

[MUSIC]

Angela Gorrell (A): It often takes our own walk through the dark night for us to then go, "Oh yes, helping other people walk through the dark night is essential." Because Richard Rohr says that there's two paths to transformation, great love and great suffering, and they are often intertwined.

[MUSIC]

Brandon and Hannah (B and H): Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi. Hi, I'm Hannah Black. And we're your hosts on The Leader's Way, an audio pilgrimage from Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale University. On this journey, we reflect on what matters most in life as we talk about all things spirituality, innovation, leadership, and transformation.

H: Hey, Brandon, how's it going?

B: It's going well. Hey, Hannah. How are you?

H: I'm doing well. I've got my pumpkin spice latte from the Yale Divinity School Refectory, and I'm not even ashamed of it.

B: Wow. So I have never had any PSL in my life.

H: Stop it. You've never. You know it by its acronym, but you don't know its exquisite taste.

B: Well, I'm at the point now where it's a thing now that I haven't done it, and I'm thinking, do I need to just extend this rally?

H: Do you have pride in the fact that you've never experienced this?

B: It's just like, what's that Christmas movie that everyone has seen that I haven't seen? It's a wonderful life.

H: Oh, uh-huh.

B: That's one of those things that seems like a rite of passage in your early childhood, and I've never seen it. And I guess I should see it, right? Because there's an Episcopal priest at the center.

H: It seems like we should do a podcast about that. But not with pumpkin spice lattes, with like Christmas lattes?

B: I like that. I could get into that. Well, I mean, as long as we're talking about popular culture and the ubiquitousness of pumpkin spice, I discovered our next guest on The Leaders Way

podcast on Instagram while scrolling, actually. And Angela Gorrell, as a Christian public theologian, was speaking in a way that was so authentic and so real, hopeful, but honoring the kind of messy, challenging nature of life. And I just thought, I want to know who this is. I want to hear what she has to say about the spiritual life. And she was kind enough to connect with us.

H: Well, before we get this party started, I just want to say a little bit about the Reverend Dr. Angela Gorrell. Gorrell is a public theologian and the author of *Always On* and *the Gravity of Joy*. Her research has been highlighted in the *New York Times*, NPR, *Christianity Today*, and elsewhere. And she's taught at Yale, Baylor, McCormick Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary. Gorrell speaks and writes about joy, meaning finding the life worth living and the intersection of spiritual and mental health. Gorrell and her sister, Coach Steph, co-host the *Grief Sisters* podcast, which you can go check out after you listen to this episode, and the *Grief Sisters* Book Club and Facebook group.

B: Angela, we're so thankful for your presence here on *The Leader's Way* podcast. And I've heard you describe yourself as a public theologian. And I'm just wondering if even before you describe what that means for you and how that looks in your life, how you got into this work and what drew you to theology in the first place. We'd love to hear your story.

A: Yeah, I am so delighted to be with you all today. Thank you so much for having me with you and for this conversation. I'm really looking forward to it. And to everyone who's listening, thanks for joining us.

I went to church the first Sunday after I was born. It's funny because you think about 40 years ago versus now, like people a lot of times don't want their baby to be in crowds for like months.

H: Yeah, I was like, is that allowed?

A: Yeah, like my parents took me to church the first Sunday after I was born. So I was born into a community of faith, both in my household and in this church that raised me and up in faith. And it was actually in middle school that I felt called, I would say, to theology. I wouldn't have put it that way at the time. But I really had this sense that the thing that I wanted to do with my life was to help people to connect with God.

I had a really ecstatic experience when I was in a worship service in seventh grade. I'm not Pentecostal, but it was a pretty Pentecostal experience. Really sensed God inviting me into ministry and saw an image of Jesus in front of me. It was really wild and beautiful. And I went and told my youth minister about it. And my youth minister's response was an immediate, "You should lead youth group in the next few months." And this was really radical because, one, I went to a Southern Baptist church at the time and I am a female. And two, it was radical because I was in seventh grade and our youth ministry had about a hundred kids that came on Wednesday nights. And so I'm really grateful for Dale Glover because in that moment he could have said many things. But the thing he said was, "I believe you and God longs to connect with you too and to utilize whatever skills, practices, love you have in your heart to join God in God's

work." You know what I mean? To come and do it. And so I think that's a love for theology. It was just sort of given to me, passed on to me that then I received. And then really in middle school felt this deep desire to do theology, live theology and help others to do the same. And then that led to getting a degree in college and ministry. And then that led to working at a church. They led me to getting in the Master's of Divinity. I can point to multiple times in my life, starting with my parents, to the person who said, "You should get a PhD." Who've really helped me to relate to that call in my life that I felt really significantly in seventh grade.

