**Steve Spilde:** Welcome. My guest today is Wendy Mitch. This is weird, because I consider you a friend. I’ve known you for a couple of years. We visit on a regular basis. But the irony is I have never actually met you. We’ve never been in the same room together, and yet I feel like you’re a friend because this relationship began with a class at the Franciscan Spirituality Center. We met, started having future conversations, [and we] continued to have conversations [and] kind of hit it off. And yet we live in this new world where we’ve never actually been together before. Welcome, Wendy.

**Wendy Mitch:** It is very odd, and it’s even odd for you to be welcoming me because it’s so familiar. It will be fun to finally meet you.

**Steve:** That’s coming up in March. You’re doing a presentation a weekend for the Spirituality Center, “An Integral Approach to Spiritual Development.” That will happen March 11th and 12th, [and] we’ll talk about that in a bit. But I’m looking forward to that day when we can say, “Hey.” One of the things I appreciate about you is your energy. Our energy levels are very different. You’re the sort of person that finishes your workout at the gym at 5 a.m., and at 5 a.m. I’m still a couple hours from waking up.

**Wendy:** There are many people like you, that is true.

**Steve:** My challenge of the winter is to just get through it and survive [and reach the point where I can say], “Oh, my goodness, I’m excited because it’s April and I didn’t die during the winter.” Your winter challenge is going to Africa and climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

**Wendy:** It’s not something I recommend to everybody, that’s for sure.

**Steve:** You just got back. Tell me about that.

**Wendy:** A friend of mine does these sorts of these crazy expeditions. She has climbed Mount Fuji, Machu Pichu, Mount Baker, and she was doing this while I still had kids at home. I often said to her, “When my kids are gone, I want to go on one of these excursions.” So, a year and a half ago, she said, “You want to hike Kilimanjaro with me?” I said, “Where is that? Is that in Wisconsin? Is that right near Mount La Crosse [or] Granite Peak?” I had no idea it was in Africa, it was in Tanzania – I knew nothing. In my naivete, I said, “Sure, why not?” We were supposed to go last year, but COVID derailed that. So, this year we went. We had 12 climbers – 10 were from the United States, two were from Spain. Nine of us summited. It was the most challenging physically, mentally experience of my life. [It took] six days getting up Kilimanjaro, which is 19,340 feet in the air – it’s one of the seven summits – and then two days to get down. I don’t want to say too much about it, but the summit day was a 6½-hour climb, from 15,000 [feet] to 19,000. I just did everything I could to stay alive – just put one foot in front of the other.

**Steve:** Which would be hard under the best of circumstances. But you were doing it in the middle of a blizzard ice storm [and] subzero windchill. You actually could have died if things had gone bad.

**Wendy:** Yeah, they were bad, and our guides were watching us like hawks. There were about a half-dozen times where I thought, “This can all be over if I just curled up under that boulder and just shut my eyes.” We left at midnight, so we were kind of exhausted when we started. But the exhaustion, the ice blizzard pelting my face, 40- to 50-mile-per-hour winds that just blew me over sometimes … A lot of us would just kind of get blown over – not where we’d fall, but we’d trip – and the temperatures just being relentless. It was a 6½-hour climb of relentless attack from Mother Nature. It’s the only way I can describe it; it just wouldn’t let up on us. But yeah, we made the summit, and I was just so happy to be alive. Then I knew I didn’t have to go uphill anymore; I could just go down, which presents its own challenges with toes and knees and slipping because it was still an ice blizzard. I always say, go big or go home. I don’t really do things on a small scale.

**Steve:** Some people have one kid, [and] some people have two. You say, “What the heck, let’s have six.”

**Wendy:** What the hell, [and] why not? My husband and I were in church one day after we had six kids, and he said, “I never told you about this, but I had a dream when I was a kid that I was going to have six kids.” My husband’s name is Rusty, and I said, “Next time, keep me out of your dreams.” I had no intention … I really thought I would become a nun. That is something I really considered after college, and these kids just kept showing up, like every two years I was pregnant. I [said], “Oh, my God, this has to stop.” You might like chocolate, but you can’t eat it every single day. Yes, [I had] six kids. They are ages 30, 28, 26, 24, and we have twins that brought up the end that are 22.

