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JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST: At The Rabbit Room, we're always saying that art nourishes community and community nourishes art. Here's another way to say the same thing. We can all be allies in bringing good, beautiful, true things into the world. One way you can be an ally with the musicians and writers and artists whose work you care about is to leave a review. It helps other people find and benefit from the work that has meant something to you. And if you want to leave a review for this podcast... well, that'll be okay too.

(THEME MUSIC)

JR: Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I'm Jonathan Rogers, your host.

Tish Harrison Warren is an Anglican priest and the author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, a book that received Christianity Today's Book of the Year Award for Spiritual Formation. *Liturgy of the Ordinary* is often mentioned in conjunction with *Every Moment Holy*, Doug McKelvey's book of prayers and liturgies for everyday life, so I thought it might be fun to invite Doug into this conversation as well.

Tish Harrison Warren, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast.

TISH HARRISON WARREN: Yeah thanks for having me!

JR: And Doug McKelvey, I'm so glad you're here too.

DOUG MCKELVEY: Yeah, it's good to be back.

JR: We thought it'd really be fun to get you two in the same conversation — not the same room because Tish is at home and Doug is here with me

— because Doug’s book *Every Moment Holy* is a book of liturgies. Tish, your book *Liturgy of the Ordinary* obviously is very concerned with liturgy. It seems like the people who go looking for one book sometimes end up with the other book as well, and so I would just love to hear y’all talk about some of the commonalities between the work you do, and I just think interesting things are gonna happen with the two of you in conversation.

I wanna start with the idea of “the ordinary.” Tish, it’s in the title of your book and it certainly is an important idea in Doug’s book. The idea that you’re both calling readers to pay attention to the ordinary in the belief, in the faith, in the confidence that the ordinary things in the world are holy, are shot through with meaning. So — also by the way I think that’s a good posture for a writer, right? It’s a spiritual posture certainly, but it’s also a writerly posture.

THW: So, one of the things that I’ve learned since the book’s come out is that “ordinary” for a lot of people is a code word for something. Like, often it’s a code word for, like — oh, okay, so this is about being a stay at home mom, or this is about being boring, or this about, y’know, being in your forties with a mortgage as opposed to being in your twenties, or a famous person, or a person that makes an impact on the world. But I really think everyone experiences the ordinary. Whether you’re a stay at home mom or a stunt driver. [laughter] That becomes the stunt driver’s ordinary, right? It’s their life.

And so, I wrote this book in part because I was... a twenty-something that wanted to change the world or at least a part of it and live adventurously, and had no idea what daily life — why that would matter to God or what spiritual formation and discipleship looked like in ways that weren’t kind of flashy or emotional or big or life-changing or world-changing.

So, I hit in my thirties a period where... y’know my husband was in grad school, we were living in Nashville, and I just had no idea how to find meaning and how to seek God in my actual lived life. It was sort of... seeking God was fantasy for a different kind of life than the one I was

actually living. And so, sort of out of that I wrestled a lot for many, many years. And then many, many years later I wrote this book, sort of pulling from a lot of things I had learned over those years. But in general when I say ordinary I just mean the stuff that makes up your actual life, what you actually do with your days. So, what you do in your first two hours of your day or last two hours of your day. What you do for your work. What you do with your neighbors and your friends. Which we all have. I mean... the President of the United States has to brush his teeth. Or, we hope so, that he does anyway. [JR chuckles] So, nobody escapes the ordinary.

JR: Doug, I know you've done some thinking about the ordinary. I mean, you've written two liturgies that I know of about changing diapers. [laughs]

DM: [laughs] Yeah, I'm trying to create a new sub-genre. [JR laughs] What Tish said does resonate with me a lot in my own experience. From the standpoint that I grew up in, traditions where there was actually not a lot of tradition. In subcultures where there was a lot of talk about doing great things for God, and a lot of pressure to have some sort of international, worldwide, y'know, miraculous ministry. And anything less wasn't really worth thinking about.

THW: Yes.

DM: At a certain point in my young adult life, suddenly coming to a place where that all ground to a halt, and it was like my ship struck an iceberg, and that iceberg was the realization that I don't know how to love people. [THW: mmmm] You know? I have never been a good friend to anyone. I have not been a good son or brother. I just fundamentally have this problem where I can't maintain relationships. And my first calling, if I'm gonna follow Jesus, is to learn to love people. And if God ever wants to do something else beyond that through my life that's fine, but I need to just concentrate on this lifelong goal of trying to become someone who loves people more like Jesus does.

