

Sally Morgenthaler

“When the Inside Is the New Outside”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 19 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, where we invite you to add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Sally Morgenthaler](#) is our featured guest. Sally brings to the conversation her rich experience as a leader in helping to design and implement new forms of contemporary worship in the [evangelical](#), [emergent](#), and [progressive](#) forms of Christianity. Here, she explores the importance of facilitating wonder within and especially beyond church walls.

Host: Hello Sally, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Sally: Thanks Michael. It is great to be talking to you.

Host: Sally, one of the things that I have been asking all of my guests is to begin by sharing some of your story. How did you come to the faith stance that you now have? Please give us your testimonial.

Sally: I grew up in the West, meaning Colorado, Wyoming, Montana: that is my place. I was raised in a home where we went to church every Sunday. I was the rebellious third child of four. My father always had the four children in tow going to church; my mother was always in the choir. I was the one who was carving on the pews and scribbling in the hymnals, and doing everything but what I was supposed to be doing. That was really true as to how my mother described me from birth, that I was destined to make trouble wherever I went, and that is really what I do.

So church for me was a place to get into trouble. I loved the stained glass windows—that’s how I learned the stories. I have always been story oriented. And I have many memories of being in our Lutheran churches. I grew up in a [mainline Protestant](#) environment in the ‘60s. It was an environment that was quickly changing; it went from one little church where it was quite conservative to a larger church in Denver that was part of the progressive, liberal movement. It was just that foment of change in the ‘60s.

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. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a semi-rural area where I could just go nuts. I remember catching a huge bullfrog and putting it in our horse tank. It wasn't a farm, but it was the closest thing to it.

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 Wright](#)esque, 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. And then, yes, my faith growing up, but I would say more primal would be beauty, truth, goodness, wherever I could find it.

I had a little camera that I took with me on every vacation; we took long vacations—five thousand miles a year by tent, and then by trailer, all throughout the United States, every state, across Canada four times, down to Mexico by car and little trailer, East Coast, West Coast, central, and down as far south as Acapulco. So I was chronicling these trips by taking pictures. That developed into an avocation, which developed more into a vocation. And [I am a photographer now](#).

So that should give you some idea of me growing up. Also, I should tell you that in that time period, you could imagine that the West was still pristine—it wasn't. I think that the rape of the West that [Thomas Berry](#) talks about was really full blown. And growing up in that, I loved the landscape, but I also grew up with this very intense grief of what was happening to the planet—as I could see it out my own window in my own little corner of the world. I have carried that also, and I didn't know quite what to do with that. But that direct experience continues to fuel the experience of the Divine for me at the foundations.

Host: It so matches our experience for nine years now traveling North America—permanently. We get to see and experience so much of this stunning continent. In fact, we have personified [North America](#) as ‘Nora.’ So, we say we are “falling ever more in love with Nora.” It’s a *reality* for us. It’s is not *just* playful—it *is* playful, obviously—but it has also become an intimate experience. We try to go to a lot of national parks, and a lot of state parks. It’s a *communion* experience; it’s a communion with God, to use religious language. And it’s very natural.

Sally: 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.”

Host: Wow. I want to invite you to lean into that just a little bit more. I would love to hear how has your religious thinking evolved over the years? And how would you describe, or how would you speak to it now?

Sally: 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.

Host: Let me actually invite you back to that, because I think it would be useful to many of our listeners. You have been a respected leader within what is often called the [Emerging Church movement](#), or postmodernist evangelicals—sort of a growing edge, an evolving edge of Christianity. And I am curious, how did you go from your childhood to that? And what has been your role in that context, because it has been significant for many people. That is what you are primarily known for.

Sally: Sure. Well, I was talking about how 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?"—not really having those answers, all I could do was try to bring wonder into the experience that I was having. I was a pastor's spouse at that point.

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.

Host: Mostly evangelical churches?

Sally: Across the board: for nearly two decades, both mainline and evangelical—from the very conservative to the very progressive.

Host: Wow.