**Steve:** I love your twins story. You had four kids, and then what happened?

**Wendy:** We were done. We thought, “This is great.” We thought about adopting; we were kind of in the process of adopting. But [I] thought, “Four kids, this is perfect. What a perfect amount of children.” [That] would be crazy for many people, right? About two years later, I got pregnant, and [I] thought, “Oh, no. This can’t be the plan. We can’t have five kids.” I don’t mean any disrespect or to take this casually, but I really thought I’d probably have a miscarriage, which I had had other miscarriages. I was just convinced this was not the plan God had for me, so I have five kids. Five months into the pregnancy, we went and had an ultrasound. I had had a lot of ultrasounds, so I knew what this looked like. We were looking at the screen, and she’s going with that little monitor over my stomach, and I [said], “Wait, wait, wait. Go back. That looks like a second head.” She said, “It did, didn’t it?” So she goes, head, heart [and] spine on the one baby, and she moves across my stomach and says, “Head, heart, [and] spine. Did you know you were having twins?” Maybe a swear word or two did come out of my mouth, but it was, “Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God.”

The nurse ran out of the room and ran down to the doctor, who was a good friend of ours. He said, “Is Rusty with her?” That’s all he wanted to know, if my husband was with me or not. So, we weren’t having five kids; we were having six.

**Steve:** I want to hear about your journey a bit. You’ve already referenced it. At one point, you [considered] becoming a nun. Tell me about your spiritual traditions.

**Wendy:** The word “spiritual” didn’t make any sense to me as I was growing up. I went to Catholic schools from first grade to master’s degree – only Catholic education. One year I was at UW-La Crosse for public education, but my tradition [was] I was raised as a Catholic. The word “spirituality” was never part of those conversations. That really hasn’t happened until more recently.

**Steve:** So “religious tradition” would be a more appropriate term.

**Wendy:** Yes, religious tradition. I was raised in the Catholic faith. I called my parents “pew flowers” because I identified that later in life that’s what we did. We went to church, and we took up space on a pew. It never was really integrated of my Catholic tradition and what I learned all through my education was, what is the right prescription? What are the things I have to believe? What are the things I have to do? What are the practices? What’s the moral code in order to achieve eternity [and] salvation, whatever that meant? I’m still figuring out what that means. It wasn’t until I was at Viterbo – I have my bachelor’s degree from Viterbo, and my master’s degree – [when] I took a World Religions class and [said], “Holy smokes, there are other paths up this mountain. I thought there was only one: the one, the true.” So, Viterbo really sort of nudged me into at least a broader understanding of what faith, maybe spirituality was. Catholic: To give you a long answer to your short question, Catholic is the religious tradition.

**Steve:** For much of your life, you identified as Catholic. But yet, describe how your journey has continued to evolve in recent years. When I say recent years, how would you continue the story?

**Wendy:** I go backwards first to say that I worked for the Catholic Church for 30 years, professional service in the church as a director of religious education, a youth minister and finally the last 16 years as a campus minister. The journey continued … I quit my job in 2018. I worked a lot of nights, a lot of weekends, and I didn’t want to keep doing that. When I quit my job, something shifted in me because for the first time, I was on the outside. I wasn’t on the inside as part of the institution, part of the structure. Then I started reading some other books, Eckhart Tolle, I was reading some authors that sort of pulled some strings at my heart, and I felt like there were maybe some windshield wipers over my eyes that cleared the scenery – maybe the fog sort of went away where I really started questioning a lot of the doctrine, the orthodoxy, the moral codes. Having six kids, who we raised to be critical thinkers, they also fell into the Catholic tradition, just because that’s the way we raised them. But when they all went to college and started questioning, they would ask me, “How can you be part of an institution that discriminates against you?” That was a question they asked me on a regular basis. They just asked me some really challenging questions that, when I was working in the church, I would have some pretty pat answers.

After I was out, I started asking myself some questions. My husband and I were on this journey together, and eventually we left the Catholic Church. That was kind of a big deal because I worked in the church for 30 years, and then suddenly this very public figure is leaving the church. That’s a lonely place to be, to walk away from that, because I got a lot of questions of, “What do you do on Sunday? Aren’t you lost? What about heaven? What about hell? What about your kids?” And especially the, “Don’t you feel lost?” question – I got that a lot. It was a lonely place to be; [I’ve] since found more community as far as people who have left that tradition. But to be honest, I have never felt more alive spiritually. Spirituality, to me, isn’t a religious tradition. It's a relationship and a journey with the divine.

