



God Hears Her Podcast

Episode 127 – Free to Flourish

Elisa Morgan & Eryn Eddy-Adkins with Amy O'Dell

Amy: Gosh, I just think it's as God intends, like I... I really feel that, like people who decide to wake up every day and... and walk alongside someone else, walk alongside another who needs that love, help, care, and commitment. And they do it in such a loving and committed way. And they really do... They are the transformation agent. They are the hands and feet of Christ. They are that every single day.

[Theme music]

Intro: You're listening to *God Hears Her*, a podcast for women where we explore the stunning truth that God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His. Find out how these realities free you today on *God Hears Her*.

Eryn: Welcome to *God Hears Her*. I'm Eryn Eddy-Adkins.

Elisa: And I'm Elisa Morgan. Have you ever heard of the Interpersonal Whole-Brain Model of Care? Whew! It's a mouthful, but it was developed by an amazing woman who works to help the neurodevelopment of children by combining science and love.

Eryn: I admire our guest, Amy O'Dell, so much. Her work is amazing, and the passion that she has for helping kids is incredible. Her story provides hope for so many people.

Elisa: Let's get to know the Founder of Jacob's Ladder by first learning about her life as a little girl. Join us for this conversation with Amy O'Dell on *God Hears Her*.

Amy: I was raised in Madison, Georgia. My mother still lives in the home that I was raised in as a kindergartener on up, which is so unusual to be able to say that, you know, and accent is real. I love the South. I love my southern roots. I love the upbringing that I had. Small town, beautiful... still beautiful, close-knit community, a lot of real positives about that. I do have siblings, an older sister and a younger brother, who I dearly adore and am close to. And... uh... my father passed away about five years ago from a complicated form of dementia, but I will tell you that my memory about that is watching my mom, who was married to him for 55 years, keep him at home...

Elisa: Mm.



Amy: ...and take care of him...

Elisa: Wow!

Amy: ...and navigate several difficult years, just as he had loved her and cared for her deeply for all of those many years. So ... so that's my family. As a little girl, the first memory that popped up was yearning of the soul to be quiet and to be in nature. And I've never liked a lot of busyness around me. I've never liked ... I love people deeply, but I am a dyed-in-the-wool introvert, and so I restore my soul with quiet and simple things and... And so, even as a kid, I think sometimes it's hard for someone who's made like that and designed like that to find their safe place in the world. And so I would say that that has been a real challenge for me, in many ways. And also the other little memory that popped up, again as a child, was that I would walk for hours and hours in any set of woods that I could find growing up. And I still do, but on that particular day — and many days actually — I would find my way to the local dog pound. And it was way on the outside skirts of the city, so I found a route to go through the woods. And I think, as I'm sitting here having this conversation with you, I'm looking out at the campus that I love dearly now, that has so many animals and so many kids. But I had a yearning for the things, at that point in my life, that had no options, I guess, you know? I mean that's the memory that came back is I would make that trek to that dog pound. And I hate to say it, cause I broke the law. I let them out one day.

[laughter]

Amy: ...And ...uh... that is a big no-no, a big no-no...

Elisa: Oh my gosh!

Amy: ...and ...uh...

Eryn: You wanted them to be free!

[Laughter]

Amy: And they were! [Laughter]... They were for a short time anyway, but ...um... So that's the kind of little kid I was. A do-my-own-thing, introvert, spend time in the woods, regret that I let the dogs out, cause that is something you shouldn't do, but ...um... but I did however...

Eryn: Okay. You need...



Amy: ...do that...

Eryn: ...to finish the story of what happened after you let them out.

Amy: Okay, can I...

Eryn: Yeah, I want to know...

Amy: ...tell them what happened?

Eryn: ...I want to know.

Amy: Cause this part is equally true and offensive as well. I let them out, and a few of them followed me back home. And my dad, who was a very serious man and very successful, very, you know, very driven. He didn't mind animals, but he didn't love them. And, unfortunately, when him and his... him and my mom went on their evening stroll, I think one of the dogs might've gone up and nipped at his heels. And he came home and told me that a stray dog had nipped at his heels, and I just was like *Oh gosh! Okay, there... that's retribution for me right there.* [Laughter] But I found homes for a good many of them...

Eryn: Did you really?

Amy: ...and... I did...

Eryn: Aww!

Amy: ...I did, because they... they did follow me home.

Eryn: See, I love that because... Okay, the reason I love unpacking a little bit of like our little-girl self is that I feel like we can find the things that we were doing, maybe the mischievousness that we would get ourselves into, or even our temperament. And I feel like we can look back, and we can almost go *I am still that ... I'm that...*

Elisa: Absolutely.

