

# LEARNING HOW TO



**SEE**

with  
**Brian  
McLaren**

Season 4, Episode 4  
**Re-Wild**

feat. Todd Wynward

Brian: Yesterday, I took my kayak out into the Everglades. I paddled across a lake, through a series of mangrove tunnels, and then out into a remote lagoon, where I fished for a while and then just sat. My little boat rocked in gentle waves, an alligator surfaced, and upon seeing me, gently submerged and swam away. An osprey hovered, curled like a fist, plunged into the water and then rose, shivering off spray, a fish wiggling in its talons. Then, all seemed still for a while, with only a whisper of wind riffing the lake. A swallow-tailed kite appeared, swooping and soaring in silence just above the mangroves, a graceful miracle in motion. I felt full. I simply needed to be there for a few hours out in the wild just to listen, watch, observe, all the more because I'd been hunkered down in what I call the writing cave, a place where I am deep, deep, deep into words, the words of this book in fact. I felt I needed to shake off words, just as that osprey had shaken off water.

I have a theory. When our ancient ancestors developed the capacity for language, words became increasingly all-encompassing. Words became not only our primary way of engaging with others socially, but they also became the tool by which we each conduct our own inner dialogue. Language became so powerful both interpersonally and intrapersonally, that the web of words in our heads often felt more real to us than the web of life outside our heads. Language, we discovered, was a tool we used to describe reality, but it also could become a substitute for reality. We might say it was the original form of virtual reality. Christianity evolved as, among other things, a language, a set of words pointing to a set of ideas. This language was necessary to liberate people from another language, the language of empire and domination. This liberating language evolved and shaped the inner architecture of generations of Christians, furnishing them with foundational terms like sin, grace and salvation. These terms were woven together in stories, and the stories were woven together in a framing story, another phenomenon of language.

But like everything, language evolves, meanings modify, what once was liberating can become a cage in which we pace, dreaming of freedom. Many people today are pacing the cage. Old Christian words have been emptied of their substance or their original meanings have mutated. The old framing story doesn't fit the reality we experience and feels instead like a conspiracy theory or manic fantasy. We can't help but feel that the language of Christianity creates a make-believe world, a rabbit hole, an alternative reality where angels and demons are real, but climate change and evolution aren't. The gap between actual reality and the Christian linguistic reality stretches our credulity to a breaking point. That's why many can no longer stay Christian, and that's why many of us who choose to stay Christian must deconstruct the Christianity we inherited and shake off much of its language.

Well, I'm really super happy to be in conversation today with Todd Wynward. Todd, you and I met some years ago. I remember meeting you, I think it was at a CAC related event, although it may have been somewhere else, but you have a much longer history with the Center for Action and Contemplation than I do, and I wondered if you could just introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your story with the CAC.

Todd: Thanks, Brian. Yeah, it actually was the first Wild Goose conference that you and I met. You had blown me away with Everything Must Change, and I was an aspiring author who was just starting my own book, Rewilding the Way, and you were kind enough to walk and talk with me for a good long 10 minutes, and that was a gift. But I'd been searching for authentic and emerging transformative Christianity for quite some time. And yeah, when I

was a young 23-year-old, I had a chance to go to this new place called the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I told a young Father Richard Rohr had just started up something transformative. And so I was able to attend and immerse myself in what they called the School for Profits back then. And it was an immersive, multi-month residency. It blew me away. It was a transformational, immersive catechesis for me as a young lad.

Brian: That's fantastic. So with that, I promise you my math isn't good enough to figure out your age, but this would've been the early 1990s. Is that about right?

Todd: That's right, very good.

Brian: Something happened between then and when we met, and you wanted to talk about, and you were writing a book called *Rewilding The Way*. Tell me about your connection with the wild.

Todd: On the book notes, you're supposed to, as an author, write something that makes you different from other people. And one of the things my editor suggested was that I write that I spent more than a thousand nights outdoors. I've been an avid wilderness leader, trip expedition planner, I've started public schools with an outdoor emphasis, I've worked with Outward Bound and NOLS, the two outdoor trek companies. And when I was in my early twenties, actually encouraged by the CAC at the time, I created something called Peak Experiences. As a zealous 23-year-old, 24-year-old, I wanted to bring people into the outdoors to help have transformative spiritual experiences that would lead to social change.

Brian: Say that again, to have transformative spiritual experiences that lead to social change. That's it?

