

Gretta Vosper

“Beyond God: Becoming What We Believe In”

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Note: *The 38 interviews in this series were recorded in December 2010 and January 2011.*

Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 28 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith.](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com)” I’m [Michael Dowd](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com), 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, [Gretta Vosper](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com) is our featured guest. [Gretta](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com) is the founder of the [Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com). She currently leads the West Hill United Church in Toronto, Canada. Her bestselling book, [With or Without God: Why the Way We Live Is More Important than What We Believe](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com), made Amazon’s list of “[Top 25 Books that Caused a Commotion.](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com)” She advocates, among other things, that the Bible is not the authoritative Word of God for all time, and encourages churchgoers to drop dogmatic beliefs and to cultivate a heart for the wellbeing of all life. (Her latest book, published in April 2012, is titled, [Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief.](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com)) Here we discuss “Beyond God: Becoming What We Believe In.”

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

Gretta: Michael, it is wonderful to be part of this project.

Host: I am excited for you to be joining us, Gretta, in part because you are one of the few Christian thinkers and actors in the world who gets a warm reception not only from fellow religious people, but also from nonreligious people—and sometimes even religious skeptics. To begin, please share your faith journey. How did you come to where you are now, theologically or philosophically?

Gretta: I am a minister in the [United Church of Canada](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com), and that’s the church I was born into and have grown up in. It has framed a lot of who I am and the message that I have and the leadership that I am able to offer to [a congregation here in Toronto](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com). Growing up across the street from the church, our relationship with the church was a close one; my parents were both involved. But I was going through Sunday school at a time when the church was introducing new ideas, so the curriculum that was being used was the notorious “New Curriculum.” Now, I

say ‘notorious,’ because the United Church of Canada had been working closely on resources with other denominations, including the Baptist Church.

When the New Curriculum came in, there was a hue and cry against it. It presented the Bible as a collection of stories that had been written to help us understand faith and to come to new understandings about God that were more in keeping with contemporary scholarship that was being read and taught in theological colleges between the 1930s and 1950s—and this curriculum came out early in the 1960s. It taught about Jesus as being a model for our behavior, for living in right relationship, for being good. It taught about *God* as love. Those were concepts that were still not very welcome in many mainline denominations. But that’s the milieu in which I grew up, so I have an understanding of God that was very broad—even as a young child. When I arrived at theological college, which was a second career option for me, I learned that all those things that I had learned while I was growing up were ones that were now going to be offered to me in an academic setting.

So at theological college, I was able to really steep myself in the contemporary scholarship that had informed the creation of the New Curriculum—and that brought me into contact with scholars who had very progressive understandings. From theological college I arrived into a typical United Church congregation and went about the work and enjoyed it very much. I was in leadership in the Church for just about ten years when I had the opportunity to be in conversation with many congregations. The conversation focused on their core values and core beliefs. It took about a two-year period to go through about twenty congregations with this project. At the end of it, when I looked at it, I was astounded that even the people that I was ministering to, and those that my colleagues who had been trained in the same kind of colleges were leading—that many of the people in those congregations, unless they had some of their own theological education, they had not grasped that contemporary scholarship even existed. They still believed in a very supernatural, interventionist understanding of God as a being. They still believed that Jesus was the only Son of God; that he had died for their sins, although they couldn’t really articulate what that meant. It was a very elementary understanding. I don’t use that word disparagingly. I use it in the sense that in our elementary classes in church those are the things that many people had learned but not really moved beyond unless they had actually intentionally done so. So, I was flabbergasted because I had been speaking about contemporary scholarship in most of my preaching. Yet in most of the interchanges that I had with members of my community, I couldn’t understand why people had not actually heard what it was I was saying.

I went back to my congregation with the thought, “I’ve got to figure this out.” The next Sunday, our service began as usual with a Call to Worship and a Prayer of Approach, and we sang hymns that spoke about Jesus being the light of the world and God reigning over all Creation. It was so obvious, suddenly, why people weren’t getting it. I was spending twenty to twenty-five minutes every Sunday reading a [Lectionary](#) passage, explaining the context out of which it had grown, who had written it, why they had written it, what the socio-economic situation was, the political situation, the players, and why none of that had any connection with what was going on in our world right now—or if it did, picking up from that point and jumping

off into something else. Then, usually in the last two or three minutes, pulling in some metaphor that I could use to make sense of it. But I had really missed what was going on, entirely. So that was when I realized I couldn't lead that way anymore. I couldn't be in leadership in the Church if what I was doing was merely deconstructing scripture and reconstructing it in a way that really wasn't making it any more meaningful for people. So that's really where this project began—realizing that I was not offering the people that I was serving everything that I could.

