**Steve Spilde:** Welcome, everyone. Today it is my great honor to welcome John Heagle as my guest. I’ve had the privilege to know John for about 10 years. I first was acquainted to him … He is the presenter for our Spiritual Direction Preparation Program, our weekend entitled “Personal Growth in Faith Development.” John has had a great influence on me and my own personal growth and faith development, so it’s a real privilege for me to join John in conversation today. Thank you.

**John Heagle:** It’s good to be with you – very much so. Thank you.

**Steve:** Could you talk about how when you first met with the participants in the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program, how long ago that was, and what your first experience was.

**John:** I couldn’t give you the exact time. I think I’ve been there four times now, and that would be every other year, so it would be about 10 years ago I think that we began that process – particularly because the topic was one that I felt so comfortable with.

**Steve:** What are your credentials to talk about that? Where does that come from? I know you as having experience as a priest. I know you have experience as an instructor [and] as a therapist. Talk about your background.

**John:** I guess I would like to start briefly [with] how I would frame my early life. I grew up with two main elements of energy. One is a very close farm Catholic family. My parents were survivors of The Great Depression, and they got married in 1934 and began farming together on the same land they lived on for 65 years, and that’s where I grew up. They had four boys; I’m the second oldest. There was a lot of boy energy in our house, a lot of physical interaction, a lot of testosterone energy that was there. We were never a perfect family, but [we were] a close family. What I remember in addition to my farm-close family is that I was born in the context of the beginning of the Second World War. Obviously, I was too young … I was born in 1938. In November of that year, seven months after I was born is when the famous Kristallnacht happened in Germany when the Nazis began to persecute the Jewish people. I was too young to remember. I was even too young to remember much of Pearl Harbor; I was about three years old. All I remember is my parents being very upset. Only later did I come to understand that that was kind of a background setting that I didn’t become aware of until my adolescent years. I could remember the blackouts, the rationing of gasoline, butter, and sugar. Of course, we made our own butter, so that wasn’t a problem with all that. But I just think that was a very important part.

I also remember when you turned 6, you officially started helping with the chores in the barn. Also, since mom only had four boys, she also taught us how to cook and clean, so we also learned that. We had to get up before going to school and throw out the sileage and feed the cows, and then go back in and take a bath and catch the school bus. There was this kind of sense of uber responsibility. I know I was raised as kind of a pleaser, to be “a good boy,” and to jump through all the right hoops – not just with my parents, but [also] in school with the sisters and with the whole church part of it, which was also very important. We went to church every Sunday and prayed every day. We had all our meals together because we were working in the field or doing the chores together, so it was that kind of setting, I think, that really helped shape me. I think that’s a very significant influence, anyway. And also, the war part of it got me back into social justice work.

**Steve:** You grew up in northern Wisconsin, near Menomonie. You became a priest. Can you talk about that journey and at what point that idea entered your mind and kind of the path that led you in that direction?

**John:** It’s interesting that probably the two sources of what I would call spirituality – in those days they didn’t speak of it that way – but the two sources of mystery I guess is the word I would use, or of religious presence, were the forest, farmland, the fields. And we had a creek at the bottom of our land, and a river within a quarter of a mile, Red Cedar River. The rivers and the forest and the fields were one real profound source for me of spontaneous nature mysticism. I had a real sense of union with mystery, with the holy. I wouldn’t have called that “God;” God was more in church. The second part of it was I became an alter server early. As soon as you receive your First Communion in second grade you could become an alter server, but you had to memorize the Latin. In those days, the Mass was in Latin. For some reason I was always a questor; I always wanted to know “why?” I remember the first response prayer before the alter was, “Ad Deum, qui laetificat juventutem meam.” It took me a long time in the second grade to memorize that. I went to the sister who was training us and I said, “What does that mean?” She said, “It doesn’t matter what it means. It’s from one of the Psalms. Just pray it.” But I was determined to find out what it meant, and when I found out it was Psalm 42 and it meant, “I will go to the altar of God, and I will do so with the joyfulness of youth.” I thought, “Holy mackerel, that’s great.” Being an altar server, there was something about church, the eucharist or the Mass, that really was very sacred even though it was in another language and the ritual was outdated.