Todd: Yeah, this idea of the inner and the outer, and that the inner spirit changing, having a mountaintop experience or a desert rewilding experience might cause people to have a different social agenda. And so I found that ever since I was a high schooler in California going to summer camps, I found the ability for the outdoors, for fire, for rain, for earth, for air, to bring us back to an elemental relationship with seasons and with the earth.

Brian: Tell me a little bit about your traditional religious upbringing, and how that connected or didn't connect with your experience of the sacred in the wild.

Todd: I grew up in a polite Presbyterian church, I guess the frozen chosen would be the nickname that we might give it, with a lot of fear. Fear, sex, drugs, and rock and roll were all taboo, so somewhat evangelical. I grew up and had an earnest heart for Christ, maybe like yourself, in my early teens, but I found that everything in my life felt very manicured and commodified and terraformed by humanity. And I longed, by the time I was 18, to go to wild spaces. I began going to college up in Portland, Oregon, sea kayaking and wilderness tripping, and then that was the beginning of it all.

Brian: So for a young guy, you and I have so much in common in this way, but for a young guy, part of that is just adventure, and there's something exhilarating and exciting and is deeply, deeply wholesome about that kind of adventure. But part of that, for you, there was a spiritual dimension to it, I guess. Can I ask you to speak some more about that?

Todd: Yeah. Well, I began to look at Jesus' own life as a pattern, and I began to see His own days of testing in the wilderness, and it really connected with my own immersive. As you know, the wildness, you get into undomesticated space where you're not in control and you have to adapt and respond. And I love what I think it might have been Belden Lane first said, but something that the desert and the wilderness is where you learn what you fiercely love and what to fiercely ignore or resist. And so then I began to look at the desert, Desert Fathers and this leaving Babylon or leaving exile or leaving the Roman Empire. And as you know, I come from a Mennonite tradition now, which does view Constantine and the going Christianity coming complicity in bed with the Roman Empire as the fatal apostasy or the defection from the Christ path. And so seeing Thomas Merton and the other monks advocating to go to the desert, that's where we find spiritual strength and clarity, I think, in order to speak back to empire or to conventional ways of thinking.

Brian: Yes, as two guys who grew up going to church and we're exposed to a lot of Bible, when you say that, it makes me think how the word wilderness and desert, when I grew up, whether it was Moses leading the people through the wilderness, through the desert toward the Promised Land, it's so interesting, the associations I had with that were 100% negative. And one of the things that I've wondered about is how different it would be if we translated wilderness as the wild, and that we were to say, "Look, in the Middle East, if you're not in a city and if you're not on a farm near a river, the wild is the desert." And maybe those purely negative associations with wilderness were part of our own bias being projected on those biblical texts. I don't know, does that ring true with your experience?

Todd: It does, but I think that piece of adventure or fascination, I didn't feel those things to avoid, but more like these are the spaces where taboos break and where transformation happens. And reading about Jacob wrestling and getting a sacred wound, those were deep mythology things that even as a young earnest evangelical type, I didn't know what to do with that, I didn't know the mystery of the wild and to know that you're going to come back changed. I guess that's the piece that I always read about in the Bible, and it really blew me away when I suddenly recognized that Jesus, only after going to the Jordan and then going into the wilderness, did He come back to do His public ministry. His clarity, there's that clarity in the desert, and I guess the piece that fairly early on I stopped demonizing the desert and seeing it as a place of transformation. But that's only buyer beware. You're going to get changed, and that might be why a lot of us conventional Christians don't like that.

Brian: You used that word manicured before and you think about the experience of a manicured religion, where everything is neat and clean and straight lines and decently and an order, and maximum comfort, minimum, so that if someone changes the slightest thing in the liturgy, people are up in arms as if a tornado had ripped through their spiritual life. And then you think part of the experience of being in the wild is danger and is humility. Just a few days ago, I was out in the Rocky Mountains, I had a speaking engagement there and I stayed over two days to do some fly fishing. I was out alone on a river, and I was aware I could make one false step on a slippery rock in the water and I could be in a lot of trouble. And so there is this sense of heightened... It matters whether I plant my foot correctly here or whether I'm sloppy and careless.

It ups the ante, doesn't it, for life, in intense ways?