Host: Yes. Wow! I've got to ask you to continue, because I think a lot of ministers are in that place. [Daniel Dennett](#), the [New Atheist](#) philosopher, published [a survey of ministers](#) who no longer believe in any of the otherworldly, supernatural stuff in a literal way and are struggling with their faith. It's really an amazing study (which gave birth to [The Clergy Project](#)). I think you are speaking the heart and the experience of so many ministers. So, what happened next? Where did you go next?

Gretta: I did read [that article](#), the work that Dennett had done. As I read it, a part of me mourned the situation that many of [those people](#) find themselves in. I am so privileged to be in a community that, when I went to them ten years ago and said, "I can't do this anymore, and these are the reasons why," they said, "Okay, so where are we going?" And I said, "I haven't got the foggiest notion where we're going." I only knew that I needed to have more integrity and needed to bring what I believed together with what I was trying to create in that community. The community held their hand out and said, "Okay, let's go," and we walked into this unknown territory together. So, I have been very fortunate to work with an incredible group of people, who every time we have taken a look at the horizon and seen things that looked scary and frightening, have said, "Well, we can't go back that way, so let's just keep going." That has created a very safe place for me to be able to do this work—and the kind of place that I wish for all my colleagues who live that life of dissonance.

Our community initially began looking at who we were and wanting to articulate a statement of faith, because we knew that we didn't hold to traditional beliefs. There had been a book study active in the congregation for about twenty years at that point in time, which had looked at a number of progressive, contemporary theologians' work: [John Spong](#), [John Dominic Crossan](#), and [Marcus Borg](#). All had been studied from years before by a core group of people, although certainly not all the congregation. They knew the Bible was not the authoritative Word of God for all time, and they were ready to explore the implications of that—because once you say that, there's an awful lot we do that rests on that belief. Take that belief away, and what do we have and what are we working with? So, they wanted to sort of put a stake in the ground and say, "Okay. This is what we believe." And it was a very pragmatic choice, because if I had left and gone somewhere else, they didn't want to be taken back to some more traditional, more conservative understanding.

So we sat down at the table and thought that we would start that process, but as soon as we did, one of the first things that someone wanted to put in was, "We don't believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God for all time." Well, as soon as we wrote that down, we realized

that there would be people in our community who might think that it was. And then came the question, “Who do we think Jesus is?” And immediately after writing something down, we thought, “Oh, there are people in our community who might think that.” So, we realized that we were doing what every statement of faith down through the history of humanity has ever done — and that’s draw a line in the sand. And we didn’t want to do that.

So we wrestled with it more, and we recognized that what we wanted to do was be like some of those very early Christian communities that were called Christian in a very derogatory way, because they lived differently than the people around them, because they placed values that they held in high esteem at the center of their communities and they tried to live up to them, no matter the cost. We recognized that what we wanted to do was to be able to be identified as people who lived according to some values that were really hard to live up to, but that we were going to struggle with. And so, we wrote instead another document that we called [VisionWorks](#). That document has been what has really formed this work—given it form—in these intervening years.

VisionWorks was first celebrated by the community in 2004. In 2009 it was rewritten by a group. I had nothing to do with the rewriting, and sort of waited with fear and trepidation for what they were going to come up with, because I knew it was going to stretch us. And it does. I mean, we are stretched by that work and by the ideals and the values that we say we want to live by.

Once we had that first document in place, then whenever someone in the community raised a question about something that we were doing, we would take it to the document, which represented our choices, and we would measure it against what we had said we wanted to be like. If it needed to be changed or removed entirely from the community’s celebrations or actions, then it was—and that was where the real change started to happen in the community.

Host: I’ll bet that’s where the change really happened. In some ways, it sounds to me that that document, or those documents, really served—not just as the articulation of your choices but also really as an embodiment of your collective intelligence, your collective heart at that time.

Gretta: That’s a very nice way to put it, and, yes, I would say that is very true. The people who worked on it were from a broad spectrum of the community. They had been engaged in conversations; they had wrestled with ideas; and they wanted to put down those highest ideals that we could frame this human community with. The word that was used to describe it very frequently was ‘daunting’. It was a daunting task to try to live up to these ideals—either personally or as a community—and everyone who was writing it knew that.

Host: Did you seek some kind of buy-in from the congregation? Was there a vote or a presentation to the congregation and feedback, so that it wasn’t seen as an elite group of people in the church making decisions that would affect the whole?