Eryn: ...and now just woman form. And that now...



Elisa: Absolutely.

Eryn: ...looks like it in this way.

Amy: That's right.

Elisa: Take us forward, you know, in... into, you know, what's your family story now? And how has God led you to live out letting dogs out... [laughing]... in a metaphorical sense?

Amy: That's right. It is a metaphorical sense and a realistic sense as well. So... um... There's one little piece, I think, I'd like to say in the puzzle, cause it's been such a journey. When I was in my later 20s, maybe early 30s, and I had a daughter who was about 4 years old; and Jacob, who is the namesake of the organization Jacob's Ladder, was an infant. He was under 2 years old, but he had that diagnosis... a diagnosis of pervasive developmental delay. And I was working at a hospital, psychiatric hospital for children and adolescents at the time. And I went to drop him off at a nursery school and... uh... to go to work. And he had had a very complex, you know, pregnancy, delivery, first year of life, just super complicated, which no new mother is prepared for at all. So I guess I dropped him off at the preschool that day, and all the other kids were neurotypical, running around, doing their thing. And he was so delayed that he... he couldn't even sit up independently at that point. And I just saw how distressed he was and how without option he was in that situation. I looked in the window as I was walking out past the nursery school to my car, and I caught a glimpse of him. And all that I can say is that there was this just interjection into my soul that something was about to change. It was going to be different. And... and I had... I was so convicted ... uh... that I could not do what I thought I would... my plan was, *my plan was*, that I went and picked him up right then, put him on my hip, drove to the hospital where I was director of this child and adolescent psychiatric facility...

Eryn: Wow!

Amy: ...walked into HR. And I resigned that day. And I was the sole breadwinner for my little family that... you know at that point in time. But I remember thinking, I mean, there was no Plan B. There was... but there was such a conviction that I didn't doubt it. And ... and so from that point forward, all that I can tell you, kinda the next part of the journey was understanding Jacob, understanding how he was neurologically wired, understanding what his strengths were, but what his true challenges were. And then understanding and building this philosophical, but also research-based premise, of how the neurological system can rewire itself, and how the human condition can rewire itself. You know that's... that's what God calls us to — right — is the rewiring of the human condition to be restored. And I didn't know that that was the journey that God was putting me on. I thought it was about helping Jacob, and it was, but it was *godhearsher.org*



actually showing me what restoration really means. I could say so much about that, but I can just tell you that I really thought it was about helping my son, and it was, but it was the journey of understanding what restoration means. And from helping him — you know I worked with him six to eight hours a day for ... from the time he was 2 until he was 14 years old — and simultaneously was building the nonprofit organization, Jacob's Ladder. And through the years, over the last 26 years we've served, and I've personally met with four thousand or so families and had the same conversation with them as a family and interfaced with their loved one that was without option to find a path forward, just one step at a time. Like what does it mean to find one step at a time forward? And so that's where we are today. My... my son Jacob is 27 years old. He is a teacher here on campus...

Eryn: Wow!

Amy: He's one of the brightest, strongest, most insightful young men — and I'm biased — but I will tell you that if there are people in his life, other adults, other teachers that when they're personally struggling, the person they call is my son, because he has an innate wisdom in him that... uh... that he so graciously shares, you know, with a deep heart. And so to see that transformation and restoration for him, and then how God uses his life, is something that's hard to express...

Eryn: Yeah.

Amy: ...you know, what that means to me. And then I have a daughter, his older sister, God bless her. I mean she's been on this twisting, winding journey with a single mom and a brother that needed extra help and a mom that was busy building an organization. But what I love about that is, you know, we all have our woundedness and our brokenness. And mine looked like my own, and his looked like his own, and part of her story is that's her story.

Eryn: Yeah.

Amy: Right? And... and so that comes with its own set of things to just acknowledge and work through and heal and... But her story became part of the model of care here at Jacob's Ladder. There are siblings ...

Eryn: Oh.

Amy: ... We call it the whole... Interpersonal Whole-Brain Model of Care is the model, and...and what I've...



Elisa: Say...say that again...

Amy: ...termed it to do...

Elisa: ... That's a mouthful...

Eryn: That's awesome...

Elisa: Yeah.

Amy: Interpersonal Whole-Brain Model of Care.

Elisa: And you've invented this... discovered it?

Eryn: Yeah.

Elisa: Can you tell us about it?