Sally: So not just in Evangelicalism. And then later on in the Emergent movement, which is primarily an evangelical movement. Now it has moved into mainline circles, but not in the same way. Its DNA is evangelical. But I really spanned both of those worlds as a leader. And because I grew up [Lutheran](#), I know the DNA: the narratives, the history, the development of mainline faith. And then as an Evangelical, early on, moving into *that* world: I know that world as well.

Host: How would you describe your faith now? What most lights you up—where you find wonder, how you integrate science and religion? How do you speak about that 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.

Host: Amen.

Sally: And re-enchant—not meaning in a magical, pre-rational sense—but in the best of the rational: a trans-rational sense.

Host: For those who are not familiar with the term trans-rational, say something about that.

Sally: Meaning that we bring to bear all of our kinds of intelligences. It’s not simply cognitive. We take cognitive as far as we can, but we include other kinds of learning and ways of knowing. So it’s a prismatic view, from the [emotional intelligence](#) values, meaning spiritual, psychological, 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.

Host: I want to go into something I have heard you speak about, in terms of this growing, this evolving interior. I think you have called it “the rise of the interior.”

Sally: For a long time, I think 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.

Host: I love that analogy.

Sally: It is like we cannot drill down far enough. People are so fascinated by it. And also, at the same time this is all happening (the last part of the twentieth century, now the first part of the twenty-first), we are so drawn to story. Story is what speaks to us now. Whether we like it or not, YouTube is here. It is taking over our lives. The world of film, virtual reality—anything that has to do with social networking, we want to know each other on a very intimate level.

In some of this, of course, we are seeing pathologies that are developing. This isn’t utopia. In the book that I am writing, *Interior Design: Where the Inside is the New Outside*, I don’t talk about that trend like this is the next best thing. As we are seeing in terms of worldviews and the memes (if you read [Don Beck](#) and [Clare Graves](#) and [Jean Gebser](#)), we understand that whatever era we are in, whatever worldview we have, carries with it both these marvelous things and then pathologies. And so as we are so focusing on creating worlds in our heads, which is literally what we are doing, there are going to be pathologies from that.

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.” And it is not just how many hours now we are in front of the screen. (When you combine television and computer, I think it is now up to six hours a day—average.) The question is, how many hours we are on social networking sites to try to connect with people in *their* inner world. I have a wonderful man in my life; his name is Joseph Myers. He is an author, and he is writing a book (and I am helping him write this), it is called *Technomadics*. The basic theory is that we have moved from being geo-nomadic, way long ago, to agrarian/industrial, where we settled and either built farms or built factories, built cities, to now technomadic. We can be anywhere at any time.

Host: That is so interesting. [Connie and I are always traveling](#), and we are in an intimate relationship with this continent, but it took me about two years to realize why this lifestyle felt so completely, primordially satisfying—like deeper than our own personal history. When it dawned on me, it was like, “Oh gosh, duh!” Here we are teaching and preaching evolution. Well, for ninety-nine percent of human existence, we did not live in the same place year around. We would migrate with seasons, and we would come back to a place where we had not been for a year or two or three, and it was like a homecoming. Connie and I have that experience all the time. It is like this nomadic life—and yet, we are so plugged in. We could not live this way and have this kind of a ministry without being plugged in. We have laptops and we’ve got websites, and all the communication is happening. We are always taking walks; this afternoon we went swimming. We do that just to nourish our souls—and for us, it *is* a religious experience. And yet, we’re plugged in through our computers for so much of the day, and we also have this nomadic lifestyle. So I can really relate to this *technomadic* idea.

Sally: Well, and it is right; 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 793 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 IM-ing. 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. Then I realized we've redefined what it means to be *family*, and what it means to have community, and what it is to be connected. We've redefined who we *are*, and what it means to be human on this planet.

Host: Yes. I am looking at your bio right now, and I see the subtitle of the *Technomadics* book is, "How People Belong and Behave Now." There's a sense of redefining community and connection. How do you stay in touch with the people that you trust, that you love, that you respect, that you care for, and vice versa? The technology is really shifting that so rapidly.

Sally: And it's all generations. My eighty-something parents are on the web. They are trading pictures and urban legends. This is our new life. And I love this term that Joseph came up with: *technomadics*. It describes where we have moved. And so our sense of place is not as strong.