Gretta: It was the whole community that worked on the document. The [2009 document](#) can be found on our website, which is <http://www.westhill.net/>. On that website, you'll find a number of documents that we use.

In terms of process, we had a writing group that was working on the original piece. When a segment of it was completed, it was printed in the bulletin on that Sunday and I would preach on it specifically. During the week, there was an opportunity for a group to come together either in the evening or during the day, using exactly the same process and the same questions. We would take the feedback from those groups back to the writing group—and then rewrite it from there. At the end of that, the document was completed and offered to the congregation. The board celebrated it and incorporated it into the work of the church. It wasn't actually embraced by the congregation in a protocol way, in terms of making it policy. The board made it policy a year later. The congregation chose to do that as well, just so that we had its approval—though we knew that there was much in it that was already celebrated by the congregation.

The congregation was very involved in writing the document. When it was rewritten in 2009, the process was much simpler. We wrote it out with a working group who wrestled with it and then offered it to the congregation as a whole, rather than each segment as we had done in 2003, leading up to the 2004 document. And then that was embraced and celebrated by the congregation as a whole at a congregational meeting.

In reality, Michael, I do have to say that we suffered considerable losses at West Hill because of the choices that we were making. We chose to create, what we call, a *non-exclusive community*. By that, I mean a community that will not present any beliefs that might exclude someone else. That is very different from an *inclusive community* that presents beliefs in an attempt to include all the perspectives that are present in the community.

I am very happy to say that the community has grown beyond the losses that we sustained. We are now a strong, vibrant, healthy community and excited about the work that we do, and engaged. It's a very warm, celebratory place to be. Yet, there are people who are very traditional believers. There are those who would call themselves *nontheistic believers*: they believe in something they would call God but it's not a being, and it may or may not have any interventionist powers. There are those who are *nonrealists* in terms of God; they don't believe that there is 'a thing out there'—so if they use the word God, they are talking more about our responsibility to love. There are people who would *never* use that word *ever* to describe anything meaningful to themselves. They may refer to themselves as *atheists* or they may prefer not to use any moniker at all, and they may not even call themselves *religious*.

Host: It sounds not too dissimilar to many [Unitarian Universalist](#) churches.

Gretta: Yes. I am often asked, "So what's the difference between you and the Unitarians?" And my response is always, "Why does there have to be a difference?" Why can't we find the places where we celebrate the same things, where we are trying to live out the same things, where the compassion that I'm talking about is exactly the same compassion that they are

talking about? I think that our strength is going to be in finding those places where we resonate; where we have gifts that we can offer one another and celebrate in common. The danger inherent in religion is that it has always drawn lines; it has always built walls; it has always identified a group that is *in* and a group that is *out*. It doesn't matter how multi-faith we can be and how tolerant we become, if we identify exclusively as a community and we have differences from someone else, we are still reinforcing the wall between us. It might be a little lower, but it is still a wall. So I'm eager to find ways that we celebrate and hold up the same common values.

Host: The term that you just used is, I think, an important one. This idea of common values, shared values, shared perspectives, is not the same thing as holding the same beliefs. It was one of the reasons I was particularly excited about your participation in this teleseries, as well as that of other pastors who are working with congregations and are about the work of evolving Church, evolving congregations, evolving Christianity in a practical, local community way. This includes ministers like, [Tom Thresher](#) in Washington state, [Bruce Sanguin](#) in Vancouver, [Ian Lawton](#) in Spring Lake, Michigan. You all are really on the ground doing the work of evolving Christianity and evolving Church. I wonder if you could say more about this notion of *shared values* and also say more about the difference between 'inclusive' and 'non-exclusive'.

Gretta: When I was growing up, my mother dreadfully and unintentionally insulted one of my schoolteachers who was Jewish, by saying that he was the most Christian man she had ever met. Your listeners will know exactly what I mean by the horror that is felt when someone says that, but we know what the intention is. What she meant long ago—and my mother would never say anything like that now; she would be horrified—what she meant was that he celebrated and he lived the same values that she felt were inherent in her own belief tradition.

Those values are the same when we enter into conversation with people of almost any faith and people who have no faith, who are working to create a world in which all life celebrates and lives with wellbeing. We are talking about the same values. Our common language is values. Our belief systems are very different; they are culturally what we bring to our value systems. For instance, we have grown up doing things in this particular way, singing particular songs, chanting this particular thing, praying in this particular way. But the values that undergird many of the world's great faith traditions are the values of love, justice, compassion, and forgiveness. Raising *those* up in a community and calling a community to live *by* them completely and immediately eradicates any barriers based on beliefs. A conversation about those values can take place across any faith distinction that might be present.