I experienced another kind of mystery in the fields and the forest and the river. Probably going into high school and especially in college, the question became for me, “What’s the connection between creation and the holy in religion?” The message often was the world is a veil of tears, and it’s something that we’re here to find the escape route from. Yet I kept saying, “I don’t know what they mean by the world, but the world I know is something that I deeply love, and I find life in it. So I kept trying to resolve this paradox of, the world is a suspicious place or a dangerous place, and our purpose is to get to heaven. That was an ongoing struggle for me in college.

**Steve:** What I’m hearing you say is, the struggle is to get to heaven to get out of this bad place. But you’re thinking of the forest where you grew up and thought, “This is not a bad place. I could spend my time here.”

**John:** Precisely. In grade school, on the last day of school, we get off the school bus at the corner and take off our shoes, carry them home, and we never put our shoes on until it’s time to go back to school again in the fall. That’s how it was. I’ve come to understand now what Jesus means by, the world is not creation. He means the world of oppression and political mechanizations and the power of imperialism. That’s what he’s talking about. That’s the world in the Gospel of John when the Gospel of John says, “God so loved the world …” That’s not the systems of oppression. That’s creation. But I didn’t know that at the time. That was a struggle for me, and I think that the breaking point for me was in 1958 [when] I was sent to Catholic University for my further seminary training. I was studying philosophy at the time, and it was still kind of the old, worn-out scholastic philosophy of studying St. Thomas in Latin. I was getting more and more bored with it. I remember reading someplace this book [entitled] “The Human Phenomenon.” It was forbidden in the seminary library. One Saturday afternoon I took the bus downtown to Galleries Bookstore, and I purchased a copy of “The Human Phenomenon.” I brought it back under my coat, and that night I told my roommate, “I’m going to read this book after Grand Silence.” I was still reading it when the bell went off at 5:30 to get up. It was a breakthrough because Teilhard [author Pierre Teilhard de Chardin] basically resolved that issue of, there’s not the world over here and the holy or the divine over there. They’re both together through the process of evolving creation and evolving human beings. It was like a light went on for me. It was at the same time a great relief because I was saying, ‘Maybe I’m in the wrong place and I shouldn’t even be in the seminary because I don’t believe this stuff.’ ”

**Steve:** I find that fascinating, that whole mystery of the incarnation, the human and the divine in the same person. The church professes that as a reality, but yet the need to separate the world from the divine …

**John:** Isn’t that an interesting paradox, because when I was growing up we talked about the incarnation, but the emphasis was never on the humanity of Jesus. It was always on the divinity. I can remember having this image from catechism class in grade school of when Jesus was born, because he was divine, that there he was in the manger and he kind of looked out and said, “OK, there’s going to be some shepherds coming, and in a few days there’s going to be wise men.” And he looked ahead and said, “I’m going to have three days that are going to be pretty tough, but after that I’m going to rise again,” like he had this whole script, unfortunately, whether they intended or not. What the church gave us was Jesus was divine. He was human, but you didn’t see the human part of it. You didn’t see the incarnational dimension – at least I didn’t as much as I have come to see. That’s precisely what God is doing: embracing all of creation and all of humanity.

**Steve:** So Teilhard really opened things up for you. The presenter of you that I know, you’ve just really continued to uncover that. What are the implications of that, that God is present in this world? It’s not, God is not somewhere else, but if you want to meet God, open your eyes to your life. Open your eyes to the creation. Open your eyes to the neighbor. Whatever’s happening right now, this is God in our midst. Am I tracking with you?”

**John:** You’re saying it very accurately. What I think is central to most emerging Christian religions – and for that matter, most spiritual traditions today – you mentioned this before. It’s the movement from individual salvation to much more of a sense of the “we.” The “we is not only myself and my fellow humanity and the people I love – my family, my friends, my colleagues – but the “we” is creation. It is the universe that we’re all part of. To begin to see that as the unfolding, kind of unfinished symphony of the holy presence … More and more have a difficult time thinking of God as a person. I certainly think God is personal, and probably supra-personal would be the way to describe it. But I tend to think of God – or whatever the word is you want to use [such as] the divine or the mystery – I think I use the word “the holy presence,” because the holy presence is enveloping and inclusive of all from the smallest electrons and below to the galaxies beyond us. It includes everything, so it’s the mystery that is closer to us than our breath and nearer to us than our heartbeat. To come to realize that is to see it everywhere.