Todd: It does, and it brings things to the basic elements of real stress rather than our false stress that we set upon ourselves. And I often bring 10th graders to the wilderness, and I would talk to them about the stresses they felt at school versus the stresses out here which really could kill you. And yet setting up your tent properly, you pay more attention to that once you realize, yeah.

Brian: Oh wow.

Todd: I love the thinking of too, of being able to spend the night out allows you to be a bit less fearful about loss and empire. It flexing your muscle of liberation when one spends the night on their own terms in the wild.

Brian: I know how to survive, I'm not dependent on electricity and TikTok and running water. And then comes to those experiences that actually feel, they feel theological. Even though it's not like you're hiking in the mountains and you see a cliff and on the cliff face a Bible verse written, it's more the experience of awe or fragility. You realize, "Gosh, if I turn my ankle out here, I'm very fragile." It's the feeling of how great the stars are, the awareness that there are other creatures, some for whom I am a predator and some for whom I could be prey, and this sense that it's not all about me. I mean, there's so much that happens in those wilderness experiences that shake us out of... I'm just thinking of junior high or high school students who so much of what's going on in them, necessarily because of their development, is about their place in the pecking order, their social status, how many likes they just got for what they posted on Instagram or whatever.

And there's something that you come in contact with yourself in a way when you're outdoors hiking, or especially when you're alone, and then something of a spiritual dimension experience. Look, I think there are some people who are going to be listening and they've never had an experience like that. And I wonder if you could just talk about what it's like, what it's been like for you.

Todd: I love what you said, and there's a de-centering and a recentering, right?

Brian: Yes.

Todd: That can happen. Or a dislocation and a relocation.

Brian: Yes.

Todd: And the notion of being situated in history, situated in a watershed, there's a humility as well as the grandiosity that both happens, and the small self, in my mind, gets more and more erased.

Brian: Yes.

Todd: The chance of connecting and communion and true communion and seasonality, it's a detox from so many toxic parts of theology and also a detox from so many toxic

parts of our society. I guess I just was thinking about those people you said who've never experienced that. I wanted to bring back just something I loved about your book, Brian. I think it was chapter eight, about Christianity as a failed tool for transformation. That's tying back to my initial thirst to come to the CAC 30 years ago. They had a school for prophets that rocked my world, and that was one, I would call that a curated catechism or a curated training.

Brian: Yes.

Todd: In my own book that I wrote, *Rewilding the Way*, the way I discovered that the early Christians might have had up to three years of experiential training before they were called a follower of the way. It just blew my mind to imagine what would that look like. And so on one hand, to have a curated planned creative training by mentors at the CAC was mind-blowing. Then the other was the raw experience of the wilderness, and that encounter that left me changed and allowed me to come back to dominant consciousness in a different way. And then thirdly, having communities of practice, of advanced practitioners around me.

So those were three different journeys I've taken. Southside Church in the early nineties also was the hub of sanctuary liberation, and I was able to be part of that community for two years with John Fife, and they were protesting our own government and putting signs up saying, "We obey a bigger law than exporting these refugees back to their homes to faith death squad." So the combination of Richard Rohr and the CAC, raw wilderness experience and sanctuary and liberation movements and Latin American theology, those were all wilding for me. Those were incredibly incubating for me.

Brian: There's a sense when we enter the wild, we're stepping out of the confines of normal and taboos and rules of normal social life. When we engage in protest, we're going wild too, we're challenging some of those standard unquestioned realities. Hey, I just want to make a couple connections. First, that School for Profits in some ways was the inspiration for what later evolved as the Living School in which you have been a student participant. And the fact that you went from this experience that talked about the inner life and inner transformation to social activism is just also a reminder of what Richard Rohr says is the most important word in the CAC's name, which is the word 'and', Center for Action and Contemplation, that we don't want contemplation without action or action without contemplation. We really see the two of them needing to be yoked, married, like two wings on a bird, so to speak, that they really go together.

You mentioned that chapter eight taught about the lack of transformation that we see in a lot of religious people, including, let's be honest, a lot of clergy. I mean, it seems like every week there's a new scandal that comes out that shows us that, behind the curtain or outside the pulpit, we often see that the shiny image wasn't backed up by a life of integrity. And this sense that when the structures of our religion aren't working, to bring about that transformation, we need to be jolted into some disruptive experience that also has a new curriculum. I want to go into two different tackhere, but the first is I'd like to ask you, when you're out in the wild, how would you describe the curriculum that you're exposed to? And then the second question is, you've also been involved in taking very, very seriously your geographical place, and so I wonder if you could talk about both of those. You can mash them together or talk about one and then the other, but it seems to me this is all part of the

curriculum of a real life of transformation.