H: So how has that journey led you to become a public theologian? And what does that mean?

A: Yeah. So over time, what I realized more and more was that this call to help people to connect with God's love and specifically recently, I think a real specific desire to help people connect with God's healing led me outside of the walls of church. Not because I don't have a deep respect for church. For me personally, I realized that so many people were struggling to make it to church for any number of reasons. And obviously the pandemic only deepened this. And so I realized that I needed to be outside of the church and in the public square, trying to help people to connect with God's healing. Like that there needed to be some of us doing that kind of work as well. Because I think that Jesus' theology and ministry was public. I think it's important that we spend time doing theology in public and that we are witnesses in public to Jesus' community of healing and love. And so that would be one way I would talk about it. Another way is one of the people that I worked with after getting my PhD was Miroslav Volf, who is at Yale Divinity School with you all. And Miroslav has become a friend, but initially he was a mentor to me and my boss.

Miroslav, when he finished his PhD with Jurgen Moltmann, he asked Professor Moltmann like, "What should I do now?" And Moltmann told him to find issues that matter to people and shine the light of the gospel on them. And when I first heard Miroslav say this, I was like, "Oh, that's what I want to do too." Really the thing that drives me right now is finding issues that matter to people in the community, in the world, and shining the light of the gospel on them. And finally, the other way that I talk about this is I really am interested in the issues that keep people awake at night.

B: As I look at your social media feed and I see that you're speaking all over the country and in really interesting places. So who are you working with? Who picks up the phone and says, "Hey Angela, we need you and your expertise to help us at this particular moment, with this particular pain."

A: Well, sometimes it is churches. Even though I'm not working within the walls of a church on a regular basis myself, I do find myself in churches or partnering with organizations and churches together. Like this last weekend, I was in Austin and I was working there with the Center for Action and Contemplation in Austin, but also the Abiding Love Lutheran Church. So sometimes it is churches or spiritual centers. But other times it is really interesting places. Like I did an online retreat session with the staff for the Atlanta Hawks MBA team a few weeks ago. So that was really wild and fun. Sometimes it's with educators. A number of weeks ago I was in Bulgaria

at a retreat center there with educators from nine countries. Then I've done a number of things over the last three years with the United States Army. The work that they invited me into was, initially, it was to invest in the lives of chaplains and religious affairs specialists. And so I ended up going to, I think, 19 posts in the United States and in Germany to be with chaplains and religious affairs specialists and to help them to help soldiers to navigate meaning, purpose, a life worth living. With great hope that we would reduce depression, anxiety, and suicide rates. And for me, that was something that I could get on board with and be really excited about doing. And it's been one of the great joys of my life to work with the Chief of Chaplains in the U.S. Army. And so that has led to a few weeks ago, I was in Oklahoma and I spoke to 1,500 soldiers that were about to deploy. So it's a big age range and it's all different kinds of groups.

H: Wow, this is interesting. There's a bit of a golden thread going through some of our conversations because in our last episode, we were talking to the Reverend Winnie Varghese and she was talking about how even though people haven't necessarily come back to church in large numbers after the pandemic, there are people out there with spiritual lives and questions. And I feel like you're really tapping into that. And then last week, not on the podcast, but in person, we had the Bishop of Lesotho, Bishop Vicentia Kgabe here, who was encouraging our students that they don't have to be restricted by the walls of the church. And people are out there and we just need creative ways to engage. So a lot of what you're saying is hearkening back to other conversations we've been having here at Berkeley.

B: I want to kind of switch to thinking about another realm, which is the digital realm. And I know this is something you've thought about a lot and even written a book about. And you're going to be teaching an online course at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale on hybrid ministry. So do you think you could share some of your wisdom about hybrid ministry with our listeners? Are there things that people get right, get wrong, need to know, should know?

A: Yeah, I think that the first thing that I would say is I define hybrid ministry as like this ability to move across online and in-person spaces in a fluid way with agility and creativity. And so doing hybrid ministry well, I think, is embracing that both online and in-person engagement can be ways of participating in Jesus's ministry, extending Jesus's community of healing, loving people well, listening well, doing ministry. And so for me, hybrid ministry is just this realization, acceptance that being in digital spaces doesn't immediately mean that it's less than, you know, for me, they're different.

