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[00:00:00] There are signs of hope everywhere if you have eyes for it. I see it in places where people are going out and being Christ's hands in the world. It's all around. It's just, we have to look for it. Welcome [00:00:30] to the Leader's Way at Yale, the podcast at the intersection of spiritual leadership Innovation and Transformation from Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. I'm your host, Brandon Nappi.

Brandon: I am so thankful for our very first guest on the Leader's Way at Yale podcast, Reverend Dr. Hilary Raining. She is an Episcopal priest, a graduate of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, also a graduate of [00:01:00] Yale Institute of Sacred Music. She earned a Doctor of Ministry degree at Drew University. She's the founder and creator of The Hive, an online spirituality and wellness community.

But she also brings many other layers to her ministry and work with people. She's certified as a trauma healing coach. She's a spiritual director and mentor to many, many people. She's a 500-hour Yoga Alliance certified yoga teacher, a meditation [00:01:30] instructor, a certified forest therapy guide. And as you'll hear in our conversation, she's also a certified Daring Way Facilitator and Counselor, the path of wholehearted healing and resilience created by renowned researcher and sociologist Brené Brown. She's the author of *Joy and Confession*, *Reclaiming Sacramental Reconciliation*. Also author of the book, *Faith with a Twist*, a 30-day journey into Christian yoga.

[00:02:00] Along with all of that, she's a beekeeper. And as you'll hear, she's a trusted guide and wisdom figure. A true mentor who has shared with so many people the healing and creative power in the Christian contemplative tradition. I hope that you enjoy this conversation as much as I did. [00:02:30]

Brandon: Reverend Dr. Hilary Raining, it's so amazing to have you with us in our inaugural podcast. Your work to share contemplative practice has touched so many hearts and minds, and so I'm wondering if we could go back to the beginning. And one of the ways I love to start conversations is to hear about folks' earliest encounter with God as a child. So would you take us back to that part of your journey?

Hilary: [00:03:00] Oh, thank you. And thank you for having me on, by the way. This is such an honor. I'm delighted. And thank you for the work that you do in the world. You have similarly, and even more so, you have impacted so many

lives. So thank you for all that you do for the spirit as a whole. It's a great joy to be here.

Yeah. My, this story I've told so many times, apologies for anybody who's heard it, but my earliest memory is also my vocational call story. I was probably about three or four, you know, when you start to make your first memories and I have this distinct moment [00:03:30] that's just kind of blazing into my brain where I'm on the floor of my baby sister's bedroom, probably in there to steal one of her toys or something, quite likely. And I just remember through her window seeing the sunlight kind of come in on beams and watching the dust particles on the beams of the sunlight and thinking, Oh, that's the Holy Spirit. I want to catch it and give it to people and that's what a priest does. And I think that's, that's what God wants me to do.

And so I ran out of the room, and I told my mom that and she immediately called our [00:04:00] parish priest. I think it was a little shocking in many ways. And he came over and talked to us about it. And as the story goes, he said, Hillary, you know, you want to be a priest. Why don't you and I sit down, and we'll have supper with Jesus. Would you like that? And of course he was talking about communion. But I thought he was talking about a literal supper, and, you know, in many ways it is. Uh, and I said, sure, can we have hot dogs and spaghetti? So, taking liberties already, uh, that might be signs of things to come, I don't know. [00:04:30]

But there are definitely some, I might call them mystical moments, where God made it very clear that this was, this was the gift of the path. So, went through my teenage years to Moravian College that has a seminary and was able to do even in my undergraduate work, which focused on psychology and religion, do some classes at the seminary there, so I was grateful for that. And then went to Berkeley and Yale and the ISM, so, you know, big fan of this work here. And did my master's there, had an incredible [00:05:00] time. Started work in parish life and then went to Drew for my doctoral work.

Brandon: Uh, thank you for, for sharing that evolution in your life to serve God and serve God's people. I know that yoga has also been a really important part of your life, both yoga practice and yoga teaching. As a yoga teacher and priest, I wonder if you can reflect a little bit about what yoga brings to your life and what that calling was like as you, you found this [00:05:30] additional layer of practice, I presume, really powerful and complimentary to your priesthood.