Amy: Oh sure. ...um... I'm so proud of it, as is our team. I've got a beautiful group of people here that work with me, and they all ... eh... I just wish everybody could watch it, cause when people come in and they actually watch the work and they notice the people that show up everyday to deliver the work, gosh, I just think it's as God intends. Like I really feel that, like people who decide to wake up everyday and... and walk alongside someone else, walk alongside another who needs that love, help, care, and commitment. And they do it in such a loving and committed way. And they really do... They are the transformation agent. They are the hands and feet of Christ. They are that every single day. And then we get to see kids who were without option open up into a brand-new life. So Interpersonal Whole-Brain Model of Care. After doing ... after 26 years of work, and looking at the commonalities... So what... what we've ended up doing is taking, you know, I call them diagnostic categories. So we serve kids who have had traumatic brain injury, nontraumatic brain injury, stroke at birth, pervasive developmental delay, genetic syndromes, autism spectrum, and also emotional-behavioral disorders; and we look at all of the neurodevelopmental metrics that make their current set of circumstances what they are. There's 474 of those that are very unique to the model that's been built. We do QEEG analysis, so we actually look at brain images of every single student that we see to see what the connectivity patterns are within the brain. What's overly connected and locked, which is what OCD would look like...

Eryn: Okay.



Amy: ...and what's under-connected, meaning there's a lack of language, a lack of mobility, a lack of emotional regulation. And when you look at the brain map, you actually see those very specific neuronal site to site are not developed and communicating as they should be. And then we look at the social structure, the family structure, what the child has available to them in terms of help and support, and what the family needs in order to navigate it, physiological help, learning style, a lot of pieces. And it's all mapped out in very specific metrics, 474 metrics, four thousand interventions. We've built a customized software platform that allows other people to access the methodology, and our goal is to be a worldwide influencer in how people view people who are living with limited options, how they interface, how they educate, how they provide therapeutic intervention, how they see the possibility rather than the self-fulfilling prophecy, or that there's a limitation and so life's going to be limited. And that's really what Free to Flourish is. It's... that's what that means. It's like how do you break away barriers where...

Eryn: Yeah.

Amy: ...labels and expectations, or lack of expectation, has been placed upon someone who's suffering, who just needs someone to come along and see them through a different ... through different eyes. You know? And then... and then not only see them, philosophically, but to come behind that with a plan. And that's really the difference, I think. And what I love about the work is we say it's the balance of science and love. And I tell my team here, "We can love on these kids all day long." Like my son was cortically visually impaired, which means he was legally blind when he was little. And I could love him to death, you know? I could give him my whole heart, but if I didn't pair that with something that started to shift the visual cortex in the brain to create a pathway that he could actually bring in a light message and filter it and understand it and give me output, my love for him, without that piece of knowledge, would not create vision for him. But when I had the commitment and the love, and I brought that forward, he is definitely not someone who is visually impaired. He's a driver, he's a teacher, he's a, you know, fully sighted person. And so that's why I feel like... that piece, where love and science collide, is such a powerful, powerful tool...

Eryn: Yeah.

Amy: ...and premise, because both are needed; because you can go very institutional model with individuals who need great care and have no compassion, no respect, and all you've done is try to put a system on top of them that they are not even able to receive...

Eryn: Yeah.



Amy: ...because they're not in a place of love and safety. So I think that's the part of it I'm the most passionate about is finding ways to very cleanly and clearly and powerfully bring those two things together and... and hopefully share the methodology with anybody who's interested in learning it so that we can impact as many people as possible.

Eryn: That's such a beautiful legacy, Amy.

Elisa: I hear so many principles in this, Eryn. You know, I hear patience, I hear obedience, I hear great trust, I hear irrationality... [laughing]... you know, which sometimes comes with great dreams and inventions, if you will. And I'm also struck... You are such a ...um... I'm looking into your face. You're such a tender, beautiful, present soul. And, you know, when you talk about those with no options, you don't like tear up, like *Whah! Whah!* ... like pity. You just have such compassion in you. And the way you describe pairing love with medicine, with science, with psychiatry, you know, with psychology, it is such a gift! And we tend to so, like you said, fall on one side or the other — either take your kid to the doctor, and that's all there is. Or love him to death, and *I'm being a bad mom*, and we get stuck in these trenches; when you're providing a... maybe a wider road, you know, for those who have no options.