Host: The potential down side of that, as the [bioregionalists](#) and the [permaculture](#) folks and those who are really committed to living in right relationship with reality—with the air, water, soil, and life of your particular region—those folks remind us that, if we are so plugged in and our sense of community and our sense of connectedness and what we care for and what we care about, tends to be either global or cyberspace, we may not learn about our bioregion—and we may not even notice the life forms around us. So I think the challenges during the coming decades will be to pay attention to the quality of life—not just the quality of *my* life or your life or my family's life, but the quality of the biological world and the air, water, and soil upon which we all depend. And that is not going to happen necessarily automatically. We are going to have to *intend* that. We are going to have to *choose* that, it seems to me.

Sally: Yes, we *are* going to have to choose it. And I think it really involves getting out of the [dualisms](#) that we have created. This "inside/outside" isn't helping us.

Host: Say more about getting out of the dualisms.

Sally: Well, if we keep those compartments, we're going to dishonor one or the other. Religion has for me become such a barrier to experiencing God. Instead of separation of church and state, often I think of separation of church and God. Because I am trying to figure out if this God lives here. For so many years as a leader in faith movements, I would say, "Do people really experience God when they come into your services?" My passion was to help churches figure out ways of not getting in the way.

Host: I have lately been speaking a lot about [‘spirituality’ as being ‘right relationship to reality.’](#) And what are the ways that we do that? Certainly, by *you* helping church leaders—from liberal to conservative Church leaders—by basically giving them a reality check. By giving them a reality check, you are in fact helping them to come into more intimate relationship with reality. That is, how people are actually perceiving their church, what people’s actual experience is.

Sally: 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. You can tell that I am a passionate about that.

Host: I got that. I am finding my heart singing as you are speaking, because of this passion for wonder. I think you have spoken of wonder “as the meeting place of science, faith, and art.” Something happens to me when I hear that kind of talk. I think so much of the potential of the moment, of where we are now, is what you call the interior world. It’s the meaning-making, the storytelling. It’s the arts, the dance, the poetry, the metaphors that reach in and move us to tears. And we are not even sure why or how.

Sally: 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. This is what art does for us. And I think what’s coming to the fore is a longing for story. I believe in a *mystic evidentialism*.

Host: A mystic evidentialism? I love it. [Bruce Sanguin](#) and I talked about being ‘empirical mystics’ or ‘evidential mystics’. Say what *you* mean by that?

Sally: If you know of the work of [James Fowler](#)’s on the “[stages of faith](#),” you get to Stage 4, and Stage 4 is where you de-mythologize everything. You take an empirical perspective on life and just gut everything; there isn’t a place for mystery, and there is not much of a place for emergence. And when you get to the next stage, you are becoming a little bit more wise, you failed a lot in life, things have happened that you couldn’t control, you couldn’t predict, you can’t understand—and you *get* the fact that your knowledge is provisional. It’s partial.

And when either religion or faith approaches the cosmos as if they know it all, what we get

is that Stage 4 cockiness: that we have *got* it. If it's faith, we close the book. When we open it up and understand, though, that the universe is creating itself anew every moment. And what had seemed unnatural becomes our new natural. An emergent, or a mystic, evidentialism will have, what I call a 'hermeneutic of humility.'

[Hermeneutics](#) in faith systems is where we apply a certain lens to a text, a certain way of interpreting a text. A hermeneutic of humility, if you look at the universe as a text, Paul says in *Corinthians*, "I see in a mirror darkly, and then I will see face to face." So, being humble in the face of such wonder: *what else is there?* I think of a passage that maybe some of our listeners are going to be familiar with, in the [second chapter of *Philippians*](#). This is a great hymn of the faith, which is often said as the Eucharistic Prayer throughout the centuries. It says that Christ did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, and took the form of a servant. It's sort of the ultimate picture, for Christians, of humility—that if you believe in the Trinity and that historic understanding of God that Jesus *was* God and part of the Godhead, then it is God's *self* being humble and entering life in this way, and modeling humility for us.

Host: Yes. Well, Sally, thank you so much for sharing your passion and your enthusiasm and your vision for an Emerging Church with our listeners on the leading edge of faith.

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