So I think that idea of coming to realize that our life is made up of ordinary

moments, and that the only people we can serve and love are those who are actually in our lives, you know? That our lives our rubbing up against each other in some capacity. So... so yeah, what you were saying, Tish, it took me back to that part of my own experience.

THW: Yeah... so I deeply resonate with everything Doug just said. And I should say actually, funny enough — just this is as a total aside — I don't actually own a copy of my book right now because I gave my last copy away, but I have Doug's book on my coffee table, so I own his book [JR and Doug laugh] and not my own book. [Tish laughs]

But uh... I'm well aware that I did not address the writing part of your question, and so I'll say that I think — I was really wrestling with ideas of formation, of the way daily life forms us. And around the same time, I took — I mean, I'm an Anglican priest. I'm a pastor. I worked in campus ministry. So, I loved to write, I wrote a lot, but I never thought, "I'm gonna be a writer. This is gonna be my career." At this point, it's my career, it's the main gig I do. But it sort of... I stumbled into it, and writing found me way more than I found writing, in many ways. Like, I wasn't looking for it.

So my writing started — I took a poetry class. I took a poetry writing course. There was a... Middle Tennessee University had a little, like, graduate level... you could take writing classes there. And I really, on a — it was a total lark — just wanted to take this class in writing poetry, and I really really loved it. But the reason that I did it was to notice my own life. I've never published a poem, so it didn't lead to... I've never tried to publish a poem. Maybe I should! [laughs] But writing began for me as a way to notice what was happening in my actual world. I was at the top of my twenties and the bottom of my thirties, I was pregnant with my first child, and I felt like my life was changing and I needed to look at it. I needed to kind of hold it close and notice it. And so that was how writing — with that poetry class and then a friend of mine who had an online magazine called The Well that InterVarsity put out, asked me to write for it. And essentially I started writing just about my own life. It was very slice-of-life, it was very, "what am I learning in my actual life today?"

So I feel like now... I just wrote a piece for Christianity Today. They asked me to write about the *via media*, which is a very ideas-heavy piece, but writing didn't start for me about ideas. It really started about noticing what was happening in front of me.

JR: So, what do you make of the connection between the idea of the ordinary on one hand and the idea of liturgy on the other? I'm not sure that's self-evident to everybody who hasn't read your book, who's not familiar with your work. Why for instance, Tish, you would speak of the liturgy of the ordinary. What's the connection?

THW: Well for me, liturgy is simply those things that we do, the stuff that we do, the practices in our life that form us. That certainly is formal liturgical liturgy on Sunday morning, but that's also, like... uhhhh, you know, compulsively picking up your smartphone is a liturgy. And um... I don't know, we have liturgies around our family life. We just started school again and entered this routine, and it feels... it's liturgical, right? It's a liturgy of our time, of our year.

So, you know... when I was wrestling with these questions of how does ordinary life matter, there was this whole spate of Christian books for a while that were all about ordinary, and how they mattered, and how God meets you in your regular, boring life. Which was great! They're actually good books, and I benefitted from them, but I kept saying, "Why?" I don't want this to just be another piece of information that I hold in my head. Y'know, my ordinary life matters, to like, y'know, put a sign on the wall to remind me. I wanted to understand.

The answer for me was formation. This is the place that we are formed. And a lot of it has to do with the name of your podcast, the idea of habit, that these are the things that kind of make us. And so, most of our life, I would say, is lived by liturgies, daily liturgies. And some of those form us more beautifully, to give and receive love. And some of those malform us. And so my book is a lot about wrestling with what are the things that form

us in our daily life.

DM: When I first moved to Nashville in the early 90s, mercifully I ended up very quickly plugged in with the Art House community that Charlie Peacock and his wife Andi had just formed, that non-profit. And one of the things that Charlie was really discussing at the time was the idea of *coram Deo*, of all of life lived out under the gaze of God, and there being no divide between sacred parts and secular parts, but that all of it alike belonged to God and was lived under his gaze and should be part of our act of worship. And those ideas were new to me and became very formational as I was just at the point of beginning to rebuild a theology that was actually more Scriptural and made more sense than what I had grown up with that ultimately fell apart.

And so, in writing *Every Moment Holy*, one of the underlying ideas of it is... the hope of being able to communicate to people that *coram Deo* idea. That we might tend to think of just church services as liturgical, or certain ceremonies for baptism and marriage and those sorts of things. But the reality is, as Tish was saying, that everything that we do that forms the rhythms of our lives, is formational to who we are. And my hope was to help bridge that gap for people in their understanding that Charlie was so instrumental in helping to bridge for me and mine when I was in my twenties, that everything matters. It's all part of that act of worship, that all parts of our lives can be offered to God and considered in light of his truth and his spirit at work within us.