**Steve:** I want to follow that up. For the people who ask those sorts of questions [regarding], “Have you stopped believing in God?” what does that word mean to you?

**Wendy:** I’m not sure if you’re asking that question. I have never stopped believing in God. My idea of God has shifted tremendously. Right now, today, I would say the definition that works for me is, consciousness. It’s within me. It’s not on the outside of me. … One of the questions you have asked me in preparing for this is, “How has my spirituality changed or been impacted as a result of being a mom of six?” I have this very visceral experience of some really, really challenging days with my kids. The only place I could go was in my bathroom, because it’s the only door that locked in the house. The desperation, my rage or my anger, my frustration or my impatience with six little kids under the age of 8, all I could do was go in the bathroom, lock the door, and get on my knees and just cry or pray or swear or scream at God. What I learned through that is God can hold me [and] God can hold this, because it saved my life. Or maybe it saved the life of people in my house that I was able to go into the bathroom and lock myself in there. My spirituality deepened during those really difficult times, because God was the only one who could handle that wrath. I couldn’t send that on to Rusty. I couldn’t send that on to my kids.

I would throw bananas occasionally across the house, [but] that was never helpful. Going into my bathroom, those experiences of desperation really helped shape who God is, and that God is consciousness within the “I have the power within me.”

**Steve:** In that story – thank you for sharing that – I hear a really powerful experience of prayer. Prayer is not hypothetical for you; it is a real experience. There is a Scripture where Jesus says, “When you go into the room and close your door.”

**Wendy:** Literally. He just forgot to put the word “bath” in front of “room.”

**Steve:** When you into the bathroom and lock the door, this is how you pray. There, again, it’s not a hypothetical. What Jesus was talking about was a real experience. I think what you are describing is exactly what he was talking about

**Wendy:** It was the most powerful experiences of prayer. And when there were no words, the “Our Father” worked. The Memorare worked. The Hail Mary, that would work when I couldn’t come up with the words myself. But hitting my knees and just realizing and recognizing and surrendering that I can’t do this alone. And that’s what prayer … Yeah, I’ve gone back to prayer every day. Now I call it “meditation.” I’m not on my knees in the bathroom.

**Steve:** You had said that for you, God is consciousness. God is a consciousness that you connect with, or that you have an awareness of, or you enter into? How would you describe that?

**Wendy:** Those were all three beautiful descriptions, Steve. I do a lot of hiking – obviously, if you’re going to do Kilimanjaro, you have to do a lot of hiking. Being out in nature, I have glimpses of this consciousness just being connected to the trees and to the snow, and in the summer to the grass, to the animals, to the sun, and to the clouds. [It is] a consciousness that’s one consciousness, and I’m a part of it. I’m not separate from it; I’m a part of it and I participate in it.

**Steve:** Let me shift gears a bit. When you come on March 11th and 12th to the Franciscan Spirituality Center, you are going to present a weekend retreat titled, “An Integral Approach to Spiritual Development.” I’ll describe my understanding of what the weekend is about, and please correct me. I would say the word “God” and using the image of Kilimanjaro and climbing a high hill. Kilimanjaro is a very high hill, but any high hill. Thinking about, say, Grandad Bluff. You’re climbing the bluffs around La Crosse. You stand on ground level, the community looks one way. And then you get halfway up Grandad Bluff, the community looks another way. Then you get to the top of Grandad Bluff, it looks different yet again. If you were to get in an airplane, it would look different still. Depending on what elevation you’re at, the reality of La Crosse looks different from different perspectives. Correct?

**Wendy:** Beautiful. Yes.

**Steve:** When you’re talking about an integral approach – integral spirituality, spiral dynamics – for me, those two are almost synonymous. I’ll let you take that apart. But that whole thing, at different levels of an integral perspective, a different spiral level, concepts like God look differently at each level as you grow through your life and you have different experiences. That’s my understanding. What’s your understanding? Fill that out for me.

