” shifted for you what you consider to be your “community” and your “family”?*

Question 2B: [Richard Louv](#), author of the bestselling *Last Child in the Woods* (and the person who coined the term “nature deficit disorder”), talks about the importance of cultivating a “[hybrid mind](#).” He explains, “The more high-tech our lives become, the more nature we need. The ultimate multitasking is to live simultaneously in both the digital and the physical world, using computers to maximize our powers to process intellectual data, and natural environments to ignite all of our senses and accelerate our ability to learn and to feel.” *Do you find this concept of the hybrid mind to be valuable? And to what extent do you feel that you yourself have achieved this kind of balance — and where are your growing edges?*

3. **Guiding the fires of childhood passion.** Sally Morgenthaler speaks of her “passion for life” that found a childhood outlet and guidance in two adult mentors. She explains,

And so I just loved life. I think that I loved it so much—I **was so passionate**—that I began to feel really strange about it. By the time **I was supposed to be sedate**—and as a girl back then, sort of just seen and not heard—I was nothing like that. I was also a student of this phenomenal renaissance woman in Denver. My mother took me to her when I was five, saying, “Please, would you teach her piano, because she has been playing since she was two, and I want her to read notes.” No other piano teacher would take me—whether that was just because they did not teach kids that young, or because it was me, I don’t know. *[laughter]* Carol Prey was a painter, photographer, musician—just an amazing human being—and her husband was a geologist.

For six years I lived in this womb of creativity of science and art. The two of them together: what an amazing thing! **That was my church.** Going to their home, which was kind of Frank Lloyd Wrightesque, with sculptures and Ansel Adams prints and the black-and-whites that Carol took of her children and her watercolor paintings. I had two lessons a week, and I developed as a pianist and I started playing a lot of places around Denver. I thought music would be good in my life, but really it was just this place **where life could be lived so passionately**, and nothing was out of bounds. **No question, no experience, no expression of curiosity or passion was out of bounds. So anyway, this was such an amazing environment to grow up in, that I have carried with me into the rest of my life this mix of science and art.**

Question 3A: *To what extent were your childhood passions **encouraged or discouraged**? And do you feel grateful for the role models or mentors you had? Or do you more have a sense of sadness for the mentors you lacked? Please elaborate.*

Question 3B: *To what extent have those childhood “passions for life” carried through to, or manifested anew in, **your adulthood**?*

4. **Quest for the right fit of faith.** With respect to finding a comfortable fit with religion and faith, Sally Morgenthaler describes **a long and difficult journey**:

I felt like I was too much—with this passion, this curiosity about life—and that somehow it didn't fit into faith systems that I grew up in. There was always this message, **"You need to be less—and certainly, less curious."** And, less interested in the things outdoors, and more in the stuff of **the Bible and in the creeds** and "this is where you need to find God." I felt bad about how, I guess, I was *made*. And in that search I felt that if I shift the kind of Christianity I am involved in, maybe I would feel better; maybe there will be **a better fit**.

In high school, I made a shift more into conservative Evangelicalism, still went to a Lutheran college, an incredible college, St. Olaf College. And I went there, having made a conversion, **born-again experience**. But none of it really fit, because **I felt even worse about myself** in that environment. Part of it had to do with **gender**, because in conservative Christian environments, as a woman, in many of them, you *are* much less. So I really was struggling by the time I got to St. Olaf—struggling even more so with my identity. I love life, what am I supposed to do with this love of life? And **I really thought in that conversion experience when I was fifteen that I had to confess or ask forgiveness for loving life**.

And now, I know how wrong that was. But I brought that into my experience at St. Olaf, and *there* was such **an expansive, progressive view of God and the way that the universe works**, and what it means to be human. After I graduated from St. Olaf, got married, and the person that I married had just had a born-again experience. He became a pastor later on in a conservative setting, and I didn't know quite what to do with that. So I think what I did was **I tried to re-enchant religion as much as I could. I tried to bring wonder into the American experience of religion** that I had had that I felt lacked in wonder.