JR: Tish, you used the word “formation,” and it made me think about... you have a chapter about making your bed. Just that simple habit of getting up in the morning and making your bed.

THW: Yes... which I do not always do... still. [JR: uh huh...] Even though it's in the book. [JR laughs] I sometimes do it though.

JR: Yeah... and of course this is a podcast about writing. And I think that idea, these ideas, of on the one hand paying attention to what's right in

front of you instead of thinking I've got to say something fabulous or something nobody's said before or whatever — I think that's super important — and then also just this idea of the habits, the liturgy of every day, trusting the process, sitting down... I think that's what you mean by formation, Tish. Doing these little habits. Making your bed once isn't gonna make a difference in your life. But doing it every morning eventually does.

THW: Yeah, that's right. And I talk about that in the book. That I never made my bed. Never. I didn't — I mean, I say this in the book but it was true — it hadn't occurred to me that grownups, like, did this. Made their bed. When there was no parent to make them do this. Which just speaks to the state of my home. [JR laughs]

So I would often wake up and immediately go to my smartphone, which that used to — no longer does but used to — sit on my bedside table. And so I would like look at the news. The very first moments of the day were imprinted by technology and, you know, news and entertainment and newstainment which is sort of like all of our news now. So I had no space for the actual embodied world I was in... noticing the weather outside, what I was feeling in my body or hearing outside. I had no space for silence.

And so that chapter on bed-making isn't so much about keeping your house clean, because I will not be able to write that book. But it's about learning these very small practices that change the course of our day. Really subtle things that point us to something larger than ourselves, or point us in a different direction, than just my sort of natural habits and natural inclinations would be.

There's a book on habit that I can't actually even remember, but I know there's this concept in it of sort of super habits, or habits that shape all of our other habits. Bed making may even be mentioned as one of those. But writing, and I think the arts of any sort, is definitely one of those. Writing is something that you have to sort of take up as a habit, that you have to

kind of do over and over again, or at least give some time to. And that habit's gonna shape the rest of your day, shape the way you see the rest of your day as you're going through it, and also shape your actual time.

When I first started writing, we had really little kids, and so I had basically an hour and a half every morning that my husband would take the kids and I could write. And that was it. I was always gonna write that day. And so — that was four days a week, so I had just over whatever that is, like ten hours a week, and that was gonna be all. So my life was shaped around that habit, and thinking about what I was gonna write the next day and what I was gonna do.

Now that I actually have more time and write more full time, it's actually kind of, in some ways, hard. I think I get less done in some ways, because it's easy to go, "well, I'll write in an hour or so." So that sort of habituation of time, I think, sort of changes us as writers. But also the practice of writing changes how you walk around in the world, how you grocery shop and do everything else you do. It kind of shapes who you are.

JR: One of the connections that's important to me between the habits of writing and the liturgy, more properly speaking if that's the right way to say it, is that in... there are mysteries about writing, there are things that happen when I sit down to write that I don't understand. I don't understand what's going on, and I have no control over those things. But what I do have control over is actually sitting down. So those habits that I do have some control over create room and space for these mysteries to assert themselves. Which I think is a really important part of — well, I know it's a really important part of what y'all are talking about.

THW: I absolutely love that idea. So, so much. James Bryan Smith in his book *The Good and Beautiful God* — his first chapter is about sleep as a spiritual practice. And one of the things he says is that sleep teaches us about all spiritual practices in that you can't make yourself sleep. You can only create the conditions under which you might fall asleep. [JR: Yes] But you can't actually rest on your own. That sort of has to be received as a

gift. I talk about that a little bit in the last chapter of my book. But I very consistently in writing... write things I don't know, don't know I knew. And there's... um... [pauses] So, I do, I love what you had to say about it. I do think there's a mystery to it. My husband, who is an academic writer, doesn't understand what I mean by that, but it's very consistently... I feel like I'm learning as I'm writing. So there is this kind of entering into something that I don't control, but we're creating those conditions where that might happen.

I remember reading Walker Percy... every day he sat in his office from 9 to 12, he said. And sometimes he would write a lot and do really well, and sometimes it wouldn't go well. But he said you kinda had to get to the point where you gave up and begged God to throw you a bone. [laughs] So, you know, this isn't... the last thing you said isn't gonna be the last thing you ever say. So there is this sense that you sit there in your office and you throw yourself on the mercy of God. He said his wife could always tell how well writing went by when he came out at noon if he was sweaty or not. And, he said when he wrote this, lately his only problem is he hasn't ever been sweaty coming out of his office. So, anyway, he just sat there. He sat there and waited.