Amy: I appreciate all that you just said. That means a great, great deal to me. It really does. You know I think that one of the things that I've seen and experienced and tried to find my way through is where truth resides... There's so much in our world that's coming at us at all times, and so much information, so much dialogue, so many platforms, so much. And I've had to be really careful about, kinda back to the young version of myself that, you know, needed quiet and not a whole lot of things coming at me, but I still am so much that way. And... and as you read scientific journals, and you look at the latest in neuroscience, and like to pull truths from that — especially that so deeply resonate with my experience for almost 30 years in the field — it's like when you talk about love and compassion for another and just being present with them, there's this whole cascade of neurochemicals that are elicited in the brain. That's a scientific fact, you know, and... and whether we know it or not, just in our parenting and in our personal interactions, that is the truth, which is why I say you could have the best methodology in the world, the most systematic approach, the most institutionally backed approach, but if the person on the other side of that care delivery feels unsafe, feels like the brain is in a state of fight-flight-or-freeze, not one thing that you're inputting or imparting to them will ever make a difference. And so we built the school on that premise completely, like if kids come in and they're not speaking, or they have behavioral disorders, or they haven't been able to conquer math, like whatever their thing is, goal number one is how do we build a trusting relationship with you so that you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you're safe, valued, and loved. And within that relational paradigm, let's start doing some hard work together in partnership. And when you can do that, you just see amazing things begin to flourish.



Eryn: What I hear you saying is empathy and compassion is the beginning to restoration. I want to learn more from you what... cause I love what you said earlier about how, as much as you stepping in to help your son and serve your son, your heart was being worked on. And so restoration looked different than what you thought, and I think all of us can resonate... that relates to all of us. So would you share... What did restoration look like for you then? And then what have you learned?

Amy: A couple of thoughts coming to mind. One is I really struggled with the belief that ... I for some reason thought that life was supposed to be happy. And anytime I found myself not feeling happy, I took that as a personal reflection of something being wrong with me. And the wrong-with-me thread tended to magnify over the years. And probably even from my youngest days, that comment about just trying to find my place, you know, the way that I had been designed, kinda set me up even to have that magnified in my adult life. But when I started to realize... because in the process of building an organization and having my own family and all those pieces and everything that meant, from no financial security to, you know, just trying to survive to this is a really tough situation for us collectively. I mean just... there was just a lot, and... uh... but what I found, truly, which is one of the greatest gifts, is that... And it brings up 1 Peter, I think, 5, verse 10, about you know, “after you have suffered for a while,” that the Lord will take you, and He will perfect you and establish you and settle you and strengthen you. And all I can say is, in each one of the trials or the storms or the assaults or whatever you want to call them — where I was going... thinking at that time, in my early 30s, *Gosh, something must be wrong with me, cause I’m just not feeling happy* — what I started to understand is that the process of going through all of that... I love the word “steadfastness,” “she cannot be moved,” you know, those kind of things. And I love those... I love Scriptures that speak into that. I read something the other day that said that those processes of difficulty in our lives, if we understand them the way that God intends them, that they forge us as steel, so that we are so solid, no matter what life brings to us. And I think the greatest gift in all of it, for me, was to then have the Lord impart to me, *Darling, hang in there, cause I’m trying to forge you into steel, like I’m just trying to forge you into steel so that you can be steadfast in Me*. And so now, whatever the day brings, I try my best, and I fail a lot, but I try really... I...I really try to stay present and aware of that fact that, *Gosh, if I’m about to step into something difficult*, which happens a lot, I try to go, *Okay, this is not to be avoided. It’s not for me to try to protect myself or to numb myself. It’s like to fully step into the difficulty and take it as an opportunity*. And I picture myself on the inside becoming forged as steel to be unshakeable and unmovable. And I just... I just love that so much, but the other piece I have to say, and this one means a whole lot to me and I’m really tender about this. But I know it’s... I know it’s not a mistake. In 2011, I visited North Point Church one Sunday, and as I was walking in, the greeters at the door handed me a little card. And it said, “Blank _____, you are so worth loving.”

Elisa: Ohhh!



Amy: And I thought *How absolutely wonderful, simple, powerful, wonderful!* And I stuck it in this little red leather Bible that I had carried with me to church that day. And then I come home and, you know, we're in 2022, this was 2011. I put it on a bookshelf. About six months ago, and I didn't bring that Bible back out. I had a different Bible, a study Bible I had started reading. About six months ago, maybe less, I was really praying, journaling, and struggling a bit with my self-worth. I could feel it. I could just feel the struggle going on between my heart and my mind about... about worth...

Eryn: Yeah.

Amy: ...And I thought, *Dang it, man, I thought I was past this...*

Eryn: You think you've overcome it, too...

Elisa: Yes, right.

Eryn: ...you know?

Amy: I thought... I thought I had come a lot further than that. And I was journaling about it and praying about it. And I promise you, if I were to take a snapshot of the journal entry on this day, a few months ago, it said, "Jesus, please, show me explicitly, like show me what it is I need to understand about this so I'm not struggling." I walk over. I have a... I had a bee in my bonnet about organizing a bookshelf, walked over there. I started pulling out all these textbooks that I wanted to move to a different shelf. Picked up that little red Bible, same day, and that little card fell out on my feet...