So that's how we create this non-exclusive community. We speak about those values. Someone in my community who is a traditional Christian, who believes in God and may even believe in a male-gendered God, would hear me talking about *their* God because I am talking about all the things that their God would call them to do. I am talking about living with justice

and making choices that intentionally produce wellbeing in one's own life and in the lives of others—which is exactly what their God would be calling them to do. Similarly, the person who is a total atheist, who wants to be in a community that is building up and living out these values and helping *them* live them out: they hear me talking about the same thing.

We are all being, in some way, compelled to live according to love—but compelled perhaps from different sources in our own understandings. We are still knit together around these very common values. That's what I think the church of the future needs to be—less and less about the ways that we articulate what is specific to our belief and cultural tradition, and more about articulating in ways that can be accessible by all. So that our communities are the places where people come to be reinforced, to be strengthened, to challenge one another, to offer one another solace when we aren't able to live up to the ideals that we hold. If church can *be* that, then I think it has a very important role to play in a society which is reducing itself to a hundred and forty character sound bites and losing the ability to talk about things that are important in the process of becoming so virtual and virtually focused.

Host: What you just shared, Gretta, leads me to want to ask you about your book, [With or Without God](#)—especially the subtitle, [Why the Way We Live Is More Important than What We Believe](#). Say a little bit about that, in light of what you just shared.

Gretta: The title came out of the experience of my community, where people are in community who have a belief in God and people are in community who do not have a belief in God. So, it's with or without God. The most important thing that we can do is choose to live well and to live in such a way that allows others to live well, as well. So, we get beyond the arguments over the peculiarities of our belief system, and we get into conversation about how to live in right relationship with one's self, with others, and with all life on this planet—and indeed the planet itself.

How do we live in right relationship with those 'others'? It is [Martin Buber's 'I-Thou'](#) conversation. How do we make everything holy, sacred, of value and of worth in and of itself, so that we relate to it differently than we do when we are just using it or when it's simply an object that is there to satisfy our own longings and our own wants?

If we can see the world in that way, we see it very differently and we interact with it very differently. We also place ourselves in the position of deep risk, because we see the world as incredibly beautiful. And anything that maligns or harms that world—the people around us, ourselves—breaks our hearts. It's really difficult to live with that kind of an open heart. Community, then, becomes also the place where that woundedness can be held and we can hold one another when we lament our own shortcomings, the shortcomings of the world as it functions. We can turn our anger against the systemic violence and injustice into life-giving ways of being in the world, life-giving ways of engaging and offering possibility.

So, we get transformed in community. We come in with our own understandings and our own attitudes and our own choices. And we're exposed to the choices that other people are

making—to what *they* know about the world, what *their* relationships are like; to the lament that *they* feel in *their* heart because they have come across some instance of injustice that we have never thought of before. Exposed to that, our own heart starts to bleed. We feel it deeply. So, community is a transformational place, and I don't think we can live without it. We have to have it, and the church is the place where that kind of community can be deep and rich—if we can get beyond the need to frame it in archaic language and present it in texts which too often can be read with violent images and read in a way that excludes and denies love, rather than shares it as deeply as it needs to be shared in this world.

I think of the story, [Little Lord Fauntleroy](#). And in that story there's this little boy who sees the horrific poverty of the people who work for the lord, whose grandson, I believe, he comes to be. We read that story to our children, and it tells the tale about how we have to see how people in our communities are not well treated. Well, we live in a world where, at this time of year when I see all the beautiful things that brighten our homes and make our communities glitter with the glow of the season, I have to think of that story and the streets where those things are being made, and the people who are making the glittery Christmas ornaments and the fashionable clothes, and all the beauty that makes us feel so lovely about this time of the year. Where are those people going home to? What is the experience of home that they have? Are they being paid a living wage? What will that living wage offer them in their circumstances? We live in a world where that's right on our doorstep, but we have to stretch our understandings of that world in order to see it there. And then, that weighs on our hearts, and we have to live differently.

Host: What is striking me is that what you are talking about is not just the evolution of congregations or of Christianity or of church, it's also the evolution of our species and how do we be in right relationship to reality, or what I mean when I say, "[getting right with God](#)." It's being in right relationship to the actual reality that we are experiencing in this real world. All the [spiritual practices](#) are meant to serve that, in [helping us grow in right relationship to reality](#). If they don't, then we need to relook at those traditional practices and exercises that we call spiritual, that we call religious, and yet which do not facilitate living well and supporting others in doing the same.