JR: So when he was productive he got sweaty? Or when he was unproductive he got sweaty?

THW: When he was productive he got sweaty.

JR: [laughs] That's funny. [THW laughs] So just a few weeks ago, on a recent episode of *The Habit*, Jessica Hooten Wilson told me that Walker Percy also watched soap operas and *The Incredible Hulk*.

THW: [laughs] That's awesome!

DM: I've spent the last few minutes looking for something on my phone and I finally found it, but it's where my mind went when you asked that last question. And this is... this is a short Celtic prayer. It's — I doubt this title

was actually attached to it when it was written during the heyday of Celtic Christianity — but the title on it is “Praying with the Spirit.” But I’ve just been stuck by how insightful and penetrating the thoughts of this anonymous author were hundreds of years ago.

“Sometimes when I pray, I utter the words,
but I do not feel or think them.
Sometimes when I pray, I utter the words
thinking about what I say, but not feeling.
Sometimes when I pray, I utter the words
and I both think and feel what I say.
An act of will cannot make me feel
nor stop my mind from wandering.
An act of will can only make me utter.
So, I shall utter the words
and let the Spirit do the rest,
guiding my mind and heart as he wills.”

JR: Wow.

THW: That’s so beautiful.

DM: But I spent so long trying to find that, that I forgot what the tie-in was to the question. [JR and THW laugh]

THW: No, it ties in perfectly! It’s this idea that we... we sort of show up with our, like, little tiny tools, whatever they are. Prayer, your keyboard... but you’re awaiting grace. You’re awaiting God to move. That’s beautiful.

JR: Yeah, and it’s healthy to acknowledge that there are mysteries at work. But it’s not especially helpful to spend all your time wondering when the mystery is gonna assert itself. You’re better off just sitting down and doing it, and hoping for the best.

THW: And also mystery can look really ordinary too. I completely believe

that mystery is at work, and sometimes mystery looks like... you know, this has happened, where I'm learning things at my computer and weeping because God is healing me through this process of writing. But sometimes mystery can look like I am frustrated and I don't know how to make this sentence work, and I don't know how to do this, but I keep working on it, and eventually through editing, you know, something semi-coherent kind of happens.

What I'm saying is, I think, there is the great mystery, but I don't only want to associate mystery with sublime experiences. My daughter planted garlic in our backyard yesterday, and if that garlic grows it's a great mystery. But it's also really, really ordinary, and she's gonna have to do lots of regular garden maintenance to do that. And no one's gonna think it's a miracle that garlic grew from garlic, but it is kind of a miracle that things grow.

JR: Sure. And staying in touch with that fact that that's a miracle... that's a really healthy act for anybody, but especially for a writer. I have something I call the Other People's Rodents Principle, and that is the rodents in your own life, you are either — you don't like your own rodents. The chipmunks that burrow under my patio... I hate those chipmunks. I hate Tennessee chipmunks. But when I go to Colorado and see the little Colorado chipmunks, they're just darling. [THW laughs]

And so, what got me thinking about this is there were these Australian exchange students that came to my kids school, and they went *nuts* over the squirrels. They thought the squirrels were the most amazing thing they'd ever seen, and these were people who live with kangaroos at home! [THW laughs] Because they were different, they were able to see what a miracle squirrels are. And they weren't wrong. It's just that I'm so used to squirrels that I forget.

THW: Right, it was your ordinary.

JR: That's right, yeah. Alright, we are kind of getting close to the end here in terms of the time we have. Tish, would you tell us just real quickly about

The Pelican Project? I would like for the listeners to have a little something about what you're doing there.

THW: Okay! The Pelican Project is — started as a group of friends, mostly Karen Swallow Prior, she kind of pulled a bunch of us together that got to know each other. And it's a group of women, a lot of them writers, not all of them — actually I think all of them right now are writers — but they're also church leaders in lots of different ways, and academics also. Several of them are academics. And so it's a guild of women that... we focus on... it's a guild of women that — I'll just read you the description — “fostering a commitment to Christian faith and practice across cultural, denominational, and racial lines.”

So we are a group of women who are leaders in the church, who are writers, who are educators. So there's a lot of guilds, like writer's guilds, but as far as we knew there wasn't one with an overt public statement of faith or public ethical commitments. So we gather not so much around craft, although craft is part of what we've talked about, but around the statement of faith and these, I think it's ten commitments, public commitments that we have. For things like civility online and trying to honor Christian orthodoxy in the great tradition of the church, while also extending hospitality to people outside of that.

