



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Daniel Pawlus: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us as for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our featured guest, whom you’ll meet in a moment, is Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, President of The Interfaith Alliance in Washington, D.C. He’ll be talking with us about the importance of nurturing interfaith relationships without compromising the integrity of our own faiths.

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome broadcast journalist and writer, Judy Valente, who has spent some time this past year at a Benedictine monastery. Today she begins a series on monastic values for our day-to-day lives.

Lillian Daniel: We begin with the story of Susan Sholtes, a successful family therapist who has used her own chronic illness to create a community—a sacred space, as she calls it—for others like her to find comfort, support and a voice. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Susan Sholtes: It never occurred to me that I would experience serious illness. I had such a healthy childhood that I was not prepared. I live with Crohn’s Disease, which affects the intestines, the skin and the joints. We often have pain related to that and fatigue. Crohn’s disease is basically an invisible illness. The hardest part, I think, is the uncertainty of it. It stops and starts. It’s a relationship with fear, never knowing what your future is going to be like. And it’s also a loss of the past. It’s constant one foot in living and one foot in grieving.

Nobody wants to feel vulnerable and you have to sort of announce that so that you can reach out and get help. We’re supposed to be strong. We’re supposed to fix it. And I think that’s very difficult to appreciate in our society. I needed to create my own community, something that was safe, and that’s one reason I started the group. So I created a sacred space and that led me to go deeper within myself and not be absorbed and to think beyond myself. People who are in my groups live with various diseases, sometimes multiple diseases. We talk about everything but mostly we talk about living and our daily lives and what we are moving towards, not something that we’re looking back at. Lola is my new therapy dog. She relaxes people. She cheers people up. She’s particularly attuned to their emotions and feelings.

My father's friend was Dr. Benjamin Spock. To Susan with admiration and love, Ben Spock. He kept telling me stories, stories about himself, about other people. And I've often thought back to that. I decided to do a documentary. Everything in the film is something they wanted to voice. And really by voicing their stories, I saw them getting better. I saw them reaching out in a different way. One thing I noticed in talking to so many people was the lack of support. And we make an assumption often that families will take care of each other or that marriages stay together because of illness, in sickness and in health. What I found was the opposite and not only was there not family support but there was not community support. I think to be in better relationship with people with chronic illness, first you have to listen to them. You need to witness their story. Not just the medical narrative but the story of their lives. And then I think we need to make more jobs for people that don't fit a certain mold. Many people have moved from middle class to lower than that just because of illness. We're losing a valuable part of our society and that's wrong.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: Our thanks to Susan Sholtes for sharing her spiritual journey. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

Dr. C. Welton Gaddy is President of the Interfaith Alliance in Washington, D.C., a nonpartisan, grassroots organization with 185,000 members and 75 faith traditions, who celebrate religious freedom and unite their voices to challenge religious extremism. He also pastors Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, Louisiana. Dr. Gaddy is a familiar face on television news programs, where he provides commentary on issues related to politics and religion. He's the author of more than 20 books and is host of "State of Belief" on Air America. We're delighted to welcome Dr. Welton Gaddy to "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Welton.

MESSAGE

Welton Gaddy: Thank you, Daniel.

Several years ago, during a White House Summit for scientists, a noted scholar observed that in the biosphere independence means death. In other words, for life to be a reality, interdependence is a necessity. As another scientist put it, "The future either will be ecumenical or there will be no future."

I agree, though I likely would use the word "interfaith" or "inter-religious" rather than "ecumenical." Either the future will be inter-religious in nature or we will not experience the full meaning and potential of the future.

Those observations crash into harsh realities. I know. Our nation is divided and, unfortunately, the religions of our nation reflect the same divisions as do our politics and other endeavors. Not only are religious traditions divided from each other, within respective traditions devotees are divided among themselves.

So, is cooperation possible? Has "different" become a moral category? Can we live with our deepest differences? And, does fellowship with people holding beliefs different from ours compromise the integrity of our own religion?

I commend to you a vision. The source of the vision throbs close to the heart of most every religious tradition and cements with strength the very foundation of our democracy. It is a vision of “walking together.” Allowing that vision to shape our rhetoric and to influence our actions is a spiritual discipline that now, also, is best understood as a social necessity.

Walking together means sharing a pilgrimage with other people—not becoming just like them or seeking to make them just like us, not demanding uniformity in thought but seeking to discover the strength and beauty of diversity—walking together modeling the reconciling nature of true religion, enlivening our democracy, helping the poorest and the weakest among us, assuring that personal love finds expression in social justice, and seeking community both in local neighborhoods and throughout our global village.

It’s a journey. No one has arrived. All are on the way. No one pilgrim has any compulsion to judge another. All are moving in the same manner: some almost sprinting, some hobbling, some just getting one foot in front of another, but all growing and all occasionally stumbling—each paying attention to others so that when people fall everyone helps to get them back on their feet and moving again.