I think that the most significant thing that we get wrong is that we try to do things in digital spaces exactly the way that we do in-person experiences. So that was the number one thing that I saw in the pandemic. I do want to say, first of all, that I realized people were dealing with a lot. And we sort of had to react instead of thinking about what's the best way. Yeah, right, exactly. And so I do have an understanding that that's what was happening. But largely what people did was they got a video camera and some sort of streaming service, and they decided we're going to do the service exactly like we do in-person, but just video it. The digital landscape, and I'm talking about everything from texting to social media platforms and websites and everything that what it is, is it's a different culture.

So we have to think of it like when we're going to go do ministry in another nation that that's not our nation of origin, we study that culture and we're like, what are its practices and how do people connect in this place? What are the ways to do it that we do it well? And how do we do it poorly? You know, we want to do the same thing with the new media landscape. We want to say, what is this culture like? What are its practices? And how do we do our ministry work in a way that makes sense for this culture?

B: Yeah. I'm so excited for this conversation. It's happening in a short form this fall and then in a longer form course in the new year. I'm excited because as I look at seminary curricula across the country, we're not by and large preparing folks to speak in any other way except within the walls in traditional ways. And as you said, Angela, it's quite evident that the digital strategy for most of us is like get a camera and point it in the direction of the real space. And, you know, maybe there's some places that do that really well, but I think it's really hard to capture that.

And I wonder, I saw on social media, and I'm not creeping because this is your ministry, it is your public ministry, but I just saw yesterday that you went to the Taylor Swift eras concert. And I hope this isn't a bridge too far, but as a person who I know reflects theologically on nearly everything. And we've been wanting to talk about Taylor on the podcast. So here we are. Because we're a house full of Swifties here. I mean, were there any sort of lessons? You know, when I went to my first and only Taylor Swift concert many, many years ago, the 1989 tour, I was just really struck by like what a liturgical experience it was. I mean, it was church in a different mode. And so I'm fascinated on the one hand by what Taylor and all of her crowds of fans create together. I'm also fascinated by conversations like, you know, churches dying, we don't need to gather anymore. And we've just seen like the biggest mass of humans gather for Taylor Swift in the last year. So I don't know if you want to disagree with all of this. But what do you notice?

A: Brandon, I love that you brought this up. I love it. I have to give a shout out to my niece, Andie, because it was her 12th birthday party that meant that I got to go. This is absolutely what you're getting at here. So her birthday was a couple weeks ago. But when she knew that the movie was coming out, she told my sister, you know, I would love to take my friends to see the Eras Tour movie for my birthday party. And it was this whole collective experience from start to finish. Like it starts with cupcakes outside the movie theater when her giving everybody like the lovers glasses and then everyone sharing friendship bracelets. So there's this like back and forth. Like people give her gifts. She gives them gifts. Like this celebration of her, this eating together of pizza and cupcakes. Right. As one does at a middle school birthday party, you know, and then we go into the theater. And yeah, it's unlike any other movie experience I've ever had because it's an interactive, dynamic thing. Everybody is out of their seats almost the entire time. Everyone's dancing, singing, like shining lights, you know, taking videos, like laughing, talking. And like for the first time, I've never talked to so many people around us like as we were at a movie and it's like, oh, why are you? Oh, you're... are you excited? Like, you know, and it was this whole thing that it was a collective experience.

B: Absolutely.

A: I think movies can do that for us in quieter ways as well. The reason why we go to the movies is because we want to collectively cry or be moved or get lost in a story with other people. And it's actually in listening to the gasp of other people or the tears of other people that were like, oh, yeah, this is what's happening here. You know, but I think that the era store movie really does demonstrate the kind of interactive in person digital experience that we can create for people. It's participatory and at the heart of doing hybrid ministry well in a new media landscape is making it participatory so that it's not just I'm just watching somebody, you know, this group of people do something. It's that I'm participating. I'm moved. I have a voice. I have thoughts. I'm reflecting. I'm engaging.

And so in our course together, that's what I'm going to be talking with people about. Like, how do we create that kind of experience for people? What does it look like to imagine nurturing spirituality and healing in people's lives in this sort of hybrid way?

B: Yeah, I'm so excited for that that you had that experience. I haven't seen the Eras tour or the movie of the tour, but I'm so curious how the energy of the live in person experience gets captured or paralleled in the theater. I'm thinking back to maybe just before the pandemic, there was a new version of Jesus Christ Superstar that might have been on Netflix or some other streaming service. And it was so beautiful and so well done, but it was a passive experience, right? You're sort of sitting passively watching something really, really beautiful versus what you're describing is interactive and community based and energetic in a way. And so I'm just curious about what I can learn about digital ministry when I do see the movie.

H: I also wonder though, like if I'm at home by myself watching the Eras tour movie, am I experiencing it in the same way as I would with a group of people in a theater? Is that possible?