Todd: Yeah, I think in particular, learning how to become a person of place is the new curriculum for myself. And I was just reading, thinking about your book and what it said about what's the effect that Christianity is having on economic inequality, racism, divisiveness, global ecocide, and for me, defecting from the consumer narrative that says, "I can have anything I want at any time I want and throw it away in any way I want," becoming a person of place, a watershed way person. And that's the curriculum that I've designed with Ched Myers being my inspiration in Watershed Discipleship, is this idea of how do I learn as a colonizer, as a settler, how do I settle well? And so the curriculum for me is learning how to humble my taste buds, to learn how to change and eat the things that are here and available in season, to change my pocketbook and my schedule to do the things that are right when the time it's telling me it's right.

So I've become a little less about adventure and extremes in the wilderness and much more about living with nature as one of many citizens of my watershed. So this idea of apple harvesting and pressing when it's time to do that, planting garlic in late fall when it's time to do that. We do a water blessing in the spring when the freezes are done and the water is now flooding back into the land. And to be able to honor the thousand-year-old Taos Pueblo tradition, and then the 500-year Hispanic acequia tradition, the waterway tradition, is a beautiful honoring of cultures here.

Brian: At this stage in your life, that work of deep embeddedness in a watershed and in a place with history, this feels like it's an essential part of your ongoing growth as a Christian disciple. It feels like this is part of what's teaching you and forming you and shaping you.

Todd: That's right. I think I've matured into being a person of place, and I love how that, it's an antidote to the racism, the economic inequality, the ecocide, and the conspicuous consumption that we have. Yeah, my path as a Christian has caused me to become rooted in place. And it's my own metanoia, my own conversion from the... As Jim Wallis has said in the past with Sojourners, that when you convert, you convert to something specific and away from something specific. And for me, the path to local, becoming one member in a watershed among many creatures and venisons, learning to apple press when it's time to press apples, to go and bless the waters when the waters come, I've been able to live into the traditions and be welcomed by the Pueblo people here in Taos Pueblo who honor the waters as they come back, and the thousand-year tradition that they have, and the 400-year tradition that Hispanic acequia people who have lived agriculturally, I'm learning from them how to be a person of place that feels like communion.

It feels like what Christ would do rather than what a consumer would do, and an exceptional, greedy one that I used to be. So that's been my conversion.

Brian: So you are, in many ways, exemplifying and giving a specific, your own life experience of this struggle that I tried to address in this book, *Do I Stay Christian?*, this feeling that I can't just keep going through the old program of Christian life, it's not enough for my spiritual life, it's not making enough difference in me, it's I'm not making enough difference in the world. And so you've gone through this process first of spending so many nights sleeping out under the stars and reconnecting with the wild world, and then in more recent years, embedding



yourself in a place including connecting with the Indigenous people of this place before colonization, in a sense, tapping into the wisdom that they're so generous to share, and connecting with the rhythms of the seasons and part of what it means to be a living creature in an environment. I think this is something that certainly rings true with me and with so many people that I know.

Todd: I love that you and I are so similar in that way, in that we both are learning to settle into place. And Robin Wall Kimmerer, the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, has been so instrumental to me about becoming a naturalized citizen. I've looked up the Immigration and Naturalization Service requirements for someone to become a citizen of the United States, and those same requirements I've applied to myself. Have I learned the law of the land? Am I a positive contributor to my community? And there's about eight. I wrote a small article about this that has gotten some traction here in town because I don't dare call myself native, but I don't want to call myself a tourist either. I'm not just a visitor and I'm not just a colonizer, and so can I be a naturalized citizen? That really is evocative for me and for many people who want to live well, who are owning all those burdens of being a colonizer, being an extractor. How do we live well again?

It's a conversion to place. And so I love looking at the ancient Jewish covenants with the land and the idea of the land having a Sabbath, of Jesus being baptized not in the Jordan, but into the Jordan. He became a watershed preacher and defender, I think, and I like thinking of that, that He had about a 30-mile region. I'd like to have that.