**Steve:** So you got introduced to that. You were still in school. You had not yet become a priest. You were still in school, correct?

**John:** Right.

**Steve:** You got introduced to that, but my sense is it continued to unfold over the years to come.

**John:** It did. When I was first introduced to it, it brought about a great sense of relief, [and] a sense of vision for me. But it was in conflict with what the church and theology was teaching at the time. The last four years of theology was exactly the four years of the Second Vatican Council, which blew open that whole separation between Heaven and Earth, matter and spirit, and soul and mind. It said it is all-inclusive. I had to kind of study the Second Vatican Council documents. A lot of the theology professors, since it was unfolding, they were still giving us the old stuff, except for the biblical people. We had some great biblical scholars, Roland Murphy and others, who were terrific. So I had to mainly do the reading at the time, and I would say probably another … another very significant turning point for me [was] I had a great sense of hope, and a great sense of energy and enthusiasm. And I have to say realistically, it lasted for about 10 years. And then I sensed that the Catholic Church, my tradition, getting a little bit frightened of where this was all going, and they began to circle the wagons a little bit and emphasize [that] we have to back up and not move forward. I always felt that that was a sad thing because everybody else – and there were a lot other dimensions of our culture and thinking and books were moving forward – so I tried to keep up with that. That was a very important growth experience for me.

**Steve:** Give me the backdrop of, during the same time you were involved in parish ministry.

**John:** Yes, I was involved in parish ministry at the very beginning, and part time in marriage work. Then I also became the Associate Chaplain at the Newman Center in La Crosse, and then Campus Minister and Professor of Philosophy at Viterbo for seven years. Then I was out in a rural parish, and then an urban parish in Eau Claire for eight years. I was also the first Director of the Office of Justice of the Peace for the Dioceses of La Crosse. Nineteen seventy-six was the year of the call to action in Detroit. Catholics were at a very significant turning point in terms of ideas related to justice and peace, equality with women – even the possibility of women being ordained – that came out of that Detroit conference. The bishops became very upset and frightened by that and basically tabled it. The Call to Action became a separate organization that I stayed involved with because I thought it was still carrying the vision forward.

**Steve:** Had you gone back to school at some point? You joined the faculty at Viterbo. You had already gained that education before you became …

**John:** I got a Masters’ Degree in Philosophy at Catholic University, and that was sufficient in those days under graduate students. I was also sent back to Rome for graduate studies in church law, which was a very significant experience just for me to learn about church as a system and as a reality. But probably the next great turning point was in 1985 when Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen invited Sister Fran Ferder and myself to come out to the Archdiocese of Seattle and begin a counseling center for ministers – for priests, sisters, brothers, and career laypeople – and to teach what we were teaching at Seattle University as adjunct instructors. That was a major breakthrough because I had to go back to school again to get licensed as a psychotherapist. In a way, Steve, I would think of it as almost a second call. Becoming a therapist is another whole kind of pastoral endeavor.

**Steve:** The ministry shifts from focusing on a congregation to focusing on an individual or focusing on a couple.

**John:** Right. It’s a very significant shift. In parish ministry, the interesting thing is you don’t have the kind of professional boundary that you have when you become a therapist. You have rather strict ethical rules about not having dual relationships, whereas in a parish it was inevitable. That was kind of a shift for me to have to learn what that meant. But the significant thing for me was I thought it would be – I don’t want to say less pastoral or less spiritual – but it actually became a deepening of spirituality because as someone like yourself and all those who become Spiritual Directors, you’re entering into sacred ground that I knew of as a priest when I would be there when someone was dying or before a baptism or people would come in when they were in crisis. As a counselor and as a psychotherapist, it’s every day. What helped me resolve the tension between caring and not caring is finding a stillness, because it isn’t that you stop caring, but it is that you said, “I’m not the messiah, I’m not the savior. All I can do is listen and be present to the deep mystery.” And you know as a Spiritual Director there is nothing more sacred than the inner journey of people’s lives.