So The Pelican Project is a — we have about twenty members, and we do projects together. So right now there's something called The Clutch, which is an online community of women who affirm our faith statement and commitments and just discuss things online. And then they're starting a podcast — I'm not part of that — but they're starting a podcast in the next few years. And we don't know from there. Might do conferences and that sort of thing. But it's largely a group of women speakers, writers, and leaders that gather around these commitments. And we've also just become friends. So we pray for each other a lot, and just kind of support each other in our work and vocations, all of our various vocations.

JR: Ah ha. Well great, I had seen something about it, and I loved seeing

that. One thing I love is that you're not monolithic or not monocultural, let's just say, in terms of, y'know, people have different — you share faith commitments, but there are things you don't agree on, and yet you're committed to being civil.

THW: That was really intentional. A lot of the church — particularly among women — the conversations can be really divided against women's — women that are for women's ordination and women that aren't. So that's intentional we have both in this group, to reach across theological differences there. We have Baptists and Presbyterians and Anglicans that reach across. And then also it's really intentionally racially diverse. We have women of color and white women and women — not across probably the entire political perspective, but a lot of it. So it's really intentionally kind of a diverse group of Christian women. But we do have these core theological commitments and ethical commitments that kind of tether us together.

JR: Uh huh. Mm. Alright, last question. Who are the writers who make you want to write, Tish? Doug's already had his chance, so —

THW: [laughs] I wanna know who!

JR: He had his own episode.

THW: I didn't hear that one. Now I'm gonna go back. That make me want to write, okay.

JR: Of course, this isn't the same thing as who are your favorite writers. I mean, it could be. But...

THW: Yes. Yeah, you warned me of that. Because I have a list of my favorite writers, and I already told you this, but I'll tell your listeners. Flannery O'Connor is — we named our daughter after Flannery O'Connor and Dorothy Day, and we love them. But I don't write like Flannery O'Connor. I don't write fiction. I don't write short stories. So reading her

nourishes me, but I don't think I'm gonna go write about, y'know, a murder. [laughs]

So... people who make me want to write... Annie Dillard is a huge one. She's been very influential to me, and when I read her stuff, she makes me believe that we live in a world that is wild and wondrous. And that makes me want to write. So Annie Dillard. Um... ah... I mean, there's poets that are really influential to me, like Scott Cairns, but I don't write poetry — I do write poetry, but I don't show it to other people. So... but his prose...

JR: Yeah, but if he makes you wanna go sit down and do what you do though, that counts.

THW: Yeah. I think he does. And his prose also, like — Luci Shaw, Scott Cairns, particularly Scott — his prose has been also really formative to me. He does a really good job of writing prose poetically. So reading him. And he's so steeped in — I mean, he reads, like, Eastern Orthodox fathers from 2,000 years ago every morning, and then he writes poetry about his daily life. So he really inspires me.

Um, I... [laughs] I'm embarrassed about this one, but C. S. Lewis. It's so predictable. [JR laughs] But he's huge! [JR: Yeah, sure] I mean, he's been so influential to me. I put lots of — I loooove other people's writing so much. And so in my books I always end up with lots of people's quotes, too many quotes. So when I turned in *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, my editor didn't have a ton of changes, but her main — she said, there's too many quotes. There's too many C.S. Lewis quotes and too many James K. A. Smith quotes. And then this book, I know already — I'm writing a book right now that's due in a month or two — I know she's gonna say there's too many C. S. Lewis quotes and too many Rich Mullins quotes. It's just... there's so many! They're in every chapter.

But Rich Mullins is also one of the writers that makes me want to write. Not only his songwriting, but he wrote little essays that I think are beautiful and brilliant. And then also Eugene Peterson. When I read Peterson I

wanna write. Those are some folks. Ann Patchett's non-fiction work has been really, really influential to me as well.

JR: Alright.

THW: Yeah.

JR: Well, Tish, thanks so much for being here. And Doug thank you too. This has been a lot of fun.

DM: Sure, thank you.

THW: Thanks!

JR: Hope we can do it again soon. Alright, y'all, bye.

THW: Bye!

(THEME MUSIC)

DREW MILLER: The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We're so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville. Special shout-out as well to The Arcadian Wild for allowing us to use their delightful song "Finch in the Pantry" as part of this podcast. Check out their album of the same name for more excellent music.

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