A: Right. No, I think you're right. I think it's not. And so that's another part of it is that we have to think about, OK, if you're alone engaging this experience, how do you create that participation, that dynamic interactive experience across screens? You know, and so we'll think about that too, because people can't always participate in something altogether. And most of the time, I think they actually don't. So part of our role as spiritual guides is to give people an expectation, like help them to be intentional. And so I also don't see that a lot in spiritual experiences online that people are leading. I don't see them setting up the expectations of people or even prior to it saying, this is how I invite you to come into this. Sort of like inviting people to sit at the edge of their seat and just like be involved. And I think that it's tough sometimes because sometimes people are like, I don't want to be involved. I just want to listen. I'm too tired to be involved. I'm too busy to be really involved. And so we have to, I think, struggle with that a bit as well.

B: I'm also thinking about your work on grief and how important this is. And I heard myself say last week, you know, sometimes we don't quite know how strongly a belief can be until we actually hear ourselves say it out loud. And I said to myself, I think as a globe, we all just need to stop everything we're doing for a year and just grieve.

And I thought, wow, I guess I believe really strongly in the power and the opportunity of grief to open up something new and my conviction that we don't do grief well. So I'm just wondering if you'd share a little bit your story of launching your grief work, your podcast, and what motivated you to move in this particular direction?

A: I wish that my interest in grief began before my own grief story, but I think that it often takes our own walk through the dark night for us to then go, "Oh, yes, helping other people walk through the dark night is essential." Because Richard Ror says that there's two paths to transformation, great love and great suffering. And they are often intertwined. And for me, that was true.

I was hired at Yale Divinity School in March of 2016 to study joy on the joy project with Miroslav Volf and a number of other scholars. It was an incredible joy to get the job. I can't even explain how excited I was. And then eight months into the project, three of my family members died in four weeks. One of them to suicide at 30 years old, my nephew at 22 years old of sudden cardiac arrest. He had a previously unknown heart condition. And then five days after my nephew's funeral, my dad died. Oh, my gosh. For 12 years of opioid addiction. The next year and a half of my work at Yale Divinity School and my life outside of it was just filled with profound grief.

It was hard not to cry like every day. It was hard to get out of bed. And absolutely the fate that I had known so clearly all my life was challenged.

The suffering of the world became palpable to me in a way that it never had. And I struggled wondering if the work we were doing on joy was important or not. Joy suddenly felt shallow in a world that was suffering. But a year and a half after my dad died, after those four weeks of hell, I said yes to a very strange invitation. I said yes to being a volunteer chaplain at a women's maximum security prison. So I found myself teaching life worth living by day and studying by day at Yale. And on Wednesday nights every week sitting with women in a prison. And I was assigned the building with women on suicide watch. And so I began to see the world suffering in a new way as well. And I began to wonder, like, what does joy say to my family suffering, to the world suffering, to these women's suffering that I'm spending time with every week. And from that flowed a book called *The Gravity of Joy*, a story of being lost and found that I wrote. And from that book, so much of the speaking engagements that I was talking to you about, some of the opportunities to leave retreats and workshops and be with people. And then this led to my sister and I starting this podcast, The Grief Sisters.

So it's my oldest sister whose son died, Mason, my nephew. And so together we just felt like we wanted to meet people in their grief the way that people had met us in ours. And then finally I'll say that I do think the only appropriate response to suffering is lament. I think we see that and we see it's like best manifested in the Psalms in the Old Testament or First Testament. And then

we see it in the life of Jesus in John 10. When he goes to raise Lazarus from the dead, he meets with Mary. And many people know this story. Mary goes to him and says, basically, why the heck did you wait two days to come? He's dead now. And she's weeping. And she's weeping so much that like people around her are weeping.

And Jesus stops and he weeps with her. It's so powerful to me because it's like Jesus must have known what he was about to do. He knew what he was capable of. And in fact, right afterwards, he does go and resurrect Lazarus from the dead. But he still thinks it's important to weep with her. And so what I find is like God is this witness to our pain and God is with us in our pain and lament the appropriate response. So all that to say, Brandon, I'm with you. Let's spend a year doing. Let's all do grief better. But that's where it all began. That's where it is for me.

H: Yeah. So tell me if the only appropriate response is lament. When does joy fit in?