Now, I am not saying that generically—I am not saying that all American religion lacks wonder. *My* experience of it did. And so, not really having a foothold in any kind of faith and still having this question of, **"Can I exist within the Christian narrative and still be the person with this nascent experiential spirituality that I had?"**

Question 4A: *In learning about Sally Morgenthaler's arduous journey to find a faith that fit with her core being, which aspect or aspects meant the most to you? In particular, what of your own faith journey came to mind while you were listening to Sally's story?*

5. **An "outsider" counsels churches about the needs of "outsiders."** Sally Morgenthaler describes her work with churches in this way:

Sometimes in the world of faith, we tend to denigrate: that it's not real unless it is in a book. It's not real unless it is in a building. And for me, moving further into a career as a thought leader in various faith movements, I find myself continually talking about **the need to reconnect faith with life**.

I am best known for asking leaders to do that: **taking the perspective of a person who doesn't go to church, who never liked church**. What would be their impression of coming into a church? Where would their life be represented? Whatever that life is—whether they are drawn to nature or relationships, or to career, or to their jobs, or art form—**where would that connection be made?** I mean, would they get the sense that God is interested in those things? So that has been a journey for me. As I look back, I can see now that **my involvement in the faith world has been very much**

from the point of view of someone outside of it. And I fought that for a long time, and finally in the last couple of years, as I have retreated more from my past role as a leader in certain faith circles, and I'm evolving into something new, I look at it and really realize that I have been trying to give voice to the people who don't call those buildings and those systems "home."

. . . I ended up writing a book about, basically, **how you can worship in a way that outsiders can understand, outsiders can appreciate**, where they can find God, meet God in a worship setting and not have the old traditions get in the way. So that's why **I wrote a book called *Worship Evangelism*** (not such a great title). I felt like **so much of worship was exclusionary**, and I wanted people to be able to *experience* God, rather than to just experience religion when they came. So those were the early years of my career, and then later on I found myself trying to help the Church understand the way that it is perceived by people who don't go to church. Again, looking back, because I was that outsider.

Question 5A: *What do you think Sally Morgenthaler means when she says, "I wanted people to be able to **experience God**, rather than to just experience religion"?*

Question 5B: *To what extent do you agree with Sally that churches ought to pay more attention to the needs of "**outsiders**"? Do you have any ideas about how that could happen more effectively?*

6. **The importance of art in the worship experience.** In her work with client churches, Sally Morgenthaler also stressed the importance of art in the worship experience. She says,

Art has such a role to play. Art is what we call **multivalent**. If five hundred people see the same movie, they're going to have a different experience. You do not have to have *one* take-away. **It can communicate in ways that preserve paradox and ambiguity. You can simply experience the universe more directly.**

Question 6A: *Have you experienced a **worship setting in which the art** (for example, music or architecture) evoked feelings for you that were far more important and welcome than the content of the message? If so, briefly describe the art form and its power for you.*

Question 6B: *Have you experienced a worship setting in which you felt congruence with the message, **but the message was poorly supported by artistic media** – setting, acoustics, music, etc. If so, briefly describe which artistic form(s) seemed to be most lacking for you.*

Question 6C: *If you are a churchgoer, do you tend to select a church more for its message (including creedal statements) or for its ability to provide your worship experience with **uplifting artistic or ritual expressions**?*

7. **Religion that has lost its wonder.** Sally Morgenthaler sums up her frustration with the general status of Christian churches today. She says,

Much of American religion has lost wonder as a cornerstone. Our religion basically becomes a religion of **the pursuit of happiness, with a little bit of Jesus thrown in.** I mean, really: the state of a lot of American religion, especially conservative, is *that*. **Churches bless a consumeristic lifestyle** of the Manifest Destiny, and **the only wonder that we have is the ethereal Jesus and the**

afterlife. This is what we've got. **This is my frustration,** because early on I was known as somebody who went in and tried to help people with their worship. I kept trying to **reground worship in the arts,** into something that people could touch and feel—incarnational, if you will. I kept trying to bring it down into the everyday, **so people would celebrate what is already here.**

Question 7: *What response in you is evoked by Sally Morgenthaler's critique? And how would you, yourself, assess the strengths and weaknesses of "American religion" today?*

8. **An emerging, evolutionary faith.** Sally Morgenthaler describes her current faith stance in this way. She says,

I think I have definitely **evolved out of the mythic, traditional view of who God is.** I love the way that Ian Lawton put it: instead of God as *being*, **God as becoming.** I think I had evolved into that view probably in my late thirties. And yet couldn't quite go there, couldn't say that as a leader in various faith movements. **There is a cost to saying that; there is a huge cost.** So I had evolved past that and into really an evolutionary view of life in all ways.