Hilary: Uh, yes. So it came into my life in almost a funny way. As an Episcopalian, cradle Episcopalian, I've always known the importance of

incarnational understanding that we are a people who follow a God that's not remote and removed, but rather part of what it means to be in the fabric of creation, the creator coming into [00:06:00] creation in Jesus. Having an embodied spirituality was not hard for me to understand theologically. But, as many Western traditions, it was actually a little bit hard to figure out how to practice that within the Episcopal tradition, right? Not just think it but feel it. And one day when I had already gone through seminary, I was a parish priest at this point, I had a goal to try something different every day as an experience of the Holy and being surprised by the Holy Spirit.

And I was blogging about [00:06:30] it, and I did this for two years as my New Year's resolution. And one of those days, I decided to go to this new local studio that was having Like a free giveaway day, because it was their grand opening. And I took part in a belly dancing class. It was free, right? And in my family, we say, if it's free, it's for me, so, I went for it. And then won five free classes to the yoga classes that were starting in the same studio. So I said, okay, that sounds good. I had [00:07:00] never tried much yoga beforehand. I was actually dissuaded by it, by my, my father, when I was younger, he felt it wasn't perhaps Christian enough. And we have since helped change his mind, thankfully.

But I went to it and right away found the embodiment piece that I was missing in a lot of Western Christian spirituality. Practices, the breath work, the sheer exhaustion I felt. You know, I was a lot younger then. I was in pretty good shape [00:07:30] and was just drenched in sweat. I was surprised. I thought I was going to, you know, something akin to a napping class. I was very, very surprised to be wrong. And just sweating and just breathing, and by the time we got to the end of it, to my favorite posture, Shavasana, which is where you lay down and let everything be absorbed, my kind of thing. It was just so very powerful, and I could finally meditate in a way that was richer, was deeper, that was using my whole [00:08:00] body because I had exhausted the body in order to let the spirit have some freedom.

And so I was hooked kind of immediately and then started studying also the philosophy, the wisdom of it, and eventually became a yoga teacher myself because I found it was so enriching my own prayer life that I wanted to bring it to other people. And one of my best friends in the world and also yoga teacher, Amy Dolan and I even wrote a book about it called Faith with a Twist because we just wanted to show how beautifully the Christian practice and [00:08:30] yogic wisdom go hand in hand.

Brandon: Thank you. It's one of the great ironies that Christianity, which holds at the center that God and Jesus takes on a body. It's a great irony that in many

Christian lineages, we have become so disconnected from our body, and we have limited faith to a kind of intellectual consent, a kind of conceptual framework alone and left the body [00:09:00] behind.

And yet, we do have within our tradition so many embodied practices. And so, I wonder if your practice of yoga opened up for you. the reclamation of any embodied Christian practices, uh, were there moments where you went, Oh, right. We have something really similar to that too, that maybe has been under, under accentuated or lost.

Hilary: No question. And this is, I think, as you said, the great mystery, sometimes even tragedy [00:09:30] of what counts as modern Western Christianity, you know, when we hear that we believe in the resurrection of the body, that's not just the spirit. That's not just simply a dualistic mindset. God cares about every aspect of us. And in Revelation, you know, it says that God makes all things new, not all new things. And so that's, that's why I'm so dedicated to thinking about how can we bring all this together. It's, it's ancient and it's key and core to our Christian identity.

Brandon: Yeah, I'm hearing so [00:10:00] much integration in what you're describing, and you seem to have a gift for integrating seemingly disparate fields of practice and research together, sort of seeing their unison. And this other facet of your life has been the work and the writing of Brené Brown. I wonder if you could share a little bit about how her research and her writing on leadership, on growth, on healing has influenced your own life and your ministry. And I [00:10:30] know you were so inspired that you trained in her Daring Way program. So could you talk a little bit about how Brené's work has sort of shaped your ministry?