We as a species are social creatures; we're group animals. For 99% of human history, it has been shared beliefs that have enabled groups to cohere, once verbal symbolic language emerged. The shared beliefs set a group apart from other cultures, other tribes, other groups that had a different set of beliefs which helped *them* cohere and work together as a group and sacrifice for the good for the whole. Now, we live in a world where we know that we are one human species. And now we realize that the in-group needs to include all human beings. Where there is any injustice in the world or evil—when I use the word evil from an evolutionary standpoint, I mean pursuing one's own, corporate, or group's self-interest at the expense of the larger body of life—then, those things need to be rectified. Otherwise, the body will be sick; it will be *dis-eased*. In a world of weapons of mass destruction, where it is really easy to find

them and get them, it is obviously unsustainable not to include in our understanding of ‘our neighbor’ the people whom our grandparents hated or feared.

So this idea of community being a transformative place: it has to happen in local or on small scales, where one can be accountable and supported. I agree with you completely that congregations are where that can happen naturally, especially if we can move congregations from what identifies them as having certain mythic beliefs that they hold literally, to having shared values and perspectives and are committed to mutual support. I think that is the evolution of the ‘whole shebang’ as best I can see it.

Gretta: It is in small communities that people are touched and moved to change—to be transformed, to transform their hearts, so that they see the world differently. I see that we’ve kind of [scuppered](#) ourselves when it comes to evolving as a species, and we have done that through medical science. In my book, I give myself as an example of being someone who would probably never have made it to reproductive age a century or so ago, because of a bad set of lungs, allergies, and the systems in my body that function well because of medical intervention. I would not have reproduced and had two kids who now have a combination of different physical challenges inherited from their dad and from me.

So, as a human species, where are we going? Evolution has always been about the survival of a species in the environment in which it finds itself. Given that we are now escalating a shift in our environment to the extent that we may not have been able to achieve the necessary adaptive physiological changes required to adapt to it in time, and that we have already saved and reproduced those who may not have reproduced before, we are becoming entirely dependent on technology for our evolution. It is technology that will allow us to survive as our climate changes. It is technology that allows me to grow to reproductive age, so that I can have children and allows them to have children. So technology is a very significant and crucial factor of our evolution.

The question going forward is, who gets access to it? That is the question of the future and it is an ethical dilemma. Who gets to survive because they have access to this technology—and who doesn’t? We’re already seeing a lot of that in the world. For example, we don’t have to worry about malaria here, but a whole other continent does and we have the technical wizardry to deal with that, but the access to the technology is compromised by human systems. So already, we are seeing the results of the technological evolution of ourselves as a human species.

Host: One of the things that gives me some hope in that regard is that some of the richest people in the world and the most technologically sophisticated, like [Bill Gates](#), [Warren Buffet](#), and others, are deeply committed to exactly the things you just articulated: to narrowing that gap in technology and narrowing the gap in access to various technologies. Yet, one of my guests within the last couple of weeks shared her notion of [transhumanism](#)—humans becoming [ever more symbiotic with our technology](#). Some people, in knee-jerk fashion, think, “Oh, that means that in the not too distant future, we’re going to live forever or for a long

time”—without thinking through that in a finite world, if all you’ve got is birth but you’ve got people living a really long time, we’re going to have to place a moratorium on birth, otherwise we’re going to be overpopulated in a massive way very quickly. Most people do not appreciate [how sacred and how necessary death is at all levels of the cosmos](#) (but that’s a whole other topic).

Gretta: There is a beautiful prayer in [The Faith Club](#) from the [Yizkor Jewish Memorial Service](#), that asks, What if we were given the gift of being able to live forever—but along with that gift comes the fact that there can be no new life: only us forever and always. No first love, no first job, no first discovery. No first anything. Could there ever be any question what our answer would be?

Host: Yes, and it becomes the question, Is it heaven or is it hell? There’s an Iroquois story that touches on the same point. The tribe was given a choice by Great Spirit, “You can either have immortality or you can have children. Choose.” Of course, there was a big debate among the members of the tribe, and finally the grandmothers all sat in circle together and after speaking with each other and being in silence, they came back and said, “We choose children.”