Later, this dialogue ensues:

Host: How would you describe your faith now?

Sally: Well, I think a truly **evolutionary** view of life ... and I mean that by '**emergent**'—not just deep-time past, but present and future: that life is continuing to create itself, to transform, to become immediate. **That view of life will re-enchant the world.** And re-enchant—not meaning in a magical, pre-rational sense—but in the best of the rational: a **trans-rational** sense. Meaning that we bring to bear **all of our kinds of intelligences.** It is not simply cognitive. We take cognitive as far as we can take it, but we include all of the other kinds of learnings, the ways of knowing. So it's kind of a prismatic view, from the **emotional intelligence** values, meaning psychological, spiritual, right brain as well as left brain, integrative approach. Does that make sense?

Host: Yeah, I hear echoes of **Integral philosophy**, Integral thinking.

Sally: Very much; I am very interested in that movement.

Question 8A: *Were you surprised to learn that, when Sally's view of God evolved, she needed to **keep that view hidden**, given the groups she was working with? And do you recall a time **when you spoke inauthentically** because some view or sense of relationship had shifted for you? Did that experience exact an emotional toll on you? Please elaborate, to the extent you are comfortable doing so.*

Question 8B: *Sally talks about her faith stance now as "**evolutionary**" and "**emergent.**" She explains that it "**re-enchants**" the world, but not in a magical way. Rather, in a "**trans-rational,**" "**integral**" way. To what extent do you share her faith perspective — and where do you differ?*

9. **"The rise of the interior."** The title that Sally Morgenthaler suggested for this interview when Michael Dowd made the invitation was, "**When the Inside Is the New Outside.**" Here is where Sally begins to explain what she means by this phrase:

For a couple hundred years in the Enlightenment project, we tended to focus on what we call **the objective—the outside world that we can see and measure and predict** and think about it in

linear ways. Descartes really helped us with that, and it has been a wonderful thing. “I think, therefore I am.” I can look at this object, or I have this substance in a test tube, and I can figure out what it is and how it works. And that’s all great. But **with the rise of neuroscience and neurotechnology, what we are understanding is that what we used to relegate to the subjective, the inner world, is itself a reality that can be explored, as well—and can be explored with the scientific method.**

As we are doing that, and the rise of the social sciences in what we used to call the soft sciences, what we are understanding about ourselves is more about how we work. Piaget, at the base of it in terms of cognitive development, and then applied to moral development (with Erikson and Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan and Kegan), we are understanding more about how we grow. **We have a world inside that has a map now. We can pinpoint areas of growth.** We can pinpoint geographies where we weren’t able to in the past. Now, with neurotechnology, we can actually see them at work.

Howard Gardner, in his original work on multiple intelligences, did not include **emotional and spiritual intelligence** because we really couldn’t measure them. Well, guess what? That is all changing. So **what does it mean when we are now able with the scientific method to investigate the inner world? We are validating that world as real.** And I think intuitively people know it is real—most of the pain and suffering in our world is not caused by stuff on the outside. It is caused by stuff on the inside—and our values and our addictions and how we orient ourselves to others. This is where the pain comes from.

So our inner world that we have relegated to the subjective, now there is almost this feeding frenzy to understand—to get to do Google Earth on the inner world.

Question 9: Sally Morgenthaler expresses delight in the technological advances that have recently allowed scientists access to probe the inner workings of the human brain. Thus, “objective” scientific tools can now be brought to bear in understanding the deeply subjective realm. ***Do you share Sally’s enthusiasm for how science can be brought to bear on understanding our thoughts and feelings and inner drives? And is there any recent brain science discovery, in particular, that you find fascinating or even of great practical use in navigating life’s challenges? Please elaborate.***

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