Hilary: Oh, I'd be delighted to. And what's so wonderful about it is you can see the work of the Holy Spirit on this path. I had not heard of Brené Brown until I started researching, again, an embodied spiritual practice in my doctoral work, looking at the work of reconciliation of a penitent, i.e., private confession. Which some people don't even know Episcopalians [00:11:00] have in our tradition.

But man, talk about an embodied practice, right? You know, opening your heart space up so much that you are in a space that feels almost like a womb so that a new creation can happen when it's done right, right? So as I was doing research into that embodied practice, I started thinking about how trauma works on the soul and the body. And how shame and traumas tend to work in almost the exact same way. And sure enough, how vulnerability, [00:11:30] like the

vulnerability of telling your story in the confessional, would actually help to start incorporating that so you can transform this. Trauma expression that tends to happen around shame so that you don't transmit it, right? Transform it so you don't transmit it.

And as I was doing this research, I stumble upon Brené Brown, whose work intersects all these places so beautifully. She is a researcher who delves deep into shame and vulnerability. She always jokes that that doesn't make her the popular person at [00:12:00] the party, something I related to all too well. Nobody wants to talk about that research. Except everybody wants to talk about it because it's actually where the rubber hits the road in so many of our experiences. So as I'm learning more and more about her, here's that Holy Spirit moment. The Diocese of Texas, under their great leadership, decided that they would go ahead and have Brené work with their whole diocesan clergy to be trained in her Daring Way process and then would [00:12:30] have the option to go on and become a certified Daring Way facilitator if they wanted to work with her and her team for another year.

And I begged to be led into that, even though I'm not in the diocese of Texas, they were like opening it up for like just a couple extra clergy from around the church. I was so blessed to be chosen to do that work because Brené and her team were incredible. They led us through this entire process of The Daring Way, which not only teaches you about this stuff, but you also go through it as [00:13:00] a facilitator. Again, embody pieces. Brené is also an incredible Episcopalian herself. Her book, *Wholehearted Living*, she said that she got that image for the title of that book from going to church, hearing the sursum corda, and knowing that we have to lift our whole hearts up into the Lord. And that was how she felt vulnerability, shame, and all this work could be held up to God in a sacred way.

So, I was hooked, happy to go, and then spent the whole rest of the year working with her and her team to become this sort of [00:13:30] facilitator. And since then, every year we do a piece of education with her and keep that facilitation work, like, up to date with her most recent research and everything. So, it's really a blessing in my life.

Brandon: Innovation has been a part of your ministry as you've both dug back into the Christian tradition, into the yogic tradition, but your ministry has also leaped forward in responding to the Holy Spirit in new and creative ways. What you and others have created in The Hive [00:14:00] has been this powerful resource for contemplative practice. So can we hear the Genesis story? Where

was this idea born from and what are you learning as it's unfolding in your midst under your leadership?

Hilary: Oh, I love talking about this, so you'll have to shut me up when I've talked too much. I was starting to use this yogic practice, these tools from the mystics from these other 500 years cycles that I was mentioning and starting to, to let that work on my soul in a way that was transforming my prayer [00:14:30] practice. In particular, I was using some of the work of the contemplatives around the cloud of unknowing, some of the desert mother and fathers, their wisdom. And realizing that every time we have one of these 500-year cycles, wisdom schools tend to pop up. These groups of people who go to the desert or transform a practice within their own lives, and it spreads, right? You know, we have these incredible touchstones throughout history. When you learn about them, that's maybe inspiring. But when you pray like they prayed, and [00:15:00] learn how to sit with them in this great cloud of witnesses, that's something altogether different.

And so as I was doing that sort of work with the spirit, with this cloud of witnesses and was in a time of deep meditation. I liken it to the story of Peter and the time when he is in Joppa and the sail comes down and it's filled with all these foods that he was never supposed to eat, right? That vision. This thing just came down right in front of me as I was in meditation, and it was a [00:15:30] honeycomb. I'm a fourth-generation beekeeper, so this was an image I was familiar with, but what was different this time around was that all of the bees were dancing in and out of the hive bringing in their wisdom their nectar their own joys and were dancing around the center Queen bee, which was quite the Christ figure. There was something so profoundly beautiful about it that I knew that those bees were bringing in all of their wisdom from time memorial, right, to serve this Christ [00:16:00] in the middle of the hive.