**Steve:** Let me check if I’m following you. As a therapist, someone could make an appointment with you for an hour session. You could give them your full attention, that was the only agenda on your schedule, and you have their undivided attention. But you knew there was a starting point and there was an ending point and you could still take care of John, whereas with the parish that was much harder to do. Am I tracking?

**John:** You’re naming it correctly. For me at the beginning, boundaries of the therapist was not something that drew me. It was something that kind of got in the way because I thought I was supposed to be on duty 24 hours a day. It was like I had to make this transition to say, “You are not here 24/7. You are here to help people in a deeper way for a brief amount of time.” And it’s a respectful way of standing with them in their freedom and respecting that you’re not the one who is going to solve this. It was a difficult thing to move from being pastoral caregiver to being counseling listener. I guess I began to realize that my vocation … When I was a kid growing up, if you were Catholic and you felt the tug of religion and you were a Catholic boy, you had three choices. You become a monk or you become a brother or a priest, and all three of them have the same bottom line [in that] you have to be a celibate. But in those days I didn’t think about the celibacy part. I just thought, “This is what I know I’m drawn to, and I almost feel like I’m driven toward it – toward whatever this mystery is and whatever I’m supposed to do.” That experience becomes different in a distinct way. It’s almost like in pastoral ministry, you’re doing evangelization. In therapy, it feels sometimes like I’m doing pre-evangelism. You’re just listening. It doesn’t matter what their religious specific doctrinal issues are. It’s, what are the painful wounds of their lives? And where can they find hope, which is even more profound.

**Steve:** If someone is in a situation where they’re being beaten or abused, you can talk about salvation or that sort of thing, but I don’t need salvation 40 years from now. I’m being beaten and abused. I need salvation from this particular pain right here, right now.

**John:** Exactly. So many people who have been abused are literally, as you know, suffering from post-traumatic stress, and so you need to begin to help them find, what are the triggers that bring about flashbacks and memory explosions? What are the triggers in what you begin to do to immediately to say, “That was then, and this is now?” It really comes down to, how do they begin to develop a radical trust in life, which for me is another description of faith.

**Steve:**  Radical trust in life. I love that phrase. You’ve given me your evolving definition of faith. Give me a few more definitions. What is your evolving definition of religion, and your evolving definition of spirituality? Are those two the same? Are those two distinct?

**John:** When I was growing up, religion and spirituality were the same, basically because the word spirituality was very seldom used. What was used was spirit, and spirit had to do with something that is not flesh. It had to do with mind over matter, that dualistic split. My experience was that religion – and it still is my conviction – religion should be the primary bearer of spirituality. And if you look at the world traditions, the spiritual traditions that emerged in what’s called The First Axial Period from about 800 B.C. to 200 B.C. when most of the world religions emerged, religion was reformed by spiritual insight from Celtic and magic and a sense of fate and trying to please “the gods” above us with sacrifices for his kinds to an inner sense of meaning and relationship with whatever this ultimate mystery happens to be. There was a time … and I think ideally religion should, as I say, be the bearer of spirituality. But when religion gets more focused on doctrine or rules and loses its touch with human experience, then spirituality will revolt. It will resist and say, “I’m sorry, but you’re not feeding me, you’re not talking to me.” People will begin to seek to be fed where they can find food, where they can find meaning, where they can find significance. I think one of the ways in which religion right now I think is in an incredible time of crisis is that it has lost touch with some of its deep roots, its founding vision and sense of passion. It needs to readjust to what I would believe is an evolutionary process-oriented view of the holy. The new creation story has to become part of preaching and catechesis and not something [that says], “You can look at that if you would like to,” but it should be more mainstream. That would be the first thing I would say.

