

TALKING THE WALK

The execution of good intentions

Episode 38 | Phil Wall

Although only two more episodes are to come, there's no hint of winding down this fourth season of the podcast yet! This time, Phil Wall joins host Jo Taylor to answer the four *All Terrain* questions.

Many will know Phil for the transformational things he has founded and fronted (Roots, the Mission Team), for his engaging, extrovert personality, and his relentless drive to make things happen for the good of others – for example, his ballsy move to give away £10 of his own money to every single person in a packed-out Southport conference centre, trusting in people's good will to take that money and multiply it for the benefit of those living with HIV in Africa.

But there's another side to Phil – a thoughtful, reflective, emotionally responsive – which those fortunate to have met Phil in a one-to-one context are more likely to have witnessed. Thankfully, Phil's conversation with Jo is one such opportunity to experience his full breadth and depth.

Embracing accountability and inspiration

Like several previous guests, Phil says he quite enjoys change, but differentiates between change that happens to you and change you want to bring about. Having people that will keep you accountable is vital for the latter, he says.

'When I've decided to change certain things, I tend to go through a process that begins with a conviction. But because that can be so fleeting, what I have to do next is build a plan – if I don't have a plan, I'll get bored and move on to the next thing. And what I need to do then is build habits around that plan.

'But the other thing which has had such profound importance in my life is accountability. I'm someone who believes the desire for personal change *without* accountability is called wishful thinking. I'm greatly blessed to have brothers that I trust deeply. I could tell them anything and I know they won't judge me. But they call me to account around those things that they know I'm committed to.'

But it's not just people he has deep relationships with that can help him be a better follower of Jesus.

When he was doing research for his Masters, Phil interviewed seven young orphans who were leaders of child-headed households. One of the girls, Precious, explained how her daily routine started at 5.30 every morning, when she would start the fire and make breakfast for her siblings. After taking them to

school, she would then do various jobs in the community – washing pans, sweeping – to earn some money to buy food, before picking her younger brothers and sisters up from school, giving them a meal and supervising them to do their homework. Finally, after putting them to bed, she would do her own schoolwork by candlelight and go to bed at 11.15pm. Precious was 13 years old, and she had followed that daily routine for two years when Phil met her.

‘So I said to her: “Why didn't you run away?” When the interpreter had translated my words she had a look of disdain in her eyes. Gesturing to a collection of little kids sitting in the doorway playing, she replied: “How can I run away? They are my responsibility.”

‘Precious would now be in her early 20s. And if she's still healthy, I would love to walk alongside her and learn from her. Because people who have that kind of depth, resilience, commitment and courage are people I need to learn from.’

☰ *Which of Phil's four-step process do you find easiest and hardest? To develop a conviction, make a plan, create new habits or invite accountability from others? Have you experienced a depth of friendships where you are able to hold each other to account for the things you have said you want to do? If not, how might you develop that kind of trust and support in a friendship?*

☰ *Phil states that he loves learning from ‘people with depth, resilience, commitment and courage’. These might well be people from outside your circle of family and friends. How can you make space and time in your life for people who can inspire you with characteristics you deeply admire and want to learn from?*

Committing to surrender and altruism

A ‘rule of life’ community is one that commits to living their life in a particular way, based on certain shared values. A few years ago, Phil and some friends – Danielle Strickland, Steve Court and Ian Mayhew – launched a ‘rule of life’ community called Infinitum.

‘It was to help us make sure we kept going in our vision to follow Jesus. The daily rhythm is built on three vows which I try to visit each morning: to live a life of surrender, a life of generosity – not just in giving, but in my attitudes, language and mindset – and a life of mission, so that my life would be intentional and focused. And that's been a really helpful architecture for me to manage change in my life.

‘And I don't do it well, but I do it better than I used to do, because of that journey. And that's kind of this rule of life that has really helped me journey more effectively through change than I had known before.’

But what about when life is tough? ‘I recently watched a video of a 20-something American man who had been granted an audience with the Dalai Lama. He asked: “What would you say to a generation young people really struggling with anxiety and mental health?”