Elisa: Oh my gosh.

Amy: ...And I looked down at my feet, and I... And it said, "Blank, _____, you are so worth loving." And I picked that little card up, and I just started to sob. And I took a marker, and I wrote in the blank, "Amy, you are so worth loving." And I hung it on my refrigerator, and every day the first thing I see, when I get up... when I wake up, is that little card. And after I found the card, I went on the website and ...uh... I read about... And I didn't know this was happening. That's the other thing. Like I had no idea I would be in this conversation today. And I went on the website and I ordered the ... a bag for my top team. And I thought, *you know what... we come here, and we serve...* And I think there's a common thread perhaps with people that feel this compassion in their soul to reach out and try to help another, is that maybe we struggle with our own...

Eryn: Yeah.



Amy: ... worth. Like we're worth being helped. You know? And ...uh... so I bought the bags, and I thought *What a neat, neat, neat thing that the Lord would do to line this up for me so I could just go, "Okay, all right. I think I've made a little progress on..."*

[laughter]

Eryn: *I hear You... I hear You, Lord. I hear you. You were trying to tell me in 2011, and now You're telling me today.*

Amy: That was crazy, really. It's just... eh... that's why I say I'm honored, and I'm in a little disbelief that the Lord would be so specific in His answer. Like I... I shouldn't be surprised anymore...

Eryn: Yeah.

Amy: ...but ... but I'm still amazed. I'm in awe of how specific, when you cry out, there's an answer. And it may not be immediate sometimes, and sometimes it is, and it's just *Wow! Okay...*

Eryn: Yeah.

Amy: ...And then you're just... Again, it's a moment of transformation like *Okay, that just moved something around in my soul.*

Eryn: Mm. Just over here in tears, just wiping them over here. Nobody can...

Amy: I am too!

Eryn: ... No one gets to see this video!

Elisa: Eryn, the Lord has used you in your obedience with *So Worth Loving...*

Amy: That's right.

Elisa: ...and...and, Amy, the Lord has used *you* in your obedience to serve people who have "no options." And, you know, there... I know there are people listening who, you know, either they feel like they have no options, or they're parenting children who seem not to have options and...



Eryn: Yeah.

Elisa: ...seem not to fit, and they don't know how to help them. And all that you're talking about, Amy, about, you know, there maybe a medical-slash-scientific explanation for them; but it doesn't connect to the love side in their head. And, oh, we just get all tangled up in a knot, trying to... What kind of advice or encouragement would you offer to those precious parents — and I know many of them, and at times I've been one, you know — what would you say to us?

Amy: Mm. You know I think that one thing I would say is: Don't look too far into the future. One of the great lessons, I think, about having someone that you love dearly that's struggling is that you... you do have to eventually let go of that ill-perceived idea that we have control over things, and that you can learn to live in a state of surrender. And in the surrender, the hope is in the moment. Like the hope is just in this present moment, and I always think about, *in the present moment what is the one thing I can do here? And what is my one next step?* And beyond the one next step, I just don't go there...

Eryn: That's good.

Amy: ...I ... I just think, you know, there's a reality being shown me, like the evidence of the day is showing me this. And so what is it that I need to know, understand, and is there an action I need to take or not? And then be very prayerful and very selective about what that means; cause, again, there's a lot of noise. There's a lot of opinion, and until you feel like a resolute sense, as best you can, about *This is... this feels like the right thing. This feels like it resonates with me, my family, my loved one.* But hold onto the hope. There is a way forward. And I'll just say my life's work is about helping people find the way forward, so I hope, you know, we've developed a lot of free parent courses and free resources. And people can contact Jacob's Ladder for those. Free to Flourish is going to have access to those. So I think, again, like one of my passions is honestly helping change the conversation in the broader community so there's less people that go down a dead-end path and waste time and resources. But short answer is: There's always hope. Only focus on the one next step.

[Theme music]

Eryn: Take it one step at a time. Thank you for that reminder, Amy.

Elisa: What a beautiful conversation. Be sure to check out Jacob's Ladder and Amy's new initiative "Free to Flourish." You can find that and more on our website at godhearsheer.org. That's godhearsheer.org



Eryn: Thank you for joining us, and don't forget: God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His.

[Music]

Elisa: Today's episode was engineered by Anne Stevens and produced by Jade Gustman and Mary Jo Clark. We also want to thank Kristi and Maggie for all of their help and support. Thanks everyone.

[ODB theme]

Eryn: *God Hears Her* is a production of Our Daily Bread Ministries.