The second is, for me spiritually itself has evolved. I would say that initially, spiritually still had a little bit of the leftover emphasis of on heaven and the afterlife and beyond, whereas over the last 40 years it’s become much more inclusive and integrated into a holistic perspective – at least on my good days I like to describe it that way. I would describe spirituality as the core vision and ethical life values out of which you live your life. But I think everybody has a spirituality. Most of my clients in the last 25 years have not been Catholic and not even been particularly belonging to any religion, or they had at one time belonged to a church and left. He would come in and ask me more for answers, and I would always kind of push it back on him. One day he brought in The Oregonian newspaper that had the headlines on it from the Pew Report that said 30 percent of young adults who are growing up have left the religion of their parents and other ancestors. He threw the paper down on my desk and said, “Father, what are you going to do about that?” And I said, “Well, Frank, what is it that you think I should do?” He said, “You’re a priest. You should fix it.” I said, “Frank, let me ask you something. Tell me why you go to church every Sunday.” He didn’t break a moment. He said, “Well, that’s easy. I go to church every Sunday to punch my ‘Stay Out of Hell Card’ for one more week.” I remember looking at him and smiling and saying, “You know what, Frank? That’s why a lot of people are no longer going to church. Fear doesn’t work for them. They’re looking for something that motivates them, that gives them meaning.” So what I’ve come to describe spirituality personally for me is, what drives me? What is my passion in terms of my spiritual vision and my pastoral action – not just what I believe in. I think there’s a danger sometimes that we leave spirituality with some kind of an interior reflective sense rather than seeing that contemplation always has to come over into action. One of my favorite passages is Mark, Chapter 1, Verse 12, where it says, “The Spirit drove Jesus into the desert.” And the word there, ex bali, is like Jesus was thrown into the desert by the Spirit. And it’s like, what takes possession of you in a good way, [and] in a creative, passionate way? That, for me, is what my spirituality is.

**Steve:** Circling back to when you were young, you did have this sense of connecting with the holy mystery. You were talking about being in the woods and by stream, on the land [and] barefoot. There was something there, there was something special, there was something that made your heart feel more alive. I loved that story about learning how to be an alter server and the prayer and like, “What does the prayer mean?” [and being told], “Don’t worry about what it means. Just say it.” What I hear you saying is, sometimes religion can be a thing of, “Don’t worry about what it means. Just say it.” And you’re saying, even from an early age, “No. I know what it feels like when it means something. And I have to connect with that part of me that’s meaningful.” Am I tracking with you?

**John:** You would make a great Spiritual Director for me, Steve. I mean that seriously as well as in friendship. You really have the gift of caring deeply. … The spiritual passion I had as a child was a sense of wonder at the beauty and power of creation. I took 4-H, so I took forestry for two years. I could identify all of the various species of trees, and I planted 150 Norway Spruce on our own property in addition to the forest … That’s where I experienced … It wasn’t so much I had to ascend to a doctrine of God. I experienced it. That’s what I think kept me going because now I can say that it is less that I have to make an intellectual ascent to, let’s say, the Creeds. I believe in the Creeds, [but] I don’t understand them. I can say, “I experience the presence of God.”

**Steve:** Before I let you go, you tell this beautiful story when you come to do the SDPP weekends, the story of accompanying the woman who was dying. Do you know the story I’m talking about?

**John:** I do.

**Steve:** That just covers so much of this. She needed a connection with God that was real. It couldn’t be hypothetical. It couldn’t be, “Just say it.” You had to use words that were true.

**John:** Actually, she’s still living even though she was told she was going to die. She had a rare form of cancer, and her doctor gave her six weeks to live. She’s an attorney, family, originally from Hawaii. She came to see me one day, and I’d never met her before. I had an appointment with her, and she showed up and said, “I’m here for one reason: I want you to help me learn how to die.” I said, “Can you tell me more about that?” She said, “The doctor says I have about six months to live, at the outside.” She said, “I’m afraid to die. I don’t know what that means.” I said, “I don’t know if I can teach you how to die, but I’ll walk with you and we can listen to what that mystery is.” We met about three or four times, and the fifth time she came in and she said, “I really appreciate our times together and our conversations.” She said, “Last night I had a dream that has really riveted me. In the dream, I was in a large auditorium – my conference auditorium. I was alone in there, except for one other person who was clear on the other side of the room. I couldn’t see that person, but I knew it was Jesus. I said, ‘Jesus, I can’t hear you. Come closer.’ All at once, he was sitting right next to me. He looked at me and said, ‘Everything is going to be all right.’ I remember there was a pause, and I said, “What do you think he meant by that?” She said, “Whether I live or whether I die, everything is going to be all right.” I remember looking at her and smiling and saying, “Esther, you don’t need me to teach you how to die. You’re teaching me something about the wholeness of living as well as dying.”