It is a choice, and indigenous cultures have always known that. When you have to live within the confines of a particular bioregion, a particular watershed, there was always the understanding that population couldn’t simply keep growing. Today, we are forced to deal with the same reality as a species, because we are on a planet with seven billion human beings. So this becomes a pertinent issue: [how we think about death](#). And do we continue to see death as “the enemy” and as something to be overcome? Do we continue to think that if people die, we see it as a failure of medicine?

My wife, Connie, is passionate on this issue. She calls it ‘[intergenerational inequity](#)’ ([audio, here](#))—that we’re keeping people alive in their eighties and nineties because we have the technology to do so. Yet, in many cases, it is not about the person’s quality of life or choice. Moreover, there is now an enormous expense to society, and the younger generation is shackled by endless financial debt. The inequity, then, in how money is spent is partly grounded in how we think about death and dying. Do we see it as a natural process? Do we see death as sacred, and as no less sacred than life? Do we help each other in our waning years to do what needs to be done: to have the necessary communications so that one can die with peace, gratitude, and trust? That trust is not simply in holding onto some otherworldly reward that finally will make this entire life worthwhile, but more that our life is complete and we’ve communicated gratitude and been reconciled with people that we have harmed or hurt or betrayed; and that we have had those communications because [we have a different way of thinking about death](#).

Gretta: That is very important. One of the reasons that we are facing such difficulty is the low numbers of people who are actually having those conversations—and those are the kinds of conversations that church needs to have and allow. Since I have been ‘out’ about not believing

in the kind of afterlife that Christianity has always described, I have had deeper, richer conversations about death than ever before with people who are at that portal. I think this is because people before were afraid to say anything or express doubts, and now they know that they can talk about it. We can speak of [death as gift](#) and how we can embrace it differently.

So I think communities have to hold responsibility for those conversations and that will make a different way that we look at the world. You are quite right that our frantic grasping at the last few years of life and squeezing time out regardless of the quality of life or regardless of what it is costing future generations is really something that we have to think about, we have to have deep conversations about. We have to recognize how damaging and detrimental that is to the Earth as a whole and to the people that we purport to love: our children and our grandchildren.

Host: The whole issue became really upfront-and-personal for me about a year ago. I was diagnosed with serious cancer, and underwent chemotherapy, and had a rather large tumor removed from my spleen. There was a period of about a month when I was looking at the very real possibility that I could die soon. Having this [Christian naturalism](#) approach to reality—that I interpret all of what sounds like [unnatural or supernatural](#) (*audio*, [here](#)) concepts of my faith in a natural, this-world, realistic way—allowed me to look at the possibility that I could die very soon from a place of profound gratitude and trust. Part of that was because I had done the ‘spiritual work’ of getting to the place where I had no secrets, I didn’t have any resentments, and I didn’t have any unfinished business. I felt complete with my life and my kids. My three kids were doing really well, so I felt like my genetic legacy was in good hands. My memetic legacy (my ideas) were still getting out to the world through my book. So all this allowed me to be in that place of gratitude and trust, but it also allowed me to not take any day for granted. When I saw a full moon, I was not assuming that I would be seeing many more. And I hope I don’t ever lose this attitude. Even though my latest CT scan didn’t show any sign of cancer, I hope I don’t lose that real upfront-and-personal sense that life is sacred: take every day, value it, it’s precious, and don’t take any of it for granted.

Gretta: Absolutely. That is a beautiful way to look at that experience in your life and to see that there can be gift in it—to wonder at the beauty of the world and embrace it. I think that it is in relationship that we get to celebrate those things most deeply. The relationships that we build with people in our family and our friends and in communities can buoy us, challenge us, and help us through those times. I am not suggesting that death is not a time of profound sadness. It is hugely sad and the losses are enormous for people. But it can be seen so differently than the ways that religion has presented it in the past, and so seen as part of life and as a significant and very important part of it.

Host: It makes sense in that it was only very recently historically that we have actually had [measurable knowledge about death](#). It is the death of cells in the embryonic stage of development that keeps us from being spheres. It is the death of mountains that allows for

healthy soil. It is the death of stars, of supernovas and red giants, that allows for the Periodic Table of Elements, and all that we now know that the ancient people could not have possibly known. All they knew was death hurts like hell; it's horrific. So the stories that we have traditionally had around us make sense. But until we grasp that [death plays a vital and necessary role in an evolving Cosmos at all levels](#), I think Christianity will continue to be shackled by unnatural, otherworldly notions of the Gospel. Medical technologies will continue to prolong physical and emotional suffering and provoke family discord. And I think the medical industry will continue to underwrite the widening gap between the rich and the poor. To my mind, few things are more important today than transforming how we view death.