A: Yeah, lament is a gateway to joy. It is the thing that breaks us open and makes it possible for joy to find us. Joy is the very being and presence of God ministering to us. So as we engage and lament, God is this witness to our pain, to our lament and with us in it. And that ministry of God's presence then is joy. It finds us. You know, we open ourselves to joy as we lament. I see this really clearly, this theological idea of sorrow or lament and joy being able to live in close proximity to one another in the Book of Ezra, chapter three, the temples being rebuilt. And Ezra said that there are people that are standing and watching the temple be rebuilt and they're weeping because they remember the way that things used to be. And there are people who are rejoicing because they are so excited that this is happening. They're overjoyed that this good, beautiful thing is happening. And he says it's hard to distinguish the sounds of weeping from the sounds of rejoicing. And I find this all the time in life, right, that joy and sorrow collide within us, but God is present in the midst of both. And finally, I'll say that joy is the recognition of and connection we feel to meaning, truth, beauty, goodness, one another God. So joy has grit.

B: I'm so thankful, Angela, that you're sort of, you're complexifying joy. This is not toxic positivity. This is not running away from things that are uncomfortable. One of the privileges that I have, just walking with new preachers and supporting them as they preach their very first sermons as seminarians and divinity students. And one of the temptations that I've seen over and over again is this urge to tie it all up with a nice bow. If you're going to touch on something that's hard, that's sad, that requires lamenting, that they move way too quickly to joy and hope because it's so uncomfortable to lament and it's uncomfortable to grieve. And so, you know, recently we've had some really meaningful conversations about just sitting with the discomfort. It's biblical, it's part of the tradition to create space for that. So it's an encouragement to me to continue being with them and encouraging them to stay in the discomfort.

A: Yeah. Well, and also, and the thing about joy too, is that you can be in the discomfort and still experience joy because it's this profound emotion. Alexander Schmemmann, the priest, he says that joy is a bright sorrow. And so for him, it's that maybe for a moment we allow the pain and suffering of the world to hang in the background as we recognize the goodness and beauty and truth and meaning that's still possible. But it's bound up together. You know, joy is a bright

sorrow. And so I find that oftentimes joy is sobering. It's quiet. It's transformative. And which is why it's such a beautiful, I think, partner to sorrow. Like my favorite ode to joy in the Bible is Luke 15 and it's stuff is lost. And then joy comes when it's found. I'm with you too. I always told my students, like, I welcome half-baked ideas and half-baked testimonies in class. You know, because like so often the way that we testify about God's presence or our faith is to like put this bow on it. But I think it's important for people to hear half-baked testimonies where we're like, this is what I'm doing. This is what I hope God's doing. But I have no idea. And that's like the end of the testimony.

H: Yeah. Yeah. Do you have advice for our listeners who might be seeking joy in their lives? How do you access joy?

A: I think there are numerous gateways to joy, lament being one of them. Drawing on the Psalms and a book called *From Lament to Advocacy* in Chapter 1, Dr. Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, an incredible religious educator. So drawing on her work and the Psalms and then my own little spin on it, I think there are like three parts to lament. You know, obviously the theologian have to give footnotes.

So the three parts to lament are naming. So just I invite you, if you're in a period of grief in your life or if you are really blown away, saddened by how brutal the world is currently, I invite you to write a lament. And this could look like going on a stroll and saying it as a voice memo to yourself or a chant or a song where you could write it down. First part is naming. Name everything that you are grieving, everything that you're feeling. What are you sad about, worried about, mad about?

And then the next part is questioning. What questions do you have for God, for the universe, for others? What are your confusions? The final part is imagining. If God were to break into these things that I'm naming, what might God do? If God were to answer these questions, how might God answer them? Or imagining what God has done in the past. Who has God been? Who do you know God to be? What has God been capable of? And that final part, what you're doing is also engaging in what I call like backward looking or retrospective joy. And Psalm 77 is a great example of this kind of lament because first of all, the psalmist is very, very honest. So it's a beautiful lament when you're really ticked off. It's a great one because the psalmist is very, very ticked off at the beginning. But in the middle, the psalmist takes a turn and says, but I remember when retrospective joy gives us this ability to go back to moments when the goodness, meaning, truth, beauty, connection of the world wasn't so invisible, but instead was very clear. And sometimes we can reconnect with that joy again and sometimes feel it even more acutely. And so I would say that backward looking joy and lament are two gateways to joy, but there are many more.

B: I'm so thankful, Angela. I'm thinking back to all the podcast conversations that we've had. I think you've quoted more scripture than anyone else, along with Richard Rohr, Thurman and Taylor Swift. Like, well done. It's the expansiveness of a public theologian we needed to do all of those things. I'm thrilled and so thankful.

A: Thank you.

B&H: Thank you for listening to The Leader's Way. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website at berkeleydividy.yale.edu. Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow Berkeley at Yale on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more. Until next time, the Lord be with you.