So I woke up and felt motivated that that's what was needed in this time, a wisdom school that was able to bring these spiritual traditions to modern mystics, if you will. We need wisdom schools right now. If the last one was 500 years ago, this cycled shift that we're talking about, that means the new one is like right now as it's starting because the Reformation was, you know, 510 years ago, not even. So we're at the key beginning of this and we need this pollen. We [00:16:30] need these seeds, right? Because everything we plant right now will be the sorts of trees that the rest of this 500-year cycle will be sitting under.

I look around and you look at all the data of people who are deeply spiritual. We're not in a lack of time frame where people are spiritual. Like they are by and large, young people and everybody are saying they're feeling the spirit.

They're just not always feeling it in church. They might feel it in soul cycle. They might turn to like Gwyneth Paltrow for [00:17:00] things, right. You know, and my whole hope with a hive is that you don't need to look without. We actually have some of the most beautiful and ancient practices that will motivate the next cycle of mystics in the world.

Brandon: It's really inspiring to think about, and I've sensed in my conversations in my family, with friends, just bumping into people in cafes this deep, longing for encounter with the sacred. And I wonder if you could unpack this phrase that you use that I love so much – modern mystics. For [00:17:30] those who may hear a phrase like that and think that can't be me, that must be a kind of elitist experience, I must need decades of prayer, or somehow the experience of God just belongs to someone else, and not humble little old me. How do you understand those words, and what's the ultimate invitation at the center of them?

Hilary: I think the best definition that I can give for what a mystic is, especially a modern mystic, would be somebody who is willing to take a long and loving [00:18:00] look at what actually is. A long and loving look at what actually is. By that I mean this, this beautiful life that we are given, this incredible creation, the joys and the shadow sides of it. It's as though we are invited to be so Christ like in this world that we join in looking at it in love, like when Christ was approached by the rich young man and it says he looked on him with love, even, even with all of his foibles. Because when we're able to [00:18:30] do that, we're able to do what Christ has done, which is to fully join into this world in its struggles and in its triumphs so that we can start to change it.

But you, you can't have an activist lifestyle without something that fuels that activist lifestyle, or you're, you're gonna burn out. So having that contemplation piece with the action makes it so, so strong. And it's not rarified at all. In fact, you know, I always like to say there's a difference between a state and [00:19:00] a stage.

You know, when we think of a state of, of transcendence, we, this is where I think people think that the mystic tradition is, right? We think of somebody who's like, Oh, I'm, I'm an ecstasy. I've seen God. I've seen the light, right? You know, That's actually very, very rare. Instead, I like to think of the mystical journey as a stage, right? You know, somebody who is growing in this, somebody who's going into a stage of trying to become more and more Christ like, and that's an entire lifetime's bit of work. [00:19:30] It's our work, and it's the entirety of the human being's work, so, rather than think of it as an exclusive club, it's actually, I think, the work of what it is to be alive and to be human.

Brandon: Thank you. And as you so beautifully lay out this universal call to divine encounter, in terms of modern mysticism, would you be willing to share in your own path, those things, that sabotage your spirit because I presume that [00:20:00] like so many of us you have moments of intense inner criticism or doubt.

Hilary: Yeah, so I'll pretend this is the confessional right now. Absolutely, I'll put my money where my mouth is. I know that I'm off my spiritual path when a couple things are arising for me. I find myself trying to numb some feelings away or thoughts away – they call it doom scrolling for a reason, right? You know, like, you know, you're in trouble. But when you look at the clock and it has been a [00:20:30] very long time that you are just scrolling through social media or YouTube or whatever, that's certainly the case for me. I know it as a, oh, this is me trying to numb something away, so it's my first kind of canary in the coal mine.