Gretta: And where do we do that? We do that in community, and we who are leaders in the Church are responsible for making sure that communities can have those conversations. That is why I do the work that I do, so that the community that I serve and the community that those people create is a community that draws more and more people into that very important conversation.

For example, suppose a person walks in the door of my church, and maybe they haven't gone to church for thirty years and they get up the nerve to make it through the door because something in their life is completely out of whack—either they've got a diagnosis, or their relationship is falling apart, or a kid is in trouble, and they think church might help—and they manage to *fall* in my front door. What point on the learning curve do they have to reach before we start offering them support? That learning curve needs to be completely flat. So that means no technical language and no God language that might mean something that we all inside understand but which that person is going to hear as an interventionist, supernatural being that is being prayed to in order to make their life better. It's *we as a community* that can help make their life better. And we need to become what we believe in—and then, with that strength and with the recognition of that profound strength and beauty, offer that outward to anybody and everybody.

Host: That's great. Related to what you just shared, [your next book is on the topic of prayer](#). Many people don't quite know how to understand prayer from an evolutionary perspective. How do you understand prayer in evolutionary context?

Gretta: First of all, I need to say that I went into this book really kind of kicking and screaming. I wasn't sure I wanted to write on prayer, but it was [John Spong](#), who said, "Gretta, somebody's got to answer these questions." And it's true that one of the biggest questions I get is, "Okay, how do I pray now?" Or, "I don't know how to pray anymore." Prayer has been so important to so many people and it goes straight to the roots of our tradition and it wraps the world in a multitude of languages and forms. So it is a really significant part of the life of anyone who considers themselves a person of faith. Of course, the fact that anyone who *doesn't* consider themselves a person of faith, the fact that they can achieve the same goals

and find the same solace and get the same strength without relying on prayer suggests that, first, prayer is not essential, but second, it is deeply important. Those are the two main areas that I try to look at in the book.

The questions for me are: What has prayer been, and what does it offer people who engage in it, who practice prayer? What are the benefits that prayer has given them as individuals? What has it given communities? And what has it offered us as a human species? I have really fallen in love with the topic as I've written, and as I've read, and as I've learned so much about those benefits and how important they are to human society.

Once you realize what these benefits are, the next question is: How do we offer them in ways that are sustainable in belief systems that are constantly changing and that, for many of us, are going to crumble? How do we sustain those benefits? What can we do? What does prayer become? Is it still prayer? Do we want to call it that? Should we call it something else? Those are the questions that I deal with.

In the community that I serve, of course we pray regularly. It doesn't look like what it was five years ago, or ten years ago. It probably doesn't look much like what prayer looks like in many other communities of faith. But the transformational energy within it is high—and I would say, even higher than what it used to be. So we open our community prayer time by talking about how honored we are to participate in a tradition that is as ancient as it is, that is as diverse as it is. And we offer into that community our vulnerabilities. Individuals stand up and say what their vulnerabilities, what their celebrations are. We use a short response. We used to say, "O God, in your mercy, hear our prayer." Well, that didn't work for us anymore, so the leader now says, "In this abundant blessing," and the community responds, "We share the joy." Or, "In this our time of need . . . may love abound."

So [we still have a prayer response](#). It still feels like prayer for people who have been involved in those kinds of communities. But the vulnerability is way higher than it ever was before—mostly because I was the one who was responsible for saying the prayers of the community before. Now, individuals stand up and offer it—sometimes with a huge grin on their face because they are so filled with joy at something that has happened in their life; or sometimes with a quavering voice; and sometimes members of the community cannot even understand what is being said because the person is so broken as they offer it into that community. What you see happening is the community bearing witness to a truth that lies in the center of someone's heart, and then being present to offer that person care and support, or to celebrate with them what it is that they have offered. So it is an enormously transforming and very powerful time for our community. I would say it is one of the most important things that we do, even though it doesn't look at all like traditional prayer.

Host: I personally think that the work that you are doing, that what you and your partner, [Scott Kearns](#) are doing, and the work of [Michael Morwood](#), [Jim Burklo](#), [Bruce Sanguin](#)—all of you who are taking this deep-time, evolutionary, science-based, naturalistic understanding of reality and giving it liturgical legs. Creating songs, hymns, responsive readings, and prayers, and various kinds of tools that congregations can use, which (as you say) are nonexclusive, that are

liturgical, and that can touch our hearts because they're either ritualistic or they use poetry: There's just something about that kind of language and that kind of communication that can speak to us in a deeply emotional and personal way when we're in times of need. So I am, for one, hugely grateful for the work that all of you who are creating liturgical forms are doing. I understand you've got some stuff up on your website, with regards to that. Can you share with our listeners how they can access some of these tools that you and Scott have created?