‘I was expecting the Dalai Lama to give some really pastoral statement. But he said: “Altruism! Give yourself away to others. That's how to manage your anxiety and your mental health challenges.”

'I loved that. It avoids that feeling-sorry-for-yourself victim mentality. I am no victim. I have suffered, but I'm no victim, and I'm not allowing myself to go there and get stuck.'

☰ *If you were to launch a 'rule of life community' with friends, which three values would be most important for you to commit to? In what practical ways might a commitment to surrender, generosity and mission impact the life of a follower of Jesus?*

☰ *The Dalai Lama suggests altruism is the antidote to anxiety. When your head is not in a good place, why might 'giving yourself away to others' help you? How might it also help the people you're helping, particularly if they know you're struggling with anxiety and mental health?*

Choosing to observe and celebrate

As a police officer, Phil's eyes were always up, taking things in. 'That mindset, that capacity, is really helpful now to help me notice things and be able to take great joy from them.'

Phil lists several things that bring him real joy. Hitting the most amazing golf shot. Hearing his three children talk about their journey and seeing who they're becoming. Finding out about what his two sisters are up to in their ministries. Seeing his wife Wendy laughing, listening to her as she's caring for someone over the phone, or witnessing the encouraging notes, gifts and food she gives to people.

It's clear the common thread is people being fully themselves, reaching new heights, or being at the top of their game: 'I love seeing others succeed. I celebrate others' success. And I get to do this as a job! I get to see people grow and develop. So that brings me such genuine joy: to see others grow.'

'And another thing that brings me joy is talking to people about Jesus. I had an amazing opportunity on Monday this week and when I came home I was so excited to tell Wendy about it. I always have loved telling people the difference Jesus has made in my life and inviting them to consider his story and their story, and how those two things might or might not interact.'

☰ *How do you feel when you've achieved something you've worked hard at, or when you've done something new? How might you be at the top of your game this week? What is your mum, dad, sister, brother, child, spouse, romantic partner, teacher, boss, church leader, best friend or work colleague really great at – something that brings you real joy when they do it? Tell them!*

☰ *Has the opportunity to talk about Jesus ever come up naturally with someone you've been talking to? What happened? If it came up again this week what would you say? How has your experience of or appreciation for Jesus changed in the last 12 months? What difference does he make in your life? If not much, how might you invite him to become more alive to you this week?*

Dismantling old narratives and welcoming challenges

Phil experienced a season of emotional health challenges that caused him to rethink his sense of self.

'That was probably the nearest thing to suffering I've experienced. I found it very challenging and exhausting. But I'm very thankful to God that I matured through that process, that I can now see things

very differently. I look back on that time now with thankfulness that I went through it, because of the lessons I learnt.’

But as well as learning though seasons of suffering that he didn’t choose, Phil also sees the huge growth that comes from intentionally putting himself in challenging situations.

‘Wendy and I have been praying, as I enter my 60s, “God, what do you want this next season for us to be like? How do we make sure we don’t sit back and settle down as we approach retirement, but actually push on for a next season of effectiveness and purpose for the kingdom?” And the net result of all those conversations is that we are in the process of moving to the United States for a few years to work alongside the *WeSeeHope*¹ board there to see if we can build a sustainable fundraising pipeline.’

‘So, how do we mature? Don’t settle – it’s too easy to settle. We avoid complacency. We constantly challenge ourselves to take risk, because without risk, there is no growth, no opportunity to grow in skills, capabilities, maturity or faith.’

☰ *Even though he found it challenging and painful, Phil describes the dismantling of old narratives about his sense of self as a healing and maturing process that he is grateful to God for. Are there any times you’ve suffered or been in pain that now, in retrospect, you can see how they helped you grow? How has your sense of self changed over time?*

☰ *Phil and Wendy’s decision not to wind down into retirement is perhaps unusual for their generation, but is based on the conviction that growth and maturity only comes through new challenges. Do you agree with this line of thinking? Do you think there comes a point in a person’s life when it’s okay for them to settle and stop maturing?*

TALKING THE WALK is a blog series reflecting on episodes of [The All Terrain Podcast](#), written by Matt Little.

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¹ weseehope.org.uk