The second thing I will say is when resentment shows up for me, when I know that I am off of the spiritual path is when I am just thinking like. I can't believe I have to do this. I can't believe this person has asked me to do that. Instead of being like, hey, what a privilege.

I also know the bigger things are when [00:21:00] I give in to things like despair, which is easy to do, not just because of how harsh things can be in the world right now, just by turning on the news, but it's also easy to do because the world makes money off of our despair. And so they put it in our face all the time. You know that it's making somebody money when every time you turn on the news, you are so scared. You think to yourself, what can I do? And then here's a commercial for what you can do. What do you know? If you just buy this car or, or take this drug or, you know, lose 10 [00:21:30] pounds, the world will be fine. So when I give into that despair, I know I'm listening to the world more than I'm listening to God.

Brandon: Oh, thank you for your candor. And, and I'm quite sure that many folks are feeling that alignment and attunement as they recognize themselves in your wonderful sharing. So, so appreciate that. And what's the path back? I mean, you sort of named these as signs that you're off the path, what's it like for you to get back on the path?

Hilary: So this [00:22:00] is going to be a little, uh, I teach a lot of ascetical and liturgical theology, so here's that hat coming on. It's not flashy, but it's the way of purgation that tends to be the first step back. That is a super ascetical word, but it's the idea that on the mystical path that there tends to be these threefold

steps on the way like the first purgation, the next illumination, the third unification, if we ever hopefully get to that stage, right? You know, this idea that first step though, that purgation It's kind of a sweat equity of spiritual life. And [00:22:30] as you heard from my yoga story, I don't mind a little sweat equity when it comes to this. It's often when I know I need to do something like even a minor fast. I need to cut out technology for a while in whatever way I can. I often will cut out sugar as something that I find really helps. Or, if it's gone on too long, I'll take a bigger fast where I might not eat from sunup to sundown or something like that for a few days to kind of reset my intentions.

I also find that the right of reconciliation, [00:23:00] is huge in this, right, because you can name before somebody else all these things. Hear yourself name them, and most importantly, hear somebody tell you what a beloved child of God you are from the beginning to the end of that service. It really helps to kind of get it out, as it were.

And then, of course, the embodied practices. If I am in a big funk, I will start a new yoga series with an intention for rebirth or forgiveness. Something that almost makes me sit with [00:23:30] those emotions, positive and negative. So that I can make friends with them. So that they aren't just like the shadow side that I'm trying to avoid, but rather that they are a part of me that I also need to love and show mercy to because God has already shown love and shown mercy to. It's learning to be Christ-like with myself through these practices as well. So, a little bit of sweat equity and then a whole lot of grace.

Brandon: As you look out into the world, what are the causes of hope that you find?

Hilary: There are, [00:24:00] there are signs, maybe it's just because it's spring and so I'm feeling almost poetic about it, but I feel like there are signs of hope everywhere if you have eyes for it. Um, that's nothing new. It's cliché for a reason, right? Because the more we train ourselves to start looking for these signs of hope the more that we will be able to see them. And that's even not just a spiritual practice, science is finally catching up with that spiritual piece. They find that people who practice gratitude not only have better heart rates, live longer, have better relationships, they actually do the [00:24:30] important work of impregnating these signs of hope on to their brains, because our brains are like Teflon for good experiences and they're Velcro for negativity, like that's biologically have served us to keep us learning hard lessons faster to keep us safe.

But it means we actually have to stop and meditate on these signs of hope. Right, you know, and so, so your important question, I'm seeing signs of hope with my family first and foremost. I'm delighted to be the mother of a, [00:25:00] of a really fantastic teenager, wife of a great, great man. So I'm delighted to see that in my family. But I'm also seeing hope in the way that my church, St. Christopher's in Gladwyne, is turning to their own spirituality in a way that isn't just inwardly focused but is tied to their outreach. You know, so I see that in the parish community. I see that in conversations around the hive, where people are not just looking for content, but are looking for connection, you know and actually finding it.

I [00:25:30] see it in places where people are going out and being Christ's hands in the world. It's all around. It's just, we have to look for it. And it's all too easy to not.