Gretta: The Center for Progressive Christianity in the U.S. is carrying two collections of prayers that I have written. One is called [Holy Breath](#) and the other one's called [Another Breath](#). Those are collections of prayer that I write for opening our service. They offer non-exclusive opportunities for the community to engage either in unison or to be led in prayer. Periodically, I have thought that I didn't want to continue with that, because I personally am not really keen on unison prayers, but people clip them out of the bulletin and drop them in neighbors' mailboxes and they read them to their co-workers on their answering machines, and so on. So we still use them because they're used far beyond the Sunday service.

Scott has a collection of twenty-nine songs that he has written in a book called *The Wonder of Life*. All the resources are available at <http://www.tcpc.org>. Scott has an evangelical background and wrote music in the Evangelical Church in his younger years. Then, his faith unraveled when he inadvertently took one of Marcus Borg's books out of a library and realized that so much of what he had based his faith on was a human construct. He stopped writing for many years, but broke that logjam on the eve of the launch of the [Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity](#), when he wrote a song for that event. That really opened him up to creating some incredibly great music. He is a phenomenal songwriter and composer, and people will really enjoy his very accessible pieces of music. Also available is a collection of songs that we have put together in a book called [Sing it Forward](#). These are all rewrites of traditional tunes, so that they can be used in congregations that still use some of the traditional music and want to continue to do so.

We have found at West Hill Church, on this bleeding edge, that one of the things that is best done early on is to shift the language without shifting the form. If that can be done, people are far more willing to make the shift and to go with you. It wasn't until after there was an article in a newspaper and one in our national denominational magazine that people started questioning what words I actually used at Communion. I had been at West Hill for seven years at that point. I had never used the traditionally recognized words of Institution [Eucharist], but no one had *noticed* until it hit the newspapers. Then suddenly, it was a concern. But we know that the traditional form is so powerful and the symbol is so powerful—and what I was saying, the particular words I was using, allowed people who would not hear those (traditional) words or who would have been excluded if those words had been used, it allowed them to come to be in community with us. It also allowed those for whom the symbol was powerful to continue to be there, because they weren't being excluded by the loss of that symbol.

So, when it comes to shifting words of songs, sometimes people say, “You know, I like those words.” We had moved away from a lot of those traditional songs and had not sung them at all, because we hadn’t changed the words. When we started changing the words and bringing some of that music back, the joy and the tears in our community to have reclaimed something that they thought they had lost was really beautiful.

So those resources are available through the [Center for Progressive Christianity](#) in the States and [Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity](#) in Canada.

Host: Gretta, I look forward to meeting Scott and actually experiencing his music as well, because Connie and I were involved in [the first Evolutionary Revival service down in San Diego a couple of years ago](#). It was really quite an extraordinary event. I see more and more of these ‘revival’ services happening, with dynamic preaching and dynamic music that moves people’s hearts and souls and bodies. And yet, you don’t have to check your brain out at the door. There is no part of me that has to say, “Well, I don’t really believe that, but I’m going to say this because I’m being expected to.” All of it is congruent.

Gretta: ... which is why I think [this project](#) is so important, Michael. There are so many people out there who have not connected into anything, because they don’t think that anything is there that they can enjoy, that they can celebrate. So they don’t participate; they don’t seek it out. This project will give access to a whole different perspective to people who have been deeply isolated. When I was speaking in Adelaide, Australia, last year, a gentleman came up to me after I spoke and he said, “You know, I left the Church when I was a very young teenager because I was going through confirmation class, where I was told I had to believe things that I refused to believe—and I have not been back in a church until today.” That man was eighty-eight years old.

For that length of time, he had been isolated. But the fact that he came that day meant that, for all that time, he *knew* he was disconnected and he *felt* that isolation. So, if we can touch people who have been maligned in their journey by the Church, excluded—if we can touch them and bring them into conversation, honor what they believe, honor what it is that they have to offer *us*, what they have to say and the perspective that they have to share: I think that will be a very important part of our work.

And so I celebrate this project that you have initiated, because I think it will do a lot to help people feel reconnected.

Host: Hmmmm. We’ll just see where it unfolds, but it’s very exciting... Well, Gretta Vosper, thank you so much for your ministry—and yours and Scott’s ministry—and for sharing your perspective and your experience here on the leading edge of faith.

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