Brian: Yes. Yes, yes, yes, Todd. Oh my, well, this has been such a rich conversation. I'm so grateful for the example and the wisdom you've shared in your writings, and the example of this beautiful work that you're doing in Taos Pueblo. We'll make sure to put links in the show notes for this episode because I really hope everyone will learn about what you're doing. And it strikes me that this is something that could catch on, isn't it? I mean, when you and Ched Myers began talking about this years ago and dreaming about where this could go, I think your hope is that more and more of us could experience rewilding, replacing, relocating into the location where we actually are, and learning how to be naturalized citizens of this little piece of Earth where we live. Yes?

Todd: Yeah, Brian, I think it's a real danger for those of us who have privilege to think about replacing ourselves by purchasing our little bit of land, and maybe going on nature hikes or going on a canoe every now and then into the waters around you, and imagining yourself to be one with, I think, the justice element. And I guess what I'm loving about what I see in your work, where you're both a theologian and a strategist and an activist, and what the Center for Action and Contemplation is reinventing a little bit itself as what does it mean to be a School for Profits again, and I think what you said about the threefold almost of the initial raw wilderness experience, the curated training, and thirdly, becoming a body of a transformed community, those are three steps that we can take to really sink into place and become that leaven and the loaf that Jesus originally was steaming.

Brian: Beautiful, beautiful. Well, I think it wouldn't be appropriate for us to end without saying we wake up every day with this awareness that the way human beings have been living with the Earth, really for 10,000 years, but really the problems have intensified in the last couple centuries as we, human beings in their number and in their extraction from the Earth, we



know we're living in an unsustainable way. We know our way of life has to change, and we believe that part of this change is a deeply spiritual transformation that has to do with changing the way we see, changing the way we spend, changing the way we earn, changing the way we relate, changing the way we travel. In some ways, this process that we're inviting people into it is not just about personal fulfillment, it really is about the future of the human species on this beautiful planet. And I think you and I both share this sense that this isn't just for personal enrichment, this is there are very serious planetary issues at stake right now. Anything you'd like to say about that before we close?

Todd: I think it's so important to not feel despairing, to not browbeat ourselves and say how terrible we are. There's been a lot that needs to change, but I love what the ancient church fathers called a conversion of manners. At any moment, we have the opportunity to drop the mindset of the colonizer. That's what Robin Wall Kimmerer said, and it strikes to my heart. At any moment, we have the opportunity to drop the mindset of the colonizer, and it, again, allows to know that the earth is inviting us, the native people are inviting us to live in a simpler way, connected with all things. And so there's a rejoicing and an invitation that's always there for us.

Brian: Oh, that's so beautiful. I should add that you and I are having this conversation, you're outdoors finding a signal where we could have this conversation. I think I just heard a crow or a magpie back in the background there, and we've heard some traffic going by, but that's just a reminder of what we're really talking about in this episode. Todd, thank you so much, it's been a pleasure to be in this conversation with you.

Todd: Oh, such a joy. Thank you for the path we're walking together. I think I'd like to close with what Wendell Berry has done with Jesus' words and said, "Do into those downstreams as you would have those upstream do unto you," and that just feels like a simple way of moving forward one step at a time.

Brian: Amen. Amen. Thank you. I'd like to leave you with this short reflection from part three of Do I Stay Christian?

In the wild, under the sun, in the weather, with our bare feet on soil and rock, we can begin to break through to feel the truth. We are not independent ghost in machine or spirit in meat monads, we are interdependent events that happen here, on and in and with, and as part of the Earth, which is part of larger solar, galactic, and cosmic systems. Every breath tells us that we are porous, every meal and every trip to the bathroom tell us the same thing, what was in air and soil was captured in a zesty mango that I ate and that became part of me. Both the mango and I depend on nuclear reactions within the Sun to keep us alive. Sun, space, earth, soil, air, wind, rain, we are all part of one great wild web that does not depend on our language to keep functioning.

That is why I took my kayak into the Everglades yesterday, that is why I sat in wordless wonder as the swallow-tailed kite banked, dove and hovered over the mangroves. I, who love words and make my living by them need to soar above words, especially my own, in the wild. If this episode has raised questions for you, we'll devote a final episode in this season to responding to listener questions. You'll find information in the show notes and how to leave a recorded or written question. And I look forward to responding. Thanks to the Center for

Action and Contemplation for all of your support for this podcast. Thanks especially to our wonderful producer, Corey Wayne, and all of his artistry and support. And a special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in learning how to see. And if you found this series helpful, I hope you'll share it with someone you know and love.