Brandon: The way we'll close, I think, may be the most vulnerable of all the questions. We have a rapid fire 10 questions to peek under the hood and see what really makes, um, your, your life tick. We'll just go through these, and we're eager to hear your favorite snack food.

Hilary: Okay, it's gotta be popcorn and [00:26:00] ice cream and dried mango. Those three I could eat all day every day. I love it.

Brandon: Favorite place to pray?

Hilary: Nature. In my room right here where I'm praying from, in our little prayer room here, and St. Christopher's, our sanctuary here.

Brandon: Favorite toppings on pizza?

Hilary: I'm a plain girl but give me extra cheese.

Brandon: TV show, film, or play you've recently enjoyed?

Hilary: We are re-watching Battlestar Galactica, and let me tell you, it's not great for the hope, but it is a fascinating re-watch. It's making me really [00:26:30] scared with all the A. I. stories that are coming out to re-watch Battlestar Galactica, but it's great.

Brandon: It's a long, hard look at the real. Guilty pleasure?

Hilary: Oh, TV at the end of the day. I just love putting my feet up and watching some.

Brandon: It is the platinum age of television. There's so much good TV to watch, right?

Hilary: My only hardship is when the other people in my family are watching something else and they don't want to watch the show that we're watching together. That's my biggest hardship when it comes to TV.

Brandon: If you weren't a priest, professor. Uh, what would you be? [00:27:00]

Hilary: So I think I probably would have followed my dad into ecological forestry, which is his whole thing. He's dedicated to, um, helping people, forest owners in particular, property owners, um, help to foster good ecosystems and healthy ecosystems within their, their own properties and has saved countless acreage of trees, uh, and, and land. So I would probably have followed him into that.

Brandon: Favorite band from childhood? Perhaps the most revelatory of all questions.

Hilary: Paul Simon, and [00:27:30] specifically Graceland, was on loop in my childhood. And, like, I wore out the tape. I loved it so much.

Brandon: The strangest thing in your fridge right now?

Hilary: Um, lion's mane mushroom. Sugar water for my bees and a sourdough starter. So a lot of, like, fungi in there.

Brandon: Fungi are having a moment. I love it.

Hilary: And my fridge is all about it. There's also probably leftovers that are moldy, but we won't talk about that kind of fungi, right? [00:28:00]

Brandon: We are making a playlist this year. For all the, uh, the leaders that we interview, we are, uh, receiving two song suggestions. What are yours?

Hilary: So I actually, in particular, brought two song suggestions that came from Brené Brown when she did something similar with us in Daring Way. So I brought her suggestion, and I also brought Brian McLaren's suggestion because

I'm also in living school from the Center for Action and Contemplation, um, so I thought it would be appropriate if I brought theirs. Um, so Brené's was All Will Be Well by Gabe Dixon, [00:28:30] which to me just sounds like Julian of Norwich set to music, so I love that one. And then Brian McLaren's is this really bluesy kind of groove called Let It All Go by Beats Antique. So I recommend both of those to you all.

Brandon: Fantastic. I'll be listening on my drive home. Finally, you've been so generous with your time. Thank you. Finally, what's the one thing you want to be remembered for in your ministry and in your life?

Hilary: You know, I think it's Count Zinzendorf, who is a Moravian, who says that, you know, the three things that [00:29:00] we're supposed to do in life is to preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten. Those are the three things. And I struggle with that as a human being who is still railing against her own finitude. But isn't that true? You know, I hope more than anything that at the end of my life, what will be remembered is that I've preached the gospel. And anything beyond that, I put in God's good hands. So that's my, my deepest hope.

Brandon: Reverend Dr. Hilary Raining, we're so thankful for your time, but even more for the [00:29:30] luminous light that you shine in the world to so many people. Thank you.

Hilary: My delight. And thank you.

Thank you for listening to the Leader's Way at Yale podcast. Join us in our work to heal the healers. Care for the caregivers and support the spiritual leaders who are transforming our world, compassion, justice, and love. Online at berkeleydivinityschool.yale.edu. [00:30:00]