To be sure, the individual politics and religious convictions of the travelers differ dramatically. But coming to know each other on the journey, the pilgrims’ respect for each other’s dignity causes them to speak to one another with civility. Special interests and partisanship are respected though neither is allowed to destroy patriotic cooperation aimed at securing the best of the public’s welfare for everybody. Adjectives that stereotype persons and agitate divisions recede in significance. We’re walking together: rich and poor, Asian and African American, gay and straight, successes and failures.

Now I must be honest. The religious tradition of my childhood looked at this vision with suspicion or outright rejection. Growing up in West Tennessee in the 1940’s I had never met a Catholic, I knew one Jew, and people of other traditions—Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, for example—were considered “lost” with a possibility of being “saved” only if they embraced a faith identical to mine—a very fundamentalist Christian faith. Thankfully, the more I studied the scriptures of my tradition and learned of my faith and the more I allowed that faith to grip my life, I came to see faith unthreatened by truth from any source, open to dialogue across all lines of division, unconditionally committed to freedom—freedom is faith’s best friend—and inclusive rather than exclusive of other people.

Indeed, it has been within the Christian tradition that I found the vision of which I am speaking. But the vision of walking together is one shared among many religious traditions. In the Christian Scriptures, I see Jesus walking together with his disciples and later two despondent pilgrims on their way to a place called Emmaus finding hope in their realization of the presence of the divine mystery in their walking together. Reading the Hebrew Scriptures, I am captivated and inspired by images of the ancient people of Israel journeying together toward the Promised Land. Among Muslim brothers and sisters I ponder the meaning of the prophet Mohammed walking together with his followers from Medina to Mecca. Of course the very concept of journey or pilgrimage is often used as a synonym for any maturing religious experience.

Cooperation despite differences in opinions, walking together, is not a goal projected in spite of faith, but because of faith. We seek to walk together not only because it is a practical necessity but because it is a primal act of religious integrity.

And it is such a practical endeavor. Think of civil rights advocates walking together to secure the full promise of the United States Constitution for everybody and to realize Martin King's dream of a beloved community. Recall images of diverse people joining hands to walk together across a field in search of a child in the community who has become lost or been harmed. Friends, we can do together what no one of us can do alone.

I leave you with words inspired by spirituality and a passion for a civil society, words the embodiment of which in us is as urgent as our next breaths. Hear, please, this paraphrase of the Mayflower Compact:

*We pledge to walk together
In the ways of truth and affection,
As best we know them now
Or may learn them in days to come,
That our children may be fulfilled
And that we may speak to the world
In words and actions
Of peace and goodwill.*

Here is truth worth observing, a covenant worth celebrating, and a spiritual discipline worth practicing. I commend to you the vision of walking together and I hope to see you on the journey.

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Welton Gaddy, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Welton Gaddy.

Welton, I was fascinated and wanted to learn more about the transition that you went through. How did you go from being a Fundamentalist Southern Baptist to really believe that folks of other religions were damned, to becoming a person who fights for religious liberty? What were the things that changed and shaped you?

Welton Gaddy: Well, the first thing is I had parents who loved me and trusted me and were willing for me to go where a search took me and loved me wherever I came out. In the historic Baptist tradition, religious freedom has always been primal.

Lillian Daniel: Right. That's been your roots in history.

Welton Gaddy: And it's changed. It's changed among some people who now call themselves Baptists and whether they identify with that tradition or not. I had good teachers. I can't ever say enough about the importance of those formative years. Both in Sunday school and then in university I had great teachers. And they were willing, again, as my parents, to trust the process of learning and to not be afraid of truth wherever it was found. I went through the trauma of the take over of the Southern Baptist Convention by a new group of leaders who had somewhat different theology, different priorities. They rewrote the policy papers.

Lillian Daniel: Say more about that for our viewers. What was the change?

Welton Gaddy: In the late 70s and early 80s, there was great turmoil in the Southern Baptist Convention. And what I've found there—because this relates to the Interfaith Alliance—was that the same strategy used in taking over religious organizations and conventions was the strategy being imposed by some in trying to take over the nation and to do so with, at least, theocratic tendencies. And so I had never thought about doing interfaith work. The invitation to go there was a surprise. But I had seen first hand what it's like to lose a tradition. I knew what it was like to have something that was precious to me, religious liberty, threatened by people who wanted to shape everybody by their convictions, and to use the government to impose on the nation their particular agenda. I certainly believe that legislation in our nation should reflect values, but not narrow sectarian values, values that help everybody. It's a long leap from supporting civil rights to supporting particular pieces of legislation that only one religious group happens to be interested in. And I have to say that inter-religious work is the hardest work I've ever done but it's the most rewarding work I've ever done.

Daniel Pawlus: Let's talk a little bit more about that. I'm fascinated by the Interfaith Alliance and I think our viewers, many may not have heard about it. So tell us a little bit about the founding and the actual work that you're doing there on a daily basis. We'd love to learn more.