**Wendy:** Well, I think you might want to do the retreat.

**Steve:** I plan to be there. I will be the first person in the room.

**Wendy:** I like that. Spiral dynamics, for someone coming to the retreat, if they’re not familiar with spiral dynamics, I think it will be an opening, much like you just described: these different stages or spaces of development, that God, spirit. Because we’re talking about spirituality and those staying in that realm, it all looks different from whatever perspective you are. If you take Kilimanjaro, right, I had this altitude to move through. I had to move through all these stages, and you integrate each stage as you go. It’s the same with spiritual development, and human development, right? Spiral dynamics offers us a model to understand human development collectively and personally. We move through these stages, and we see life just a little differently with each stage. I’m not talking momentous steps; I’m talking maybe a glimpse [and saying], “Wow, maybe this looks a little different.” You stay there until that doesn’t work anymore. I guess that’s my experience with the Catholic Church. I was there until … It worked until it didn’t work anymore [and] until I needed a new perspective.

The visual [and] the metaphor of Kilimanjaro being vertical, I don’t want people to think that it’s vertical movement. It’s spaces. I will use the analogy of Kilimanjaro, but it’s different spaces – one not better than the other. Does that answer that question?

**Steve:** I hear one of the elements there is letting go of a very dualistic view of life, [meaning] either/or, black or white, up or down. As you grow, sometimes people come to see things more holistically, integral [and] more integrated. It’s not so much anymore either/or; [rather], it’s both/and. Depending on the situation, there are times when people are a child, and other times when they’re a parent. That’s why when people get older, sometimes it gets so confusing. When their parents get to an age where, I had this relationship with this person [where] when I was 5 years old and they were 30, they would take care of me. And now all of a sudden they’re 85 and I’m 60, [and] I’m taking care of them. That role has flipped, and so it’s not either/or, but it’s both/and.

**Wendy:** I like the both/and. My kids taught me this, too. Four of my six kids were involved in a program called “Destination Imagination,” and it’s all improvisation. They competed on a global scale. The No. 1 rule for that kind of competition is “yes/and.” You’re working as a team and you’re trying to solve these problems, improv, and someone makes a suggestion, someone has an idea, someone has perspective, it’s always “yes/and” – not “no/or,” it’s “yes/and” to integrate and include. Moving through these stages, Ken Wilber’s work – I’ll reference Ken Wilber, and I’ll reference Don Beck – it’s “transcend and include,” which I just love that we transcend it so it works until it doesn’t work, so we move through, but we include it. It’s even the parts that we walk away from we still include as we transcend through.

**Steve:** So, you became a mother of six kids, but you still had the experience of being a child. You were both a child and an adult.

**Wendy:** Yeah.

**Steve:** And sometimes when you’re throwing a banana, it’s like, who’s throwing the banana – is this the kid, or is this the mother?

**Wendy:** I was just going to say sometimes it wasn’t real clear: Is she the mom today, or is she just the kid having a temper tantrum? I just hoped the bananas wouldn’t hit a child. And there would be maybe a toss of a banana behind me and not necessarily a pitching. But yeah, that’s a really good description of it. And that’s why I think some of the best parents are those who have integrated their childhood, their teenage years, their young adult years. You remember, and you remember the difficulties in that, and you remember how you struggled with that, which makes you a better parent.

**Steve:** I want to end with one more question. We’ve kind of been circling around it. You clarified in the beginning that it wasn’t your spiritual tradition; it was your religious tradition. But now you do speak in terms of the spiritual tradition, or spiritual development. What does spirituality mean to you?

**Wendy:** I think I referenced this in the beginning, [so] I’ll do the same reference. It’s a journey, a relationship with the divine – whatever that divine is. I don’t have to name the divine “God” or “Christ” or consciousness or higher power – the language from the 12-step program. Whatever anyone chooses to label that divine, I like to say the divine. It’s a relationship or a journey into the divine. [That] would be spirituality.

**Steve:** For people who find the divine in the church, what would you say to them?

**Wendy:** Beautiful, because I have integrated that. My favorite part of the Mass – one of the questions you … the Catholic Mass, the Lamb of God. In the Catholic Mass, Mass of Creation, by Marty Haugen, that has so much meaning to me. I went to Mass a lot. I would go sometimes three to four times a week because of my job, and I always found calm and peace in the Mass, in the ritual. I started having problems with the text, with the words. But the singing [of] the sacred songs, the sacred rituals, those are so much a part of me today. I will go on YouTube just to listen to Marty Haugen’s version of “The Lamb of God” as part of a prayer experience for me. Anyone who is still part of the church, whatever faith tradition, absolutely. Can you experience the Divine in church? You bet. I did multiple times. I still do.