Welton Gaddy: Well, the founding was about 16 years ago, 17 years ago now, and it was in the middle of Newt Gingrich's Contract with America, that kind of take over of government by a more theocratically oriented constituency. And a group of religious leaders from diverse traditions came together to form the Interfaith Alliance. Frankly, they only wanted to be a voice saying that when someone tells you they speak for all religions, there's a good possibility they don't speak for everybody and they don't speak for us. But when the announcement was made about the formation of the Interfaith Alliance, calls began to come in from all over the nation saying we've got a group in our community that would like to identify with you. And so there developed from that grassroots organizations, as well. When I came to the Interfaith Alliance the primary mission was countering the Religious Right, but I've said to those who were asking me to take that job, I don't get up in the morning to oppose something, I want to be for something. And the preservation and strengthening and defense of religious freedom in our nation is a cause worth working for. So instead of having a broad agenda, which is good for a progressive organization if you have the money and staff and all to do it, we decided to look at the intersection of religion and politics through the lens of religious freedom and to try to bring into a civil conversation not just members of the majority faith in the nation but the voices of people of all religious traditions and no religious traditions.

Lillian Daniel: Let me ask you. These are lofty concepts, but what are some concrete examples of things that have happened in recent history that has curtailed people's religious liberty? What kind of concrete things that you're working on.

Welton Gaddy: Well, there are two answers to that question. After 9/11, we saw something of our membership that we had never seen before. In Denver, members of the Interfaith Alliance organized an event to go and circle the mosque in Denver and say we are embracing you as people of this city. We don't look down on you for what has happened.

Lillian Daniel: We don't stereotype you.

Welton Gaddy: Right. We had great rapport with the Sikh community. From the Sikh community came the first murder after 9/11 with someone thinking they were getting rid of a Muslim who would be identified with this. So we found the kind of compassion that comes from bringing different people together who really care for each other. That's one thing. In religious liberty we are finding that there are two or three generations, at least, that have grown up without a real indoctrination into what religious liberty means. The Religious Right actually used the phrase "church-state separation" in such a derogatory way that people became a little bit suspicious of it. So we've tried to say, look...I said in my remarks that freedom is religion's best friend. It's faith's best friend. The reason that this nation has such religious vitality is because we have respected each other's right to pursue different paths and we have protected that for each, other not just ourselves. We are in a situation right now in the divisions within our nation where people are tending to look out only for themselves.

Daniel Pawlus: That's an excellent point. We've got a couple of minutes left, Welton, so I want to get to this if we can. What's holding us back on this? Are people afraid? Are they unaware? Are they just apathetic to this idea of religious cooperation, or interfaith cooperation? What do you think is going on in the conversation?

Welton Gaddy: Well, I think there is fear. I think that those clouds of smoke from 9/11 are still in people's minds. But I also think that political leaders and religious leaders have to bear a major part of the responsibility for the divisiveness that we're finding in the nation now. When you take the kind of absolutism that is usually identified with religion, we have convictions, we believe this is true, and you impose that on politics, which is an art that is forwarded by compromise, and then you do away with civil debate. And so when two people look at each other and one of them says: "I'm right, you're wrong. I don't have anything that I can learn from you. If you want to listen to me I'll talk." Then that gets at the very core of our democracy and unfortunately it has received justification from religion. It's time for the politicians and religious leaders in our nation to say we've got to work together.

Lillian Daniel: And I think the viewers of our show would definitely agree with you on that. They take delight in the variety of traditions.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: And now we turn now to a new series this season of reflections by Judy Valente on monastic values for our day-to-day lives. This past year, Judy has spent a week every month

with the Benedictine sisters at Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas. Today, she reflects on “Praise.”

REFLECTION

Judy Valente: For over a year now, I’ve been spending about a week a month at Mount St. Scholastica, a Benedictine Monastery for women in Atchison, Kansas. I went to this place in the heart of America’s heartland to see if ancient monastic traditions had anything to teach a modern professional woman like me. I’ve learned plenty. We might think of monasteries as throw-backs to the past. But, in fact, monasteries offer us a glimpse of the future, a future our world so desperately needs: one that stresses community over competition, service over self-aggrandizement, quietude over gratuitous talk, simplicity over constant consumption.

Like many professionals, I usually start my day by reading the newspaper and tuning in to National Public Radio. But at Mount St. Scholastica, the day begins at dawn, with prayer. The Sisters make this moving gesture of shaping the sign of the cross across their lips. And they say, “Lord, open my lips and we shall proclaim your praise.” It’s a commitment to make the entire day—all our words and actions—a way of praising God. I can’t tell you how many times that thought has prevented me from blowing my stack at a co-worker, or making negative comments, because if what I’m doing during the course of my work day isn’t in some way praising God, then maybe it isn’t worth doing.

The monastic women of Mount St. Scholastic have taught me that whatever petty annoyances, disappointments or potential setbacks I might be facing, my days are meant for praise. And my work can be one continuous prayer.

CLOSING

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Judy. And our thanks again to Welton Gaddy, Susan Sholtes and you for joining us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lillian Daniel.

Daniel Pawlus: And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org, where you’ll find an extensive collection of reflections and stories, on video and in print, to enrich your spiritual life. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may peace be with you in the week ahead.